

Summer Song

William Carlos Williams - 1883-1963

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Wanderer moon
smiling a
faintly ironical smile
at this
brilliant, dew-moistened
summer morning,—
a detached
sleepily indifferent
smile, a
wanderer's smile,—
if I should
buy a shirt
your color and
put on a necktie
sky-blue
where would they carry me?

About William Carlos Williams' 'Summer Song'

by David Orr

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is one of the most celebrated American poets of the 20th century. As a young man, Williams was briefly associated with Ezra Pound's spare, subject-fixated "Imagism" movement, but Williams soon developed a voice too singular to fit neatly into any group identity. That voice -- quirky, unpretentious, ranging easily between joy and darkness -- reflected Williams' fascination with life in and around Rutherford, New Jersey, where he spent his career as a general-practice doctor.

Williams is widely admired (and occasionally reviled) for his distinctive free-verse technique, which emphasizes line breaks, isolated words and subtle shifts in syntax. His description of a woman eating plums in "To a Poor Old Woman" is a representative example of his ability to say very different things with small gestures, in this case without even changing words:

They taste good to her

They taste good

to her. They taste

good to her

“Summer Song” is taken from Williams’ third book, *Al Que Quiere!*, and strikes a whimsically serious note that is characteristic. The moon is one of the oldest props in poetry, whether it appears as a symbol of constancy, inconstancy, companionship, alienation or (in Plath’s “The Moon and the Yew Tree”) obliterating despair. But Williams’ summer moon is unusual: a traveler with a “faintly ironical smile,” a “sleepily indifferent / smile.” The poet doesn’t simply look at the moon, he *becomes* the moon by assuming its costume: “a shirt / your color” and a “necktie / sky-blue.” The poem’s closing question -- “where would they carry me?” -- is as amused and ironic as the moon itself, because while the moon wanders, it always returns to the same familiar places. It is, like Williams, a world traveler who never leaves home.

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