

POEMS BY

Wisława Szymborska (1923-2012)

SOURCE: *Spoiling Cannibal's' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*. Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 1993

On Death, without Exaggeration

It can't take a joke,
find a star, make a bridge,
it knows nothing about weaving, mining, farming
building ships or baking cakes.

In our planning for tomorrow
It has the final word
Which is always beside the point.

It can't even get the things done
That are part of its trade:
Dig a grave,
Make a coffin,
Clean up after itself.

Preoccupied with killing,
It does the job awkwardly,
Without system or skill,
As though each of us were its first kill.

Oh, it has its triumphs,
But look at its countless defeats,
Missed blows
And repeat attempts!

Sometimes it isn't strong enough
To swat a fly from the air.
Many's the caterpillar
That has out-crawled it.

All those bulbs, pods,
Tentacles, fins, tracheae,
Nuptial plumage and winter fur

Show that its's fallen behind
With its half-hearted work.

Ill will won't help
And even our lending a hand with wars and coups d'état
Is so far not enough.

Hearts beat inside eggs.
Babies' skeletons grow.
Seeds, hard at work, sprout their first tiny pair of leaves
And sometimes even tall trees far away.

Whoever claims that's it's omnipotent,
Is himself living proof
That it's not.

There's no life
That couldn't be immortal
If only for a moment.

Death
Always arrives that very moment too late.
In vain it tugs at the knob
Of the invisible door.
As far as you've come
Can't be undone.

Stage Fright

Poets and writers.
So, the saying goes.
That is poets are writers, but who—

Poets are poetry, writers are prose—

Prose can hold anything including poetry
But in poetry there's only room for poetry—

In keeping with the poster that announces it
With a fin-de-siecle flourish of its giant P
Framed in a winged lyre's strings
I should simply walk in, I should fly—

With a wart on his cheek and a furrowed forehead,
As if clay had covered up the angelic marble—he would
Know himself when it all happened.
The price after all, for not having died already
Goes up not in leaps but step-by-step, and he would
Pay that price, too.
About his ear, just grazed by the bullet
When he ducked at the last minute, he would
Say: “I was damn lucky.”

While waiting to be served his noodle soup, he would
Read a paper with the current date,
Giant headlines, tiny print of ads,
Or drum his fingers on the white tablecloth, and his hands would
Have been used a long time now,
With their chapped skin and swollen veins.

Sometimes someone would
Yell from the doorway: “Mr. Baczynski, phone call for you” —
And there’d be nothing strange about that
Being him, about him standing up, straightening his sweater,
And slowly moving toward the door.

At this sight no one would
Stop talking, no one would
Freeze in mid-gesture, mid-breath
Because this commonplace event would
Be treated—such a pity—
As a commonplace event.