

From *View With a Grain of Sand*, poems by by Wislawa Szymborska
translated by Stanislaw Barańczak & Clare Cavanagh, 1993

[“Wislawa Szymborska: A Portrait in Quotes”](#) by Ela Bittencourt in *Guernica Magazine*

[“Polish Poet, Observer of Daily Life, Wins Nobel”](#) by Jane Perlez

[“Wislawa Szymborska - The Poetry of Existence”](#) in Culture.pl

[“Wislawa Szymborska, Poet Of Gentle Irony, Dies At 88”](#) by David Orr in *NPR*

[“Wislawa Szymborska, 1923-2012: The Szymborska Poem Above My Desk”](#) by Dana Stevens
in *Slate Magazine*

[“Why You Should Be Reading Wislawa Szymborska”](#) by Megan O’Grady in *Vogue*

Map: Collected and Last Poems by Wislawa Szymborska

Vocabulary

By Wislawa Szymborska

“*La Pologne? La Pologne?* Isn’t it terribly cold there?” she asked,
and then sighed with relief. So many countries have been turning
up lately that the safest thing to talk about is climate.

“Madame, ” I want to reply, “my people’s poets do all their
writing in mittens. I don’t mean to imply that they never remove
them; they do, indeed, if the moon is warm enough. In stanzas
composed of raucous whooping, for only such can drown out the
windstorms’ constant roar, they glorify the simple lives of our
walrus herders. Our Classicists engrave their odes with inky icicles
on trampled snowdrifts. The rest, our Decadents, bewail their fate
with snowflakes instead of tears. He who wishes to drown himself
must have an ax at hand to cut the ice. Oh, madame, dearest
madame.”

That’s what I meant to say. But I’ve forgotten the word for
walrus in French. And I’m not sure of icicle and ax.

“*La Pologne? La Pologne?* Isn’t it terribly cold there?”

“*Pas du tout,*” I answer icily.

Clochard

By Wislawa Szymborska

In Paris, on a day that stayed morning until dusk,
in a Paris like -
in a Paris which -
(save me, sacred folly of description!) Clochard
in a garden by a stone cathedral
(bit built, no, rather
played upon a lute)
a *clochard*, a lay monk, a naysayer
sleeps sprawled like a knight in effigy.

If he ever owned anything, he has lost it,
and having lost it doesn't want it back.
He's still owed soldier's pay for the conquest of Gaul—
but he's got over that, it doesn't matter.
And they never paid him in the fifteenth century
for posing as the thief on Christ's left hand—
he has forgotten all about it, he's not waiting.

He earns his red wine
by trimming the neighborhood dogs.
He sleeps with the air of an inventor of dreams,
his thick beard swarming towards the sun.

The gray chimeras (to wit, bulldogryphons,
hellephants, hippopotoads, croakodilloes, rhinocerberuses,
behemammoths, and demonopods,
that omnibestial Gothic allegro vivace)
unpetrify

and examine him with a curiosity
they never turn on me or you,
prudent Peter,
zealous Michael,
enterprising Eve,
Barbara, Clare.

Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition

By Wislawa Szymborska

So these are the Himalayas.
Mountains racing to the moon.
The moment of their start recorded
on the startling, ripped canvas of the sky.
Holes punched in a desert of clouds.
Thrust into nothing.
Echo- a white mute.
Quiet.

Yeti, down there we've got Wednesday,
bread and alphabets.
Two times two is four.
Roses are red there,
and violets are blue.

Yeti, crime is not all
we're up to down there.
Yeti, not every sentence there
means death.

We've inherited hope-
the gift of forgetting.
You'll see how we give
birth among the ruins.

Yeti, we've got Shakespeare there.
Yeti, we play solitaire
and violin. At nightfall,
we turn lights on, Yeti.

Up here it's neither moon nor earth.
Tears freeze.
Oh Yeti, semi-moonman,
turn back think again!

I called this to the Yeti
inside four walls of avalanche,
stomping my feet for warmth
on the everlasting
snow.

Reading by Bill Hayes from Favorite Poem Project:

http://www.favoritepoem.org/poem_NotesfromaNonexistentHimalayanExpedition.html

Prompt: Write a poem in which you talk to a mythical creature, person, animal or object about something that is on your mind.

Poems inspired by artwork:

Ekphrasis: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/ekphrasis>

Ekphrastic poems by other poets:

- Musée Des Beaux Arts
- Ode to a Grecian Urn
- https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/browse#page=1&sort_by=recently_added&for ms=289

Landscape (pg 37-38)

Brueghel's Two Monkeys

By Wislawa Szymborska

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.

Rubens' Women

By Wislawa Szymborska

Titanettes, female fauna
naked as the rumbling of barrels.
They roost in trampled 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, bath 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 distorting
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 haloes.
The twentieth, silver screens.
The seventeenth, alas, holds nothing for the 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 bedchamber.

Funeral

By Wislawa Szymborska

“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 that beard”
“he was asking for it, always mixed up in something”
“that new guy was going to make a speech, I don’t see him”
“Kazek’s in Warsaw, Tadek has gone abroad”
“you were smart, you brought the only umbrella”
“so what if he was more talented than they were”
“no, it’s a walk-through room, Barbara won’t take it”
“of course, he was right, but that’s no excuse”
“with body work and paint, just guess how much”
“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”
“five times and never any answer”
“all right, so I could have, but you could have, too”
“good thing that at least she still had a job”
“don’t know, relatives, I guess”
“that priest looks like Belmondo”
“I’ve never been in this part of the grounds”
“I dreamed about him last week, I had a feeling”
“his daughter’s not bad-looking”
“the way of all flesh”
“give my best to the widow, I’ve got to run”
“it all sounded so much more solemn in Latin”
“what’s gone is gone”
“good bye”
“I could sure use a drink”
“give me a call”
“which bus goes downtown”
“I’m going this way”
“we’re not”

Poetry Reading

by Wislawa Szymborska

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

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

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

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

Water

by Wislawa Szymborska

A drop of water fell on my hand,
drawn from the Ganges and the Nile,

from hoarfrost ascended to heaven off a seal's whiskers,
from jugs broken in the cities of Ys and Tyre.

On my index finger
the Caspian Sea isn't landlocked,

and the Pacific is the Rudawa's meek tributary,
that same stream that floated as a little cloud over Paris

in the year seven hundred and sixty-four
on the seventh of May at three a.m.

There are not enough mouths to utter
all your fleeting names, O water.

I would have to name you in every tongue
pronouncing all the vowels at once

while also keeping silent—for the sake of the lake
that still goes unnamed

and doesn't exist on this earth, just as the star
reflected in it is not in the sky.

Someone was drowning, someone dying was
calling out for you. Long ago and, yesterday.

You have saved houses from fire, you have carried off
houses and trees, forests and towns alike.

You've been in christening fonts and courtesan's baths.
In coffin and kisses.

Gnawing stone, feeding rainbows,
In the sweat and the dew of the pyramids and lilacs.

How light the raindrop's contents are.
How gently the world touches me.

Whenever wherever whatever has happened
Is written down on the waters of Babel.

In Praise of Dreams

By Wislawa Szymborska

In my dreams
I paint like Vermeer van Delft.

I speak fluent Greek
and not just with the living.

I drive a car
that does what I want it to.

I am gifted
and write mighty epics.

I hear voices
as clearly as any venerable saint.

My brilliance as a pianist
would stun you.

I fly the way we ought to,
i.e., on my own.

Falling from the roof,
I tumble gently to the grass.

I've got no problem
breathing under water.

I can't complain:
I've been able to locate Atlantis.

It's gratifying that I can always
wake up before dying.

As soon as war breaks out,
I roll over on my other side.

I'm a child of my age,
but I don't have to be.

A few years ago
I saw two suns.

And the night before last a penguin,
clear as day.

The Joy of Writing

by Wislawa Szymborska

Why does this written doe bound through these written woods?
For a drink of written water from a spring
whose surface will xerox her soft muzzle?
Why does she lift her head; does she hear something?
Perched on four slim legs borrowed from the truth,
she pricks up her ears beneath my fingertips.
Silence-this word also rustles across the page
and parts the boughs
that have sprouted from the word "woods."

Lying in wait, set to pounce on the blank page,
are letters up to no good,
clutches of clauses so subordinate
they'll never let her get away.

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

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

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

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

Identification

By Wisława Szymborska

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—

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/53833/identification-56d2338272962>

A Paleolithic Fertility Fetish

By Wisława Szymborska

The Great Mother has no face
Why would the Great Mother need a face.
The face cannot stay faithful to the body.
The face disturbs the body, it is undivine.
It disturbs the body's solemn unity.
The Great Mother's visage is her bulging belly
with its blind navel in the middle.

The Great Mother has no feet.
What would the Great Mother do with feet
Where is she going to go.
Why would she go into the world's details.
She has gone just as far as she wants
and keeps watch in the workshops under her taut skin.

So there's a world out there? Well and good.
It's bountiful? Even better.
The children have somewhere to go, to run around,
something to look up to? Wonderful.
So much that it's still there while they're sleeping,
almost ridiculously whole and real?
It keeps on existing when their backs are turned?
That's just too much—it shouldn't have.

The Great Mother barely has a pair of arms,
two tiny limbs lie lazing on her breasts.
Why would they want to bless life,
give gifts to what has enough and more!
Their only obligation
is to endure as long as earth and sky
just in case
of some mishap that never comes.
To form a zigzag over essence.
The ornament's last laugh.

No End of Fun

By Wisława Szymborska

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 né 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.

*né fin = born late (like saying "too late")

Analysis: <https://prezi.com/ngaerwqrboap/no-end-of-fun/>

Autotomy

By Wisława Szymborska

<https://poetrying.wordpress.com/2012/02/02/autotomy-wislawa-szymborska/>

True Love

By Wisława Szymborska

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

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

For nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lot's Wife

By Wisława Szymborska

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.

Seen from Above

by Wisława Szymborska

A dead beetle lies on the path through the field.
Three pairs of legs folded neatly on its belly.
Instead of death's confusion, tidiness and order.
The horror of this sight is moderate,
its scope is strictly local, from the wheat grass to the mint.
The grief is quarantined.
The sky is blue.

To preserve our peace of mind, animals die
more shallowly: they aren't deceased, they're dead.
They leave behind, we'd like to think, less feeling and less world,
departing, we suppose, from a stage less tragic.
Their meek souls never haunt us in the dark,
they know their place,
they show respect.

And so the dead beetle on the path
lies unmourned and shining in the sun.
One glance at it will do for meditation --
clearly nothing much has happened to it.
Important matters are reserved for us,
for our life and our death, a death
that always claims the right of way.

The Experiment

by Wisława Szymborska

As a short subject before the main feature—
in which the actors did their best
to make me cry and even laugh—
we were shown an interesting experiment
involving a head.

The head
a minute earlier was still attached to ...
but now it was cut off.
Everyone could see that it didn't have a body.
The tubes dangling from the neck hooked it up to a machine
that kept its blood circulating.
The head
was doing just fine.

Without showing pain or even surprise,
it followed a moving flashlight with its eyes.
It pricked up its ears at the sound of a bell.
Its moist nose could tell
the smell of bacon from odorless oblivion,
and licking its chops with evident relish
it salivated its salute to physiology.

A dog's faithful head,
a dog's friendly head
squinted its eyes when stroked,
convinced that it was still part of a whole
that crooks its back if patted
and wags its tail.

I thought about happiness and was frightened.
For if that's all life is about,
the head
was happy.

Smiles

By Wisława Szymborska

The world would rather see hope than just hear
its song. And that's why statesmen have to smile.
Their pearly whites mean they're still full of cheer.
The game's complex, the goal's far out of reach,
the outcome's still unclear—once in a while,
we need a friendly, gleaming set of teeth.

Heads of state must display unfurrowed brows
on airport runways, in the conference room.
They must embody one big, toothy "Wow!"
while pressing flesh or pressing urgent issues.
Their faces' self-regenerating tissues
make our hearts hum and our lenses zoom.

Dentistry turned to diplomatic skill
promises us a Golden Age tomorrow.
The going's rough, and so we need the laugh
of bright incisors, molars of good will.
Our times are still not safe and sane enough
for faces to show ordinary sorrow.

Dreamers keep saying, "Human brotherhood
will make this place a smiling paradise."
I'm not convinced. The statesman, in that case,
would not require facial exercise,
except from time to time: he's feeling good,
he's glad it's spring, and so he moves his face.
But human beings are, by nature, sad.
So be it, then. It isn't all that bad.

The Onion

By Wisława Szymborska

The onion, now that's something else.
Its innards don't exist.
Nothing but pure onionhood
fills this devout onionist.
Oniony on the inside,
onionesque it appears.
It follows its own daimonion
without our human tears.

Our skin is just a coverup
for the land where none dare go,
an internal inferno,
the anathema of anatomy.
In an onion there's only onion
from its top to its toe,
onionymous monomania,
unanimous omninudity.

At peace, of a peace,
internally at rest.
Inside it, there's a smaller one
of undiminished worth.
The second holds a third one
the third contains a fourth.
A centripetal fugue.
Polyphony compressed.

Nature's rotundest tummy
its greatest success story,
the onion drapes itself in its
own aureoles of glory.
We hold veins, nerves, and fat,
secretions' secret sections.
Not for us such idiotic
onionoid perfections.

We're Extremely Fortunate

By Wisława Szymborska

We're extremely fortunate
not to know precisely
the kind of world we live in.

One would have
to live a long, long time,
unquestionably longer
than the world itself.

Get to know other worlds,
if only for comparison.

Rise above the flesh,
which only really knows
how to obstruct
and make trouble.

For the sake of research,
the big picture
and definitive conclusions,
one would have to transcend time,
in which everything scurries and whirls.

From that perspective,
one might as well bid farewell
to incidents and details.

The counting of weekdays
would inevitably seem to be
a senseless activity;

dropping letters in the mailbox
a whim of foolish youth;

the sign "No Walking on the Grass"
a symptom of lunacy.

Some People Like Poetry

By Wisława Szymborska

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.

<https://www.szymborska.org.pl/en/wislawa/selected-poems/>

Utopia

By Wisława Szymborska

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

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

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

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

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

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

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

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

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

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

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

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

Into unfathomable life.

Clothes

By Wisława Szymborska

You take off, we take off, they take off
coats, jackets, blouses, double-breasted suits,
made of wool, cotton, cotton-polyester,
skirts, shirts, underwear, slacks, slips, socks,
putting, hanging, tossing them across
the back of chairs, the wings of metal screens;
for now, the doctor says, it's not too bad,
you may get dressed, get rested up, get out of town,
take one in case, at bedtime, after lunch,
show up in a couple of months, next spring, next year;
you see, and you thought, and we were afraid that,
and he imagined, and you all believed;
it's time to tie, to fasten with shaking hands
shoelaces, buckles, velcro, zippers, snaps,
belts, buttons, cuff links, collars, neckties, clasps
and to pull out of handbags, pockets, sleeves
a crumpled, dotted, flowered, checkered scarf
whose usefulness has suddenly been prolonged.

Children of Our Age

By Wisława Szymborska

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.

Writing a Résumé

By Wisława Szymborska

What needs to be done?
Fill out the application
and enclose a résumé.

Regardless of the length of life
a résumé is best kept short.

Concise, well-chosen facts are de rigueur.
Landscapes are replaced by addresses,
shaky memories give way to unshakable dates.

Of all your loves mention only the marriage,
of all your children only those who were born.

Who knows you counts more than who you know.
Trips only if taken abroad.

Memberships in what but without why.
Honors, but not how they were earned.
Write as if you'd never talked to yourself
and always kept yourself at arm's length.

Pass over in silence your dogs, cats, birds,
dusty keepsakes, friends, and dreams.

Price, not worth,
and title, not what's inside.
His shoe size, not where he's off to,
that one you pass yourself off as.

In addition, a photograph with one ear showing.
What matters is its shape, not what it hears.

What is there to hear, anyway?
The clatter of paper shredders.

An Opinion on the Question of Pornography

By Wisława Szymborska

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

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.
The partners' age or sex is 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 fertilize 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 only 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.

No Title Required

By Wisława Szymborska

It's come to this: I'm sitting under a tree,
beside a river
on a sunny morning.
It's an insignificant event
and won't go down in history.
It's not battles and pacts,
whose motives are scrutinized,
or noteworthy tyrannicides.

And yet I'm sitting by this river, that's a fact.
And since I'm here,
I must have come from somewhere,
and before that
I must have turned up in many other places,
exactly like the conquerors of nations
before setting sail.

Even a passing moment has its fertile past,
its Friday before Saturday,
its May before June.
Its horizons are no less real
than those a marshal's fieldglasses might scan.

This tree is a poplar that's been rooted here for years.
The river is the Raba; it didn't spring up yesterday.
The path leading through the bushes
wasn't beaten last week.
The wind had to blow the clouds here
before it could blow them away.

And though nothing much is going on nearby,
the world's no poorer in details for that,
it's just as grounded, just as definite
as when migrating races held it captive.

Conspiracies aren't the only things shrouded in silence.
Retinues of reasons don't trail coronations alone.
Anniversaries of revolutions may roll around,
but so do oval pebbles encircling the bay.

The tapestry of circumstance is intricate and dense.
Ants stitching in the grass.
The grass sewn into the ground.
The pattern of a wave being needled by a twig.

So it happens that I am and look.
Above me a white butterfly is fluttering through the air
on wings that are its alone
and a shadow skims through my hands
that is none other, no one else's, but its own.

When I see such things I'm no longer sure
that what's important
is more important than what's not.