

Ian C. Williams

Traversing Disconnection

Maureen Alsop. *Later, Knives & Trees*. Negative Capability Press, 2014.

Amid its swirls of vivid, dream-like imagery, Maureen Alsop's *Later, Knives & Trees* engages and explores a convergence of isolation, intense pain, and abandonment. Harkening back to her collection, *Apparition Wren* (Main Street Rag 2007), Alsop delves into dreams, dissecting their images and assembling meaning. However, the assemblages gleaned from *Later, Knives & Trees* occupy a darker, more complicated realm.

These poems voice a grief akin to “the song tucked into the death that named you,” a pain in the midst of disconnection. Alsop grapples with estrangement, whether internal or external, social or cosmic, intimate or coldly precise. In these poems, we are not only inclined, but also taught to examine what it is to connect with those around us and to experience the trauma that breeds when these connections are severed.

Almost immediately, Alsop's poems introduce the strained distance that characterizes the collection as a whole, voicing in “Vetiver,” “Your soul lost contact with your other soul.” The speaker mourns that which pulls us apart from each other and ourselves. As readers, we are compelled to relate to this distance, and even though these poems don't always voice specific relationships or our connection with them, they share an intimacy that is impossible not to experience through the reading.

Despite its exploration of disconnection, *Later, Knives & Trees* also flourishes in its embrace of relationship, its celebration of passion, and in the complications that inevitably arise as relationships mature. Alsop masterfully shows us the beauty of young love and intimacy, and artfully follows that image with wrenching obstacles, with “reluctant text” and “asters scattered.” What is loss without first knowing love? And further, what worth is absence without closeness? Alsop knows these relationships, voicing the jubilation that surrounds love and the mystic renewal that embraces it:

The silent dim of a new song
snaps the meadow.

We hear each other again, as if for the first time, in these

dreams that follow death.
Our voices, now, made bright by the sun—

But text must hesitate and something must scatter the asters. These poems know that the irrepressible emotions that overcome death and sing in spite of silence never last. How more often do they wither and decay than bloom again after the winter? In “A Willow Tree and Often, a River,” the speaker questions the cosmos and roles we play in it, articulating the pain of loss:

Soon there is distance in love. Soon, you, who have always
been proud pass through me.

The impulse for home once will be lost.

Where closeness that defied mortality once dwelled, indifference has taken residence. As the speaker attempts to understand this shift, the will to return home has disappeared. Alsop reaches into loss and withdraws the transformations that it takes. How easily love turns apathetic. How quickly pain twists into malice. The poems not only show how distance pulls even the most intimate relationships apart, but, as in “Etch,” they show us how it can become malignant and irresistible: “You would no longer / whisper with your lips close to my throat. So I lay my throat under the knife.” The poems in *Later, Knives & Trees* don’t revolve around conventional ideas of love and loss that populate so many books; rather, they explore a web of emotions that are never easily understood.

Yet, almost invisibly, a quiet strength rises over the course of these poems, developing into a steadfast determination that refuses to be quelled. This strength declares, “I will answer by surface, photographing the / wind. Until I am received.” After the struggle to connect, the searing pain of loss and the residual pangs of mourning, the speaker of these poems still harnesses a strength of will and courage that defies grief. It is in this subtlety that Alsop’s strength as a poet manifests, in the quiet, irrepressible courage that resonates with readers long after they have returned the book to the shelf and walked out into the world to wrestle their own grief.

Maureen Alsop’s poems appeared in *Kestrel* 29. —Eds.

Drew Myron

Muscle, Memory and Grit

Rick Campbell. *The History of Steel: A Selected Works*.
All Nations Press, 2014.

From the start, *The History of Steel* roots us to place:

This is who I am; this is where I come from—my river,

my barges, my mill, my smokestack, my town
full of soot.

Setting a tone of pride and declaration, this themed collection is both a love song to Pittsburgh and a striking personal history. Though he's previously published four solid poetry collections, this is Rick Campbell's most intimate and inviting work.

The pages ooze with slag and smog, in poems vivid with memory and mood. "No one danced in our soot-gray streets," he remembers in "Drinking Rum and Coca-Cola."

In a manner similar to friend and mentor Philip Levine, Campbell shares poems from his working class roots. He sinks back into the city's mills to create a poetic reflection of get-by and grit. The language here is distinct to the region and the imagery is vivid enough to pull us with him to the river's foul banks in "The Poem in the River":

our world began here and it's come to this—
the mill burning the black sky, cranking, screeching,
hissing through the night. The beauty
of the fire and light dancing on slick water.

These are poems strong and sure, thick with muscle and ache, but it's the essays—just two, I wish there were more—that set this book apart. In these straightforward mini-memoirs, we get ballast for the poems.

"We lived in a steel town in a steel valley," Campbell writes in "The New World." "Everything we had and most of the things we wanted or hated came from the mill across the river or mills up river."

When his mother attempts suicide, it's Campbell and his brother who must save her, and then carry a mix of anger and guilt

when she is committed to a mental hospital. The childhood hauntings pour from Campbell's prose in a grainy but fevered film, and as readers we feel the heft of these confessions. They both give weight to Campbell's more opaque poems and provide pause for compassion—his and ours—to rise and hold.

In another essay, "The Last Parade," he offers a candid accounting of his father's life and death: "I never liked my father," he admits. "He made me nervous."

Primarily a showcase for previously published poems, these selected works—not to be confused with a collected works—provide a curated Rick Campbell retrospective. At 63, Campbell is too young for a swan song collection, but with sections divided into "Discovery," "Exploration," "Settlement," and "Redemption Songs," the book carries a distinct sense of looking back. And it's only natural that Campbell, an accomplished poet, professor and publisher, would take stock. He served as director of Anhinga Press for twenty years, and has taught at Florida A&M University for nearly thirty years.

The History of Steel gives us two histories really, that of poet and place. This collection is a mix of heartache and pride calling from miles and years away. You can't shake your history. Campbell says so himself in the sobering villanelle, "Elegy":

We live here, where we were always bound.
Steel towns have ways of calling home their own.
Too many of us come back to this town.

Rick Campbell's poems and essays have appeared in *Kestrel* 22, 28, 30, and in this issue; he was guest poetry editor for *Kestrel* 33. —Eds.

Linda H. Heuring

Odyssey of the Senses

Nancy Takacs. *Blue Patina*. Blue Begonia Press, 2015.

Nancy Takacs takes you places. Sometimes to places you'd love to visit: Mirror Lake, Balance Rock, the wilds of Lake Superior. Sometimes to places you'd rather not go: the back stoop where a fallen and bloodied father asks for help. But in spite of yourself, with each poem in her latest collection, *Blue Patina*, Takacs paints a landscape that you drift, or rather fall into, and then *wham*, you know why you were drawn there.

Wham might not be in the regular poetry review vernacular, but Takacs is no regular poet. She has divided *Blue Patina* into four sections, "The Voices," "Utah Map," "The Worrier," and "Still," and infused each with a sense of place determined by the five senses and the vision of a woman at one with her environment.

Childhood dominates the first section, glimpses of growing up Catholic in New Jersey. In a quartet of poems about Sundays, "Sunday, Father" begins with him handing his wife a birthday card, then heading out for "church," aka Campbell's Tavern, "in his navy blue suit, tucking a hand in the breast of his jacket, / being Dean Martin." But in her way, Takacs strips away that holy day charm:

When our roast chicken is long out of the oven,
our pie just done, my father's heavy steps
sparkle on our skin. At the back door he calls me—*Apple,*
I fell. I'm bloody. Come clean me up.

It is in one of the childhood poems, "English," that Takacs shares her first glimpses of what her future held:

In eighth grade, strict Sister Rose made us write
an essay about ourselves. I started with the title
and couldn't think of one. I hated the personal . . .

But the next year she found her voice:

Then in ninth grade, Mrs. McCarthy,
with her disheveled blouses and crowded teeth,

assigned a poem, with a metaphor, not about me,
but a body of light. I wrote about Venus,
her distance
and electricity.

That voice, pulling you in like a siren, echoes through the
second section, as in its title poem, “Utah Map”:

It itches with sand in its crevices . . .

The briny breath of the Great Salt Lake.
The eyes of the Temple.

As in many of her poems, Takacs contrasts life there with the
expanse of the desert and the mountains, from the young women with
braided hair in a sporting goods store to the petroglyphs she sat beside
to write. Through it all, though, is a love affair with the land:

My husband and I have been lost here
on and off for thirty years, our jeep
clawing its way over slick rock
or getting stuck in quicksand. I don’t know
how we found the nerve to dig down,
pull grasses, heave stones from old avalanches
to rock under our wheels, how we had the sense
to find our way back. I don’t know
how we lost map after map.

She engulfs you in colors and textures. The blue patina of the title is
the blue-to-brown desert varnish on rock faces, formed over thousands
of years, while the colors in “‘Process’ at the Balance Rock Cafe” are
inspired by a painting by David Dornan in a cafe in Helper, Utah:

Now I know all I really love is color,
blood in the process, how truth
comes from the shuffle,
touched, moved aside, jumbled, left to wait
by the artist-dresser for his new wearer.

The third section is composed of “The Worrier” poems, a
departure from Takacs’ usual style, yet filled with the imagery for
which she is known. Each poem is an intimate conversation between
different facets of the self, and here she writes about bees and boaters
and the body. In “The Worrier *the body*” she describes silence:

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What is inside your silence?

An alcove of jackrabbits.
A Jeep door slamming.
The flat landscape of a lip.

What else does silence hold?

Billowing words,
blueberry sheets,
the failsafe,
the bitter scent of marigold,
what I never said to my parents,
the flourishing, the flourishing,
the deadweight.

But Takacs doesn't let us rest there:

What is still pure?

Purity always waits
for a crime.

“Still,” the title poem of the fourth section, tackles creativity and imagination:

How far our imaginations have taken us.
How far
the path of a bee from that of a search engine,
but still both as delicate as
unruly sparks in the brain.

Where Takacs has taken us in *Blue Patina* is into her world, her perfect and flawed and imagined landscapes of rock and dust and water and asphalt. She takes us places we don't want to miss.

Nancy Takacs' poems have appeared in *Kestrel* 24, 26, 29, 33, and in this issue. —Eds.

Olivia Kate Cerrone

A Tenuous Balance

Maria Terrone. *Eye to Eye*. Bordighera Press, 2014.

In *Eye to Eye*, Maria Terrone's most recent collection of poetry, language transcends the boundaries of memory and imagination, offering a more penetrating look into the workings of grief and desire. Time becomes a fluid construct, evoking a sense of constant movement and possibility—one feels as though one can travel anywhere in the realm of her poems. In the opening, "Spaccanapoli," the narrator emerges as a spectator in an ancient section of Naples, absorbed with a rich array of sensations that soon bend into fantasy:

Ciao! Bella! Over-ripe vowels
thicken the air; I'm lost in black eyes, as if tumbling
through layers of earth and time into a chamber swelled
by a cult's chant . . .

The image of eyes serves as an alluring motif throughout each of the four sections of this book, questioning the limits of perception and intimacy. In the title poem, eighteenth-century loved ones exchange miniature portraits of a beloved's eye—keepsakes to foster remembrance and desire against distance and loss. Terrone ends this poem with the image of Lazarus, risen and seen, but still apart from the living, harboring knowledge impenetrable through sight alone.

The presence of such distance, compounded by a longing for greater intimacy, is found in many of the poems in this collection. In "The Manicurists," the narrator silently wonders about the private history of her nail technician, who speaks with her co-workers in a tongue not shared with their Western clientele. In "Pastorale," the narrator struggles to penetrate the strange, alienating mystery of her brother, Bob, whose home is surrounded by a collection of armored trucks, revealing a lifelong obsession with the military. In one of the most heartbreaking poems of the collection, "Across the Gulf," the narrator attempts to forge some deeper connection with her father, whose memory has been locked away by Alzheimer's. This unwavering sense of alienation and loss, this failure to see and be seen, also lives in the poet's larger engagement with a violent and politically-charged world. In "Missing the Names," the poet meditates on her failure to know the names of birds and nations as

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people revolt and take aim,
while impossibly brilliant birds squawk above
plazas and plains, the bloodied nameless.

The influence of social media is also a recurrent theme throughout Terrone's poetry. In "A Facebook Page in Iran," the narrator, though unable to decipher the Farsi on her friend Mohsen's homepage, still finds his grief, conveyed in "heartbroken English, / a rant that out-roared oceans," inspiring, and she is left hoping that he continues to "post and post again to burn the tyrant's Rulebook." In "The Office," the narrator peruses different web-based technology:

data-min[ing] for meaning,
believing
it's there to be found.

Perhaps the most haunting aspect of this collection is the vulnerability felt in the poet's examination of illness and mortality. In "Horsehair," the poet grasps for some higher meaning in the traumatic aftermath of cancer, as she considers the healing power of horsehair thread, used once among wounded Civil War soldiers, and now to soothe scar tissue. Layered in association—images of horses, childhood, scarred flesh, and historical commentary—the architecture of this poem is powerful in its transcendence.

A longing for release, free from mortal concerns and inevitable disappointments, is embodied in the recurrent description of birds, their joyous flight depicted with awe. In "Envyng the Birds," the narrator imagines an avian life, free of "words that ricochet and fall like spent bullets." Yet, it is through her human ancestors that Terrone takes further inspiration. In "Lace," the narrator finds hope and endurance in an ancient Mediterranean tradition, where women produce lace that is as "intricate as brain circuitry." There, the narrator depicts an empowering reminder that:

When the world is like a skein
unraveling, look again to the lace: see
how absence forms its pattern,
and purpose fills even the smallest space.

Rendered with compassion and stark honesty, the poetry of Maria Terrone offers readers a powerful meditation on life. It is a pleasure to read her work and embark on this transformative and exciting journey through a subconscious terrain crafted through language. Like the linen heirlooms passed down through generations

in “The Tatted Handkerchief,” Terrone’s poems “defy expectation, achieve a tenuous balance,” and offer redeeming beauty in the face of sorrow and uncertainty.

Maria Terrone’s essay, “A Facebook Page in Iran” appeared in *Kestrel* 31. —Eds.

Christopher Jay Vance

Not the Whole Story

Matt Zambito. *The Fantastic Congress of Oddities*. Cherry Grove Press, 2014.

Matt Zambito is a poet who understands subtlety. This collection ends with “Trying to Make a Long Story Short,” a poem which attacks and mocks the futility of poetry, of life, and all of the writing in the pages before it. Zambito tackles the hardest questions of humanity with wit, cynicism, playfulness, and unyielding faith, but never forgets that he is trying and failing to shrink the entire span of life into the tired form of a sonnet, or heroic couplets, or any other form his poetry takes. His humor and depth live in the careful layering of bold assertions over the uncertainty that persists through all facets of existence.

The collection itself takes on the form of this layering. His first section, “Theoretically,” makes fun of itself, as Zambito selects poems that ought to find the truths of life, as poetry is wont to do, but never truly pins any down. In the first poem, “It’s Just One of Those Days,” Zambito describes the overwhelming nature of the world before telling the reader that, really,

Today’s more like
one of those days you’d love

to sit out front with a big
pizza pie, plopped on the frosted stoop, pop
open the lid and celebrate.

He waves absurdity like a marching army’s flag, whether he’s turning frustration and pain into dark humor like in the poem above, or simply abandoning the seriousness of poetry altogether, as in “This is My Story (And I’m Sticking to It)” which brazenly begins: “Everybody is Carrie Frances Fisher.” Still, he uses this absurdity in his poems to shed light on the absurdity of human existence, as the above poem reminds us: “The most beautiful experience we can have / is the mysterious.”

“Flurry,” the second section of his book, peels this layer away. The truth becomes even less clear, and there is no shame in being lost in the confusion and wordplay intrinsic to these poems. “Our is slowly becoming, and Is is / always and is always becoming and

is always / just. Just what is just?" Zambito asks in "Just Because," a meditation that revels in the complex questions of existence and free will. In the previous section, humor appears in the ridiculousness of his so-called "truths," and it reappears in this section with the equally ridiculous search for truth, a self-admitted "meaningless / quest made meaningful / by repetitions" ("Stet"). This section is more than just an exercise in wordplay, as it leaves the reader with hints at conclusions, saying that "we were [...] not there to change a thing" ("Stet"), or that "there's a really big friend behind the really big universe / counting on us to count the stars until" ("The Really Big Universe").

"Zugzwang," referring to a state in chess where a player can make no move that improves the current situation, aptly describes the final section. Death and destruction are themes in this section, such as in "Fire Fires Back," a surprising poem that leaves a human powerless before the sublime strength of fire, asking, "My God, / how much water can [my hands] really hold?" Zambito avoids nihilism, however, as he peels away the layers of easy truths and intellectual scrambling of previous sections. Even in the apparent meaninglessness he has uncovered, he finds joy, and laughter, such as, "To My Friends the Erythrophobes," a poem about people who are terrified of the color red. This poem, after mocking the ever-present terror that could be part of any life, encourages the fearful to:

barge in
on your grandparents mid missionary position,
and once thoroughly embarrassed, haul ass
to the bathroom, stare at your blushing
cheeks, then weep until your eyes—Oh,
I once was blind—turn red.

Zambito's poems adopt this mindset wholeheartedly, barging in on the unexplored, scary truths in our lives throughout its sections, but eventually finding the concept of truth itself to be defunct. The poems encourage laughter in the face of gruesome, brutal, and painful events, and insists that there is no such thing as a simple truth, that the day-to-day assumptions we make about life, love, faith, and society are not the whole story. No matter the subject, Zambito brings his own appreciation of its underlying inscrutability and produces pieces memorable, meaningful, and undeniably comical. As he claims in "Trying to Make a Long Story Short," Zambito provides the reader with no answers, only "a last chance to choose—one way or another—which forever" we choose to accept.

Matt Zambito's poems appeared in *Kestrel* 28 and 31. —Eds.