

"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.

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people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as profound

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?"

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language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is yielding language to consent to admire its own paralysis. Like staid language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its politeness, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic

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

act of mockery but also for the small bundle of life sacrificed to achieve its aims. The blind woman shifts attention away from assertions of power to the instrument through which that power is exercised. Speculation on what (other than its own frail body) that

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

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schoolchildren, providing shelter for desperate, sunning themselves among the public. She is convinced that when language dies, our indifference, disuse, or carelessness, or killed by fear, not only she herself

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

violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state languages or the *raj-kun*-languages of mindless media, whether it is the product but calcified languages of the academy or the commodification of languages, whether it is the

align language of
law-without-ethics, or
language designed for the
strangement 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

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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 heavens, she wonders? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little

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

seductive, mutant language designed to pack their throats like part-producing geese with whom unsayable, transgressive words will be more of the language as a supplement to the ordinary history of everyday life.

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

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experience it is not a substitute for it. It acts 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

ere," his simple words
re exhilarating in their
fe-sustaining properties
because they refused to
ncapsulate the reality of
00,000 dead men in a
ataclysmic race war.
refusing to monumen-
alize, disdaining the
inal word", the precise
avery, genocide, war.
or should it yearn for

Word-work is sublime,
self-ravaged tongue?
by the thought of a
how many are outraged
because alternate? And
it is critical; rased
tives; discredited because
because it is interroga-
literature banned
does not know of
its destruction. But who
toward knowledge, not

he 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.

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bear to contemplate, to even guess? Don't you remember being young when languages were magic without meaning? When you could say, could you mean? When the invisible was what imagination strove to see? We've demands for answers buried so

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 there nothing in our hands that you could not

life? What is death?" No
 trick at all; no silliness. A
 straightforward question
 worthy of the attention of
 a wise one. An old one.
 And if the old and wise
 who have lived life and
 faced death cannot
 describe either, who can?

een 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

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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
attention? We are
young. Unripe. We have
heard all our short lives
that we have to be
responsible. What could
that possibly mean in

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

creating us at the very
moment it is being
created. We will not
blame you if your reach
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 recollection of a
surgeon's hands, your
words sustain only the
places where blood

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

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"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."

then sun. Lifting their
faces as though it was
there for the taking.
Turning as though
there for the taking.
They stop at an inn.
The driver and his
mare go in with the
lamp leaving them
humming in the dark.
The horse's void
streams into the snow
beneath its hooves and

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 prayed in their
sex, they thought of heat,

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

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.

One day the woman is
visited by some young

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“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

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.”
Her answer can be taken
to mean: if it is dead, you
have either found it that

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

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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
she thinks of language
partly as a system, partly
as a living thing over
which one has control,
but mostly as agency – as
an act with consequen-
ces. So the question the

criticisms of respectabil-
ity and patriotism as it
moves relentlessly toward
the bottom line and the
bottomed-out mind.
Sexist language, racist
language, theistic language
– all are typical of the
polishing languages of
mastery, and cannot, do
not permit new knowledge
or encourage the mutual
exchange of ideas.

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

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a device for grappling
with meaning, providing
guidance, or expressing
love. But she knows
tongue-suicide is not
only the choice of
children. It is common
among the infantile
heads of state and power
merchants whose
evacuated language leaves
them with no access to
what is left of their

The old woman is keenly
aware that no
intellectual mercenary,
nor insatiable dictator,
no paid-for politician or
demagogue; no
concurrent journalist
would be persuaded by
her thoughts. There is
and will be rousing
languages to keep citizens
armed and aiming;
slaughtered and

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

Underneath the eloquence,
time and life that
rationalizations for and

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the glamor, the scholarly
associations, however
stirring or seductive, the
heart of such language is
linguistic, 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

“Once upon a time, ...”
visitors ask an old
woman a question. Who
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

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

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

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“summing up”,
acknowledging their
“poor power to add or
It shivers, this silence, and
the children, annoyed, fill it
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?”
“You trivialize us and
trivialize the bird that is

children heard was “It’s
not my problem. I am old,
female, 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

gnomic punctuations;
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

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than the meaning available
in the words she has spoken.
we are stupid enough to
medicocracy. Do you think
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

beliefs wide skirt and the
stitch that unravels fear’s
caul. You, old woman,
blessed with blindness,
can speak the language
that tells us what only
language can: how to see
without pictures.
Languages alone protects
us from the scariness of
things with no names.
Language alone is
meditation.

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,

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see only cruelty and
medicocracy. Do you think
we are stupid enough to
It shivers, this silence, and
the children, annoyed, fill it
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?”
“You trivialize us and
trivialize the bird that is

“Tell us what it is to be a
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,

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

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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

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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.

“Why didn’t you reach
out, touch us with your
soft fingers, delay the the

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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 staring 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."

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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

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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

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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

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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-lottery 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 was installed by King Gustav III in 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 vague gravity and hefty responsibilities 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

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

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 destruction, he wanted his namesake prize to recognize people whose work has

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.

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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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. American novelist Toni 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,

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 withheld, she explains: “After all, the more words we are allowed to take, the freer we become.”

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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.” Each writer’s Nobel lecture includes something that could be applied across the work of the other women who have won, something that collects the

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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 of the world whose story she 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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