

Still Life from the Zone of Alienation

1. The Red Forest

*Mati Zemlya, subdue every evil and unclean being
so that they may not cast a spell on us or do us any harm*

At 1:36am the pine forest turned
red. A sickly, ginger, rusty red as if
the sap had turned to blood and
flooded the needles with screams of pain. The
air tasted metallic and all life was
silenced in that great exhalation of
fissured breath. Within the noxious cloud the
trees gagged and retched: contamination
entered their bark, xylem, radiated through
the heartwood, liquified the pith into pools
of poison. Bleeding outwards red needles
fell to the ground and no one saw this
happen. The forest died instantly. Cloaked in
a deep stillness Mati Zemlya wept. Looked
on days later, as the machines moved in,
stripping the earth of deadwood, burying it in
trenches, enclosing all in a
sarcophagus of sand. A mass
grave of trees over which she sings her lullaby
of sorrow.

2. The School Stairwell

*Mati Zemlya, calm the North winds and
clouds, subdue the snowstorms and the cold*

It was 27th April 1986. To the North, in
a school, a stairwell. On it twelve flags
bright with the red of the Soviet states. Little
rectangular cards pasted on a pistachio
green wall. Estonia, Latvia, Uzbekistan,
Armenia, Byelorussia. Ensigns of a time
in realignment.

By 1994 the institutional green of
the wall was peeling in frilled strips which
folded over and around themselves delicately,
like the petticoats of mushrooms.
The red forest of flags were fading.
Byelorussia, Armenia, Turkmenia
and Karelia had disappeared completely;
plucked off the wall permanently by time.
Now 30 years later, only the red field
of Kirghizia remains. Time has
swallowed the golden hammers and
sickles, the stars, the blue bars. Around it
there is no trace of green left. Plaster, broken
in places, exposes a skeleton of
brickwork. Red water encircles the surviving
piece of card. An island, a signpost of
childhood, marooned in time.

3. The Waiting Room

Mati Zemlya, calm the winds and all bad weather. Calm the moving sands and whirlwinds.

In 2015 the waiting room of the children's hospital is bright with reds, greens and yellows. Sunlight streams through a large rectangular picture window, filling the space with gold. There are no children here now, no toys on the floor, no parents waiting anxiously, no doctors or nurses. There is no glass in the window and vegetation blurs the edges of the frame. The carpet is covered with red virginia creeper. Bluebells, marigolds, hollyhocks and chamomile break through the red with splashes of joy. The chromatics of spring. Young birch, spruce and larch, growing on once gravelled paths, stretch gently in the breeze, nodding in a landscape frozen in silence. A roe deer steps delicately over the windowsill and sniffs the air inside. Patiently Mati Zemlya has restored this place to a vision which is her own. Still, life remains in the zone of alienation. New life imprinted on the old.