



## Of Modern Poetry

BY WALLACE STEVENS

The poem of the mind in the act of finding  
What will suffice. It has not always had  
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what  
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed  
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.  
It has to face the men of the time and to meet  
The women of the time. It has to think about war  
And it has to find what will suffice. It has  
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage  
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and  
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,  
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,  
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound  
Of which, an invisible audience listens,  
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed  
In an emotion as of two people, as of two  
Emotions becoming one. The actor is  
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging  
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives  
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly  
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,  
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

It must  
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may  
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman  
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.

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**16th May 1973**

Wisława Szymborska

*(Translated from the Polish by Adam Czerniawski)*

One of those many dates  
that no longer tell me anything.

Where did I go on that day,  
what was I doing — I don't know.

If someone committed a crime  
— I would be lost for an alibi.

The sun shone and set  
but I didn't notice.

I have no diary note  
of the Earth's rotation.

Would have been easier to think  
I had briefly died  
than remembered nothing,  
though I lived without a break.

Assuredly, I wasn't a spirit,  
I breathed, I ate,  
my steps were audible  
and there must be  
traces of my fingers on door-handles.

My reflections were mirrored.  
I wore something that had a colour.  
One or two people must have seen me.

Perhaps that day  
I found something I had lost earlier.  
Or lost something I found later.

I was full of feelings and impressions.  
Now it's all  
like dots in brackets.

Where was I shrouded,  
where did I hide —  
it's rather a clever trick  
to vanish from one's own eyes.

I shake memory —  
will something slumbering for years  
start rustling  
from its branches.

No.  
Manifestly I demand too much —  
no less than one second.



## Interrogative

BY TRACY K. SMITH

1. Falmouth, Massachusetts, 1972

Oak table, knotted legs, the chirp  
And scrape of tines to mouth.  
Four children, four engines  
Of want. That music.

What did your hand mean to smooth  
Across the casket of your belly?  
What echoed there, if not me—tiny body  
Afloat, akimbo, awake or at rest?

Every night you fed the others  
Bread leavened with the grains  
Of your own want. How  
Could you stand me near you,

In you, jump and kick tricking  
The heart, when what you prayed for  
Was my father's shadow, your name  
In his dangerous script, an envelope

Smelling of gun-powder, bay rum,  
Someone to wrestle, sing to, question,  
Climb?

## 2. Interstate 101 South, California, 1981

Remember the radio, the Coca-Cola sign

Phosphorescent to the left, bridge  
After bridge, as though our lives were  
Engineered simply to go? And so we went

Into those few quiet hours  
Alone together in the dark, my arm  
On the rest beside yours, our lights  
Pricking at fog, tugging us patiently

Forward like a needle through gauze.  
Night held us like a house.  
Sometimes an old song  
Would fill the car like a ghost.

## 3. Leroy, Alabama, 2005

There's still a pond behind your mother's old house,  
Still a stable with horses, a tractor rusted and stuck  
Like a trophy in mud. And the red house you might  
Have thrown stones at still stands on stilts up the dirt road.

A girl from the next town over rides in to lend us  
Her colt, cries when one of us kicks it with spurs.  
Her father wants to buy her a trailer, let her try her luck  
In the shows. They stay for dinner under the tent

Your brother put up for the Fourth. Firebugs flare  
And vanish. I am trying to let go of something.  
My heart cluttered with names that mean nothing.  
Our racket races out to the darkest part of the night.

The woods catch it and send it back.

4. But let's say you're alive again—

Your hands are long and tell your age.  
You hold them there, twirling a bent straw,  
And my reflection watches, hollow-faced,

Not trying to hide. The waiters make it seem

Like Cairo. Back and forth shouting  
That sharp language. And for the first time  
I tell you everything. No shame  
In my secrets, shoddy as laundry.

I have praised your God  
For the blessing of the body, snuck  
From pleasure to pleasure, lying for it,  
Holding it like a coin or a key in my fist.

I know now you've known all along.

I won't change. I want to give  
Everything away. To wander forever.  
Here is a pot of tea. Let's share it  
Slowly, like sisters.

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