

## A Few Words on the Soul by Wislawa Szymborska

Translated from the Polish by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

We have a soul at times.  
No one's got it non-stop,  
for keeps.

Day after day,  
year after year  
may pass without it.

Sometimes  
it will settle for awhile  
only in childhood's fears and raptures.  
Sometimes only in astonishment  
that we are old.

It rarely lends a hand  
in uphill tasks,  
like moving furniture,  
or lifting luggage,  
or going miles in shoes that pinch.

It usually steps out  
whenever meat needs chopping  
or forms have to be filled.

For every thousand conversations  
it participates in one,  
if even that,  
since it prefers silence.

Just when our body goes from ache to pain,  
it slips off-duty.

It's picky:  
it doesn't like seeing us in crowds,  
our hustling for a dubious advantage  
and creaky machinations make it sick.

Joy and sorrow  
aren't two different feelings for it.  
It attends us  
only when the two are joined.

We can count on it  
when we're sure of nothing  
and curious about everything.

Among the material objects  
it favors clocks with pendulums  
and mirrors, which keep on working  
even when no one is looking.

It won't say where it comes from  
or when it's taking off again,  
though it's clearly expecting such questions.

We need it  
but apparently  
it needs us  
for some reason too.