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*“Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. [...] And this is the exact process of the making of poetry, or what should be called not its ‘making’ but its remaking...”*

-from Derek Walcott’s “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” (What the Twilight Says and Other Essays, p. 69)

There is an interior quality to man that poetry alone has access to. The walls of our subjectivity are buried with truths about the individual and their world, and it takes poetry to shatter, to masterfully obliterate *everything*, in order for these truths to surface. Not only surface, though—but evolve. Poetry reupholsters the walls of our subjectivity and turns us into animals of deep confession. We say the truth because of poetry; we say new things that have always existed somewhere in us. Poetry delivers itself with integrity and beauty. It collects the broken pieces that fall from introspection, puts them back together, and asks that we marvel at its new shape. That’s what poetry does best, according to Derek Walcott, but not without love’s assistance. Love binds broken pieces whole again. For Walcott, it is love that admires the wholeness of us, and it is love that remakes such wholeness when the beautiful thing about ourselves is not that we’re whole, but exposed to life’s sharpest elements. Poetry can’t always restore that in us which has come undone, but it can illuminate that which has undone us. It can direct others, through love, to our suffering, our screams, our burning desires; to the impermanence and essence of all of these things. When poets cast light on the shadows of human life, they wander into unexplored regions of the mind. But first, before poets situate us in the throes of those truths, the proverbial vase must be broken, and we must offer ourselves up to the journey its disassembled parts choose to take us on.

Any vase can be fixed as many times as it's been broken. The pieces may become smaller and smaller after each disaster. Harder to find, more frustrating to glue back together, but the vase will always remember its shape. If after some time there are pieces that can't be found, don't fret: the beauty of the vase was never that which made it symmetrical. Humans, however, are unlike vases, and sometimes are beguiled by the prospect of symmetry—wholeness—only to have it cruelly refused. John Keats points out how well the seasons demonstrate this. As one season rolls on into the next, our lives flow along an axis of asymmetry, no season in our mind like the one before. Like the vase, we break and seldom recover every fragment. That's part of the truth we learn from "The Human Seasons." Walcott engages this truth, too, acknowledging that poetry is the attempt at defining the space left behind by those fragments. Those are the walls of our subjectivity. The speaker in Keats' poem explores this subjectivity over the course of the four seasons of the mind. When the mind is in its Spring, it is supple and replete with optimism. Spring depicts our youth and the time during which we "take all beauty with an easy span." According to Keats, Spring arrives first, and it is only after its passage that the other seasons begin to unravel the symmetry Walcott suggests that we admire. Right at the moment when the proverbial vase feels too strong to fracture, Spring's end brings Summer into the mind of the man, with its "honed cud of youthful thought." Summer ushers in more solemn contemplations for the man, walking him away from his youth and to the "quiet coves" of Autumn. In Autumn, the vase begins to show signs of wear, as the man grows content even without the vibrant and ephemeral delights of Spring and Summer. Man endures Autumn for the longest time in his mind. This is where the asymmetry of life becomes most evident. Autumn is the first tremor that cracks the vase, the first glance man gets at their interiority. When Keats says of the Autumn-minded man, he is "contented so to look on mists in idleness—to let fair things pass by unheeded as a threshold brook," he invokes a stillness that prepares him for Winter. Winter is what ultimately shatters the vase. "He has his Winter too of pale misfeature," Keats writes, "Or else he would forgo his mortal nature." Winter is the end of the journey in Keats' world, and at the end of the journey, there is no reconstitution of his vase. Poetry then, Keats might say in response to Walcott, isn't the remaking of the vase, but the quiet witness of its broken pieces.

Poetry for Keats, when put in conversation with Walcott, is a way to observe the human condition over the stretch of time. When W.H. Auden is added to the mix, as much is true with one exception. Poetry is the means through which we understand love and time, and the means through which we understand the following about their relationship: that time, steady in its temperament, outruns love. This process breaks us repeatedly, and always has throughout the course of history. Poetry tries to testify against time, albeit in vain, that love is as resolute a force as time. Auden's "As I Walked Out this Evening" details, however, that we break when pressed against the pressure of Time. Time is both what "shatters our vase" when we are in love, and what allows us the space to see where all of its pieces have scattered. In many ways, the beginning of Auden's poem invokes the lustfulness of Keats' Spring in "The Human Seasons." The speaker in the poem leaves his home to find two lovers talking. He hears their impossible declarations of devotion, that they will love each other until "China and Africa meet" and until "the ocean is folded and hung up to dry." The speaker in this poem is a cynic, non-believing of the strangers' love and its strength to endure. They cite Time as the reason for love's eventual abandon. Time "watches from the shadow and coughs when you kiss." Time is suspicious of that which seems certain, unbreakable. And "In headaches and in worry/Vaguely life leaks away,/And Time will have his fancy To-morrow or to-day." *Love loses its potency as time marches on*, I could imagine Auden saying to Walcott, to which he wouldn't disagree. However, he'd remind us that in losing love to Time, are moments before that eventual deadline, before death, for poetry to inhabit. And in those moments, it is poetry's vocation to find love's broken pieces and savor that journey. While the journey may not always be pleasant, the journey always warrants the production of poetry. As Auden writes in stanza 12, "O look, look in the mirror,/O look in your distress:/Life remains a blessing/Although you cannot bless."

So far, we have seen how both poems neatly fit into the mold of Walcott's definition of poetry. We glean from both pieces that poetry is a response to the seasons passing through us, and to Time. On this, between the poets, there's no dispute. In the first sentence of Walcott's definition he says, "Break a vase and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole." Although this may be true, Walcott neglects that there is life before the "vase breaks," and that the momentum herein constitutes poetry too. He says nothing

of life's beauty, of its pure and ignorant joy, in the moments when things don't seem fragile. Poetry can be deeply unserious and light as well, as parts of ourselves can be. Auden acknowledges the unserious parts of our burning desires with the romance of the lovers under the archway; Keats does so with his vibrant descriptions of the mind's Spring and Autumn. The other part of Walcott's definition that is challenging to accept is this judgment. He declares that the love vested in the reassembling of the vase, is the "exact process of making poetry." Poetry has its essence outside of anything a writer can craft, which is to say that it exists without our reassembling. Poetry, for lack of a better expression, just *is*. In the context of Walcott's definition, to suggest that there's any exact process behind "remaking" poetry, prevents the "unserious" among us from participating in its exercise.

Walcott's definition of poetry is elegant. For him, poetry expresses itself as an extension of our interiority. It represents the writing on the walls of our subjectivity being writ large. Whether his definition of poetry concerns itself with something universal, isn't the focus of this dialogue. What's important is that he highlights a significant quality of the human spirit. That it is profoundly resilient. When we, or things in our lives, shatter, we respond by tirelessly working to make them whole again. We are committed to finding the truth of broken things, and in the midst of this toil, we manage to find time to create poetry. As the seasons turn over and as Time slowly erects its impenetrable wall, poetry continues on, realizing the depth contained within all of us.