



Arthur, Chris. *What Is It Like to Be Alive? Fourteen Attempts at an Answer*. Rochester: EastOver Press, 2024.

A Flight into the Past: Chris Arthur's

What Is It Like to Be Alive? Fourteen Attempts at an Answer (2024)

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) — a treatise centred on the question of suicide — hypothesises that the meaning of life is essentially what prevents us from taking our own. In this context, a person's ultimate freedom is not found in discovering a decisive reason for existence, but rather in finding daily motivations to shape a life whose future feels acceptable to them. Camus's philosophy of living, therefore, is deeply bound to an ontological question — one grounded in the verb to be: What is the meaning of life? or What are the meanings of living?

Chris Arthur, in *What Is It Like to Be Alive? Fourteen Attempts at an Answer* (2024), his latest collection of essays, addresses a similar problem from an entirely different angle. Rather than confronting the contentious question of life's meaning, he turns instead to the more tangible subject of the experience of living, examining everyday incidents which, despite their apparent triviality, prove rich in concealed meanings about the sheer accident of worldly existence. Arthur's meditation on living is thus tied not to an ontological, but to a contemplative question — one grounded less in a verb than in a predicative adjective, or perhaps a preposition: What is it like to be alive? or What is the experience of living like?

Reprising the approach he adopted in *Hidden Cargoes* (2022), Arthur scrutinises a series of seemingly insignificant moments and objects to extrapolate new perspectives on his own encounter with the world. From introspective musings provoked by old photographs to

speculative reflections inspired by the instinctive behaviour of wild animals, his essays delve into the almost imperceptible threads that weave the intricate fabric of lived reality.

The clearest expression of this project appears in his title essay, “What Is It Like to Be Alive?”, which centres on the uncanny emotions and reflections prompted by a photograph of a Swedish boy and his horse standing in a snowy landscape. After a descriptive synthesis of the image — the small, heavily clad boy holding the reins of a white horse towering behind him — Arthur links it to the caption on the reverse side: “A little boy with a horse in winter, 1958. Sweden.” From there, he finds within himself the unsettling question posed by his title: what is it like to be alive?

A conventionally academic mind might attempt to answer this through some formulaic synthesis — a universal response designed to provide closure — but Arthur allows himself instead to drift imaginatively back into the world of the photograph. The result is not a definitive conclusion but a personal reverie, an impression that conveys what he truly means by his haunting question: the reconstruction, within oneself, of another’s existence in the world.

At first glance, this might appear naïve or even absurd; yet Arthur demonstrates how such an endeavour can acquire validity as an act of language. Without presuming to appropriate the past or the experiences of others, he focuses on re-enacting those experiences as his own, thereby rebuilding history from elements hitherto overlooked.

Aleida Assmann, in “Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory” (1996), explains that history and cultural memory are constructed through processes of selection — mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion by which the present is composed of certain preservations and rejections of the past. Those rejected elements, she writes, become “cultural waste”: legitimate fragments of culture that, through equally legitimate acts of omission, are dismissed as irrelevant to the shaping of the present. Yet, she observes, what is once deemed worthless may later be re-evaluated as vital for the structuring of contemporary meaning. Anselm Kiefer’s *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe* (Faith, Hope, Love, 2011), for instance, employs the salvaged remains of an aircraft propeller — its three blades inscribed with those words — to evoke, in the present, the horror of war and, more broadly, of the Second World War itself.

Although Assmann’s focus lies on the collective dimension of cultural memory, her insights apply equally to Arthur’s essays, which explore the selective processes by which an

individual constructs their own perception of reality as an existence in time. By writing an entire essay around the photograph of the Swedish boy and his horse — cultural detritus long ignored as trivial — Arthur reinscribes that forgotten image within history and culture, creating for himself a new fragment of reality that lends substance and, ultimately, lends meaning to his own experience of being alive.

Arthur writes in the essay:

Perhaps part of the appeal the photograph holds for me is that in 1958 I was about the same age as the little boy pictured. This makes me feel a kind of fugitive companionship, knowing that we've run life's course together, kept pace invisibly through the years without either of us realising it, he following his life-story, I following mine, each locked into our own particular orbits of concern, members of a secret guild of unmet contemporaries, innocently complicit in the simultaneity of our momentary being. (68)

A distinctive feature of *Hidden Cargoes* was Arthur's use of the analytical technique of *Ansatzpunkt*: the selection of a minute detail of reality as the starting point from which to unfold a wider interpretation of the world. In *What Is It Like to Be Alive?*, however, he adopts a different method — one akin to Roland Barthes's concepts of *punctum* and *studium* in his writings on photography. By identifying specific puncta — small but striking details within an image — and relating them to its broader composition, Arthur seeks to comprehend both the photograph's larger reality and his own affective response to it. The *studium* that follows is then an effort to invest the image with emotional resonance and to situate it within both collective and personal histories. His essays often revolve around particular images drawn from his own experiences — from the Swedish boy's photograph to the Utagawa Hiroshige's paintings and George Rodger's photographs of the Shoah — balancing *punctum* and *studium* as he attempts to piece together a new past and, through it, a renewed sense of living.

Arthur in fact writes in the Introduction of the book:

The value of asking “What is it like to be alive?” lies not so much in the specifics of any of the countless answers that could be given as in the space for reflection that it opens up — the way in which thinking about it attunes the mind to notes that can be missed if we only listen in the register set by our everyday preoccupations. (xiii)

Most of Arthur's essays may sound a melancholic note — an inevitable cadence in writing that, in Romantic fashion, gathers fragments of the past to reconstruct the present. Yet his “attempts at an answer” range from sombre to luminous, mirroring his commitment to making sense of his own encounter with the world's contingencies. His work thus treads a delicate line between Camus's and Assmann's philosophies, replacing the former's search for categorical truths with intricate linguistic experiments, while extending the latter's reflections on cultural memory into a personal vision of reality as an imaginative weaving of subjective experience.

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