

Grave dreams: The work of Wislawa Szymborska

by [Peggy Rosenthal](#) in the [April 24, 2002](#) issue

Wislawa Szymborska, a Nobel Prize winner, makes poetry out of unusual materials: lists of instructions, clothes items, apologies or questions. Her tone can be wry or playful or chilling. Her purpose is to shake us awake to how human history gets assembled from the smallest movements—impulsive or thoughtful, random or rational—of our minds and hearts.

“Plotting with the Dead” asks questions that almost assault us. They seem like the script of a police or courtroom interrogation, with us as the accused. “Under what conditions do you dream of the dead? / Do you often think of them before you fall asleep?” While every poem is a dialogue with the reader, inviting us into its world, rarely does a poem yank us in so aggressively.

We’re given no chance to refuse this poem’s (this interrogator’s) assumption: that we “dream of the dead,” and often. Wait! we might want to say; I don’t dream of the dead! But the poem won’t let us register this objection. Instead, the first stanza’s questions force us to personalize our dead. Who in particular appears to us? The implication is that if we don’t dream of the dead, we ought to.

The second stanza gives our dead not only voice (“To what do they refer?”) but also living relationships. The questions imply that the dead are members of a community, and that they are connected to others both dead (“who’s behind them?”) and alive (“who besides you sees them in his dreams?”).

The third stanza gives them bodies, which—unexpectedly, eerily—change as living bodies do. And as we’re asked to picture the dead growing old or pale, suddenly an unsettling fact confronts us: violence as a reality in the life of the dead. Of all the ways that a person can die—old age, illness, accident, natural disaster, murder—only the last is mentioned. Again the poem is limiting the options we’re allowed to consider: either a large proportion of the dead have been killed by other people, or those are the ones we dream about.

What Szymborska is doing is brilliantly subversive. Poetry is the art form that opens up language, drawing us out of the literal into newly imagined worlds. Yet Szymborska devises a poem in which language closes in on us, robbing us of possibility. It's as if she is saying: conditions are so extreme, so violently repressive even of imagination, that imagination (art) must turn itself inside out, must deny its nature, in order to speak the truth of the times.

The poem's interrogation continues. "What do they hold in their hands?" and infers that what they hold somehow implicates us in the manner of their deaths. We are even more directly implicated when the poem gives us only two options for what is "in their eyes": "entreaty" or "threat." The dead are either begging us for something or threatening us. In either case, they are not resting in peace, as we commonly pray when we bury them.

And in response, "Do you only chat about the weather?" The poet knows us well: in the face of the horrors that we inflict on one another, our self-protective impulse is to make small talk. She won't let us get away with this. The final stanza pounds us, revealing our guilt. The dead's questions are "awkward" because we continue to deny our complicity in deaths that we might have prevented. The poem's final three lines name the terms of our indictment, the ways we avoid our responsibility to human community: safely keeping quiet, evasively changing the subject, waking up just in time.

I can't think of a more unnerving poem. It is a prime sample of the genre that Carolyn Forché collects in her anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*. Forché argues that our usual literary distinction between "personal" and "political" writing doesn't work for poets who feel compelled to witness to social evils from which they have personally suffered. "Extremity demands new forms or alters older modes of poetic thought," Forché says. To engage us intimately with the political, poets of witness invent a new literary space of "the social." Often they "rely on the immediacies of direct address."

Szymborska witnesses to evils she experienced as a Polish citizen under communist repression. Her poetry won't let us escape from our responsibility for one another's fates. Human bonds extend even to those whose lives were cut short by our failures. We are in community with the dead of Buchenwald, Rwanda, Palestine, El Salvador, Israel . . .