



(WHEN ASSIGNED)
FOR EACH POEM... ** in your journal*

- ☐ RESEARCH - look up allusions & historical context, take notes on the poem itself
- ☐ COLORMARK - read it twice, mark image patterns, fig. language, symbols, repetition, contrasts, etc. on the poem itself
- ☒ TWO-SENTENCE SUMMARY - explain literal meaning & its connection to the title
- ☒ SPEAKER & TONE RUNDOWN - \approx 4 sentence on the speaker, characterize the persona & their tone (complex)
- ☒ THEME CLAIM (complex) - include how the poet's choices (lang., sound, structure) convey it!

Wisława Szymborska, Poetry Foundation Bio:

Well-known in her native Poland, Wisława Szymborska received international recognition when she won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. In awarding the prize, the Academy praised her "poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality." Collections of her poems that have been translated into English include *People on a Bridge* (1990), *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems* (1995), *Miracle Fair* (2001), and *Monologue of a Dog* (2005).

Readers of Szymborska's poetry have often noted its wit, irony, and deceptive simplicity. Her poetry examines domestic details and occasions, playing these against the backdrop of history. In the poem "The End and the Beginning," Szymborska writes, "After every war / someone's got to tidy up."

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Stanislaw Baranczak wrote, "The typical lyrical situation on which a Szymborska poem is founded is the confrontation between the directly stated or implied opinion on an issue and the question that raises doubt about its validity. The opinion not only reflects some widely shared belief or is representative of some widespread mind-set, but also, as a rule, has a certain doctrinaire ring to it: the philosophy behind it is usually speculative, anti-empirical, prone to hasty generalizations, collectivist, dogmatic and intolerant."

Szymborska lived most of her life in Krakow; she studied Polish literature and society at Jagiellonian University and worked as an editor and columnist. A selection of her reviews was published in English under the title *Nonrequired Reading: Prose Pieces* (2002). She received the Polish PEN Club prize, the Goethe Prize, and the Herder Prize.

- 1952: *Dlatego żyjemy* ("That's Why We Are All Alive")
- 1954: *Pytania zadawane sobie* ("Questioning Yourself")
- 1957: *Wołanie do Yeti* ("Calling Out to Yeti")
- 1962: *Sól* ("Salt")
- 1966: *101 wierszy* ("101 Poems")
- 1967: *Sto pociech* ("No End of Fun")
- 1967: *Poezje wybrane* ("Selected Poetry")
- 1972: *Wszelki wypadek* ("Could Have")
- 1976: *Wielka liczba* ("A Large Number")
- 1986: *Ludzie na moście* ("People on the Bridge")
- 1989: *Poezje: Poems*, bilingual Polish-English edition
- 1992: *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* ("Non-required Reading")
- 1993: *Koniec i początek* ("The End and the Beginning")
- 1996: *Widok z ziarnkiem piasku* ("View with a Grain of Sand")
- 1997: *Sto wierszy – sto pociech* ("100 Poems – 100 Happinesses")
- 2002: *Chwila* ("Moment")
- 2003: *Rymowanki dla dużych dzieci* ("Rhymes for Big Kids")
- 2005: *Dwukropek* ("Colon")
- 2009: *Tutaj* ("Here")
- 2012: *Wystarczy* ("Enough")
- 2013: *Błysk rewolwru* ("The Glimmer of a Revolver")

first stop...

★ NOBEL PRIZE SPEECH is linked on BENTONENGLISH.com

" 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, (5)
if you're the planet's 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 (10)
in precisely the same way,
with precisely the same kisses.

One day, perhaps some idle tongue
mentions your name by accident:
I feel as if a rose were flung (15)
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? (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.

With smiles and kisses, we prefer (25)
to seek accord beneath our star,
although we're different (we concur)
just as two drops of water are.

Calling out to Yeti
1957

Calling Out
to Yeti
1957

" Still "

Across the country's plains
sealed boxcars are carrying names:
how long will they travel, how far,
will they ever leave the boxcar -

(5) 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.

(10) 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:
(15) 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.

(20) 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.

(25) 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.

" Starvation Camp Near Jaslo "

Write it down. Write it. With ordinary ink
on ordinary paper; they weren't given food,
they all died of hunger. *All. How many?*

It's a large meadow. How much grass

(5) *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,

(10) 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.

(15) 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

(20) 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.

(25) 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

(30) about war hitting you straight in the heart.

Write how quiet it is.

Yes.

Salt
1962

"Written in a Hotel"

Kyoto is fortunate,
 fortunate and full of palaces,
 winged roofs,
 stairs like musical scales.
 Aged but flirtatious, (5)
 stony but alive,
 wooden,
 but growing from sky to earth,
 Kyoto is a city
 whose beauty moves you to tears. (10)

I mean the real tears
 of a certain gentleman,
 a connoisseur, lover of antiquities,
 who at a key moment
 from behind a green table, (15)
 exclaimed that after all
 there are so many inferior cities
 and burst out sobbing
 in his seat.

That's how Kyoto, far lovelier (20)
 than Hiroshima, was saved.

But this is ancient history.
 I can not dwell on it forever
 or keep asking endlessly,
 what's next, what's next. (25)

Day to day I trust in permanence,
 in history's prospects.
 How can I sink my teeth into apples
 in a constant state of terror.

Now and then I hear about some Prometheus (30)
 wearing his fire helmet,
 enjoying his grandkids.

While writing these lines
 I wonder
 what in them will come to sound (35)
 ridiculous and when.

Fear strikes me
 only at times.
 On the road.
 In a strange city. (40)

With garden-variety brick walls,
 a tower, old and ordinary,
 stucco peeling under slapdash moldings,
 cracker-box housing projects,
 nothing, (45)
 a helpless little tree.

What would he do here,
 That tenderhearted gentleman,
 the connoisseur, lover of antiquities.

Plaster god, have mercy on him. (50)
 Heave a sigh, oh classic,
 from the depths of your mass-produced bust.

Only now and then,
 in a city, one of many.
 In a hotel room (55)
 overlooking the gutter
 with a cat howling like a baby
 under the stars.

In a city with lots of people,
 many more than you'll find painted (60)
 on jugs, cups, saucers, and silk screens.

In a city about which I know
 this one thing:
 it's not Kyoto,
 not Kyoto for sure. (65)

No End of Fun
 1967

" The Joy of Writing "

Where is a written deer running through a written forest?
 Whether to drink from written water
 which will reflect its mouth like a carbon?
 Why is it raising its head, does it hear something?
 Propped on four legs borrowed from the truth
 it pricks up its ears from under my fingers.
 Silence—that word, too, is rustling on paper
 and parts the branches caused by the word "forest."

(5)

Over a white page letters are ready to jump
 and they may take a bad turn.
 Sentences capable of bringing to bay,
 and against which there is no help.
 In a drop of ink there are quite a few
 hunters squinting one eye,
 ready to rush down a vertical pen,
 to encircle the deer, to take aim.

(10)

(15)

They forget that this is not life here.
 Other laws rule here, in black and white.
 An instant will last as long as I desire.
 It will allow a division into small eternities
 each full of buckshot stopped in its flight.
 If I command, nothing here will happen ever.
 Not even a leaf will fall without my accord,
 or a blade of grass bend under a dot of a hoof.

(20)

And so there is such a world
 on which I impose an autonomous Fate?
 A time which I bind with fetters of signs?
 A life that at my command is perpetual?

(25)

The joy of writing.
 A chance to make things stay.
 A revenge of a mortal hand.

(30)

Polish; trans. Czeslaw Milosz

No End of Fun <hr/> 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. (5)

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 the scales, the pans don't move. (10)
 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 broken whisper. (15)
 Into flesh and poetry.

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

Here the heavy heart, there *non omnis moriar*-
 Just three little words, like a flight's three feathers. (20)

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

-In memoriam Halina Poswiatowska

Could Have
 1972

A MEDIEVAL MINIATURE

Up the verdantest of hills,
in this most equestrian of pageants,
wearing the silkiest of cloaks.

(5) Toward a castle with seven towers,
each of them by far the tallest

In the foreground, a duke
most flatteringly unrotund;
by his side, his duchess
young and fair beyond compare.

(10) Behind them, the ladies-in-waiting,
all pretty as pictures, verily,
then a page, the most ladsome of lads,
and perched upon his pagey shoulder
something exceedingly monkeylike,
(15) endowed with the drollest of faces
and tails.

Following close behind, three knights,
all chivalry and rivalry,
so if the first is fearsome of countenance,
(20) the next one strives to be more daunting still,
and if he prances on a bay steed
the third will prance upon a bayer,

and all twelve hooves dance glaucingly
atop the most wayside of daisies.

(25) Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary,
cross-eyed and out at elbows,
is most manifestly left out of the scene.

Even the least pressing of questions,
burgherish or peasantish,
(30) cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.

And not even the eaglest of eyes
could spy even the tiniest of gallows—
nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt.

(35) Thus they proceed most pleasantly
through this feudalest of realisms.

This same, however, has seen to the scene's balance:
it has given them their Hell in the next frame.
Oh yes, all that went without
even the silentest of sayings.

A Large Number
1970

The People on the Bridge

1980

#8

" CHILDREN OF OUR AGE "

We are children of our age,
it's a political age.

All day long, all through the night,
all affairs—yours, ours, theirs—

(5) 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.

(10) 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

(15) 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.

(20) 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,

(25) 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?

(30) Meanwhile, people perished,
animals died,
houses burned,
and the fields ran wild
just as in times immemorial

(35) and less political.

The People on the Bridge

1980

#9

There wasn't a moment to lose,
(25) no deferred questions, no belated revelations,
just those experienced in time.

Wisdom couldn't wait for gray hair.
It had to see clearly before it saw the light
and to hear every voice before it sounded.

(20) Good and evil—
they knew little of them, but knew all:
when evil triumphs, good goes into hiding;
when good is manifest, then evil lies low.
Neither can be conquered

(35) or cast off beyond return.
Hence, if joy, then with a touch of fear,
if despair, then not without some quiet hope.
Life, however long, will always be short.
Too short for anything to be added.

OUR ANCESTORS' SHORT LIVES

Few of them made it to thirty.
Old age was the privilege of rocks and trees.
Childhood ended as fast as wolf cubs grow.

One had to hurry, to get on with life
(5) before the sun went down,
before the first snow.

Thirteen-year-olds bearing children,
four-year-olds stalking birds' nests in the rushes,
leading the hunt at twenty—

(10) they aren't yet, then they are gone.
Infinity's ends fused quickly.

Witches chewed charms
with all the teeth of youth intact.

A son grew to manhood beneath his father's eye.
(15) Beneath the grandfather's blank sockets the grandson
was born.

And anyway they didn't count the years.
They counted nets, pods, sheds, and axes.
Time, so generous toward any petty star in the sky,
offered them a nearly empty hand

(20) and quickly took it back, as if the effort were too much.
One step more, two steps more
along the glittering river
that sprang from darkness and vanished into darkness.

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'état
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
Translated by S. Baraneczak & C. Cavanagh

The People on the Bridge
1986

#11

Possibilities

- I prefer movies.
I prefer cats.
I prefer the oaks along the Warta.
I prefer Dickens to Dostoyevsky.
(5) 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
(10) 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.
(15) 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
(20) 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.
(25) 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.
(30) 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.
(35) 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.

Translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh

SOME PEOPLE

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

(5) 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.
(10) What happens loudly: someone's bread is ripped away,
someone tries to shake a limp child back to life.

Always another wrong road ahead of them,
always another wrong bridge
across an oddly reddish river.
(15) 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
(20) 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,
(25) maybe he won't be the enemy
and will let them live some sort of life.

Moment

2002

Photograph from September 11

BY WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

TRANSLATED BY CLARE CAVANAGH

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

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

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

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

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

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

Moment
2002

" PLATO, OR WHY "

For unclear reasons
under unknown circumstances
Ideal Being ceased to be satisfied.

It could have gone on forever,
hewn from darkness, forged from light, (5)
in its sleepy gardens above the world.

Why on earth did it start seeking thrills
in the bad company of matter?

What use could it have for imitators,
inept, ill-starred, (10)
lacking all prospects for eternity?

Wisdom limping
with a thorn stuck in its heel?
Harmony derailed
by roiling waters? (15)

Beauty
holding unappealing entrails
and Good—
why the shadow
when it didn't have one before? (20)

There must have been some reason,
however slight,
but even the Naked Truth, busy ransacking
the earth's wardrobe,
won't betray it. (25)

Not to mention, Plato, those appalling poets,
litter scattered by the breeze from under statues,
scraps from that great Silence up on high . . .

Translated by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Barańczak

" Consolation

Darwin.

They say he read novels to relax.

But only certain kinds:

nothing that ended unhappily.

(5) If he happened on something like that, 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,
(10) 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,
(15) at least in fiction
with its microscopes.

Hence the indispensable silver lining,
the lovers reunited, the families reconciled,
the doubts dispelled, fidelity rewarded,
(20) 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,
(25) forgers of documents tossed down the stairs,

seducers scurrying to the altar,
orphans sheltered, widows comforted,
pride humbled, wounds healed,
prodigal sons summoned home,
(30) cups of sorrow tossed into the ocean,
handkerchiefs drenched with tears of reconciliation,
general merriment and celebration,
and the dog Fido,
gone astray in the first chapter,
(35) turns up barking gladly
in the last.

Colon
2005