

*Finalists*  
by Rae Armantrout  
(Wesleyan, 2022)



*Peter Hughes*

Rae Armantrout's are the most re-readable of poems because they are not completely set or stable. They are not chamfered. They do not stick the finish. You cannot see your reflection in their varnish. You become part of the dynamics initiated by the text. And, of course, this is how all good art works. The poems are serious and witty, engaged and self-scrutinising, open-ended.

There are lots of readings by – and interviews with – Rae Armantrout that you can see online. I like the City Lights Live one (June 11th, 2022) with Lyn Hejinian where we get a reading from *Finalists* followed by an interview. In various interviews Rae Armantrout has talked about her influences including Bishop, Williams, Niedecker, Oppen and Creeley. She's also talked about the development of Language Poetry; poets feeling suffocated by the poems usually found in magazines in the late 70s and early 80s: short narrative poems with a nice epiphany glowing at the bottom. So some poets (she mention Silliman) thought there should be more jumps and leaps, more of the world should be allowed in, and connections between parts of the text could be more oblique and ambiguous. Oh, and poems are not 'identity vehicles'. I paraphrase.

So much for background.

I think it's in that Hejinian interview that Rae Armantrout is invited to talk about how she writes and says something like: *Should I just say it? I write about ephemeral states of mind occasioned by shifting phenomena... I write about whatever intrigues me at the moment... I write about the tricks our language habits play on our thinking.*

The bit about 'whatever intrigues me' is very important because what is intriguing remains intriguing in the writing and so the poem does not rinse or iron it out. It's not tucked in and patted at the end either. Rae Armantrout is extraordinarily prolific and I would have to admit that one or two poems feel a little light and inconsequential; a bit 'well, this one can go in too.' But these are very much in a minority.

Let's (finally) look at a poem and these are the first lines of the book. We should also note that the first (pre-pandemic) section of the book is called Threat Landscape.

Hang On

Domestic as  
 an empty shopping cart  
 parked on a ledge  
 above a freeway

The vertiginous precarity of this is startling, especially given the first word, 'Domestic'. This is how we live now. Also, 'Hang On' as in 'endure, dig in', but also 'Hang On'; wait a minute, is this right? Hold tight, it's going to be bumpy ride just standing still, for the finalists. Who are the finalists? Those who have made it this far. Those who still seem to be winning, accumulating more and more. But also, perhaps, the final generation to inhabit an earth that is being ground to lifeless stone. The first poem, 'Hang On', shifts after those opening four lines to meditations on the acorn barnacle. Good at hanging on. Will probably outlive the humans. This juxtaposition of the human and non-human happens a lot in these poems. The

second poem, for example, 'Red Sky at Night', consists of four sections each starting with 'If'. If it's sunset, and an old woman is scribbling, and an old, solitary man is doing the crossword to a background of TV babble, and if the tree continues to bloom... Why 'if'? More precarity. But let's look at the fourth section more carefully.

If the tree blooms pink  
there will be more

than we can imagine  
always,

extra promptings  
of pure nothing

which we can neither  
keep nor forget.

The contemplation of this arrangement of 'pure nothing' has a Zen quality, a self-effacing generosity. But it is also a product of section two, a woman scribbling. The man doing the crossword and the woman scribbling and the TV droning on inconsequentially create a little collage of guilt and complicity in the context of this book. We are destroying the world and potter about in pursuit of our hobbies, pastimes. Yet look at this beauty, natural beauty and that created by a human artist. But always that 'if'. 'If the tree blooms pink / there will be more'. But what if it doesn't?

Rae Armantrout knows about science and she is good at exploring the nooks of perception, the insubstantiality of the sub-atomic, the mystery of the 'pure nothing' which is anything but. She knows how far our ignorance extends – that's always handy. 'Vultures', which also features the wonderful line 'Vultures wheel over Miami', concludes with section four. I'm quoting that here:

When you are genuinely sick  
the leaves recede

and the flickering holes between them

come forward –

not angels, but  
unnamed objects.

I know that the last word is ‘objects’, noun, with the stress on the first syllable. But when you blink, doesn’t the 3rd-person singular verb momentarily ‘come forward’ to nestle uneasily with the ‘objects’ we more usually detect. The unnamed objects and the objection is, if not upheld, at least registered.

At this early stage of the book (we’re still on page 6) we also start to get some cracks opening into the world of gender, identity, branding and bullshit. ‘Who’s Who’ is a great title and the first four lines are just as good:

Yeats saw a fish  
as a mysterious girl

which made the world seem  
more fuckable.

The second and final section says, in its entirety:

“Here’s the thing,”  
says the brand spokesmodel

waving her Diet Coke

and sounding beleaguered  
yet defiant,

“just do you”

This is funny and sad and effective. Cokeperson has every reason to sound beleaguered as the top plastic polluter. The last words sound a lot like ‘fuck yourself up’ environmentally and healthwise to anyone who reads a newspaper. ‘Spokesmodel’ is quietly great, isn’t it?

I said that there was a good deal of self-referential flexing in the poems and sometimes it works like an *ars poetica*. Take the start of 'How to Disappear', page 32.

You had been swinging restlessly  
between the appearance of spontaneity  
and the appearance of serious thought.

Note the emphasis on 'appearance', as though actually there may have been no spontaneity or serious thought involved either. Suddenly we get a line such as

That was one idea I had

and of course it's disarming, that unexpected eye contact with the reader. It can be a slightly arch commentary on the poem, to the reader:

Yes, she said "destination."

So the poems sometimes ask themselves what they are doing, what are we doing.

What do I have in mind  
for my next thought?

This is from 'Siphon' (p.56). And on p.97, in 'Crescendo', there's:

I miss this moment  
as it goes on happening

It's hard to think and think about thinking, especially as the world goes to hell in a handcart.

It's hard to come by good  
ideas  
while California  
goes up in flames

Note the killer line-break after 'good'. That's from 'Too Much Information', p. 125. So are these lines:

You never know  
what will matter next.

Pack everything.

We are in the second section of the book now, called 'Finalists'. What are we supposed to do now with this perpetual calamity? What are we thinking? What even are thoughts? Are we approaching a time when there will be no more human thoughts?

But one can also find  
oneself  
mesmerised by nothing

while deep inside,  
in bones and gut,

the thoughts  
think themselves

'Lapse', p.127

The eco-crisis is framed partly from a child's point of view in the poem 'In Response' (p. 128). The poem is interspersed with customer satisfaction formulae. 'Did Tiny's Wooden Alphabet meet your expectations?' Then:

The three-year-old waves her bubble wand, says  
"Oh look, a bubble,"  
while running to pop it

in the new/old video footage

How many stars would you give this?

Oh look, another extinction event. Pop goes the biosphere. And I

think that the power of this collection is in the nakedness of the questioning; the innocence of the art of rearranging phrases so that they illuminate each other, held in the constant context of our environmental and political desertification. The poems are lean, memorable, adult. Deft and adroit, of course. Decades of craft. Masterclasses in precise lexical choice, surgical line breaks. Beautiful too, and heartbreaking. Look at the force of 'wingless' here, in the last lines of 'Our Days' (p.133).

You need to decontextualize  
an object  
in order to see it,

I once said.

Last sloth  
in a pocket of rain forest;

exquisite scent  
of hyacinth

wafted  
on the wingless breeze.