Saddiq Dzukogi’s Poetics of Grief

Salawu Olajide
September 28, 2022



Martin Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art* describes language as “home of being.” He also describes poetry as a form with powers to disclose “being.” Saddiq Dzukogi’s collection of poems, *Your Crib, My Qibla* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), which is occasioned by the death of his daughter, Baha, wades through a complex terrains of spells that a negation of being catalyzes, to borrow from Heidegger’s existential insight. Introducing the collection, Dzukogi writes:

> *These are poems born out of grief and the celebration of our beloved daughter Baha, who we lost twenty-one days after her first birthday. In writing these poems I feel like I am holding her in my hands. She is alive as grief, alive as memory, alive as song.*

The poems indeed perform these stated aims most brilliantly even in their unbearable sorrowfulness, proving a diligent sitemap for the poet’s complicated emotional groundswell as he constructs a rousing epistemology of Baha’s be-ing and *non*-being.

The collection is divided into two parts as demarcated in the title, “Your Crib” and “My Qibla”. This bifurcation juxtaposes disparate but interconnected images: “crib”– a baby’s bed, a child space of rest and play, her infanthood, her homeliness – and “qibla” – the direction towards Kaabba in Mecca’s Sacred Mosque, used by Muslims in different contexts of prayers and supplications. This

association, in effect, adds a conjuctural dimension to the cartography of disconsolation that the poet constructs. Grieving, Dzukogi is explaining here, is as much a psycho-somatic experience as it is spiritual.

In the first part, "Your Crib," the poet, in order to effectively dam the boundless emotions contained in the subject, cedes perspective to a third person narrator who performs, as it were, the role of conductor and interpreter, leading the reader through the expansive and uneven landscape of grief and crystallizing its intersubjective materializations among the members of the family. Dzukogi explains that the use of third person "he" may seem like "relinquishing agency of one's own feelings, but it was an artistic choice to make it a little bit easier to read without forcing the reader to embody the pain in a way that will feel so personal to them." It is a humane consideration; the contours of grief are not easy things to set down. The first poem in the collection, "Wineglass," opens the door to one of the most involving, most intensely refracted, landscapes of grief in contemporary Nigerian writing:

When your mother found strands of your hair
hung up in the teeth of your comb,
your father squirreled them into a wineglass.
It bites him hard that your life happened
like an hourglass with only a handful of sand—this
split to the seam of his body, a split
of darkness that won't kill him but squeezes
adrenaline into his veins, so he lives
through the pain of your absence. He's not all right
to speak. His voice rims with bereavement

Because a grieving body is also a recapitulative being – retracing vanished movements of the body, revisiting disembodied spaces, tallying figments of connection, against oblivion – the poet keeps going back and forth, through memory, to imagination. In "Window," "Dates," and "Ribbons" , he attempts to tally the past, to rearrange the bygone moments through the clouding mist of memory. In "Song to a Birdwoman," he recalls the occasion of Baha's birth, when "Her mother, labor blood still trickling down her legs/ passes her to him, cradled in the towel of her arms, / the hospital waiting hall full of the baby's face." The magic of the moment shifts to the dark hours in the next poems, "Internment" and "Burial Sheet" and their funeral minutiae. "So Much Memory" emphasizes the unyielding, if ghostly, presence of Baha, how everything seems to entrap her being:

Now he answers to everything that reminds him of her,
a crib rocking, a circle of faces
crowing at him. He can neither leave his eyes open
nor shut them....
See how he runs his hands over his body,
how his skin peels.…

Grief is a scene of sundering and surrender; the grieving body floats in the subterranean forces of loss and longing, scavenging feelings that it is unable to perfectly articulate. We see this in "When He Says Your Name," in "Memories by the Sea," and in "Scarf" where

a frigid climate of grief climbs up his toes until legs quiver
in response. He wishes grief were a cloth he could take off.
Unsure if your ghostly body will show itself
in the deserted corners of the house, he peers into every void.
He runs into the woods to see what rattles

the half-opened leaves of the twigs.
He can't explain just how sacred an act
sniffing your clothes has become.

Writing grief inexorably posits the ardor of recollection, but it also queries its epistemic misprision, making wider room for disputation and speculation. Writing grief thus may configure contrasting representations. Writing itself involves language; but language, pressed to the duty of mourning and memorialization, ductile with the very fact of loss, becomes seduced into phenomenological formulations. This is so because in its effort to apprehend reality beyond its capacity, language has no material guide signs, save imagination. The child's unformed words in "Flower's Tenderness" communicate meaning that the Father "gets…as if the sound is a language." But in "Memories by the Sea," the father's grief occludes language: "Grieving is the only way he speaks of nothing". "Chibi" goes on to demonstrate how memory is re-imagined as language of grief:

When his mother said through memories,
he can have his daughter back. He conjured more memories
and bade her to ride each like a horse,
until she arrives. …
Memory is a shell where time is ductile,
where it draws him in, until the present and past
became tactile in his body.

Poems in the second part, "My Qibla," yield, almost wholeheartedly, to imaginative recalibration. Structured in one part as a sequence of dialogue between Baha and her father, "My Qibla" affords the poet wider latitude to ponder on the phenomenology of death and afterlife as well as the transcendence of love and affection. The affordances are such that he is imaginatively attuned to spectral conjurations and becomes able to articulate the complex unknown through the now all-pervading, omnificent eyes of Baha. This section houses some of the most affecting lines in the collection. Perhaps because of the tenderness embedded in a child's vision, words entrusted to Baha confront her father's rueful dirges with sunny considerations. In "She Begins to Speak," she consoles her father:

Don't despair, it reflects on me.
I am anchored to your feelings….
When the daffodils grow,
my rebirth is complete. Your grief is empty,
when your pillow dries—put it out there
let sunlight claim its wetness.

"My Qibla," rather than enacting acts of prayer, conducts a phenomenological analysis of it. In "Janazah," an Islamic funeral prayer performed to seek pardon for the deceased and all faithful dead, the poet describes the significance of the last prayers in Islamic funeral ritual for the repose of the soul of the deceased. But in "Observations" Baha's imagined prayer embeds a kenotic aspiration:

Ba, I'm praying
that a hummingbird hands me its ability
to hover and fly backward,
back into a timepiece where I am
myself in a bathwater
you prepared.

This is fantasy, she knows; but she also knows that man's prayers are a form of fantasy:

```
From where I stand,
it's easier to pull the earth
closer to my forehead
than to wait for my prayers
to be answered.
```

Baha's imagined ambivalence towards efficacy of praying appears over-determined by her supersensible oversight and supernatural location. But its signification as an outsourced self-interrogation becomes obvious when it is considered against the father's earthly habit of devotion. Her father, who has now jettisoned the third person pronoun "he" for personal pronoun "I," performs "wudu to speak to God," reciting Quran to heal, but also notices in "Unexpressed Grief" that "In the Quran there is a solution to every mystery,/but not for an unexpressed grief." In the end it is Baha, who is made to clarify that "my prayer is a planetary body, siphons my energy and gives nothing in return," redirecting her father's grieving to consider a resolution in writing; writing qua *act* of perpetuating be-ing, *act* of re-membering:

```
Maybe writing about absence and inserting
me in the corners of empty rooms will span circles.
Maybe the art you create is not a mistake.
```

Your Crib, My Qibla constructs a most monogenic elegiac sequence – all fifty nine poems of it – whose risk of monotony is circumscribed by the deft articulation of the profound candor of the poet's feelings. This is a collection as beautiful as it is difficult; it demonstrates the power of language to invent a corpus of extraordinary grace out of the chaotic currents of human sorrowfulness.

Peter Akinlabi, a poet, lives in Abuja.