The End and the Beginning
By Wislawa Szymborska

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

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

3 Someone has to trudge
through sludge and ashes,
through the sofa springs,
and shards of glass,
the bloody rags.

4 Someone has to lug the post
to prop the wall.
Someone has to glaze a window,
set the door in its frame.

5 No sound bites, no photo opportunities,
and it takes years.
All the cameras have gone
to other wars.

6 The bridges need to be rebuilt,
the railroad stations, too.
Sleeves will go ragged
from rolling them up.

7 Someone, broom in hand,
still remembers how it was.
Someone else listens, nodding
his unsevered head.

8 But others are bound to be bustling nearby
who'll find all that
a little boring.

9 From time to time someone still must
dig up a rusted-out argument
from underneath a bush
and haul it off to the dump.

10 Those who knew
what this was all about
must make way for those
who know little.
And less than that.
And at last nothing less than nothing.

11 Someone has to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects,
with a cornstalk in his mouth
gazing at clouds.

Connection Questions
What images does the poem evoke? What do you picture as you read different stanzas of
the poem? What imagery best represents the way you picture Europe as it looked after
World War II?

What kinds of challenges did the world face in the immediate aftermath of World War II?
What needed to be “tidied up”?

In what sense is the end of a war also a beginning?