



Wisława Szymborska

English A: Literature

Dwadzieścia Dwa—Selected Poetry of Wisława Szymborska

NIST International School, Bangkok, Thailand

All selections originally written in Polish.

Most translations are from Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh's translation entitled *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems / Nic Dwa Razy: Wybor Wierzy* (1997) which is currently out of print; further selections curated from several online and digitally formatted sources in the public domain.

Wisława Szymborska—Polish poet and translator, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996, at the age of seventy-three. Szymborska is one of the few woman poets who have received the prize. Her early works were born more or less within the straitjacket of Socialist Realism. While skepticism marked Szymborska's views of the human condition, it did not stop her from believing in the power of words and the joy arising from imagination. Szymborska often used ordinary speech and proverbs but gave them a fresh and arresting meaning, sometimes with an unexpected twist of humour.

*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.*

(from 'The Joy of Writing,' 1967)

Wisława Szymborska was born in Bnin (now part of Kórnik) in western Poland. In 1931 her family moved to Krakow, where they lived near the railway station. From the kitchen window Szymborska watched with enthusiasm trains coming and going. However, she never left Poland. With her friends she created a theater game based on the works of Henryk Sienkiewicz. At the age of nine she became interested in films – especially those which were forbidden to her. Karl Freund's *Mummy* (1932), starring Boris Karloff, inspired Szymborska to visit a history museum, which had two mummies in its care. During World War II, when German occupied Poland, her mother refused to leave Krakow.

Szymborska attended illegal classes and joined an underground theater, where she worked as a prompter. In her wartime writing she stated, that, "Hitler gives the Germans something to be enthusiastic about and offer up their lives for that, for those Germans, Hitler is great. Don't you understand that the power of a movement depends on the human beings it produces?" After the war, from 1945 to 1948, Szymborska studied Polish literature and sociology at the famed Jagiellonian University. From 1953 to 1981 she then worked for the Krakow literary magazine *Zycie Literackie* as poetry editor and columnist. "I'm old-fashioned and think that reading books is the most glorious pastime that humankind has yet devised," she said of her time as a journalist.

As a poet Szymborska made her debut with the poem 'Szukam słowa,' which was published in the newspaper *Dziennik Polski* (Polish Daily) in March 1945. Three years later she finished her first collection of poems, but this work was not published. The Communist had gained power tightening their cultural policy and Szymborska's expression was considered too complex and unintelligible to the masses. She returned to the manuscript, made it more political and at the same time revised her entire manner of writing. Her first collection *Dla tego żyjemy* (That's What We Live For), came out in 1952. It was followed by *Pytania zadawane sobie* (1954, Question Put to Myself), which gave less attention to political issues, the "struggle for peace," and so forth.

Like many Polish intellectuals, Szymborska eventually became disillusioned with communism and its institutions within the Polish state and beyond. 'I looked back in terror where to step next...' In her later work, she expressed her pessimism about the future of mankind. Though her writing was more personal and relatively apolitical, she once noted, "Apolitical poems are political too" in 'Children of This Age'. *Wolanie do Yeti* (1957 Calling out to Yeti), marked her break with socialist-realist literature. In 'Still Life with Toy Balloon' she said: "Fly off through the open window, / fly off into the wide world, / let someone cry out: Oh! / so I can weep."

Sto pociech (1967, *A Million Laughs, A Bright Hope*) is considered Szymborska's first work of her mature period. When Communism claimed it was the final answer to the question about the ideal form of society, Szymborska admitted that she has no knowledge of Utopia, but only an ironic view of it as an "island where everything comes clear." Her role in the society she saw as vague: "I am ignorant of the role I perform. / All I know is it's mine, can't be exchanged."

Szymborska avoided literary gatherings, and looked at life from her own special point of view (with a cigarette in her fingers and with a cup of coffee on the table) through the political upheavals of her country – the rise of Solidarity movement, General Jaruzelski's declaration of martial law in 1981, and the fall of the Communist regime. A supporter of the Solidarity, she published poems under a pseudonym in the underground press.

Szymborska also translated poems from the French and wrote a number of literary columns, most of which first appeared in *Zycie Literackie*. She reviewed books from all genres by Polish and non-Polish writers, from history to humor and from popular science to the arts. After the Nobel award she retreated to Zakopane to escape reporters and well-wishers and to write her acceptance speech. "I'm a private person," she told in a telephone conversation to Czeslaw Milosz, her countryman, who had won the prize in 1980, and emigrated to the United States, "... inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists generally. There is, has been, and will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It's made up of all those who've consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination... Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know." (from Nobel Lecture, 1996) Szymborska's two poems published in the magazine *Orda* (1/2000) recorded her concerns about aging and strangeness – she saw that we are only visitors in a cosmic party.

Chwila (2002), which appeared when Szymborska was 79, contained 23 poems. Her writing in *Nonrequired Reading: Prose Pieces* (2002) was misleadingly casual – her incisive views on scientists, gardening, fairy tales, fashion, and other subjects stand up for repeated readings without losing their freshness. *Dwukropek* (2005, Colon), dealing with the questions of determinism and contingency, was Szymborska's second collection of poems after the Nobel Prize. Szymborska died peacefully, asleep in her home in Krakow, on February 1, 2012.

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Cat in an Empty Apartment

Die - you can't do that to a cat.
Since what can a cat do
in an empty apartment?
Climb the walls?
Rub up against the furniture?
Nothing seems different here,
but nothing is the same.
Nothing has been moved,
but there's more space.
And at nighttime no lamps are lit.

Footsteps on the staircase,
but they're new ones.
The hand that puts fish on the saucer
has changed, too.

Something doesn't start
at its usual time.
Something doesn't happen
as it should.
Someone was always, always here,
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared.

Every closet has been examined.
Every shelf has been explored.
Excavations under the carpet turned up nothing.
A commandment was even broken,
papers scattered everywhere.
What remains to be done.
Just sleep and wait.

Just wait till he turns up,
just let him show his face.
Will he ever get a lesson
on what not to do to a cat.
Sidle toward him as if unwilling and ever so slow
on visibly offended paws,
and no leaps or squeals at least to start.

Translated by [Stanislaw Baranczak](#) & Clare Cavanagh

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.

Translated by [Stanisław Barańczak](#) & Clare Cavanagh

The End and the Beginning

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

Someone has to shove
the rubble to the roadsides
so the carts loaded with corpses
can get by.

Someone has to trudge
through sludge and ashes,
through the sofa springs,
the shards of glass,
the bloody rags.

Someone has to lug the post
to prop the wall,
someone has to glaze the window,
set the door in its frame.

No sound bites, no photo opportunities,
and it takes years.
All the cameras have gone
to other wars.

The bridges need to be rebuilt,
the railroad stations, too.
Shirtsleeves will be rolled
to shreds.

Someone, broom in hand,
still remembers how it was.
Someone else listens, nodding
his unshattered head.

But others are bound to be bustling nearby
who'll find all that a little boring.

From time to time someone still must
dig up a rusted argument
from underneath a bush
and haul it off to the dump.

Those who knew
what this was all about
must make way for those
who know little.
And less than that.
And at last nothing less than nothing.

Someone has to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects
with a cornstalk in his teeth,
gawking at clouds.

Translated by [Stanisław Barańczak](#) & Clare Cavanagh

Funeral

"so suddenly, who would've expected this"
"stress and cigarettes, I was warning him"
"fair to middling, thanks"
"unwrap these flowers"
"his brother snuffed because of his ticker too, must be running in the family"
"I'd never recognise you with your beard"
"it's all his fault, he was always up to some funny business"
"the new one was to give a speech, can't see him, though"
"Kazek's in Warsaw and Tadek abroad"
"you're the only wise one here, having an umbrella"
"it won't help him now that he was the most talented of them all"
"that's a connecting room. Baśka won't like it"
"he was right, true, but that's not the reason for"
"with door varnishing, guess how much"
"two eggs and a spoonful of sugar"
"none of his business, what was the point then"
"blue and small sizes only"
"five times and never a single answer"
"I'll give your that, I could've, but so could you"
"so good at least she had that job"
"I've no idea, must be relatives"
"the priest, very much like Belmondo"
"I've never been to this part of the cemetery"
"I saw him in my dream last week, must've been a premonition"
"pretty, that little daughter"
"we're all going to end up this way"
"give mine to the widow, I've got to hurry to"
"but still it sounded more solemn in Latin"
"you can't turn back the clock"
"goodbye"
"how about a beer"
"give me a ring, we'll have a chat"
"number four or number twelve"
"me, this way"
"we, that way".

Translated from the Polish by Mikołaj Sekrecki

Hatred

Look, how constantly capable
and how well maintained
in our century: hatred.
How lightly she regards high impediments.
How easily she leaps and overtakes.

She's not like other feelings.
She's both older and younger than they.
She herself gives birth to causes
which awaken her to life.
If she ever dozes, it's not an eternal sleep.
Insomnia does not sap her strength, but adds to it.

Religion or no religion,
as long as one kneels at the starting-block.
Fatherland or no fatherland,
as long as one tears off at the start.
She begins as fairness and equity.
Then she propels herself.
Hatred. Hatred.
She veils her face with a mien
of romantic ecstasy.

Oh, the other feelings --
decrepit and sluggish.
Since when could that brotherhood
count on crowds?
Did ever empathy
urge on toward the goal?
How many clients did doubt abduct?
Only she abducts who knows her own.

Talented, intelligent, very industrious.
Do we need to say how many songs she has written.
How many pages of history she has numbered.
How many carpets of people she has spread out
over how many squares and stadiums!

Let's not lie to ourselves:
She's capable of creating beauty.
Wonderful is her aura on a black night.
Magnificent cloud masses at rosy dawn.
It's difficult to deny her pathos of ruins
and her coarse humor

mightily towering above them columns.

She's the mistress of contrast
between clatter and silence,
between red blood and white snow.
And above all she never tires of
the motif of the tidy hangman
above the defiled victim.

She's ready for new tasks at any moment.
If she must wait she'll wait.
She said she was blind. Blind?
She has the keen eyes of a sniper
and boldly looks into the future
--she alone.

Translated by Walter Whipple

Here

I don't know about other places,
but here on Earth there's quite a lot of everything.
Here chairs are made and sadness,
scissors, violins, tenderness, transistors,
water dams, jokes, teacups.

Maybe somewhere else there is more of everything,
only for some reason there are no paintings there,
cathode-ray tubes, dumplings, tissues for tears.

There are plenty of places here with surroundings.
Some you can particularly get to like,
name them your own way
and protect them from evil.

Maybe somewhere else there are similar places,
But no one considers them beautiful.

Maybe like nowhere else, or in few other places,
here you have your own body trunk,
and with it the tools needed,
to add your children to those of others.
Besides that your hands, legs, and the amazed head.

Ignorance here is hard at work,
constantly measuring, comparing, counting,
drawing conclusions and finding square roots.

I know, I know what you're thinking.
Nothing is permanent here,
for since ever forever in the power of the elements.
But notice—the elements get easily tired
and sometimes they have to take a long rest
before the next time.

And I know what else you're thinking.
Wars, wars, wars.
But even between them there happen to be breaks.
Attention—people are evil.
At ease—people are good.
At attention we produce wastelands.
At ease by the sweat of our brows we build houses
and quickly live in them.

Life on earth turns out quite cheap.
For dreams for instance you don't pay a penny.
For illusions—only when they're lost.
For owning a body—only with the body.

And as if this was not enough,
you spin without a ticket in the carousel of the planets,
and along with it, dodging the fare, in the blizzard of galaxies,
through eras so astounding,
that nothing here on Earth can even twitch on time.

For take a good look:
the table stands where it stood,
on the table the paper, exactly as placed,
through the window ajar just a waft of the air,
and in the walls no terrifying cracks,
through which you could be blown out to nowhere.

duszenko.northern.edu/szymborska/here.html

Hitler's First Photograph

And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?
That's tiny baby Adolf, the Hitler's little boy!
Will he grow up to be an LL.D.?
Or a tenor in Vienna's Opera House?
Whose teensy hand is this, whose little ear and eye and nose?
Whose tummy full of milk, we just don't know:
printer's, doctor's, merchant's, priest's?
Where will those tootsy-wootsies finally wander?
To garden, to school, to an office, to a bride,
maybe to the Burgermeister's daughter?

Precious little angel, mommy's sunshine, honeybun,
while he was being born a year ago,
there was no dearth of signs on the earth and in the sky:
spring sun, geraniums in windows,
the organ-grinder's music in the yard,
a lucky fortune wrapped in rosy paper,
then just before the labor his mother's fateful dream:
a dove seen in dream means joyful news,
if it is caught, a long-awaited guest will come.
Knock knock, who's there, it's Adolf's heartchen knocking.

A little pacifier, diaper, rattle, bib,
our bouncing boy, thank God and knock on wood, is well,
looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket,
like the tots in every other family album.
Shush, let's not start crying, sugar,
the camera will click from under that black hood.

The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunau,
and Braunau is small but worthy town,
honest businesses, obliging neighbors,
smell of yeast dough, of gray soap.
No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps.
A history teacher loosens his collar
and yawns over homework.

Translated by Stanisław Baranczak & Clare Cavanagh

In Praise of Self-Deprecation

The buzzard never says it is to blame.
The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.
If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn't understand remorse.
Lions and lice don't waver in their course.
Why should they, when they know they're right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they're light.

On this third planet of the sun
among the signs of bestiality
a clear conscience is Number One.

Translated by Stanislaw Baranczak & Clare Cavanagh

An Interview with Atropos

Madam Atropos?

That's correct.

Of Necessity's three daughters,
you fare the worst in world opinion.

*A gross exaggeration, my dear poet.
Klotho spins the threat of life,
but the thread is delicate
and easily cut.
Lachesis determines its length with her rod.
They are no angels.*

Still you, Madame, hold the scissors.

And since I do, I put them to good use.

I see that even as we speak ...

I'm a Type A, that's my nature.

You don't get bored or tired,
maybe drowsy working nights?
Really, not the slightest? With no holidays, vacations, weekends,
no quick breaks for cigarettes?

We'd fall behind, I don't like that.

Such breathtaking industry.
But you're not given commendations,
orders, trophies, cups, awards?
Maybe just a framed diploma?

Like at the hairdresser's? No, thank you.

Who, if anyone, assists you?

*A tidy little paradox—you mortals.
Assorted dictators, untold fanatics.
Not that they need me to nudge them.
They're eager to get down to work.*

Wars must surely make you happy
what with all the assistance you receive.

*Happy? I don't know the feeling.
I'm not the one who declares them,
I'm not the one who steers their course.
I will admit, though, that I'm grateful,
they do help to keep me au courant.*

You're not sorry for the threads cut short?

*A little shorter, a lot shorter—
Only you perceive the difference.*

And if someone stronger wanted to relieve you,
tried to make you take retirement?

I don't follow. Express yourself more clearly.

I'll try once more: do you have a Higher-Up?

... Next question please.

That's all I've got.

*Well goodbye then.
Or to put it more precisely ...*

I know, I know. Au revoir.

Translated by [Stanisław Baranczak](#) & Clare Cavanagh

Lots' 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.

Translated by [Stanisław Baranczak](#) & Clare Cavanagh

Love at First Sight

They're both convinced
that a sudden passion joined them.
Such certainty is beautiful
but uncertainty is more beautiful still.

Since they'd never met before, they're sure
that there'd been nothing between them.
But what's the word from the streets, staircases, hallways –
perhaps they've passed each other by a million times?

I want to ask them
if they don't remember –
a moment face to face
in some revolving door?
perhaps a "sorry" muttered in a crowd?
a curt "wrong number" caught in the receiver? –
but I know the answer.
No, they don't remember.

They'd be amazed to hear
that Chance has been toying with them
now for years.

Not quite ready yet
to become their Destiny,
it pushed them close, drove them apart,
it barred their path,
stifling a laugh,
and then leaped aside.

There were signs and signals
even if they couldn't read them yet.
Perhaps three years ago
or just last Tuesday a certain leaf fluttered
from one shoulder to another?
Something was dropped and then picked up.
Who knows, maybe the ball that vanished
into childhood's thickets?

There were doorknobs and doorbells
where one touch had covered another
beforehand.
Suitcases checked and standing side by side.
One night perhaps some dream
grown hazy by morning.

Every beginning
is only a sequel, after all,
and the book of events
is always open halfway through.

Translated by [Stanisław Barańczak](#) & Clare Cavanagh

A Moment in Troy

Little girls—
skinny, resigned
to freckles that won't go away,

not turning any heads
as they walk across the eyelids of the world,

looking just like Mom or Dad,
and sincerely horrified by it—

in the middle of dinner,
in the middle of a book,
while studying the mirror,
may suddenly be taken off to Troy.

In the grand boudoir of a wink
they all turn into beautiful Helens.

They ascend the royal staircase
in the rustling of silk and admiration.
They feel light. They all know
that beauty equals rest,
that lips mold the speech's meaning,
and gestures sculpt themselves
in inspired nonchalance.

Their small faces
worth dismissing envoys for
extend proudly on necks
that merit countless sieges.

Those tall, dark movie stars,
their girlfriends' older brothers,
the teacher from art class,
alas, they must all be slain.

Little girls
observe disaster
from a tower of smiles.

Little girls
wring their hands
in intoxicating mock despair.

Little girls
against a backdrop of destruction,

with flaming towns for tiaras,
in earrings of pandemic lamentation.

Pale and tearless.
Triumphant. Sated with the view.
Dreading only the inevitable
moment of return.

Little girls
returning.

Translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

No End of Fun

So he's got to have happiness,
he's got to have truth, too,
he's got to have eternity
did you ever!

He has only just learned to tell dreams from waking;
only just realized that he is he;
only just whittled with his hand ne' fin
a flint, a rocket ship;
easily drowned in the ocean's teaspoon,
not even funny enough to tickle the void;
sees only with his eyes; hears only with his ears;
his speech's personal best is the conditional;
he uses his reason to pick holes in reason.
In short, he's next to no one,
but his head's full of freedom, omniscience, and the Being
beyond his foolish meat -
did you ever!

For he does apparently exist.
He genuinely came to be
beneath one of the more parochial stars.
He's lively and quite active in his fashion.
His capacity for wonder is well advanced
for a crystal's deviant descendant.
And considering his difficult childhood
spent kowtowing to the herd's needs,
he's already quite an individual indeed -
did you ever!

Carry on, then, if only for the moment
that it takes a tiny galaxy to blink!
One wonders what will become of him,

since he does in fact seem to be.
And as far as being goes, he really tries quite hard.
Quite hard indeed - one must admit.
With that ring in his nose, with that toga, that sweater.
He's no end of fun, for all you say.
Poor little beggar.
A human, if ever we saw one.

Translated by Stanislaw Baranczak & Clare Cavanagh

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.

By Wisława Szymborska From "The People on the Bridge", 1986 Translated by S. Baranczak & C. Cavanagh

Plato, or Why on Earth

For reasons unclear,
and in circumstances unknown,
the Ideal ceased to be content with itself.

It could have gone on and on with no end,
carved away from darkness, chiseled out of light,
in its dreamy gardens above.

So why on Earth did it seek excitement
in the bad company of matter?

Why did it need enthusiasts
among the non-starters, born losers,
with no prospects for eternity?

Wisdom on crutches
with a thorn deep in its heel?
Harmony torn apart
by stormy waters?
Beauty
with aesthetically displeasing intestines
and Good
—why with a shadow
if it used to be without?

There had to be a reason,
inconsequential as it seemed,
but it won't be betrayed even by the Naked Truth,
busily sifting through
its earthly attire.

And to top it all off, Plato, those intolerable poets,
the gust-borne shavings off the monuments,
scraps of the grand highland Silence...

translated, from the Polish, by Justyna Kostkowska

Psalm

Oh, the leaky boundaries of man-made states!
How many clouds float past them with impunity;
how much desert sand shifts from one land to another;
how many mountain pebbles tumble onto foreign soil
in provocative hops!
Need I mention every single bird that flies in the face of frontiers
or alights on the roadblock at the border?
A humble robin - still, its tail resides abroad
while its beak stays home. If that weren't enough, it won't stop bobbing!
Among innumerable insects, I'll single out only the ant
between the border guard's left and right boots
blithely ignoring the questions "Where from?" and "Where to?"
Oh, to register in detail, at a glance, the chaos
prevailing on every continent!
Isn't that a privet on the far bank
smuggling its hundred-thousandth leaf across the river?
And who but the octopus, with impudent long arms,
would disrupt the sacred bounds of territorial waters?
And how can we talk of order overall?
when the very placement of the stars
leaves us doubting just what shines for whom?
Not to speak of the fog's reprehensible drifting!
And dust blowing all over the steppes
as if they hadn't been partitioned!
And the voices coasting on obliging airwaves,
that conspiratorial squeaking, those indecipherable mutters!
Only what is human can truly be foreign.
The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind.

Translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

Rubens' Women

Titanettes, female fauna,
naked as the rumbling of barrels.
They roost in trampled beds,
asleep, with mouth agape, ready to crow.
Their pupils have fled into flesh
and sound the glandular depths
from which yeast seeps into their blood.

Daughters of the Baroque. Dough
thickens in throughs, baths steam, wines blush,
cloudy piglets careen across the sky,
triumphant trumpets neigh the carnal alarm.

O pumpkin plump! O pumped-up corpulence
inflated double by disrobing
and tripled by your tumultuous poses!
O fatty dishes of love!

Their skinny sisters woke up earlier,
before dawn broke and shone upon the painting.
And no one saw how they went single file
along the canvas' unpainted side.

Exiled by style. Only their ribs stood out.
With birdlike feet and palms, they strove
to take wing on their jutting shoulder blades.

The thirteenth century would have given them golden haloes.
The twentieth, silver screens.
The seventeenth, alas, hold nothing for unvoluptuous.

For even the sky bulges here
with pudgy angels and a chubby god ---
thick-whiskered Phoebus, on a sweaty steed,
riding straight into the seething chamber.

Translated by [Stanisław Baranczak](#) & Clare Cavanagh

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.

translated by Magnus J. Krynski

The Suicide's Room

You certainly think that the room was empty.
Yet it had three chairs with sturdy backs.
And a lamp effective against the dark.
A desk, on the desk a wallet, some newspapers.
An unsorrowful Buddha, a sorrowful Jesus.
Seven good-luck elephants, and in a drawer a notebook.
You think that our addresses were not there?

You think there were no books, pictures, records?
But there was a consoling trumpet in black hands.
Saskia with a heartfelt flower of love.
Joy the fair spark of the gods.
Odysseus on the shelf in life-giving sleep
after the labours of Book Five.
Moralists,
their names imprinted in syllables of gold
on beautifully tanned spines.
Right next, statesmen standing straight.

And not without a way out, if only through the door,
not without prospects, if only through the window,
that is how the room looked.
Distance glasses lay on the windowsill.
A single fly buzzed, that is, was still alive.

You think at least the note made something clear.
Now what if I tell you that there was no note -
and so many of us, friends of his, yet all could fit
in the empty envelope propped against the glass.

Translated by Stanisław Baranczak & Clare Cavanagh

Tortures

Nothing has changed.
The body is a reservoir of pain;
it has to eat and breathe the air, and sleep;
it has thin skin and the blood is just beneath it;
it has a good supply of teeth and fingernails;
its bones can be broken; its joints can be stretched.
In tortures, all of this is considered.

Nothing has changed.
The body still trembles as it trembled
before Rome was founded and after,
in the twentieth century before and after Christ.
Tortures are just what they were, only the earth has shrunk
and whatever goes on sounds as if it's just a room away.

Nothing has changed.
Except there are more people,
and new offenses have sprung up beside the old ones--
real, make-believe, short-lived, and nonexistent.
But the cry with which the body answers for them
was, is, and will be a cry of innocence
in keeping with the age-old scale and pitch.

Nothing has changed.
Except perhaps the manners, ceremonies, dances.
The gesture of the hands shielding the head
has nonetheless remained the same.
The body writhes, jerks, and tugs,
falls to the ground when shoved, pulls up its knees,
bruises, swells, drools, and bleeds.

Nothing has changed.
Except the run of rivers, the shapes of forests, shores, deserts, and glaciers.
The little soul roams among these landscapes,
disappears, returns, draws near, moves away,
evasive and a stranger to itself,
now sure, now uncertain of its own existence,
whereas the body is and is and is
and has nowhere to go.

Translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

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.

Translated by [Stanisław Barańczak](#) & Clare Cavanagh

Vietnam

"Woman, what's your name?" "I don't know."
"How old are you? Where are you from?" "I don't know."
"Why did you dig that burrow?" "I don't know."
"How long have you been hiding?" "I don't know."
"Why did you bite my finger?" "I don't know."
"Don't you know that we won't hurt you?" "I don't know."
"Whose side are you on?" "I don't know."
"This is war, you've got to choose." "I don't know." "
Does your village still exist?" "I don't know."
"Are those your children?" "Yes."

Translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

A Domestication of Death: The Poetic Universe of Wisława Szymborska

by Malgorzata Anna Packalén

Strong relativism and openness are well known to be important dimensions in the temporal sphere at the basis of Wisława Szymborska's poetry. The way in which she links the past with the present, the present with what is to come and the event/experience of a moment with the weightless dimension of eternity is what gives this poetry its greatest strength.

This and the everpresent existential questions are leitmotifs in Szymborska's poetry. The poems describe with the same gravity both empirical reality and the non-existing, the potential - that which is best described by its absence, a kind of quasi-reality. The constant balancing act on the border between being and non-being is very strong in all sides of the poems' variety and idea world. Szymborska does not attempt to go deep to find a code for the secret of being but rather tries to make us aware of its nature. Her anti-Platonic attitude also becomes stronger over the years, as she writes with obvious irony:

*For unclear reasons
under unknown circumstances,
the Ideal Being has ceased to be enough for itself.*

*It could be and be without an end [...]
why did it immediately hunt for impressions in the bad company of materia?*

*Why did it need worthless
imitators, unlucky creatures
without prospects of eternity? [...]*

"Plato or why?" in: *Chwila*, Kraków 2002, translated by Janet Vesterlund

No Respect for Eternity

The "bad company of materia" is focused upon here because it is just through this materia that the being is continuously re-created, instead of "being and being without end". The material sphere encloses elements of the perfect world of ideas. Concrete objects, despite their transient nature according to the philosophical doctrine of Plato, should be a necessary means for achieving eternal moralistic values. Szymborska has no respect for eternity, however - quite the opposite: it is the moment that – even brief and transient as clouds in the sky (an important metaphor in this context, to which I will return later) – gives our lives meaning. As the lyric subject says: "Life lasts as long as a few signs scratched by a claw in the sand". At the same time we are reassured that:

*There's no life
that couldn't be immortal*

if only for a moment.

"On Death, without Exaggeration" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

The mortal and the immortal – it all holds together with the recurring question of being and/or non-being. The death motif has two important dimensions in this poetry. The poems about the deeply human have a very suggestive message: the chilling feeling and indifference toward others' suffering. Her poem "Still" is especially expressive in this context, where she creates in the very first lines an almost anguished expressionistic situation: a train is on its way somewhere but no one steps off because the freight cars are hermetically sealed and the passengers – symbolically represented by Jewish names – can not determine the direction of the trip:

*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 [...]*

"Still" in: *Poems*

The poem can be interpreted on several levels but what can be felt especially strongly is the universally human meaning, here having both an existential and a deeply ethical dimension. Szymborska writes with particular consistency about the moral aspects of human history, which of course includes a long series of examples of spiritual imprisonment and different crimes against human rights – crimes that give all too clear evidence that people neither can nor wish to draw obviously correct conclusions about history's cruel experiences. For that very reason, hatred, or sooner "its leitmotif – the impeccable executioner / towering over its soiled victim", such as in the poem of the same title, "Hatred", is one of our own century's leitmotifs. It is hate that most often leads to war and to totally unnecessary suffering and death.

Conquering the Unconquerable

Szymborska shows a further dimension of the death motif. This has to do with "common" deaths, so to speak, results of the laws of nature. The death that –

*In our planning for tomorrow,
it has the final word,
which is always beside the point.*

"On Death, without Exaggeration" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

It is this death, seen with intellectual valor and melancholy, that in some way is a constant part of Szymborska's poetry. Stripped of all visible pathos, such as "[...] can't take a joke", it is many times –

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

"On Death, without Exaggeration" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

Awkward or not, death can not be stopped. Yet, it is not only a victor: the mystery of death is the equal of another mystery – man's human creativity that helps him to conquer the unconquerable:

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

"On Death, without Exaggeration" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

At the same time it is the unassailable privilege of each of us to make the choice between rejecting or keeping silent:

*Non omnis moriar – a premature worry.
But am I entirely alive and is that enough.
It never was, and now less than ever. [...]
I can't tell you how much I pass over in silence.*

"A Large Number" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

But this choice also brings with it the sadness that knowledge of rejected possibilities creates, that is "a premature worry", for nothing is given, nothing can be taken for granted, everything can be questioned and we can likewise create everything through the power of our artistic creativity. This Horatian "*non omnis moriar*" is according to Szymborska, of course, one of humankind's greatest gifts: what a person has created during his lifetime can make him immortal. It is not simply a gift, however, but also one of human beings' burdens. Not to refute "*non omnis moriar*", but – as Krystyna Pietrych very rightly points out – from the perspective of death, man is but a plaything in the hands of chance that sometimes passes beyond into fate itself. Chance – another key word in Szymborska's dialectic poetic world – not only applies to the miracle of being or existence but also means that because of the very arbitrariness of life, it may be able to escape from death, as in the poem "Could Have":

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. [...]
As a result, because, although, despite.*

"Could Have" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

Elegant Linguistic Playfulness

Here, there is also another aspect of Szymborska's "paradise lost of probability": chance in her poetry is a specific link between free choice and necessity. No one has true control over death, but it is not less one of man's ancient doings and privileges to conjure a spell against death by continuously questioning the reality that is. Szymborska's conjurations in this respect are expressed in a quite elegant linguistic playfulness, such as in the poem "Funeral", which consists simply of a series of phrases snatched from the conversation between people during a funeral:

*"so suddenly, who could have seen it coming"
"stress and smoking, I kept telling him"
"not bad, thanks, and you"
"these flowers need to be unwrapped"
"his brother's heart gave out, too, it runs in the family"
"I'd never know you in the beard"
"he was asking for it, always mixed up in something" [...]*

"Funeral" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

The first minutes of the funeral conversation expectedly have to do with the dead man, but life shortly takes over and the lines have more and more to do with the survivors' quite undramatic, not to say banal, everyday lives and worries:

*"you were smart, you brought the only umbrella" [...]
"two egg yolks and a tablespoon of sugar"
"none of his business, what was in it for him"
"only in blue and just small sizes" [...]
"give my best to the widow, I've got to run" [...]
"give me a call"
"which bus goes downtown"
"I'm going this way"
"we're not"*

"Funeral" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

The author studiously double codes the text in a kind of linguistic mimicry: as used as we are to seeing death in all its frightening character, we do not think about the obvious fact that, as death grips life, life also intervenes in death. Both grip each other with the

same intensity. Everyday life can easily be taken over by a pathos that in turn just as easily yields to everyday life. Death is de facto not more frightening than life. And – paradoxically – it is in fact, more problematic for the living than for the dead. It is the living who demand guarantees about existence from some kind of higher power, about the meaning of life, about the unavoidability of fate.

The Survivors' Dilemma

The confrontation with death not only encompasses man's ancient anguish for himself but also belongs together with the survivors' dilemma: someone else's death can also affect the survivor in a strong and personal way. Much has been written about Szymborska's lost partner and her elegies after his death. One in particular is Szymborska's elegy "Cat in an empty apartment". Regardless of whether the reader believes or does not believe that the event described is real, this particular poem is probably one of the most remarkable that has been written in the genre of a lamentation since Kochanowski wrote his "Treny" [Lament] in 1581. At the same time, it is probably only Szymborska who can describe a great personal loss from the perspective of an abandoned cat:

*Die – you can't do that to a cat.
Since what can a cat do in an empty apartment?
Climb the walls?
Rub up against the furniture?
Nothing seems different here,
But nothing is the same. [...]*

*Something doesn't start at its usual time.
Something doesn't happen as it should.
Someone was always, always here,
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared.*

"Cat in an Empty Apartment" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

If the cat could read, he would surely have recognized Kochanowski's verse:

*Your flight, my dearest, caused
This vast emptiness in my house.*

*We are a crowd yet no one's here:
One tiny soul and so much is gone.*

"Tren VIII", translated by Adam Czerniawski, in: *Jan Kochanowski, Treny*, edited by Piotr Wilczek, Katowice 1996

"This vast emptiness in my house" – that is how it also feels for the living creature whose master "stubbornly stays disappeared". The mourning that is reserved in some ancient human tradition for people has been permitted a cat. But the cat can not verbalize its

feelings, nor can it hold a dialogue with the dead, or even less, ask questions about them in the lyrical duet in that way that the lyric "I" does in the poem "Plotting with the Dead". The cat is not even aware of the death itself, the funeral, etc. It is only aware of the sudden emptiness. It does not even know – fortunately – that death can neither be stopped nor persuaded, that it is everyone's unavoidable fate, the only one that – as Szymborska ironically reminds us – is statistically completely proven:

*Out of every hundred people [...]
Mortal:
one hundred out of one hundred –
a figure that has never varied yet.*

"A word on statistics" in: *Chwila*, Kraków 2002, translated by Joanna Trzeciak

The acceptance of the power of fate is a fact that everyone sooner or later must face, must submit to and must reconcile himself with. In protest against fate however the lyric "I" defies the power of death with the small, insignificant means that it has at hand – such as in the poem "Parting with the View", that is by refusing a beautiful and beloved place that the survivor used to visit with the loved friend, now gone, its presence:

*I know that my grief
will not stop the green. [...]*

*I take note of the fact
that the shore of a certain lake
is still – as if you were living –
as lovely as before. [...]*

*There's one thing I won't agree to:
my own return.
The privilege of presence –
I give it up. [...]*

"Parting with the View" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

At the same time, Szymborska writes in her poem "Clouds":

*People may do what they want,
then they die, all of them, one after another,
for them – the clouds – there's
nothing particularly
strange about that.*

"Clouds" in: *Chwila*, Kraków 2002, translated by Janet Vesterlund

Impressionistic View

Here can be seen a glimpse of Szymborska's very special life philosophy. As Anna Legezyńska points out, the existential time in Szymborska's poetry is the *present*. What happens here and now is just exactly what a person can try to capture for a short moment. Everything else exists as a hypothesis, either reconstructed from memory (the past) or as a product of speculations about the future. The clouds, a key word in Szymborska, not only in her latest collection of poems, aptly symbolizes the transitoriness and fickleness of life, of the moment. It makes one aware of the complex nature of being and non being, about the natures of life and death in all their dimensions. It also reflects the lyric "I's" impressionistic view of life: that everything "after a fraction of the moment stops [...] being this and starts being that." A small change of light, perspective and mood is enough for us to be able to both capture and re-evaluate these short moments in life –

*A forest that looks like a forest, forever and ever amen,
and over the forest birds in flight that play being birds in flight.*

*As far as the eye can see this moment reigns supreme.
One of the moments on earth
that was asked to be enduring.*

"Moment" in: *Chwila*, Kraków 2002, translated by Janet Vesterlund

Here, of course, we can hear the echo – as many researchers have noted – of Goethe's words "*Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!*", with which Faust signed the contract on his soul, here however in Szymborska's sarcastic tones. In "Faust" man is encouraged to constantly strive to give his life meaning. This is also what makes it possible for the powers of the heavens to save Faust's soul from the claws of Mephistopheles: "He who fails not to try / it is he we can save". "*Wer sich immer strebend bemüht, den können wir erlösen*". The lyric subject in Szymborska's poem "Advertisement" consciously defies this classic literary line with the words:

*Sell me your soul.
There are no other takers.*

There is no other devil anymore.

"Advertisement" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

These reflections about death demonstrate no theological arguments, however, and "One of the moments on earth / that was asked to be enduring" is not said to a religious purpose. On the contrary – Szymborska's poetic credo and firm conviction of faith are strongly marked by stoicism: seizing the moment, this "*Verweile doch*" privilege, is man's only means of being able, for a moment, to challenge, and even deny, death, of being able in that way to defy the world's rational understanding of its surroundings.

This poetic and metaphysical sphere, somewhere between "*memento mori*" and "*carpe diem*", is the space that is at our disposal during our lifetimes, when we are all of us to a greater or lesser extent at the mercy of chance. This space coincides with eternity. Our own short time on earth is in any case "only a fragment wrested from the storm", because life must not be shadowed by man's masochistic "*memento mori*" that meets the reader, such as in baroque poetry. We are confronted every day with the wonders of existence and all the potential possibilities there are.

Of these, death is only the last of our human existence's constantly passing and constantly changing forms. Our relations with other people belong here as well. As William Morris wrote in 1888 in his work "A Dream of John Ball":

*Fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell:
fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death [...]*

A lack of human contact is here compared with death. The same message is found in Szyborska's poems. These relations between human beings are among the fundamental aspects of human existence/life. The entire civilized world represses death and, with this, also the freedom to decide over our "time on earth". Knowledge of death and acceptance of it give us the freedom to love and to do so with a gravity that only the given limit can allow. Flight from death is also a flight from life itself, from love. Because love is that which is each person's specific "*non omnis moriar-capital*" and – as the lyric "I" in one of the poems says –

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

*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.*

"First Love" in: Chwila, Kraków 2002, translated by Joanna Trzeciak

Time and Timelessness

In this way death is domesticated in Szyborska's poetic universe: by seizing the moment with the force of emotion, just at this line between time and timelessness. Szyborska's lyric subject takes the role of a kind of late modern writer of didactic verse, teaching morals through poetry, although often in the disguise of unconventionality or

irony. From the perspective of other beings in the universe our human world often seems full of cruelty and foolishness. What separates us from the other beings in this evolutionary chain, however, is our ability both to feel and show emotions, to think and to remember. In spite of the fact that the natural cycle reduces each existence to a link in this chain, every human being has something that is not included in this circle: a soul. The natural biological cycle is in this way complemented with its metaphysical dimension. Here, Szymborska's philosophical tendency lies close to Descartes' dualism. Man has long known that death as a biological fact and physical decay can be the subject of scientific observation and analysis. What happens to our brains or souls after death is still a factor of faith and an object of speculation.

It is hardly possible to find confirmation of a religious or non-religious position in Szymborska's poems. God is not explicitly named, but the Christian tradition is present with its third dimension: the immortal soul, our promise of safety in the face of the frightening abyss of eternity, even if "Nobody has one all the time / or forever". Therefore the living and the dead, human and non-human, large and small, known and unknown, present and absent move around one another in Szymborska's poems and populate the poetic cosmos which is also the timeless universe of being.

The inherent lyric subject in Szymborska's poetic universe would thus be able to say – as though these were his very last words – that which Descartes himself was said to say on his deathbed: "*Ça mon âme, il faut partir*" ("Thus my soul, it is time to go"), although of course with the relating-reflecting-self-ironic complement so typical of Szymborska:

*Life, however long, will always be short.
Too short for anything to be added.*

"Our Ancestors' short lives" in: *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1996/szymborska-article.html

Szyborska, the Polish Identity, and the Holocaust

John Hoare & Allan Reid

Wisława Szymborska is perhaps the leading poet of postwar Poland. However, Szymborska has been as reticent to discuss her biography as to discuss theoretical aspects of her poetry. In one poem she asks what poetry is, and replies firmly, "I don't know and I don't know and I hold on to that/like to a life raft." Her work is characterized by humility, a wry and frequently ironic sense of humor, and a profound sense of the joy and tragedy inherent in individual human existence and in the collective history of the species. Commentators generally agree with her that there is no need to know anything of her life to appreciate or understand her poetry. This is one of the few theoretical questions on which her position is unambiguously known, and while it may not apply equally well to all poets, it does seem to hold true for her work. Each of her poems successfully creates its own world, and there is little to connect them beyond some stylistic and methodological consistency.

The poetry of Wisława Szymborska is remarkably rich in imagery, subject matter, and intellectual scope. She has written on topics ranging from the purely quotidian ("Cat in an Empty Apartment") to the arts, history ("Reality Demands"), love, existential angst ("Four in the Morning"), and much more. Her work is highly complex and constantly reveals new dimensions of meaning and expression. If there is one thing that characterizes her approach, it would be the concretization of our abstract and fragmented perceptions of the physical, psychological, and moral world. It is highly reminiscent of Hegel's pre-phenomenological position in his famous essay "Who Thinks Abstractly?" in which he describes people watching a hanging and shows each spectator focusing on just one aspect of the man on the gallows. Each of them thinks he or she is seeing the totality of the phenomenon, but in actuality each only sees a single aspect: criminal, son, youth, and so on. Szymborska examines familiar phenomena, and by reminding her reader of their details and multifaceted nature ("eagerness to see things from all six sides"), she brings to consciousness a refocused and renewed sense of what is there.

She has written numerous poems to address social and political themes, including the conflicts and atrocities of the twentieth century. The three poems from her oeuvre that most directly address the Holocaust are "Still" ("Jeszcze"), "Hunger Camp near Jasło," and "Hitler's First Photograph," and each in its own way demonstrates her poetic method and contributes to an understanding, both of the phenomena they address and of her poetic imagination.

"Still" is an extended metonymic evocation of a sealed boxcar containing Jewish "names" travelling across the Polish countryside to a sinister destination. The focus on the names instead of the people to which they are attached is not an exploration of nominalism but an indictment of the crude objectification of the "other," which lies at the core of anti-Semitism and other forms of racism: "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." It diminishes their value as individual persons, as

personalities, and it seemingly legitimizes the artificial alienation it engenders. Interestingly the poet's target here is not Nazism and its adherents but her compatriot inhabitants of the countryside through which the train is traveling. True, the Nazis may have filled and sealed the boxcars, but it is local anti-Semitism she refers to specifically, and in doing so she raises the always disturbing and thorny question of the passive complicity of bystanders. The train is neither invisible nor silent as it moves like a ghost ship through the countryside. Indeed, she contrasts the clickety-clack of the train moving along holding its grotesque cargo with the "crashing silence" of those on the outside who know but refuse to act or even acknowledge what is happening.

In "Hunger Camp near Jaslo" Szymborska also refers to the silence around such events, but like Anna Akhmatova in "Requiem", she enjoins her poetic persona to "write it," to tell the world. She takes the reader away from conceiving the Holocaust as a phenomenon of unimaginable—and therefore abstract—proportions to confronting the individuality of each victim: "History counts its skeletons in round numbers./A thousand and one remains a thousand,/as though the one had never existed."

Similarly, in "Hitler's First Photograph"—a truly remarkable poem—Szymborska with disturbing irony presents a picture of Hitler as a lovable little baby ("Precious little angel, mommy's sunshine, honey bun.") who embodies all the hope and potentiality of any other infant. He represents and embodies his parents' joys and dreams, he might grow up to be just about anything, but there is no mention, no hint, of the diabolical monster he in fact became. He is identical with all of us and all of our children at that age—indistinguishable: "Looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket,/like the tots in every other family album." The reader is left with the realization that everyone is obliged to try to understand and to be engaged, unlike the history teacher at the end of the poem who cannot hear what is going on around him and simply "loosens his collar/and yawns over homework."

These poems, while not occupying a large space within Szymborska's work, are closely connected with other works that, in combination, develop an expansive and profound expression of the worth and importance of every human being and every human existence. Szymborska explores aspects of the Holocaust in the same way as she approaches the minutiae of daily life, probing common details with phenomenological thoroughness to force us to reintegrate our experience of them with greatly increased and intensified awareness of their complexity, richness, and power.