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Soundtrack to a Wayfarer's Transition

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Wreaths for a Wayfarer: An Anthology of Poems in Honour of Pius Adesanmi (1972–2019), edited by Nduka Otiono and Uchechukwu Umezurike, Ottawa, Canada, Daraja Press, 2020, xxvii + 300 pp.

Pius Adesanmi embodied poetry in motion. Long limbs like a gazelle, built to support a bulky frame that traverses any space he walks with confidence; an enthusiastic and animated speaker who was always full of stories and songs in his speeches; a friendly nature that welcomed everyone into his space with a burst of loud hearty laughter. Such was the life of Adesanmi, that even in death, he left with a tinge of poetry. For a man who spent the greater part of his adult life away from his African roots, but never lost an ounce of love for Africa and defended her with fierce passion, it appears the poetic nature of his life predetermined that he would die and breathe his last on African soil. And, not one to be written out of his own story, Pius gifted the world one last poetry “performance,” a rendition from the bible book of Psalms 139: 9,10, posted on his Facebook timeline ten minutes before he and 156 others plunged to their death on an Ethiopian landscape.

But the journey is far from over for this self-confessed and renowned wayfarer. As an Africanist scholar, Pius Adesanmi often argued, through the lens of his Yoruba worldview and amongst the Yoruba people, that death is not the end of living, but part of the journey: a transition to some higher calling and greater responsibility. A common saying amongst the Yoruba nation literally translates as “one who has witnessed Sango unsheath his sword [a metaphor for thunder as Sango is believed to be the demigod of lightning, thunder, and other fiery luminaries] will never say Sango is dead.” Oral history shows that Sango actually died via suicide, but his legend is kept alive in the skies, the place to which he supposedly journeyed from the earth. Journeys and transition have been part of Adesanmi’s existence, and he often referred to himself as an Abiku, the child born to die and return in a continuous cyclical journey of life and death, with death never the ending but the opening of another door of return. His sole poetry collection is also an homage to his devotion to the trope of transition and motion, with the apt title *The Wayfarer and Other Poems*.

Like the legend of Sango, whereby it is the citizens who bear witness to his transition in their retelling of his story, it appears Adesanmi has written the last piece in his story and now his fellow writers and scholars must pay homage to him. And

that is what they have done with the first, of what are definitely going to be many collections of tribute poetry, *Wreaths for a Wayfarer: An Anthology of Poems in Honour of Pius Adesanmi (1972–2019)*.

Wreaths for a Wayfarer is an eclectic collection of 161 poems by 126 poets and writers, woven like a tapestry of words into a wreath for one of their own. The mix of writers cuts across generations, social strata and stylistic practices of the genre. Rather than being a drawback, this is actually a strength of the anthology, that one man can bring together such an array of writers in one tome. It is an attestation to the influence of Adesanmi, the wayfarer, on his earthly journey – a man who served as a bridge that connected people from different backgrounds and brought them together for a common cause, be that the academic field of African studies and his desire to see it gain greater traction in academia, or global literature at large and his love of deconstructing the western canonisation of literature. Above all these, however, Adesanmi quintessentially remained a human with love for fellow humans. It is a testament to Adesanmi's influence and reach across generations that renowned African poets such as Niyi Osundare, Helon Habila, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Maxim Uzor Uzoatu, Emman Usman Shehu, Jumoke Verissimo and Funmi Aluko, all representing various ethnic and generational divides, share the pages of the collection with up and coming poets in a poetic salute to a wayfarer who also happens to belong to their artistic tribe.

As a collection, *Wreath for a Wayfarer* fills a gap in the coming to terms with the tragic passage of Pius Adesanmi by his artistic peers. In a culture that has become so material, that the concept of a wreath carries with it the presence of a cadaver and a tomb – neither of which was present at the time Pius died, due to the nature of his death – to have a “wreath” of words helps give Adesanmi's contemporaries closure and deal with the trauma that accompanied his passing. One of the co-editors, Nduka Otiono, alludes to this in his introduction, pointing out that the poems represent “the collective wreaths laid by a dispersed community of writers unsettled by the untimely loss of Adesanmi.”

With a celebration of the life of Pius Adesanmi at its heart, *Wreaths for a Wayfarer* is not so concerned about the canonisation and timelessness that often attend the publication of this kind of work, a desire to put together works that stand the test of time and will meet the demands of critics for quality based on western-oriented values. Rather, there seems to be a focus on the immediacy of celebration and elegy for a departed colleague, with particular emphasis on the socio-political relevance of the poems. That is more pronounced in the time frame taken to produce the anthology, a turnaround of about one year from the time of conception at the death of Adesanmi to its publication around the first anniversary of the event.

In his introduction to the book, Otiono draws on his “quarter of a century relationship with Adesanmi as a friend [and] co-traveller” to provide the driving force behind the production of the anthology. He firmly places the anthology in proper conversation with its predecessors that have been produced to celebrate other departed poets on the African continent, such as Christopher Okigbo and David Diop. An accomplished poet himself with two collections to his name, Otiono recognises the power of the written text in the hands of a writer. It is his weapon in the face of oppression and his instrument in times of celebration. And that is why Otiono believes that the poems in the anthology

serve as a celebration of life, a life lived in the service of humanity and love for the African continent.

Being a collection of poems in honour of a departed colleague, it is not a surprise that most of the poems in the collection are either in the form of homage to or dirge for Adesanmi. However, the poems also serve as an endorsement of some of the values and issues that were close to the heart of the scholar before his death, especially issues relating to the African continent. For example, there are two poems titled "Wayfarer," by Funmi Aluko and James Yeku, and both draw heavily on the thematic thrust of a poem by Adesanmi with the same title. The poems "Protest" by Ejiogor Ugwu and "Say Me a Rebellion" by Kingsley Madueke place themselves firmly in conversation with Adesanmi's well-known critical commentaries on the state of affairs on the African continent.

And this gives rise to a question that seems to plague any anthology of this nature. With such an eclectic collection of poets linked only by their collective grief, and each possessing their own unique and differing poetic voices, forms, registers and ranges, how do you bring them into a harmonious and coherent whole for easy reading and aesthetic appeal? Credit must go to the editors, Otiono and Uchechukwu Umezurike, for managing to achieve these goals without losing the thematic link, Pius Adesanmi, that brought the voices out into the open. Adesanmi was a man of many parts, after all: a writer, scholar, activist, public speaker and, above the rest, a human. Yet these parts did not operate in isolation, but constantly overlapped in his engagement with his identified public, either in the classroom or on social media. Therefore, organising the selected poems in three sections, "Wayfarer," "Requiems" and "Homecoming," which, according to Otiono in his introductory remarks reflects "various stages of Adesanmi's life," is an act that deserves commendation.

Adesanmi's influence on the poem is evident. Often arguing through his Yoruba worldview in some of his essays, it is not a surprise that there are poems that reflect this view. "When an Iroko Falls" by Iquo Diana Abasi, "Akáşólérí (Mourners)" by Kòlá Túbòsún, "Abiku Agba" by Usman Oladipo Akanbi and "Haiku – Ai-Ku (Immortality)" by Adesanya Adewale Adeshina are examples of how Pius's love for his mother tongue and its richness can serve as an inspiration for poetic accomplishments. Yet Adesanmi's love as an Africanist and a humanist transcends his ethnic leaning to embrace other cultures, and so from the Igbo cultural roots comes the beautiful poem, "Planting Season" by Anote Ajelurou, that uses the harvest festival of the new yam as a thematic framework for mourning the passing of Adesanmi.

Yet the book about Adesanmi has Adesanmi in it. With Adesanmi's sole poetry collection, *The Wayfarer and Other Poems* (published in 2001 by Oracle Books, Lagos), now out of print, the editors also felt the need to reacquaint his ardent followers with the poetic side of Adesanmi. However, it is also a commentary on the state of archiving on the African continent and the need to preserve the written works of the best minds on the continent for posterity – a challenge to publishers, both independent and established, to give attention to this side of their industry.

As deserving of praise as are the poets who made it into the collection, there is something to be said about those who did not – further attestation to the influence of Adesanmi on the continent and why more volumes of this kind can be expected. The editors turned down 131 submissions from prospective poets who had hoped to

be part of providing the soundtrack to Adesanmi's passage. It cannot be ruled out that some of these poems will make their way into other volumes or collections. For his efforts in the short time he spent on earth, it will not be too much an honour for Adesanmi.

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