

Waterfall



SUMMARY

The speaker insists that she's not asking to be young again or to slow down time: she knows that time, like a river, flows only one way. Time absorbs her life like a river absorbs a beautiful waterfall—a waterfall in which the speaker can see all the events of her life rushing past like shining drops of water, always vanishing.

Nor, the speaker goes on, does she want her beloved to be young again, or to feel the young love they shared again—back when love felt like a dark, bittersweet-smelling forest, and still pools of water seemed to hold their reflections frozen in time.

These days, the speaker says, all she wants is to see the comfortable love she and her partner share in her partner's alert, trusting eyes and his worn face, aged by years of thought and discernment. She wants to sit down and have everyday conversations with her partner, not constantly think back on the past.

But when the speaker's partner leaves the room (looking cheerful and energetic, not because he's young and lively, but because he's making an effort), she feels sudden passionate love for him. She remembers in those moments that the waterfall of life, no matter how beautiful it is, is always rushing past, hurrying on toward the deep waters of death.

green darkness." The excitement and mysteriousness of young love have faded; they no longer hold allure for her. Where once water seemed to reflect a love that was "motionless, as if for ever," now the speaker is much more aware of the fact that time never stops moving.

The speaker doesn't dream of "delay[ing]" this process, but rather tries to appreciate "minute by glinting minute," acutely aware of what she has to be grateful for. Rather than mourning the passage of young love, then, the speaker instead savors what has replaced it: a mature relationship based on mutual respect and understanding.

Now, the speaker says, "it is enough [...] to come into a room / and find [...] kindness." The speaker's relationship now may not be exciting, but it is satisfying and gentle. Time has shaped and changed this relationship; years have "chastened"—or subdued—the couple into more "careful" creatures. The pair now trust and respect each other more wisely and deeply than they did in youth. The speaker says it is enough for them to simply "sit in the afternoons," talking "without nostalgia." In other words, they're not longing for the way things used to be. They are content with the life they have now.

Yet, despite the speaker's satisfaction with this more mature relationship, she sometimes surprises herself by feeling as passionately as she once did. This passion is different from young love, as it springs from the realization that even what she has now will someday soon escape her. The speaker notes that, sometimes, when this person leaves, she finds herself lit up with "a quick / intensity" of love. This sudden ignition of feeling is due to the realization that "water [...] falls fast / and only once to the dark pool below." It is the knowledge of time's passage and her own eventual death that gives the present moment its intensity and urgency, providing the speaker with a renewed sense of passion. The poem ultimately suggests that, while young love may stem from the idea that a relationship will last forever, mature love comes from the knowledge that it won't.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



THEMES



TIME, AGING, AND LOVE

"Waterfall" is about the ways time and aging affect love and relationships. Like a waterfall that plummets into a river below, the speaker sees her life moving inevitably towards death. There is no stopping this process, and the speaker accepts the fact she will thus never again experience the lush excitement of young love. Instead, she appreciates what she has now: a relationship that is wiser for its years. Yet, sometimes this very knowledge of time's passage moves her to feel a sudden and surprising passion. In this way, the poem suggests that knowing love will all soon be gone can make it all the more precious.

The poem begins with the speaker acknowledging her own mortality, comparing her life to "the jewelled arc of the waterfall" which eventually joins "time's irreversible river." And as the speaker ages, she realizes she no longer experiences love the way she did when she was young and everything seemed as if it would last forever. She doesn't imagine that the person she loves will suddenly be young again and appear to her "in love's



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*I do not ...
... of the waterfall*

The poem begins with a [metaphor](#): the speaker says she isn't asking to be young again, or to "delay / [...] time's irreversible

river." In other words, the speaker understands time as a river that flows in only one direction: toward old age and, eventually, death.

By comparing time to a river that will swallow up the "jewelled arc of the waterfall" (i.e. her life—more on this in a second), the speaker illustrates the sheer force of time, which stops for nothing—and also acknowledges that the process of living, aging, and dying is natural. She wants to appreciate the beauty and brevity of her one life, while also not fighting the flow of the way things are meant to be. In other words, she is trying to grow old gracefully and confront her mortality with acceptance rather than fear and bitterness.

The waterfall itself is a metaphor for the speaker's own life: both breathtaking and fleeting. The [imagery](#) of the waterfall's "jewelled arc" immediately suggests that there is a trajectory to the speaker's life: a beginning, middle, and end to the speaker's life. But this transient "arc" is also "jewelled": something to be admired and wondered at, not taken for granted or resisted.

The poem's structure mirrors this bright flow. For instance, the speaker's [enjambment](#) across lines 1-3 (and throughout much of the poem) imitates the ceaseless movement of time's metaphorical waters, which cannot be "delay[ed]" and which eventually claim each and every life.

And the musicality of the [consonance](#) and [assonance](#) in these lines ("in the rising of time's irreversible river / that takes the jewelled arc of the waterfall") helps to emphasize the speaker's understanding of life's fleeting beauty.

LINES 4-6

*in which I ...
... fast, fast falling.*

In the "jewelled arc" of her life's "waterfall," the speaker goes on, she:

[...] glimpses, **minute** by glinting **minute**,
all that I have and **all** I am always losing

In other words, this late in her life, the speaker appreciates each and every moment, savoring them all with the knowledge that they will soon be gone.

The /gl/ [alliteration](#) in "glimpse" and "glinting" draws attention to the relationship between brevity and beauty: part of what makes each moment so precious is the fact that it will never come again. And the [diacope](#) on the words "minute" and "all" (in bold above) slows the reader down so that they experience, alongside the speaker, this feeling of zooming in on each precious moment before it is gone.

But even as the speaker tries to appreciate these moments, they seem to slip from her grasp. The swift repetition here, like the later [epizeuxis](#) of "fast, fast falling," suggests how quickly moments expire, one after the other.

As these brief, jewellike moments occur, the speaker sees them briefly lit up by sunlight—[imagery](#) that [symbolically](#) suggests awareness and illumination. In other words, in embracing life's beauty and brevity, the speaker is connecting to some innate truth about what it means to be alive.

LINES 7-9

*I do not ...
... spices the air*

In the second stanza, the speaker again insists that she's not asking to reverse time. This time she addresses someone else, a beloved, saying that she doesn't dream that he'll:

come to me **darkly** in love's green darkness
where the dust of the bracken **spices** the air

The lush, murky [imagery](#) here suggests the fertility and mystery of young love—presumably a love she shared with the "you" she's speaking to now. Such love is characterized not only by "green[ery]" and "spic[iness]," which suggest vitality and excitement, but also by "darkness."

The [polyptoton](#) on the word "dark" characterizes not just the place ("green darkness") the lovers are in, but also the demeanor of the beloved ("darkly"). In other words, it seems that the passion of youth was a double-edged sword. Young love was beautiful, but dark confusion lurks just beneath the vibrancy of the speaker's memories.

The [metaphor](#) of love being a "green darkness" also suggests that love is complicated, regardless of how old the person experiencing it might be. "Green" suggests newness, tenderness, and the sunlight of spring or summer. On the other hand, darkness suggests mystery and even blindness. In this way, the speaker seems to recall a time when she was so caught up in the fervor of love that she couldn't see or think clearly. Or perhaps she is simply unable to recall young love clearly now that so many years have passed!

Either way, the speaker doesn't "dream" of, or hope for, this kind of love anymore.

LINES 10-12

*moss, crushed, gives ...
... if for ever.*

Perhaps the reason the speaker no longer "dreams" of young love is because it left a bittersweet taste in her memory. Expanding her vision of her lover visiting her in "green darkness," she describes "moss" being "crushed" and emitting "an astringent sweetness."

In other words, in the heat of love, the speaker and her beloved *broke* something—something which left a complicated scent in the air, a scent that is both biting and sweet. This olfactory (or smell-based) [imagery](#) evokes the speaker's contradictory

memories of young love: beautiful, but also painful. And smooth /s/ [sibilance](#) and sharp /t/ [consonance](#) come together in the phrase "astringent sweetness," as if to emphasize love's contradictions.

Part of the pain of this memory is that this passion the lovers felt for each other didn't survive. The speaker can remember "water hold[ing their] reflections / motionless, as if for ever." In other words, at the time, it felt like their love was beautiful because it would never end. Now, looking back, the speaker understands that all love must eventually end, one way or the other.

But now, she also sees that love's brevity (and life's brevity!) don't diminish love or life, but infuse them with even greater significance.

LINES 13-15

*It is enough ...
... that are shrewd*

The speaker describes the way that her relationship with her beloved has changed since they were young. She doesn't need the headiness of wild green love anymore: now, it's "enough" to enjoy "the kindness we have for each other."

They now share a different kind of feeling, something they "call[...] love," but which might be a feeling for which they don't quite have a name. The "shrewd" (or sharp-witted and observant) relationship they have now is tempered by "kindness." They know each other inside and out; there are no more illusions of eternal passion, just a kind of quiet understanding and care.

The [alliteration](#) ("come," "kindness," "calling") and /n/ and /m/ [consonance](#) ("enough," "now," "come," "room," "find," "kindness") in these lines amplify this quietly meaningful moment. These are not buoyant, bouncy sounds, but restrained, gentle ones, suggestive of the way the couple's relationship has softened and matured over the years.

There is likewise a simplicity to the language here that contrasts with the previous stanza's vibrancy. Like the couple's relationship, the language is stripped down, devoid of decoration.

And the speaker's honest admission that what they have now is something they can only "call[]" love is quietly moving. The speaker isn't fooling herself; something has shifted considerably between her and her beloved. She doesn't cast judgement on this shift, but accepts it, saying that what they have now is "enough" for her.

LINES 16-18

*but trustful still, ...
... conversation, without nostalgia.*

Not only are the couple's eyes "shrewd" (or sharp and observant) from years of navigating their relationship, they are

also "trustful." The speaker says that their faces have become "chastened" (or humbled) from all this "careful judgement." This [imagery](#) implies that their relationship hasn't been all roses—it has at times been rocky and perhaps even painful, enough so that they feel a little worn down.

Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, they have learned "to sit in the afternoons / in mild conversation." The intensity of youth is gone; what remains is a tender companionship. The speaker says that they are not "nostalgic" for the way things used to be. Instead, they are existing in the present, content with where they've ended up.

A combination of smooth /s/ [sibilance](#) and sharp /t/ [consonance](#) in this passage recalls the "astringent sweetness" of their younger love:

*but trustful still, face chastened by years
of careful judgement; to sit in the afternoons
in mild conversation, without nostalgia.*

The /t/ consonance interrupts the smooth flow of sibilance, perhaps hinting at a kind of delicate formality as the couple practices being careful with each other. Because they have hurt each other in the past, they know each other's tender places. Part of the "kindness" that they have now comes from being attentive to each other's needs and not making the same mistakes that they've made before.

LINES 19-24

*But when you ...
... dark pool below.*

In the final stanza, the speaker changes her tune a little, admitting that the simpler, kinder relationship the couple has achieved is sometimes disturbed by a resurgence of their old passion. When her loved one leaves the room, she says, his brave, effortful "jauntiness" sometimes overcomes her with a "quick / intensity" of love. Seeing him leave, the poem implies, reminds her that he won't be around forever. Any kind of leave-taking, short or long, can feel final when one considers the brevity of life.

The speaker's mature wisdom infuses the moment with urgency. Realizing that what they have will someday come to an end, the speaker is suddenly flooded with the desire to hold on to what's in front of her. At this moment, she is reminded of the [metaphor](#) of the waterfall.

The poem concludes with [imagery](#) of that waterfall, which "however luminous and grand, falls fast / and only once to the dark pool below." In other words, no matter how beautiful or wonderful, every single life will eventually be carried away by time's ever-moving current. A life, like a plunging waterfall, moves quickly; it is there and then gone in the blink of an eye.

By returning to the metaphor of life as a waterfall, the poet

makes clear that this poem isn't just about this particular relationship. Rather, the relationship is an example of the way that time shapes and changes everything, including love. Seen rightly, the speaker suggests, the unstoppable movement of time doesn't have to be frightening. Rather, time can imbue every moment of life with significance and value.

There is a kind of beauty to this impermanence, a beauty echoed in [onomatopoeic](#) language that imitates the movement of the waterfall: liquid /l/ [consonance](#) ("luminous," "falls," "only," "pool," "below") and spray-like /f/ [alliteration](#) ("falls fast").

While the imagery of the waterfall cascading irrevocably into the darkness "below" may feel a little ominous on first read, that "darkness" merely mirrors the darkness of love in the second stanza. Just as there was a "darkness" to young love, so is there an inability to see beyond the "dark pool" that waits at the end of each life. But the [repetition](#) here suggests that this inevitable and mysterious conclusion has its own richness, too. The speaker doesn't seem to be afraid of death so much as inspired by it.



SYMBOLS



WATER

In this poem, the speaker uses a waterfall to [symbolize](#) life itself and its inevitable movement. She describes her life and everything in it as "the jewelled arc of the waterfall," and sees it falling "fast, fast" into the river below. In other words, with the perspective of age, she is coming to appreciate both the brevity and the beauty of life.

The river that this waterfall feeds is also symbolic, representing "time's irreversible" flow. In other words, just as a river flows only in one direction, so does a person's time on earth. The river "takes" the waterfall just as time will eventually swallow the speaker's life.

The speaker says that when she and her loved one were younger, it seemed as if the water would hold their "reflections / motionless, as if for ever." This speaks to the way youth cannot understand the way time will shape and change their love.

But water, the speaker says, "falls fast / and only once to the dark pool below." As she gets older, the speaker realizes how little time she's always had, that almost all of it is already gone, and that there's no getting it back.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "I do not ask for youth, nor for delay / in the rising of time's irreversible river / that takes the jewelled arc of the waterfall / in which I glimpse, minute by glinting minute, / all that I have and all I am always losing / as sunlight lights each drop fast, fast falling."

- **Lines 11-12:** "and water holds our reflections / motionless, as if for ever"
- **Lines 22-23:** "remembering that water, / however luminous and grand, falls fast"
- **Line 24:** "and only once to the dark pool below."



POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

A combination of [enjambement](#) and [end-stopped lines](#) sets the pace of the poem.

In the first stanza, for instance, the first three lines are enjambed, mirroring the idea that the speaker can't "delay" the [metaphorical](#) river of time. The poem sweeps along without slowing down, reflecting exactly what the speaker is saying: time stops for no one.

The next two lines end with images of water ("river," "waterfall"), and the enjambment here continues to support the idea of time flowing quickly past. The next three lines, however, go back and forth between being end-stopped and enjambed:

[...] minute by glinting **minute**,
all that I have and all I am always **losing**
as sunlight lights each drop fast, fast **falling**.

The first end-stop here—a gentle comma—slows down the rush of enjambments, suggesting that the speaker has paused to get a good look at her life as a whole. But the enjambment in line 5 reminds readers of the speaker's big insight: *people* can pause to consider, but *time* always flows on, and eventually takes everything away. Finally, line 6 is end-stopped, suggesting the finality of death. (In fact each stanza concludes with an end-stopped line, bringing the speaker back to a firm "ending" over and over.)

Overall, the poem's mixture of enjambments and end-stopped lines suggests that, though the speaker can do nothing to slow time down, she can at least learn to appreciate the beauty of what's in front of her before it's gone.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "delay / in"
- **Lines 2-3:** "river / that"
- **Lines 3-4:** "waterfall / in"
- **Lines 5-6:** "losing / as"
- **Lines 8-9:** "darkness / where"
- **Lines 9-10:** "air / moss"
- **Lines 10-11:** "sweetness / and"
- **Lines 11-12:** "reflections / motionless"
- **Lines 13-14:** "room / and"

- **Lines 14-15:** "other / – calling"
- **Lines 15-16:** "shrewd / but"
- **Lines 16-17:** "years / of"
- **Lines 17-18:** "afternoons / in"
- **Lines 19-20:** "jauntiness / sinewed"
- **Lines 20-21:** "strength / – suddenly"
- **Lines 21-22:** "quick / intensity"
- **Lines 23-24:** "fast / and"

REPETITION

The poem's [repetitions](#) help readers to share the speaker's understanding of life's brevity and beauty.

Take a look at the [diacope](#) in line 4, for instance:

in which I glimpse, minute by glinting minute,

This repetition slows the poem down, especially as it coincides with an [end-stopped line](#). For a moment, it seems, the speaker is able to see her life all at once, as if it were a sparkling waterfall.

The next line contains another instance of diacope, as the speaker catches sight of "all that [she has] and all [she is] always losing." This time, diacope doesn't slow things down so much as emphasize the profundity of the "glimpse" the speaker has gotten. She is acutely aware not only of all the parts of life she values, but also of the fact that every single one of them will soon be gone. She is confronting "all" of what it means to be human with gratitude and grace.

Line 6 contains both [polyptoton](#) and [epizeuxis](#):

as sunlight lights each drop fast, fast falling.

The repetition in this line has an almost domino-like effect: it seems the words are banging into each other, the first knocking down the second and so on. This repetition emphasizes the beauty, and the speed, of living. In this moment, the speaker both sees her days lit up like individual jewels, and understands that they go fast.

Finally, there's the polyptoton in line 8, when the speaker recalls a time when her beloved appeared to her "darkly in love's green darkness." The repetition of the root word "dark" here draws attention to the shadowy mystery of youth. This darkness was lush and beautiful, but also bittersweet, filled with difficult lessons the speaker has no desire to relive.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "minute by glinting minute"
- **Line 5:** "all that I have and all I am always losing"
- **Line 6:** "fast, fast"

- **Line 8:** "darkly in love's green darkness"

CONSONANCE

The poem is filled with musical [consonance](#) that intensifies the speaker's imagery and makes the poem feel all the more emotional and moving.

Take the /r/ sounds of "rising of time's irreversible river" in line 2, which add a sense of building momentum to this line about time's forward motion (the [assonance](#) of "rising" and "time" adds to the effect, filling the line with rhythm).

There's plenty more consonance to be found in this first stanza, often appearing alongside more assonance and [alliteration](#) (as in "glimpse" and "glinting"). Lines 5-6 and are particularly musical, with the repetition of liquid /l/ sounds, muffled /f/ sounds, and hissing [sibilance](#), plus the assonant /aw/ sounds of "all," "always," and "falling":

all that I have and all I am always losing
as sunlight lights each drop fast, fast falling.

Those sounds seem to capture the rush and spray of falling water itself. These richly musical sounds suggest the complex rushing of the [metaphorical](#) waterfall of life itself, and capture the beauty and poignancy of the speaker's realization: life, like the course of a waterfall, is both stunning and *brief*. By evoking life's onrushing loveliness not just through [imagery](#) but through music, the poem helps the reader to *feel* what the speaker is experiencing at this moment.

Later, listen to all the consonance in line 10:

moss, crushed, gives out an astringent sweetness

The combination of sharp /t/ and /r/ consonance and softer /n/ and /s/ sounds evokes exactly what the speaker is describing here: the bittersweet smell and quietude of crushed plants beside still waters, and the bittersweetness of young love.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "rising," "irreversible," "river"
- **Line 3:** "jewelled," "waterfall"
- **Line 4:** "glimpse," "glinting"
- **Line 5:** "all," "all," "always," "losing"
- **Line 6:** "sunlight," "lights," "fast," "fast," "falling"
- **Line 7:** "do," "dream," "you," "young"
- **Line 8:** "might," "come," "darkly," "love's," "green," "darkness"
- **Line 9:** "dust," "bracken," "spices"
- **Line 10:** "moss," "an," "astringent," "sweetness"
- **Line 11:** "reflections"
- **Line 12:** "motionless"

- **Line 13:** “enough,” “now,” “come,” “into,” “room”
- **Line 14:** “find,” “kindness”
- **Line 15:** “calling,” “love,” “shrewd”
- **Line 16:** “trustful,” “still,” “face,” “chastened,” “years”
- **Line 17:** “careful”
- **Line 18:** “conversation,” “nostalgia”
- **Line 19:** “jauntiness”
- **Line 20:** “sinewed,” “resolution,” “strength”
- **Line 21:** “suddenly,” “then”
- **Line 22:** “intensity,” “remembering”
- **Line 23:** “luminous,” “grand,” “falls,” “fast”
- **Line 24:** “only,” “once,” “pool,” “below”

ASSONANCE

Like [consonance](#), [assonance](#) contributes to the poem's musicality and rhythm. Assonance is particularly striking when it is combined with consonance and/or [alliteration](#), such as in line 4:

in which I glimpse, minute by glinting minute,

Here, short /ih/ assonance combines with /n/ and /t/ consonance as well as /g/ alliteration to great effect: the staccato sounds make every word feel distinct. In other words, the sounds here help the reader to *feel* time slowing down, just as the speaker describes seeing each and every moment of her life lit up before it falls into the river of time below.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “do,” “youth,” “nor,” “for”
- **Line 2:** “rising,” “time's”
- **Line 4:** “in,” “which,” “glimpse,” “minute,” “glinting,” “minute”
- **Line 5:** “all,” “all,” “always”
- **Line 8:** “come,” “love's”
- **Line 9:** “dust”
- **Line 16:** “face,” “chastened”
- **Line 20:** “strength”
- **Line 21:** “suddenly,” “then”
- **Line 22:** “intensity,” “remembering”

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) adds musicality and rhythm to the poem, just as [consonance](#) and [assonance](#) do.

In the first line, for example, /d/ and /n/ alliteration immediately heightens the language:

I do not ask for youth, nor for delay

These stately alliterative sounds give the poem a feeling of gravity right off the bat: the speaker is clearly confronting

something pretty emotional here.

Meanwhile, in line 4, /gl/ alliteration (“glimpse,” “glinting”) emphasizes the relationship between life's beauty and its brevity: the speaker only barely catches sight of sparkling moments before they vanish.

And in line 6, the swift /f/ alliteration of “fast, fast falling” imitates the speaker's realization that her life is quickly slipping past—an effect that reappears in the final line with the words “falls fast.”

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “do,” “not,” “nor,” “delay”
- **Line 4:** “glimpse,” “glinting”
- **Line 5:** “all,” “all,” “always”
- **Line 6:** “fast,” “fast,” “falling”
- **Line 7:** “do,” “dream,” “you,” “young”
- **Line 8:** “darkly,” “darkness”
- **Line 9:** “dust”
- **Line 20:** “sinewed,” “strength”
- **Line 21:** “suddenly”
- **Line 23:** “falls,” “fast”

IMAGERY

The poem's [imagery](#) helps readers to share the speaker's emotional experiences.

Much of the imagery supports the poem's central [metaphor](#) of life as a waterfall. For instance, the speaker's descriptions of a “rising [...] river,” a “jewelled [...] waterfall,” and “sunlight” in the first stanza—and water falling into “the dark pool below” in the final stanza—all help to paint a vivid picture of life and time as an onrushing stream of sunlit water.

In the second stanza, meanwhile, the speaker imagines a younger version of her beloved appearing to her in “love's green darkness.” In this fertile-but-murky setting, olfactory (or smell-based) imagery of “the dust of the bracken spic[ing] the air” and “crushed” moss “giv[ing] out an astringent sweetness” helps readers to feel both the pleasures and dangers of young love. Back when the speaker and her beloved first knew each other, this imagery hints, things had to *break* in order to “spice[] the air” with their fragrance. This might suggest a relationship that was both sensual and volatile!

But by the third stanza, things have changed. The speaker describes her and her loved one's eyes as “shrewd / but trustful still” and their “face[s] chastened by years / of careful judgement.” There is no lush, metaphorical language here; the imagery is straightforward and clear, just as the speaker's relationship is now characterized by clarity and trust. Rather than making love in a murky, mysterious wilderness, the couple now “sit in the afternoons / in mild conversation.” The difference in the imagery from stanza two to stanza three shows just how much their relationship has changed.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-4
- Line 6
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 15-18
- Lines 22-24

METAPHOR

In the poem's central [extended metaphor](#), the speaker compares her life to the "jewelled arc of the waterfall" crashing into "the dark pool below." In other words, no matter how brilliant and lovely a life is, nothing in the world can stop it from ending; time eventually takes its toll. Like a waterfall ending in a "dark pool," life only "glint[s]" in the "sunlight" briefly before vanishing forever. This metaphor suggests that the speaker has become sharply aware of how short her time really is.

The speaker later describes sunlight "light[ing] each drop" of her life before it disappears into "time's irreversible river." By using a river as a [metaphor](#) for time, the poem observes that life flows relentlessly on, in one direction only. And the "sunlight" here suggests the illumination of the speaker's attention and understanding: she's really coming to terms with the movement of life, seeing all her days lit up one by one.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes her beloved, in younger days, appearing to her "in love's green darkness." By comparing young love to both greenness and darkness, the speaker suggests freshness and vitality, but also mystery and even pain. This "green darkness" might be fertile, but it's also confused and perhaps deceptive: her memories of young love, in other words, are a mixed bag!

The poem's metaphors thus ground the speaker's complex emotions in the physical world. Through images of falling water, sunlight, and "green darkness," the speaker confronts both the beauty and the pain of love and mortality.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 22-24

Chastened (Lines 16-17) - Subdued or humbled.

Jauntiness (Lines 19-20) - Cheerful liveliness or sprightliness.

Sinewed (Lines 19-20) - Given strength. Sinews are the tissues that connect muscles to bones, and they're a common metaphor for toughness and endurance.

Resolution (Lines 19-20) - Determination or resolve.

Luminous (Line 23) - Bright and shining; radiant.

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

"Waterfall" is made up of four six-line stanzas, or [sestets](#). It doesn't use a traditional form such as the [sonnet](#) or the [villanelle](#), but instead moves in a natural, fluid way that imitates the water it describes.

This uniform stanza length gives the poem structure, while the number of stanzas might suggest the four seasons—a common image for the passage of time, one of this poem's major themes.

Many of the lines here are [enjambéd](#), giving them an onward-flowing movement that mimics the movement of the waterfall. But each stanza concludes with an [end-stopped line](#), lending a sense of completion to each of the stages of life the speaker describes here.

All of these formal choices reflect the speaker's central ideas: time flows irreversibly onward, and everything comes to an end someday. Although the speaker feels as if she is "always losing" the things that make her life beautiful and worthwhile in the flow of time, she sees this loss as a natural part of aging. She doesn't expect to be able to hold onto any of it forever.

METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#), meaning that it doesn't follow any specific metrical pattern. The lines here have a natural, free-flowing, conversational rhythm that mirrors the [symbolic](#) waterfall the speaker describes.

However, the poem does order its irregular lines in the same ways over and over; every stanza here is six lines long, for instance. This combination of fluid language and uniform stanzas helps the poem's shape to match its subject. Just like the waterfall of life, this poem feels both wild and *bounded*: life doesn't go on forever, and even wild waters have limits.

RHYME SCHEME

"Waterfall" does not use a [rhyme scheme](#). The lack of rhyme helps the poem to feel straightforward and intimate; the speaker doesn't sound like someone performing, but like someone who is speaking directly and honestly to herself and to the person that she loves.

But the poem plays with sound in lots of other ways—especially

**VOCABULARY**

Irreversible (Lines 1-2) - Not able to be changed or stopped.

Delay (Lines 1-2) - A slow-down or a postponement.

Bracken (Line 9) - A kind of large, coarse fern that grows in thickets.

Astringent (Line 10) - Acidic or bitter.

Shrewd (Lines 15-16) - Astute, sharp, and intelligent.

through various forms of [repetition](#), from [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) ("the rising of time's irreversible river") to [diacope](#) and [epizeuxis](#) ("minute by glinting minute," "fast, fast").

These repetitions help the poem's language to feel elegant and musical without sounding too formal, supporting the speaker's candid [tone](#) while also expressing deep feeling.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Waterfall" is aging and taking stock of her life. In particular, she's thinking over her relationship to someone whom she has loved for a long time.

She doesn't long for youth or for the way things used to be; while young love was beautiful in its own way, it was also perhaps too innocent, based on the idea that the relationship would never change and love would never end. Older now, the speaker understands that everything is subject to the passage of time, even love—and she is grateful for the relationship that she has with her beloved now, a relationship characterized by kindness, trust, and unsentimentality.

The speaker still feels passionate love for her partner, but now her passion is born of the knowledge that love doesn't last forever: death will inevitably bring an end to this relationship. Such knowledge makes her clutch life and love while they are still available to her.

While the speaker of this poem doesn't need to be interpreted as Edmond herself, the boundary between Edmond and her speakers is often fairly thin. For this reason, it's reasonable to imagine that Edmond is writing in the first person and addressing her own husband in this poem. (This is also why this guide has used female pronouns throughout; readers should note that the speaker isn't actually gendered in the poem itself, and can be interpreted differently!)



SETTING

Most of the poem's setting is figurative; the action here takes place inside the speaker's thoughts. For example, when the speaker says that she "glimpse[s], minute by glinting minute, / all that [she] has and all [she is] always losing" in the "waterfall" of her life, she's not describing an actual waterfall. Rather, she's using the waterfall as a [symbol](#) of life and time: always flowing onward, and impossible to recover once it's gone.

Similarly, the speaker says that she doesn't "dream" that her loved one will arrive "darkly in love's green darkness / where the dust of the bracken spices the air," and where crushed moss "gives out an astringent sweetness." This vivid setting is [metaphorical](#), evoking the lushness, mystery, and occasional pain of young love. In other words, young love was rich and sensual, but uncertain and sometimes bitter, too. (The

specificity of this [imagery](#) might also suggest that the speaker's symbolic setting is *based* on a real-life place, perhaps one she and her beloved visited when they were young.)

The only purely physical setting in the poem appears in stanza three, as the speaker describes coming into a room to find the person that she loves. There, they "sit in the afternoons / in mild conversation, without nostalgia." This scene lacks the rich sensuality of the speaker's remembered youth, but it makes up for that loss in clarity and stability. This domestic setting suggests that speaker is happy with the calm and certainty of her relationship now.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Lauris Edmond (1924-2000) wrote poems from an early age but didn't begin "writing seriously" until much later in life, publishing her first collection at age 51. After that collection, *In Middle Air* (1975), her star rose rapidly; within 10 years, she had published six poetry collections and a novel and had been awarded the Katherine Mansfield Memorial Fellowship, one of New Zealand's most prestigious literary awards.

Edmond's work is deeply personal, treating intimate subjects like her crumbling marriage and her daughter's suicide. She wove her poems into her two autobiographies, collapsing the distance between her own voice and the voices of her speakers.

Edmond avoided identifying with any one literary movement, preferring to treat each new poem as a distinct and independent project. While many other New Zealand poets of her time (such as Ian Wedde, Bill Manhire, and Elizabeth Smither) were influenced by [Modernism](#) and [Postmodernism](#), experimenting with form and style, Edmond kept her language more conventional and approachable. Her poems use a calm and expressive voice, filled with vulnerability, warmth, and shrewd insight. It is perhaps partly for this reason that her work was able to reach such a broad audience.

Readers were also drawn to Edmond's depiction of everyday experience. Her works compassionately examines common subjects: love and relationships, death and aging, children and grandchildren.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like many women before her, Edmond (who came of age in the early 1940s) gave up a career in favor of raising a family and supporting her husband's endeavors. It wasn't until quite late in her life that she returned to college to finish her studies—and began organizing and rewriting the many poems she had written in private.

The poet has attributed her success to a feminist awakening that prompted her to realize the trap that she and so many

other women had fallen into. Had it not been for the “[fortunate \[...\] accident](#)” of being alive in the 1970s and '80s, a period when second-wave feminism inspired more and more women to break with convention and seek fulfillment outside the home, it might never have occurred to her to publish her work.

As Edmond's career took off, her marriage began to show strains, and she and her husband Trevor divorced in the mid-1980s. But the two remained close until Trevor's death, and Edmond felt lucky to have had the opportunity to live two different lives—one as a wife and mother, the other as a successful writer. "Waterfall" reflects this sense of gratitude and fulfillment in the speaker's appreciation for "all that [she] has and all [she is] always losing."

<http://www.landfallarchive.org/omeka/items/show/26952>

- [An Edmond Reading](#) — Watch Edmond reading her poetry aloud. (<https://teara.govt.nz/en/video/47108/lauris-edmond-on-for-arts-sake>)
- [Edmond's Legacy](#) — Read an obituary of the poet that talks about her life and legacy. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/mar/16/news.obituaries>)
- [A Short Biography](#) — Learn more about Lauris Edmond in this biography from ReadNZ. (<https://www.read-nz.org/writer/edmond-lauris/>)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [An Interview with Edmond](#) — Read a 1982 interview with Lauris Edmond in which she discusses her life and work. (<http://www.landfallarchive.org/omeka/items/show/26942>)
- [Edmond's Reception](#) — Read a 1985 review of Edmond's Selected poems to learn more about how her work was received during her lifetime.



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