

Restless, Unrelenting

Rowland Bagnall on four books that chart personal and cultural histories tinged with tragedy and inspiration

Dianne Seuss

frank: sonnets

Fitzcarraldo £12.99

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Modern Poetry

Fitzcarraldo £12.99

August Kleinzahler

A History of Western Music

Carcanet £12.99

Imogen Cassels

Silk Work

Prototype £12.99

‘The sonnet, like poverty, teaches you what you can do / without’, writes Diane Seuss in her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *frank: sonnets*, a forceful lyric memoir in which nothing from the poet’s life appears to be off limits. Encompassing her childhood in working-class Michigan and struggles with addiction, exploitative encounters with the male bravado of the New York art and poetry scene (‘their loathing / of women was indisputable’, Seuss remembers, ‘sometimes leaving genuine bruises’) and the loss of several loved ones through the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, the work included here stares back across the landscape of a troubled life, Seuss’s ‘enormous [...] raucous tragedy’, attempting to make sense of how one’s past is sharpened to the knife-edge of the present.

A sequence of 127 restless, unrelenting poems, *frank* proceeds according to an almost cinematic logic – ‘fragments / of a life that come at me like pages in a flipbook’ – with each sonnet ‘one frame in a long strip / of celluloid’. Early poems offer snapshots from a bleak (if bleakly comic) childhood in small-town America, ‘that crumbling osmotic space between wilderness and failure’, as Seuss has noted in an interview. Set in an environment in which ‘kids learned more about death than life’, the poems conjure scenes that wouldn’t appear out of place in photographs by Seuss’s namesake, Diane Arbus, America’s great chronicler of ‘the ordinary grotesque and the grotesque ordinary’, writes Susan Sontag.

In one shot, we meet the neighbours' 'peanut-headed' children, 'the oldest [...] on a leash tied to a clothesline / like a dog', living beside a woman with 'a taxidermized tiger and an uncaged / parrot' in her living room. A few pages later, an encounter with a ticket booth attendant – 'ole hook-for-a-hand' – and an episode in which the problem of the 'unspayed dog's periods' is solved 'with my sister's bikini underpants stuffed with a Kotex pad'. For all this freakishness and eccentricity, the overwhelming quality of Seuss's childhood is the persistent threat of danger: pets 'smashed by an ice-cream truck', a knife thrown at the poet's head, 'a helluva jam, sitting in the cab / of a truck between two nasty bumpkins, saved when / a turkey vulture crashed through the windshield'. Indeed, macabre events appear so commonplace in Seuss's world as to have become, in some sense, unremarkable – a 'trampoline impaled on a tree during a tornado'; the young Seuss, aged 10, struck by lightning – so much so that when a neighbour 'dove and broke his neck people / thought he was playing drowned.' 'Tragic spectacle, my realm', writes Seuss, 'I its ruthless queen.'

Seuss's spectacle unfolds with near-Shakespearean relentlessness, through her father's early death from an abdominal tumour and several turbulent relationships to a life of single parenthood and her son's dangerous drug addiction. I'm reminded, in particular, of *Titus Andronicus*, a play in which things escalate quite happily from bad to worse (and *even worse*), culminating in a famous scene where all Titus can do is laugh: 'Why, I have not another tear to shed'. '[E]au de / suffering', notes Seuss, not without a sense of humour, 'yes, I'm in that camp'.

While some readers may find this fragrance overpowering, Seuss's great strength as a poet is her confidence to be unfiltered, not to censor or adorn her work, to let the content of the poems be guided by the truth of her experience. 'Don't / narrativize, Diane. Don't narrativize Diane', ends a poem from her next collection, *Modern Poetry*: 'See what a comma can do?' ('Comma'). 'I am not the hero, certainly', she has stated in a recent interview with Juliette Jeffers, 'So owning my own sins, [my] lack of virtue, I don't think there's any shame in that.' This is not Wordsworth's emotion recollected in tranquility; tranquility, for Seuss, never seems to arrive. Instead, there is a rawness and momentum to these poems, 'the mind like a jackrabbit bounding, bounding,' as she writes in *frank*. Above all, Seuss's memoir seems to stress that the effects of history on our lives are ever-present and ongoing, that the past is not a finished product but a living, angry, flustered thing still shoving us along. As Robert Lowell suggests in *History* (1973), his own book of sonnets, 'unlike writing, life never finishes.'

Modern Poetry lifts its title from a textbook Seuss encountered as a child, as well as her first course in poetry at college. The collection mounts a critique of poetry as an academic enterprise, restricted to the classroom. 'Don't underestimate direct / experience', writes the poet in 'My Education'. 'My advice is to live on a street / in which no one will say, when you're murdered, / things like that don't happen here' ('Rhapsody'). Mimicking the textbook from which it borrows its title, *Modern Poetry* deploys a range of formal strategies – ballads and villanelles, *ars poetica* – using them to query art's relationship with actual life. The title

poem tells the story of Seuss's college class, which she attended as 'an enrapt but ill-equipped student', in the words of this collection's blurb. 'It was what I'd been waiting for my whole life', she writes, 'but I wasn't ready for poetry', at least for poetry as packaged and delivered by professors, strangely disconnected from experience. Stumped by the coldly metaphysical reflections of Wallace Stevens, Seuss's ears prick up at William Carlos Williams, grounded poet of the everyday, only to be foiled again: 'I knew something of wheelbarrows, old women, / and [...] plums, but the prof showed us // how complicated it all really was' ('Modern Poetry').

With wit, surprise, and plenty of humour – 'poetry,' ends 'Little Fugue State', 'this dog I've walked and walked / to death' – Seuss shrugs off her 'unscholarliness', accepting that her work will exist 'on the edge of tradition', 'rarely [...] anthologized', yet delighted that her poems 'with all of their / deficiencies' and 'asymmetric knowledge', will be, if nothing else, '[her] own' ('My Education'). While Seuss's work is more than worthy of its celebration, it feels peculiar – even a touch ironic – to encounter it so formally presented in its new imprint from Fitzcarraldo, a quirk of the house style. Unsurprising for an independent publisher that draws attention (rightly) to its Nobel laureates, Seuss's collections seem aesthetically imposing, Literature with a capital L, like commemorative stone ledgers on the tombs in a cathedral; they seem to signal something highly serious – indicative, in some ways, of the very academic gravitas that Seuss is writing consciously against.

Modern Poetry makes the case for writing rooted in a livable reality. 'Truth should sting', reads one poem, 'like a major bee' ('Poetry'). Suspicious of poetic artifice, however, Seuss appears to comment on the very project of her previous collection. 'It seems wrong / to curl now within the confines / of a poem', the speaker reflects in 'Curl'. 'Maybe to live within / a poem is to entrap oneself', read lines from 'Against Poetry'; 'A poem, unlike / a living being, cannot [...] grant you / reality.' Maybe, when all's said and done, 'The best poem is no poem' ('Coda'). Poetry, for Seuss, is both repository and placeholder, something to contain the past and therefore keep it close to hand. In the words of Anne Carson, writing in her elegiac *Nox* (2010): 'It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself.'

The persistent occupation of the present by the past charges the work of August Kleinzahler. 'Memory stinks / like good marinara sauce', suggests a poem from *Sleeping It Off in Rapid City* (2008); 'You never get that garlic smell / out of the walls.' With *A History of Western Music*, Kleinzahler gathers a selection of his poems spanning more than thirty years, a celebration of the role that music plays in all our lives, both soundtracking and sculpting it.

Born in Fort Lee, New Jersey, Kleinzahler worked a variety of jobs – taxi driver, locksmith, lumberjack – before settling in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury district in the 1980s. In the late 1990s, he began to write a weekly music column for the *San Diego Reader*, and a selection of this work appeared in 2009 as *Music I-LXXIV*, revealing an impressive breadth of listening

– Muddy Waters, Liberace, Ivor Cutler, J S Bach – a dizzy range of influence reflected in the poems. From meditations on the great jazz legends of the twentieth century and Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* (1791) to pieces that respond to artists as diverse as Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, and Whitney Houston, *A History of Western Music* revels in the ubiquitous, unavoidable presence of music in contemporary life, whether humming from the radio or piping through ‘the hotel elevator [...] as if poured through history’s electric sieve’ (‘Chapter 21 [April in Paris]’), even ‘Bubbling from speakers hidden in the palms and sycamores’ (‘Chapter 38 [Rose Exile]’). Arranged into a series of non-chronological ‘Chapters’, the poems offer fragments from the poet’s life, expressing something of the role that music plays in making sense of our own histories, the way that certain periods and places, objects and people, become tethered inextricably to a specific tune. The project is reminiscent of Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity* (1995), whose narrator sets about reorganising his extensive record collection: not alphabetically, not chronologically, but *autobiographically*.

‘There is going on just now a vast shifting of inventory / from the one place to another’, read lines from Kleinzahler’s *The Hotel Oneira* (2013). A supreme poet of transit, of things on the move, one of the interests of this new collection is the suddenness with which music can jolt us – emotionally, imaginatively – from the present moment, ‘transported / by the tapestry of sound’ (‘Chapter 72 [Bartleby]’). The opening poem presents a tragi-comic episode in which the poet is brought to a sudden standstill in the supermarket by a famous power ballad: ‘about to weep among the avocados and citrus fruits’ (‘Chapter 63 [Whitney Houston]’). With ‘the deliberateness / of a surgeon’ (‘Chapter 40 [Exile]’), Kleinzahler’s poems animate this process of imaginative travel – highly attuned to the ways in which ‘the mind starts / in spite of itself’, suggests a line from ‘Peaches in November’ in *Red Sauce, Whiskey and Snow* (1995).

With jazz-like improvisations, cutscenes, and sudden changes of direction – what Mark Ford has referred to as the poet’s ‘calculated flirtation with fragmentation and dissolution’ – Kleinzahler channels ‘the rhythms and polyrhythms’ (‘Chapter 6 [Odeon]’) of the music he responds to, offering a rich variety of formal and expressive modes that matches the range of genres and composers on parade. In one poem, Kleinzahler deploys a playful, onomatopoeic rendering of bebop’s ‘twitch toggle-switch bobble’ – ‘YAHTZEE YAHTZEE / SWEET-DEW-DROPSIE’ (‘Chapter 44 [Bebop]’) – flexing a sonic muscle that betrays, perhaps, the lasting influence of Basil Bunting, who taught Kleinzahler briefly in the early 1970s. Each poem in *A History of Western Music* proceeds according to ‘its own sequence of microtones’ (‘Chapter 5 [Hyper-Bercesse: 3 A.M.]’), a distinctive celebration of the fleeting power and beauty of a snatch of music, ‘the way the swallows gather around the Duomo / for a few moments at dusk then scatter’ (‘Chapter 11 [Spoleto]’). For Kleinzahler, there is no avoiding music’s impact on our lives, its strains ‘intent [on] / finding out places to get through the way wind / tries seams / and cracks in the old house’ (‘Chapter 9 [Blue at 4 P.M.]’). The collection quietly embodies Thomas Hardy’s lines, ending ‘The Solitary Reaper’: ‘The music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more.’

With poems that reveal the ‘serious architect[ure]’ (‘Our Lady of the Soil’) of an impressive, lasting debut, Imogen Cassels maps the sharp currents and transformations of desire, love, and stubborn grief. With intelligence and hesitation, the collection charts the aftermath of a death in the family, sensitive to subtle alterations in relationships and states of being, the aspects of a world made strange again by loss. A poetry of care and carefulness, *Silk Work* is a delicate, expressive book, both guided by and modelling a ‘clarity / of gesture’ (‘Faun’). Deliberate and vulnerable, physically small, it is a book that even seems to signal that it should be carefully handled, as though it were the only copy in existence, or made of paper that might fall apart at any moment in our hands. ‘[S]low wading through / language’s green water’ (‘Rive’), the poems in this collection are both tentative and self-assured, the products of patience, each arriving ‘bright eyed with something’ meaningful or wise to offer (‘So much implied’).

Incorporating fragile structures, folksongs, and quiet allusions, Cassels’s poetry is one of microscopic noticing, paying close attention to the changes ushered in by new thoughts and emotions, small adjustments in the self and weather, the rhythms of syntax, the feel of the body. The poems occur at the moment ‘where attention / becomes form’ (‘8 sonnets’), as though leaving a transcript of the poet’s noticing for us to follow. ‘[T]he disciplined attention of art is a moral discipline’, reminds the narrator of Garth Greenwell’s novel, *Small Rain* (2024), each poem or brushstroke ‘an attempt to activate in us that awareness we nearly always shut down.’ Cassels seeks this same awareness, tracking it through passages of grief and recovery – ‘the gradual recession of a self’ (‘Chesapeake’), the ‘long move out into the sun’ (‘So much implied’) – acknowledging the way the world and self are altered in the process: ‘every morning now / an amazingly bruised thing that I am’ (‘8 sonnets’), she writes, ‘a working patina / of scratches’ (‘Proof against breaking’).

‘This / representing yourself, desperate to get it right, / as if you could, is that the aim of writing?’ asks Denise Riley in ‘A Shortened Set’, a question Cassels seems attuned to. I’m reminded, also, of Douglas Dunn’s *Elegies* (1985), written in the aftermath of his wife’s death, a collection that bears witness to the transformative power of bereavement. ‘I think, and feel, and do, but do not know / All that I am’, writes Dunn, ‘all that I have been, once, / Or what I could be could I think of it.’ The poetry in *Silk Work* ripples similarly with uncertainty and modest doubt, a by-product of language’s inherent (and frustrating) tendency to miss the thing we really mean; after all, writes Robert Lowell, again in *History*, ‘words are what get in the way of what they say.’ Cassels’s poems are happy to be tacit, to leave things unsaid, finding strength in ambiguity. It is this quality, perhaps – the confidence to keep things private – that makes the wisdom of the poems felt. ‘Each want is past having’, sings ‘New song’, without fanfare, ‘which is why I wanted it.’ In ‘Romanov’, a line articulating grief so simply it seems frighteningly obvious: ‘How / I wish I didn’t think of you, regards.’

These poems traverse a changing landscape, noting minor alterations in the flora and fauna, documenting the geology transforming underfoot. They navigate ‘the dream / of moving slipshod into the new life’, somewhere after love and grief, ‘tender still and seeking / utterly

without geography, / hardly at all' ('Jude'). In the words of poet Maria Sledmere, Cassels charts the process of 'Finding yourself outside of yourself, then having the strength to touch the world again, [...] to let it stream through you.' There is a solemn optimism, here, an understanding – perhaps a kind of faith – that 'the last trick / of a horizon' is 'that you can reach it' ('Chesapeake'), a place, writes Denise Riley, where the 'heart takes grateful note / to be in life.' 'I am / happy and mournful', writes Cassels, 'I can hardly wait' ('Chesapeake').

Rowland Bagnall's second collection, *Near-Life Experience* (Carcanet, 2024), was an *Observer* Poetry Book of the Month. He serves as the Reviews Editor of *Oxford Poetry* and writes about photography for *The Art Newspaper*.