

place on the map of the political systems that they do not see themselves as occupying. Polish historians, except for communist ones, do not see prewar Poland as a protofascist state. Kunicki is unable to provide any credible proofs that Poland was in any way evolving in the direction of Nazi Germany, but foreign historians handily impose this label on Poland, thus contributing to the postcolonial pigeonholing of Poland in American scholarship in particular. Kunicki seems a willing participant in this process. Toward the end the author remarks that “Piasecki’s memoranda were the products of a profoundly ideological mind operating on the verge of obsession” (169). Unfortunately, the same could be said about Kunicki’s book. Δ

Here

By Wisława Szymborska. Bilingual Polish-English, with English translations by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Barańczak. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 85 pages. ISBN: 978-0547364612. Hardcover. \$22.00.

James E. Reid

Wisława Szymborska, Poland’s fifth recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, passed away in February 2012. Szymborska’s poetry was popular in Poland, but she was perhaps not as well known abroad as some of her contemporaries such as Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, or Tadeusz Różewicz. Miłosz received the Nobel; many feel that Herbert should have. Różewicz’s *Sobbing Superpower: Selected Poems* (translated by Joanna Trzeciak), was nominated for the prestigious \$65,000 International Griffin Poetry Prize in 2012. How Poland has the ability to produce so many poets of international stature is an engaging question for another essay.

Szymborska’s work is often characterized by the modesty we hear in the opening words of her 1996 Nobel speech: “I’m supposed to talk about poetry. I’ve said very little on the subject, next to nothing, in fact. And whenever I have said anything, I’ve always had the sneaking suspicion that I’m not very good at it.” This is not false

modesty, but the true modesty of an honest and questioning poet facing the necessity of speaking about her poetry before an international audience. Her poetry has an open, graceful, and almost tactile surface that does not quite conceal the range and depths of her concerns. The publishers of the hardcover edition of this book offer an invitation to her inviting tactility. The cover of *Here* has the most welcoming texture of any dust jacket I have touched.

Miłosz introduced many of Szymborska’s poems to a wider audience in his 1996 anthology *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*. There he criticized poetry that was excessively abstract, and spoke about the importance of the tangible world for the poet: “I am obviously interested in the visible world, again and again unveiling itself and offering itself to the eye.” That Szymborska shares this deep interest in the here and now is obvious in her previous books as well as in *Here*. Her translators, Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak, have honored her voice by producing translations that read as clearly as if she had composed these poems in English.

Here (Tutaj) was published less than two years before Szymborska died of lung cancer. Her commitment to write with care and good humor about the everyday world and its concerns is again evident in this collection. What is new in *Here* is the extent of her references to death, a topic that Szymborska has treated occasionally in a matter of fact way in her earlier books:

Death? It comes in your sleep,
exactly as it should.

“I’m Working on the World,” *Calling Out to Yeti*
[1957]

In the collection of poems in *Here*, she comes at death with a range of approaches, as its approach draws near. She speaks humorously in tongues: “We wax eloquent in unknown tongues, / talking not with just anyone, but with the dead” (“Dreams”). Facing her own mortality and mystified by microorganisms, she finally leaves off trying to understand them with “But the time is short. I write” (“Microcosmos”). Then, after a number of attempts, she finally abandons trying

to picture clearly someone who has already passed away: “No, no, all wrong. / He should be alone” (“Portrait From Memory”). “In A Mail Coach” finds her transported to an early nineteenth-century mail coach, crossing Poland in the company of Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49), one of Poland’s great Romantic poets, where she enjoys bringing him the news that:

I’ve come from the Future, and I know how it turns out.

Your poems are loved and admired
And you lie with kings in Wawel Castle.

Was Szyborska smiling as she brought these glad tidings to Słowacki? How many other poets would offer this kind of generosity toward an earlier poet who is now long gone? Is she accompanying him now across Poland and into whatever exile awaits?

In “Metaphysics” Szyborska concludes her meditation on the inconclusiveness of being and nonbeing with the tasty recollection that at least “today you had a side of fries.” And she knows with certainty how quickly the dead are forgotten. “The Day After—Without Us” provides a weather forecast in twenty lines, coolly free of any gloomy emotion about the departed who are so quickly forgotten, even in the poem’s conclusion: “those still living / should bring umbrellas.”

Near the end of *Here* Szyborska conducts an “Interview With Atropos,” the Greek goddess who, for thousands of years, has been cutting the thread of each human life to end it. This meeting is a challenging undertaking that many writers would shy away from but Szyborska approaches it with her usual fearless grace. Atropos, however, is more than a little prickly and defensive about the deadly work she has been deeply committed to for thousands of years. They part with Szyborska’s “Au revoir” (*Do widzenia*). How many poets would conclude an interview with death with such a breezy “until we meet again”?

“Greek Statue” describes in relentless detail the wear and tear of time on this ancient and now decaying representation of what was once a young and beautiful human body:

It first removed the nose, then the genitalia,
next, one by one, the toes and fingers,

over the years the arms, one after the other

This memento mori inventory awaits us all. However, Szyborska’s various approaches to death are not grim or ghastly, but are leavened with a gentle humor that lifts the weight from these harbingers of finality. An exception to this lightness is “Labyrinth,” the penultimate poem in *Here*. It does not resemble Zbigniew Herbert’s quiet recollection of his Minoan visit in the *Labyrinth On The Sea*. Her way through the labyrinth proceeds with the ragged and edgy unpredictability of an implacable labyrinth that leads her.

to the very intersection
where your hopes, errors, failures,
efforts, plans, and new hopes
cross paths
so as to part.

Szyborska continued to write after she completed *Here*, and we can look forward to the posthumous publication of her final work, *Dwukropek* or *Colon*. In keeping with her commitment to reach into the past and make it present, the title of her next and probably last book, *Dwukropek*, is the last word of the last poem in *Here*. Her death came at home, peacefully in her sleep, surrounded by friends and relatives, “exactly as it should.” Δ

The Wall & Beyond

By **Joanna Kurowska**. Little Elm, Texas: eLectio Publishing (<www.electiopublishing.com>, 2012. 68 pages. Kindle edition, ISBN 13-978-1482371178, \$3.99; printed edition (2013), ISBN 10-1482371170. \$11.99.

Katia Mitova

“People have asked me, am I an American poet or a Polish poet writing in English? Maybe being a poet is supranational. It’s like being in a journey; in fact, my poetic ‘I’ often sits in a train,” states Joanna Kurowska in the fall 2011 issue of *Apple Valley Review*. There are, of course, different ways of traveling. Regular commuters tend to be oblivious of the