



PROJECT MUSE®

Mistress of Distraction

Barbara Henning

American Book Review, Volume 40, Number 3, March/April 2019, pp. 24-25
(Review)

Published by American Book Review

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2019.0036>



WOBBLE

Rae Armantrout

Wesleyan University Press

<https://www.hfsbooks.com>

160 Pages; Print, \$11.99

In Rae Armantrout's new collection, *Wobble*, her poem "Practicing" calls to mind a poem by George Oppen's "Psalm" (1975). Both poets call attention to language and the observed world. Oppen illuminates what Burt Kimmelman calls the "physical tangible landscape" as he observes deer in the forest. Near the end of this short poem, Oppen slides into the physical tangibility of language itself, the grammar of seeing. In the eyes of the deer, the roots dangling from their mouths, the sun and the leaves, he hears language merging with the thing itself, "The small nouns/ crying faith." While Oppen takes his reader into the thingness of this seeing-word-eye moment, almost mesmerizing us with presence, Armantrout, on the other hand, calls forth a meditative-image and then leaves us with a question.

As the sun finds you
upstanding,

knotted
at intervals,

gray-green

In the second stanza with "as I do—" we begin to see the tree's body and life as related to her own body and writing practice.

As you were limbs
aloft and

eagerly splayed,
still practicing

the old faith
as I do—

these words,
pushed to the fore,

posing

At the end of the poem, I'm wondering about the relationship between the tree and poet and on the meaning of "old faith" and "posing." As poets, aren't our words and lines a type of posturing? And as we age and continue writing, some of us, like Armantrout, keep the old faith, keep writing and meditating on the meaning of life through language art. The tree's limbs splay open, minute-by-minute continuing throughout its life to adjust for balance and to allow sunlight and water to merge with its body. As it stands in the middle of a field so beautiful, all by itself, knotted and aged, I imagine the poet standing there, too, perhaps her arms stretched under the sun, absorbing the beauty of the tree and the sun.

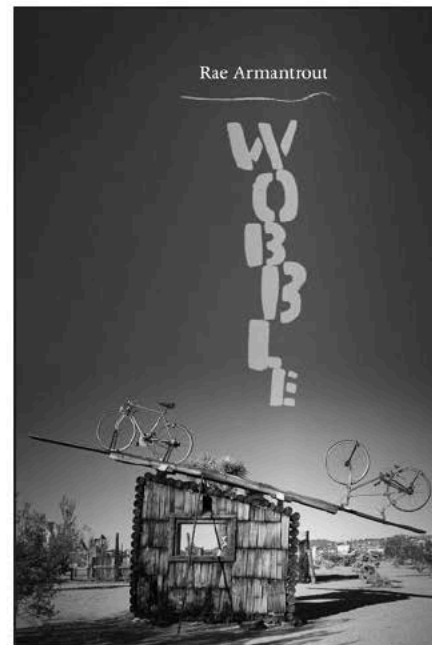
As a "mistress of distraction's indirection," Armantrout often angles from one idea, metaphor, or image to another, inviting us to analyze the relationship. In her poetic world, metaphor and analogy never make a tight fit. Just when I think I have figured it out, meaning slips away.

In "Arch," she addresses a seahorse and compares it to an arched eyebrow. Immediately I am underwater drifting with this calm sea animal:

Like an arched eyebrow
traveling alone, you drift,

seahorse,

a forgotten, persistent



question.

Despite your skeptical
attitude, it's true

that your numbers are crashing.

If an arched eyebrow indicates a person who isn't approachable and who needs more space (as internet beauticians explain), that's an unusual but apt view of a lone seahorse in a vast ocean. She reminds us that the animal is an endangered species even though ironically it consumes "up to 3,000 baby shrimp / per day!" A quick internet search and I learn that seahorses are widely consumed as a result of traditional Chinese medicine, for such problems as wheezing, impotence, and labor induction.

————— Henning continued on next page

The title “Arch” might also suggest a monarch, the one above the others drifting along and consuming others, but also an arch might signify a beginning and an end of a curve.

Who doesn't want
to be a revenant,

to go back to basics
in a big way

By returning to “basics,” avoiding death, we long to start over again, maybe living in a natural world without all the human distractions and complications in our day and time; instead, hunting prey and drifting proudly along. In the next line, I'm surprised—

on the small screen
which, somehow, still

survives? “Terrific”
and “terrible”

I now suspect that she is looking at a seahorse on a cellphone, perhaps the same image I am looking at as I read about its characteristics. Perhaps Armantrout is suggesting that our magnificent human eyes spend too much time looking into screens instead of into the world. Or maybe we too are over consuming as we drift along with our cell phones and computers.

So, the seahorse survives. Is this terrific or is it terrible? Both words share the same root meanings — to cause terror, fright, and awe. To be terrific is to be horrifyingly wonderful, perhaps like the seahorse, stunningly beautiful while consuming and endangering others, and then the trick: we aren't even seeing the seahorse, just consuming an image.

In her poem, “Openings,” Armantrout describes how small children seem to innately suspect that their surroundings are alive. “Because children suspect that objects conceal their powers and intentions, / animators make an alarm clock run, screaming, in circles.” Just the thought of this clock is frightening. Yet when the child watches it over and over again, she learns it is a trick. In the next part of the poem, Armantrout returns to a body and an “I”:

Because as I lie facing the wall the bones of
my eye socket hurt, I see myself

as an ancient skeleton recently unearthed.

Then I appear in a reenactment
of the moments before my death, a clear-
eyed young woman peering
from the mouth of a cave
into what I take to be
an open future.

Now I'm with the narrator and her resting body, her eye socket aching. Maybe the child was on to something that became masked by the repetition of a fake message. As her body rests, the narrator feels time passing in her bones, a continuation of time long past, then moving forward to death and a memory or a vision, to a time when one believed

*In her collage of ideas and images
Rae Armantrout undoes the glib
connections we often make while
allowing that which is real to
glimmer through and with the veils of
language.*

life perpetual, the future open. I'm searching with the narrator and wondering if with our imaginations we are weaving a veil to deny our mortality or do the objects and bodies in the world have hidden powers and intentions that we can't read anymore.

“Mother” is another poem that seems deceptively simple.

I want to get
to the managed care

evening,
where the future appears

to stream directly
into the past

with brief time-outs,
“nows,”

for setting preferences.

If only our lives could be as easily organized as the euphemisms for the care of the elderly, just set us in a nursing home and adjust the computer. Time out from aching eye sockets and resting skeletons.

Then Armantrout switches registers. In part two, the animals take over the once techno-controlled world. Then we invent a scientist or a secret guide to solve our problems. Maybe we are watching a fantasy film.

When wolves converge
on prisons,

when bats cover
solar panels

crashing power grids,

a safari guide
a scientist
with a troubled past,
and a secret agent

must concentrate
to solve problems.

We and our agents act to solve the problem with “a chemical tracer,” something used to determine facts about the quality of water. Then “a tap dance” is performed, some ritual to get back to what has been lost, in 3-D and color, must be a film, the way we create images as we try to regain the past. In that last stunning line we realize that the film, the words, the imagined constructs are just that: imagined. Armantrout leaves this poem with: “That is not my mother!” Even the little bird in the Dr. Seuss book can tell you who is his mother and who is a fake. This is another example of the humor woven through the poems in *Wobble*.

It is a pleasure to read and muse along with Rae Armantrout. In her collage of ideas and images she undoes the glib connections we often make while allowing that which is real — our mortal aging bodies and the universe within and without — to glimmer through and with the veils of language.

Barbara Henning is a poet and novelist. Her most recent books are Just Like That (2018) and a book of poetry, A Day Like Today (2015). She lives in Brooklyn and teaches for Long Island University. Her website is barbarahenning.com.