

Love After Love: Derek Walcott's Poetic Ode to Being at Home in Ourselves by Maria Popova

“Sit. Feast on your life.”

The great Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has written beautifully about why learning to love others begins with learning to love ourselves — a sentiment that the reactive modern cynic might dismiss as the vacant fodder of self-help books, but one which more considered reflection reveals to be deeply truthful and deeply uncomfortable. What, after all, does loving oneself even mean — particularly if we’re aspiring to be unselfish and generous, and to outgrow the illusory ego-shell we call a self?

That’s what Caribbean poet and playwright Derek Walcott (b. January 23, 1930) — a writer of such extraordinary poetic prowess that his 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature appears a wholly inadequate measure of his mastery and mesmerism — addresses with a luminous sidewise gleam in a poem titled “Love After Love,” found in his *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (public library).

On an archival On Being episode titled “Opening to Our Lives,” mindfulness pioneer Jon Kabat-Zinn reads Walcott’s masterpiece — undoubtedly one of the greatest, most soul-stretching poems ever written. Please enjoy: