

**Life while you wait**

Life while you wait.  
Performance without rehearsal.  
Body without alterations.  
Head without premeditation.

I know nothing of the role I play.  
I only know it's mine. I can't exchange it.

I have to guess on the spot  
Just what this play's all about.

Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,  
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.  
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.  
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.  
I can't conceal my hayseed manners.  
My instincts are for happy histrionics.  
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.  
Extenuating circumstances strike me as cruel.

Words and impulses you can't take back,  
Stars you'll never get counted,  
Your character like a raincoat you button on the run?  
The pitiful results of all the unexpectedness.

If only I could just rehearse one Wednesday in advance,  
Or repeat a single Thursday that has passed!  
But here comes Friday with a script I haven't seen.  
Is it fair, I ask  
(my voice a little hoarse,  
since I couldn't ever clear my voice offstage)?

You'd be wrong to think that it's just a slapdash quiz  
Taken in makeshift accommodations. Oh no.  
I'm standing on the set and I see how strong it is.  
The props are surprisingly precise.  
The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.  
The farthest galaxies have been turned on.  
Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere,  
And whatever I do  
Will become forever what I've done.

## **A Contribution to Statistics**

Out of a hundred people, those who always know better-- fifty-two  
doubting every step-- nearly all the rest  
glad to lend a hand. if it doesn't take too long-- as high as forty-nine  
always good, because they can't be otherwise-- four, well maybe five  
able to admire without envy-- eighteen  
suffering illusions, induced by fleeting youth-- sixty, give or take a few  
not to be taken lightly-- forty and four  
living in constant fear of someone or something-- seventy-seven  
capable of happiness-- twenty-something tops  
harmless singly, savage in crowds-- half at least  
cruel, when forced by circumstances-- better not to know even ballpark figures  
wise after the fact-- just a couple more than wise before it  
taking only things from life—thirty. (I wish I were wrong)  
hunched in pain, no flashlight in the dark-- eighty-three, sooner or later  
righteous-- thirty-five, which is a lot  
righteous and understanding-- three  
worthy of compassion-- ninety-nine  
mortal-- a hundred out of a hundred---  
Thus far this figure still remains unchanged.

## **Utopia**

Island where all becomes clear.  
Solid ground beneath your feet.

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here  
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.

The Tree of Understanding, dazzlingly straight and simple,  
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.

The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:  
the Valley of Obviously.

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

Echoes stir unsummoned  
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.  
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.  
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,  
and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches  
turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave  
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

### **The Three Oddest Words**

When I pronounce the word Future,  
the first syllable already belongs to the past.

When I pronounce the word Silence,  
I destroy it.

When I pronounce the word Nothing,  
I make something no non-being can hold.

### **Possibilities**

I prefer movies.  
I prefer cats.  
I prefer the oaks along the Warta.  
I prefer Dickens to Dostoyevsky.  
I prefer myself liking people  
to myself loving mankind.  
I prefer keeping a needle and thread on hand, just in case.  
I prefer the color green.  
I prefer not to maintain  
that reason is to blame for everything.  
I prefer exceptions.  
I prefer to leave early.  
I prefer talking to doctors about something else.

I prefer the old fine-lined illustrations.  
I prefer the absurdity of writing poems  
to the absurdity of not writing poems.  
I prefer, where love's concerned, nonspecific anniversaries  
that can be celebrated every day.  
I prefer moralists  
who promise me nothing.  
I prefer cunning kindness to the over-trustful kind.  
I prefer the earth in civvies.  
I prefer conquered to conquering countries.  
I prefer having some reservations.  
I prefer the hell of chaos to the hell of order.  
I prefer Grimms' fairy tales to the newspapers' front pages.  
I prefer leaves without flowers to flowers without leaves.  
I prefer dogs with uncropped tails.  
I prefer light eyes, since mine are dark.  
I prefer desk drawers.  
I prefer many things that I haven't mentioned here  
to many things I've also left unsaid.  
I prefer zeroes on the loose  
to those lined up behind a cipher.  
I prefer the time of insects to the time of stars.  
I prefer to knock on wood.  
I prefer not to ask how much longer and when.  
I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility  
that existence has its own reason for being.

## **The Joy of Writing**

Why does this written doe bound through these written woods?  
For a drink of written water from a spring  
whose surface will xerox her soft muzzle?  
Why does she lift her head; does she hear something?  
Perched on four slim legs borrowed from the truth,  
she pricks up her ears beneath my fingertips.  
Silence – this word also rustles across the page  
and parts the boughs  
that have sprouted from the word “woods.”

Lying in wait, set to pounce on the blank page,  
are letters up to no good,  
clutches of clauses so subordinate  
they'll never let her get away.

Each drop of ink contains a fair supply  
of hunters, equipped with squinting eyes behind their sights,  
prepared to swarm the sloping pen at any moment,  
surround the doe, and slowly aim their guns.

They forget that what's here isn't life.  
Other laws, black on white, obtain.  
The twinkling of an eye will take as long as I say,  
and will, if I wish, divide into tiny eternities,  
full of bullets stopped in mid-flight.  
Not a thing will ever happen unless I say so.  
Without my blessing, not a leaf will fall,  
not a blade of grass will bend beneath that little hoof's full stop.

Is there then a world  
where I rule absolutely on fate?  
A time I bind with chains of signs?  
An existence become endless at my bidding?

The joy of writing.  
The power of preserving.  
Revenge of a mortal hand.

## **On Death, without Exaggeration**

It can't take a joke,  
find a star, make a bridge.  
It knows nothing about weaving, mining, farming,  
building ships, or baking cakes.

In our planning for tomorrow,  
it has the final word,  
which is always beside the point.

It can't even get the things done  
that are part of its trade:  
dig a grave,  
make a coffin,  
clean up after itself.

Preoccupied with killing,  
it does the job awkwardly,  
without system or skill.  
As though each of us were its first kill.

Oh, it has its triumphs,  
but look at its countless defeats,  
missed blows,  
and repeat attempts!

Sometimes it isn't strong enough  
to swat a fly from the air.  
Many are the caterpillars  
that have outcrawled it.

All those bulbs, pods,  
tentacles, fins, tracheae,  
nuptial plumage, and winter fur  
show that it has fallen behind  
with its halfhearted work.

Ill will won't help  
and even our lending a hand with wars and coups d'etat  
is so far not enough.

Hearts beat inside eggs.  
Babies' skeletons grow.  
Seeds, hard at work, sprout their first tiny pair of leaves  
and sometimes even tall trees fall away.

Whoever claims that it's omnipotent  
is himself living proof  
that it's not.

There's no life  
that couldn't be immortal  
if only for a moment.

Death  
always arrives by that very moment too late.

In vain it tugs at the knob  
of the invisible door.  
As far as you've come  
can't be undone.

## Advertisement

I'm a tranquilizer.  
I'm effective at home.  
I work in the office.  
I can take exams  
on the witness stand.  
I mend broken cups with care.  
All you have to do is take me,  
let me melt beneath your tongue,  
just gulp me  
with a glass of water.

I know how to handle misfortune,  
how to take bad news.  
I can minimize injustice,  
lighten up God's absence,  
or pick the widow's veil that suits your face.  
What are you waiting for—  
have faith in my chemical compassion.

You're still a young man/woman.  
It's not too late to learn how to unwind.  
Who said  
you have to take it on the chin?

Let me have your abyss.  
I'll cushion it with sleep.  
You'll thank me for giving you  
four paws to fall on.

Sell me your soul.  
There are no other takers.

There is no other devil anymore.

## Consolation

Darwin.

They say he read novels to relax,  
But only certain kinds:  
nothing that ended unhappily.  
If anything like that turned up,  
enraged, he flung the book into the fire.

True or not,  
I'm ready to believe it.

Scanning in his mind so many times and places,  
he'd had enough of dying species,  
the triumphs of the strong over the weak,  
the endless struggles to survive,  
all doomed sooner or later.  
He'd earned the right to happy endings,  
at least in fiction  
with its diminutions.

Hence the indispensable  
silver lining,  
the lovers reunited, the families reconciled,  
the doubts dispelled, fidelity rewarded,  
fortunes regained, treasures uncovered,  
stiff-necked neighbors mending their ways,  
good names restored, greed daunted,  
old maids married off to worthy parsons,  
troublemakers banished to other hemispheres,  
forgers of documents tossed down the stairs,  
seducers scurrying to the altar,  
orphans sheltered, widows comforted,  
pride humbled, wounds healed over,  
prodigal sons summoned home,  
cups of sorrow thrown into the ocean,  
hankies drenched with tears of reconciliation,  
general merriment and celebration,  
and the dog Fido,  
gone astray in the first chapter,  
turns up barking gladly  
in the last.

## **Photograph from September 11**

They jumped from the burning floors—  
one, two, a few more,  
higher, lower.

The photograph halted them in life,  
and now keeps them  
above the earth toward the earth.

Each is still complete,  
with a particular face  
and blood well hidden.

There's enough time  
for hair to come loose,  
for keys and coins  
to fall from pockets.

They're still within the air's reach,  
within the compass of places  
that have just now opened.

I can do only two things for them—  
describe this flight  
and not add a last line.

## **The End and the Beginning**

After every war  
someone has to clean up.  
The Things won't  
straighten themselves up, after all.

Someone has to push the rubble  
to the side of the road,  
so the corpse-filled wagons  
can pass.

Someone has to get mired  
in scum and ashes,

sofa springs,  
splintered glass,  
and bloody rags.

Someone has to drag in a girder  
to prop up a wall.  
Someone has to glaze a window,  
rehang a door.

Photogenic it's not,  
and takes years.  
All the cameras have left  
for another war.

We'll need the bridges back,  
and new railway stations.  
Sleeves will go ragged  
from rolling them up.

Someone, broom in hand,  
still recalls the way it was.  
Someone else listens  
and nods with unsevered head.  
But already there are those nearby  
starting to mill about  
who will find it dull.

From out of the bushes  
sometimes someone still unearths  
rusted-out arguments  
and carries them to the garbage pile.

Those who knew  
what was going on here  
must make way for  
those who know little.  
And less than little.  
And finally as little as nothing.

In the grass that has overgrown  
causes and effects,  
someone must be stretched out  
blade of grass in his mouth  
gazing at the clouds.