Our Common Heritage: On Wislawa Szymborska

by Czeslaw Milosz (fellow Polish author and Nobel Prize winner)
translated by Joanna Trzeciak

One
Poetry that speaks to the enduring and irreversible coordinates of human fate—love, striving, fear of pain, hope, the fleeting nature of things, and death—leads us to believe that the poet is one of us, and shares in that fate. "We," the subject of such poetry, is determined neither by nation nor by class. But it would not be quite right to claim that its theme is therefore an eternal human nature, for as our consciousness changes, we humans try to confront ultimate things in new and different ways. In Szymborska's poetry the "we" denotes all of us living on this planet now, joined by a common consciousness, a "post-consciousness," post-Copernican, post-Newtonian, post-Darwinian, post-two-World-Wars, post-crimes-and-inventions-of-the-twentieth-century. It is a serious and bold enterprise to venture a diagnosis, that is, to try to say who we are, what we believe in, and what we think.

Two
Szymborska's "I" is an ascetic "I," cleansed not only of the desire to confess, but of any individuating features, and yet it is linked to the "I" of all others who share in the human condition and thus deserve pity and compassion. The poem "Laughter" tells of a conversation with a girl, the poet herself from many years ago, but there is nothing singular in this: it could be a meeting between any two people. Moreover the "he" in "Laughter" goes unnamed; we know nothing about him. Another poem "Clothing," which describes a visit to the doctor's office, begins: "You undress, we undress, you undress"—the use of these three forms of the verb "undress" embodies the essence of Szymborska's poetry: "the singular you," "the plural you," and "the collective we" merge into one. And to cite yet another example, doesn't the poem "A Report from the Hospital" bring us news of what happens to each of "you," to all of "us"?

Three
The consciousness that Szymborska probes is "ours" because we hold it in common, the result of our schooling, the glossy magazines we've read, television, and visits to museums. Now, there may be a villager somewhere in southern India who would not recognize himself in these poems because the frequent references to our past—Homer, Troy, Rome, Lot's wife, the Flood, Mary Stuart, and so forth—would be foreign to him. But in general, on a planet growing ever smaller, increasingly we dine on the same cultural dishes.

Four
Our cultural consciousness is shaped early on in life: We learn from grownups that the Sun does not, in fact, revolve around the Earth, that the Earth is but a speck within an unfathomable whirl of galaxies, that scientists seek to discover the origin of life on earth, that Homo sapiens resulted from a long evolutionary
... process, and that our closest relative is the monkey. The foundation of Szymborska's worldview seems to be biology lessons learned at school—many of her poems find their origins in evolutionary theory itself. Yet she never makes the reductionist turn. On the contrary, to her, man is astonishing, precisely because even though his genealogy is so modest and he is bound up in a fragile body, he nonetheless stands up to nature and creates his own world of art, values, discoveries, and adventures. Man is astonishing because he has "a hand miraculously feathered by a fountain pen" (in "Thomas Mann"), because he summons up the courage to write—the "Revenge of a mortal hand" (in "The Joy of Writing"). The cult of the giant achievements of the human spirit, of the masterpieces of the past preserved in museums or passed on in writing, is counted among the basic ingredients of twentieth-century consciousness. Szymborska cultivates this, mindful that whatever remains is all the more precious for having been torn away from an ever watchful death. Particular to our century is a coming to grips with the fragility of our bodily existence, as treated in one of Szymborska's most moving poems, "Torture":

Nothing has changed.
The body is painful,
   because the soul is:
   a stranger to itself, evasive,
   at one moment sure, the next unsure of its existence,
   while the body is and is and is
   and has no place to go.

Five
Thus Polish poetry finally has worked its way to existential meditation, leaving behind pure lyric and embarking on discourse, which had always been thought prosaic. A great deal had to happen before the necessary tools could be forged to allow a poet like Szymborska to respond to the clearly perceived need for intelligent discourse on life's cheerless dance. Varied shades of irony and humor became the modern and indispensable seasoning. Szymborska brings joy because she is so sharp, because she derives pleasure out of juggling the props of our common heritage (when she writes about Rubens' women and the Baroque, for example), and because she has such a good sense of the comic. And she takes a conscious risk, performing her magic tricks along the fine line between poem and essay.

She would not have been faithful to the true colors of her times had she preserved their brighter shades. To be frank, hers is a very grim poetry. Because her work is part of world literature, we can hold this diagnosis up to that of others in different languages. A comparison with the despairing vision of Samuel Beckett and Philip Larkin suggests itself. Yet, in contrast to them Szymborska offers a world where one can breathe. Thanks to a thorough relinquishing of subjectivity, "I" and its particular form of personal depression fall by the wayside. They are replaced by a playfulness that gives us, in spite of everything else, a feeling for the enormous diversity and splendor of human existence.