In the way that you can be surprised when someone dies, no matter how rationally foreseeable the death is, I was startled to open my New York Times on February 2 and find an obituary for Wislawa Szymborska, the great Polish poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1996. Only 88, I wanted to say. Much too young.

Szymborska’s poems are mostly short, and her output was not voluminous—only around 400 published poems. And yet, she is one of the few contemporary poets you can call beloved and not have it be a condescension or an insult. In The New York Review of Books Charles Simic called her poems “poetry’s equivalent of expository writing,” which captures their accessibility, their logical clarity and their interest in facts (especially odd ones), stories, things and people, but doesn’t convey their charm or vitality. Expository writing is, after all, a required class for college freshmen—the opposite of fun, dazzle, originality, pathos. For me, Szymborska’s signature quality is the way she puts tragedy and comedy, the unique and the banal, the big and the little, the remembering and the forgetting, right next to each other and shows us that this is what life is:

After every war
someone has to tidy up.
Things won’t pick
themselves up, after all.

Someone has to shove
the rubble to the roadsides
so the carts loaded with corpses
can get by.

—from “The End and the Beginning”

She takes the most serious themes—war, history and its many horrors, the passage of time, death, love and the loss of love—expresses them through vivid, concrete situations and gives them a wry comic twist. “Museum” shows us mortality by imagining the gleeful triumph of our “ten thousand aging things”: “The hand has lost out to the glove./The right shoe has defeated the foot.” “Hitler’s First Photograph” mocks the present for its ignorance of the future: “And who’s this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?/That’s tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers’ little boy!” The heartbreaking “Cat in an Empty Apartment,” one of her best-known poems, presents a sudden death (of a friend? suicide?) from his cat’s limited, perplexed and also increasingly irritated point of view:

Something doesn’t start
at its usual time.
Something doesn’t happen
as it should.
Someone was always, always here,
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared.

The cat doesn’t comprehend death—“just wait till he turns up”—but really, who does?

Szymborska lived through appalling times: World War II and the brutal Nazi occupation of Poland, followed by four decades of Stalinist communism—which Elizabeth Bishop, another poet of particularity, called “our worst century so far.” After a brief “socialist realist” phase in her youth, she disclaimed grand political schemes and mass utopianism in favor of irony, wit, skepticism and the individual: “Four billion people on this earth,” she wrote in “A Large Number,” “But my imagination is still the same.” In the great poem “Starvation Camp Near Jaslo,” she writes: “History rounds off skeletons to zero./A thousand and one is still only a thousand.” For Szymborska, it is always that one who matters—transient, blind, foolish, the plaything of chance that it miscalls destiny, but also urgent, insistent, full of its own meaning, alive:

Could Have

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck—there was a forest.
You were in luck—there were no trees.
You were in luck—a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,
a jamb, a turn, a quarter inch, an instant.
You were in luck—just then a straw went floating by.

As a result, because, although, despite.
What would have happened if a hand, a foot,
within an inch, a hairsbreadth from
an unfortunate coincidence.

So you’re here? Still dizzy from another dodge, close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn’t be more shocked or speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside me.
It was only the other morning that my wife, happening to leaf again through “Here,” the most recent gathering of Wislawa Szymborska’s poems, remarked, looking at the cover photograph of the eighty-something-year-old Polish poet, the writer’s eyes shut in private bliss, cigarette in hand, “You know, I’m worried about Szymborska. I wish she would stop smoking.” This remark—made, of course, by someone who had never come anywhere near the poet’s fleshly, personal presence—was a sign of the effect that Szymborska had on her readers. They thought of her as a friend and neighbor and counsellor—as someone to worry about, and worry with, more than someone to merely pay the blank tribute of “admiration.” She had no mere “admirers,” really, though her friends and fans, in this American neighborhood alone, ran from Jane Hirshfeld and Billy Collins to Woody Allen.

Of course, obituaries are not—or shouldn’t be—-a competitive sport, so we shouldn’t spend too long complaining that the New York Times, this morning, announcing her death—from lung cancer, just as my wife had feared and the photo presaged—badly underplayed it, pushing her off to the margins with a much shorter notice than they gave the death of the artist Mike Kelley. Bitching about obituaries (to invent a rather Szymborksian title for a poem) is a mug’s game, so: not too long—but a moment. A poem of hers should have appeared on the front page, but, allowing that that’s too much to ask, the notice might have given those unfamiliar with her work some sense of why she mattered so much. Nothing in the Times obit—which oddly made much of her early unimportant political writing and was inadvertently chauvinist in its implication that the Nobel Prize overburdened her in a way that it might not have some other, more burly, pundit-minded male writer—would give a non-Szymborska-reader a clear sense of why she won it, or why hers was perhaps the one recent “obscure” Nobel in Literature to which everyone who knew the author’s work already assented. (Everyone who didn’t know her work, and was puzzled, read it, and then they assented, too.) She is that kind of good.

Though hardly a happy poet in the usual sense—born in Krakow in 1923, possibly the worst moment and place ever to arrive on this planet, with Hitler waiting to greet her on her sixteenth birthday and Stalin evilly coming along behind, how could she be?—Szymborska’s poetry had the gift of creating both the happiness of wisdom felt and the ecstatic happiness of the particulars of life fully imagined. From the experience of armies and dogmas and death that shaped her early life, she found a new commitment to the belief that the poetic impulse, however small its objects, is always saner than the polemical imperative, however passionate its certitudes.

Szymborska took as subjects “chairs and sorrows, scissors, tenderness, transistors, violins, teacups, dams and quips,” to use a list from the title poem in that last collection. Though determinedly microcosmic, she was never minor. Szymborska takes on an onion, and that onion is peeled, down to its essence. A Szymborska poem is always charming, wonderfully charming, charming as a small child singing, charming as a great pop-song lyric. But her poems are also, to use an old word, “deep,” mysteriously so, about the very nature of existence. The sum effect of a Szymborska poem, at least as
rendered in American English, is often of an odd but happy collaboration between Ogden Nash and Emily Dickinson. (Though she is less easily defeated than Ogden, and more worldly than Emily.)

In her poetry, a child about to pull a tablecloth from a table becomes every scientist beginning an experiment; a visit to the doctor, with its stripping down and piling on of clothes, a metaphor for the company and odd mechanisms of our naked bodies; she ponders the grammar of divorce (“are they still linked with the conjunction ‘and’ or does a period divide them?”) and the inner life of Hitler’s dog. In my favorite of all her poems, “A Tale Began” (which I was overjoyed to be able to use for the epigraph for my own book “Through The Children’s Gate”), she writes about the range of human difficulties that, over time, make the decision to have a child impossible. “The world is never ready for the birth of a child,” she writes, and goes on:

Our ships are not yet back from Winland
We still have to get over the S. Gothard pass
We’ve got to outwit the watchmen on the desert of Thor
Fight our way through the sewers to Warsaw’s center…

But the child, arrives anyway, and she wishes that:

May delivery be easy,
may our child grow and be well.
Let him be happy from time to time
and leap over abysses.
Let his heart have strength to endure
and his mind be awake and reach far.

But not so far
that it sees into the future.
Spare him
that one gift,
O heavenly powers

In a way, Szymborska supplied her own best epitaph, and obituary, in the text of her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which she took on the “astonishment” of normal life:

“Astonishing” is an epithet concealing a logical trap. We’re astonished, after all, by things that deviate from some well known and universally acknowledged norm, from an obviousness we’ve grown accustomed to. Granted, in daily speech, where we don’t stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like “the ordinary world,” “ordinary life,” “the ordinary course of events.” …But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone’s existence in this world.

Not a single existence unastonishing. So perhaps a notice merging her existence into so many others, not making too much of it, would have been the one she wanted, and found truly astonishing. In any case, the poems are there this morning as much as they were there last night, with the poet still smoking and smiling on the cover of her final book. Though doubtless to those who loved her as Wislawa the loss is immense, is it too terrible to admit that I can’t recall a literary loss I’ve felt with
more emotion but less grief? We can now press Szymborska on to the next receptive reader. “You now have a curated body of work that you can love and contemplate,” that same wife said this morning. While the poet lived, it was cheering to think, as her readers did almost every day, that another poem might be coming. Now that’s she gone, we’re happy—truly happy, astonishingly happy—to know the poems came.
WHEN Wislawa Szymborska won the world's top literary prize in 1996, her friends called it the “Nobel disaster.” This was not just because she had spent an uncomfortable night before the award ceremony in the bath: the bathroom was the only part of her quarters in a grand Stockholm hotel in which she could manage to turn on the light. Nor was it the “torture” she felt in having to make a speech—one of only three she had given in her life. The real disaster was the trauma of fame and fortune. It was years before she could publish another poem. Her fans' delight in her Nobel prize was mixed with disappointment that it had rendered her mute.

Like many Poles who survived the war, Ms Szymborska readily accepted communism in early life, seeing it as a salvation for a ruined world. Early poems praised Lenin and young communists building a steel works. Later she blamed her own “foolishness, naivety and perhaps intellectual laziness,” but some found it hard to forgive her for signing a petition in 1953 backing a show trial of four priests.

Her ironic and individualistic spirit was ill fitted to the grey conformity of “people's Poland:” the Nobel citation said she wrote with the ease of Mozart and the fury of Beethoven. Playful, subtle and haunting, her poetry could never be in harmony with the socialist realist style dictated by the country's cultural commissars. She mocked their intolerance of dissent in a poem on pornography:

There's nothing more debauched than thinking.
This sort of wantonness runs wild like a wind-borne weed on a plot laid out for daisies.

Communism she likened to the abominable snowman—horrid and unreal—though she stayed in the party until 1966, hoping “to try to fix it all from the inside.” That, she said later, had been another delusion.

Ms Szymborska was 16 when Hitler and Stalin carved up Poland between them. “Old age was the privilege of rocks and trees,” she wrote. Although not a mainstream dissident, her poems distilled the essence of individual stubbornness in the face of what the party bosses said was historical inevitability.

I believe in the refusal to take part.
I believe in the ruined career.
I believe in the wasted years of work.
I believe in the secret taken to the grave.
These words soar for me beyond all rules without seeking support from actual examples.
My faith is strong, blind, and without foundation.
Scepticism was her watchword. She eschewed political causes; her fight was “against the bad poet who is prone to using too many words.” Her favourite phrase was “I don't know.” She told the Nobel audience: “It's small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended.” Without it, she said, Isaac Newton would have gobbled apples rather than pondering the force that makes them drop. Her compatriot Marie Sklodowska-Curie would have “wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families.”

**An accretion of answers**

It was the same for poets. Each poem was a kind of answer, but as soon as the last full stop hit the page the result seemed inadequate. “So the poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paper clip by literary historians and called their ‘oeuvre’.”

Her own output was slender in quantity and lean in style. For all her erudition, she did not come across as intimidatingly brainy (unlike some other Polish post-war poets). Schoolchildren learn her poems by heart, like this one about a bereaved pet.

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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?
Nothing seems different here
but nothing is the same.
Nothing's been moved
but there's more space.
And at night-time no lamps are lit.
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Invented words and syntactic tricks made some of her poems for Polish-speakers only. But her translators, chiefly Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak, did a fine job, particularly in the *New Yorker*, which has published 16 of the best.

Her humor was mischievous: the lavatory seat in her Cracow flat was made of barbed wire encased in clear plastic. Asked why she had published so little—her entire canon was only some 400 poems—she replied gently that she had a waste-paper basket. Success left no dent in her reclusive modesty, and she would never claim that her external life was interesting. Imagine trying to make a film of a poet's “hopelessly unphotogenic” life, she said: “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?”

Who, indeed? But plenty read and love the results of her self-imposed solitude.
Wislawa Szymborska, a gentle and reclusive Polish poet who won the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature, died on Wednesday in Krakow, Poland. She was 88.

The cause was lung cancer, said David A. Goldfarb, the curator of literature and humanities at the Polish Cultural Institute in New York, a diplomatic mission of the Polish Embassy.

Ms. Szymborska had a relatively small body of work when she received the Nobel, the fifth Polish or Polish-born writer to have done so. Only about 200 of her poems had been published in periodicals and thin volumes over a half-century, and her lifetime total was something less than 400.

The Nobel announcement surprised Ms. Szymborska, who had lived an intensely private life. “She was kind of paralyzed by it,” said Clare Cavanagh, who, with Stanislaw Baranczak, translated much of Ms. Szymborska’s work into English.

“Her friends called it the ‘Nobel tragedy,’ ” Dr. Cavanagh, a professor of literature at Northwestern University, said in an interview on Wednesday. “It was a few years before she wrote another poem.”

Ms. Szymborska lived most of her life in modest conditions in the old university city of Krakow, working for the magazine Zycie Literackie (Literary Life). She published a thin volume of her verse every few years. 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.

Much of her verse was contemplative, but she also addressed death, torture, war and, strikingly, Hitler, whose attack on Poland in 1939 started World War II in Europe. She depicted him as an innocent — “this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe” — being photographed on his first birthday.

Ms. Szymborska began writing in the Socialist Realist style. The first collection of what some have called her Stalinist period, “That’s What We Live For,” appeared in 1952, followed two years later by another ideological collection, “Questions Put to Myself.”

Years later she told the poet and critic Edward Hirsch: “When I was young I had a moment of believing in the Communist doctrine. I wanted to save the world through Communism. Quite soon I understood that it doesn’t work, but I’ve never pretended it didn’t happen to me.”
“At the very beginning of my creative life I loved humanity. I wanted to do something good for mankind. Soon I understood that it isn’t possible to save mankind.”

By 1957, she had renounced both Communism and her early poetry. Decades later, she was active in the Solidarity movement’s struggle against Poland’s Communist government. During a period of martial law, imposed in 1981, she published poems under a pseudonym in the underground press.

She insisted that her poetry was personal rather than political. “Of course, life crosses politics,” she said in an interview with The New York Times after winning the Nobel in 1996. “But my poems are strictly not political. They are more about people and life.”

Wislawa Szymborska was born on July 2, 1923, near Poznan, in western Poland. When she was 8, her family moved to Krakow. During the Nazi occupation, she went to a clandestine school, risking German punishment, and later studied literature and sociology at the prestigious Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

Her marriage to the poet Adam Wlodek ended in divorce. Her companion, the writer Kornel Filipowicz, died in 1990. She had no children, and no immediate family members survive.

Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish exile who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980, said of Ms. Szymborska’s Nobel selection: “She’s a shy and modest person, and for her it will be a terrible burden, this prize. She is very reticent in her poetry also. This is not a poetry where she reveals her personal life.”

Her last book to be translated, “Here,” was published in the United States last year. Reviewing it for The New York Review of Books, the poet Charles Simic noted that Ms. Szymborska “often writes as if on an assigned subject,” examining it in depth. He added: “If this sounds like poetry’s equivalent of expository writing, it is. More than any poet I can think of, Szymborska not only wants to create a poetic state in her readers, but also to tell them things they didn’t know before or never got around to thinking about.”

In her Nobel lecture, Ms. Szymborska joked about the life of poets. Great films can be made of the lives of scientists and artists, she said, but poets offer far less promising material.

“Their work is hopelessly unphotogenic,” she said. “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?”

Paul Vitello contributed reporting.