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On Translating Wisława Szymborska's Poem "Widok z ziarnkiem piasku"

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The poem "Widok z ziarnkiem piasku" by Polish poet Wisława Szymborska (1923-2012) was first published in her 1986 volume, *Ludzie na moście* (The People on the Bridge). Its title was then used for a selection of her poems, *Widok z ziarnkiem piasku: 102 wierszy* (View with a Grain of Sand: 102 poems), which appeared in 1996, the year in which Szymborska won the Nobel Prize for Literature. A selection translated into English by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, first published in 1995 and reprinted in 1996 (presumably to meet post-Nobel demand), uses the same title: *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems by Wisława Szymborska*. Evidently, the translators found "View with a Grain of Sand" both striking and characteristic enough of Szymborska's poetry to communicate its singular qualities to new, Anglophone readers.

My translation of the poem is not the first to appear in English. There is the version in the book by Barańczak and Cavanagh, and a more recent one by Joanna Trzeciak, included in her volume, *Miracle Fair: Selected Poems of Wisława Szymborska* (2002). I admire each of these translations and acknowledge the close kinship mine has with both of them, beginning with our titles, which are – unavoidably, given the stark original – identical. Like the majority of Szymborska's poems, "Widok z ziarnkiem piasku" is in free verse. I first translated it as a teenager, for whom it was (along with other poems in *Ludzie na moście*) a revelation. The translation offered here builds on that early attempt. It overlaps in some of its word-choices with one or both of the translations by Barańczak and Cavanagh and Trzeciak, but it also proposes some alternative renderings, particularly in the final four stanzas.

To highlight one of these overlaps: Barańczak and Cavanagh's translation of the lines about the grain of sand – "And that it fell on the windowsill/is only our experience, not its" (135) – seems almost perfect to me. My version hews close to theirs: "The fact that it fell on the window-sill/is only our experience, not its." With the phrase, "The fact that...," I try to capture the declarative Polish opening, "A to, że spadło..." (literally: As for this, that it fell...). To my ear, Barańczak and Cavanagh's briefer "And that it fell..." sounds too elliptical in English. Trzeciak's rendition of the same lines, "Its falling onto the windowsill/is only our adventure" (67), which keeps the Polish "przygoda" (adventure) but elides "nie jego" (not its), manages to be both fluent and succinct. I prefer Barańczak and Cavanagh's "experience", however, to Trzeciak's "adventure", which seems overblown in the context of a grain of sand landing on a ledge, where the Polish "przygoda" is mildly ironic. I think "experience" conveys a similar tinge of irony.

My translation departs more from the others in the later stanzas. Barańczak and Cavanagh translate "Bezdennie dnu jeziora/i bezbrzeżnie brzegom" as: "The lake's floor exists floorlessly/and its shore exists shorelessly" (135) (you can hear the internal rhyme they have introduced), while Trzeciak renders it more colloquially: "To the bottom of the lake, it's bottomless/and shoreless to its shore" (67). I propose a phrasing which I think sounds more natural in English than either of these and which conveys Szymborska's meaning more explicitly: "The bottom of the lake can't tell its depth,/its shores do not feel themselves shores." The other translations each use the suffix "-less"

(e.g. “floorlessly”, “bottomless”) to gloss the Polish prefix “bez-” (without). The use of “-less” to render “bez-” works well elsewhere in the poem, e.g. when “bezbarwnie” becomes “colourless”, and “bezboleśnie”, “painless”. But in the fourth stanza the use of “-less” makes the English sound more gnomic than the Polish: what does “exists floorlessly” (or “shorelessly”) mean? Trzeciak’s “shoreless to its shore” is also initially confusing: what is shoreless to whose shore? In Polish the lake’s shores (brzegi) are unambiguously shoreless to themselves, but Trzeciak’s line seems to imply that the lake’s floor is shoreless to the lake’s shore, which makes no sense. “Bezdenie dnu jeziora/i bezbrzeżnie brzegom” is strange but clear and resonant in Polish. The alliterative repetition of the sounds “bez”, “dnu”, “den” and “brze” give the lines an oracular quality. But the lines’ meaning is plain. The speaker’s perspective in the poem is unorthodox yet her language feels, by and large, normal, however invented particular words may be, such as “bezbrzeżnie” or “bezniebnie” (skylessly).

A conversational voice presenting strange or provocative viewpoints is typical of Szymborska’s poetry, which somehow makes the previously unthought-of seem uncannily familiar: for example, the cooing relative’s response to baby Hitler in “Fotografia Hitlera” (A Photograph of Hitler), or the voyeuristic official censor’s voice in “Głos w sprawie pornografii” (An Opinion on the Question of Pornography) (both poems from the 1986 volume *Ludzie na moście*). Readers of Szymborska’s poems often find themselves implicated in unnerving perspectives. In “Widok z ziarnkiem piasku”, the poet is effectively channelling the point of view of things – sand, water, stones, cloud – which have none. In doing so she draws attention to how peculiar human beings are in their relentless anthropomorphizing of the world. The poem’s rhythmically recurring use of “bez” (-less) and “nie” (not) highlights the tenacity of this habitual thinking by repeatedly resisting it. At the same time, Szymborska suggests how chillingly vacant the world would be, without an overlay of human perception. Despite the mention of waves breaking and wind tearing at a cloud, there is an unsettling stillness in the poem, worthy of a Magritte painting. And the closing image of time’s rapid and indifferent passing emphasizes just how finite are human perspectives.

“Widok z ziarnkiem piasku” forcefully defamiliarizes a reflexive human way of thinking. My translation seeks to convey the idiomatic quality of Szymborska’s voice without surrendering the surreal effect that her poem conjures.

Bibliography

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Widok z ziarnkiem piasku

**By
Wisława Szymborska**

Zwiemy je ziarnkiem piasku.
A ono siebie ani ziarnkiem, ani piasku.
Obywa się bez nazwy
ogólnej, szczególnej,
przelotnej, trwałej,
mylnej czy właściwej.

Na nic mu nasze spojrzenie, dotknięcie.
Nie czuje się ujrzone i dotknięte.
A to, że spadło na parapet okna,
to tylko nasza, nie jego przygoda.
Dla niego to to samo, co spaść na
cokolwiek,
bez pewności, czy spadło już,
czy spada jeszcze.

Z okna jest piękny widok na jezioro,
ale ten widok sam siebie nie widzi.
Bezbarwnie i bezkształtnie,
Bezgłośnie, bezwonne
i bezboleśnie jest mu na tym świecie.

Bezdenie dnu jeziora
i bezbrzeżnie brzegom.
Nie mokro ani sucho jego wodzie.
Nie pojedynczo ani mnogo falom,
co szumią głuche na swój własny szum
wokół nie małych, nie dużych kamieni.

A wszystko to pod niebem z natury
bezniebnym,

View with a Grain of Sand

**By
Wisława Szymborska
Translated by Mary Besemeres**

We call it a grain of sand.
It calls itself neither grain, nor sand.
It gets by without a name
either general or specific,
passing or permanent,
mistaken or accurate.

Our look, our touch mean nothing to it.
It feels neither looked at, nor touched.
The fact that it fell on the window-sill
is only our experience, not its.
To the grain it’s the same as falling on
anything
without knowing if it’s landed
or falling, still.

From the window, there’s a fine view of
the lake,
but the view cannot see itself.
Colourless, shapeless,
Soundless, scentless,
And painless is how it finds this world.

The bottom of the lake can’t tell its
depth,
its shores do not feel themselves shores.
The water feels neither wet nor dry,
the waves no sense of being one or
many;
they break, deaf to their own breaking,
over rocks neither large nor small.

And all this under a sky by nature
skyless,

<p>w którym zachodzi słońce nie zachodząc wcale i kryje się nie kryjąc za bezwiedną chmurę. Targa nią wiatr bez żadnych innych powodów, jak tylko ten, że wieje.</p> <p>Mija jedna sekunda. Druga sekunda. Trzecia sekunda. Ale to tylko nasze trzy sekundy.</p> <p>Czas przebiegł jak posłaniec z pilną wiadomością. Ale to tylko nasze porównanie. Zmyślona postać, wmówiony jej pośpiech, a wiadomość nieludzka.</p>	<p>in which the sun sets without really setting and hides without hiding behind a heedless cloud. The wind tears at the cloud for no other reason than that it's blowing.</p> <p>A second passes. Another. A third. But they're only our three seconds.</p> <p>Time's raced by like a runner with urgent news. But that's only our analogy. The figure is made-up, his speed make- believe, the message inhuman.</p>
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