

RIP: Wislawa Szymborska, "Mozart of Poetry"

Gretchen Kalwinski

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Blog

I was going to write a post rounding up the recent obituaries about the life and work of Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner Wislawa Szymborska—who died February 1 at the age of 88—but since [the Poetry Foundation's already done an apt job of that](#), I'll instead focus on what it was about Szymborska's style that appealed to me.

It's okay if you don't know who I'm talking about. First, let's get her name pronunciation down: It is vees-WAH-vah. As the Telegraph noted last week: "While she was arguably the most popular poet in Poland, most of the world had not heard of the shy, soft-spoken Szymborska before she won the Nobel prize [in 1996]."

What always drew me to her poetry was its deep and quiet meditative quality, which was often injected with doses of her dry humor. From a [Guardian article](#): "Everyone needs solitude, especially a person who is used to thinking about what she experiences. Solitude is very important in my work as a mode of inspiration, but isolation is not good in this respect. I am not writing poetry about isolation," she said, going on to wonder why anyone would want to interview her. "For the last few years my favourite phrase has been 'I don't know'. I've reached the age of self-knowledge, so I don't know anything. People who claim that they know something are responsible for most of the fuss in the world."

The Nobel committee described her as the "Mozart of poetry" but with "something of the fury of Beethoven" and the Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski said on Twitter that [her death was an "irreparable loss to Poland's culture."](#)

Ms. Szymborska "looks at things from an angle you would never think of looking at for yourself in a million years," Dr. Cavanagh said on the day of the Nobel announcement. She pointed to "one stunning poem that's a eulogy." That poem, "Cat in an Empty Apartment," as translated by Dr. Cavanagh and Mr. Baranczak, opens:

Die — You can't do that to a cat.

Since what can a cat do

in an empty apartment?

Climb the walls?

Rub up against the furniture?

Something that I learned while reading her obituaries is that Poland has a reputation for romanticizing its poets; (more than I can say of Americans, the vast majority of whom are indifferent to poetry). [Per the Times](#): "She was popular in Poland, which tends to make romantic heroes of poets, but she was little known abroad. Her poems were clear in topic and language, but her playfulness and tendency to invent words made her work hard to translate."

Back to that wry wit. In Szymborska's Nobel lecture, she said this of poets' lives, as compared to those of artists or musicians: "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 15 minutes later, and then another hour passes, during which nothing happens. Who could stand to watch this kind of thing?"



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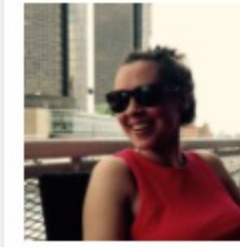
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Gretchen Kalwinski is a Chicago-based writer and editor. Her articles, reviews, interviews, and travel stories have appeared in *Time Out Chicago*, *Chicago Reader*, *Orbitz.com*, *Chicago Booth Magazine*, and *Make Literary Magazine*. She received her B.A. from Indiana University and an M.F.A. in creative writing from Northwestern University. She's currently working on her first novel and a short-story collection.

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