

The 'Relentless March': Rae Armantrout

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Go Figure by Rae Armantrout
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RAE ARMANTROUT IS A PROLIFIC POET. Since the turn of the century, she has published twelve full collections, two editions of *Selected Poems* (2001, 2016), a volume of *Collected Prose* (2007) and an important section of *The Grand Piano* (2007), a collective autobiography produced by the so-called Language school of poets, a generation of experimental post-war writers rooted in the San Francisco Bay Area. Armantrout's fifth collection in seven years, *Go Figure*, opens with something like a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of her own productivity: "Here I go again". Suspended in quotation marks—as fragments of found language in Armantrout's poetry so often are—this phrase seems to have been lifted from Whitesnake's 1982 stadium anthem of the same name (*Here I go again on my own / Going down the only road I've ever known*, etc.). At the same time, it seems to say something significant about the apparently unending nature of Armantrout's poetic project, her 'ongoing attempt / to catalog the world', as she puts it several stanzas later.

Throughout *Go Figure*, Armantrout returns to this sense of ongoingness, describing 'the conveyer belt / of seasons', 'The relentless march of cattails', even pausing to consider whether the world might turn out to be, on closer inspection, 'a perpetual motion machine'. In Armantrout's poetry, one thing is certain: experience is never finished, one moment deferring—every moment—to the next. The poet's work is never done, 'an expert / witness, unable / to leave', according to 'Disasterville'. As she writes in 'Yoohoo', from *Next Life* (2007), we are always subject to 'The present's chronic / revision // which a poem / reenacts.' With each new collection, it is as though Armantrout and the world to which her poems respond are caught in a deadlock, each refusing to allow the other to abandon ship or walk away—*Hey, we're not done here!*

'There was so much looming / and vanishing // to take note of / always', reads the title poem of *Notice*, a slim pamphlet of Armantrout's poetry published in 2024. For several decades, Armantrout has developed a reputation as one of poetry's most gifted noticers, an acute observer of both natural and linguistic phenomena, documenting minute shifts and changes in the weather, the landscape, a scene through the window, unusual quirks and cultural moments, received language and turns of phrase, keeping a record of the 'rapidly changing orientations' of the twenty-first century, to quote

a line from *Partly* (2016). The poems in *Go Figure* are no exception, noting ‘that fly / touching down / on the landing pad / of a small leaf’ and ‘the little noggins of a head of cauliflower’, an attention to empirical detail and smallness that betrays the long-term influence of William Carlos Williams and the poet’s friend and peer, Ron Silliman. ‘There is a lot of the “quodidian” in my work’, admits Armantrout to Lyn Hejinian in an interview of 1999, an expression of her ‘long-standing commitment to dealing with contingency [...], to representing whatever appears, whatever happens to come by.’ ‘The present / must be kept empty / so that anything / can happen’, reads another slim stanza from *Partly*. ‘It makes sense / to turn that corner // in a black sedan’, begins *Next Life*, ‘and to write down / everything that passes.’

Whether noting down the microscopic details of the natural world (‘Light on one leaf / amid a shiny throng’), peculiar snippets of overheard language (‘“Lake-washed chinos”’) or the sudden, unexpected presence of a cultural object or phenomenon (‘and now here we are / feeding Styrofoam popcorn // to a wooden dinosaur’), Armantrout’s work in *Go Figure* continues to address the bumpy texture of the everyday, exploring and exploiting its collisions and uncertainties. With her trademark narrow lines and thin columns of text—juxtaposing brief units of language collaged into numbered or divided sections—Armantrout’s poetry embodies, more than anything, these small acts of attention, charting the poet’s thoughts and observations as they tick from moment to unfolding moment. I’m reminded of a comment by the poet Jane Hirshfield, describing her Zen Buddhist practice in a way that seems to speak to Armantrout’s poetics just as well. ‘Zen pretty much comes down to three things’, she suggests: ‘everything changes; everything is connected; pay attention.’

Paying attention in our age of infinite distraction, however, tends to be far easier said than done, a struggle Armantrout’s writing seems consistently to dramatise; poetry, like meditation, is a *practice* after all. In the words of psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, writing in *Attention Seeking* (2019), ‘To begin with, the question is always: at any given moment, what is worth paying attention to? And then, what kind of attention should we be paying? And then, what are the reasons we can give for doing this?’ ‘We must be interested in the right things in the right way’, he continues, ‘Or at least this is what everybody tells us.’

Time and again, Armantrout’s poems seem to circle these questions, striving to take notice or do justice to ‘what passes’, to discover something meaningful or truthful at the heart of things, ‘To test an impression’, suggests one new poem, ‘by putting it in words’. There is an investigatory quality to Armantrout’s writing, gathering data, preparing it for scrutiny beneath the microscope of every poem. (It doesn’t seem a coincidence, throughout her career, to find that Armantrout so often seems to reference crime shows and detective series, as though drawing a comparison between

the Poet and the DCI.) In *Up to Speed* (2004), we encounter a short prose poem, a story ‘of two young technicians [...] who must give their superior a moment by moment account of their attempts to monitor the subject.’ While ‘the subject’ remains nameless, we learn that the technicians frequently have trouble ‘keeping the listening devices within range.’ ‘We sympathize with the hunted subject,’ Armantrout concludes, ‘but also with the clearly competent, frequently exasperated technicians, whose situation is, after all, much like our own.’

In one sense, this exasperation seems related to the hunt for accuracy or precision, a kind of exactness, to discover in among these parts a blueprint for the whole, as if all this paying of attention might amount—at long last—to discovery. In recent years, Armantrout’s poetry has become increasingly infused with the language of scientific enquiry, particularly the fields of quantum mechanics and particle physics, as though the poet’s own attentiveness were being measured in increasingly small increments, ‘a moment of stillness / demanding an answer’, reads a poem from *Money Shot* (2011). This is not so much the work of a detective as a scientist busily splitting the atom, on the trail of the Higgs boson. Indeed, the longer we spend with Armantrout’s poetry, the more we find that we are in the presence of a core language of splitting and dividing, whether ‘lilac’s / lavender swag // above long leaves / split down the middle’, or the ‘identical twin / [grand] children’ who occupy so many of these recent poems. This sense of the molecular even accounts, in large part, for Armantrout’s pervasive formal strategy, small units of language split into sections; more than any other stanzaic device, this is a poetry of couplets, ‘dividing before / from now // again and again’, to cite a few more lines from *Partly*.

In 2006, Armantrout was diagnosed with a rare form of adrenal cancer, from which she has successfully recovered. The poems most concerned with this experience are collected in *Versed* (2009), itself a split project, comprised of two separate manuscripts (‘Versed’ and ‘Dark Matter’), joined at the hip; the same is true of Armantrout’s previous book, *Finalists* (2022), whose hinge-like sections include ‘Finalists’ and ‘Threat Response’. Whether the poet’s brush with cancer continues to preoccupy her thoughts or not—one wonders how it couldn’t—it’s difficult not to project a heightened interest in the cellular onto Armantrout’s poetry. Unlike the notion of splitting the atom, however—searching for further and further exactness, for points and precision—this introduces to her work a sense of multiplicity or proliferation. After all, ‘As we know from physics, and from neuroscience,’ says the poet to Ben Lerner in an interview of 2011, ‘any single object we will ever see is, in fact, a buzzing multiplicity which we have found it practical to identify as a single entity. We ourselves are colonies of cooperating (*knock wood*) cells.’ ‘In a fit of repugnance’, reads a section of ‘The Fit’, from *Up to*

Speed, ‘each moment / rips itself in half, // producing a twin’, and so on, and so on, blooming like a sudden growth.

As such, we discover a small paradox at the heart of Armantrout’s poetics. This is both a poetry of singularity, of pinpoints and exactitude, but also, in the same instance, a poetry of multiples, of splitting and dividing cells, both the decisive moment (to borrow a phrase from the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson) and the ongoing investigation. ‘I think my poetry involves an equal counterweight of assertion and doubt’, writes Armantrout in ‘Cheshire Poetics’, a statement from *Collected Prose*, evoking Lewis Carroll’s enigmatic, disappearing cat. ‘It’s a Cheshire poetics,’ she continues, equivocally, ‘one that points two ways then vanishes in the blur of what is seen and what is seeing, what can be known and what it is to know. That double-bind. But where was I?’ This is the same ‘double-bind’, perhaps, that a number of Armantrout’s readers have identified in her work before. ‘[S]he tries to make sense of it all, or tries to verify that there is no sense in it’, writes Lydia Davis: ‘she seeks answers, or at least more questions.’ Speaking to David Naimon in 2017, Armantrout recalls a therapist who ‘once [...] told me, for instance, that I was a perfectionist’. Well, ‘yes and no,’ she reflects, ‘and I guess “yes and no” is what I would say to pretty much anything, frankly.’

To some extent, Armantrout’s duality—the simultaneous ‘yes and no’ of her writing—is rooted in the origins of Language Poetry, the movement with which she is typically linked. ‘The central premise of that poetics was that language wasn’t neutral; that it was, among other things, a means of control and manipulation which needed to be questioned closely’, suggests Armantrout to Simon Collings. ‘That was true then at the tail-end of the Vietnam war and it’s doubly true now’. This constant questioning—what Fanny Howe has referred to as Armantrout’s ‘emphatic preference for suspicion’—is everywhere within the poems, both in the minute observations she records and in the brief clippings of quoted language she holds up for further scrutiny. ‘I am attracted to looking at the different things language can mean in one (sometimes quite ordinary) utterance’, she has stated:

Writing is partly about listening closely to yourself as you think or compose and being aware of the different tensions and weights among the words, the different directions any one of them could lead.

Very often, in Armantrout’s work, what starts as a description will evolve into a query, almost unthinkingly, as though the very process of attempting to articulate or understand the world produced a further set of questions. What becomes clear, reading Armantrout, is that neither the poet nor the poetry is here to offer any answers. ‘I can’t remember which scientist said

it,' she suggests, again to David Naimon, 'but some scientist said that [...] the most exciting thought [we] can have is not "Eureka!", it's "Huh—that's funny!" [...] because, you know, when [...] experimental data doesn't conform to your theory, then you know you have work to do, then you have a project, then you have a place to go and that's what's exciting.' 'What next?,' asks this new collection's title poem, cueing itself up: "Go figure".

The many fragments of Armantrout's poetry are arranged like objects whose relationships have yet to be determined; from time to time, they resemble the curious connections created by photographs, in which two or more apparently unrelated things appear to be profoundly linked, 'randomized, but // perhaps not truly random', in the words of Armantrout's 'Again'. ('I don't intend to make poems ambiguous', the poet has stated, 'I just don't immediately edit out ambiguities.') Even so, what is precisely enlivening about these poems is that they seem to hover at the border between questioning and explanation, as though something truly valuable was on the cusp of being revealed, a form of the truth. '[T]he poems are full of spaces and I think that the world is that way,' Armantrout notes:

nobody fills in the gaps for you, nobody explains cause and effect
for you, we're often just left with this impression and that impression
[and] we have to figure out how to connect them [...], so I
think I maybe duplicate that in my poems because that's what
seems authentic to experience.

I'm reminded of a statement by the critic Emma Smith, reflecting on the essential 'gappiness' of Shakespeare's plays. '[A]mbiguity is the oxygen of these works,' she suggests, 'making them alive in unpredictable and changing ways.' For Smith, Shakespeare's works 'hold our attention because they are fundamentally incomplete and unstable: they need us, in all our idiosyncratic diversity [...] to make sense'—of the language, of the meaning, of the moment, of ourselves. Armantrout's poems require the same, a commitment to uncertainty, a willingness to wait and see. 'For me it was never / about what speaks,' writes the poet in 'Never', towards the end of this collection, 'but about what seems / to speak // while remaining silent.' These are poems that speak both to and for a century still finding its feet, the terrain far from predictable, both spongy and a little sharp. 'That's life, I thought,' suggests a couplet from the title poem, 'off its rocker.'