

## Thinking Out Loud

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One of the ways a poem can be eloquent is by pretending to have nothing to do with eloquence. This strategy has many dangers. If we catch the writer cultivating modesty, putting on airs by pretending to do the opposite, the poem's plain clothes will appear calculated for effect. Of course we know that all good art has been calculated for effect. Nevertheless, the directness of certain poems can seem wholly natural, as if the poet desired only to speak in the clearest possible way, saying just what needs to be said.

Wisława Szymborska's poems feel like this, like unpremeditated thought, which is, at the same time, thinking of such clarity that its complications continually surprise us. The poems are accessible, the words simple. We know them, we recognize the shape of those sentences, they could be ours. They say what we almost thought of saying: "After every war / someone has to tidy up. / Things won't pick / themselves up, after all." Yes, that's true. And so this poem continues, off-handedly accumulating its devastating perceptions, as if a resigned but overburdened parent were speaking—a mother, no doubt. Can't you remember to pick your things up and put them away? she complains. But the children never remember. And knowing how easily someone could trip over that ball or that truck, the mother sighs and returns those toys to their places. So, at night, the women go out onto the field of battle to retrieve the bodies.

"In the language of poetry," Szymborska writes in her Nobel lecture, "where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal." And yet, after every war someone "has to shove / the rubble to the roadsides / so the carts loaded with corpses / can get by." This is the way it goes. This is what people have allowed to become usual. And yet: "Someone, broom in hand, / still re-

members how it was. / Someone else listens, nodding / his unshattered head.” That could be the poet, remembering, the reader, nodding.

But we aren’t permitted to linger in this reflective moment, as if such communion were a kind of victory. At the end of the poem, called “The End and the Beginning,” remembering is lost. “Those who knew / what this was all about / must make way for those / who know little. / And less than that. / And at last nothing less than nothing.” At the end someone lies in the expanse of a field that conceals the past. The grass “covers up / the causes and effects,” and this survivor, who does not think of himself as a survivor, lazily gazes up at the sky with a cornstalk in his teeth. We can’t blame him for what he doesn’t know. He’s just “gawking at the clouds” like a kid, or a poet.

In one of her short prose pieces called “Nervousness,” Szyborska recalls a group reading in Krakow in 1945, the first such occasion since the end of the war. Many participated, and “not everyone read well,” though Szyborska admits her knowledge of poetry then “equaled zero.” She was just listening; her first book wouldn’t appear for another twelve years. “At a certain moment,” she writes, “they announced someone named Milosz. He read calmly, without histrionics. As if he were simply thinking out loud and inviting us to join him. ‘There you go,’ I told myself, ‘that’s real poetry, there’s a real poet.’”

Craft disappears into content. That’s the illusion. Some people listen, and hear themselves listening, as if their attentiveness were part of the thinking of the poem itself, which then includes them. “Poetry— / but what is poetry anyway?” Szyborska asks in “Some People Like Poetry.” “More than one rickety answer / has tumbled since that question first was raised. / But I just keep on not knowing, and I cling to that / like a redemptive handrail.” On the one hand, the rickety answers. On the other, the redemptive handrail—which is not knowing. How easy it is to fall if one is too certain. Isn’t that what shatters the heads, what strews the fields with bodies? Not just that, of course. “I prefer,” she writes in “Possibilities,” “keeping in mind even the possibility / that existence has its own reason for being.” And so, in a typical move, she unsettles us, catches us thinking a little less expansively than she has been thinking, but taking us along. And poetry—where does that fit in? “I prefer the absurdity of writing poems / to the absurdity of not writing poems.” Yes, I tell myself. That’s what I want to hold on to.