Wisława Szymborska: Life-While-You-Wait
by Maria Popova

One spring evening not too long ago, I joined the wonderful Amanda Palmer on a small and friendly stage at Chicago’s Old Town School of Folk Music and we read some Polish poetry together from Map: Collected and Last Poems (public library) — the work of Nobel laureate Wisława Szymborska (July 2, 1923–February 1, 2012), for whom we share deep affection and admiration.

When Szymborska was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996 “for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality,” the Nobel commission rightly called her “the Mozart of poetry” — but, wary of robbing her poetry of its remarkable dimension, added that it also emanates “something of the fury of Beethoven.” I often say that she is nothing short of Bach, the supreme enchanter of the human spirit.

Amanda has previously lent her beautiful voice to my favorite Szymborska poem, “Possibilities,” and she now lends it to another favorite from this final volume, “Life While-You-Wait” — a bittersweet ode to life’s string of unrepeatable moments, each the final point in a fractal decision tree of what-ifs that add up to our destiny, and a gentle invitation to soften the edges of the heart as we meet ourselves along the continuum of our becoming.

Please enjoy:

brainpicker · Amanda Palmer reads "Life While-You-Wait" by Wisława Szymborska

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 this 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 even clear my throat 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.

Map: Collected and Last Poems, translated by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak, is a work of immense beauty in its 464-page totality. Complement it with Amanda’s bewitching reading of “Possibilities” — her art, like Brain Pickings, is free and made possible by donations. In fact, she wrote a whole fantastic book about the mutually dignifying and gratifying gift of patronage.