

POETRY

Wisława Szymborska

Selected and introduced by Edward Hirsch

The Polish poet Wisława Szymborska, who won the 1996 Nobel Prize in literature, is a canny ironist and rapturous skeptic. She writes a poetry of sardonic individualism, and comes at common experiences from her own angle, with her own perspective. “Four billion people on this earth,/but my imagination is still the same,” she confesses in her poem “A Large Number”; “It’s bad with large numbers./It’s still taken by particularity.” Szymborska is all too aware of how the world keeps escaping our various formulations about it: “But even a Dante couldn’t get it right,” she admits, “Let alone someone who is not./Even with all the muses behind me.”

Despite her modesty, Szymborska has mounted in her work a witty and tireless defense of individual subjectivity against collectivist thinking, and her poems are slyly subversive in a way that compels us to reconsider received opinion. No sooner does a familiar idea come her way than she starts turning it around to see what it will look like from different directions. She manages to question herself even as she exposes general assumptions and undermines political cant. Indeed, the rejection of dogma becomes the premise of a thoughtful personal ethics.

Szymborska was born in 1923 in the small town of Brnin in the Poznań area of western Poland. She moved with her family to Kraków when she was eight years old and has lived there ever since. She attended school illegally during the German occupation, when the Nazis banned Polish secondary schools and universities, and after the war studied Polish literature and sociology at Jagiellonian University. From 1952 to 1981, she worked on the editorial staff of the cultural weekly *Zycie Literackie* (Literary Life). She has published nine collections of poems and several editions of her selected verse, as well as a volume of newspaper reviews and columns. She is also known to Polish readers as a distinguished translator of French poetry, mostly of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Szymborska came of age during World War II, and spent much of her life under Stalinism. Thus she saw her country twice destroyed. She shares with Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Różewicz—the two other major Polish poets of the half-generation after Czesław Miłosz—an absolute distrust of rhetoric, of false words and sentiments, of political creeds and ideologies, of general ideas and philosophies. The war was such a traumatic event for the writers of this generation that it called all moral and aesthetic values into question and, in a sense, poetry had to be rebuilt from the ground up, like the country itself. Hence, these poets have deliberately cultivated a cool, economical, and antirhetorical style, writing a stripped-down poetry of drastic simplicity. For these poets, stylistic clarity became a matter (and a form) of ethics, a response to ideological obfuscations, political double talk.

Szymborska is a philosophically oriented poet who raises universal subjects nonchalantly, with an offhand charm. She typically begins a poem

with a question or a simple paradoxical assertion which the poem breezily sets out to explore. Her strategy is to run through all the ramifications of an idea to see what it will yield. Often she begins by seeming to embrace a subject and ends by undercutting it with a sharp, disillusioned comment. For example, in the poem “Children of Our Age,” she takes a common assertion—“We are children of our age,/it’s a political age”—and examines it until it begins to leak and fall apart. She tries to find the human being—the human reality—obscured by political dogma.

Meanwhile, people perished,
animals died,
houses burned,
and the fields ran wild
just as in times immemorial
and less political.

One key to Szyborska’s style may be the way she works subversive variations on familiar rhetoric.

Szyborska’s poems—wise, funny, and personal—have the sting of long experience. She looks at the world with the eye of a disabused lover and understands something fundamental about our century. In the poem “Hatred,” she writes, “See how efficient it still is,/how it keeps itself in shape—/our century’s hatred.” In “The Century’s Decline,” she writes, “Our twentieth-century was going to improve on the others”:

A couple of problems weren’t going
to come up anymore:
hunger, for example,
and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect
for helpless people’s helplessness,
trust, that kind of stuff.

Anyone who planned to enjoy the world
is now faced
with a hopeless task.

Yet Szyborska’s bitterness about human fallibility—human cruelty—mingles with her sense of the world’s unfathomable richness. Despite the odds, she finds herself enjoying the world after all, revitalized by commonplace miracles, by what she calls in one poem “miracle fair”: fluttering white doves, a small cloud upstaging the moon, mild winds turning gusty in a hard storm, the inescapable earth. In the end, she pits her dizzying sense of the world’s transient splendor against unbearable historical knowledge. Or, as she puts it: “My identifying features/are rapture and despair.”



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.



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.

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.

Reality Demands

Reality demands
that we also mention this:
Life goes on.
It continues at Cannae and Borodino,
at Kosovo Polje and Guernica.

There's a gas station
on a little square in Jericho,
and wet paint
on park benches in Bila Hora.
Letters fly back and forth
between Pearl Harbor and Hastings,

a moving van passes
beneath the eye of the lion at Cheronea,
and the blooming orchards near Verdun
cannot escape
the approaching atmospheric front.

There is so much Everything
that Nothing is hidden quite nicely.
Music pours
from the yachts moored at Actium
and couples dance on their sunlit decks.

So much is always going on,
that it must be going on all over.
Where not a stone still stands
you see the Ice Cream Man
besieged by children.
Where Hiroshima had been
Hiroshima is again,
producing many products
for everyday use.

This terrifying world is not devoid of charms,
of the mornings
that make waking up worthwhile.
The grass is green
on Maciejowice's fields,
and it is studded with dew,
as is normal with grass.

Perhaps all fields are battlefields,
all grounds are battlegrounds,
those we remember
and those that are forgotten:
the birch, cedar, and fir forests, the white snow,
the yellow sands, gray gravel, the iridescent swamps,
the canyons of black defeat,
where, in times of crisis,
you can cower under a bush.

What moral flows from this? Probably none.
Only the blood flows, drying quickly,
and, as always, a few rivers, a few clouds.

On tragic mountain passes
the wind rips hats from unwitting heads
and we can't help
laughing at that.



"The Joy of Writing," "Lot's Wife," "Under One Small Star," and "Reality Demands," are reprinted from VIEW WITH A GRAIN OF SAND: SELECTED POEMS, copyright © 1993 by Wisława Szymborska. English translation by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanaugh, copyright © 1995 by Harcourt Brace & Company. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.