

# WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

POLAND (1923–2012)

LANGUAGE: POLISH

## TRZY SŁOWA NAJDZIWNIEJSZE

Kiedy wymawiam słowo Przyszłość,  
pierwsza szlaba odchodzi już do  
przeszłości.

Kiedy wymawiam słowo Cisza,  
niszczę ją.

Kiedy wymawiam słowo Nic,  
stwarzam coś, co nie mieści się w  
żadnym niebycie.



Nobel Prize laureate Wisława Szymborska was born in Prowent, Poland. The family moved many times during her childhood, eventually settling in the city of Kraków, where Szymborska lived and worked until her death at the age of eighty-nine. A bright student, Szymborska began attending underground classes at the outset of World War II in order to continue with her education. She looked for any kind of work that would prevent her from being deported to Germany and wound up working for the railroad. After only a few years at the university, she found herself unable to afford it and left. Always a clever writer, Szymborska frequently employed literary devices such as paradox, contradiction, and understatement to illuminate philosophical, moral, and ethical issues.

TRANSLATOR'S GLOSSARY		
WORD	DEFINITION	POSSIBLE SYNONYMS
cisza (n.)	complete absence of sound	silence, hush, quietness, quiet, noiselessness, soundlessness
co nie mieści się (phrase)	not able to remain secure, intact, or in position without giving way	cannot hold, cannot embrace, cannot hold on to, cannot carry, cannot fit
coś (pron.)	unknown or unspecified thing	something
do (prep.)	indicates direction or position	to
ją (pron.)	refers to an object	it
już (adv.)	indicating that something happened before now, in the past	already, by now, by this time
kiedy (adv.)	at or during the time that	when, as soon as
najdziwniejsze (adj.)	very peculiar, unexpected, extraordinary	strange, odd, extraordinary, weird
nic (n.)	not anything; no single thing	nothing, naught, zip
niebycie (n.)	something that does not exist	nonbeing, nonentity, nonexistence
niszczę (v.)	put an end to the existence of something	I destroy, I eliminate, I obliterate, I eradicate, I exterminate
odchodzi (v.)	be in rightful possession of; be due to	belongs, is possessed by, is owned by
pierwsza (adj.)	coming before all others in time or order	first, initial
przeszłości (n.)	the time or a period of time before the moment of speaking or writing	past, times gone by, former times, history
przyszłość (n.)	time regarded as still to come	future, the time to come, the time ahead, coming times
słowa (n. plural)	single, distinct, and meaningful elements of speech or writing	words, lyrics, terms, names
słowo (n. sing.)	a single, distinct, and meaningful element of speech or writing	word, term, name
stwarzam (v.)	cause something to exist or come about	I make, I create, I construct, I produce, I fashion

WORD	DEFINITION	POSSIBLE SYNONYMS
szlaba (n.)	a unit of pronunciation having one vowel sound, with or without surrounding consonants, forming the whole or a part of a word	syllable
trzy (adj.)	number with the value of three	three
w (prep.)	expressing the situation of something that is or appears to be enclosed or surrounded by something else	in, inside, within
wymawiam (v.)	make the sound of a word or part of a word, typically in a correct or particular way	I pronounce, I say, I utter, I voice, I get my tongue around
żadnym (pron.)	negative	no, not any

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## PHRASE BY PHRASE

TRZY SŁOWA NAJDIWNIEJSZE \_\_\_\_\_

Kiedy wymawiam słowo Przyszłość, \_\_\_\_\_

pierwsza sylaba odchodzi już do \_\_\_\_\_

przeszłości. \_\_\_\_\_

Kiedy wymawiam słowo Cisza, \_\_\_\_\_

niszczę ją. \_\_\_\_\_

Kiedy wymawiam słowo Nic, \_\_\_\_\_

stwarzam coś, co nie mieści się w \_\_\_\_\_

żadnym niebycie. \_\_\_\_\_



## REFLECTING AND FINDING MEANING

Group Member Names:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Pick a scribe for the group, and work together to answer the questions.

What are the best parts of this translation, and why do you think they are good?

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What elements of the original poem did you lose in the translation? What did you manage to keep?

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Did you achieve something new with your translation, and if so, does it make sense in the poem or not?

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## BACKGROUND NOTES

### I. About Poland

- Poland is a country in the center of Europe with a long history of invasions. It went from being Europe's largest nation in the mid-1500s to nonexistent in the nineteenth century after being divided among the more powerful Russian, Prussian, and Austrian empires. It regained its independence in 1918, only to suffer through two World Wars.
- World War II began in Poland when Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded in September 1939. More than six million Polish citizens died throughout the course of the war; half of those were Jews killed in concentration camps. The Holocaust drastically changed the demographics of Poland, which, before the war, included a prominent community of Yiddish-speaking Jews. Following mass migrations and genocide, Poland became one of the least ethnically diverse countries in the world.
- In 1944, a Soviet-backed Polish provisional government was formed, and in 1952 Poland was renamed the People's Republic of Poland. In the 1970s, shipyard workers in Gdańsk formed the Solidarity movement in opposition to the communist government. It was the first recognized mass political movement of the Soviet bloc. During the Revolutions of 1989, Poland's Marxist–Leninist government was overthrown, and Poland, adopting a new constitution, became a fully independent democracy.

### II. About the Polish Language

- Polish is a Slavic language and the native language of Poland. There are roughly thirty-eight million Polish speakers in Poland, one million in other Eastern European countries, and one million in North America. While the United States has about nine million Polish Americans, only six percent of them speak Polish fluently.
- Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conquerors of Poland tried, unsuccessfully, to suppress the Polish language. As a result, Polish became a crucial element of Poles' national identity, and they developed a rich literature tradition.
- The Polish written language is made up of basic Roman letters in addition to those with diacritical marks (ą, ć, ę, ł, ń, ó, ś, ź, ż). Polish has a more diverse range of sounds than English due to its ten vowels and thirty-five consonants.

### III. About Wisława Szymborska

- Wisława Szymborska began writing poetry at five years old. She acknowledged her family—her father, mother, and older sister—for encouraging reading and writing while she was growing up. Her father was particularly supportive of her early writing, though he died when she was only thirteen. She would present her father with poems and, if he liked them, he would reward her with some change from his pocket.
- When the Germans invaded Kraków, her mother refused to leave, so the family remained. During the occupation, Polish students were not allowed to attend public schools, so Szymborska went to an underground school and worked at an underground theater.
- When the postwar socialist government blocked her from publishing her first collection of poetry, Szymborska changed the poems so that they shed a better light on the regime. Her book was published in 1952, though she later regretted making those concessions and refused to acknowledge any of the poems she wrote during that time.
- After World War II Szymborska became a communist, though with increasing skepticism. In 1957 she wrote a poem comparing Joseph Stalin to the Abominable Snowman, and in 1966 she officially broke with the Communist party. She joined the democratic anti-communist Solidarity movement in the 1980s.
- She was awarded Germany's highest literary honor, the Goethe Prize, in 1991, and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. At this point she became popular worldwide, though she disliked the resulting attention thrust upon her.
- As a poet, she is known for considering the world with a unique perspective. During her Nobel Prize lecture she explained, "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."
- Szymborska on inspiration: "Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous 'I don't know.'"

### IV. About Couplets

- A couplet is a pair of two lines working as a unit in a poem, whether they comprise a single stanza (a grouped set of lines in a poem) or are part of a larger stanza. While the lines in a couplet traditionally rhyme and employ the same meter, they do not have to. There are several types of couplets, which are classified by the syllable count and meter of the lines.

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