

# Still Life

Alexander Long



## *Still Life without History*

I offer this because I can.

I'm American.

But why can't I make out a single word of what this *it* is,

Why do I feel more lost than a t-shirt  
Of Ernesto Guevara I saw hanging

In a boutique off Aldstadter Ring, where Kafka  
Snuck a smoke before Hitler and Stalin

Tried to erase the names of the streets?

*Praha* loosely translates into *threshold*,

And those who were there are here now  
In something I can't compose, whose motif

Is what they've lost,

This *it* I'm not permitted to touch,  
But want.

Some sing to the star that burns  
The first snow no one can mark.

Others listen a long time

For a deeper translation that knits itself  
Into the stubborn weeds along a riverbank

Where an elderly couple gathers water  
As snow fills the space of the long yield

Still others call hope,

Until History appears on its chestnut mare,  
Dressed in the state-issued drab-green coat and hat,

Chewing an unlit cigar, filing its report:

What they hear is History itself, a joke that no one gets—

Even the teller, the one who cries with laughter.

He tells the joke over and over and over

Until those listening catch on that the joke is  
There is no joke, but only moments

Of stars shining, brief flickers to sing to.

Until the joke, in fact, becomes a song the state accommodates,  
Something as forgettable as water music,

As water. *This* water I can't touch.

What does it feel like to sing air fissioned  
By an accident called History?

I'm American.

How do you compose water  
Sliding through your hands, fire sung to,

A body here, a song there,

There, in the mouth of a schoolgirl  
In a city once called Pripyat, a village once called Raduga:

It's December, 1989, and she taps her foot on the cracked asphalt,  
Bored with singing to herself.

She waits for the sign to hoist the flag,

Only there's no one to give the sign,  
Nor was there ever a flag agreed upon.

And though her feet are numb and her nose runs,

She doesn't know when to give up,  
When to raise the flag that doesn't exist

Yet. And all I see in this moment  
Is that there's no one to call her back

To the chores of pickling cucumbers, no one to punish  
Her for skipping the piano lesson

Her father saved and saved for;  
No cucumbers, no piano, no teacher, no music.

How is that? That can't be, can it?

I mean, I hear something.

*Still Life with Abraham Lincoln,  
Twenty-Three Years before the Confederacy Shot Him,  
a Hundred Years before the Nazis Tried to Prove Him Wrong*

Or let's say we have no choice.

Pick a century.

Let's say we're in a line that stretches a hundred train cars long.

It's August in Bergen-Belsen, Gettysburg, Springfield.

Or it's the night before  
He gets married, and after eighteen months of separation, Lincoln comes

To the exact place Mary Todd instructs him.

Before he can breathe *no*, his toes curl and his soul smolders.

\* \* \*

Now, let's say, he understands the fear and the rapture  
Of tigers sprung from cages of P.T. Barnum.

Let's say, in this moment, Lincoln resigns  
Himself fully to pleasure, forsaking no one,

Then thinks better of it.

After all, a man with scruples will not simply fuck  
And walk away. This is why Davis will take him down,

And know that he can.

But, it's still 1842, and look here,  
His letters gush like Job:

*To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me.*

His depression eclipses, say, Poe's or Plath's.

His only allies, Celan & Kafka, nod their assent.

After the fact, they've blessed him and sing with the wrens:

*We came to this together, we'll finish this together.*

\* \* \*

He sweats on the courthouse steps. He pushes  
His glasses *up* from the tip of his nose.

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