On One Poem by Wislawa Szymborska, the 1996 Nobel Laureate in Literature

On the cover of The End and the Beginning, the latest volume by the renowned Polish woman poet Wislawa Szymborska, is an abstract painting by Poland's foremost painter Jerzy Nowosielski. It was in fact Nowosielski, Szymborska's old friend, who introduced me to her a few years ago in Kraków. Although I had been interested in both her verbal and visual output, I asked the poet about her lesser known yet equally fascinating collages. Her deferential response was interspersed with self-conscious laughter. Since then, for me, she will remain forever the rarest type of celebrity, the one that does not exude an aura of self-importance. Szymborska, who creates, from time to time, pun-filled collages, is an art connoisseur, and, moreover, in her poetry frequently evokes masterful paintings. In this triple role, she expresses her fascination with the visible world;

Breughel's Two Monkeys

This is what I see in my dreams about final exams: two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill, the sky behind them flutters, the sea behind them flutters, the sea behind them flutters, the sea is taking its bath. The exam is the History of Mankind. I stammer and hedge.

One monkey stares and listens with mock disdain, the other seems to be dreaming away—but when it’s clear I don’t know what to say he prompts me with a gentle clinking of his chain.

Photograph of the poet from Wroclaw Czytania Szymborskiej (Krakow: 1996)

joy, no matter what its origin.
Yet one cannot claim that this is a systematic tendency of hers, for Szymborska's imagination resists all systems by creating anti-systems. Almost every statement we can find in her poetry has an opposite statement. In her verse, a casually conjured image is often complemented by a refined image taken from high culture, be it a medieval book illumination or a Rubens painting. All forms of culture, low or high, are for Szymborska a source of cognitive amusement and surprise. Other than children, poets perhaps are the only individuals that never lose the gift to be surprised and, in turn, to surprise the reader. Szymborska is a master at achieving this effect.

Let us look, for example, at her poem, “Breughel's Two Monkeys.” The title already informs us of the poem's point of reference—Pieter Breughel's painting from the Dahlem Museum. Szymborska takes care to preserve the painting's integrity and content. Its miniature scale is a perfect match for Szymborska's miniature poem on art. The many details captured in the painting's city and seascape are juxtaposed with a rudimentary interior that serves as a confinement for two monkeys.

Szymborska—without imposing her poetic ego on the painting—engages in a dialogical interaction with our distant cousin, the monkey. Then, she ironically reverses the roles and endows the monkey (in this case, two monkeys) with superior wisdom and experiences stemming from enslavement. In an astonishingly simple way, she shifts Breughel's personal statement on his marriage and leaving Antwerp into a universal message concerning the erroneous History of Mankind.

Why then are the two nouns marked with capital letters?
The poem appeared in 1957 during a political thaw that offered Szymborska a brief moment of freedom and allowed her to publish the first of her uncensored volumes. The History Exam was over. Very few Polish poets passed that exam during the Stalinist era. Many, in fact, compromised their talents,
Interest in Hungary Thrives at IU

The Bloomington campus of Indiana University is the major center for the study of Hungary in the United States. It is home to the Hungarian Studies program, the only such U.S. program leading to an advanced degree offering a concentration of courses devoted to Hungary, her history, culture, literature, and language. In addition to courses taught by regular faculty in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, the Hungarian program is enhanced each year by the holder of the György Ránki Chair in Hungarian Studies.

The Hungarian Chair is an endowed position funded jointly by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and IU and filled by a professor appointed from Hungary. Established by an agreement in 1979, it represented the rather unusual arrangement of an appointee from a Communist country serving on the faculty of an American public university.

This year's Hungarian Chair is Laszlo Borhi of the Institute of History at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This spring, he has been teaching two courses on the political economy of Hungary and Hungarian foreign policy, while working on a historical study of the American response to Soviet rule in Hungary during the period 1944-56. Borhi also organized an international conference, "Hungarian Contributions to Scholarship," which was attended by the Ambassador of the Hungarian Republic, His Excellency György Bánlaki.

The conference took place April 5-6 and brought together some 20 scholars from the region.

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