

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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Love After Love

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

Derek Walcott¹

Reflections

I was recently invited to present to a class of undergraduate creative writing students. They were gathered around a long table, as a banquet, and were poised with their laptops and notebooks; they seemed eager and kind, if a little nervous. I said, "I hope you will relax. Rather than method, I'd like to talk about Muse." And I handed them this poem.

It is likely true that in some ways it is easier, or at least more programmatic, to teach craft—the history and rules of form, rhyme and metrical structure, the use of line and stanza—than it is to teach inspiration; garmentry is more visible than the soul it dresses. So when it comes to the Muse—recognizing it, feeding it, allowing it to manifest in poetry—there is but only so much one can tell another about the work they alone can do, which is the work of paying

¹ "Love After Love" by Derek Walcott from *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. Used by permission.

attention to the disturbances, entrances, and passions of their life. I have always loved Walcott's poem for beginning a conversation like this, moving us in a direction toward the work that is reuniting with—or perhaps facing for the first time, with both patience and anticipation—the inner teacher, who has been present all along.

His are gentle instructions, more invitation than demand: sit; eat; give; take down; peel; feast. Though synonymous with *eating*, *feasting* is certainly and importantly distinct. With its roots in the Latin “festa,” meaning joyous, the feast is more occasion than meal. To feast is to celebrate, even to consecrate, and it implies abundance, sumptuousness, even extravagance. What a posture to assume not only in summoning the Muse to one's writing, but in summoning the soul back to life.

I appreciate Walcott's unwavering hopefulness. As this poem would have it, we can all but rest easy in faith, for it is not a question of whether or not love after love is in the cards for us; Walcott insists it is indeed: the time *will* come; you *will* greet yourself arriving; you *will* love again the stranger. Amen to that.

✧ About the poet

Derek Walcott (1930-2017) was born on the island of Saint Lucia, a former British colony in the West Indies. Though trained as a painter, Walcott was both a renowned playwright as well as an award-winning poet. With his twin brother, he cofounded the Trinidad Theater Workshop and, while teaching at Boston University, he founded the Boston Playwrights' Theatre. During his long career, he held teaching positions at Columbia University, Yale University, Rutgers University, and Essex University in England. In 1992, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. His other honors include a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award, a Royal Society of Literature Award, and the Queen's Medal for Poetry. He was an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He died in March 2017 at the age of 87.



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