

By Deborah Escalante and Calvin Pennix

Don't Back Away: An Interview with Rae Armantrout

*Rae Armantrout has been a part of the first generation of Language poetry in San Francisco since the 1970s. She has published ten books, and has also been featured in numerous anthologies. Armantrout won the 2009 National Book Critics Circle Award for her most recently published book, *Versed*, which was also awarded the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. She visited Chapman University on September 14, 2010 for the Poetry Reading Series.*

Deborah Escalante and Calvin Pennix: You won the 2009 National Book Critics Circle Award and the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for your book *Versed*. What were your initial reactions to being awarded these prestigious literary recognitions?

Rae Armantrout: I was a bit overwhelmed. I didn't realize how much media attention this particular prize receives. It seemed as if I spent weeks being interviewed in the newspaper, on the radio, and even by a couple of local television stations. Sometimes the interviewers knew something about poetry—but sometimes they didn't. I didn't watch the television morning show, but my husband tells me my clip came on right after a segment about farm animals.

All this attention was briefly inhibiting and distracting, but that effect didn't last long. I think I may be too old to change and also too old to take fame very seriously. Let's just say I've seen the arc of a number of careers in my day.

Escalante and Pennix: The use of language poetry seems to have had a recent resurgence—or at least visibility. In a piece entitled "Experiments," Language poet Bernadette Mayer advises a language poet to "Work your ass off to

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change the language and don't ever get famous." Has winning the Pulitzer Prize affected the way you compose your newer material? Does having a larger audience therefore allow you to feel less or more limitation when composing a poem?

Armantrout: Well, certainly winning this prize caused the sales of my book to go up. I guess that's a good thing. Though if people buy *Versed* only because it won a prize, they may be a bit disconcerted by what they find. That's my fear anyway.

But it doesn't change the way I write. Really, I write for myself first as a way of thinking things through. And I write as a way to communicate with some good friends. I also write as a way to "talk back" to the culture. I think writing in order to please an audience of people you don't know, i.e. trying to second-guess what they want and give it to them, is just not what artists are motivated to do. It wouldn't work anyway. People see through that.

Escalante and Pennix: Since its publication, *Versed* has received a lot of attention within literary circles. Do you think this attention is due to a literary acknowledgment of Language poetry in particular, or because the theme of isolation and despair with a hint of sardonic disposition resonates emotionally with readers?

Armantrout: I'm not really aware of an uptick in interest in Language Poetry per se. And I can't really account for the relative success of *Versed*. Are we all in a place where "sardonic despair" resonates with us? Maybe. It would be interesting to ask why.

Escalante and Pennix: In her essay "Barbarism," Lyn Hejinian gives a list of points that serve as premises for Language writing. She mentions ideas like: *a poem is not an isolated autonomous rarified aesthetic object, the structures*

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of language are social structures in which meanings and intentions are already in place, and it is not surrealism to compare apples and oranges. As you set out to write a poem, are you conscious of the tenets of Language writing and set out to fulfill them?

Armantrout: This question is a bit odd because it presumes that Language Poetry existed before me and that I learned about it and became a follower—like joining a religious cult—when, in fact, I was one of the original Language Poets. We agree on a number of things. Like Lyn, I am interested in the social structures of language and meaning. And, like Lyn, I am very interested in including disparate things in my poems, apples and oranges, if you will, and seeing how they might fit together or not.

Escalante and Pennix: With a few exceptions, the poems in *Versed* employ a consistent form. What is the significance of the short lines and short poems? Are there underlying social and/or political commentaries with your use of form?

Armantrout: The line breaks in my poems are probably more aesthetic than political. Or maybe they are indirectly political. I often break a line to signal or score a kind of double take. I like lines, whether I'm reading or writing them, where it's difficult to tell what's coming next. The world is often quite surprising. Why shouldn't poems be surprising as well?

Escalante and Pennix: You mentioned in a prior interview, "Humor and anger are often two sides of the same coin." You wrote the poems in *Versed* after having battled cancer, and there are moments of stark emotion intertwining with ironic tones throughout the book. Can you elaborate on the use of language's power to convey a very tongue-in-cheek tone with a more serious, self-reflexive tone? How can a writer balance these two sentiments when composing a poem or when arranging a book of poems?

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Armantrout: My sense is that most humor is really "dark" humor. This includes the humor in slapstick and in cartoons. The moments when concept and reality first diverge is often funny—especially when seen from the outside. I'm thinking of that moment in the Roadrunner cartoon when Wile E. Coyote runs off a cliff in pursuit of the Roadrunner. He just hangs in mid air for a minute while his mind catches up with his body. Why is that funny? Is it funny to be both a body and a mind. The mind thinks it's above the body, but it has to take the fall. I explore some of those moments and problems in the book. Sometimes they're funny (like maybe in "Simple"); sometimes not so much.

Things can be funny and sad and scary all at the same time.

Escalante and Pennix: Some of your poems are composed of snapshots—so to speak—of images or phrases, which seem to be connected with an adhesive that holds those pieces together. For example, the adhesive in "Relations" seems to be time. Does the idea of an adhesive resonate with your sense of the composition of a particular poem, or is it something that works its way in after completion of a poem, perhaps even moreso in the reader's experience?

Armantrout: I like the concept of "adhesive." And yes I do hope that some kind of loosely binding adhesive holds the sections in my poems together.

It might be easier to use the poem "Operations" as an example. I think the adhesive that holds its parts together might be the idea of vicarious experience or surrogacy. Celebrities and/or religious figures appear in most of the sections as possible surrogates for the self. In the second section someone complains, "Hey, / my avatar's not working!" That is first of all the voice of a boy playing a video game. The avatar is the character that represents the player in the game. But the word avatar is also used to mean the embodiment or representative of a god. The hawk

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in the third section could possibly be imagined as an avatar. It is also a predator. That leads to the final section which imagines a creation myth where Hunger instead of Logos invents light. Light serves the predator to find his prey.

Anyway, that's a trip through the loose binding of that poem.

Escalante and Pennix: During your visit to Chapman University, you spoke of the references to popular culture in your work (i.e. *True Blood*). Does the reference come first—a sort of trigger—and then the poem builds around or from what is being referenced? Or is popular culture referenced because it fits what the poem is accomplishing?

Armantrout: Most of my poems begin with a specific trigger, not a general idea. The trigger could be anywhere—in a book, in an overheard remark, in a song, in a dream, or, yes, in a television program. The trigger is usually something that makes me stop and wonder: Why that? In the case of a television show, I might be wondering, why is this popular or why do I like this? What need does this serve?

Escalante and Pennix: You are currently one of ten poets working on a project entitled *The Grand Piano: An Experiment In Collective Autobiography*. It began in 1998, the first volume was published in November 2006, and others have followed in three-month intervals thereafter. Can you tell readers more about this project and how it came about?

Armantrout: We've actually completed the project. The tenth volume just came out.

They came out at a rate of about two a year.

Barrett Watten had the idea in the first place and was really the driving force behind it. Ten writers involved with

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Language Poetry on the West Coast agreed to write essays, delving into our memories of the formative years of the movement, from 1975-1985. As it turned out, we did some of that, but we also wrote about our current passions and activities. The essays use that time period as a kind of touchstone.

I think the project is interesting because really we have quite different perspectives and personalities.

Escalante and Pennix: While you were at Chapman University, you read some poems from your new book entitled *Money Shot*. The book's title plays upon a sexual connotation, but there are also social and political implications working within the title. What can readers expect from you in this next work?

Armantrout: *Money Shot* has just come out. As you may or may not know, the "money shot" in a porn movie is the scene where it's clear that the man has had an orgasm. I was interested in the suggestion of exposure and verification or exposure as verification. What does poetry show? What does it verify? Where's the money shot?

But I was also literally thinking about money. These poems were written in 2008 and 2009 when the devastation caused by speculation and the essential insolvency of the system were being revealed after being hidden for who knows how long. That was a money shot of a different order.

Escalante and Pennix: Being the Professor of Poetry and Poetics at the University of California, San Diego, what are some of goals you look to achieve in your classroom? What are some of the techniques and concepts you teach? What do you want your students to take from you and your class? Which poets are you currently teaching?

Armantrout: The most important thing students can take away from a writing class really is the habit of reading and

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the ability to be a good reader—because most of them won't continue on as poets.

Right now I'm teaching a big lower division class where we cover everything from Emily Dickinson and John Donne to Ron Silliman and K. Silem Mohammad. In my recent graduate workshop, we read the early versions of "Howl" as well as books by Francis Ponge, Rachel Loden, Monica Youn, and Catherine Wagner.

The advice I give young writers, besides the injunction to read, is the mandate to cut out any word you can and see what you have left. That's almost always a good idea.

I would also say that, if you want to be an artist of any sort, you have to be willing to scare yourself; don't back away from the scary, ugly and difficult.