



Map: Collected and Last Poems

Wisława Szymborska, *Clare Cavanagh (Translation)*, *Stanisław Barańczak (Translation)*

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A new collected volume from the Nobel Prize–winning poet that includes, for the first time in English, all of the poems from her last Polish collection

One of Europe’s greatest recent poets is also its wisest, wittiest, and most accessible. Nobel Prize–winner Wisława Szymborska draws us in with her unexpected, unassuming humor. Her elegant, precise poems pose questions we never thought to ask. “If you want the world in a nutshell,” a Polish critic remarks, “try Szymborska.” But the world held in these lapidary poems is larger than the one we thought we knew.

Carefully edited by her longtime, award-winning translator, Clare Cavanagh, the poems in *Map* trace Szymborska’s work until her death in 2012. Of the approximately two hundred and fifty poems included here, nearly forty are newly translated; thirteen represent the entirety of the poet’s last Polish collection, *Enough*, never before published in English.

Map is the first English publication of Szymborska’s work since the acclaimed *Here*, and it offers her devoted readers a welcome return to her “ironic elegance” (*The New Yorker*).

Map: Collected and Last Poems Details

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Menashe Israel says

Some gems in here. But I have realized that I am not a fan of translation. The music of translated poetry seems to be always a little bland. Szymborska maintains an artful tension of seriousness and humor that merits respect. I am, however, very much looking forward to opening up Kipling now. There are not many things as delicious as poetry in ones own language. I imagine that if I spoke and read Polish that this would have been even better.

Temple Cone says

In his short story “On Exactitude in Science,” Jorge Luis Borges imagines a guild of Renaissance cartographers so committed to precision that they created a 1:1 scale map where “the kingdom was the size of the kingdom.” Later cartographers found such obsessiveness absurd and destroyed the map, but its fragments littered the realm, “providing shelter for beggars and animals.” In the title poem of her collection *Map: Collected and Last Poems*, Wislawa Szymborska writes:

I like maps, because they lie.

Because they give no access to the vicious truth.

Because great-heartedly, good-naturedly

they spread before me a world

not of this world.

I believe her, but only partly. In this remarkable, final collection, Szymborska (who died in 2012) proves herself as clear-headed as that later generation of cartographers, yet equally capable of creating lyric poems that seem worlds unto themselves, worlds that offer shelter to the most marginalized, weak, and mute members of society.

It came as something of a surprise in 1996 when Szymborska received the Nobel Prize in Literature. Though known in Polish literary circles and through her *Samizdat* contributions, she lacked the public profile of her countryman, the poet Czeslaw Milosz, who received the Nobel Prize in 1980, or of Zbigniew Herbert, who was viewed as the next Polish poet likely to receive the honor. Nevertheless, Szymborska earned the Nobel with a relatively modest body of poetry, one that is less baroque and immediately political than Milosz’s and less classical and bitingly ironic than Herbert’s, but which is by turns curious, empathetic, accessible, unflinching in the face of suffering, and astonished in the face of creation. In the years that followed, she has become one of the most popular poets in English, “My identifying features / [of] rapture and despair” (“*Sky*”) translated in a syntactically clear and accessible style by the team of Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak (more on them later).

What, then, distinguishes Szymborska’s poems, most of which are only a page or two in length? For one,

they are deeply philosophical, speculating on universal matters in the simplest language. Reflecting on human existence in “Nothing Twice,” Szymborska writes of how “the sorry fact is / that we arrive here improvised / and leave without the chance to practice.” The philosophy never becomes leaden, though, thanks to Szymborska’s self-deprecating attitude, which can be as cleansing as a glass of seltzer water or of sulfuric acid. In “Seen from Above,” she addresses our belief that human lives matter more than nonhuman ones—“Important matters are reserved for us, / for our life and our death, a death / that always claims the right of way”—while in “In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself,” she notes, “On this third planet of the sun / among the signs of bestiality / a clear conscience is number one.” Yet Szymborska effervesces, too, her irony balanced with whimsy and surprise that nevertheless offer great insight; in “A Large Number,” she writes of her own imagination, “It’s bad with large numbers. / It’s still taken by particularity,” while in “Bodybuilders’ Contest,” she wryly observes of one participant, “Onstage, he grapples with a grizzly bear / the deadlier for not really being there.”

Szymborska’s poems share many qualities with good prose: a sense of story, multiple points of view, memorable images and phrases, and unexpected insights into the human condition. She writes poems that invite us to consider the world from the perspective of a cat whose owner has died, of a royal couple in a Byzantine mosaic, and of the infant Hitler. She rarely writes of herself—Szymborska’s “I” is the universal “I,” and one can easily identify oneself with the speaker of a poem—but instead directs her attention outward, into the historical and biological world we inhabit.

Her descriptions can range from the ornate—as in “Commemoration,” when she describes a swallow as “calligraphy, / clockhand minus minutes, / early ornithogothic, / heaven’s cross-eyed glance”—to the arrestingly simple, as in “Hitler’s First Photograph,” when she describes Hitler’s hometown of Braunau as

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.

In our era of “self-expression” and gratuitous avant-gardism, when much poetry vainly admires its own emotions and linguistic pyrotechnics, such outwardness and engagement with the world, which are hallmarks of epic and lyric poetry alike, seem miraculous, though perhaps they shouldn’t. As Szymborska herself muses in “Miracle Fair”: “The commonplace miracle: / that so many miracles take place.”

It shouldn’t surprise us that Szymborska has become so popular in the United States. We have poets like Mary Oliver who offer hymns of praise to the beauty of the natural world, and we have poets like Carolyn Forché who address the realities of political oppression and create poems that bear witness to suffering. But we have no poet who addresses the burdens of history the way Szymborska does: not self-centered, stoic but empathetic, with an unflinching consideration of the impact of war on the human body and on the everyday lives of those who endure it. In “Reality Demands,” she observes that “Perhaps all fields are battlefields, / those we remember / and those that are forgotten,” while in “Hatred,” she writes,

Let’s face it:

[hatred] knows how to make beauty.

The splendid fire-glow in midnight skies.

Magnificent bursting bombs in rosy dawns.

Nor do we have a poet who looks so clearly at the natural world, from the microscopic to the cosmos itself, whose reflections on the physical law of entropy become meditations on Death, and whose musings on the lives of stars and paramecia alike reveal to her the wholeness of existence. “A drop of water fell on my hand, / drawn from the Ganges and the Nile,” she writes in “Water,” finding in that common, life-giving element a principle that links existence together: “Someone was drowning, someone dying was / calling out for you. Long ago, yesterday.” Szyborska speaks for those without voices, for insects and for plants, finding kinship with them but also honoring their alienness; in “The Silence of Plants,” she writes:

The same star keeps us in its reach.

We cast shadows based on the same laws.

We try to understand things, each in our own way,

And what we don't know brings us closer too.

It is, finally, our shared mortality that brings us closer; our loneliness as individuals makes us a community: “When the night is clear, I watch the sky,” says “The Old Professor,” “I can't get enough of it, / so many points of view.”

Lest my appreciation of Szyborska's poetry seem too partial, let me note that reading her collected poems (which includes all of her work save three early volumes in a Social Realist vein and those very few poems Szyborska herself deemed untranslatable), I found some weaknesses I hadn't noticed when reading her individual volumes. In her earlier works, Szyborska's treatment of romantic relationships occasionally verges on sentimentality, as in “Flair,” when she says of a moth fluttering over her and her lover, “I didn't see, you didn't guess, / our hearts were glowing in the night.” Yet such lapses are rare. More disappointing is the surprising flatness of language in her last two books, where the diction proves less precise and the phrasings less memorable than one might expect from Szyborska. One learns from the “Translator's Afterword,” that Stanislaw Baranczak had become too ill to work on these translations, and that Clare Cavanagh completed most of them on her own. It appears that it is the tension born of collaboration, and not the skill of one translator, that has made Szyborska so interesting and accessible for English readers.

Perhaps we ought not hold Cavanagh wholly accountable for the flatness of these later poems, since they themselves sometimes betray a flatness of subject matter. In her later work, Szyborska wrote a number of poems about the experience of writing poems, a recursive move that was once exciting but is now deplorably de rigeur, perhaps accounting for the struggles of contemporary poetry to remain relevant to non-poets. Does one really want to read the imagined dialogue between the author and her unwritten poem in “An Idea,” where the poet asks, “Tell me a little more about yourself,” and the poem “whispered a few words in my ear”? Which words, one asks? None other than these words, it appears. Perhaps those who appreciate koans may enjoy this sound of one hand clapping.

And yet, there are moments when Szyborska's reflections on poetry and on culture in general shake the reader to the core. In “Photograph from September 11,” Szyborska looks at an image of people falling from the burning World Trade Center towers, observing that “The photograph halted them in life, / and now keeps

them / above the earth toward the earth.” In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, some public intellectuals questioned the capacity of art to address such violence. Szymborska, it seems, has no patience with such navel-gazing. She reaches out to the victims—“Each is still complete, / with a particular face / and blood well hidden”—using the photograph to come as close as possible to the experience, to enter into their being, and then allowing poetry to save them and, in so doing, save us all: “I can do only two things for them— / describe this flight / and not add a last line.”

I urge you to read and reread Wislawa Szymborska’s *Map: Collected and Last Poems*. Do not let death add a last line.

Roger Brunyate says

Poems of a Lifetime

It turns out that I already owned a Szymborska anthology, in a bilingual edition from 1981 with translations by Robert A. Maguire, that my father-in-law brought back from Poland. I am ashamed to say I never read it, put off by the cheap Soviet-era printing and a vague sense that the poet would probably be “important,” but not enjoyable. Big mistake! As this new collection proves, Szymborska is thoroughly entertaining throughout, at times even hilarious. Her importance is confirmed by the award of the Nobel Prize in 1996, but it would have long been clear from her themes: love, art, history, life and death, the mystery of existence, and, though with a very subtle touch, the politics of a troubled nation in troubled times. Perhaps because both are Nobel laureates whose work has been celebrated in volumes spanning entire lifetimes, I was also reminded of *The Great Enigma* by Tomas Tranströmer, though Szymborska is a less private figure, and her poems are more approachable.

Though I do not know a word of Polish, I am lost in admiration for translator Clare Cavanagh, working sometimes with Stanislaw Baranczak, sometimes alone. In an afterword, she notes that she has translated a handful of early poems, plus Szymborska’s most recent collection, *Enough* (2012), and each of the ten collections in between, beginning with *Calling Out to Yeti* from 1957. So this is essentially the complete collected works—with the exception of some light verse and a few poems deemed (with the poet’s agreement) to be untranslatable. I find myself wondering why this would be, and suspect that these are poems whose wordplay in Polish has no equivalent in English. As I compare Maguire’s earlier selection with Cavanagh’s, I find that Maguire leaves out almost everything that depends on clever rhymes or puns—but it is precisely these that Cavanagh gets so marvelously. Look at her translation of these two stanzas from “The Onion”:

*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 cover-up
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.*

I have been dipping into this collection for the past week, but there are over 250 poems here, and it would be impossible to absorb all of them in even a month. But it has been fascinating to catch traces of the poet's evolution. Were she William Blake, you might call the early *Calling Out to Yeti* her "Songs of Innocence"; here is the opening of the poem "Flairance":

*So here we are, the naked lovers,
lovely, as we both agree,
with eyelids as our only covers
we lie in dark, invisibly.*

But seven years later, in *Salt*, she has moved to "Songs of Experience":

*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 [...] 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 traveling circus with one lion
than to me, who lies at his side.*

It is interesting to see Szyborska return to similar themes over the years. The idea, for example, that life only happens in the moment, with neither rehearsals nor repeat performances:

*Nothing can ever happen twice.
In consequence, the sorry fact is
that we arrive here improvised
and leave without the chance to practice.
["Nothing Twice," 1957]*

*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.
["Life While-You-Wait," 1976]*

*There's no life
that couldn't be immortal
if only for a moment.
Death
always arrives by that very moment too late.*
["On Death, Without Exaggeration," 1986]

I find the last of these wonderfully consoling.

The Nobel Committee has had a history of somehow eliding the criteria for the Peace and Literature prizes. So many of their laureates have not merely been great writers, but prophets who have spoken truth to power, standing up against oppressive regimes. And certainly Szymborska, who came to adulthood during the Second World War, then saw her country sealed off behind the Iron Curtain, would have had much to speak out against. What is striking, though perhaps not surprising, is how subtly she does it. There is one poem about a concentration camp, another about a terrorist bomber, another about the futility of man-made boundaries. There is one from 1986 that begins, "We are the children of our age, / it is a political age," and goes on to describe the politicization of every aspect of life in her country. A poem from 1972 called "Dinosaur Skeleton" is a satire; each of its eleven stanzas begins with an escalating form of address—"Beloved Brethren," "Esteemed Comrades," "Honored Dignitaries," and so on—while the descriptions that follow of the beast itself get increasingly more flowery yet pointed. But she is always aware of the existence of evil, and man's tendency to hide it. So let me end with a complete poem, "In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself," succinct, yet with a sting in its tail:

*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.*

Kelly says

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.*

Ken says

Wisława is a kindred soul in that she views the world askance and deeply understands its ironies. Where she veers from other poets is her gentle amusement with it all. Maybe she feels bitter, sarcastic, angry, etc., but she keeps it under wraps and instead couples irony with charm, an appealingly odd couple indeed. She has a knack for comparisons, too. What's metaphor? Quite a bit, in Wisława's view.

The collection gets stronger over time, with very few works chosen from early collections. This is cheering news for new poets, for it shows that even poets good enough to get published are works in progress, getting stronger with each collection.

Two of my favorites are fairly well known works, "A Contribution to Statistics" and "The Joy of Writing":

A Contribution of Statistics

Out of a hundred people

those who always know better
-fifty-two

doubting every step
-nearly all the rest,

glad to lend a hand
if it doesn't take too long
-as high as forty-nine,

always good
because they can't be otherwise
-four, well maybe five,

able to admire without envy
-eighteen,

suffering illusions
induced by fleeting youth
-sixty, give or take a few,

not to be taken lightly
-forty and four,

living in constant fear
of someone or something
-seventy-seven,

capable of happiness
-twenty-something tops,

harmless singly, savage in crowds
-half at least,

cruel
when forced by circumstances
-better not to know
even ballpark figures,

wise after the fact
-just a couple more

than wise before it,

*taking only things from life
-thirty
(I wish I were wrong),*

*hunched in pain,
no flashlight in the dark
-eighty-three
sooner or later,*

*righteous
-thirty-five, which is a lot,*

*righteous
and understanding
-three,*

*worthy of compassion
-ninety-nine,*

*mortal
-a hundred out of a hundred.
thus far this figure still remains unchanged.*

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, 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.*

Nice, no? Very nice. Among other favorite titles I wrote down:

"Miracle's Fair"
"Some People Like Poetry"
"Hatred"
"May 16, 1973"
"Among the Multitudes"
"The Three Oddest Words"
"A Little Girl Tugs at the Tablecloth"
"Early Hour"
"Photograph from September 11"
"An Idea"
"To My Own Poem"

Ellie says

Szyborska is a major poet of our times. Her work which I've only been able to read in translation is brilliant and at least in translation seems beautiful. I wish I could memorize her poems!

This is a volume to read and read again. Which I will.

Alarie says

Szyborska's poems aren't always my cup of tea, but often enough they're a glass of fine champagne. I toast her Nobel prize! I love her humor and her worldview, but usually prefer poems that are more compressed. Luckily, this means I appreciated her more as the book went on. That's always good news for a poet, when you watch them get better and better over time, from 1944-2011. My favorites of the excerpted

books are *The People on the Bridge* (1986), *Here* (2009), and *Enough* (2011).

I especially enjoyed Szyborska's spine-tingling poems like "The Terrorist, He's Watching":

"The bomb in the bar will explode at thirteen twenty.
Now it's just thirteen sixteen.
There's still time for some to go in
and some to come out."

We watch what the terrorist sees from a safe distance. Some are lucky, but there's always some poor soul who "goes back in for his crummy gloves."

Another expertly creepy poem is "Hitler's First Photograph":

"And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?"

The poem wonders what baby will be when he grows up. As the camera is clicked, "No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps."

One of my favorite poems is "Cat in an Empty Apartment," that begins

"Die – you can't do that to a cat.
Since what can a cat do
in an empty apartment?...
Nothing seems different here,
but nothing is the same....
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."

I've been that cat. Haven't you?

Peter says

For some reason this collection struck me as more bitter and world weary than some of her shorter books. The 4 stars are because I am depressed enough already by the local national events and I don't (selfishly) want to be reminded as to how far down things can go. Szyborska survived ww II and the communist government in Poland . She is as witty and clever as ever

Rick says

Szyborska should have as many readers as Beyonce has listeners, as the Super Bowl has viewers, as a Kardashian has Twitter followers. No knock on any of them but the wit, wisdom, beauty, and subtle power of Szyborska's poetry deserves not just a global poetry audience but a global audience period. And over time she will have that, but she deserved such a readership in her lifetime, and, more importantly, we could all benefit from her work now and needn't wait any longer to engage with this supple and inspiring artist.

The first poems in the collection were published in 1944 and the last poems in 2011. A long career and a life that began ten years before the Nazis took power in Germany and so saw the Nazi-Soviet invasion of Poland, the horrors of war and Holocaust, the decades of Stalinism in control of Poland, and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. From the first poem in the book: "Our wartime loot is knowledge of the world, / --it is so large it fits in two clasped hands, / so hard that a smile does to describe it, / so strange, like old truths echoing in prayers." From the last, the book's title poem: "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.... I like maps, because they lie. / Because they give no access to the vicious truth. / Because great heartedly, good-naturedly / they spread before me a world / not of this world."

Szyborska notices with an acuity that is beyond impressive. You read her and you think: wise, compassionate, insightful, hopeful in human nature, skeptical of all else. She writes about life large and small and when she writes large, the small is in it, and when she writes small, the large is in it. Her poems are simple, direct, but sharply nuanced. One full sample:

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
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 hunts at twenty—
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.
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
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.

There wasn't a moment to lose,
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.

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
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.

There are so many worthy poems: Lot's Wife, Moment, Photograph from September 11, Teenager, Vermeer, The Terrorist He's Watching, A Contribution to Statistics, A Little Girl at the Tablecloth, Snapshot of a Crowd, Beheading, A Moment in Troy, Moment of Silence...because there are so many indelible verses ripe with lines and images, twists or turns, that will follow you after you have closed the book, a wry presence in your conscience, a gentle reminder of humanity's grace, a subtle prod against complacency, credulity, indifference, and self-importance. Map encompasses her long career and is one of those books one is never done reading. Indeed, not long after I finished my hardcover copy, I bought an e-copy and downloaded it onto my phone and am re-reading even now. It is that good and more even than I can effectively say. It is the book of Psalms for the 20th and 21st centuries.

Michael Feehly says

Wonderful poems full of humor and wisdom. Szymborska is a master class in the art of repetition of lines within her poems, recycling and refusing to let a single thought slip through her fingers without total examination.

Zach says

Direct and piercing poems, written with, in my mind, the best of human emotions: quiet amazement, occasional renewed astonishment. This excellent collection of poems from a Polish great reminded me so many times of the rhapsodies of Annie Dillard. Each poem a distilled moment.

Though not a "nature poet" in the conventional sense, Szymborska's poems often turn to that ineffable world outside of human heads. The poems don't seek comfort there, necessarily, but they tend to find a world unconcerned with our vagaries and worries, a world that is open to us whenever we deign to actually take a close look. She finds that it is our soul that wanders these inhuman places, only rarely: "We can count on it / when we're sure of nothing / and curious about everything." ("A Few Words on the Soul.")

Though I don't want to read too much into the "Polish conscience" from this work, there are many allusions that signal the traumas and dashed hopes and new lives made in the 20th century. She even admits in the poem "Possibilities" that "I prefer conquered to conquering countries". What she finds in many of her poems is that despite the cacophony, despite the violence and depravity, human life remains very much the same as it ever was. If we care to pay them any attention at all, clouds still mass and drift and float by. We don't have to explain them. We never will. They're just there.

Parrish Lantern says

In the introduction to "Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts" the translators* state that "Wis?awa Szymborska is that rarest of phenomena: a serious poet who commands a large audience in her native land", they also go on to say that as well as this she has the additional ability to get critics who otherwise would delight in disagreement to be consistently enthusiastic about her work. Although she was well-known in her homeland of Poland, it wasn't until she won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996 that she received recognition on the international stage, and by god did she receive recognition – her first post award collection "View with a Grain of sand" was published in an edition of 120,000 in the U.S.A, this in a country where a popular collection of poetry would be lucky to sell 20,000. The German edition set new sales records (60,000) and this appears to be repeated in most places that editions of her work were published.

Wis?awa Szymborska was born on 2 July 1923 in Prowent, Poland (now part of Kórnik, Poland), the daughter of Wincenty and Anna (née Rottermund) Szymborski. Her father was at that time the steward of Count W?adys?aw Zamoyski, a Polish patriot and charitable patron. After the death of Count Zamoyski in 1924, her family moved to Toru?, and in 1931 to Kraków, where she lived and worked until her death in early 2012.

When World War II broke out in 1939, she continued her education in underground classes. From 1943 she worked as a rail road employee and managed to avoid being deported to Germany as a forced labourer. It was during this time that her career as an artist began with illustrations for an English-language textbook. She also began writing stories and occasional poems. Beginning in 1945, she began studying Polish literature before switching to sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. It was here that she became involved in the local writing scene, and met and was influenced by Czes?aw Mi?osz. In March 1945, she published her first poem "Szukam s?owa" ("Looking for words") in the daily newspaper, Dziennik Polski.

Comic Love Poem

I wear beads around my neck
Every day's a day of joy
Sustained by the touch
Of unforeseen events.

I only know the rhythm
To a melody so soft
That if you ever heard it,
You'd have to hum along.

I exist not in myself,
I'm an element's function.
A symbol in the air.
Or a circle on the water.

Each time your eyes open,
I only take what's mine.
I leave faithfully behind
Your earth, your fire.
(From unpublished collection 1944 – 48)

My introduction to Wis?awa as a writer was not long after starting this blog, her name surfaced as a suggestion in the comments on a post I'd written about another Nobel Prize winner. This led me to find out more and within a short period of I'd purchased both of the books mentioned above, and soon became enamoured by the poetry I came across, poetry such as:

In Praise Of Feeling Bad About Yourself

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
(From A Large Number 1976)

I had always meant to write a post highlighting some of her poetry, but as is the way things work out,

something else caught my attention, some other new writer's pyrotechnics, new idea came to the fore, putting this intention on the back burner until that moment passed and something else ensnared my mind's focus – and yet the two books mentioned above, still remained with me, became almost a benchmark on how poetry should comport itself, the manner in how it could describe the most horrid of situations, and without clamouring would describe that horror.

There is also a quietness within her work, that does not speak meekly or with pathos, but that finds amazement in all, making her poetry a questing poetry, one searching for answers but doing so in a fashion that realises the likelihood of an answer, is more likely to be in the form of more questions, as stated in her Nobel Prize speech:

"Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating "I don't know." Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift that's absolutely inadequate to boot. So the poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paperclip by literary historians and called their "oeuvre". (Nobel Speech)

Her poetry seems to resonate with people because she has this ability to take serious ideas and within a few words encapsulate them, sometimes merely as a way of explaining them to herself/ourselves and sometimes to deflate them, using humour to show the error in these philosophies, sometimes the horror. Another reason is that at first glance the poems appear simple, it is in the process afterwards that you start to realise that there is a depth that warrants continual exploration that it takes more than splashing in the shallows to understand all that she has to say. Wis?awa combines the everyday minutiae, the dust and clatter of daily life, then holds it up to the grand and august mirror of history and both images hold true.

The reason I have now got around to writing about her work, is because a new collected volume MAP: Collected and Last Poems has just been published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. This collection contains work spanning her whole life, almost seven decades of her vision. From the early 1944 – 48 (unpublished) period through her first collection "Why We Live" in 1952 right up to her last poetry written just before her death in 2012, and translated for the first time within this collection. Making this the impetus I needed to highlight the poetry of this wonderful writer and also making this the ideal place to learn more, whether this is an introduction, or you're already familiar with her poetry.

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 drenched 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.

(Enough 2011)

Cheryl Kennedy says

Wisława Szymborska was born in Poland in 1923. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1996. Clare Cavanagh was awarded the PEN Translation Prize for her work on Szymborska's poetry along with Stanisław Barańczak.

I'm not able to pronounce the author's name or know but the surface features of her homeland. But I can tell you that reading the two hundred fifty poems in this collected volume of her work was accessible to me. Her knowledge of being human in this world is universal and luminous.

"Her surprise of fresh perception make her the enemy of all tyrannical certainties. Hers is the best of the Western mind-free, restless, questioning." New York Times Book Review

First Love

They say
the first love's most important.

That's very romantic,
but not my experience.

Something was and wasn't there between us,
something went on and went away.

My hands never tremble when I stumble on silly keepsakes
and a sheaf of letters tied with string
---not even ribbon.

Our only meeting after years:
two chairs chatting
at a chilly table.
Other loves still breathe deep inside me.
This one's too short of breath even to sigh.

Yet just exactly as it is,
it does what the others sill can't manage:
unremembered,
not even seen in dreams,
it introduces me to death.

Wislawa Szymborska died in 2012. MAP is the Collected and Last Poems of this extraordinary poet.

Lauren says

"I like maps, because they lie.
Because they give no access to the vicious truth.
Because great-heartedly, good-naturedly
they spread before me a world
not of this world."
- Map, by Wislawa Szymborska, translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanaugh.

This book, Map: Collected and Last Poems is my introduction to her work, but as the name implies some of her last work. It's a hefty collection of over 400 pages and about 220 poems. Many beg for re-reading, and I've journeyed through this Map collection all month for #witmonth.

Basking in the glow of Szymborska's words, and grateful that I've stumbled across her work, and that she was so prolific in her lifetime with both poetry, prose, and essays.

*Women in Translation month 2018

Giedre says

4.5/5

I don't love all of the poems collected here. I don't think all of them are equally strong. I do love *most* of them. I even have a soft spot for the weaker ones. There is a lightness to Szymborska's poems, even the darker, more serious ones, that just captivates me. There is humour when all you're expecting is rage. That's Szymborska for you—she dances to her own tune. I rather love that about her.
