

placenta in a field. Tell us about a wagonload of slaves, how they sang so softly their breath was indistinguishable from the falling snow. How they knew from the hunch of the nearest shoulder that the next stop would be their last. How, with hands prayered in their sex, they thought of heat,

“Finally”, she says, “I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together.”

children finish speaking, until the woman breaks into the silence.

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might flow. We know you can never do it properly – once and for all. Passion is never enough; neither is skill. But try. For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us

catastrophe this world has become; where, as a poet said, “nothing needs to be exposed since it is already barefaced.” Our inheritance is an affront. You want us to have your old, blank eyes and not in our hands. Is there no context for our lives? No song, no

sound bite, the lesson, until you knew who we were? Did you so despise our trick, our modus operandi you could not see that we were baffled about how to get your attention? We are invisible was what you could say, could not mean? When the imagination strove to remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did and demands for answers burned so that possibly mean in responsible. What could that we have to be heard all our short lives young. We have that we have to be responsible. What could that possibly mean in

been before? A chance to interrupt, to violate the adult world, its miasma of discourse about them, for them, but never to them? Urgent questions are at stake, including the one they have asked: “Is the bird we hold living or dead?” Perhaps the question meant: “Could someone tell us what is

attention to what you have done as well as to what you have said? To the barrier you have erected between generosity and wisdom? “We have no bird in our hands, living or dead. We have only you and our important question. Is the nothing in our hands something you could not

bear to contemplate, to even guess? Don't you remember being young when language was magic without meaning? When what you could say, could not mean? When the invisible was what you could say, could not mean? When the imagination strove to remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did and demands for answers burned so that possibly mean in

she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference – the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.

here,” his simple words are exhilarating in their life-sustaining properties because they refused to encapsulate the reality of 600, 000 dead men in a cataclysmic race war. Refusing to monumentalize, disdaining the “final word”, the precise slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for

experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie. When a President of the United States thought about the graveyard his country had become, and said, “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did and demands for answers burned so that possibly mean in

slaughtering in the malls, courthouses, post offices, playgrounds, bedrooms and boulevards; stirring, memorializing language to mask the pity and waste of needless death. There will be more diplomatic language to countenance rape, torture, assassination. There is and will be more

representations of dominance required – lethal discourses of exclusion blocking access to cognition for both the excluder and the excluded. The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the

weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven, and said, “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did and demands for answers burned so that possibly mean in

malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek – it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under

users and makers are accountable for its demise. In her country children have bitten their tongues off and use bullets instead to iterate the voice of speechlessness, of disabled and disabling language, of language adults have abandoned altogether as human instincts for they

schoolchildren, providing shelter for despotes, summoning false memories of stability, harmony among the public. She is convinced that when language dies, our of carelessness, disuse, indifference and absence of esteem, or killed by far, not only she herself,

way or you have killed it. If it is alive, you can still kill it. Whether it is to stay alive, it is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility. For parading their power and her helplessness, the young visitors are reprimanded, told they are responsible not only for

living or dead?” is not unreal because she thinks of language as susceptible to death, erasure; certainly imperiled and salvageable only by an effort of the will. She believes that if the bird in the hands of her visitors is dead the custodians are responsible for the corpse. For her a dead all

language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admit its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic

disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says, “Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.” She does not answer, and the question is repeated. “Is the bird I am holding living or dead?” Still she doesn't answer.

TONI MORRISON Nobel Lecture Dec. 1993 “Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise.” Or was it an old man? A guru, perhaps. Or a griot soothing restless children. I have heard this story, or one exactly like it, in the lore of several cultures.

people who seem to be bent on disproving her clarity and life sacrificed to achieve its aims. The blind woman showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. They enter her house and ask the one question the answer to her difference from which hides solely on speculation on what (other than its own frail body) that act of mockery but also for the small bundle of than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits their throats like literature banned does not know of its destruction. But who toward knowledge, not

regard as a profound them, a difference they question the answer to power is exercised. through which that faux-language of mindless language or the unanswerable, transgressive words; there will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of

violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits their throats like literature banned does not know of its destruction. But who toward knowledge, not

speculative, mutant languages designed to throatle women, to pack their throats like literature banned does not know of its destruction. But who toward knowledge, not

Word-work is sublime, self-ravaged tongue? by the thought of a how many are outraged because alternates? And faced death cannot who have lived life and And if the old and wise a wise one. An old one. worthy of the attention of straightforward question trick at all; no silliness. A life? What is death?” No

creating us at the very moment it is being created. We will not blame you if you reach love so ignites your words they go down in flames and nothing is left but their scald. Or if, with the recedence of a surgeon's hands, you words sure only the places where blood

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then sun. Lifting their faces as though it was there for the taking. Turning as though there for the taking. The driver and his They stop at an inn. There for the taking. exceeds your grasp; if love so ignites your words they go down in flames and nothing is left but their scald. Or if, with the recedence of a surgeon's hands, you words sure only the places where blood

then sun. Lifting their faces as though it was there for the taking. Turning as though there for the taking. The driver and his They stop at an inn. There for the taking. exceeds your grasp; if love so ignites your words they go down in flames and nothing is left but their scald. Or if, with the recedence of a surgeon's hands, you words sure only the places where blood

“Finally”, she says, “I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together.”

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4  
The old woman's  
silence is so long, the  
young people have  
trouble holding their  
laughter.

5  
both the law and its  
transgression. The honor  
she is paid and the awe in  
which she is held reach  
beyond her neighborhood  
to places far away; to the  
city where the intelligence  
of rural prophets is the  
source of much  
amusement.

6  
One day the woman is  
visited by some young

7

8  
"Once upon a time there  
was an old woman.  
Blind, Wise."  
In the version I know the  
woman is the daughter  
of slaves, black, American,  
and lives alone in a small  
house outside of town.  
Her reputation for  
wisdom is without peer  
and without question.  
Among her people she is

9  
Finally she speaks and  
her voice is soft but  
stern. "I don't know",  
she says. "I don't know  
whether the bird you are  
holding is dead or alive,  
but what I do know is  
that it is in your hands. It  
is in your hands."

10  
the bird-in-the-hand  
might signify has always  
been attractive to me, but  
especially so now  
thinking, as I have been,  
about the work I do that  
has brought me to this  
company. So I choose to  
read the bird as language  
and the woman as a  
practiced writer. She is  
worried about how the  
children put to her: "Is it

11

12  
language she dreams in,  
given to her at birth, is  
handled, put into service,  
even withheld from her  
for certain nefarious  
purposes. Being a writer  
only the choice of  
romyge-suicide is not  
love. But she knows  
with meaning, providing  
guidance, or expressing  
a device for grappling

13  
narcissism, its own  
exclusivity and  
dominance. However  
moribund, it is not  
without effect for it  
actively thwarts the  
intellect, stalls conscience,  
suppresses human  
potential. Unreceptive to  
interrogation, it cannot  
form or tolerate new ideas,  
shape other thoughts, tell

14

15  
The old woman is keenly  
aware that no  
intellectual mercenary,  
or insatiable dictator,  
the bottom line and the  
bottomed-out mind.  
Sexist language, racist  
demagogue; no  
commemorative journalis  
would be persuaded by  
her thoughts. There is  
and will be rousing  
language to keep citizens  
armed and aiming;  
slaughtered and

16  
speak only to those who  
obey, or in order to force  
obedience.

17  
The systematic looting of  
language can be recognized  
by the tendency of its users  
to forgo its nuanced,  
complex, mid-wifery  
properties for menace and  
subjugation. Oppressive  
language does more than  
represent violence; it is

18

19  
the glamor, the scholarly  
associations, however  
strutting or seductive, the  
heart of such language is  
linguishing, or perhaps  
not beating at all – if the  
bird is already dead.  
She has thought about  
what could have been the  
intellectual history of any  
discipline if it had not  
insisted upon, or been  
forced into, the waste of

20  
another story, fill baffling  
silences. Official language  
smitheryed to sanction  
ignorance and preserve  
privilege is a suit of  
armor polished to  
shocking glitter, a husk  
from which the knight  
departed long ago. Yet  
there it is: dumb,  
predatory, sentimental.  
Exciting reverence in but

21

22  
"Once upon a time, ..."  
visitors ask an old  
woman a question. What  
are they, these children?  
What did they make of  
that encounter? What  
did they hear in those  
final words: "The bird is  
in your hands"? A  
sentence that gestures  
towards possibility or  
one that drops a latch?  
Perhaps what the

23  
millions mute; language  
glamorized to thrill the  
dissatisfied and bereft into  
assaulting their neighbors;  
arrogant pseudo-empirical  
language crafted to  
lock creative people into  
cages of inferiority and  
hopelessness.

24  
Underneath the eloquence,  
time and life that  
rationalizations for and

25

26  
"summing up",  
acknowledging their  
"poor power to add or  
detract", his words signal  
deference to the  
uncapability of the life  
it mourns. It is the  
deference that moves her,  
that recognition that  
language can never live  
up to life once and for all.  
Nor should it. Language  
can never "pin down"

27  
hasty if no one could  
take the time to  
understand other  
languages, other views,  
other narratives period.  
Had they, the heaven  
they imagined might  
have been found at their  
feet. Complicated,  
demanding, yes, but a  
view of heaven as life; not  
heaven as post-life.

28

29  
children heard was "It's  
not my problem. I am old,  
femalé, black, blind.  
What wisdom I have now  
is in knowing I cannot  
help you. The future of  
language is yours."  
They stand there. Suppose  
nothing was in their  
hands? Suppose the visit  
was only a ruse, a trick to  
get to be spoken to, taken  
seriously as they have not

30  
the arrogance to be able to  
do so. Its force, its felicity  
is in its reach toward the  
ineffable.

31  
Be it grand or slender,  
burrowing, blasting, or  
refusing to sanctify;  
whether it laughs out loud  
or is a cry without an  
alphabet, the choice word,  
the chosen silence,  
unmolested language surges

32

33  
than the meaning available  
in the words she has spoken.  
It shivers, this silence, and  
with language invented on  
the spot.  
"Is there no speech," they  
ask her, "no words you  
can give us that helps us  
break through your  
dossier of failures?"  
Through the education

34  
She would not want to  
leave her young visitors  
with the impression that  
language should be forced  
to stay alive merely to be.  
The vitality of language  
lies in its ability to limn  
the actual, imagined and  
possible lives of its  
speakers, readers, writers.  
Although its poise is  
sometimes in displacing

35

36  
beliefs wide skirt and the  
woman so that we may  
know what it is to be a  
man. What moves at the  
margin. What it is to have  
no home in this place. To  
be set adrift from the one  
you knew. What it is to live  
at the edge of towns that  
cannot bear your company.  
"Tell us about ships  
turned away from  
shoreslines at Easter,  
meditation.

37  
gnomic pronouncements;  
her art without commit-  
ment. She keeps her  
distance, enforces it and  
retreats into the singularity  
of isolation, in sophisticat-  
ed, privileged space.  
Nothing, no word follows  
her declaration of transfer.  
That silence is deep, deeper  
you have just given us that  
is no education at all  
because we are paying close

38

39  
see only cruelty and  
medicinity. Do you think  
we are stupid enough to  
It shivers, this silence, and  
with language invented on  
the spot.  
"Is there no speech," they  
ask her, "no words you  
can give us that helps us  
break through your  
dossier of failures?"  
Through the education

40  
brightly you trembled  
with fury at not  
knowing?  
"Do we have to begin  
consciousness with a  
battle heroines and  
heroes like you have  
already fought and lost  
leaving us with nothing  
in our hands except what  
you have imagined is  
there? Your answer is

41

42  
beliefs wide skirt and the  
woman so that we may  
know what it is to be a  
man. What moves at the  
margin. What it is to have  
no home in this place. To  
be set adrift from the one  
you knew. What it is to live  
at the edge of towns that  
cannot bear your company.  
"Tell us about ships  
turned away from  
shoreslines at Easter,  
meditation.

43  
literature, no poem full  
of vitamins, no history  
connected to experience  
that you can pass along  
to help us start strong?  
You are an adult. The old  
one, the wise one. Stop  
thinking about saving  
your face. Think of our  
lives and tell us your  
particularized world.  
Make up a story.  
Narrative is radical,

44

45  
and a jug of warm cider.  
They pass it from  
mouth to mouth. The  
gift offers bread, pieces  
of meat and something  
more: a glance into the  
eyes of the one she  
serves. One helping for  
each man, two for each  
woman. And a look.  
They look back. The next  
stop will be their last. But  
not this one. This one is

46  
artful, but its artfulness  
embarrasses us and ought  
to embarrass you. Your  
answer is indecent in its  
self-congratulation. A  
made-for-television script  
that makes no sense if  
there is nothing in our  
hands.

47  
"Why didn't you reach  
out, touch us with your  
soft fingers, delay the the

48

49  
its hiss and melt are the  
envy of the freezing  
slaves.  
"The inn door opens: a  
girl and a boy step away  
from its light. They climb  
into the wagon bed. The  
boy will have a gun in  
three years, but now he  
carries a lamp warmed."  
It's quiet again when the

50  
60  
61  
and a jug of warm cider.  
They pass it from  
mouth to mouth. The  
gift offers bread, pieces  
of meat and something  
more: a glance into the  
eyes of the one she  
serves. One helping for  
each man, two for each  
woman. And a look.  
They look back. The next  
stop will be their last. But  
not this one. This one is

51

52  
"You trivialize us and  
trivialize the bird that is  
your past?  
wast deep in the toxin of  
duty when we stand  
dare you talk to us of  
of nationhood? How  
and again with the fiction  
perjure ourselves again  
we are stupid enough to  
It shivers, this silence, and  
with language invented on  
the spot.  
"Is there no speech," they  
ask her, "no words you  
can give us that helps us  
break through your  
dossier of failures?"  
Through the education

53  
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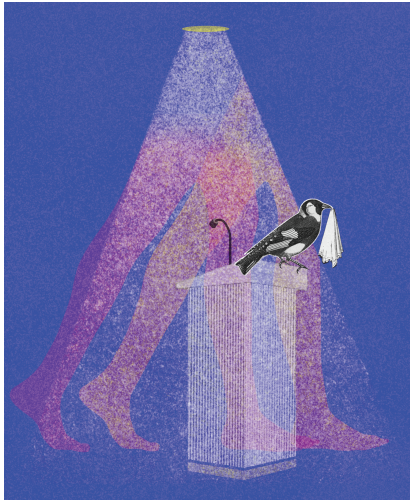
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first bars of the melody that rings in the musician's ears finally emerge as a mature work in symphonic form. Of course this is all quite naïve and doesn't explain the strange mental state popularly known as inspiration, but at least there's something to look at and listen to.

But poets are the worst. Their work is hopelessly unphotogenic. Someone sits at a table or lies on a sofa while starting motionless at a wall or ceiling. Once in a while this person writes down seven lines only to cross out one of them fifteen minutes later, and then another hour passes, during which nothing happens ... Who could stand to watch this kind of thing? I've mentioned inspiration. Contemporary poets answer evasively when asked what it is, and if it actually exists. It's not that they've never known the blessing of this inner impulse. It's just not easy to

## Wisława Szymborska: The poet and the world



They say the first sentence in any speech is always the hardest. Well, that one's behind me, anyway. But I have a feeling that the sentences to come – the third, the sixth, the tenth, and so on, up to the final line – will be just as hard, since I'm supposed to talk about poetry. I've said very little on the subject, next to nothing, in fact. And whenever I have said anything, I've always had the sneaking suspicion that I'm not very good at it. This is why my lecture will be rather short. All imperfection is easier to tolerate if served up in small doses.

Contemporary poets are skeptical and suspicious even, or perhaps especially, about themselves. They publicly confess to being poets only reluctantly, as if they were a little ashamed of it. But in our clamorous times it's much easier to acknowledge your faults, at least if they're attractively packaged, than

It's not accidental that film biographies of great scientists and artists are produced in droves. The more ambitious directors seek to reproduce convincingly the creative process that led to important scientific discoveries or the emergence of a masterpiece. And one can depict certain kinds of scientific labor with some success. Laboratories, sundry instruments, elaborate machinery brought to life: such scenes may hold the audience's interest for a while. And those moments of uncertainty – will the experiment, conducted for the thousandth time with some tiny modification, finally yield the desired result? – can be quite dramatic. Films about painters can be spectacular, as they go about recreating every stage of a famous painting's evolution, from the first penciled line to the final brush-stroke. Music swells in films about composers: the

to recognize your own merits, since these are hidden deeper and you never quite believe in them yourself ... When filling in questionnaires or chatting with strangers, that is, when they can't avoid revealing their profession, poets prefer to use the general term "writer" or replace "poet" with the name of whatever job they do in addition to writing. Bureaucrats and bus passengers respond with a touch of incredulity and alarm when they find out that they're dealing with a poet. I suppose philosophers may meet with a similar reaction. Still, they're in a better position, since as often as not they can embellish their calling with some kind of scholarly title. Professor of philosophy – now that sounds much more respectable.

But there are no professors of poetry. This would mean, after all, that poetry is an occupation requiring specialized study, regular

Just the opposite – he spoke it with defiant freedom. It seems to me that this must have been because he recalled the brutal humiliations he had experienced in his youth. In more fortunate countries, where human dignity isn't assaulted so readily, poets yearn, of course, to be published, read, and understood, but they do little, if anything, to set themselves above the common herd and the daily grind. And yet it wasn't so long ago, in this century's first decades, that poets strove to shock us with their extravagant dress and eccentric behavior. But all this was merely for the sake of public display. The moment always came when poets had to close the doors behind them, strip off their mantles, tripperies, and other poetic paraphernalia, and confront – silently, patiently awaiting their own selves – the still white sheet of paper. For this is finally what really counts.

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examinations, theoretical articles with bibliographies and footnotes attached, and finally, ceremoniously conferred diplomas. And this would mean, in turn, that it's not enough to cover pages with even the most exquisite poems in order to become a poet. The crucial element is some slip of paper bearing an official stamp. Let us recall that the pride of Russian poetry, the future Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky was once sentenced to internal exile precisely on such grounds. They called him "a parasite," because he lacked official certification granting him the right to be a poet ...

Several years ago, I had the honor and pleasure of meeting Brodsky in person. And I noticed that, of all the poets I've known, he was the only one who enjoyed calling himself a poet. He pronounced the word without inhibitions.

explain something to someone else that you don't understand yourself.

When I'm asked about this on occasion, I hedge the question too. But my answer is this: inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists generally. There is, has been, and will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It's made up of all those who've consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination. It may include doctors, teachers, gardeners – and I could list a hundred more professions. Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it. Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know."

5

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" ...

I sometimes dream of situations that can't possibly come true. I audaciously imagine, for example, that I get a chance to chat with the Ecclesiastes, the author of that moving lament on the vanity of all human endeavors. I would bow very deeply before him, because he is, after all, one of the greatest poets, for me at least. That done, I would grab his hand. "There's nothing new under the sun: that's what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were born new under the sun. And the poem you created is also new under the sun, since no one wrote it down before you. And all your readers are also new under the sun, since those who lived before you couldn't

11

There aren't many such people. Most of the earth's inhabitants work to get by. They work because they have to. They didn't pick this or that kind of job out of passion; the circumstances of their lives did the choosing for them. Loveless work, boring work, work valued only because others haven't got even that much, however loveless and boring – this is one of the harshest human miseries. And there's no sign that coming centuries will produce any changes for the better as far as this goes.

And so, though I may deny poets their monopoly on inspiration, I still place them in a select group of Fortune's darlings.

At this point, though, certain doubts may arise in my audience. All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power by way of a few loudly shouted slogans

6

read your poem. And that cypress that you're sitting under hasn't been growing since the dawn of time. It came into being by way of another cypress similar to yours, but not exactly the same. And Ecclesiastes, I'd also like to ask you what new thing under the sun you're planning to work on now? A further supplement to the thoughts you've already expressed? Or maybe you're tempted to contradict some of them now? In your earlier work you mentioned joy – so what if it's fleeting? So maybe your new-under-the-sun poem will be about joy? Have you taken notes yet, do you have drafts? I doubt you'll say, 'I've written everything down, I've got nothing left to add.' There's no poet in the world who can say this, least of all a great poet like yourself."

The world – whatever we might think when terrified by its vastness and our own impotence, or embittered by its indifference to individual suffering, of

12

also enjoy their jobs, and they too perform their duties with inventive fervor. Well, yes, but they "know." They know, and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all. They don't want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish their arguments' force. And any knowledge that doesn't lead to new questions quickly dies out: it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life. In the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society.

This is why I value that little phrase "I don't know" so highly. It's small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended. If Isaac Newton had never said to himself "I don't know," the apples in his little orchard might have

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people, animals, and perhaps even plants, for why are we so sure that plants feel no pain; whatever we might think of its expanses pierced by the rays of stars surrounded by planets we've just begun to discover, planets already dead? still dead? we just don't know; whatever we might think of this measureless theater to which we've got reserved tickets, but tickets whose lifespan is laughably short, bounded as it is by two arbitrary dates; whatever else we might think of this world – it is astonishing.

But "astonishing" is an epithet concealing a logical trap. We're astonished, after all, by things that deviate from some well-known and universally acknowledged norm, from an obviousness we've grown accustomed to. Now the point is, there is no such obvious world. Our astonishment exists per se and isn't

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dropped to the ground like hailstones and at best he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto. Had my compatriot Marie Skłodowska-Curie never said to herself "I don't know", she probably would have wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families, and would have ended her days performing this otherwise perfectly respectable job. But she kept on saying "I don't know," and these words led her, not just once but twice, to Stockholm, where restless, questing spirits are occasionally rewarded with the Nobel Prize.

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

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based on comparison with something else.

Granted, in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like "the ordinary world," "ordinary life," "the ordinary course of events" ... But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world.

It looks like poets will always have their work cut out for them.

—

**Cover by Fiorella Ferroni. Translated from Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh**

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given to nationality, but that the prize be awarded to the worthiest person, whether or not they are Scandinavian.”

So, with minimal-yet-lofty guidance, a nineteenth-century armaments tycoon bequeathed a prize that still inspires fierce arguments, intense celebration, and online gambling across the globe. Of course, geography and international politics are inextricably linked to all Nobel Prizes, with literature proving no exception. Too European, too white, too male, too contrary to or too swayed by illusory cultural tides—criticisms of the committee’s choices abound annually. Summaries of who the laureates are and where they come from arguably reach more people than the winners’ written

lifetime tenure. The academy 1786, so it predates the Nobel Foundation by 115 years. The committee selected the first woman Nobel laureate eight years into the existence of the award. This was five years before they ever elected a woman to their ranks (the same woman in both cases: Selma Lagerlöf, who borrowed from realism but returned to the romantic in her folkloric fiction).

Alfred Nobel chose the Swedish Academy as the arbiter of the literature prize, just as he chose groups to select laureates from the other categories (chemistry, peace, medicine, economics). His only instruction for the committee was that, in selecting laureates, “no consideration be

“conferred the greatest benefit to humankind.”

This edict applies vaguely and haphazardly to the laureates. Women who have won the literature prize have been assigned roles like “the epicist of female experience” or the “Geiger counter of apartheid.” They are understood to represent specific nations, ideologies, and generations. At the same time, they must represent all of us (particularly all women); they must, with their words, illuminate the universal via the specific.

Laureates are chosen by a committee whose membership draws from The Swedish Academy, a group of eighteen literary professionals (De Aderton, “The Eighteen”) with a

Beyond a sense of breaking into a boys’ club and the communal weight that comes with this entry, there is little on the surface to connect the Nobel women writers. Writers who win the Nobel Prize must have “in the field of literature, produced the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction.” This is the criteria set in the will of Alfred Nobel, a Swede who perhaps changed the world most by inventing dynamite. Though his own professional domain was namesake prize to recognize people whose work has

“I swear I’m going upstairs to find some suitable sentences, which I will be using from now on.”

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# Voices Around Me



# Nobel Prize Lectures

## Foreword

By Jessi Haley, Editorial Coordinator at Cita Press

In 2022, Annie Ernaux became the seventeenth woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. She is also the first French woman, the sixteenth French citizen, the ninety-sixth European, and the 119th person to win. In her acceptance letter, she stated “I do not regard as an individual victory the Nobel prize that has been awarded me. It is neither from pride nor modesty that I see it, in some sense, as a collective victory.”

Ernaux’s claim of a collective ownership for a highly

individualized award echoes ideas shared by many of the women laureates that came before her—as does her emphasis on the tension between the patriarchal system the Nobel stems from (and, to many, still represents) and the structural position of some winners, particularly women. When asked if she anticipated the prize, 2013 laureate Alice Munro replied: “Oh, no, no! I was a woman! . . . I just love the honor, I love it, but I just didn’t think that way.” Learning about her win from a group of reporters as she returned home from a hospital visit, eighty-seven-year-old Doris Lessing was flustered: “They told me a long time ago they didn’t like me and I would never get it. . . They sent a special official to tell me so.” Surrounded by

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works, making identity and nationality a major part of each award.

Though Lagerlöf won in 1909, nearly half of the total awards to women are concentrated in just the last eighteen years. Most of the women laureates are from Europe, as are most literature laureates in general. The first Latin American author ever to win was a woman (Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, awarded 1945), and she remains the only Latin American woman awarded. Morrison is the only Black woman recognized to date, and the body of winners remains overwhelmingly white. In terms of lived experience, the winners have faced famine, war, displacement, illicit romance,

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force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.”

Lessing, so often setting a prickly (sometimes cynical) tone in her novels of frustrated politics, colonialism, and imagined futures, is hopeful: “It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative.”

Müller’s work paints visceral, impressionistic scenes of stifled lives under Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship in Romania. No stranger to having words applied across the work of the more words we are allowed to take, the freer we become.”

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racism, motherhood, prestige, derision, and more.

What does it mean for a woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature—for the life and work of the writer? For some, like Belarusian Svetlana Alexievich (inventor of “the documentary novel”) and Austrian poet and novelist Herta Müller, it means sudden visibility: newspaper coverage, reprints, new translations. For others (Lessing, Morrison and South African novelist Nadine Gordimer), it’s a capstone in a monumental career that people have been predicting for years. For all of them, it means roughly one hundred thousand dollars in prize money and at least a temporary surge in book sales. And it’s perhaps a varied experience for the winner

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“In the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal . . . not a single existence, not anyone’s existence in this world.” Only Szymborska, who once wrote “After every war / someone has to clean up,” can be so gentle and so firm at the same time.

Gordimer, whose novels dissect the human wreckage wrought by institutionalized racism and cycles of violence, confirms that “writing is always and at once an exploration of self and of the world, of individual and collective being.”

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personally. Wisława Szymborska’s friends called her win “the Nobel tragedy” because the intensely private Polish poet was unable to write for years after the onslaught of attention. Meanwhile, Morrison gathered friends to celebrate with her in Stockholm. “I like the Nobel Prize,” she said. “Because they know how to give a party.”

Winning the prize in 2015 did not protect Alexievich from being forced into her second exile in 2020. Facing abduction and arrest, she fled—leaving behind manuscripts, her home, and a part invented a new genre to tell. No matter what the recognition means for these women personally, their names will always be paired with the phrase “Nobel Prize winner” anytime they appear

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individual work under an umbrella of “benefit to humankind.” Each writer explains, in a way reflective of her style, time, place, and politics, how recognition of her work is part of a long, shared story. But if any of the lectures contains something akin to a slogan, it must be Alexievich’s (fitting for a writer whose work, at its core, is aimed at weaving disparate perspectives into an intricate whole). In accepting the prize, she reminds readers and writers alike: “I do not stand alone at this podium. . . . There are voices around me, hundreds of voices.”

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Gordimer’s concrete political lessons to Szymborska’s larger abstract musings to fables personal (Müller) and universal (Morrison)—each contains observations that are at once totally complex and recognizably true.

With characteristic directness, “master of the contemporary short story” Munro asserts that she knew she could write about small-town Canadian life because: “I think any life can be interesting, any surroundings can be interesting.” Morrison, whose novels explore so many facets of Black American life with language that is as precise as it is poetic, argues that “language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it...its

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**This essay is adapted from the foreword from the collection *Voices Around Me: Nobel Lectures, which features the full lectures by Svetlana Alexievich, Gordimer, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Herta Müller, Alice Munro, and Wisława Szymborska. The pieces brought together here reflect these values in ways that represent each writer’s unique commitments, experiences, and style. We present this book—free, online first, and with an accordant new cover by Fiorella Ferroni—with the open invitation to share in these women’s work and ideas.***

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