First published in *A Large Number* (Wielka liczba) in 1976, Wisława Szymborska's "In Praise of Self-Deprecation" has been translated by many poets and has even been given slightly different titles, including "In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself." It is a short poem about the difference between human beings and our fellow creatures on "the third planet" from the Sun. While the translations of this poem referenced below vary substantially in wording and lineation, they both preserve the concept and the "kick" of the poem in its original Polish.

The poem begins with the images of a buzzard, a panther, piranhas, and snakes who live without "scruples," innocently, never questioning their actions. In the second stanza, Szymborska invokes animals of all types, sizes, and reputations who live their lives uncritically and "are glad of it" (Krynski and Maguire translation, 21). In stanza three we are told that no matter how much the hearts of killer whales might weigh, they are "light."

The final lines of the poem have been variously translated. Kryski and Maguire, for instance, render them this way: "There is nothing more animal-like / than a clear conscience / on the third planet of the Sun" (21). Baranczak and Cavanagh translate them a little more euphonically: "On this third planet of the Sun / among the signs of bestiality / a clear conscience is Number One" (168). The point is that human beings can feel responsibility for their actions, possess scruples, and often experience pangs of guilt. The poem wryly suggests that self-consciousness and free will may not be aspects of human life exclusively, but our feeling remorse for having committed certain actions may well be what distinguishes human beings from other living creatures. The poem's kick comes retroactively when a reader realizes that human beings do indeed behave—sometimes, at least—like buzzards, snakes, piranhas, and so forth.

**Further Information**


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