



The Depiction of Loss, Grief and the Body in Gbenga Adesina’s Selected Poems in *Painter of Water*

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Abstract

One of the phenomena and manifestations associated with grief and grieving is the use of poetry as a means of mourning the deceased. Over the centuries, poets have employed the instrumentality of poetry to express their grief at the loss of a loved one or an ideal. This chapter examines how Gbenga Adesina, a poet associated with the Nigerian confessional school of poetry, conveys his grief at the loss of his father in his poetry. The paper explores how he not only translates his experience of loss into an art form, but also, while reflecting upon his loss, provides us with insights into his selfhood in ways that extend far beyond himself. Drawing principally on Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic framework for loss in his seminal essay, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917) and the pronouncements of other scholars on bereavement, this paper argues that Adesina’s poems can be read as a substantial discourse of literary response to the finiteness and unpredictability of human life on earth. The paper concludes that Adesina demonstrates in his poems not only how poetry can be used to process loss, but also how the body has become instrumental to the formation of contemporary subjectivities.

Key words: Loss; Elegy; Confessional poetry; Self; Psychoanalysis

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INTRODUCTION

In modern times, the elegy has evolved into a complex and diverse genre. To begin with, it has no prescribed metrical form, but it has become devoted to exploring themes of loss, grief, memory, and the human condition. Sometimes it is used in the more restricted sense of a mournful lyric whose theme is either death in general or the death of a specific person. However, all of this may be, it is now generally seen as a poem of mourning.

Peter Sacks, in his seminal book on the subject, titled *The English Elegy*, explores the evolution and transformation of the elegy in English literature from the Renaissance to the modern period. He argues that elegies are works of mourning that guide the grieving mourners towards a compensatory consolation for the loss. He creates a model of mourning based on Freud’s beliefs, which begins with the loss of the object, progresses to its renunciation, and concludes with the mourners accepting the compensatory substitute and the compensatory substitution procedure. According to Sacks, modern elegy, exemplified by the works of William Butler Yeats and T. S. Eliot, is often characterised by its examination of the fractured self. This concept captures the chaos and contradictions of contemporary life. Sacks contends that dislocation and a sense of being cut off from the past, from nature, and oneself are characteristics of modern elegy (Sacks, 1985). Sacks argues that, unlike in traditional elegy, where a balance between grief and consolation forms a central part of the poet’s purpose, “the modern elegist is often forced to confront the fact that traditional consolations of elegy - the comfort of nature, the solace of memory - are no longer available” (Sacks, 1985). Traditional elegy often strives to blend grief with consolation in a controlled progression from one to the other, influenced by some theological discourse of comfort concerning loss. Traditional elegy is predicated on suppressing the pain of loss; rather than bringing it to

the fore. It depicts a fatalistic acceptance of fate and stoic resignation. Modern elegy, on the other hand, is far more resistant to these feelings. The seeming absence of feelings of consolation in modern elegy can arguably be attributed to the prevalent scepticism about faith in an increasingly secularised world and to the tendency of the modern poet to revel in melancholia. The seemingly irrecoverable loss of meaning that characterises the modern world has led to a shift in the tone of elegy from one of consolation to one of desperation. Merve Gunday contends that elegy has gone beyond: 'the description of a poetic genre by which people lament the death of a person, (...) it has become a means for the ironic exploration of the paradoxical crisis that people go through in the contemporary world where there remains no remedy for pains' (Gunday, 2015). John B. Vickery attempts what amounts to the most comprehensive definition of the modern elegy yet, and deserves to be quoted in full. The modern elegy, he opines:

...is a richly diversified genre, perhaps more so than in any other historical period. This is tied to a perceptible shift from death alone as its primary focus to a broader concentration on the phenomenon of loss in the human economy: loss of love, of intimate relationships such as friendships, of family members from parents to children, and marriage; of knowledge as a given and as represented in the confusing and contradictory ideas of time, of morality and the self; of cultures and history as the record of human achievements and failure, and of the traditional forms of social authority as found in the physical power of war, in the spiritual power of religious faith, in the surrender of personal response to a trust in the national identity, and more recently in the straitened, austere sort of consolation that consists of a simple, grim endurance of existence (Vickery, 2006).

Thus, modern elegy is composed of a diversity of dolorous themes: from John Keats' sonnet, 'When I have fears' mourning wasted talents to Alfred Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' mourning the death of a friend; from T.S. Eliot's 'Wasteland' mourning the wreckage that the European civilization had become to W.H. Auden's 'Stop All the Clocks' mourning the death of a lover. These poems explore the complexities of the self through the fragmented and disjointed nature of modern experience. In other words, modern elegies tend to focus on the personal and emotional aspects of loss and grief. It is possible to interpret this shift in modern elegy toward the self as a response to the evolving literary and cultural landscape of the contemporary era. People are left to handle the difficulties of grieving and mourning alone as a result of the breakdown of conventional religious and societal systems. As a result, there is now a larger focus on the individual's experience of loss and the emotional and personal aspects of mourning.

THE ANALYSIS OF GBENGA ADESINA'S SELECTED POEMS

Gbenga Adesina is, at the moment, one of the most celebrated contemporary poets. He received his MFA in poetry from New York University, where Yusef Komunyakaa served as his mentor. Adesina received scholarships and fellowships from the Fine Arts Centre, Poets' House and Callaboo at Oxford. His poems have been published in *The Harvard Review*, *The New York Times*, and several other online and print literary journals. In 2016, he published his first collection of poems in a chapbook, *Painter of Water*, based on which he won the prestigious Brunel University African Poetry Prize.

Adesina's poems are often influenced by his very personal experiences, especially those of his family. He grew up in a family of five boys and seemed to have been profoundly attached to his father. Adesina's poetry, as Gaamagwe Mogami opines, "meditates on love and loss, two most powerful spectrums of human experience" (Mogami). His father went into a coma before the copies of his first work arrived. The poet was devastated by his father's illness and his eventual death. Many of the poems he wrote to articulate the intensity of his pain at this time were published in his first collection of poems, *Painter of Water*. Adesina admits this much in his interview with Mathew Thorburn on Ploughshares at Emerson College. Below are some excerpts of the interview:

Thorburn: *Painter of Water* is a cohesive collection, both in terms of the themes and voices that flow through the poems, as well as the way the sequence unfolds, poem by poem. How did you assemble this chapbook?

Adesina: It was, in a way, a private elegy in response to communal pain. It was my antidote to forgetting. I think of Allen Grossman's words: "Poetry is a principle of power invoked by all of us against our vanishing". I was looking for a language for my mourning. Poem after poem was, for me, cumulative threads in a journey into song. A quite melancholic song, I admit. It couldn't possibly be otherwise. Here is a song with loss at the core. But I also wanted to affix this parallel civilization of joy of everyday-ness, love and loss and the unnameable river between. (Thorburn, Ploughshares)

Adesina in 'Painter of Water' tries to impress on the reader the significance of his loss of his father by his attempt at depicting the very physicality of his grief as a body. According to him he 'sought to situate most of the poems within the body; the body of the beloved, intimate spaces, family units, units of cohesion and affection' (Adesina, Ploughshare)

Adesina's techniques are no doubt influenced by the current emphasis on the body in contemporary cultural studies. The body has been a category of social and political analysis since the early 1980s. It is now commonplace to refer to bodies as texts, and to texts as bodies or to speak about writing the body. This thesis, 'The

Body Has a History', was derived from the intersection of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, feminist and gender studies, and postmodernism. All these discoveries elevated the body to a privileged site. Michel Foucault's anti-essentialist conception of the body, articulated through his ideas of "biopower" and "biopolitics," catalysed these discussions. Foucault drew his ideas from the phenomenological tradition of French thought on the body (as developed by Sartre, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty) that 'emphasised its materiality and cultural specificity of its embodiedness, inscribed by power-relations and at the same time marked by gender, race and class' (Michel Peters, 200).

All these intellectual milestones installed the body at the centre of human experience and emphasized its irreducibility to all external compression. In an era in which everything has been reduced to the signifier, it is believed the body has come to represent the last bastion of materiality. As Maud Ellman puts it: 'If history is nothing but a narrative, a tale like any other often heard, and if the universe is merely an effect of rhetoric, the body seems to stand for an incontestable reality, a throbbing substance in a wilderness of signs' (Ellman 3).

As already mentioned, Adesina's *Painter of Water* demonstrates not only the psychoanalytic dimensions of grief but also the poet's deliberate deployment of **literary strategies** that aestheticize mourning. The poem "Thirteen Ways of Naming My Father's Body" recalls Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and this intertextual gesture situates Adesina's work in a broader modernist tradition of **fragmentation and multiplicity**. By echoing Stevens, Adesina underscores that grief, like perception, cannot be exhausted in a single image or expression but must be approached through a constellation of perspectives. The structure of the poem, a sequence of fragmented vignettes, mirrors the disjointed process of memory and loss. This fragmentation is not merely psychological but a **literary technique**, one that foregrounds discontinuity as the most fitting form for mourning's fractured temporality.

My father knew pleasure. It tasted like
thorn on his flesh
on some days, the morning is my father's body
I wear it like loneliness
When I'm dancing and twisting alone in the dark,
my father's body joins me.
He brings in night as his dance partner.

The poem's diction oscillates between the concrete and the abstract, grounding grief in tactile imagery: "thorn on his flesh," "I wear it like loneliness," and "my father's body joins me." These images are not only psychoanalytic projections of desire and memory but also **poetic metaphors** that blur the boundaries between the body, the self, and the world. The father's body is personified as dance partner, night, and loneliness, a sequence that demonstrates Adesina's skill in **metaphoric**

transformation. The body thus becomes more than a site of trauma; it is a **literary symbol** through which grief acquires both intimacy and universality.

Adesina also engages in a subtle play with **form and voice**. The first-person pronoun ("I wear it like loneliness," "I'm dancing and twisting alone in the dark") draws the reader into a confessional mode, creating a lyric intimacy that aligns the poem with elegiac traditions. Yet, unlike the traditional elegy which seeks closure, Adesina's poem resists resolution. By layering memory upon memory, he suggests that grief is an **ongoing narrative** rather than a completed one. This stylistic refusal to end or progress neatly is as much a literary statement as it is a psychological truth, grief here becomes a **textual condition**, embodied in form as much as in theme.

Furthermore, the poem invokes **archetypal patterns of mourning** familiar in African and global poetic traditions. The father's body as a recurring motif not only represents personal loss but also resonates with cultural narratives of ancestry, lineage, and continuity. In Yoruba cosmology, for instance, the presence of the dead is never wholly erased but persists in memory, ritual, and symbol. Thus, the father's body functions on two planes: psychoanalytically, as an object of unresolved mourning, and literarily, as a **mythic symbol of continuity and presence** that places Adesina's personal grief in conversation with communal and ancestral traditions.

In this way, Adesina's poetry exemplifies how **literary form, intertextuality, imagery, and cultural archetypes** deepen the psychoanalytic dimensions of grief. His work demonstrates that mourning is not only a psychological state but also a *poetic practice*, one that translates personal loss into aesthetic expression and situates individual suffering within broader literary and cultural frameworks.

The poet continues:

Once, on a street in New York, afraid for my life
I shouted at my father to stay back indoors. I told him
not to come out of my body
I'm the light of the world. My father's body is the world.
Sometimes when I'm singing, a door opens and gives
my father's body back to the night he was born.
Fela Kuti dancing on stage is my father's body.
I sat beside a man a while ago at a garden;
his hum was my father's body.
The lines quoted above foreground the poet's inventive use of
imagery and metaphor

to keep his father present within everyday experiences. Each scene, whether on the streets of New York, in song, or in the rhythm of Fela Kuti's dance, turns the father's body into a poetic metonymy, standing in for memory, continuity, and identity. This strategy aligns the poem with the literary tradition of the elegy, where the dead are not merely mourned but continually reimagined as part of the living world. The refrain-like recurrence of "my father's body" throughout the poem functions both as incantation and as motif, giving the work a ritualistic

quality. This repetition, while signaling obsession on the psychoanalytic plane, also serves as a stylistic device that creates rhythm, cohesion, and an almost liturgical tone, situating the poem as a textual act of remembrance.

Intertextuality further enriches the poem. The evocation of Fela Kuti places the father's memory within a broader cultural and musical heritage, tying personal grief to collective history. By fusing his father's body with a legendary cultural icon, Adesina positions mourning not only as an individual psychological process but also as an engagement with communal identity and artistic memory. This intertextual reference suggests that grief resonates across cultural expressions, connecting private loss to the energy of a shared African artistic legacy.

Structurally, the poem exemplifies fragmentation and juxtaposition, a hallmark of modern and postmodern poetics. The shifts from New York streets to cosmic metaphors ("the light of the world"), from music to gardens, create a kaleidoscopic narrative that resists linear progression. This technique reflects the erratic and involuntary nature of memory, but it also functions literarily to keep the reader unsettled, mirroring the incompleteness of mourning. The body becomes not only a psychoanalytic signifier but also a textual anchor, a recurring image around which disparate scenes orbit.

On a thematic level, the father's body functions as a symbol of world-making and world-loss. When the speaker claims, "My father's body is the world," he redefines personal mourning as cosmic dislocation. This enlarges the scope of the poem beyond the personal, inviting readers to contemplate how loss destabilizes one's entire sense of order and meaning. The father, then, is not only a private figure but also an archetypal presence, embodying ancestry, origin, and continuity. Such archetypal significance situates Adesina's work within the tradition of African elegiac poetry, where mourning often blends the personal with the communal, and the intimate with the mythic.

Thus, the poem resists being read only through the lens of psychoanalysis. Its artistry lies in how Adesina weaves **cultural intertext, metaphorical innovation, structural fragmentation, and archetypal symbolism** into a coherent yet open-ended exploration of grief. By doing so, he transforms mourning into both a psychological reality and a literary performance, demonstrating how the poetic imagination sustains memory and reshapes identity.

In the concluding lines of Adesina's poem, the persona continues his work of mourning his father in quotidian situations and incidents, inspired by the images of his late beloved father. His tone changes as he addresses his interlocutor directly far away in America:

The man sitting beside you is my father. He's dead

His body is a sigh. Where I come from
rain leads home the father's body
Once at a rock concert, I asked for a dirty martini
my hand wanted to find a way to hold the night

The purr of the electric guitar was my father's body
In the beginning God made heaven and my father's
Body.

Even while still far away in America, the memories of the father continue to intrude in a sudden, almost dysphoric way into the persona's consciousness. The poet's frequent references to physiological images give the entire poem a complexion of bodily exteriority, as though to emphasise the fact that, although his father is dead, he continues to live almost in an embodied way. This persistence of the persona's attachment to his late father might be construed as bordering on the pathological. His type of mourning process is undoubtedly beyond the range of normality. As has already been observed earlier, psychoanalysts after Freud rejected the notion that the bereaved's continual fantasies and mourning about his or her lost object have something pathological about them. For instance, Bowlby reviewed the existing research on bereavement and mourning and observed that adults as well as children show signs of continuing thoughts and fantasies about a deceased loved one well after their death. He concluded that a mourner showing a continuing sense of the presence of the dead person is not pathological at all but compatible with a normal mourning process. Simon Shimshon Rubin, on his part, described ways in which bereaved individuals maintain ongoing internal relationships with love objects after their death, arguing that 'the relationship to the image of the deceased following mourning remains a circumscribed but ongoing experience involving recollection, imaging, and association at conscious and unconscious levels (Rubin 1982).

The following poem by Adesina to be analysed is "Coma," a poem presumably written when the poet's father fell into a coma before his eventual death. It is a short poem in which the poet continues his use of physiological imagery, "hands," "body," "ribs," "head," etc. He writes:

The silence is a prairie country. The silence is the silence of hospital sheets. The silence is of Ivtubes, veins, quiet siren of ghosts The silence is the silence of what is dappled invisibly by a body that is no longer human but not yet a ghost. The silence in your body has lodged in my throat. Silence, can you hear me? The silence of lime and kraal stones. The silence is not shadow but the light of a body buried under a mound of rough stones.

The poet in the lines above hints at life's tragic limitations and mysteries. The love object is buried in what seems an eternal silence, even though he is yet to become a ghost. The persona's father is reduced to just a body between the hospital's bedsheets. The persona is seething with inexpressible pain, "*the silence of your body has lodged in my throat.*" The situation has become too poignant to put into words. The persona is grappling with a host of complex emotions about a loss that is not yet a loss, and about a grief that is yet to shape itself into words. The persona addresses the silence that is his father's body: "*Silence, can*

you hear me?" He characterizes the silence as "*The silence of lime, and kraal stones.*" At this point, the persona is already imagining his father buried "under a mound of rough stones."

From a **literary perspective**, the poem's power lies in its stark simplicity and its extended metaphor of *silence*. Adesina deploys anaphora in the repetition of the phrase "*The silence is ...*" to create a rhythmic litany that mirrors both the mechanical monotony of hospital life and the suffocating stillness of impending death. This repetitive structure also aligns the poem with elegiac traditions, where the refrain operates as an incantation of grief. Silence here is more than absence of sound; it is transformed into a palpable presence, a character in its own right that interacts with the speaker. Such **personification of silence** is a deliberate literary strategy, enabling the poet to give shape and voice to the otherwise ineffable experience of anticipatory mourning.

The imagery of "prairie country," "hospital sheets," and "IV tubes" juxtaposes the vast and the intimate, the natural and the clinical. This layering of images situates the father's coma within a broader poetic universe where death is both ordinary and unspeakable. The evocation of "lime and kraal stones" connects the private hospital room to the cultural memory of burial rites, bridging the immediacy of personal loss with collective rituals of death. The shift from the sterile imagery of medical equipment to the earthy imagery of stones and lime demonstrates the poem's oscillation between life and death, between the body as a medical object and the body as a symbolic site of cultural and ancestral continuity.

In this sense, the father's "silence" embodies what literary critics might call a **liminal state** - a threshold space between life and death, presence and absence, voice and muteness. Adesina's artistry lies in his ability to craft this liminality not only as a psychological condition of the grieving son but also as a **poetic trope**. The body in coma becomes a metaphor for suspended meaning, a state where grief cannot yet be articulated but only intuited through images of silence, burial, and ghostliness. Thus, while the psychoanalytic reading emphasizes repression, attachment, and anticipatory grief, the literary reading shows how Adesina transforms this psychological reality into a finely wrought poetic meditation, where silence becomes both subject and structure of the text. The poet continues:

The silence is the silence of hands.
Hands, wire-vine hands, can you hear me?
The silence is the silence of broken ribs
The silence is the silence of the head,
Shorn and shaven. The silence is silence
of a bandage wrapped tight around
what is sunken, what is fallen in the gait
of the head.
Head,
can you hear me?
The silence is silence of blood,
seething through filament of bandage.

Blood, can you hear me?
Father, blood, father, can you hear me?

The father's silence has become cold, and so the persona engages in a mournful anatomical exploration of the father, turning his body parts into important sites of meaning: his father's 'hands, wire-vine hands' are a symbolism of hard work and impeccable character, his head a locus of logical and clear thinking, his blood a metaphor for life and his broken ribs a suggestion at life's unpredictable tragedies. The modern notion that the material body is the locus of modern selfhood is best illustrated by the poet's use of these anatomical images. According to Judith Butler, our bodies provide us with an understanding of the world. She contends that the body is a place of vulnerability, where people are more likely to get hurt, get sick, or die (Butler 20). Because the body is influenced by social and cultural standards that dictate its behaviour and expression, this susceptibility extends beyond the physical to include emotional and psychological aspects (Butler, 1997). Butler contends that this vulnerability is not just a personal or individual experience, but also a social and collective one, as our bodies are interconnected and interdependent (Butler, 1997).

The persona in Adesina's poem under review addresses each of his father's body parts directly, repeating the rhetorical question, 'Can you hear me?' His direct address to the father's body gives us an idea of the kind of life his father must have lived while he was alive. For instance, the phrase, 'What is fallen in the gait of the head' suggests the poet's father must have been a proud, self-confident man while he was alive, but now 'sunken' under the weight of illness. Indeed, this image alone suggests the body is not a naturalistic, biological given, but an entity with its history. Additionally, the persona describes his father in terms of his physical body, employing very vivid imagery to convey how he suffers the physical and emotional toll of grief at his father's coma. The poem ends on a desperate note of appeal, in which the persona loses his eloquence in addressing his father for a response: "Father, blood, father, can you hear me?"/

In "*Vows*," the poet takes a back seat and depicts the toll of grief at his father's passing from the mother's perspective. He writes:

When my father fell
into himself and the waters
within him broke their vows,
she witted to half of her carp.
She wrapped herself in a black shawl,
she, my mother crawled to his side,
put her ear to his chest. Said:
if a body is yours, you can
hear where silence
throats in its skin.
She, my mother, put her mouth
to my father's ear
Said I'll call your body

which is mine, by name
You'll come back to me.

In the lines above, the persona is not the only one who suffers the pain of loss; the pain has become communal, recalling Judith Butler's contention that the vulnerability of the body is not only a personal and individual experience but also a social and collective one, as our bodies are interconnected and interdependent (Butler 25). In this poem, the persona steps outside himself to empathise with the person with whom he shares the pain of loss. The boundaries between the persona's consciousness and that of his mother blur, as the poem's narrative is told from both the persona's perspective and that of his mother. The work of mourning enacted here moved beyond denial to recognizing and accepting the reality and finality of loss, at least on the part of the persona. He watches his mother's vain attempts to call her husband back to life. The mother believes that since she owns her husband's body, the deceased should be able to communicate with her whenever she calls upon him.

My mother, put her mouth
to my father's ear
Said, I'll call your body
which is mine, my name
You'll come back to me

The father broke their vows when he abandoned them through death. The father is still and unresponsive, and the mother wonders how a body on whose entire length she used to run her tongue during lovemaking could be this closed to her?

How can a body the whole length
of which you once
travelled with your tongue close itself to you?

The poem conveys the impression of the powerful love (both in its physical and spiritual dimensions) between the persona's parents. The father's body becomes the arena in which to enact the family's tragic drama.

When he, my father closed his eyes
and breath and his body became
a bridge he had left behind on a journey and
they wheeled him down the stairs,
She sprang after them
she cried out:
My name is
inside his tongue. I need to get it back.

Overcome with a sense of loss and abandonment, the mother sprints after the body of the persona's father, being wheeled away. She is unwilling to sever her libidinal ties to her dead husband. Her way of processing and regulating her emotions at the loss of her husband is not to perceive him as a concept but as a body to which she is still sexually attached. John Bowlby would consider the mother's continuing thoughts and fantasies about her deceased husband as a normal mourning process. She has lost her husband not only as a body but also as a concept

that is part of the structure of her sense of self-identity. Bowlby opines thus:

Many widows and widowers find that their sense of identity is maintained as they can identify their life along lines they find significant because they are willing for their sentiments of attachment to the deceased spouse to endure (Bowlby 98). Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that the closer the emotional bond with a spouse, the more intense the grief will be when they die. Psychoanalysts such as Georgios Abakoumkin, Wolfgang Stroebe and Margaret Stroebe contend that the loss of a conflicted or troubled marital relationship is likely to result in more intense or even pathological grief; that is, a conflicted or troubled relationship is more challenging to let go as the widowed person may be stuck with unresolved feelings such as anger or guilt (Abakoumkin et. al., 2010). The phrase, "When my father fell into himself", that begins the poem would seem to suggest some distance or even friction between the father and the rest of the family. However, whatever this may be, the mother perhaps has no other way of grieving and processing the pain of her loss than trying to hold onto the body of her late husband, being more libidinally attached to him than everybody else. The persona, on the other hand, being a poet, can turn his experience of loss into sublimatory elegies, thereby processing his pain and potentially detaching himself gradually from the deceased father.

The last of Adesina's poems to be analysed here is "*I Carried My Father Across the Sea*," a poem also based on "body poetics." The title of the poem shows the poet continues to mourn his father's passing even after he has travelled to America for further studies. This time, the poet allegorises his father's body to explore his memories of him. He draws his metaphors from his experience of being cared for in the hospital and from the rituals of his eventual burial. These metaphors frame and organise the poet's narrative of mourning as a journey. He writes:

He was a child. He was dead. He was the shaft of a long-tailed Astrapia. He was a forest of bruise He wore a door on his face. He wore the black suit of his wedding. The square pocket was still full of his vows. He was light to carry, his burdens and vows had bled out of him He was heavy With the responsibility of the dead. What sort of a son leaves his father chained to fatherhood?

According to Patricia Roe, accepting the loss of a loved one entails denying their "singularity," which is essentially losing them a second time (Roe, 405). With his passing, the persona's father became a child whose responsibility fell on the persona. The persona's father lost his "singularity," and the persona had to carry him across the sea in mourning. Located in time and space, the poet relives his father's memories, his present moment emerging from and reconfiguring the past with his father. Both narrative and lyrical elements are merged. The poet gains some insight into his father's character and the

significance of his passing. The father died in an accident. This accident is never explicitly stated by the poet, but phrases such as “his bandaged head,” “his vows bled out of him,” and “he was a forest of bruise” point to this fact. The persona explores the various psychological and physical facets of mourning the loss of his father.

The persona creates an impression of his father as a brooding personality who not only “wore a door on his face” but also “wore the black suit of his wedding” — a beautiful syllepsis on the word “wore.” The persona’s father strikes the reader as a stern and fastidious man who, while alive, remained faithful to his wife and family. It must have struck the persona as surprising that this man, who was quite ponderous in his ways, should feel relatively light to carry after his death.

From a **literary standpoint**, the poem is remarkable for its fusion of allegory and elegy. The very act of “carrying” his father across the sea resonates with classical myth, evoking Charon ferrying souls across the river Styx, and situates Adesina’s private grief within a broader archetypal framework of journeys between life and death. The poem thus transforms a personal act of mourning into a **mythic voyage**, where the son assumes the role of both mourner and guide. The imagery of the “Astrapia,” a bird noted for its luminous tail, injects a surreal beauty into the otherwise stark language of bruises and bandages. This juxtaposition of lightness and brutality illustrates the tension between the tenderness of memory and the violence of loss.

The poem’s diction relies heavily on **oxymoronic contrasts**, lightness versus heaviness, childlike innocence versus the weight of responsibility, vows of love versus the silence of death. These contrasts highlight the paradoxical experience of grief: the father becomes “light to carry” because his burdens have bled out of him, yet “heavy with the responsibility of the dead” because death imposes on the son the enduring weight of remembrance. Such juxtapositions exemplify Adesina’s ability to render mourning as both an intimate psychological struggle and a universal poetic paradox.

The use of repetition (“He was... He was... He was...”) gives the poem a chant-like rhythm, reminiscent of both lamentation songs and liturgical prayers. This stylistic choice reinforces the elegiac tone while also emphasizing the father’s multiplicity: he is simultaneously child, corpse, bird, bruise, door, and groom. Through this accumulation of metaphors, the poet destabilizes any single definition of the father, suggesting that identity in death becomes a palimpsest of memories, symbols, and projections.

The final rhetorical question, “*What sort of a son / leaves his father / chained to fatherhood?*”, functions as both confession and accusation. Literarily, it closes the poem not with resolution but with **open-ended guilt and responsibility**, a hallmark of modern elegy that resists

closure. The poem thus embodies the very impossibility of “moving on,” instead presenting mourning as a perpetual dialogue with the dead.

In this way, Adesina’s “*I Carried My Father Across the Sea*” demonstrates how grief is at once psychoanalytic and literary: it is the psychological struggle of ego and attachment, but also a **poetic performance** shaped by allegory, archetype, and the rhythms of elegy. With this reversal of roles, the persona becomes father to his late father, and that is why he asks rhetorically:

What sort of a son
leaves his father
chained to fatherhood?

The persona is surprised at the sudden role bestowed upon him. In the following two lines, he tries to measure himself against his father:

I lifted and propped him up with my frame.
I measured his length with my length.

The poignant helplessness of his father after death suddenly fills the persona with a profound sense of responsibility. The reversal of roles between the child and the parent is a phenomenon that has been observed in various contexts, including psychoanalytic theory and practice. This phenomenon, known as “parentification,” occurs when a child is forced to assume parental responsibilities, often as a result of parental neglect, abuse, or absence (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 2022). The parentification of a child from a psychoanalytic perspective is seen as a defence mechanism that arises in response to parental failure or absence. In the case of the persona in Adesina’s poem under review, the parentification occurs as a result of the untimely death of the father. Parentification has profound psychological implications as the child who has been parentified may struggle with feelings of guilt, shame, and responsibility, and may even have difficulty forming healthy relationships with others (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 2022). In short, parentification is a manifestation of the Oedipus complex in which the child is forced to take on the role of the parent in order to resolve unconscious conflict (Freud, 1968).

The persona measuring the length of his body against that of his late father is his unconscious way of resolving his own Oedipus issues. The poet draws metaphors from his experience of bearing the body of his father after his death to form striking anatomical imagery in his symbolic travel across the sea. He writes:

The feet stuck in seasond, his weak knees,
his arms gripped my sides
As the current rose, the collar on his broken neck
flared into a float.
The gash the surgeon’s knife left on his head
It became a halo, signalling in the dark.
I put my nose to his nose
I put my finger in his mouth

I tied his Ivtubes, now a human gill,
around our waists,
and swam in the vein
of the water.

The poet depicts his sensory engagement with his father's body, creating a vivid anatomical reality of his father's continued presence in his life even after his death. The human body is often seen as a mere physical vessel, a container for mind and soul. However, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is not just a physical entity but also a lived and experienced one. Our bodies are imbued with meaning, shaped by our experiences, cultures, and environments, and it is through these embodied narratives that we navigate the world. In Merleau-Ponty's words: "the body is a narrative of existence, a story that is written through our experiences, perceptions and interactions with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The persona in Adesina's poem under review demonstrates that his father's body contains stories, which is why, in mourning his father's passing, he stresses the corporeal aspects of his father's life more than those of the conceptual. He highlights the physical experience of the pain of loss and mourning. The persona creates a story with myth-like qualities of trying to save his father's body from drowning as they swam across the sea. He writes:

"Look," a sphinx in the waves said
"A son carries a father"
Death is not silence.
It is where I hear you most clearly.
What sort of a son
leaves his father's body
chained to the dark grievance inside the earth?
I carried my father on my back.
I felt the bracing inside his afterlife heart
on the skin of my spine
He wore his face as a door
He promised to open up to me
He bled
out his vows.

There is a Freudian sense of melancholia in the lines above as the persona seems to blame himself, if not for his father's untimely death, at least for the paradox of a child assuming responsibility over the father after his death. The allegory of him backing the father as they waded through the sea is the impersona's way of not only making the deceased explicitly present but also demonstrating the continued attachment of his libido to the lost object. He seems regretful of the fact that his father was not able to open up to him before his death, despite his promise to do so.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it must be noted that Adesina's elegies are incredibly self-involved affairs; they possess nothing beyond their emotional and aesthetic qualities. They are

bereft of the philosophic dimension we have come to expect of elegies. The persona in these poems seems to revel only in the corporeal and psychic dimensions of mourning, hardly stepping outside his body, so to speak, to reflect on the nature of mortality and its relationship to the human condition. There is little or no reference at all to religion and nature as sources of consolation in times of sorrow and loss. There are qualities we shall find in Saddiq Dzukogi's elegies, a contemporary of his. Nonetheless, Adesina demonstrates in his poems how the body has become instrumental to the formation of contemporary subjectivities, highlighting the dignity of the experience of one's body and its irreducibility to all social forms, perceptual codes and discursive structures.

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