

Questions and Answers

Wisława Szymborska is a Polish poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996.

A few days ago, I went to Barnes & Noble and bought two of her books. Upon seeing them, the young woman at the check-out counter said she was so glad to be checking out some “real literature” as compared to most of the books she checks out all day.

In Ms. Szymborska’s poem “Here,” which refers to life on earth, she says:

*...and as an extra added feature
you spin the planet’s carousel for free,
and with it you hitch a ride on the intergalactic blizzard, with times so dizzying
that nothing here on earth can even tremble. Just take a closer look:
the table stands exactly where it stood,
the piece of paper still lies where it was spread....*

HH replies:

*“Here, in my kitchen, my solid oval, oak-cloaked table
perfect for resting elbows, thoughts, sorting bills, clipping articles from The Times....
Remember, we found you upon seeing a sign on a doorway in SoHo,
announcing a second-hand furniture sale on the 3rd floor...no elevator, of course....”*

In “Thoughts That Visit Me On Busy Streets,” Wisława says:

*Those passersby might be Archimedes in jeans,
Catherine the Great draped in resale,
some pharaoh with briefcase and glasses.*

HH replies:

*“And none of us remembers who we were before,
now passing each other on the busy street;
waiting for the light to change.”*

In “Praise Of My Sister,” Wisława says:

*My sister doesn’t write poems, and it’s unlikely that she will suddenly start writing poems, and
also her father, who likewise didn’t write poems. My sister’s husband would rather die than
write poems....*

HH replies:

*“My mother wrote poems to amuse her guests at parties.
My father, as a young man, could probably quote lines from poems he learned in the
Gymnasium.
My brother was not so inclined. But, my first poems birthed me.*