

# Nearing Forty



## SUMMARY

"Nearing Forty" is dedicated to poet and educator John Figueroa, a good friend and mentor to Derek Walcott.

The [epigraph](#) quotes Samuel Johnson's 18th-century preface to an edition of Shakespeare's plays. Johnson notes that "fanciful invention"—showy creative work—can entertain audiences for a time, because we're all looking for some novelty to spice up our lives. But that novelty quickly wears off, leaving audiences craving art that expresses permanent truths.

The speaker has been unable to sleep since four, hearing the thin, repetitive sound of early-morning rain. The rain reminds him, as it chills his bones, that he's about to turn 40, and that soon his weakening eyesight (and/or imagination) will grow as foggy as a frosty window. Soon the day may come when he'll look back on his writing with the depressing honesty of middle age, and realize that his early promise was a false start, passionless and ordinary.

That would be fair, he suggests, because his friend John Figueroa's work passionately strove to confront everyday reality. Figueroa's style was beyond flashy figurative language, and it expressed itself—however humbly or painfully—in clear, bright lines of poetry. His pages were simple, like taut bedsheets bleaching in the sun under a spurting drainpipe, happy to receive any momentary burst of inspiration.

Figueroa understood early that poetic ambition would prove as brief as a dazzling meteor. The speaker pictures him clumsily lighting a wet match, smiling, accepting the hoarse whistle of a damaged kettle, and accepting that his field of vision is now narrower than the gap between two slats of a window-blind. As his poetic output diminishes like thinning leaves, he'll remember how great pessimism can take root in artists' minds, causing them to judge their life's work bleakly and soberly (as if judging a whole year by end-of-year rainfall). As a naive schoolkid, the speaker would mistakenly call the "convectional" end-of-year rains "conventional."

Alternatively, Figueroa will rise against his cynicism and get to work on his poetry, feeling a bittersweet but reliable excitement, until he can finally sleep properly (or enters the sleep of death). He'll take note of how the imagination declines toward the end. He'll approach his art in a workmanlike, deliberately conventional way, as if he were a "water clerk" measuring the force of gentle rainfall—rainfall influenced by the changing moon, persevering even while seeming to cry.



## THEMES



### DISILLUSIONMENT AND WISDOM IN MIDDLE AGE

"Nearing Forty" explores the speaker's feelings as he approaches middle age. Forty, the poem suggests, is a landmark year: a moment to reflect on the follies of being young and to acknowledge the dwindling time one has left. For this poem's speaker, whom readers might interpret as Walcott himself, middle age is also marked by growing disillusionment: the older the speaker gets, the more world-weary he becomes and the further he grows from the passion of his youth. Yet the poem argues that there's a kind of wisdom in this process: aging might sap people of their fire and ambition, but it also helps them see the world in a more level-headed and, perhaps, more truthful manner.

The restless speaker is unable to sleep, kept awake by the sound of the "rigidly metred" rain. This rain, like a ticking clock, reminds the speaker that he's constantly getting older. The speaker fears the consequences of aging for both body and mind. He anticipates his "weak / vision thickening to a frosted pane"—that is, his eyesight worsening. He also fears losing the artistic vision, imagination, and "fire" he possessed in his younger days.

But while youth is a time of passion and ambition, the poem suggests that it's also full of self-deception. People start adult life with grand ideas about who or what they might become; it all seems so *possible*. For the speaker and his friend, fellow poet John Figueroa (to whom the poem is addressed), this youthful fire manifested as ambition like a "searing meteor" and a desire to make great "work." Meteors blaze brilliantly across the sky, and meteor-like talents or works of art can dazzle their audiences for a time. But meteors are rare occurrences and have little to do with the stuff of everyday life (where, the poem suggests, more authentic inspiration awaits). Like the "pleasures of sudden wonder" mentioned in the [epigraph](#), youthful, meteor-like brilliance is impressive but "soon exhausted"—and ultimately inferior to "the stability of truth" that comes with owning up to one's regrets and failures in middle age.

Young people also think they know everything! The speaker recalls mixing up the word "conventional" for "convectional" in his school days. Growing older, paradoxically, teaches people that they *don't* have it all figured out. Middle age, then, means coming to terms with life's disappointments, reining in the passions of youth, and accepting fewer moments of pure ecstasy in exchange for a steadier sense of happiness. The

poem presents this truth as something *only* aging can teach. Being 40, or thereabouts, brings with it the "bleak modesty of middle age." Growing disillusioned but wiser, the speaker anticipates "the day when I may judge my work [...] as a false dawn, fireless and average." The speaker thus encounters a kind of reckoning, looking back on his younger self with unflinching honesty.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32



### POETRY AND INSPIRATION

Derek Walcott's "Nearing Forty" can be read as an *ars poetica*—a poem commenting on the art of poetry itself. The poem is dedicated to and addresses John Figueroa, Walcott's friend and fellow poet, whom Walcott admires for his ability to draw inspiration from his mundane, everyday surroundings. Walcott's poem declares that Figueroa "bled for / the household truth." The phrase celebrates his passion and sacrifice, along with his sense that "the household truth"—the reality of ordinary, daily life—is no less valuable than grand artistic statements or moments of "sudden wonder."

Figueroa's style was "past metaphor," this poem's speaker says, meaning that he didn't need flowery or startling images to capture this "truth." Instead, his verse was clear, straightforward, and unadorned: "simple, shining lines, in pages stretched / plain as a bleaching bedsheet under a gutter- / ing rainspout." Notice that there's nothing fancy about this image (but that it is a [metaphor](#); the speaker, it seems, has yet to master the style he so admires).

The speaker further declares that Figueroa was "glad for the sputter / of occasional insight." Instead of waiting around for some magnificent flash of inspiration to strike, he would "fumble a damp match and, smiling, settle / for the dry wheezing of a dented kettle." His vision was "narrower than a louvre's gap": the small slit between the horizontal window blinds. Figueroa's work is humble and laser-focused, acutely tuned into the strange magic of the mundane. And this, Walcott's poem insists, makes it truthful and authentic.

Against Figueroa's example, the speaker now sees his earlier work as cold and "fireless," a kind of "false dawn" or false start. Yet he, like Figueroa, can embrace the "sadder joy but steadier elation" of approaching poetry with everyday reality in mind. As the [epigraph](#) by Samuel Johnson suggests, the speaker can put aside the "delight" of "fanciful invention" and concentrate on the "stability of truth" found in the world *as it is* before him. Though imagination might "ebb[]" and flow with age, the speaker simply needs to be present and attentive like his mentor, receptive to the truth and inspiration all around him rather than waiting for grand inspiration to strike. That way, he

adds, he'll be like a "water clerk" measuring rainfall: humble, practical-minded, and willing to do the hard but necessary work authentic poetry demands.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22
- Lines 23-32



### SELF-DOUBT AND CYNICISM

Approaching middle age has made the speaker of "Nearing Forty" (a stand-in for Walcott himself) reassess his life's work. "Watching your leaves thin," the speaker says, can push people to "recall how deep / prodigious cynicism plants its seed, / gauges our seasons by this year's end rain." This [metaphor](#) suggests that getting older and watching his remaining years dwindle (or his "leaves" of published poetry seem "thin[ner]" in substance) makes the speaker reflect on his output and legacy. He can't sleep, as anxiety about the "false dawn"—that is, the unfulfilled promise—of his work keeps him awake. The roots of such self-doubt and "cynicism" run "deep," the speaker observes, and can make artists judge their lives according to their creative productivity ([figuratively](#), the "rain" of insights they've gathered by "year's end").

Self-doubt can even grow into something vast and debilitating. Disappointment at feeling like they haven't done enough or that their work doesn't matter could easily demoralize poets like the speaker and Figueroa and prevent them from writing at all. Yet the speaker ultimately presents artists with an implicit choice: wallow in cynicism or "rise and set [their] lines to work," showing up for their job just like any other laborer. "Nearing Forty" thus suggests that even great poets feel doubt about their work from time to time; self-doubt is universal, and it's easy to let it fester. It's harder—but also more rewarding—to simply get up, put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), and steadily work through these difficulties.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-8
- Lines 15-24
- Lines 25-32



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-5

(for John Figueroa) ...  
... a frosted pane,

"Nearing Forty" features a dedication and an [epigraph](#) before the main text. The poem is "for John Figueroa," a friend, fellow poet, and important mentor in Walcott's life. Throughout much

of the poem, the speaker seems to address him directly.

The epigraph comes from Samuel Johnson, one of the major critics and poets of the 18th century. It appears in Johnson's [preface](#) to Shakespeare's collected works, which praises Shakespeare for writing authentically about life as it is—"hold[ing] up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." From the epigraph on, then, the poem contrasts writing that indulges in "fanciful invention" with writing that confronts the truth. The speaker, now approaching middle age, goes on to describe a kind of split between his earlier style—which was full of "fanciful invention"—and his newfound appreciation for humble, hard-won honesty.

The poem itself opens with the speaker unable to sleep. He's been "Insomniac since four," which could mean either that he's had trouble sleeping since he was four years old or that he's been awake since 4 A.M. Either way, he's anxious. The combination of insomnia and approaching middle age has troubled his mind. He describes the rain outside as "early-rising" (occurring early in the morning) and "rigidly metred": that is, its rhythmic, repetitive sound reminds him of [metrical](#) poetry.

Already, then, it seems the speaker is a version of Walcott himself. As the rain's "coolness numbs the marrow"—chills his bones—it reminds him that he's "nearing forty." It seems that the rain's *temperature* evokes the chilly reality of age and death, while its *tempo*, like a ticking clock, evokes the passage of time.

In lines 4-5, the speaker imagines how growing older will bring him "nearer [to] the weak / vision thickening to a frosted pane." This [metaphor](#) refers to the effects of aging and can be read in two ways. As people age, their sight can worsen and even fail: the clear window "panes" of the eyes might turn cloudy or opaque. But the speaker is also referring to the *inner* vision or imagination, which poets depend on for their work. The speaker worries that aging will sap the imaginative vigor of his poetry, diminishing its quality.

These opening lines also establish the form of "Nearing Forty." The poem uses [rhyme](#) (e.g., "narrow"/"marrow" in lines 1 and 3), but never settles into a consistent [rhyme scheme](#). Likewise, it establishes a [meter](#) ([iambic pentameter](#)), but this meter loosens a bit rather than remaining "rigid[]" as the poem continues. Finally, the poem consists of a single meandering sentence!

All of these formal choices reflect the speaker's restlessness. He longs for a sense of resolution—much as one line-ending word might seek a rhyming partner—but he never quite finds it or settles into any kind of steady pattern. Frequent [enjambment](#), as in lines 2-3 and 4-5 ("rain / recounting"; "weak / vision"), makes the poem's flow even more unpredictable.

## LINES 6-8

*nearer the day...*

*... fireless and average,*

Nearing age 40 causes the speaker to reassess his "work" to date. (The speaker can be read as Walcott himself reflecting on his poetic output.) In lines 6-8, he ruefully describes how he's approaching "the day when I may judge my work / by the bleak modesty of middle age / as a false dawn, fireless and average."

Middle age, this [metaphor](#) suggests, dismantles some of the illusions that sustain people in their youth. Writers in their twenties, for example, often think they're creating groundbreaking poetry; nearing forty, they often realize those poems weren't quite as good as they thought! The speaker anticipates that he might view his earlier work "as a false dawn": that is, initially promising but ultimately unremarkable. In place of its supposed passion and uniqueness, he'll perceive its "fireless," "average" qualities. (The fricative [alliteration](#) between "false" and "fireless" harshly underlines these two negative adjectives.)

These sentiments sound depressing and deflating. Notice, however, that the speaker says "may" rather than "will." It's not *certain* that he'll "judge" his youthful work unfavorably; he just fears that he might. As the poem turns to address Walcott's friend John Figueroa, it starts to offer a more optimistic vision, sketching a future that's poetically productive (if modest in ambition).

## LINES 9-15

*which would be ...*

*... of occasional insight;*

In lines 9-15, the speaker reflects that it "would be just" if his previous work does prove to have been "a false dawn, fireless and average" (line 8). Specifically, it would be fitting in light of the values the poem's dedicatee, John Figueroa, upholds in his own poetry. (From here on, the speaker addresses Figueroa via the second-person pronouns "you" and "your." The poem turns into a kind of *ars poetica*: a poem that considers the art of poetry itself.)

The poet/speaker describes Figueroa and his approach to creativity, finding in him an implied counterexample to his own "fireless and average" earlier work. Essentially, these lines depict Figueroa's poetry as humble, down-to-earth, and attentive to everyday reality. Walcott seems to view his early poetry as brash, showy, and inauthentic by comparison.

According to Walcott, Figueroa's life "bled for / the household truth, the style past metaphor" (lines 9-10). That is, Figueroa was passionately committed to the truth *right in front of him*, common and unfussy, and saw no need to reach for more "fanciful invention" (as the poem's [epigraph](#) puts it). He strove for a style that is "past metaphor": simple and homespun rather than showy and literary.

This unadorned style "finds its parallel however wretched / in simple, shining lines." The speaker admires Figueroa's ability to

keep his language plain and clear, following the poem where it needs to go, perhaps, rather than trying to wow readers. The plain truth might not be pretty (it could be "wretched"), but at least it's the truth. Figueroa's poetic "lines" [metaphorically](#) "shin[e]" with the gleam of authenticity.

Notice that line 12 is a perfect line of [iambic](#) pentameter, its five steady iambic feet evoking Figueroa's plain and beautiful style:

in simp-| le, shin-| ing lines, | in pag-| es stretched

The poem uses this [meter](#) throughout, but it's full of variations. The *lack* of variation here adds to the impression of simplicity and directness.

The speaker now uses a [simile](#) to further capture his friend's poetic "style":

[...] pages stretched  
plain as a bleaching bedsheet under a gutter-  
ing rainspout, glad for the sputter  
of occasional insight;

The comparison to "bleaching bedsheets" might suggest that Figueroa's "pages" are mostly white and empty. His "insight" might arrive only "occasional[ly]," as a "sputter," like the overflow from a "rainspout" (drainpipe) above the drying sheets. Yet when inspiration does come, Figueroa receives it "glad[ly]." He stays authentic and attentive to the reality around him. Bedsheets and drainpipes come from the world of daily domesticity, so they're fitting images of Figueroa's commitment to "household truth."

Notice how the [rhyme](#) between "gutter-" and "sputter," plus the [eye rhyme](#) between "wretched" and "stretched," comes off as slightly forced. These effects, too, might exemplify Figueroa's commitment to the humble, homely, and "wretched" as opposed to the slick, polished, and literary.

### LINES 15-19

*you who foresaw ...  
... a louvre's gap,*

Lines 15-19 further describe the character of John Figueroa. Grammatically and [tonally](#), the description is a bit ambiguous, perhaps reflecting mixed feelings on Walcott's part. In essence, it says that Figueroa once saw "ambition as a searing meteor," but now "settle[s]" for a more domestic, down-to-earth relationship with his creativity.

Start with the meteor [metaphor](#). Ambition can be meteor-like in the sense that it's lofty (aims high, etc.), and meteors appear high in the sky. Meteors are rare, bright phenomena that attract viewers' attention; similarly, an unusually ambitious person might gain notoriety, fame, and admiration.

But meteors are also distant and fleeting. They don't have much to do with ordinary human life; they just dazzle witnesses for a brief instant. So if one's literary fame, say, resembles a meteor, that might not be such a great thing. (A striking but brief career is sometimes described as "meteoric.") It's not clear whether Figueroa felt this kind of burning ambition himself or whether he was cautioning against it. Judging by the rest of the poem, he was probably suspicious of this type of ambition; on the other hand, most people aspire to some sort of greatness when they're young.

Regardless, Figueroa is anything but meteor-like these days. The speaker imagines him "fumbl[ing] a damp match" and "settl[ing] / for the dry wheezing of a dented kettle." In other words, now that he's in his middle or older age, he accepts his humdrum reality. He even smiles, perhaps, to think of that "searing meteor" of ambition.

The language here is heavily [symbolic](#). "Fumble" suggests clumsiness or inexactness, in contrast with the sort of control or mastery one might expect from an experienced poet. Perhaps even great poets are never fully in command of their craft. The "match" is a source of fire, which might represent the fire of inspiration or the passion of youth. It's "damp," but it can still light the stove for the kettle; similarly, the poet's passion and/or inspiration may have diminished since youth, but they still get the job done. And usefulness is what seems important to the speaker now: functional truth as opposed to dazzling but false artistry. Even the kettle is imperfect: it's "dry[ly] wheezing" (as older people sometimes do) and "dented" from use (like an aging body that's suffered wear and tear). The older poet "settle[s] / for" it in the literal sense that he sits down and listens to it. But he also [metaphorically](#) settles for—accepts—the diminished inspiration and passion of his later years.

Figueroa's "vision" is or will be "narrower than a louvre's gap"—that is, a thin slit between shutters or window-blinds. Of course, this [simile](#) might describe his actual eyesight (think of an old man squinting without glasses). But it also suggests that his *poetic* vision has diminished: grown more modest, or perhaps more focused. The speaker seems to prefer a "narrow," yet authentic, poetic vision to one that's big and brash but inauthentic.

Alternatively, this simile might describe the times when Figueroa *isn't* inspired—when his vision proves a little too limited to let the light in. Either way, the fact that Figueroa is "smiling" suggests that he's at peace with his reality. As long as he's alive, he'll find inspiration somewhere. It doesn't have to strike him like a lightning bolt; he might have an idea while he's just puttering around at home. In other words, he embraces daily life, offering the speaker a model for coping with the anxieties that come with age.

## LINES 20-24

*then, watching your ...  
... conventional for convectional;*

Lines 20-24 consider an artist's relationship with their own work as they age. Still addressing his friend John Figueroa, Walcott says that the older poet, while "watching your leaves thin," will "recall how deep / prodigious cynicism plants its seed."

The [metaphor](#) about "leaves thin[ning]" might describe the aging body. Just as a tree loses its leaves in fall, people lose their vigor over time. Some men also lose their hair, so the metaphor could refer to balding. But since this is largely a poem about poetry, the "leaves" might also refer to the *pages* of Figueroa's poetic output. Perhaps, as he gets older, he writes less often, or what he does write seems "thin[ner]" in terms of its literary substance.

When inspiration seems to fade, the speaker suggests, self-criticism and doubt can take over. Metaphorically speaking, "prodigious cynicism plants its seed" deep within people's minds, urging them to give up. Note that "prodigious" can mean *great in size or extent*, but also *monstrous and unnatural*. Both meanings work here! From one little seed of doubt, an entire forest of depression can grow.

Line 22 adds another layer to this metaphor. "Prodigious cynicism," the speaker says, "gauges our seasons by this year's end rain." This claim might be read in a few different (but related) ways:

1. Cynicism might cause us to "gauge[]"—judge—our whole creative lives in the bleakest possible light, as if judging a whole year on the basis of grim, rainy, end-of-year weather.
2. More specifically, cynicism might cause us to judge our whole lives by the *quantity* of our recent creative output (how much "rain" falls at "year's end"). If our productivity has slowed, we might fear that we've failed altogether.
3. Cynicism might cause us to judge our whole lives by the *quality* of our recent creative output. We might fear that our work is merely "conventional," as line 24 goes on to suggest.

This way of thinking is a kind of option available as someone ages (particularly for artists and creative types). Lines 25-32 will offer a healthier alternative.

But first, lines 23-24 make a little joke at youth's expense. The speaker recalls being a "greenhorn[]"—a young, inexperienced person—at school. He remembers how "we[]" young students would mistakenly "call" the rains "conventional for convectional." Quick science lesson: some rainclouds form through convection (the natural tendency of heat to rise upwards), particularly in tropical places like Saint Lucia, where Walcott is from. "Conventional," a similar-sounding word, has a

totally different definition. It can mean standard, customary, and/or predictable. So the schoolchildren were simply confusing one term for another. Here, however, the speaker's reference to "convention[]" reflects aging poets' fears about their own poetry: that it isn't as exceptional as they once believed.

## LINES 25-27

*or you will ...  
... can really sleep,*

Lines 25-27 offer an alternative to "prodigious cynicism"—the kind of self-doubt that makes artists give up on themselves and/or their art. These lines continue to address (via [apostrophe](#)) John Figueroa, Walcott's friend and fellow poet:

[...] or you will rise and set your lines to work  
with sadder joy but steadier elation,  
until the night when you can really sleep,

That "or" implies a choice: self-doubt and despair on the one hand, or determination and hard work on the other. Instead of giving up, Figueroa "will rise and set [his] lines to work" (his lines of poetry, that is). In other words, he'll show up to his job day after day, treating poetry not as some divine flash of inspiration but as something more patient and workmanlike.

This approach will bring with it "sadder joy but steadier elation." Writing won't be as intoxicating as it was in the early years, but it'll be a "joy" nonetheless, and offer a "steadier" kind of happiness. By engaging with ordinary reality on a daily basis, a poet might approach the "household truth" mentioned in line 10.

The whispery [sibilance](#) of "set"/"sadder"/"steadier" evokes a hushed atmosphere—the kind one might encounter in the early morning, when one "rise[s]" and sits down "to work." This atmosphere might also hint at the relative loneliness of being a poet (all those hours at a desk!). It's worth noting, too, that the poet/speaker could well be talking about *himself* in this part of the poem, finding in Figueroa an example of how to move forward and embrace middle age.

Line 27 looks forward to a "night when you can really sleep," recalling the mention of "Insomnia[]" in the poem's opening line. Rather than ordinary sleep, though, this line [metaphorically](#) describes the big sleep of death. In other words, the writing routine Walcott is describing entails a lifelong commitment: day after day of steady "work" from now until the end.

## LINES 28-32

*measuring how imagination ...  
... seems to weep.*

Lines 28-32 elaborate on the "sadder joy but steadier elation" the previous lines describe. The speaker is still technically addressing John Figueroa, but he's also talking more broadly

about the experience of writing in older age.

Having earlier compared high ambition—which, for the speaker, was once inseparable from the art of poetry—to a "searing meteor," the poem now presents a radically different vision of creativity. Taking this more mature approach, the poet "measur[es] how imagination / ebbs"—makes a record of their years of declining inspiration—simply by working steadily each day. Rather than waiting for some meteoric flash of insight, or trying to light up the literary skies, the poet just sits down at the desk and gives it a go.

To illustrate further, the speaker compares the mature writer to a "water clerk": someone who measures local rainfall. This is an unglamorous, but practical, administrative job. The clerk is a very "conventional" figure—but in context, that's not a negative word. Instead, it suggests stability: the daily practice of writing even when one doesn't feel a spark. While the clerk's job may not be exciting, it at least involves the "measuring" of reality. The clerk, in other words, deals with the kind of "household truth" to which Figueroa has devoted his artistic life.

And so the poem comes full circle. The opening lines compared the rain to "rigidly metred" poetry. Now, the speaker suggests that, just as measuring rainfall is the water clerk's job, measuring the world through language is the poet's. Fittingly enough, the [iambic](#) pentameter in line 30 evokes the rain's steady drumming: "who weighs | the force | of light- | ly fall- | ing rain." This rhythm also conveys, perhaps, the steady commitment a poet needs in older age.

The speaker then mentions that "the new moon moves" the rain. Celestial bodies affect weather on earth; [analogously](#), poetic inspiration seems the product of remote and uncontrollable forces. Moreover, the moon is a classic [symbol](#) of change, and here it represents the changes ("new" experiences) that come with aging. Overall, this image reinforces the idea that inspiration comes and goes, and the poet must accept that.

Finally, the rain "does its work / even when it seems to weep." That is, it keeps falling and replenishing the earth even when it seems to express some sort of cosmic sadness. Of course, the speaker is projecting his own mood (or the mood of older poets in general) onto the rain. But he's also invoking a spirit of courage and determination. Rain persists whether it wants to or not. Poets, the speaker implies, should do the same. Just as rain plays an important role in human agriculture, the aging writer's poetry can make itself fruitful and useful—provided it aims for "the household truth."

Once again, [alliteration](#) helps get these ideas across. The /m/ sounds in "new moon moves it" have a gentle propulsive force that evokes the moon's gravitational pull. The soft insistence of the /w/ sounds in "weighs"/"which"/"work"/"when"/"weep" reflect the theme of perseverance.

In the end, the speaker remains somewhat anxious, but

Figueroa's creative commitment demonstrates a way forward. Age brings many changes, the poem suggests, but people have agency in how they approach it. They can trade their youthful passion and ambition for humility and maturity. In these closing lines, Walcott seems to make a break with his younger self, embracing a quieter but more authentic vision of his art.



## SYMBOLS



### RAIN

"Nearing Forty" opens and closes with rain. Due to the speaker's anxious state—his 40th birthday looms on the horizon—the rain not only establishes a melancholy atmosphere but takes on [symbolic](#) qualities.

First, there's the sound. It beats thinly on the ground with a regularity that the speaker describes as "rigidly metred." This stiff, marching rhythm is almost like a metronome or a ticking clock, reminding the speaker that time is steadily passing. Each drop is like another moment lost.

Then there's the way the rain seems to chill the bones ("its coolness numbs the marrow"). It gets under the speaker's skin in both a literal and a [metaphorical](#) sense, perhaps foreshadowing the cold reality of death.

Lines 12-15 pick up on the "rigidly metred" quality of the rain, giving it a more positive spin. Here, rain seems to represent poetic inspiration, which collects on a poet's "pages" as though they were a "bedsheet" under a "rainspout" (drainpipe). That inspiration may slow to a "sputter[ing]" trickle with time, but a good poet never stops waiting for it. Later, lines 22-24 suggest that poets judge their whole lives ("gauge[] our seasons") on the basis of their creative output, again symbolized by "rain."

The ending of the poem echoes the same idea. If the speaker is to be a good poet going forward, he feels he needs to be more like a "water clerk": a humble official who "weighs the force" of the rainfall. The rain still corresponds to the speaker's melancholy mood (he depicts it as "weep[ing]"). But it also stands in, again, for poetic inspiration: it's out there, waiting for someone to capture it and communicate its power to others.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "hearing this narrow, / rigidly metred, early-rising rain / recounting, as its coolness numbs the marrow, / that I am nearing forty"
- **Lines 12-15:** "in pages stretched / plain as a bleaching bedsheet under a gutter- / ing rainspout, glad for the sputter / of occasional insight;"
- **Lines 22-24:** "gauges our seasons by this year's end rain / which, as greenhorns at school, we'd / call conventional for convectional;"

- **Lines 29-32:** “conventional as any water clerk / who weighs the force of lightly falling rain, / which, as the new moon moves it, does its work / even when it seems to weep.”



## THE DAMP MATCH

Think about the kind of language people often use to describe poetic creativity: *fire, brilliance, flashes* of insight, etc. Through its portrait of the poet John Figueroa, “Nearing Forty” challenges those familiar ideas, finding inspiration in a more daily, “household” approach to writing.

The speaker imagines Figueroa, who is getting on in years, “fumb[ling] a damp match” in order to light his stove. The match—which, though wet, can start a fire—seems to [symbolize](#) poetic inspiration, especially as experienced by an older writer. Gone are the youthful days of blazing ambition (which line 16 compares to a “searing meteor”). In its place comes something less dazzling, more mundane, but, the poem implies, more authentic. Figueroa’s fumbling with the match may represent a struggle to find inspiration or get started on his work. It might also suggest artistic clumsiness or imprecision—the kind even the most masterful artists struggle to overcome.

The “damp match” is a humble little object, yet it’s practical and it gets the job done. Figueroa manages to light the stove with it and heat up his “kettle.” In this way, it corresponds with Figueroa’s devotion to humble “household truth,” which allows him to complete his poems.

### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-18:** “you who foresaw / ambition as a searing meteor / will fumble a damp match and, smiling, settle / for the dry wheezing of a dented kettle,”



## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

The poem’s heavy [alliteration](#) helps reinforce its [imagery](#) and link important words and concepts together. In lines 2-3, for example, alliteration captures the insistent pounding of the rain:

Insomniac since four, hearing this narrow,  
rigidly metred, early-rising rain  
recounting, as its coolness numbs the marrow,

The /r/ sounds impose themselves on the reader’s ear, much as the falling rain demands the speaker’s attention.

In line 7, the speaker imagines that turning 40 brings a kind of

reckoning with oneself. He calls this the “bleak modesty of middle age” (line 7). Growing older, in other words, makes you humble, stripping away the delusions of youth. The /m/ here connects “middle age” with that newly “modest[.]” attitude.

In the following line, the speaker anticipates that he’ll judge his work “as a false dawn, fireless and average[.]” Here, the fricative /f/ sounds highlight the negative qualities of the speaker’s work; their harsh sound seems to convey some of his frustration.

The speaker turns his attention to his friend and fellow poet, John Figueroa. In lines 25-26, he imagines Figueroa facing middle/old age with quiet dignity, turning up daily for the difficult work of writing poetry:

[...] or you will rise and set your lines to work  
with sadder joy but steadier elation,

Those sibilant /s/ sounds give the lines a whispery quality, hinting at the subdued life of middle or older age. They also give the lines themselves a “stead[y]” sonic consistency.

The speaker then compares this older and wiser type of poet to a “water clerk,” or administrator measuring rainfall. Strong alliteration brings this [simile](#) to life:

[...] conventional as any water clerk  
who weighs the force of lightly falling rain,  
which, as the new moon moves it, does its work  
even when it seems to weep. (lines 29-32)

Again, the repeating sounds (including the many soft /w/ sounds) reflect the image of steady rain. These sounds also lend extra “force” or emphasis to a passage *about* force—including the force of rainfall, the gravitational force of the “moon,” and the emotional force of writing as a vocation.

### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “rigidly,” “rising,” “rain”
- **Line 3:** “recounting,” “numbs”
- **Line 4:** “nearing,” “nearer”
- **Line 7:** “modesty,” “middle”
- **Line 8:** “false,” “fireless”
- **Line 9:** “which would”
- **Line 12:** “pages”
- **Line 13:** “plain,” “bleaching bedsheet”
- **Line 17:** “smiling, settle”
- **Line 18:** “dry,” “dented”
- **Line 20:** “then,” “thin”
- **Line 21:** “prodigious,” “plants”
- **Line 24:** “call conventional,” “convectional”
- **Line 25:** “set”
- **Line 26:** “sadder,” “steadier”

- **Line 29:** “conventional,” “water,” “clerk”
- **Line 30:** “weighs,” “force,” “falling”
- **Line 31:** “moon moves,” “work”
- **Line 32:** “when,” “weep”

## ENJAMBMENT

"Nearing Forty" is heavily [enjambéd](#). Indeed, the poem consists of one long sentence, so enjambment plays an important role in the way it unfolds down the page.

Overall, enjambment lends the poem an unpredictable, jittery quality. The speaker is in a state of anxiety, a kind of spiritual and creative crisis. His sleepless mind can't settle, and thanks to enjambment, the poem's rhythm never quite settles either. Lines often break abruptly, almost violently, as in lines 4-5:

that I am nearing forty, nearer the weak  
vision thickening to a frosted pane,

The line break here reflects the "weak[ness]" being discussed; it's as if the speaker has briefly run out of breath and has to pause before completing the phrase. Similarly, the break in lines 28-29 captures a sense of exhaustion:

[...] measuring how imagination  
ebbs,

Here Walcott uses an unusually short line ("measuring how imagination" is one [metrical](#) foot shy of pentameter), followed by the pause of enjambment, followed by a [caesura](#) after the first word of the line. Together, these effects create a staggered, dragging sound that reflects the description of "ebb[ing]" imaginative force.

When the speaker addresses John Figueroa, his much-admired poet friend, enjambment ties in with his descriptions of Figueroa's poetic style:

that finds its parallel however wretched  
in simple, shining lines, in pages stretched  
plain as a bleaching bedsheet under a gutter-  
ing rainspout, glad for the sputter  
of occasional insight; (lines 11-15)

Enjambment *stretches* these phrases over multiple lines, supporting the image of "pages stretched" like bedsheets. The jumpy breaks after "gutter-" and "sputter" are unpredictable and sudden—just like the "sputter / of occasional insight."

### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “rain / recounting”
- **Lines 4-5:** “weak / vision”

- **Lines 6-7:** “work / by”
- **Lines 7-8:** “age / as”
- **Lines 9-10:** “for / the”
- **Lines 10-11:** “metaphor / that”
- **Lines 11-12:** “wretched / in”
- **Lines 12-13:** “stretched / plain”
- **Lines 13-14:** “gutter- / ing”
- **Lines 14-15:** “sputter / of”
- **Lines 15-16:** “foresaw / ambition”
- **Lines 17-18:** “settle / for”
- **Lines 20-21:** “deep / prodigious”
- **Lines 22-23:** “rain / which”
- **Lines 23-24:** “we'd / call”
- **Lines 25-26:** “work / with”
- **Lines 28-29:** “imagination / ebbs”
- **Lines 29-30:** “clerk / who”
- **Lines 31-32:** “work / even”

## IMAGERY

The [imagery](#) of "Nearing Forty" helps establish its anxious atmosphere. Remember, these are the restless thoughts of a poet wondering how he's going to cope physically, mentally, and creatively with getting older.

The poem opens with the sound of rainfall:

Insomniac since four, hearing this narrow,  
rigidly metred, early-rising rain [...]

This auditory (sound-based) imagery reflects the speaker's state of mind. The noisy, distracting rain is keeping the speaker awake and perhaps fueling his "Insomniac" worries. Tellingly, it reminds him of poetry. It sounds "rigidly [metred](#)," suggesting that his anxieties relate, at least in part, to his poetic craft. Like the ticking of a clock, the rain's strict tempo might also evoke the relentless progression of time (towards old age and death).

The rain also "numbs the marrow" with "its coolness" (line 3). In other words, it chills the speaker's bones. This *internal* coldness—an example of tactile, or touch-based, imagery—suggests that the speaker doesn't feel comfortable with himself. Perhaps he lacks the warming fire of his youthful poetic passion.

Growing older, according to the speaker, will cause "the weak / vision" to "thicken[] to a frosted pane" (lines 4-5). This visual imagery captures the way age weakens one's eyesight, as if clouding the window "pane[s]" of the eyes. [Metaphorically](#), it also refers to imaginative "vision"—something a poet can't do without. The speaker worries that this internal vision, too, will grow cloudier with time.

All's not lost, though. For comfort, the speaker thinks about his friend and fellow poet, John Figueroa. In lines 17-19, he imagines how Figueroa:

will fumble a damp match and, smiling, settle  
for the dry wheezing of a dented kettle,  
for vision narrower than a louvre's gap,

The "fumb[ing]" of the match (tactile imagery) suggests imprecision and uncertainty, qualities that the speaker believes he must embrace as he ages. The kettle's "dry wheezing" (auditory imagery) calls to mind the wheezy breathing and speech that often accompany old age. (Metaphorically, it might suggest the weakening of one's *poetic* voice.) And there's that "narrow[ing]" of the vision again, this time to a "louvre's gap"—the crack between two slats of a window-blind.

All of this imagery relates, literally or metaphorically, to diminished skill, ambition, and insight. Though it reflects some ambivalence on the poet's part, it generally conveys admiration for Figueroa. The older man seems more at peace with aging; he knows he won't always feel inspired, but he steadily devotes himself to his poetic work nonetheless.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "hearing this narrow, / rigidly metred, early-rising rain / recounting, as its coolness numbs the marrow,"
- **Lines 4-5:** "the weak / vision thickening to a frosted pane,"
- **Lines 17-19:** "will fumble a damp match and, smiling, settle / for the dry wheezing of a dented kettle, / for vision narrower than a louvre's gap,"
- **Lines 30-32:** "lightly falling rain, / which, as the new moon moves it, does its work / even when it seems to weep."

## METAPHOR

The speaker uses [metaphor](#) and other [figurative language](#) to express his worries about aging, and to explore different approaches to creativity.

The speaker fears that, after age forty, he'll be "nearer the weak / vision thickening to a frosted pane." This metaphor describes the deterioration of eyesight with age, as the eyes "frost[]" over like windowpanes (e.g., due to cataracts). But it also hints at fears of a diminished *poetic* vision. The poet worries he'll feel uninspired in later life, and view his youthful work as a metaphorical "false dawn, fireless and average." He once thought his poetry was the "dawn[ing]" of something new and brilliant—but he might come to feel just the opposite.

Figueroa, the speaker's fellow poet, offers a counterexample. Metaphorically, Figueroa's "life bled for / the household truth"—that is, for mundane, daily truths, as opposed to grand and abstract ones. Figueroa's commitment to the truth was so unshakeable that he devoted his whole being to it, as if shedding blood for it.

The speaker then uses a complex [simile](#) to describe Figueroa's poetry:

[...] pages stretched  
plain as a bleaching bedsheet under a gutter-  
ing rainspout, glad for the sputter  
of occasional insight;

The image of "bedsheet[s]" on a washing line reinforces the idea that Figueroa's work expresses humble home truths. He's not afraid to be "plain" and unpretentious in his language. His "insight" (inspiration) is now just an occasional "sputter," like a brief patter of "rain[]" on hanging sheets—but Figueroa receives it gratefully.

Figueroa also views literary "ambition" as a "searing meteor." A meteor flashes across the sky, briefly impressing witnesses below. But it's a distant phenomenon (not very relevant to daily life), and it offers no lasting illumination. Figueroa distrusts poetic "ambition" that's flashy in this way. He doesn't think it'll stand the test of time, so he strives to express ordinary truths instead.

Lines 20-22 suggest that it would be easy for Figueroa to grow jaded as he ages. When metaphorically "watching [his] leaves thin"—watching his body deteriorate and/or his "leaves" (pages) of new writing diminish in quantity or quality—Figueroa might:

[...] recall how deep  
prodigious cynicism plants its seed,  
gauges our seasons by this year's end rain [...]

In other words, cynicism can easily grow from a seed of self-doubt into a whole forest of discouragement. It can cause someone to judge their whole life by their recent output ("this year's end rain"), instead of taking a longer view and a more workmanlike approach.

The speaker imagines exactly this approach in lines 28-32, which compare the poet to a modest "water clerk" rather than a dazzling genius. The water clerk's work, though unglamorous and "conventional," measures the world as it actually is. Furthermore, it draws connections between one aspect of the world and another, revealing small but tangible truths (e.g., how the "moon" affects weather). The clerk just turns up, does his job, and gets on with things. Poets, the speaker implies, should do the same.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "nearer the weak / vision thickening to a frosted pane,"
- **Lines 6-8:** "nearer the day when I may judge my work / by the bleak modesty of middle age / as a false dawn, fireless and average,"

- **Lines 9-10:** “your life bled for / the household truth”
- **Lines 12-15:** “pages stretched / plain as a bleaching bedsheet under a gutter- / ing rainspout, glad for the sputter / of occasional insight”
- **Line 16:** “ambition as a searing meteor”
- **Lines 20-21:** “then, watching your leaves thin, recall how deep / prodigious cynicism plants its seed,”
- **Line 22:** “gauges our seasons by this year's end rain”
- **Lines 28-32:** “measuring how imagination / ebbs, conventional as any water clerk / who weighs the force of lightly falling rain, / which, as the new moon moves it, does its work / even when it seems to weep.”



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Nearing Forty" is one long 32-line stanza. The *lack* of stanza breaks reflects the speaker's state of mind. These aren't meant to come across as well-organized thoughts, but rather as the slightly meandering worries of a speaker who can't sleep. Heavy [enjambment](#) makes the poem feel even more disjointed and anxious.

Notice how the poem both starts and ends with rain. This circularity suggests the way the speaker's thoughts keep looping back on themselves, as he wonders what it means to turn 40 and how middle age will affect his work.

"Nearing Forty" also features both a dedication and an epigraph. The dedication foregrounds John Figueroa, Walcott's friend and fellow poet, and defines the "you" whom the speaker addresses throughout. The [epigraph](#) comes from Samuel Johnson's 1765 preface to an edition of Shakespeare's complete works. It distinguishes between "fanciful invention" and "the stability of truth" in art—that is, between art that's all razzle-dazzle and art like Figueroa's, which is plain, authentic, and honest. This distinction sets up the poem's exploration of different attitudes toward the creative process.

### METER

"Nearing Forty" uses a very loose [iambic](#) pentameter, meaning that it generally contains five metrical feet per line, each with an *unstressed-stressed* syllable pattern. But most lines feature some variation in the [meter](#); the resulting, unsettled rhythm reflects the speaker's restless state of mind.

The meter is most simple and stable when the poet is *discussing* simplicity and stability. In the first half of the poem, for instance, line 12 is one of the few examples of perfect iambic pentameter:

in simp- | le, shin- | ing lines, | in pag- | es stretched

It's no coincidence that the meter tightens up here. The speaker is praising John Figueroa's poetry for its plainspoken honesty; the steady rhythm of this line effectively mirrors Figueroa's steady hand.

The same regularity shows up in line 30, which depicts the poet as a kind of humble "clerk" (rather than some grand genius):

who weighs | the force | of light- | ly fall- | ing rain [...]

The speaker sees this clerk figure as a model of how to write as he gets older. The consistent iambs here not only reflect the rhythm of "rain[fall]" but also hint at a steady, workmanlike approach to poetry.



## VOCABULARY

**Insomniac** (Line 1) - Unable to sleep.

**Rigidly metred** (Line 2) - Strictly rhythmic and repetitive-sounding, as though governed by a poetic [meter](#).

**Numbs the marrow** (Line 3) - Chills the bones.

**Pane** (Lines 4-5) - A sheet of glass in a window.

**False dawn** (Lines 6-8) - A light rising before dawn (and so not actually the start of a new day). This is an [idiom](#) describing a promising situation that fails to deliver on its promise.

**Just** (Lines 6-9) - Fair and reasonable.

**Bleaching** (Lines 12-13) - Turning white in the sun.

**Insight** (Lines 14-15) - Flash of inspiration.

**Searing** (Lines 15-16) - Burning intensely.

**Fumble** (Lines 15-17) - Handle clumsily.

**Wheezing** (Line 18) - Breathing with a whistling sound. (Here referring to the kettle's shrill exhalation of steam.)

**Louvre's gap** (Line 19) - The space between two slats of a window-blind.

**Prodigious cynicism** (Lines 20-21) - A great or monstrous sense of doubt, pessimism, etc. (here referring to self-doubt in particular).

**Gauges** (Lines 20-22) - Measures or judges.

**Greenhorns** (Line 23) - Inexperienced young people.

**Convictional** (Lines 23-24) - Related to the process of [convection](#), whereby hotter material (e.g., warm air in a weather system) moves upward. Walcott is referring here to [convictional rainfall](#), which occurs during convective storms (thunderstorms).

**Elation** (Line 26) - Excitement or exhilaration.

**Ebbs** (Lines 28-29) - Diminishes, like an ocean tide going out.

**Water clerk** (Lines 29-30) - An administrative worker whose job involves measuring water levels/rainfall.

## RHYME SCHEME

"Nearing Forty" contains many [rhymes](#) but no consistent [rhyme scheme](#). In the early lines, it looks as though the poem is setting up a pattern—ABACBC, etc.—but it's soon clear that there's no pattern at all.

These choices make sense given the poem's themes. As the speaker approaches age 40, he's trying to sort out who he is. He's anxiously searching for meaning and purpose—and the poem's rhymes seem to be doing something similar. Each end-word looks for the reassuring *click* of a rhyming counterpart, but the rhymes remain unpredictable throughout. Moreover, some of the rhymes are exact (like "narrow" and "marrow"), while others are [slant](#) (like "weak" and "work"). These variations keep the reader in a state of uncertainty, just like the speaker himself.

title suggests, he's nearing age 40 (the poem was published when Walcott himself was 39). Approaching middle age provokes him to reconsider his life and work.

He is writing indoors during a rainstorm: the poem starts and ends with references to rain. The "rigidly metred" sound of rainfall seems to evoke the passage of time, like the ticking of a clock. The speaker also mentions that the rain is "convictional"—or, as he mistakenly called it in his school days, "conventional." This detail might refer to the convective ([convective](#)) storms Walcott would have experienced "seasonal[ly]" in the tropical climate of his native Saint Lucia. In other words, Walcott may be writing in his home country and recalling his childhood there.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Derek Walcott (1930-2017) was born and raised on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia, the country where much of his writing is set. Critics have praised his body of work as a landmark of postcolonial literature. One of the most decorated poets of the 20th and early 21st centuries, Walcott received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, with the prize committee citing his "historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment."

Walcott was a talented and committed student of literature, publishing poetry from an early age. His first major publication was *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, which appeared in 1962. That collection, and Walcott's subsequent work, was very well received. And yet, as "Nearing Forty" suggests, praise and accolades offer little relief from the self-doubt that assails an aging artist. It's fair to think of this poem as autobiographical: Walcott was in fact nearing forty when he wrote it, and he counted the Jamaican poet John Figueroa (1920-1999), the poem's dedicatee, as a key figure in his life. The poem was published in Walcott's collection *The Gulf and Other Poems* (1969).

In a 1985 interview with *The Paris Review*, Walcott articulated the same fears about middle age as those on display in the poem: "You're aware of the fact that you have reached a certain stage in your life. You're also aware that you have failed your imagination to some degree, your ambitions. This is an amazingly difficult time for me. I'm absolutely terrified."

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Unlike much of Walcott's work, "Nearing Forty" doesn't engage deeply with historical themes or conjure up a specific cultural context. Its language and [imagery](#) are fairly timeless, and its [setting](#) is invoked only indirectly. The poem most likely takes place in Walcott's native Saint Lucia, the island country where he went to "school" (and apparently learned about



## SPEAKER

Many clues suggest that the poem is autobiographical. Walcott's speaker is a poet nearing age 40, a friend and admirer of John Figueroa—and Walcott himself was all of those things when he wrote "Nearing Forty." The speaker, then, seems to be the poet himself.

The approaching milestone of forty puts the speaker in a restless, agitated state. His lines meander down the page in a single, heavily [enjambéd stanza](#), a form that seems to reflect his troubled mindset.

The speaker fears that his earlier work was a false start or "false dawn" (line 8)—bright and promising, but inauthentic. Though this possibility troubles him, he sees a way forward in the figure of Figueroa, to whom he addresses the poem. Figueroa seems to take a less brash, more workmanlike approach to his art. He has [metaphorically](#) "bled for / the household truth" (lines 9-10)—that is, devoted his life to capturing everyday, relatable reality. (His art offers the kind of "stability of truth" that, as the poem's [epigraph](#) notes, Samuel Johnson perceived in Shakespeare.)

The poem implies that Walcott will use Figueroa as a model for his own poetry in middle age. Now that the metaphorical "fire" of his youth has fizzled out, the speaker, following Figueroa, will work more like a humble "water clerk" measuring rainfall (lines 29-30). That is, he'll show up to the job each day and faithfully record whatever comes.



## SETTING

"Nearing Forty" is set early in the morning after a restless night (the speaker has been "Insomniac since four"). The speaker doesn't specify a physical [setting](#), but he seems to be alone: the poem conveys the restless thoughts of his worried mind. As the

"convectonal" rains, which occur "seasonal[ly]" in tropical climates).

Hailing from the Caribbean but instilled with a deep love of English literature, Walcott often explored themes of postcolonialism, identity, power, and politics. His 1970 play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* was a major success, exploring "the condition of the colonized natives under the oppressive forces of the powerful colonizers." In 1967, Saint Lucia became an "Associate State," no longer fully beholden to Great Britain but not yet fully independent—a status the country eventually acquired in 1979.

"Nearing Forty" is dedicated to John Figueroa, a Jamaican poet and educator who was ten years Walcott's senior. The two men had a close bond and, as the poem makes clear, Walcott admired Figueroa's dedication to directness and truth. Figueroa published some key studies of Walcott's poetry and was an important figure in the development of Anglophone Caribbean literature.

artist). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYsZORiVTb8>)

- [The Poet's Biography](#) — Read about Derek Walcott's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/derek-walcott>)
- [The Poet as Nobel Laureate](#) — Read a biography of Derek Walcott, his citation for the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, and his Nobel lecture. (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/walcott/biographical/>)
- [An Interview with Walcott](#) — Listen to the poet discuss his life and work. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXjGCTEXt0>)

#### LITCHARTS ON OTHER DEREK WALCOTT POEMS

- [A Far Cry from Africa](#)
- [Love After Love](#)



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Walcott Remembered](#) — Read Walcott's 2017 obituary in the New York Times, which quotes his metaphor comparing history itself to an "insomniac night." (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/17/books/derek-walcott-dead-nobel-prize-literature.html>)
- [A Walcott Documentary](#) — Watch a short film about Walcott and his twin brother, Roderick (also a writer and



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Howard, James. "Nearing Forty." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 24 Feb 2023. Web. 24 Mar 2023.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "Nearing Forty." LitCharts LLC, February 24, 2023. Retrieved March 24, 2023. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/derek-walcott/nearing-forty>.