

“I am too close ...”

I am too close for him to dream of me.
I don't flutter over him, don't flee him
beneath the roots of trees. I am too close.
The caught fish doesn't sing with my voice.
The ring doesn't roll from my finger.
I am too close. The great house is on fire
without me calling for help. Too close
for one of my hairs to turn into the rope
of the alarm bell. Too close to enter
as the guest before whom walls retreat.
I'll never die again so lightly,
so far beyond my body, so unknowingly
as I did once in his dream. I am too close,
too close, I hear the word hiss
and see its glistening scales as I lie motionless
in his embrace. He's sleeping,
more accessible at this moment to an usherette
he saw once in a travelling circus with one lion,
than to me, who lies at his side.
A valley now grows within him for her,
rusty-leaved, with a snowcapped mountain at one end
rising in the azure air. I am too close
to fall from that sky like a gift from heaven.
My cry could only waken him. And what
a poor gift: I, confined to my own form,
when I used to be a birch, a lizard
shedding times and satin skins
in many shimmering hues. And I possessed
the gift of vanishing before astonished eyes,
which is the richest of all. I am too close,
too close for him to dream of me.
I slip my arm from underneath his sleeping head –
it's numb, swarming with imaginary pins.
A host of fallen angels perches on each tip,
waiting to be counted.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Salt 1962)

“Over Wine”

He glanced, gave me extra charm
and I took it as my own.
Happily I gulped a star.

I let myself be invented,
modelled on my own reflection
in his eyes. I dance, dance, dance
in the stir of sudden wings.

The chair's a chair, the wine is wine,
in a wineglass that's the wineglass
standing there by standing there.
Only I'm imaginary,
make-believe beyond belief,
so fictitious that it hurts.

And I tell him tales about
ants that die of love beneath
a dandelion's constellation.
I swear a white rose will sing
if you sprinkle it with wine.

I laugh and I tilt my head
cautiously, as if to check
whether the invention works.
I dance, dance inside my stunned
skin, in his arms that create me.

Eve from the rib, Venus from foam,
Minerva from Jupiter's head –
all three were more real than me.

When he isn't looking at me,
I try to catch my reflection
on the wall. And I see the nail
where a picture used to be.

Wisława Szymborska
(from *Salt* 1962)

“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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from *Salt 1962*)

“Golden Anniversary”

They must have been different once,
fire and water, miles apart,
robbing and giving in desire,
that assault on one another’s otherness.
Embracing, they appropriated and expropriated each other
for so long
that only air was left within their arms,
transparent as if after lightning.

One day the answer came before the questions.
Another night they guessed their eye’s expression
by the type of silence in the dark.

Gender fades, mysteries molder,
distinctions meet in all-resemblance
just as all colours coincide in white.

Which of them is doubled and which missing?
Which one is smiling with two smiles?
Whose voice forms a two-part canon?
When both heads nod, which one agrees?
Whose gesture lifts the teaspoon to their lips?
Who’s flayed the other one alive?
Which one lives and which has died
entangled in the lines of whose palm?

They gazed into each other’s eyes and slowly twins emerged.
Familiarity breeds the most perfect of mothers -
it favors neither of the little darlings,
it scarcely can recall which one is which.

On this festive day, their golden anniversary,
A dove, seen identically, perched on the windowsill.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Salt 1962)

“Without A Title”

The two of them were left so long alone,
so much in un-love, without a word to spare,
what they deserve by now is probably
a miracle – a thunderbolt, or turning into stone.
Two million books in print on Greek mythology,
but there’s no rescue in them for this pair.

If at least someone would ring the bell, or if
something would flare and disappear again,
no matter from where and no matter when,
no matter if it’s fun, fear, joy or grief.

But nothing of the sort. No aberration,
no deviation from the well-made plot
this bourgeois drama holds. There’ll be a dot
above the “i” inside their tidy separation.

Against the backdrop of the steadfast wall,
pitying one another, they both stare
into the mirror, but there’s nothing there
except their sensible reflections. All

they see is the two people in the frame.
Matter is on alert. All its dimensions,
everything in between the ground and sky
keeps close watch on the fates that we were born with
and sees to it that they remain the same –
although we still don’t see the reason why
a sudden deer bounding across this room
would shatter the entire universe.

Wisława Szymborska
(from *Salt* 1962)

“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
(from A Large Number 1976)

“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,
and you're the planets 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 exactly 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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Calling out to Yeti 1957)

“Born”

So this is his mother.
This small woman.
The gray-eyed procreator.

The boat in which, years ago,
he sailed to shore.

The boat from which he stepped
into the world,
into un-eternity.

Genetrix of the man
with whom I leap through fire.

So this is she, the only one
who didn't take him
finished and complete.

She herself pulled him
into the skin I know,
bound him to the bones
that are hidden from me.

She herself raised
the gray eyes
that he raised to me.

So this is she, his Alpha.
Why has he shown her to me.

Born.
So he was born, too.
Born like everyone else.
Like me, who will die.

The son of an actual woman.
A new arrival from the body's depths.
A voyager to Omega

Subjed to
his own absence,
on every front,
at any moment.

He hits his head
against a wall

that won't give way forever.

His movements
dodge and parry
the universal verdict.

I realized
that his journey was already halfway over.

But he didn't tell me that,
no.

"This is my mother."
was all he said.

Wisława Szymborska
(from No End of Fun 1967)

“Parable”

Some fishermen pulled a bottle from the deep. It held a piece of paper, with these words: “Somebody save me! I’m here. The ocean cast me on this desert island. I am standing on the shore waiting for help. Hurry! I’m here!”

“There’s no date. I bet it’s already too late anyway. It could have been floating for years,” the first fisherman said.

“And he doesn’t say where. It’s not even clear which ocean,” the second fisherman said.

“It’s not too late, or too far. The island Here is everywhere,” the third fisherman said.

They all felt awkward. No one spoke. That’s how it goes with universal truths.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Salt 1962)

“Life While-You-Wait”

Life While-You-Wait.
Performance without rehearsal.
Body without alterations.
Head without premeditation.

I know nothing of the role I play.
I only know it's mine, I can't exchange it.

I have to guess on the spot
just what this play's all about.

Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.
I can't conceal my hayseed manners.
My instincts are for hammy histrionics.
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.
Extenuating circumstances strike me as cruel.

Words and impulses you can't take back,
stars you'll never get counted,
your character like a raincoat you button on the run –
the pitiful results of all this unexpectedness.

If I could just rehearse one Wednesday in advance,
or repeat a single Thursday that has passed!
But here comes Friday with a script I haven't seen.
Is it fair, I ask
(my voice a little hoarse,
since I couldn't even clear my throat offstage).

You'd be wrong to think that it's just a slapdash quiz
taken in makeshift accommodations. Oh no.
I'm standing on the set and I see how strong it is.
The props are surprisingly precise.
The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.
The farthest galaxies have been turned on.
Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere.
And whatever I do
will become forever what I've done.

Wisława Szymborska
(from A Large Number 1976)

“Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem”

In the poems opening words
the authoress asserts that while the Earth is small,
the sky is excessively large and
in it there are, I quote, ‘too many stars for our own good.’”

In her depiction of the sky, one detects a certain helplessness,
the authoress is lost in a terrifying expanse,
she is startled by the planet’s lifelessness,
and within her mind (which can only be called imprecise)
a question soon arises:
whether we are, in the end, alone
under the sun, all suns that ever shone.

In spite of the laws of probability!
And today’s universally accepted assumptions!
In the face of the irrefutable evidence that may fall
Into human hands an day now! That’s poetry for you.

Meanwhile our Lady Bard returns to Earth
a planet, so she claims, which ‘makes its rounds without eyewitnesses,’
the only “science fiction that our cosmos can afford.”
The despair of a Pascal (1623 – 1662, *note mine*)
is, the authoress implies, unrivalled
on any, say, Andromeda or Cassiopeia.
Our solitary existence exacerbates our sense of obligation,
and raises the inevitable question, How are we to live et cetera?
since “we can’t avoid the void.”
“ ‘My God,’ man calls out to Himself,
‘have mercy on me, I beseech thee, show me the way ...’ ”

The authoress is distressed by the thought of life squandered so freely,
as if our supplies were boundless.
She is likewise worried by wars, which are, in her perverse opinion,
always lost on both sides,
and by the “authoritorture” (*sic!*) of some people by others.
Her moralistic intentions glimmer throughout the poem.
They might shine brighter beneath a less naïve pen.

Not under this one, alas. Her fundamentally unpersuasive thesis
(that we may well be, in the end, alone
under the sun, all suns that ever shone)
combined with her lackadaisical style (a mixture
of lofty rhetoric and ordinary speech)
forces the question: Whom might this piece convince?
The answer can only be: No one. Q.E.D.

Wisława Szymborska
(from *A Large Number* 1976)

“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, se 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 drip of ink contains a fair supply
of hunters, equipped with slanting 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
(from No End of Fun 1967)

“Autotomy”

In danger, the holothurian cuts itself in two.
It abandons one self to a hungry world
and with the other self it flees.

It violently divides into doom and salvation,
retribution and reward, what has been and what will be.

An abyss appears in the middle of its body
between what instantly become two foreign shores.

Life on one shore, death on the other.
Here hope and there despair.

If there are scales, the pans don't move.
If there is justice, this is it.

To die just as required, without excess.
To grow back just what's needed from what's left.

We, too, can divide ourselves, it's true.
But only into flesh and a broken whisper.
Into flesh and poetry.

The throat on one side, laughter on the other,
quiet, quickly dying out.

Here the heavy heard, there *non omnis moriar* –
just three little words, like a flight's three feathers.

The abyss doesn't divide us.
The abyss surrounds us.

in memorium Halina Poswiatowska

Wisława Szymborska
(from Could Have 1972)

“The 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
(from New Poems 1997)

“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 thickets and crickets and creepers and creeks!
The beeches and leeches alone could take weeks.
Chinchillas, gorillas, and sarsaparillas –
thanks so much, but all this excess of kindness could kill us.
Where’s the jar for this burgeoning burdock, brooks’ babble,
rooks' squabble, snakes’ squiggle, abundance, and trouble?
How to plug up the gold mines and pin down the fox,
how to cope with the lynx, bobolinks, streptococs!
Take dioxide: a lightweight, but might 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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Could Have 1972)

“Astonishment”

Why after all this one and not the rest?
Why this specific self, not in a nest,
but a house? Sewn up not in scales, but skin?
Not topped off by a leaf, but by a face?
Why on earth now, on Tuesday of all days,
and why on earth, pinned down by this star's pin?
In spite of years of my not being here?
In spite of seas of all these dates and fates,
these cells, celestials and coelenterates?
What is it really that made me appear
neither an inch nor half a globe too far,
neither a minute nor aeons too early?
What made me fill myself with me so squarely?
Why am I staring now into the dark
and muttering this unending monologue
just like the growling thing we call a dog?

Wisława Szymborska
(from Could Have 1972)

“Allegro Ma Non Troppo”

Life, you're beautiful (I say)
you just couldn't get more fecund,
more befrogged or nightingaley,
more anthilful or sproutsprouting.

I'm trying to court life's favour,
to get into its good fraces,
to anticipate its whims.
I'm always the first to bow,

always there where it can see me
with my humble, reverent face,
soaring on the wings of rapture,
falling under waves of wonder.

Oh how grassy is this hopper,
How his berry ripely rasps.
I would never have conceived it
if I weren't conceived myself!

Life (I say) I've no idea
what I could compare you to.
No one else can make a pine cone
and then make the pine cone's clone.

I praise your inventiveness,
bounty, sweep, exactitude,
sense of order – gifts that border
on witchcraft and wizardry.

I just don't want to upset you,
tease or anger, vex or rile.
For millennia, I've been trying
to appease you with my smile.

I tug at life by its leaf hem:
will it stop for me, just once,
momentarily forgetting
to what end it runs and runs?

*Wisława Szymborska
(from *Could Have* 1972)*

“Starvation Camp Near Jaslo”

Write it down. Write it. With ordinary ink
on ordinary paper: they weren't given any food,
they all died of hunger. *All. How many?*
It's a large meadow. How much grass
per head? Write down: I don't know.
History rounds off skeletons to zero.
A thousand and one is still only a thousand.
That *one* seems never to have existed:
a fictitious fetus, an empty cradle,
a primer opened for no one,
air that laughs, cries and grows,
stairs for a void bounding out to the garden,
no one's spot in the ranks.

It became flesh right here, on this meadow.
But the meadow's silent, like a witness who's been bought.
Sunny. Green. A forest close at hand,
with wood to chew on, drops beneath the bark to drink –
a view served round the clock,
until you go blind. Above, a bird
whose shadow flicked its nourishing wings
across their lips. Jaws dropped,
teeth clattered.

At night a sickle glistened in the sky
and reaped the dark for dreamed-of loaves.
Hands came flying from blackened icons,
each holding an empty chalice.
A man swayed
on a grill of barbed wire.
Some sang, with dirt in their mouths. *That lovely song*
about war hitting you straight in the heart.
Write how quiet it is.
Yes.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Salt 1962)

“Some People”

Some people flee some other people.
In some country under a sun
and some clouds.

They abandon something, close to all they've got,
sown fields, some chickens, dogs,
mirrors in which fire now preens.

Their shoulders bear pitchers and bundles.
The emptier they get, the heavier they grow.

What happens quietly: someone's dropping from exhaustion.
What happens loudly: someone's bread is ripped away,
some tries to shake a limp child back to life.

Always another road ahead of them,
always another wrong bridge
across an oddly reddish river.
Around them, some gunshots, now nearer, now farther away,
above them a plane seems to circle.

Some invisibility would come in handy,
some grayish stoniness,
or, better yet, some nonexistence
for a shorter or a longer while.

Something else will happen, only where and what.
Someone will come at them, only when and who,
in how many shapes, with what intentions.
If he has a choice,
maybe he won't be the enemy
and will let them live some sort of life.

Wisława Szymborska
(from New Poems 1997)

“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; it's 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 writes, 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 the rivers,
the shape of forests, shores, deserts, and glaciers.
The little soul roams among those 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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The People on the Bridge 1986)

“Still”

Across the country’s plains
sealed boxcars are carrying names:
how long will they travel, how far,
will they ever leave the boxcar –
don’t ask, I can’t say, I don’t know.

The name Nathan beats the wall with his fist,
the name Isaac sings a mad hymn,
the name Aaron is dying of thirst,
the name Sarah begs water for him.

Don’t jump from the boxcar, name David.
In these lands you’re a name to avoid,
you’re bound for defeat, you’re a sign
point out those who must be destroyed.

At least give your son a Slavic name:
he’ll need it. Here people count hairs
and examine the shape of your eyelids
to tell right from wrong, “ours” from “theirs.”

Don’t jump yet. Your son’s name will be Lech.
Don’t jump yet. The time’s still not right.
Don’t jump yet. The clattering wheels
are mocked by the echoes of night.

Clouds of people passed over this plain.
Vast clouds, but they held little rain –
just one tear, that’s a fact, just one tear.
Dark forest. The tracks disappear.

That’s-a-fact. The rail and the wheels.
That’s-a-fact. A forest, no fields.
That’s-a-fact. And their silence once more,
that’s-a-fact, drums on my silent door.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Calling Out to Yeti 1957)

“An Opinion on the Question of Pornography”

There's nothing more debauched than thinking.
This sort of wantonness runs wild like a wind-borne weed
on a plot laid out for daises.

Nothing's sacred for those who think.
Calling things brazenly by name,
risqué analyses, salacious syntheses,
frenzied, rakish chases after the bare facts,
the filthy fingering of touchy subjects,
discussion in heat – it's music to their ears.

In broad daylight or under cover of night
they form circles, triangles or pairs.
Their partners' age or sex are unimportant.
Their eyes glitter, their cheeks are flushed.
Friend leads friend astray.
Degenerate daughters corrupt their fathers.
A brother pimps for his little sister.

They prefer the fruits
from the forbidden tree of knowledge
to the pink buttocks found in glossy magazines –
all that ultimately simple hearted smut.
The books they relish have no pictures.
What variety they have lies in certain phrases
Marked with a thumbnail or a crayon.

It's shocking, the positions,
the unchecked simplicity with which
one mind contrives to fertilise another!
Such positions the Kama Sutra itself doesn't know.

During these trysts of theirs, the only thing that's steamy is the tea.
People sit on their chairs and move their lips.

Everyone crosses his own legs
so that one foot is resting on the floor
while the other dangles freely in midair.
Only now and then does somebody get up,
go to the window,
and through a crack in the curtains
take a peep out at the street.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The People on the Bridge 1986)

“Discovery”

I believe in the great discovery.
I believe in the man who will make the discovery.
I believe in the fear of the man who will make the discovery.

I believe in his face going white,
his queasiness, his upper lip drenched in cold sweat.

I believe in the burning of his notes,
burning them into ashes,
burning them to the last scrap.

I believe in the scattering of numbers,
scattering them without regret.

I believe in the man’s haste,
in the precision of his movements,
in his free will.

I believe in the shattering of tablets,
the pouring out of liquids,
the extinguishing of rays.

I am convinced this will end well,
that it will not be too late,
that it will take place without witnesses.

I’m sure no one will find out what happened,
not the wife, not the wall,
not even the bird that might squeal in its song.

I believe in the refusal to take part.
I believe in the ruined career.
I believe in the wasted years of work.
I believe in the secret taken to the grave.

These words soar for me beyond all rules
without seeking support from actual examples.
My faith is strong, blind and without foundation.

Wisława Szymborska
*(from **Could Have** 1972)*

“Ruben’s Women”

Titanettes, female fauna,
naked as the rumbling of barrels.
They roost in ramped beds,
asleep, with mouths 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 troughs, baths steam, wines blush,
cloudy piglets careen across the sky,
triumphant trumpets neigh the carnal alarm.

O pumpkin plump! O plumped-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’s 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 halos.
The twentieth silver screens.
The seventeenth, alas, holds nothing for the unvoluptuous.

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

Wisława Szymborska
(from *Salt 1962*)

“Bodybuilders’ Contest”

From scalp to sole, all muscles in slow motion.
The ocean of his torso drips with lotion.
The king of all is he who preens and wrestles
with sinews twisted into monstrous pretzels.

Onstage, he grapples with a grizzly bear
the deadlier for not really being there.
Three unseen panthers are in turn laid low,
Each with one smoothly choreographed blow.

He grunts while showing his poses and paces.
His back alone has twenty different faces.
The mammoth fist he raises as he wins
is tribute to the force of vitamins.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Salt 1962)

“A Byzantine Mosaic”

“O Theotropia, my empress consort.”

“O Theodendron, my consort emperor.”

“How fair thou art, my hollow-cheeked beloved.”

“How fine art thou, blue-lipped spouse.”

“Thou art so wondrous frail
beneath thy bell-like gown,
the alarum of which, if but removed,
would waken all my kingdom.”

“How excellently mortified thou art,
my lord and master,
to mine own shadow a twinnèd shade.”

“Oh how it pleaseth me
To see my lady’s palms,
Like unto palm leaves verily,
clasped to her mantle’s throat.”

“Wherewith, raised heavenward,
I would pray thee mercy for our son,
For he is not such as we, O Theodendron.”

“Heaven fend, O Theotropia.
pray, what might he be,
begotten and brought forth
in godly dignity?”

‘I will confess anon, and thou shalt hear me.
Not a princeling but a sinner have I borne thee.
Pink and shameless as a piglet,
plump and merry, verily,
all chubby wrists and ringlets came he
rolling unto us.’

“He is roly-poly?”

“That he is.”

“He is voracious?”

“Yes, in truth.”

“His skin is milk and roses?”

“As thou sayest.”

“What, pray, does our archimandrite say,
a man of most penetrating gnosis?
What say our consecrated eremites,
most holy skeletesses?
How should they strip the fiendish infant
of his swaddling silks?”

“Metamorphosis miraculous
still lies within our Saviour’s power.
Yet thou, on spying
the babes unsightliness,
shalt not cry oyt
and rouse the sleeping demon from his rest?”

“I am thy twin in horror.
Lead on, Theotropia.”

Wisława Szymborska
(from No End of Fun 1967)

“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, dazzlingly 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.

*Wisława Szymborska
(from A large number 1976)*

“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
(from The People on the Bridge 1986)

“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
(from Nothing Twice 1997)

“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 by each other 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 thicket?

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

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

Wisława Szymborska
(from View with A Grain of Sand 1993)

“Some People Like Poetry”

Some people—
that means not everyone.
Not even most of them, only a few.
Not counting school, where you have to,
and poets themselves,
you might end up with something like two per thousand.

Like—
but then, you can like chicken noodle soup,
or compliments, or the color blue,
your old scarf,
your own way,
petting the dog.

Poetry—
but what is poetry anyway?
More than one rickety answer
has tumbled since that question first was raised.
But I just keep on not knowing, and I cling to that
like a redemptive handrail.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Republic Magazine 1996)

“Hatred Poem”

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 is 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.
Just also works well at the outset
until hate gets its own momentum going.

Hatred. Hatred.

Its face twisted in a grimace
of erotic ecstasy.

Oh these other feelings, listless weaklings.
Since when does brotherhood draw crowds?

Has compassion ever finished first?

Does doubt ever really rouse the rabble?

Only hatred has just what it takes.

Gifted, diligent, hard-working.

Need we mention all the songs it has composed?

All the pages it has added to our history books?

All the human carpets it has spread

over countless city squares and football fields?

Let's face it:

it knows how to make beauty.

The splendid fire-glow in midnight skies.

Magnificent bursting bombs in rosy dawns.

You can't deny the inspiring pathos of ruins

and a certain bawdy humor to be found

in the sturdy column jutting from their midst.

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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems 1995)

“One Version of Events”

If indeed we were allowed to choose,
we must have been mulling things over for a long time.

The bodies offered us were uncomfortable
and wore out dreadfully.

The means of satisfying hunger
sickened us.

The passive inheritance of traits
and the tyranny of organs
put us off.

A world that was meant to surround us,
was in endless decay.
The effects of causes wreaked heavy havoc on it.

Of all those fates
given to us for inspection
most we rejected
in sorrow and horror.

Questions arose such as these:
what use is there in the painful delivery
of a dead child?
And why be a sailor
who never reaches port?

We agreed to death
but not in every form.
Love attracted us,
sure, but a love
that kept its word.

The fickleness of judgments
and impermanence of masterpieces
scared us off
from the service of art.

Everyone wanted a homeland without neighbors
and to live their entire lives
in the interval between wars.

None of us wanted to seize power
or be subject to it,
none of us wanted to fall victim
to our own delusions or anyone else's.

There were no volunteers
for tight crowds, parades,
and even less so for vanishing tribes;
but without them, history
never would have been able to march on
through centuries foreseen.

Meanwhile a goodly number
of lighted stars
had gone out and grown cold.
It was high time for a decision.

After many reservations
there finally appeared a few candidates
for discoverers and healers,
for philosophers without acclaim,
for several anonymous gardeners,
musicians, and conjurers

—though for want of other submissions
even these lives
couldn't be fulfilled.

The whole thing
had to be rethought yet again.

We were offered
a package tour,
a journey from which we'd return
fast and for certain.

A chance to remain outside eternity,
which is, after all, monotonous
and ignorant of the concept of passing,
might never have come again.

We were riddled with doubt
whether, knowing it all beforehand,
we indeed knew it all.

Is such a premature choice
any choice at all?
Wouldn't it be better
to let it pass?
And if we are to choose,
to make the choice there?

We took a look at Earth.
Some adventurers were living there already.

A feeble plant
was clinging to a rock
with reckless trust
that the wind would not uproot it.

A smallish animal
was crawling out of its nook
with an effort and a hope that surprised us.

We found ourselves too cautious,
small-minded, and ridiculous.

Anyway, soon our numbers began to fade.
The least patient ones went off somewhere.
Theirs was a trial by fire
—that much was clear.
Indeed, they were lighting one
on the steep bank of a real river.

Several
were already heading back.
But not our way.
And as if they were carrying the spoils? Of what?

Wisława Szymborska
(from VQR Online, Spring 2001, published 2003)

“A Little Bit About The Soul”

A soul is something we have every now and then.
Nobody has one all the time
or forever. Day after day,
year after year,
can go by without one.

Only sometimes in rapture
or in the fears of childhood
it nests a little longer.
Only sometimes in the wonderment
that we are old.

It rarely assists us
during tiresome tasks,
such as moving furniture,
carrying suitcases,
or traveling on foot in shoes too tight.

When we're filling out questionnaires
or chopping meat
it's usually given time off.

Out of our thousand conversations
it participates in one,
and even that isn't a given,
for it prefers silence.

When the body starts to ache and ache
it quietly steals from its post.

It's choosy:
not happy to see us in crowds,
sickened by our struggle for any old advantage
and the drone of business dealings.

It doesn't see joy and sorrow
as two different feelings.
It is with us
only in their union.
We can count on it
when we're not sure of anything
and curious about everything.

Of all material objects
it likes grandfather clocks
and mirrors, which work diligently
even when no one is looking.

It doesn't state where it comes from
or when it will vanish again,
but clearly it awaits such questions.

Evidently,
just as we need it,
it can also use us
for something.

Wisława Szymborska
(from A Word on Statistics 1997)

“The People on the Bridge”

An odd planet, and those on it are odd, too.
They're subject to time, but they won't admit it.
They have their own ways of expressing protest.
They make up little pictures, like for instance this:

At first glance, nothing special.
What you see is water.
And one of its banks.
And a little boat sailing strenuously upstream.
And a bridge over the water, and people on the bridge.
It appears that the people are picking up their pace
because of the rain just beginning to lash down
from a dark cloud.

The thing is, nothing else happens.
The cloud doesn't change its color or its shape.
The rain doesn't increase or subside.
The boat sails on without moving.
The people on the bridge are running now
exactly where they ran before.

It's difficult at this point to keep from commenting.
This picture is by no means innocent.
Time has been stopped here.
Its laws are no longer consulted.
It has been relieved of its influence over the course of events.
It has been ignored and insulted.

On account of a rebel,
one Hiroshige Utawaga
(a being who, by the way,
died long ago and in due course),
time has tripped and fallen down.

It might well be simply a trifling prank,
an antic on the scale of just a couple of galaxies,
let us, however, just in case,
add one final comment for the record:

For generations, it's been considered good form here
to think highly of this picture,
to be entranced and moved.

There are those for whom even this is not enough.
They go so far as to hear the rain's spatter,
to feel the cold drops on their necks and backs,
they look at the bridge and the people on it
as if they saw themselves there,
running the same never-to-be-finished race
through the same endless, ever-to-be-covered distance,
and they have the nerve to believe
that this is really so.

Wisława Szymborska
(from People on the Bridge 1996)

“The End and the Beginning”

After every war
someone’s got to tidy up.
Things won’t pick
themselves up, after all.

Someone’s got to shove
the rubble to the roadsides
so the carts loaded with corpses
can get by.

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

Someone’s got to lug the post
to prop the wall,
someone’s got 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.
Shirt sleeves 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's got to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects
with a cornstalk in his teeth,
gawking at clouds.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Republic magazine 1993)

“Monologue of a Dog Ensnared in History”

There are dogs and dogs. I was among the chosen.
I had good papers and wolf's blood in my veins.
I lived upon the heights inhaling the odors of views:
meadows in sunlight, spruces after rain,
and clumps of earth beneath the snow.

I had a decent home and people on call,
I was fed, washed, groomed,
and taken for lovely strolls.
Respectfully, though, and comme il faut.
They all knew full well whose dog I was.

Any lousy mutt can have a master.
Take care, though --- beware comparisons.
My master was a breed apart.
He had a splendid herd that trailed his every step
and fixed its eyes on him in fearful awe.

For me they always had smiles,
with envy poorly hidden.
Since only I had the right
to greet him with nimble leaps,
only I could say good-bye by worrying his trousers with my teeth.
Only I was permitted
to receive scratching and stroking
with my head laid in his lap.
Only I could feign sleep
while he bent over me to whisper something.

He raged at others often, loudly.
He snarled, barked,
raced from wall to wall.
I suspect he liked only me
and nobody else, ever.

I also had responsibilities: waiting, trusting.
Since he would turn up briefly, and then vanish.
What kept him down there in the lowlands, I don't know.
I guessed, though, it must be pressing business,
at least as pressing
as my battle with the cats
and everything that moves for no good reason.

There's fate and fate. Mine changed abruptly.
One spring came
and he wasn't there.
All hell broke loose at home.
Suitcases, chests, trunks crammed into cars.

The wheels squealed tearing downhill
and fell silent round the bend.

On the terrace scraps and tatters flamed,
yellow shirts, armbands with black emblems
and lots and lots of battered cartons
with little banners tumbling out.

I tossed and turned in this whirlwind,
more amazed than peeved.
I felt unfriendly glances on my fur.
As if I were a dog without a master,
some pushy stray
chased downstairs with a broom.

Someone tore my silver-trimmed collar off,
someone kicked my bowl, empty for days.
Then someone else, driving away,
leaned out from the car
and shot me twice.

He couldn't even shoot straight,
since I died for a long time, in pain,
to the buzz of impertinent flies.
I, the dog of my master.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Monologue of a Dog Ensnared 2004)

“The Ball”

As long as nothing can be known for sure

(no signals have been picked up yet),

as long as Earth is still unlike
the nearer and more distant planets,

as long as there's neither hide nor hair
of other grasses graced by other winds,
of other treetops bearing other crowns,
other animals as well-grounded as our own,

as long as only the local echo
has been known to speak in syllables,

as long as we still haven't heard the word
of better or worse Mozarts,
Platos, Edisons, elsewhere,

as long as our inhuman crimes
are still committed only between humans,

as long as our kindness
is still incomparable,
peerless even in its imperfection,

as long as our heads packed with illusions
still pass for the only heads so packed,

as long as the roofs of our mouths alone
still raise voices to high heavens

lets act like very special guests of honour
at the district firemen's ball,
dance to the beat of the local oompah band
and pretend that it's the ball
to end all balls.

I can't speak for other
for me this is misery and happiness enough:

just this sleepy backwater
where even the stars have time to burn
while winking at us
unintentionally.

*Wisława Szymborska
(from *The New Yorker* magazine 2003)*

“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
(from *Poetry 2010*)

“Maybe All This”

Maybe all this
is happening in some lab?
Under one lamp by day
and billions by night?

Maybe we're experimental generations?
Poured from one vial to the next,
shaken in test tubes,
not scrutinized by eyes alone,
each of us separately
plucked up by tweezers in the end?

Or maybe it's more like this:
No interference?
The changes occur on their own
according to plan?
The graph's needle slowly etches
its predictable zigzags?

Maybe thus far we aren't of much interest?
The control monitors aren't usually plugged in?
Only for wars, preferably large ones,
for the odd ascent above our clump of Earth,
for major migrations from point A to B?

Maybe just the opposite:
They've got a taste for trivia up there?
Look! on the big screen a little girl
is sewing a button on her sleeve.
The radar shrieks,
the staff comes at a run.
What a darling little being
with its tiny heart beating inside it!
How sweet, its solemn
threading of the needle!
Someone cries enraptured:
Get the Boss,
tell him he's got to see this for himself!

Wisława Szymborska
(from *The New Yorker* 1992)

“Hitler’s First Photograph”

And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?
That's tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers' 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, honey bun,
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, Braunen,
and Braunen is a 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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from View with a Grain of Sand 1996)

“A 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".

*Wisława Szymborska
(from View with a Grain of Sand 1957)*

“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 Chaeronea,
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 the 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 grass.

Perhaps all fields are battlefields,
those we remember

and those that are forgotten:
the birch forests and the cedar forests,
the snow and the sand, the iridescent swamps
and the canyons of black defeat,
where now, when the need strikes, you don't cower
under a bush but squat behind it.

What moral flows from this? Probably none.
Only that 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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Yorker 1993)

“Brueghel’s Two Monkeys”

This is what I see in my dreams about final exams:
two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill,
the sky behind them flutters, the sea is taking its bath.

The exam is History of Mankind.

I stammer and hedge.

One monkey stares and listens with mocking disdain,
the other seems to be dreaming away—
but when it’s clear I don’t know what to say
he prompts me with a gentle
clinking of his chain.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Yorker 1993)

“I'm Working on the World”

I'm working on the world,
revised, improved edition,
featuring fun for fools,
blues for brooders,
combs for bald pates,
tricks for old dogs.

Here's one chapter: The Speech
of Animals and Plants.
Each species comes, of course,
with its own dictionary.
Even a simple "Hi there,"
when traded with a fish,
make both the fish and you
feel quite extraordinary.

The long-suspected meanings
of rustlings, chirps, and growls!
Soliloquies of forests!
The epic hoot of owls!
Those crafty hedgehogs drafting
aphorisms after dark,
while we blindly believe
they are sleeping in the park!

Time (Chapter Two) retains
its sacred right to meddle
in each earthly affair.
Still, time's unbounded power
that makes a mountain crumble,
moves seas, rotates a star,
won't be enough to tear
lovers apart: they are
too naked, too embraced,
too much like timid sparrows.

Old age is, in my book,
the price that felons pay,
so don't whine that it's steep:
you'll stay young if you're good.
Suffering (Chapter Three)
doesn't insult the body.
Death? It comes in your sleep,
exactly as it should.

When it comes, you'll be dreaming
that you don't need to breathe;

that breathless silence is
the music of the dark
and it's part of the rhythm
to vanish like a spark.

Only a death like that. A rose
could prick you harder, I suppose;
you'd feel more terror at the sound
of petals falling to the ground.

Only a world like that. To die
just that much. And to live just so.
And all the rest is Bach's fugue, played
for the time being
on a saw.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Yorker 1998)

“Return Baggage”

The cemetery plot for tiny graves.
We, the long lived, pass by furtively,
like wealthy people slums.

Here lie little Zosia, Jacek, Dominik,
prematurely stripped of the sun, the moon,
the clouds, the turning seasons.

They didn't stash much in their return bags.
Some scraps of sights
that scarcely count as plural.
A fistful of air with a butterfly flitting.
A spoonful of bitter knowledge – the taste of medicine.

Small-scale naughtiness,
granted, some of it fatal.
Gaily chasing the ball across the road.
The happiness of skating on thin ice.

This one here, that one down there, those on the end”
before they get to reach a doorknob,
break a watch,
smash their first windowpane.

Malgorzata, four years old,
two of them spent staring at the ceiling.

Rafalek: missed his fifth birthday by a month,
and Zuzia missed Christmas,
when misty breath turns to frost.
And what can you say about one day of life,
a minute, a second:
darkness, a lightbulb's flash, then dark again?

KOSMOS MAKROS
CHRONOS PARADOKSOS
Only stony Greek has words for that.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Yorker 2004)

“A Little Girl Tugs at the Tablecloth”

She’s been in this world for over a year,
and in this world not everything’s been examined
and taken in hand.

The subject of today’s investigation
is things that don’t move by themselves.

They need to be helped along,
shoved, shifted,
taken from their place and relocated.

They don’t all want to go, e.g., the bookshelf,
the cupboard, the unyielding walls, the table.

But the tablecloth on the stubborn table
—when well-seized by its hems—
manifests a willingness to travel.

And the glasses, plates,
creamer, spoons, bowl,
are fairly shaking with desire.

It’s fascinating,
what form of motion will they take,
once they’re trembling on the brink:
will they roam across the ceiling?
fly around the lamp?
hop onto the windowsill and from there to a tree?

Mr. Newton still has no say in this.
Let him look down from the heavens and wave his hands.

This experiment must be completed.
And it will.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Yorker 2004)

“The Kindness of the Blind”

A poet is reading to the blind.
He did not suspect it was so hard.
His voice is breaking.
His hands are shaking.
He feels that here each sentence
is put to the test of the dark.
It will have to fend for itself
without the lights or colors.
A perilous adventure
for the stars in his poems,
for the dawn, the rainbow, the clouds, neon lights, the moon,
for the fish until now so silver under water,
and the hawk so silently high in the sky.
He is reading---for it is too late to stop---
of a boy in a jacket yellow in the green meadow,
of red rooftops easy to spot in the valley,
the restless numbers on the players' shirts,
and a nude stranger in the door cracked open.
He would like to pass over---though it's not an option---
all those saints on the cathedral's ceiling,
that farewell wave from the train window,
the microscope lens, ray of light in the gem,
video screens, and mirrors, and the album with faces.
Yet great is the kindness of the blind,
great their compassion and generosity.
They listen, smile, and clap.
One of them even approaches
with a book held topsy-turvy
to ask for an invisible autograph.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Yorker 2004)

“ABC”

I'll never find out now
What A. thought of me.
If B. ever forgave me in the end.
Why C. pretended everything was fine.
What part D. played in E's silence.
What F. had been expecting, if anything.
Why G. forgot when she knew perfectly well.
What H. had to hide.
What I. wanted to add.
If my being around
meant anything
to J. and K. and the rest of the alphabet.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Yorker 2004)

“Everything”

Everything –
a smug and bumptious word.
It should be written in quotes.
It pretends to miss nothing,
to gather, hold, contain, and have.
While all the while it’s just
a shred of gale.

Wisława Szymborska
*(from *The New Yorker* 2005)*

“A Note”

Life is the only way
to get covered in leaves,
catch your breath on the sand,
rise on wings;
to be a dog,
or stroke its warm fur;
to tell pain
from everything it's not;
to squeeze inside events,
dawdle in views,
to seek the least of all possible mistakes.
An extraordinary chance
to remember for a moment
a conversation held
with the lamp switched off;
and if only once
to stumble on a stone,
end up soaked in one downpour or another,
mislay your keys in the grass;
and to follow a spark on the wind with your eyes;
and to keep on not knowing
something important.

Wisława Szymborska
(from The New Yorker 2005)

“Perspective”

They passed like strangers,
without a word or gesture,
her off to the store,
him heading for the car.

Perhaps startled
or distracted,
or forgetting
that for a short while
they'd been in love forever.

Still, there's no guarantee
that it was them.
Maybe yes from a distance,
but not close up.

I watched them from the window,
and those who observe from above
are often mistaken.

She vanished beyond the glass door.
He got in behind the wheel
and took off.
As if nothing had happened,
if it had.

And I, sure for just a moment
that I'd seen it,
strive to convince you, O Readers,
with this accidental little poem
that it was sad.

Wisława Szymborska
(from *The New Yorker* 2006)

“While Sleeping”

I dreamed I was looking for something,
maybe hidden somewhere or lost
under the bed, under the stairs,
under an old address.

I dug through wardrobes, boxes and drawers
pointlessly packed with stuff and nonsense.

I pulled from my suitcases
the years and journeys I'd picked up.

I shook from my pockets
withered letters, litter, leaves not addressed to me.

I ran panting
through comforting, discomfiting
displaces, places.

I floundered through tunnels of snow
and unremembrance.

I got stuck in thorny thickets
and conjectures.

I swam through air
and the grass of childhood.

I hustled to finish up
before the outdated dusk fell,
the curtain, silence.

In the end I stopped knowing
what I'd been looking for so long.

I woke up.
Looked at my watch.
The dream took not quite two and a half minutes.

Such are the tricks to which time resorts
ever since it started stumbling
on sleeping heads.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Map: Collected and Last Poems 2012)

“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*.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Poetry 1997)

“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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Map: Collected and Last Poems 1976)

“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
(from Poems New and Selected 1998)

“Children Of The 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
(from Poems New and Collected 1988)

“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.

*Wisława Szymborska
(from Poems New and Collected)*

“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
(from Poetry 2006)

“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
(from View with a Grain of Sand 1996)

“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
(from Poetry 2010)

“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
(from Poems New and Collected)

“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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from *Poems New and Collected*)

“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
(from Miracle Fair 2001)

“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).

Wisława Szymborska
(from Poems New and Collected)

“Museum”

Here are plates with no appetite.
And wedding rings, but the requited love
has been gone now for some three hundred years.

Here’s a fan—where is the maiden’s blush?
Here are swords—where is the ire?
Nor will the lute sound at the twilight hour.

Since eternity was out of stock,
ten thousand aging things have been amassed instead.
The moss-grown guard in golden slumber
props his mustache on Exhibit Number...

Eight. Metals, clay and feathers celebrate
their silent triumphs over dates.
Only some Egyptian flapper’s silly hairpin giggles.

The crown has outlasted the head.
The hand has lost out to the glove.
The right shoe has defeated the foot.

As for me, I am still alive, you see.
The battle with my dress still rages on.
It struggles, foolish thing, so stubbornly!
Determined to keep living when I’m gone!

Wisława Szymborska
(from Poems New and Collected 1996)

“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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from View with a Grain of Sand)

“A Large Number”

Four billion people on this earth,
but my imagination is the way it's always been:
bad with large numbers.
It is still moved by particularity.
It flits about the darkness like a flashlight beam,
disclosing only random faces,
while the rest go blindly by,
unthought of, unpitied.
Not even a Dante could have stopped that.
So what do you do when you're not,
even with all the muses on your side?

Non omnis moriar—a premature worry.
Yet am I fully alive, and is that enough?
It never has been, and even less so now.
I select by rejecting, for there's no other way,
but what I reject, is more numerous,
more dense, more intrusive than ever.
At the cost of untold losses—a poem, a sigh.
I reply with a whisper to a thunderous calling.
How much I am silent about I can't say.
A mouse at the foot of mother mountain.
Life lasts as long as a few lines of claws in the sand.

My dreams—even they are not as populous as they should be.
There is more solitude in them than crowds or clamor.
Sometimes someone long dead will drop by for a bit.
A single hand turns a knob.
Annexes of echo overgrow the empty house.
I run from the threshold down into the quiet
valley seemingly no one's—an anachronism by now.

Where does all this space still in me come from—
that I don't know.

Wisława Szymborska
(from View with a Grain of Sand 1993)

“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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Poems New and Collected)

“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 thread 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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Map: Collected and Last Poems)

“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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Poems New and Collected 1967)

“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...

Wisława Szymborska
(from Poems New and Collected)

“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.

Wisława Szymborska
(from Poems New and Collected 1976)

“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."

Wisława Szymborska
(from Poems New and Collected)