



Richard Wilbur

(1921-2017)

Altitudes (1956)

1

Look up into the dome:
It is a great salon, a brilliant place,
Yet not too splendid for the race
Whom we imagine there, wholly at home

With the gold-rosetted white
Wainscot, the oval windows, and the fault -
Less figures of the painted vault.
Strolling, conversing in that precious light,

They chat no doubt of love.
The pleasant burden of their courtesy
Borne down at times to you and me
Where, in this dark, we stand and gaze above.

For all they cannot share,
All that the world cannot in fact afford,
Their lofty premises are floored
With the massed voices of continual prayer.

2

How far it is from here
To Emily Dickinson's father's house in America;
Think of her climbing a spiral stair
Up to the little cupola with its clear

Small panes, its room for one.
Like the dark house below, so full of eyes
In mirrors and of shut-in flies,
This chamber furnished only with the sun

Is she and she alone,
A mood to which she rises, in which she sees

Bird-choristers in all the trees
And a wild shining of the pure unknown

On Amherst. This is caught
In the dormers of a neighbor, who, no doubt,
Will before long be coming out
To pace about his garden, lost in thought.