

Classic Poetry Series

Wisława Szymborska
- poems -

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Wisława Szymborska(2 July 1923 – 1 February 2012)

Wisława Szymborska-Włodek [vi'swava ??m'b?rska] a Polish poet, essayist, translator and recipient of the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature. Born in Prowent, which has since become part of Kórnik, she later resided in Kraków until the end of her life.

She was described as a "Mozart of Poetry". In Poland, Szymborska's books have reached sales rivaling prominent prose authors: although she once remarked in a poem, "Some Like Poetry" ("Niektórzy lubia poezje"), that no more than two out of a thousand people care for the art.

Szymborska was awarded the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature "for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality". She became better known internationally as a result of this. Her work has been translated into English and many European languages, as well as into Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese and Chinese.

Life

Wisława Szymborska was born on 2 July 1923 in Prowent, Poland (present-day Bnin, Kórnik, Poland), the daughter of Wincenty and Anna Szymborski. Her family moved to Kraków in 1931 where she lived and worked until her death in early 2012. When World War II broke out in 1939, she continued her education in underground classes. From 1943, she worked as a railroad employee and managed to avoid being deported to Germany as a forced labourer. It was during this time that her career as an artist began with illustrations for an English-language textbook. She also began writing stories and occasional poems.

Beginning in 1945, Szymborska took up studies of Polish language and literature before switching to sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. There she soon became involved in the local writing scene, and met and was influenced by Czesław Miłosz. In March 1945, she published her first poem Szukam słowa (Looking for a word) in the daily paper Dziennik Polski; her poems continued to be published in various newspapers and periodicals for a number of years. In 1948 she quit her studies without a degree, due to her poor financial circumstances; the same year, she married poet Adam Włodek, whom she divorced in 1954. The union was childless. Around the time of her marriage she was working as a secretary for an educational biweekly magazine as well as an illustrator.

Her first book was to be published in 1949, but did not pass censorship as it "did not meet socialist requirements". Like many other intellectuals in post-war Poland, however, Szymborska remained loyal to the PRL official ideology early in her career, signing political petitions and praising Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Lenin and the realities of socialism. This attitude is seen in her debut collection *Dlatego żyjemy* (That is what we are living for), containing the poems "Lenin" and "Młodzieży budującej Nową Huta" ("For the Youth who are building Nowa Huta"), about the construction of a Stalinist industrial town near Kraków. She became a member of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party. Like many communist intellectuals initially close to the official party line, Szymborska gradually grew estranged from socialist ideology and renounced her earlier political work. Although she did not officially leave the party until 1966, she began to establish contacts with dissidents. As early as 1957, she befriended Jerzy Giedroyc, the editor of the influential Paris-based emigré journal *Kultura*, to which she also contributed. In 1964, she opposed a Communist-backed protest to *The Times* against independent intellectuals, demanding freedom of speech instead.

In 1953, she joined the staff of the literary review magazine *Życie Literackie* (Literary Life), where she continued to work until 1981 and from 1968 ran her own book review column entitled *Lektury Nadobowiązkowe* (Non-compulsory Reading). Many of her essays from this period were later published in book form. From 1981-83, Szymborska was an editor of the Kraków-based monthly periodical, *Pismo*. During the 1980s, she intensified her oppositional activities, contributing to the samizdat periodical *Arka* under the pseudonym "Stanczykówna", as well as to *Kultura* in Paris. Szymborska translated French literature into Polish, in particular Baroque poetry and the works of Agrippa d'Aubigné. In Germany, Szymborska was associated with her translator Karl Dedecius, who did much to popularize her works there.

Death

Wisława Szymborska died 1 February 2012 at home in Kraków, aged 88. Her manager Michał Rusinek confirmed the information and said that she "died peacefully, in her sleep". She was surrounded by friends and relatives at the time. Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski described her death on Twitter as an "irreparable loss to Poland's culture".

She was working on new poetry right until her death, though she was unable to arrange her final efforts for a book in the way she would have wanted. Her last poetry will be published later in 2012.

Themes

Szyborska frequently employed literary devices such as irony, paradox, contradiction and understatement, to illuminate philosophical themes and obsessions. Many of her poems feature war and terrorism. In "Calling out to the Yeti" (1957), she compared Joseph Stalin to the abominable snowman.

She wrote from unusual points of view, such as a cat in the newly empty apartment of its dead owner. Her reputation rests on a relatively small body of work, fewer than 350 poems. When asked why she had published so few poems, she said: "I have a trash can in my home".

Pop Culture

Szyborska's poem "Nothing Twice" turned into a song by composer Andrzej Munkowski performed by Lucja Prus in 1965 makes her poetry known in Poland, rock singer Kora cover of "Nothing Twice" was a hit in 1994.

The poem "Love At First Sight" was used in the film Turn Left, Turn Right, starring Takeshi Kaneshiro and Gigi Leung.

Three Colors: Red, a film directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski, was inspired by Szyborska's poem, "Love At First Sight".

Awards

1954: The City of Kraków Prize for Literature

1963: The Polish Ministry of Culture Prize

1991: The Goethe Prize

1995: The Herder Prize

1995: Honorary Doctor of the Adam Mickiewicz University (Poznan)

1996: The Polish PEN Club prize

1996: Nobel Prize for Literature

2011: Order of the White Eagle

A Few Words On The Soul

We have a soul at times.
No one's got it non-stop,
for keeps.

Day after day,
year after year
may pass without it.

Sometimes
it will settle for awhile
only in childhood's fears and raptures.
Sometimes only in astonishment
that we are old.

It rarely lends a hand
in uphill tasks,
like moving furniture,
or lifting luggage,
or going miles in shoes that pinch.

It usually steps out
whenever meat needs chopping
or forms have to be filled.

For every thousand conversations
it participates in one,
if even that,
since it prefers silence.

Just when our body goes from ache to pain,
it slips off-duty.

It's picky:
it doesn't like seeing us in crowds,
our hustling for a dubious advantage
and creaky machinations make it sick.

Joy and sorrow
aren't two different feelings for it.

It attends us
only when the two are joined.

We can count on it
when we're sure of nothing
and curious about everything.

Among the material objects
it favors clocks with pendulums
and mirrors, which keep on working
even when no one is looking.

It won't say where it comes from
or when it's taking off again,
though it's clearly expecting such questions.

We need it
but apparently
it needs us
for some reason too.

translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh

DUSZA

Dusza siä miewa.
Nikt nie ma jej bez przerwy i na zawsze.

Dzień za dniem, rok za rokiem
może bez niej minąć.

Czasem tylko w zachwytach
i lękach dzieciństwa
zagnieżdża się na dłużej.
Czasem tylko w zdziwieniu,
że jesteśmy starzy.

Rzadko nam asystuje
podczas zajęć żmudnych,
jak przesuwanie mebli,
dźwiganie walizek,

czy przemierzanie drogi w ciasnych butach.

Przy wypełnianiu ankiet
i siekaniu mięsa
z reguły ma wychodne.

Na tysiąc naszych rozmów uczestniczy w jednej
a i to niekoniecznie, bo woli milczenie.

Kiedy ciało zaczyna nas boleć; i boleć,
cichcem schodzi z dęru.

Jest wybredna: niechcnie widzi nas w tłumie,
mierzi ją; nasza walka o byle przewagi
i terkot interesów.

Radość i smutek
to nie są; dla niej dwa różne uczucia.
Tylko w ich pojęciu jest przy nas obecna.

Możemy na nią liczyć;
kiedy niczego nie jesteśmy pewni,
a wszystkiego ciekawi.

Z przedmiotów materialnych
lubi zegary z wahadłem
i lustra, które pracują gorliwie,
nawet gdy nikt nie patrzy.

Nie mówi skąd przybywa
i kiedy znowu nam zniknie,
ale wyraźnie czeka na takie pytania.

Wygląda na to,
że tak jak ona nam,
równie; i my
jesteśmy jej na coś potrzebni.

Wisława Szymborska

A Great Man's House

It was written in marble in golden letters:
here a great man lived and worked and died.
He laid the gravel for these paths personally.
This bench — do not touch — he chiseled by himself
out of stone.
And — careful, three steps — we're going inside.

He made it into the world at just the right time.
Everything that had to pass, passed in this house.
Not in a high rise,
not in square feet, furnished yet empty,
amidst unknown neighbors,
on some fifteenth floor,
where it's hard to drag school field trips.

In this room he pondered,
in this chamber he slept,
and over here he entertained guests.
Portraits, an armchair, a desk, a pipe, a globe, a flute,
a worn-out rug, a sun room.
From here he exchanged nods with his tailor and
shoemaker
who custom made for him.

This is not the same as photographs in boxes,
dried out pens in a plastic cup,
a store-bought wardrobe in a store-bought closet,
a window, from which you can see clouds better
than people.

Happy? Unhappy?
That's not relevant here.
He still confided in his letters,
without thinking they would be opened on their
way.
He still kept a detailed and honest diary,
without the fear that he would lose it during a
search.
The passing of a comet worried him most.

The destruction of the world was only in the hands
of God.

He still managed not to die in the hospital,
behind a white screen, who knows which one.
There was still someone with him who remembered
his muttered words.

He partook of life
as if it were reusable:
he sent his books to be bound;
he wouldn't cross out the last names of the dead from
his address book.
And the trees he had planted in the garden behind
the house
grew for him as *Juglans regia*
and *Quercus rubra* and *Ulmus* and *Larix*
and *Fraxinus excelsior*.

Translated, from the Polish, by Joanna Trzeciak

Wisława Szymborska

A 'Thank You' Note

There is much I owe
to those I do not love.
The relief in accepting
they are closer to another.
Joy that I am not
the wolf to their sheep.
My peace be with them
for with them I am free,
and this, love can neither give,
nor know how to take.
I don't wait for them
from window to door.
Almost as patient
as a sun dial,
I understand
what love does not understand.
I forgive
what love would never have forgiven.
Between rendezvous and letter
no eternity passes,
only a few days or weeks.
My trips with them always turn out well.
Concerts are heard.
Cathedrals are toured.
Landscapes are distinct.
And when seven rivers and mountains
come between us,
they are rivers and mountains
well known from any map.
It is thanks to them
that I live in three dimensions,
in a non-lyrical and non-rhetorical space,
with a shifting, thus real, horizon.
They don't even know
how much they carry in their empty hands.
'I don't owe them anything',
love would have said
on this open topic.

Advertisement

I'm a tranquilizer.
I'm effective at home.
I work in the office.
I can take exams
on the witness stand.
I mend broken cups with care.
All you have to do is take me,
let me melt beneath your tongue,
just gulp me
with a glass of water.

I know how to handle misfortune,
how to take bad news.
I can minimize injustice,
lighten up God's absence,
or pick the widow's veil that suits your face.
What are you waiting for—
have faith in my chemical compassion.

You're still a young man/woman.
It's not too late to learn how to unwind.
Who said
you have to take it on the chin?

Let me have your abyss.
I'll cushion it with sleep.
You'll thank me for giving you
four paws to fall on.

Sell me your soul.
There are no other takers.

There is no other devil anymore.

Wisława Szymborska

Birthday

Birthday

So much world all at once – how it rustles and bustles!
Moraines and morays and morasses and mussels,
The flame, the flamingo, the flounder, the feather –
How to line them all up, how to put them together?
All the tickets and crickets and creepers and creeks!
The beeches and leeches alone could take weeks.
Chinchillas, gorillas, and sarsaparillas –
Thanks do much, but all this excess of kindness could kill us.
Where's the jar for this burgeoning burdock, brooks' babble,
Rooks' squabble, snakes' quiggle, abundance, and trouble?
How to plug up the gold mines and pin down the fox,
How to cope with the linx, bobolinks, strptococs!
Tale dioxide: a lightweight, but mighty in deeds:
What about octopodes, what about centipedes?
I could look into prices, but don't have the nerve:
These are products I just can't afford, don't deserve.
Isn't sunset a little too much for two eyes
That, who knows, may not open to see the sun rise?
I am just passing through, it's a five-minute stop.
I won't catch what is distant: what's too close, I'll mix up.
While trying to plumb what the void's inner sense is,
I'm bound to pass by all these poppies and pansies.
What a loss when you think how much effort was spent
perfecting this petal, this pistil, this scent
for the one-time appearance, which is all they're allowed,
so aloofly precise and so fragilely proud.

translated from Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak
and Clare Cavanagh

Urodziny

Tyle naraz świata ze wszystkich stron swiata:
moreny, mureny i morza, i zorze,
i ogień, i ogon, i orzeł, i orzech -
jak ja to ustawię, gdzie ja to położę?
Te chaszczce i paszczce, i leszczce, i deszczce,

bodziszek, modliszka - gdzie ja to pomieszczę?
Motyle, goryle, beryle i trele -
dziękuj, to chyba o wiele za wiele,
Do dzbanka jakiego tam opian i opot,
i ubin, i popoch, i przepych, i kopot?
Gdzie zabrak kolibra, gdzie ukryte srebro,
co zrobi na serio z tym ubrem i zebraniem?
Już taki dwutlenek rzecz ważna i droga,
a tu o miornica i jeszcze stonoga!
Domyłam się; ceny, choć; cena z gwiazd zdarta -
dziękuj, doprawdy nie czuję się; warta.
Nie szkoda to dla mnie zachodu i słońca?
Jak ma się; w to bawię; osoba i yjca?
Na chwilę; tu jestem i tylko na chwilę;
co dalsze, przeocz, a resztę; pomyśl.
Nie zdanie; wszystkiego odróżni; od
próżni.
Pogubię; te bratki w po piechu podróży.
Już; choć; by najmniejszy - szalony wydatek:
fatyga i odygi i listek, i piatek
raz jeden w przestrzeni, od nigdy, na o lep,
wzgardliwie dokładny i kruchy wyniośle.

Wisława Szymborska

Children Of Our Age

We are children of our age,
it's a political age.

All day long, all through the night,
all affairs--yours, ours, theirs--
are political affairs.

Whether you like it or not,
your genes have a political past,
your skin, a political cast,
your eyes, a political slant.

Whatever you say reverberates,
whatever you don't say speaks for itself.
So either way you're talking politics.

Even when you take to the woods,
you're taking political steps
on political grounds.

Apolitical poems are also political,
and above us shines a moon
no longer purely lunar.
To be or not to be, that is the question.
And though it troubles the digestion
it's a question, as always, of politics.

To acquire a political meaning
you don't even have to be human.
Raw material will do,
or protein feed, or crude oil,

or a conference table whose shape
was quarreled over for months;
Should we arbitrate life and death
at a round table or a square one?

Meanwhile, people perished,
animals died,

houses burned,
and the fields ran wild
just as in times immemorial
and less political.

Wisława Szymborska

Clouds

Clouds

I'd have to be really quick
to describe clouds -
a split second's enough
for them to start being something else.

Their trademark:
they don't repeat a single
shape, shade, pose, arrangement.

Unburdened by memory of any kind,
they float easily over the facts.

What on earth could they bear witness to?
They scatter whenever something happens.

Compared to clouds,
life rests on solid ground,
practically permanent, almost eternal.

Next to clouds
even a stone seems like a brother,
someone you can trust,
while they're just distant, flighty cousins.

Let people exist if they want,
and then die, one after another:
clouds simply don't care
what they're up to
down there.

And so their haughty fleet
cruises smoothly over your whole life
and mine, still incomplete.

They aren't obliged to vanish when we're gone.
They don't have to be seen while sailing on.



CHMURY

Z opisywaniem chmur

musiałabym się bardzo śpieszyć -
już po ułamku chwili
przestają być te, zaczynają być inne.

Ich właściwością jest
nie powtarzać się nigdy
w kształtach, odcieniach, pozach i układzie.

Nie obciążone pamięcią o niczym,
unoszą się bez trudu nad faktami.

Jacy tam z nich świadkowie czegokolwiek -
natychmiast rozwiewają się na wszystkie strony.

W porównaniu z chmurami
żyacie wydaje się ugruntowane,
omalże trwałe i prawie że wieczne.

Przy chmurach
nawet kamień wygląda jak brat,
na którym można polegać, ,
a one, cóż, dalekie i płocze kuzynki.

Niech sobie ludzie będą, jeśli chcą, ,
a potem po kolei każde z nich umiera,
im, chmurom nic do tego
wszystkiego
bardzo dziwnego.

Nad całym Twoim życiem
i moim, jeszcze nie całym,
paradują w przepychu, jak paradowały.

Nie mają obowiązku razem z nami ginąć.
Nie muszą być widziane, żeby płynąć.

Consolation

Darwin.

They say he read novels to relax,
But only certain kinds:
nothing that ended unhappily.
If anything like that turned up,
enraged, he flung the book into the fire.

True or not,
I'm ready to believe it.

Scanning in his mind so many times and places,
he'd had enough of dying species,
the triumphs of the strong over the weak,
the endless struggles to survive,
all doomed sooner or later.
He'd earned the right to happy endings,
at least in fiction
with its diminutions.

Hence the indispensable
silver lining,
the lovers reunited, the families reconciled,
the doubts dispelled, fidelity rewarded,
fortunes regained, treasures uncovered,
stiff-necked neighbors mending their ways,
good names restored, greed daunted,
old maids married off to worthy parsons,
troublemakers banished to other hemispheres,
forgers of documents tossed down the stairs,
seducers scurrying to the altar,
orphans sheltered, widows comforted,
pride humbled, wounds healed over,
prodigal sons summoned home,
cups of sorrow thrown into the ocean,
hankies drenched with tears of reconciliation,
general merriment and celebration,
and the dog Fido,
gone astray in the first chapter,
turns up barking gladly

in the last.

Wisława Szymborska

Could Have

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.
You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck -- there was a forest.
You were in luck -- there were no trees.
You were in luck -- a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,
A jamb, a turn, a quarter-inch, an instant . . .

So you're here? Still dizzy from
another dodge, close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or
speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside me.

Wisława Szymborska

Dreams

Despite the geologists' knowledge and craft,
mocking magnets, graphs, and maps—
in a split second the dream
piles before us mountains as stony
as real life.

And since mountains, then valleys, plains
with perfect infrastructures.

Without engineers, contractors, workers,
bulldozers, diggers, or supplies—
raging highways, instant bridges,
thickly populated pop-up cities.

Without directors, megaphones, and cameramen—
crowds knowing exactly when to frighten us
and when to vanish.

Without architects deft in their craft,
without carpenters, bricklayers, concrete pourers—
on the path a sudden house just like a toy,
and in it vast halls that echo with our steps
and walls constructed out of solid air.

Not just the scale, it's also the precision—
a specific watch, an entire fly,
on the table a cloth with cross-stitched flowers,
a bitten apple with teeth marks.

And we—unlike circus acrobats,
conjurers, wizards, and hypnotists—
can fly unfledged,
we light dark tunnels with our eyes,
we wax eloquent in unknown tongues,
talking not with just anyone, but with the dead.

And as a bonus, despite our own freedom,
the choices of our heart, our tastes,
we're swept away
by amorous yearnings for—

and the alarm clock rings.

So what can they tell us, the writers of dream books,
the scholars of oneiric signs and omens,
the doctors with couches for analyses—
if anything fits,
it's accidental,
and for one reason only,
that in our dreamings,
in their shadowings and gleamings,
in their multiplings, inconceivablings,
in their haphazardings and widscafterings
at times even a clear-cut meaning
may slip through.

Wisława Szymborska

First Love

They say
the first love is the most important.
That's very romantic
but it's not the case with me.

There was something between us yet there wasn't.
It transpired and expired.

My hands don't tremble,
when I stumble upon small mementos
or a stack of letters wrapped in twine
—not even a ribbon.

Our only meeting after all these years
is a conversation between two chairs
at a cold table.

Other loves
still breathe deeply within me.
This one lacks the breath to sigh.

But still, just the way it is,
it can do what the rest are not yet able to do:
unremembered
not even dreamt of
it accustoms me to death.

Translated by Joanna Trzeciak

Wisława Szymborska

Going Home

He came home. Said nothing.
It was clear, though, that something had gone wrong.
He lay down fully dressed.
Pulled the blanket over his head.
Tucked up his knees.
He's nearly forty, but not at the moment.
He exists just as he did inside his mother's womb,
clad in seven walls of skin, in sheltered darkness.
Tomorrow he'll give a lecture
on homeostasis in metagalactic cosmonautics.
For now, though, he has curled up and gone to sleep.

Wisława Szymborska

Hatred

See how efficient it still is,
how it keeps itself in shape—
our century's hatred.
How easily it vaults the tallest obstacles.
How rapidly it pounces, tracks us down.

It's not like other feelings.
At once both older and younger.
It gives birth itself to the reasons
that give it life.
When it sleeps, it's never eternal rest.
And sleeplessness won't sap its strength; it feeds it.

One religion or another -
whatever gets it ready, in position.
One fatherland or another -
whatever helps it get a running start.
Justice also works well at the outset
until hate gets its own momentum going.
Hatred. Hatred.
Its face twisted in a grimace
of erotic ecstasy...

Hatred is a master of contrast-
between explosions and dead quiet,
red blood and white snow.
Above all, it never tires
of its leitmotif - the impeccable executioner
towering over its soiled victim.

It's always ready for new challenges.
If it has to wait awhile, it will.
They say it's blind. Blind?
It has a sniper's keen sight
and gazes unflinchingly at the future
as only it can.

Hunger Camp At Jaslo

Write it. Write. In ordinary ink
on ordinary paper: they were given no food,
they all died of hunger. "All. How many?
It's a big meadow. How much grass
for each one?" Write: I don't know.
History counts its skeletons in round numbers.
A thousand and one remains a thousand,
as though the one had never existed:
an imaginary embryo, an empty cradle,
an ABC never read,
air that laughs, cries, grows,
emptiness running down steps toward the garden,
nobody's place in the line.

We stand in the meadow where it became flesh,
and the meadow is silent as a false witness.
Sunny. Green. Nearby, a forest
with wood for chewing and water under the bark-
every day a full ration of the view
until you go blind. Overhead, a bird-
the shadow of its life-giving wings
brushed their lips. Their jaws opened.
Teeth clacked against teeth.
At night, the sickle moon shone in the sky
and reaped wheat for their bread.
Hands came floating from blackened icons,
empty cups in their fingers.
On a spit of barbed wire,
a man was turning.
They sang with their mouths full of earth.
"A lovely song of how war strikes straight
at the heart." Write: how silent.
"Yes."

Translated by Grazyna Drabik and Austin Flint

Anonymous submission.

Identification

It's good you came—she says.
You heard a plane crashed on Thursday?
Well so they came to see me
about it.
The story is he was on the passenger list.
So what, he might have changed his mind.
They gave me some pills so I wouldn't fall apart.
Then they showed me I don't know who.
All black, burned except one hand.
A scrap of shirt, a watch, a wedding ring.
I got furious, that can't be him.
He wouldn't do that to me, look like that.
The stores are bursting with those shirts.
The watch is just a regular old watch.
And our names on that ring,
they're only the most ordinary names.
It's good you came. Sit here beside me.
He really was supposed to get back Thursday.
But we've got so many Thursdays left this year.
I'll put the kettle on for tea.
I'll wash my hair, then what,
try to wake up from all this.
It's good you came, since it was cold there,
and him just in some rubber sleeping bag,
him, I mean, you know, that unlucky man.
I'll put the Thursday on, wash the tea,
since our names are completely ordinary—

Wisława Szymborska

Lot's Wife

They say I looked back out of curiosity.
But I could have had other reasons.
I looked back mourning my silver bowl.
Carelessly, while tying my sandal strap.
So I wouldn't have to keep staring at the righteous nape
of my husband Lot's neck.
From the sudden conviction that if I dropped dead
he wouldn't so much as hesitate.
From the disobedience of the meek.
Checking for pursuers.
Struck by the silence, hoping God had changed his mind.
Our two daughters were already vanishing over the hilltop.
I felt age within me. Distance.
The futility of wandering. Torpor.
I looked back setting my bundle down.
I looked back not knowing where to set my foot.
Serpents appeared on my path,
spiders, field mice, baby vultures.
They were neither good nor evil now--every living thing
was simply creeping or hopping along in the mass panic.
I looked back in desolation.
In shame because we had stolen away.
Wanting to cry out, to go home.
Or only when a sudden gust of wind
unbound my hair and lifted up my robe.
It seemed to me that they were watching from the walls of Sodom
and bursting into thunderous laughter again and again.
I looked back in anger.
To savor their terrible fate.
I looked back for all the reasons given above.
I looked back involuntarily.
It was only a rock that turned underfoot, growling at me.
It was a sudden crack that stopped me in my tracks.
A hamster on its hind paws tottered on the edge.
It was then we both glanced back.
No, no. I ran on,
I crept, I flew upward
until darkness fell from the heavens
and with it scorching gravel and dead birds.

I couldn't breathe and spun around and around.
Anyone who saw me must have thought I was dancing.
It's not inconceivable that my eyes were open.
It's possible I fell facing the city.

Wisława Szymborska

Miracle Fair

Commonplace miracle:
that so many commonplace miracles happen.

An ordinary miracle:
in the dead of night
the barking of invisible dogs.

One miracle out of many:
a small, airy cloud
yet it can block a large and heavy moon.

Several miracles in one:
an alder tree reflected in the water,
and that it's backwards left to right
and that it grows there, crown down
and never reaches the bottom,
even though the water is shallow.

An everyday miracle:
winds weak to moderate
turning gusty in storms.

First among equal miracles:
cows are cows.

Second to none:
just this orchard
from just that seed.

A miracle without a cape and top hat:
scattering white doves.

A miracle, for what else could you call it:
today the sun rose at three-fourteen
and will set at eight-o-one.

A miracle, less surprising than it should be:
even though the hand has fewer than six fingers,
it still has more than four.

A miracle, just take a look around:
the world is everywhere.

An additional miracle, as everything is additional:
the unthinkable
is thinkable.

Wisława Szymborska

Negative

Negative

Against a grayish sky
a grayer cloud
rimmed black by the sun.

On the left, that is, the right,
a white cherry branch with black blossoms.

Light shadows on your dark face.
You'd just taken a seat at the table
and put your hands, gone pray, upon it.

You look like a ghost
who's trying to summon up the living.

(And since I still number among them,
I should appear to him and tap:
good night, that is, good morning,
farewell, that is, hello.

And not grudge questions to any of his answers
concerning life,
that storm before the clam).

translated from Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak
and Clare Cavanagh

Negatyw

Na niebie burym
chmurka jeszcze bardziej bura
z czarną obwąką słońca.

Na lewo, czyli na prawo,
biała gałkaą czereśni z czarnymi kwiatami.

Na twojej ciemnej twarzy jasne cienie.

Zasiadłeś przy stoliku
i położyłeś na nim poszarzałe ręce.

Sprawiasz wrażenie ducha
który próbuje wywoływać żywych.

(ponieważ jeszcze zaliczam się do nich,
powinam mu się zjawić i wystukać:
dobranoc , czyli dzień dobry,
żegnaj , czyli witaj.

I nie skąpić mu pytań na żadną
odpowiedź,
jeśli dotyczą życia,
czyli burzy przed ciszą.)

Wisława Szymborska

Nothing Twice

Nothing can ever happen twice.
In consequence, the sorry fact is
that we arrive here improvised
and leave without the chance to practice.

Even if there is no one dumber,
if you're the planet's biggest dunce,
you can't repeat the class in summer:
this course is only offered once.

No day copies yesterday,
no two nights will teach what bliss is
in precisely the same way,
with precisely the same kisses.

One day, perhaps some idle tongue
mentions your name by accident:
I feel as if a rose were flung
into the room, all hue and scent.

The next day, though you're here with me,
I can't help looking at the clock:
A rose? A rose? What could that be?
Is it a flower or a rock?

Why do we treat the fleeting day
with so much needless fear and sorrow?
It's in its nature not to stay:
Today is always gone tomorrow.

With smiles and kisses, we prefer
to seek accord beneath our star,
although we're different (we concur)
just as two drops of water are.

translated by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak

Wisława Szymborska

On Death, Without Exaggeration

It can't take a joke,
find a star, make a bridge.
It knows nothing about weaving, mining, farming,
building ships, or baking cakes.
In our planning for tomorrow,
it has the final word,
which is always beside the point.

It can't even get the things done
that are part of its trade:
dig a grave,
make a coffin,
clean up after itself.

Preoccupied with killing,
it does the job awkwardly,
without system or skill.
As though each of us were its first kill.

Oh, it has its triumphs,
but look at its countless defeats,
missed blows,
and repeat attempts!

Sometimes it isn't strong enough
to swat a fly from the air.
Many are the caterpillars
that have outcrawled it.

All those bulbs, pods,
tentacles, fins, tracheae,
nuptial plumage, and winter fur
show that it has fallen behind
with its halfhearted work.

Ill will won't help
and even our lending a hand with wars and coups d'etat
is so far not enough.

Hearts beat inside eggs.
Babies' skeletons grow.
Seeds, hard at work, sprout their first tiny pair of leaves
and sometimes even tall trees fall away.

Whoever claims that it's omnipotent
is himself living proof
that it's not.

There's no life
that couldn't be immortal
if only for a moment.

Death
always arrives by that very moment too late.

In vain it tugs at the knob
of the invisible door.
As far as you've come
can't be undone.

Wisława Szymborska

Photograph From September 11

They jumped from the burning floors—
one, two, a few more,
higher, lower.

The photograph halted them in life,
and now keeps them
above the earth toward the earth.

Each is still complete,
with a particular face
and blood well hidden.

There's enough time
for hair to come loose,
for keys and coins
to fall from pockets.

They're still within the air's reach,
within the compass of places
that have just now opened.

I can do only two things for them—
describe this flight
and not add a last line.

Translated By: Clare Cavanagh And Stanislaw Baranczak

Wisława Szymborska

Pi

The admirable number pi:
three point one four one.
All the following digits are also initial,
five nine two because it never ends.
It can't be comprehended six five three five at a glance,
eight nine by calculation,
seven nine or imagination,
not even three two three eight by wit, that is, by comparison
four six to anything else
two six four three in the world.
The longest snake on earth calls it quits at about forty feet.
Likewise, snakes of myth and legend, though they may hold out a bit
longer.
The pageant of digits comprising the number pi
doesn't stop at the page's edge.
It goes on across the table, through the air,
over a wall, a leaf, a bird's nest, clouds, straight into the sky,
through all the bottomless, bloated heavens.
Oh how brief - a mouse tail, a pigtail - is the tail of a comet!
How feeble the star's ray, bent by bumping up against space!
While here we have two three fifteen three hundred nineteen
my phone number your shirt size the year
nineteen hundred and seventy-three the sixth floor
the number of inhabitants sixty-five cents
hip measurement two fingers a charade, a code,
in which we find hail to thee, blithe spirit, bird thou never wert
alongside ladies and gentlemen, no cause for alarm,
as well as heaven and earth shall pass away,
but not the number pi, oh no, nothing doing,
it keeps right on with its rather remarkable five,
its uncommonly fine eight,
its far from final seven,
nudging, always nudging a sluggish eternity
to continue.

Wisława Szymborska

Poetry Reading

Poetry Reading

To be a boxer, or not to be there
at all. O Muse, where are our teeming crowds?
Twelve people in the room, eight seats to spare
it's time to start this cultural affair.
Half came inside because it started raining,
the rest are relatives. O Muse.

The women here would love to rant and rave,
but that's for boxing. Here they must behave.
Dante's Infemo is ringside nowadays.
Likewise his Paradise. O Muse.

Oh, not to be a boxer but a poet,
one sentenced to hard shelleying for life,
for lack of muscles forced to show the world
the sonnet that may make the high-school reading lists
with luck. O Muse,
O bobtailed angel, Pegasus.

In the first row, a sweet old man's soft snore:
he dreams his wife's alive again. What's more,
she's making him that tart she used to bake.
Aflame, but carefully-don't burn his cake!
we start to read. O Muse.

Translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh

WIECZOR AUTORSKI

Muzo, nie być bokserem to jest nie być wcale.
Ryczącej publiczności poskąpiłaś nam.
Dwanaście osòb jest na sali,
już czas ,żebyśmy zaczynali.
Połowa przyszła, bo deszcz pada,
reszta to krewni. Muzo.

Kobiety rade zemdle#263; w ten jesienny wieczór,
zrobi#261; to, ale tylko na boksterskim meczu.
dantejskie sceny tylko tam.
I wniebobranie. Muzo

Nie by#263; bokserem, by#263; poet#261;,,
mie#263; wyrok skazuj#261;cy na ci#281;#380;kie norwidy,
z braku muskulatury demonstrowa#263; #347;wiatu
przysz#322;#261; lektur#281; szkoln#261;-w
najszcz#281;#347;liwszym razie-
o Muzo. O Pegazie,
aniele ko#324;ski.

W pierwszym rz#261;dku staruszek slodko sobie #347;ni,
#380;e mu #380;ona nieboszczka z grobu wsta#322;a i
upiecze staruszkowi placek ze #347;liwkami.
Z ogniem, ale niewielkim, bo placek si#281; spali,
zaczynamy czytanie .Muzo.

Wisława Szymborska

Possibilities

I prefer movies.
I prefer cats.
I prefer the oaks along the Warta.
I prefer Dickens to Dostoyevsky.
I prefer myself liking people
to myself loving mankind.
I prefer keeping a needle and thread on hand, just in case.
I prefer the color green.
I prefer not to maintain
that reason is to blame for everything.
I prefer exceptions.
I prefer to leave early.
I prefer talking to doctors about something else.
I prefer the old fine-lined illustrations.
I prefer the absurdity of writing poems
to the absurdity of not writing poems.
I prefer, where love's concerned, nonspecific anniversaries
that can be celebrated every day.
I prefer moralists
who promise me nothing.
I prefer cunning kindness to the over-trustful kind.
I prefer the earth in civvies.
I prefer conquered to conquering countries.
I prefer having some reservations.
I prefer the hell of chaos to the hell of order.
I prefer Grimms' fairy tales to the newspapers' front pages.
I prefer leaves without flowers to flowers without leaves.
I prefer dogs with uncropped tails.
I prefer light eyes, since mine are dark.
I prefer desk drawers.
I prefer many things that I haven't mentioned here
to many things I've also left unsaid.
I prefer zeroes on the loose
to those lined up behind a cipher.
I prefer the time of insects to the time of stars.
I prefer to knock on wood.
I prefer not to ask how much longer and when.
I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility
that existence has its own reason for being.

Wisława Szymborska

Some Like Poetry

Some -

thus not all. Not even the majority of all but the minority.
Not counting schools, where one has to,
and the poets themselves,
there might be two people per thousand.

Like -

but one also likes chicken soup with noodles,
one likes compliments and the color blue,
one likes an old scarf,
one likes having the upper hand,
one likes stroking a dog.

Poetry -

but what is poetry.
Many shaky answers
have been given to this question.
But I don't know and don't know and hold on to it
like to a sustaining railing.

Translated by Regina Grol

Wisława Szymborska

Some People

Some people fleeing some other people.
In some country under the sun
and some clouds.

They leave behind some of their everything,
sown fields, some chickens, dogs,
mirrors in which fire now sees itself reflected.

On their backs are pitchers and bundles,
the emptier, the heavier from one day to the next.

Taking place stealthily is somebody's stopping,
and in the commotion, somebody's bread somebody's snatching
and a dead child somebody's shaking.

In front of them some still not the right way,
nor the bridge that should be
over a river strangely rosy.
Around them, some gunfire, at times closer, at times farther off,
and, above, a plane circling somewhat.

Some invisibility would come in handy,
some grayish stoniness,
or even better, non-being
for a little or a long while.

Something else is yet to happen, only where and what?
Someone will head toward them, only when and who,
in how many shapes and with what intentions?
Given a choice,
maybe he will choose not to be the enemy and
leave them with some kind of life.

Jacyś ludzie

Jacyś ludzie w ucieczce przed jakimś ludźmi.
W jakimś kraju pod słońcem

i niektórymi chmurami.

Zostawiają za sobą jakieś swoje wszystko,
obsiane pola, jakieś kury, psy,
lusterka, w których właśnie przegląda się ogień.

Mają na plecach dzbanki i tobołki,
im bardziej puste, tym z dnia na dzień cię ższe.

Odbywa się po cichu czyjeś ustawanie,
a w zgiełku czyjeś komuś chleba wydzieranie
i czyjeś martwym dzieckiem potrzebąsanie.

Przed nimi jakaś wcią ż nie tędy droga,
nie ten, co trzeba most
nad rzeką dziwnie różową.
Dokoła jakieś strzały, raz bliżej, raz dalej,
w górze samolot trochę kołujący.

Przydałaby się jakaś niewidzialnoś ć,
jakaś bura kamiennoś ć,
a jeszcze lepiej niebyłoś ć
na pewien krótki czas albo i długi.

Coś jeszcze się wydarzy, tylko gdzie i co.
Ktoś wyjdzie im naprzeciw, tylko kiedy, kto,
w ilu postaciach i w jakich zamiarach.
Jeśli będzie miał wybór,
może nie zechce być wrogiem
i pozostawi ich przy jakimś życiu.

Wisława Szymborska

Still

In sealed box cars travel
names across the land,
and how far they will travel so,
and will they ever get out,
don't ask, I won't say, I don't know.

The name Nathan strikes fist against wall,
the name Isaac, demented, sings,
the name Sarah calls out for water for
the name Aaron that's dying of thirst.

Don't jump while it's moving, name David.
You're a name that dooms to defeat,
given to no one, and homeless,
too heavy to bear in this land.

Let your son have a Slavic name,
for here they count hairs on the head,
for here they tell good from evil
by names and by eyelids' shape.

Don't jump while it's moving. Your son will be Lech.
Don't jump while it's moving. Not time yet.
Don't jump. The night echoes like laughter
mocking clatter of wheels upon tracks.

A cloud made of people moved over the land,
a big cloud gives a small rain, one tear,
a small rain—one tear, a dry season.
Tracks lead off into black forest.

Cor-rect, cor-rect clicks the wheel. Gladeless forest.
Cor-rect, cor-rect. Through the forest a convoy of clamors.
Cor-rect, cor-rect. Awakened in the night I hear
cor-rect, cor-rect, crash of silence on silence.

Wisława Szymborska

The End And The Beginning

After every war
someone has to clean up.
Things won't
straighten themselves up, after all.

Someone has to push the rubble
to the side of the road,
so the corpse-filled wagons
can pass.

Someone has to get mired
in scum and ashes,
sofa springs,
splintered glass,
and bloody rags.

Someone has to drag in a girder
to prop up a wall.
Someone has to glaze a window,
rehang a door.

Photogenic it's not,
and takes years.
All the cameras have left
for another war.

We'll need the bridges back,
and new railway stations.
Sleeves will go ragged
from rolling them up.

Someone, broom in hand,
still recalls the way it was.
Someone else listens
and nods with unsevered head.
But already there are those nearby
starting to mill about
who will find it dull.

From out of the bushes
sometimes someone still unearths
rusted-out arguments
and carries them to the garbage pile.

Those who knew
what was going on here
must make way for
those who know little.
And less than little.
And finally as little as nothing.

In the grass that has overgrown
causes and effects,
someone must be stretched out
blade of grass in his mouth
gazing at the clouds.

Wisława Szymborska

The Joy Of Writing

Why does this written doe bound through these written woods?
For a drink of written water from a spring
whose surface will xerox her soft muzzle?
Why does she lift her head; does she hear something?
Perched on four slim legs borrowed from the truth,
she pricks up her ears beneath my fingertips.
Silence - this word also rustles across the page
and parts the boughs
that have sprouted from the word 'woods.'
Lying in wait, set to pounce on the blank page,
are letters up to no good,
clutches of clauses so subordinate
they'll never let her get away.

Each drop of ink contains a fair supply
of hunters, equipped with squinting eyes behind their sights,
prepared to swarm the sloping pen at any moment,
surround the doe, and slowly aim their guns.

They forget that what's here isn't life.
Other laws, black on white, obtain.
The twinkling of an eye will take as long as I say,
and will, if I wish, divide into tiny eternities,
full of bullets stopped in mid-flight.
Not a thing will ever happen unless I say so.
Without my blessing, not a leaf will fall,
not a blade of grass will bend beneath that little hoof's full stop.

Is there then a world
where I rule absolutely on fate?
A time I bind with chains of signs?
An existence become endless at my bidding?

The joy of writing.
The power of preserving.
Revenge of a mortal hand.

Wisława Szymborska

The Silence Of Plants

The Silence of Plants

A one-sided relationship is developing quite well between you and me.
I know what a leaf, petal, kernel, cone, and stem are,
and I know what happens to you in April and December.

Though my curiosity is unrequited,
I gladly stoop for some of you,
and for others I crane my neck.

I have names for you:
maple, burdock, liverwort,
eather, juniper, mistletoe, and forget-me-not;
but you have none for me.

After all, we share a common journey.
When traveling together, it's normal to talk,
exchanging remarks, say, about the weather,
or about the stations flashing past.

We wouldn't run out of topics
for so much connects us.
The same star keeps us in reach.
We cast shadows according to the same laws.
Both of us at least try to know something,
each in our own way,
and even in what we don't know
there lies a resemblance.

Just ask and I will explain as best I can:
what it is to see through my eyes,
why my heart beats,
and how come my body is unrooted.

But how does someone answer questions
which have never been posed,
and when, on top of that
the one who would answer
is such an utter nobody to you?

Undergrowth, shrubbery,
meadows, and rushes...
everything I say to you is a monologue,
and it is not you who's listening.

A conversation with you is necessary
and impossible,
urgent in a hurried life
and postponed for never.

trans. Joanna Trzeciak

MILCZENIE ROŚLIN

Jednostronna znajomość między mną a wami
rozwija się nie najgorzej.

Wiem co listek, co płatek, kłos, szyszka, łodyga,
i co się z wami dzieje w kwietniu, a co w grudniu.

Chociaż moja ciekawość jest bez wzajemności,
nad niektórymi schylam się specjalnie,
a ku niektórym z was zadzieram głowę.

Macie u mnie imiona:

klon, łopian, przylaszczka,
wrzos, jałowiec, jemioła, niezapominajka,
a ja u was żadnego.

Podróż nasza jest wspólna.

W czasie wspólnych podróży rozmawia się przecież,,
wymienia się uwagi choćby o pogodzie,
albo o stacjach mijanych w rozpędzie.

Nie brakłoby tematów, bo łączy nas wiele.

Ta sama gwiazda trzyma nas w zasięgu.

Rzucamy cienie na tych samych prawach.

Próbujemy coś wiedzieć, każde na swój sposób,
a to, czego nie wiemy, to też podobieństwo.

Objaśnię jak potrafię, tylko zapytajcie:
co to takiego oglądać oczami,
po co serce mi bije
i czemu moje ciało nie zakorzenione.

Ale jak odpowiadać na niestawiane pytania,
jeśli w dodatku jest się kimś
tak bardzo dla was nikim.

Porośla, zagajniki, łąki i szuwary -
wszystko, co do was mówię, to monolog,
i nie wy go słuchacie.

Rozmowa z wami konieczna jest i niemożliwa.
Pilna w życiu pospiesznym
i odłożona na nigdy.

Wisława Szymborska

Three Oddest Words

When I pronounce the word Future,
the first syllable already belongs to the past.

When I pronounce the word Silence,
I destroy it.

When I pronounce the word Nothing,
I make something no nonbeing can hold.

Wisława Szymborska

Tortures

Nothing has changed.
The body is susceptible to pain,
it must eat and breathe air and sleep,
it has thin skin and blood right underneath,
an adequate stock of teeth and nails,
its bones are breakable, its joints are stretchable.
In tortures all this is taken into account.

Nothing has changed.
The body shudders as it shuddered
before the founding of Rome and after,
in the twentieth century before and after Christ.
Tortures are as they were, it's just the earth that's grown smaller,
and whatever happens seems right on the other side of the wall.

Nothing has changed. It's just that there are more people,
besides the old offenses new ones have appeared,
real, imaginary, temporary, and none,
but the howl with which the body responds to them,
was, is and ever will be a howl of innocence
according to the time-honored scale and tonality.

Nothing has changed. Maybe just the manners, ceremonies, dances.
Yet the movement of the hands in protecting the head is the same.
The body writhes, jerks and tries to pull away,
its legs give out, it falls, the knees fly up,
it turns blue, swells, salivates and bleeds.

Nothing has changed. Except for the course of boundaries,
the line of forests, coasts, deserts and glaciers.
Amid these landscapes traipses the soul,
disappears, comes back, draws nearer, moves away,
alien to itself, elusive, at times certain, at others uncertain of its own existence,
while the body is and is and is
and has no place of its own.

Anonymous submission.

True Love

True love. Is it normal
is it serious, is it practical?
What does the world get from two people
who exist in a world of their own?

Placed on the same pedestal for no good reason,
drawn randomly from millions but convinced
it had to happen this way – in reward for what?

For nothing.

The light descends from nowhere.
Why on these two and not on others?
Doesn't this outrage justice? Yes it does.
Doesn't it disrupt our painstakingly erected principles,
and cast the moral from the peak? Yes on both accounts.

Look at the happy couple.
Couldn't they at least try to hide it,
fake a little depression for their friends' sake?
Listen to them laughing – it's an insult.
The language they use – deceptively clear.
And their little celebrations, rituals,
the elaborate mutual routines –
it's obviously a plot behind the human race's back!

It's hard even to guess how far things might go
if people start to follow their example.
What could religion and poetry count on?
What would be remembered? What renounced?
Who'd want to stay within bounds?

True love. Is it really necessary?
Tact and common sense tell us to pass over it in silence,
like a scandal in Life's highest circles.
Perfectly good children are born without its help.
It couldn't populate the planet in a million years,
it comes along so rarely.

Let the people who never find true love
keep saying that there's no such thing.

Their faith will make it easier for them to live and die.

Wisława Szymborska

Two Monkeys by Brueghel

I keep dreaming of my graduation exam:
in a window sit two chained monkeys,
beyond the window floats the sky,
and the sea splashes.

I am taking an exam on the history of mankind:
I stammer and flounder.

One monkey, eyes fixed upon me, listens ironically,
the other seems to be dozing-
and when silence follows a question,
he prompts me
with a soft jingling of the chain.

Wisława Szymborska

Under One Small Star

My apologies to chance for calling it necessity.
My apologies to necessity if I'm mistaken, after all.
Please, don't be angry, happiness, that I take you as my due.
May my dead be patient with the way my memories fade.
My apologies to time for all the world I overlook each second.
My apologies to past loves for thinking that the latest is the first.
Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home.
Forgive me, open wounds, for pricking my finger.
I apologize for my record of minuets to those who cry from the depths.
I apologize to those who wait in railway stations for being asleep today at five
a.m.
Pardon me, hounded hope, for laughing from time to time.
Pardon me, deserts, that I don't rush to you bearing a spoonful of water.
And you, falcon, unchanging year after year, always in the same cage,
your gaze always fixed on the same point in space,
forgive me, even if it turns out you were stuffed.
My apologies to the felled tree for the table's four legs.
My apologies to great questions for small answers.
Truth, please don't pay me much attention.
Dignity, please be magnanimous.
Bear with me, O mystery of existence, as I pluck the occasional thread from your
train.
Soul, don't take offense that I've only got you now and then.
My apologies to everything that I can't be everywhere at once.
My apologies to everyone that I can't be each woman and each man.
I know I won't be justified as long as I live,
since I myself stand in my own way.
Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words,
then labor heavily so that they may seem light.

Wisława Szymborska

Utopia

Island where all becomes clear.
Solid ground beneath your feet.

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.

The Tree of Understanding, dazzling straight and simple.
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.

The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

Echoes stir unsummoned
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

Vermeer

As long as the woman from Rijksmuseum
in painted silence and concentration
day after day pours milk
from the jug to the bowl,
the World does not deserve
the end of the world.

Wisława Szymborska