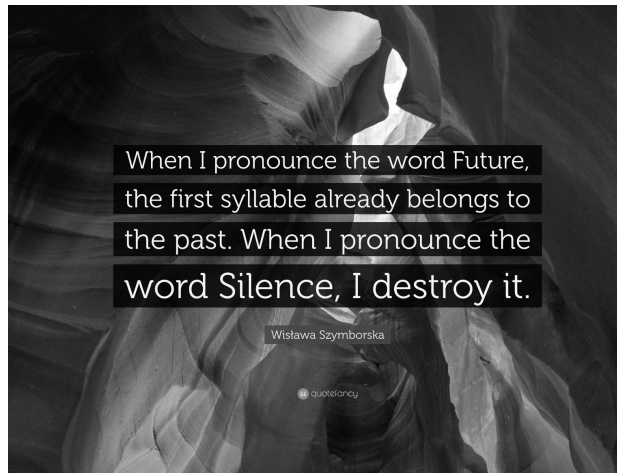


# **The Poetry of Wisława Szymborska**



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**Advertisement ([Performance](#))**

1972 (*Poems New and Collected*)

I'm a tranquilizer. I'm effective at home. I work in the office. I can take exams or 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.	4      8
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.	12     16
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?	20
Let me have your abyss. I'll cushion it with sleep. You'll thank me for giving you four paws to fall on.	24
Sell me your soul. There are no other takers.	
There's no other devil anymore.	28

**Guiding questions:**

- Who is the speaker? How is the choice of speaker effective in conveying the overall meaning?
- What is the significance of the poem's title?

- ## Identification

**Guiding questions:**

- What is this poem about? How do you know (what are the hints)?
- How does the choice of speaker affect your understanding of the poem?

- What literary devices/strategies help you understand the situation and/or empathize with the subject of the poem?
- What is the significance of the last two lines of the poem?
- How does this poem explore a global issue? (what does the poet have to say, specifically, about this issue?)

**Map ([Article](#)) (quick [History of Poland](#) video)**

*Enough*, final collection 2012

Flat as the table it's placed on. Nothing moves beneath it and it seeks no outlet.	4
Above -- my human breath creates no stirring air and leaves its total surface undisturbed.	8
Its plains, valleys are always green, uplands, mountains are yellow and brown, while seas, oceans remain a kindly blue beside the tattered shores.	12
Everything here is small, near, accessible. I can press volcanoes with my fingertip, stroke the poles without thick mittens, I can with a single glance encompass every desert with the river lying just beside it.	16
A few trees stand for ancient forests, you couldn't lose your way among them.	20
In the east and west, above and below the equator -- quiet like pins dropping, and in every black pinprick people keep on living. Mass graves and sudden ruins are out of the picture.	24
Nations' borders are barely visible	28

as if they wavered -- to be or not.

I like maps, because they lie.  
Because they give no access to the vicious truth.  
Because great-heartedly, good-naturedly 32  
they spread before me a world  
not of this world.

### Guiding questions:

- What is the meaning of this poem (is she just talking about maps?) How do you know?
- Examine the use of literary devices, (in particular tone and imagery) to convey the poet's overall idea/meaning.
- How is this poem similar to Szymborska's other poems in this Body of Work?
- What Global Issue does this poem explore? What is Szymborska saying about this issue?

### Some People Like Poetry

(*The End and the Beginning* 1993)

#### [Nobel Speech](#)

Some people -  
that means not everyone.  
Not even most of them, only a few.  
Not counting school, where you have to, 4  
and poets themselves,  
you might end up with something like two per thousand.

Like -  
but then, you can like chicken noodle soup, 8  
or compliments, or the color blue,  
your old scarf,  
your own way,  
petting the dog. 12

Poetry -  
but what is poetry anyway?  
More than one rickety answer  
has tumbled since that question first was raised. 16  
But I just keep on not knowing, and I cling to that  
like a redemptive handrail.

**Guiding questions:**

- What is the tone of the poem and what is its effect on the reader? What strategies (including choice of diction) conveys this tone?
- What is the effect of the way she has structured the poem? What is the purpose of each stanza?
- How do the concluding two lines summarize her argument?
- How does the topic of this poem relate to Szymborska's Nobel Prize lecture?

**The End and the Beginning**

(*The End and the Beginning* 1993)

After every war  
someone has to clean up.  
Things won't  
straighten themselves up, after all. 4

Someone has to push the rubble  
to the side of the road,  
so the corpse-filled wagons  
can pass. 8

Someone has to get mired  
in scum and ashes,  
sofa springs,  
splintered glass, 12  
and bloody rags.

Someone has to drag in a girder  
to prop up a wall.  
Someone has to glaze a window, 16  
rehang a door.

Photogenic it's not,  
and takes years.  
All the cameras have left 20  
for another war.

We'll need the bridges back,  
and new railway stations,  
Sleeves will go ragged,  
From rolling them up. 24

Someone, broom in hand,  
still recalls the way it was.  
Someone else listens 28  
and nods with unsevered head.

But already there are those nearby  
starting to mill about  
who will find it dull. 32

From out of the bushes  
sometimes someone still unearths  
rusted-out arguments  
and carries them to the garbage pile. 36

Those who knew  
what was going on here  
must make way for  
those who know little. 40  
And less than little.  
And finally as little as nothing.

In the grass that has overgrown  
causes and effects, 44  
someone must be stretched out  
blade of grass in his mouth  
gazing at the clouds.

### **Guiding questions:**

- What are some of the challenges for the generations who grow up in a post-war society?
- What images does the poem evoke? What do you picture as you read different stanzas of the poem? What imagery best represents the way you picture Europe as it looked after World War II?
- In what sense is the end of a war also a beginning?
- The word “someone” is used as a synecdoche. How is this an effective strategy?
- How does this poem address a global issue? What exactly is the poet critiquing? How do you know?

### **The Joy of Writing**

*Salt*, 1962

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.”	4     8
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.	12
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.	16
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.	20     24
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?	28
The joy of writing. The power of preserving. Revenge of a mortal hand.	32

### Guiding questions:

- What does each stanza say about writing? (Don’t forget the final stanza!)
- Determine what this poem is about, overall. Note the poetic devices used to help you understand what it is about. Give examples to support your understanding. Some of the poetic devices you could discuss are (but not limited to): extended metaphor, metaphor, alliteration, rhetorical questions, repetition.
- How does this poem relate to the ideas presented in Szyborska’s Nobel Prize speech?
- How does this poem relate to (or address) one of the global issues?



## **The Real World**

**(*The End and the Beginning* 1993)**

The real world doesn't take flight  
the way dreams do.  
No muffled voice, no doorbell  
can dispel it,  
no shriek, no crash  
can cut it short.

6

Images in dreams  
are hazy and ambiguous,  
and can generally be explained  
in many different ways.  
Reality means reality:  
that's a tougher nut to crack.

12

Dreams have keys.  
The real world opens on its own  
and can't be shut.  
Report cards and stars  
pour from it,  
butterflies and flatiron warmers\*  
shower down,  
headless caps  
and shards of clouds.  
Together they form a rebus\*\*  
that can't be solved.

18

Without us dreams couldn't exist.  
The one on whom the real world depends  
is still unknown,  
and the products of his insomnia  
are available to anyone  
who wakes up.

24

\*a hot implement for warming a bed  
\*\*rebus: a puzzle in which words are represented by pictures and letters

Dreams aren't crazy—  
it's the real world that's insane,  
if only in the stubbornness  
with which it sticks  
to the current of events.

30

In dreams our recently deceased  
are still alive,

36

in perfect health, no less,  
 and restored to the full bloom of youth.  
 The real world lays the corpse  
 in front of us.  
 The real world doesn't blink an eye.

Dreams are featherweights, 42  
 and memory can shake them off with ease.  
 The real world doesn't have to fear forgetfulness.  
 It's a tough customer.  
 It sits on our shoulders,  
 weighs on our hearts, 48  
 tumbles to our feet.

There's no escaping it,  
 it tags along each time we flee.  
 And there's no stop  
 along our escape route  
 where reality isn't expecting us. 54

### Guiding questions:

- What is the main idea conveyed in this poem (in one phrase/sentence).
- Find references to the poem that convey this main idea. List the quotes, and beside each put the literary strategy she uses and how it is effective.
- How does this poem reflect some of the ideas in "The End and The Beginning"?
- How does this poem explore one (or more) of the global issues? (Be specific...how does the poet approach this issue?)

### Under One Small Star [\(Collaged Reading with Music\)](#) 1972

My apologies to chance for calling it necessity.  
 My apologies to necessity if I'm mistaken, after all.  
 Please, don't be angry, happiness, that I take you as my due.  
 May my dead be patient with the way my memories fade. 4  
 My apologies to time for all the world I overlook each second.  
 My apologies to past loves for thinking that the latest is the first.  
 Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home.  
 Forgive me, open wounds, for pricking my finger. 8  
 I apologize for my record of minuets to those who cry from the depths.

I apologize to those who wait in railway stations for being asleep today at five a.m.  
 Pardon me, hounded hope, for laughing from time to time.  
 Pardon me, deserts, that I don't rush to you bearing a spoonful of water. 12  
 And you, falcon, unchanging year after year, always in the same cage,  
 your gaze always fixed on the same point in space,  
 forgive me, even if it turns out you were stuffed.  
 My apologies to the felled tree for the table's four legs. 16  
 My apologies to great questions for small answers.  
 Truth, please don't pay me much attention.  
 Dignity, please be magnanimous.  
 Bear with me, O mystery of existence, as I pluck the occasional thread from your train. 20  
 Soul, don't take offense that I've only got you now and then.  
 My apologies to everything that I can't be everywhere at once.  
 My apologies to everyone that I can't be each woman and each man.  
 I know I won't be justified as long as I live, 24  
 since I myself stand in my own way.  
 Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words,  
 then labor heavily so that they may seem light.

### Guiding questions:

- What significance does the title of the poem have?
- How does her style of writing change throughout the poem?
- How is the post-war spirit represented in Szymborska's writing?
- What is the symbolic nature of the falcon?
- What different contrasts is in this poem?

### Possibilities ([Reading](#)/ [Project](#))

Circa 1996

I prefer movies.  
 I prefer cats.  
 I prefer the oaks along the Warta.  
 I prefer Dickens to Dostoyevsky.  
 I prefer myself liking people 5  
 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. 10  
 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 15  
 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. 20  
 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. 25  
 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. 30  
 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. 35  
 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.

### Guiding questions:

- How is the title of the poem reflected in the poem? Why is it important?
- How is Szymborska's personal context present in the poem?
- Examine the use of allusions in "Possibilities." How do they deepen the poem's exploration of human experience?
- How does Szymborska use enjambment in the poem, and what effect does it create?
- Discuss how the poem explores the tension between individuality and collective human experience
- Analyze the poem's concluding lines. How do they tie together the themes explored throughout the poem?
- What feelings does this poem evoke? What images come to mind?

## Photograph From September 11th [\(Audio\)](#)

(From Monologue of A Dog, 2005)

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

The photograph halted them in life,  
and now keeps them 5  
above the earth toward the earth.

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

There's enough time 10  
for hair to come loose,  
for keys and coins  
to fall from pockets.

They're still within the air's reach,  
within the compass of places 15  
that have just now opened.

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

### Guiding questions:

- What is the significance of the poet's focus on small details like loose hair and falling keys?
- What does the poem suggest about the global impact of the September 11 attacks?
- How does Szymborska use language to create a sense of intimacy with the subjects of the photograph?
- How does Szymborska balance respect for the victims with the stark reality of their fate?
- What ethical considerations does the poem raise about witnessing and representing tragedy?
- What does the ending of the poem imply about the role of this non American artist?

## **Nothing Twice (1998)**

*From Poems New and Collected: 1957–1997*

Nothing can ever happen twice.  
In consequence, the sorry fact is  
that we arrive here improvised  
and leave without the chance to practice. 4

Even if there is no one dumber,  
if you're the planet's biggest dunce,  
you can't repeat the class in summer:  
this course is only offered once. 8

No day copies yesterday,  
no two nights will teach what bliss is  
in precisely the same way,  
with precisely the same kisses. 12

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. 16

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? 20

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. 24

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. 28

### **Guiding questions:**

- What does the rhetorical questioning add to the poem?
- Why do you think the poet chose to frame this with a romance?
- How is the theme of change conveyed through the metaphors?

## **True Love** ([Audio](#))

1972 Collection "Could Have"

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?	4
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.	8
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.	12
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!	16
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?	24
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.	28
Let the people who never find true love keep saying that there's no such thing.	32
Their faith will make it easier for them to live and die.	

**Guiding questions:**

- How does the use of rhetorical questions help szymborska change tone throughout the poem?
- How does the last stanza in the poem shed light on Szymborska's view on love?
- How do those final lines shape the reader's response to the poem?
- What is the essential question about love?

**On Death, Without Exaggeration ([Audio](#))**

From "The People on the Bridge", 1986

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, 5  
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, 10  
make a coffin,  
clean up after itself.

Preoccupied with killing,  
it does the job awkwardly,  
without system or skill. 15  
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! 20

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, 25  
tentacles, fins, tracheae,  
nuptial plumage, and winter fur  
show that it has fallen behind  
with its halfhearted work.

Ill will won't help 30  
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 35  
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 40  
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 45  
of the invisible door.  
As far as you've come  
can't be undone.

### **Guiding questions:**

- How does the author reify death from subject to object?
- How does Szymborska use personification to portray Death throughout the poem? What effect does this have on the reader's perception of Death?
- How does Szymborska balance humor and seriousness in her treatment of death? Provide specific examples from the text.
- How does Szymborska's background, growing up in Poland during World War II, potentially influence her perspective on death in this poem?
- Analyze the use of everyday objects and situations in the poem. How do these contribute to Szymborska's "domestication" of death?

### **Four A.M. (Performance) (Ted Talk)**

1998

The hour between night and day.  
The hour between toss and turn.  
The hour of thirty-year-olds.

The hour swept clean for roosters' crowing.  
The hour when the earth takes back its warm embrace. 5  
The hour of cool drafts from extinguished stars.  
The hour of do-we-vanish-too-without-a-trace.

Empty hour.  
Hollow. Vain.  
Rock bottom of all the other hours. 10

No one feels fine at four a.m.  
If ants feel fine at four a.m.,  
we're happy for the ants. And let five a.m. come  
if we've got to go on living.

-Wislawa Szymborska

### **Guiding Questions**

- What effect does the repetition of "the hour" create in the poem?
- What do you make of the existentialism of line 7?
- Does this poem mean anything to you personally?

### **Pi (Performance)**

1976

The admirable number pi:  
three point one four one.  
All the following digits are also just a start,  
five nine two because it never ends.  
It can't be grasped, six five three five , at a glance, 5  
eight nine, by calculation,  
seven nine, through imagination,  
or even three two three eight in jest, or by comparison  
four six to anything  
two six four three in the world. 10

The longest snake on earth ends at thirty-odd feet.  
 Same goes for fairy tale snakes, though they make it a little longer.  
 The caravan of digits that is pi  
 does not stop at the edge of the page,  
 but runs off the table and into the air, 15  
 over the wall, a leaf, a bird's nest, the clouds, straight into the sky,  
 through all the bloatedness and bottomlessness.  
 Oh how short, all but mouse-like is the comet's tail!  
 How frail is a ray of starlight, bending in any old space!  
 Meanwhile two three fifteen three hundred nineteen 20  
 my phone number your shirt size  
 the year nineteen hundred and seventy-three sixth floor  
 number of inhabitants sixty-five cents  
 hip measurement two fingers a charade and a code,  
 in which we find how blithe the trostle sings! 25  
 and please remain calm,  
 and heaven and earth shall pass away,  
 but not pi, that won't happen,  
 it still has an okay five,  
 and quite a fine eight, 30  
 and all but final seven,  
 prodding and prodding a plodding eternity  
 to last.

### Guiding Questions

- How does the poem's form contribute to its exploration of pi as both a mathematical constant and a metaphor?
- How does Szymborska use contrast in the poem, particularly between finite and infinite concepts?
- What might the poet be suggesting about the nature of knowledge and human limitations?
- What tone does the poet establish, and how does it evolve throughout the poem?
- What is the significance of the interruptions in the poem's flow, and how do they contribute to its meaning?

### Clouds ([Reading](#)) (Moment, 2002)

Clouds  
 I'd have to be really quick

to describe clouds –  
a split second's enough  
for them to start being something else. 5

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

Unburdened by memory of any kind,  
they float easily over the facts. 10

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. 15

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, 20  
and then die, one after another:  
clouds simply don't care  
what they're up to  
down there.

And so their haughty fleet 25  
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.

### **Guiding Questions**

- 1. How does the poem explore the theme of divine indifference?
- 2. How does the poem challenge the reader's perception of time and memory?
- 3. How does the poet use irony in her portrayal of clouds?
- 4. How does Szyborska use personification to characterize clouds in the poem?
- 5. What philosophical ideas does the poem touch upon regarding existence and permanence?