

# ASM TUITION ACADEMY

## MY FATHER WOULD NOT SHOW US

### My Father Would Not Show Us

[Which way do we face to talk to the dead?]

Dedicated to: Rainer Maria Rilke

My father's face

five days dead

is organised for me to see.

It's cold in here

and the borrowed coffin gleams unnaturally;

the pine one has not yet been delivered.

Half-expected this inverted face

but not the soft, for some reason

unfrozen collar of his striped pyjamas.

This is the last time I am allowed

to remember my childhood as it might have been:

a louder, braver place,

crowded, a house with a tin roof

being hailed upon, and voices rising,

my father's wry smile, his half-turned face.

My father would not show us how to die.

He hid, he hid away.

Behind the curtains where his life had been,

the florist's flowers curling into spring,

he lay inside, he lay.

He could recall the rag-and-bone man

passing his mother's gate in the morning light.

Now the tunnelling sound of the dogs next door;

everything he hears is white.

My father could not show us how to die.

He turned, he turned away.

Under the counterpane, without one call

or word or name,

face to the wall, he lay.

### Context:

Ingrid de Kok is a South African poet known for exploring themes of memory, family, and social issues. "**My Father Would Not Show Us**" is a deeply personal and reflective poem that addresses the complex emotions surrounding the death of the poet's father. The speaker reflects on how her father chose to hide his vulnerability, withdrawing emotionally as he neared death. The poem touches on how death is often hidden from loved ones, leaving those left behind to grapple with unresolved feelings of grief.

The poem's title, "**My Father Would Not Show Us**," suggests a deliberate withholding on the father's part, referring to both his death and the emotions leading up to it. The speaker's reflections create a sense of emotional distance and incompleteness, which adds to the poignancy of the poem.

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## Themes:

### 1. **Death and Grief:**

- The central theme of the poem is **death** and the emotional aftermath for those left behind. The speaker reflects on her father's death, focusing on how he **hid** from his family, both physically and emotionally, as he approached his final moments. His refusal to confront or share his death with his family leaves the speaker with a sense of emotional distance and unresolved grief.
- **Grief** in the poem is portrayed as complex, with the speaker expressing both sorrow and frustration over her father's withdrawal. The lack of closure adds to the emotional weight of the poem.

### 2. **Emotional Distance:**

- The poem highlights the theme of **emotional distance**, particularly in the way the father **hides** his vulnerability from his family. His refusal to **show** his death reflects his reluctance to share this part of himself with those closest to him. This emotional withdrawal creates a barrier between the speaker and her father, even in death.
- This distance leads to the speaker's feelings of alienation and confusion, as she is left to process his death without the opportunity to fully understand or connect with him in his final moments.

### 3. **Memory and Loss:**

- **Memory** plays a key role in the poem as the speaker reflects on moments from her father's life, as well as his death. The speaker recalls the **rag-and-bone man** as a part of her father's past, which she remembers after his death. These memories, however, seem to lack depth, further emphasizing the emotional distance between them.
- The poem also grapples with the theme of **loss**, not just in terms of the father's physical death but also the emotional loss that comes from his decision to hide away in his final moments. The father's absence, both physically and emotionally, haunts the speaker, making the grief more profound.

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## Poetic Devices:

### 1. **Repetition:**

- The phrase "**he hid, he hid away**" is repeated throughout the poem, emphasizing the father's emotional and physical withdrawal. This repetition reinforces the idea that the father's death was something he kept from his family, adding to the speaker's feelings of alienation.
- The repeated refrain also mirrors the act of hiding and retreating, as if the father's withdrawal is something continuous and unresolved.

### 2. **Imagery:**

- The poem is rich in **imagery** that conveys both the physical and emotional aspects of death:
  - "**Behind the curtains where his life had been**" creates a visual image of the father hiding behind a literal curtain, symbolizing his withdrawal from life and from his family.

- “**The florist’s flowers curling into spring**” suggests both life and decay, representing the natural cycle of life and death.
  - “**A bird in the house**” is a metaphor for the father’s voice, creating an image of something fleeting, elusive, and difficult to capture, much like the father’s emotional availability.
3. **Metaphor:**
- The “**curtain**” is a metaphor for the barrier between life and death, as well as the emotional barrier between the father and the family. It serves as a physical and symbolic division that the father hides behind, preventing the speaker from fully understanding his experience of death.
  - “**A trumpet on the staircase**” is another metaphor used to describe the father’s voice, which is portrayed as something loud but fleeting, echoing through the house without ever truly being understood or captured.
4. **Tone:**
- The tone of the poem is **melancholic** and **reflective**, with an undercurrent of frustration. The speaker expresses sadness over her father’s death but also frustration with his decision to keep his death private. The emotional distance created by the father’s withdrawal leaves the speaker feeling detached and unresolved in her grief.
  - The **reflective tone** adds depth to the speaker’s emotions, as she contemplates the significance of her father’s actions and the impact they have on her ability to mourn.
5. **Structure:**
- The poem is written in **free verse**, with no regular rhyme scheme or meter. This loose structure mirrors the fragmented, disjointed nature of the speaker’s thoughts as she processes her father’s death. The lack of a formal structure also reflects the emotional complexity of grief, which is often unpredictable and difficult to contain.
  - The poem’s irregular line lengths and enjambment create a sense of **disjointedness**, mirroring the speaker’s feelings of emotional confusion and unresolved grief.
6. **Contrast:**
- There is a contrast between the father’s life and his death, particularly in the imagery of the “**florist’s flowers curling into spring.**” While flowers are typically a symbol of life and renewal, here they are juxtaposed with the image of the father “**hiding**” from his death. This contrast emphasizes the father’s retreat from life, even as the world continues around him.
  - The **contradiction** in the title, “**would not show us,**” sets up an expectation of closeness or learning in death, yet the father actively chooses to keep his death hidden. This highlights the emotional barrier between the speaker and her father.

## COMPARISON WITH,

## ONE FLESH

## A CHILD TO HIS SICK GRAND FATHER

To compare "**My Father Would Not Show Us**" by Ingrid de Kok with "**A Child to His Sick Grandfather**" by Joanna Baillie and "**One Flesh**" by Elizabeth Jennings, we can focus on how each poem addresses themes of **death**, **grief**, and **emotional distance**, while using different **poetic devices** to explore familial relationships. These poems all reflect on how individuals confront the decline of loved ones, though each presents a unique perspective on how death affects both the dying and those left behind.

### Context:

- "**My Father Would Not Show Us**" (Ingrid de Kok):  
The poem reflects on the speaker's experience of her father's death. The father deliberately hides his death from his family, refusing to share his final moments with them. The emotional withdrawal leaves the speaker feeling distanced and unresolved in her grief, adding a layer of frustration to the mourning process.
  - "**A Child to His Sick Grandfather**" (Joanna Baillie):  
This poem, written in the 18th century, explores a child's feelings of sorrow and confusion as they watch their once strong and caring grandfather decline in health. The child's perspective is filled with affection, hope, and helplessness, as the grandchild attempts to comfort and understand the changes in their beloved grandfather, highlighting the inevitability of death and aging.
  - "**One Flesh**" (Elizabeth Jennings):  
Jennings reflects on the emotional distance that has developed between her aging parents, who once shared physical intimacy but now lie apart in separate beds. The poem addresses the passage of time, the transformation of love from passion to quiet companionship, and the quiet sadness that accompanies long-term relationships when the intensity of love fades.
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### Themes:

1. **Death and Decline:**
  - "**My Father Would Not Show Us**": The poem deals with **death** directly, focusing on the father's deliberate attempt to **hide** his death from his family. The father's withdrawal creates a sense of emotional distance, as the speaker struggles with feelings of unresolved grief and alienation from the process of dying.
  - "**A Child to His Sick Grandfather**": The poem is also focused on **decline** but from a child's perspective. The child reflects on the **physical deterioration** of the grandfather, expressing sorrow and confusion as they watch a once strong figure weaken. There is an emotional closeness between the child and the grandfather, in contrast to the emotional distance in de Kok's poem.
  - "**One Flesh**": While **death** is not directly addressed, there is a sense of **emotional decline** in Jennings' poem. The couple, who once shared physical and emotional intimacy, now live separately in the same space. Their relationship has declined into a quiet, emotionally distanced companionship, suggesting the inevitability of change as people age.
2. **Emotional Distance:**

- **"My Father Would Not Show Us"**: The theme of **emotional distance** is central, as the father's withdrawal from his family during his final moments creates a profound sense of separation. The father's refusal to show his vulnerability leaves the speaker feeling disconnected from him and his death, which complicates her grieving process.
  - **"A Child to His Sick Grandfather"**: In contrast, the child's relationship with the grandfather is marked by **emotional closeness**. The child expresses deep affection and sorrow, and though they are witnessing the grandfather's decline, there is no emotional withdrawal. The child's attempts to comfort the grandfather highlight the strong bond between them.
  - **"One Flesh"**: Emotional distance is a key theme in Jennings' poem as well, though it is portrayed in a quieter, less explicit way. The aging couple's physical separation (lying in **separate beds**) symbolizes their emotional disconnection. Despite their shared history, there is a sense of isolation between them as time has eroded their intimacy.
3. **Grief and Acceptance:**
- **"My Father Would Not Show Us"**: Grief in this poem is **complicated** by the father's choice to hide his death. The speaker's grief is mixed with frustration and confusion because her father did not allow his family to share in his final moments. This creates a feeling of unresolved mourning.
  - **"A Child to His Sick Grandfather"**: The child's grief is present, but there is also an element of **hope** and **confusion**. The child does not fully comprehend the permanence of death and still hopes for the grandfather's recovery. The poem ends with the child expressing a desire to stay with the grandfather, reflecting an innocence in the face of death.
  - **"One Flesh"**: Grief in Jennings' poem is more about the **loss of intimacy** and the **passage of time**. The speaker mourns the emotional and physical distance between her parents, reflecting on how time has transformed their love into something distant and almost detached. There is a quiet resignation in the poem, as the speaker accepts this change but is saddened by it.

### Poetic Devices:

1. **Imagery:**
- **"My Father Would Not Show Us"**: de Kok uses vivid **imagery** to capture the emotional and physical withdrawal of the father. Phrases like **"behind the curtains"** and **"he hid away"** evoke a sense of concealment and distance. The **florist's flowers** symbolize life continuing outside while the father remains hidden from it, suggesting the father's retreat from life itself.
  - **"A Child to His Sick Grandfather"**: Baillie uses **physical imagery** to describe the grandfather's deterioration, focusing on his physical weakness and frailty. The child observes details like the **"wan cheek"** and **"white hairs"**, symbolizing the grandfather's aging. This imagery highlights the physical decline that accompanies aging.
  - **"One Flesh"**: Jennings' **domestic imagery** reflects the emotional distance between the couple. The image of the **separate beds** becomes a powerful symbol of their physical and emotional separation, while the **book** the father

holds suggests his retreat into himself, echoing the theme of emotional isolation.

## 2. Repetition:

- **"My Father Would Not Show Us"**: Repetition is used in the phrase **"he hid, he hid away"**, emphasizing the father's deliberate withdrawal from his family. This reinforces the emotional distance and the speaker's frustration with his refusal to show vulnerability.
- **"A Child to His Sick Grandfather"**: Baillie uses repetition in the child's address to the grandfather, emphasizing phrases like **"you used to"** to contrast the grandfather's current state with his former strength. This repetition highlights the child's sorrow and disbelief at the changes in the grandfather.
- **"One Flesh"**: Jennings does not rely heavily on repetition, but the poem's controlled, regular structure mirrors the routine and emotional restraint of the couple's relationship. The structure itself reinforces the theme of quiet resignation and distance.

## 3. Tone:

- **"My Father Would Not Show Us"**: The tone is **melancholic** and **frustrated**. The speaker mourns her father's death, but there is also a sense of frustration with his refusal to share his final moments with the family. This mixture of sadness and frustration creates an emotionally complex tone.
- **"A Child to His Sick Grandfather"**: The tone is **innocent** and **hopeful**, mixed with sorrow. The child does not fully understand death and approaches the grandfather's decline with love, hope, and confusion. The tone shifts between affection and a growing understanding of the inevitable.
- **"One Flesh"**: The tone is **quiet** and **reflective**. There is a deep sense of **resignation** and **sadness** as the speaker reflects on her parents' emotional distance. The poem is contemplative, with an undercurrent of melancholy as the speaker comes to terms with the transformation of their love over time.

## 4. Structure:

- **"My Father Would Not Show Us"**: The poem is written in **free verse**, reflecting the disjointed, unresolved nature of the speaker's emotions. The lack of a strict structure mirrors the emotional confusion and frustration the speaker feels.
- **"A Child to His Sick Grandfather"**: The poem has a **rhymed structure** and follows a regular meter, reflecting the child's innocent, hopeful perspective. The ordered form contrasts with the disorder of the grandfather's decline, highlighting the child's attempt to make sense of the situation.
- **"One Flesh"**: Jennings uses a **regular rhyme scheme (ABABCC)** and structured stanzas to reflect the ordered, controlled nature of the couple's relationship. The formal structure mirrors the routine and predictability of their lives, even as the speaker contemplates the emotional distance between them.