

A Conversation with Rae Armantrout

Robert Stanton: You have become noticeably more prolific over the past fifteen years or so (forgive the stats: 38 poems published in book form in the '70s, 24 in the '80s, 60 in the '90s, followed by 237 in the '00s and 63 so far in the '10s). Versed, two complete manuscripts containing 87 poems altogether, was the most visible signal of this acceleration to date. Is this something you are conscious of? Are there specific reasons for it?

I've been asked this question before. There has been a noticeable acceleration, but I really don't know how to explain it. I could make guesses. My son left home for college in 2001. That might have something to do with it. Or not. Perhaps women writers take longer to get started, either because of family responsibilities or because it takes them longer to gain confidence. Probably knowing that I have a supportive publisher waiting for my new work keeps me motivated as well.

Bob Perelman: Faith in the solidity of the word was fundamental to many modernists, whereas in a number of poems you find words arbitrary, comically quirky ("Relations" [13], "A Resemblance" [10], just to name two). But this attitude goes hand in hand with the most exacting word-choice. What do you make of this?

I find the instabilities of language both troubling and attractive (a "bad romance" as Lady Gaga has it). It goes beyond the comically quirky, doesn't it? Obviously, words may sound alike because they come from one root, or they may sound alike and be unrelated. This raises an important question: what is more crucial than whether or not we can successfully attribute meaning to pattern? And patterns involve similarity and difference. In fact, this is where all sentience begins. In other words, "This looks a lot like the spot where I cached my nuts last fall." For good reason, the intimation of resemblance is seductive – though the brute fact of similarity, two peas in a literal pod, can be pretty irritating. For me this issue is like a sore tooth I keep running my tongue across. In one poem you mention, "Relations," there are pairs of sounds-alike words. The third line reads: "Bobble" and "Bauble." "Bobble" might suggest one of those bobble head dolls on a dashboard. And, in fact, the first line of the poem supports this interpretation since it reads: "Head" and "Bring." As in "Bring me the head of John the Baptist," I was thinking, which would make the "speaker" Salome and the "bauble" rather gruesome.

Is the chime of the rhyme another kind of bauble?

For me the most interesting word play in the poem occurs in the last three lines where the Salome type character says:

Bring me the friendship

between solving
and dissolving.

I think these lines might serve as a kind of poetics statement. Solving and dissolving may have an etymological family relation or maybe they are just “good friends.” To solve, of course, is to complete (and clarify) while to dissolve is to melt. If there’s a disturbing message in their affinity, I’m only the messenger.

Romana Huk: Many people assume that poetries after modernism (especially innovative ones) eschew the use of metaphor altogether, given developing interests in diversity and difference rather than unities and similarities (non-identity rather than identity). And you do that, too – but you also worry it quite a lot, as if it’s had an all but physical effect on perception that’s ineradicable: “Metaphor forms / a crust / beneath which / the crevasse / of each experience” (title poem). Can you talk a little bit about that linguistic landscape of perception where in interviews about *Versed* you’ve located us, helplessly disconnected from the real – it feels like a very physical place! A kind of primitive place, really, where “Metaphor / is ritual sacrifice. // It kills the look-alike” (“Integer”). What’s your view of this place we live, in language – and how do you negotiate between its “figures” and crevasses?

First, I don’t think we really get to choose between the two poles you describe. There is no similarity without difference; there is no difference without similarity. Together similarity and difference are the basis for sentience. We may observe problems with metaphorical thinking, but we can’t abandon metaphor. The first quote from *Versed* you use to illustrate my suspicion of metaphor is, of course, itself a metaphor. Metaphors don’t actually form crusts. So I have a sort of love/hate relationship with the metaphorical. As the linguist George Lakoff points out, it is deeply embedded in our language. Even such an apparently simple statement as “Prices are rising” is, in fact, a metaphor. You use a metaphor when you ask how I “negotiate” between “figures” and “crevasses.” I picture myself trying to bargain with a chasm. It’s a rather cartoonish image. I guess the more serious answer to your question is that I use my imagination without turning off my critical mind. And sometimes, as in the examples you point to, I create metaphors for metaphor, meta-metaphors, if you will. The second group of lines you quote is from the poem “Integer”:

Metaphor
is ritual sacrifice.

It kills the look-alike.

No,
metaphor is homeopathy.

A healthy cell
exhibits contact inhibition.

This set of comparisons invokes both violence and a questionable form of medical treatment. The 6th and 7th lines of the section are a factual description of the difference between normal cells and cancer cells. So, yes, my thoughts about the nature of metaphor

take place here as part of a bodily drama. Is metaphor aggressive and destructive like cancer? Does it attempt to replace the reality it represents? Or is it an improbable cure? Whatever its dangers or limitations, I think metaphor is somehow (mysteriously) necessary for human thought. That interests me.

Romana Huk: Others have asked about the experience that so clearly informs these poems – a number of them written, as you’ve said, during a period in which you believed you were soon to die. You’ve said that that experience is perception-altering, and so as a poet you naturally “went into it” – quite bravely, as the first poem of the second section of the book, *Dark Matter*, suggests, with its account of locating a place to spread your ashes, and its suggestion at the end that “The future / is all around us.” // It’s a place, / any place / where we don’t exist.” What did that perception-altering experience do to your understanding of being itself? There’s a kind of metaphysics of being, an astonishing one, all-but-available here in your poems, which in a very physical way locates itself in relation to what/where we “are” not: “Each one / is the inverse/ shape of what’s / missing” (“*Dark Matter*”). Can you speak about the *Dark Matter* section a little, and how it necessarily complements the first half of *Versed*?

I see what you mean about an “almost available” metaphysics of being, though I have never thought of it in those terms. The lines “Each one/is the inverse/shape of what’s/missing.” is a way to describe both the measurement of dark matter (astronomers can calculate how much dark matter is present by observing the ways in which it warps normal matter) and the ways in which we are shaped (warped?) by our (now invisible) histories and interactions. It turns out that galaxies wouldn’t hold together without dark matter. And life needs death. Etcetera. That is no great comfort when you face your own death, of course. It’s just a simple fact that the world, your neighborhood, for instance, will look the same to your neighbors right after you die as it did just before. We might say that’s the real world, the one we can never know. This is the kind of thing you contemplate when you have time and occasion to think about death – or at least it’s the kind of thing I thought about. But enough metaphysics! The *Dark Matter* section of *Versed* was written after I completed my treatment, in the period when I was waiting, - really expecting the cancer to return, because I had been led to believe it probably would. Most of the poems in the first section, called *Versed*, were written before I was diagnosed – but not all. I started the poem called “Own” in the hospital right after my surgery. ‘On Your Way,’ “Together,” “Heaven” and “Running” were also written during my treatment, which lasted through November of 2006. I started *Dark Matter* in December of that year and finished it in December of 2007.

One strange thing is that some of the poems written before my diagnosis, such as “Operation,” “Later,” and “Worthwhile” really seem to be written in the shadow of illness and death too. It almost makes you believe in premonition.

Robert Stanton: At what point did it become apparent that *Versed* and *Dark Matter* would be appearing together as a single volume? Did that decision effect the organization or composition of either manuscript?

My editor, Suzanna Tamminen, actually suggested I put the two manuscripts together. I didn't think *Dark Matter* was long enough to be a book so I kept working on it. But to keep working on it, I had to keep myself oriented toward mortality. And time was going by. And I wasn't getting sick. It was liberating to put the two parts together and see how, actually, they did fit - as prequel and sequel, perhaps. It was liberating to call it finished and put it behind me. The poems I wrote next, for what turned out to be *Money Shot*, had a different feel and a different focus of concern.

Robert Stanton: While you do make use of biographical detail in your work – your husband Chuck and son Aaron make frequent appearances in your poems, for example – it is not in any conventionally 'confessional' manner. For *Versed*, written in the light of a cancer diagnosis and treatment, this personal material might be assumed to exert even more pressure. Has your attitude toward including the personal in your poems changed over the years? How do you feel about it now?

I treat autobiographical material the way I treat anything else. I write about what seems noteworthy, in a literal sense, to me at the moment. Chuck, it must be said, is an unusual person who has a different way of looking at things. So he sometimes gets to play the role of muse. I am drawn to what seems puzzling or peculiar, wherever I find it. It could be on television or in a physics book or in a phone call with a family member. I like to put material from very different sources, different levels of discourse, in contact with one another to see how they interact. I don't generally indicate the source of the material. It could be from a dream or from the newspaper! If you can't tell the difference, I think that's interesting. I do sometimes include things that are very personal – but I never assume they are unique to me.

John Schmidt: I want to talk a little bit about the way your poetry is structured. One of the reasons your works are so tersely effective is the lineation: often no more than a word or two will occupy a given line. The prose poems in *Versed* (i.e. "Together," "On Your Way," "Previews," "Report") stick out as a result. Why did you decide to write these poems in this way? Is it a consequence of their content--with the exception of "Previews," each seems to address more directly the specter of cancer--or was the decision strictly formal? How do you think the prose poem creates meaning, as opposed to the form you traditionally choose for your writing?

I break lines, ideally anyway, at places where the reader may not be able to tell for sure what's coming next. For example, here are the first three lines of the poem "Dark Matter":

Who am I
to experience a burst
of star formation?

It doesn't seem likely that, if the first or second line there was covered, you would be able to imagine what the next line might be. I like to use line breaks to create surprises or at least suspense – maybe even double meaning. I also break lines when I want to create emphasis. Sometimes I want the reader to linger for a second on the implications of the final word in a line. In the lines above, for instance, the word “burst” might be worth a second look. Why are my lines so short? I guess I find a lot of occasions for emphasis or suspense.

Of course, I also break lines as I do for rhythmic reasons. If you make a very short pause after each line and a slightly longer pause after each stanza, you will hear the cadence of the poem as I intended.

Sometimes, because the subject matter seems to dictate the voice or the tone somehow, I find that the voice I'm using is what I would call prosaic. Perhaps it sounds deliberately pedantic, for example. It would seem silly to break faux pedantic language into short lines. That's a special case. In general, I resort to prose poetry when, for whatever reason, the natural meaning units are so continuous that I can't achieve much suspense or useful emphasis by breaking them into lines.

John Schmidt: Many of your poems have been described as "faux collages," where bits of overheard dialogue--often reproduced verbatim--interact meaningfully and obliquely with creative fragments. What's more, these found words (if it's appropriate to call them that) are sometimes culled from the channels of mass culture (as is the case, for instance, in "Results"). Can you briefly touch on why so much of your poetry draws directly from things out there in the world, and the power of the poem to defamiliarize/make strange the words we see every day?

We don't live in a natural world, obviously. We live within a given political, technical, and financial system. That is our real world now, the one we depend on.

I think our poetry should respond to the real world. To respond to something, you have to acknowledge it. My poems interact with this world. They are the medium through which I bring consciousness to bear on it. If I don't write, I find myself taking things for granted which shouldn't be taken for granted. I hope my readers, too, will become more consciously engaged with certain aspects of the world in which we find ourselves. I'm aware that referring to, say, pop songs may make my poems less accessible once the songs are forgotten. That is a chance I take.

Romana Huk: Can you discuss your asterisks and the way they disconnect in order to connect sections of your poems? Very often, a syntactical unit is incomplete until one traverses these asterisks; possibilities for it then unfold. Similarly – and I haven't seen this happen too often in recent poetry – the thought in one poem necessarily travels into the next – as happens between “Resounding” and “Like” when the latter's title seems necessary to the end of the previous poem. Can you speak a little about something that seems of paramount interest throughout your work – “relation” – insofar as it informs

how we're to read the bits of your poems and their proximity to other poems in this book?

You're right that "Resounding" and "Like" seem to somehow co-exist or actively inhabit the same space; both involve images of the sea and references to a female of some sort. I put the manuscript together bit by bit. When I finish a new poem, I try to place it next to the poem with which it will have the most resonance. As the poems accrete in my binder, the order gets refined and improved using that technique.

The connections between sections in a poem can be more or less direct. Sometimes (but not always) the sections are different takes on what I see as one idea. For instance, I would say that each section in the poem "Perfect" expresses enthusiasm for the mixed and uneven pleasures of everyday life. The enthusiasm sounds a bit exaggerated. The reader can decide for himself/herself whether it seems forced.

I didn't set out to write a poem on that topic, by the way. I probably wrote those sections at different times (in this case I can't remember) and, when reading through my notebook, noticed that those notes had a similar feeling tone. So I put them side-by-side. It's not always that straight forward, but that might give you an idea of the process.

Robert Stanton: Another topic that recurs in *Versed* is loneliness, a sense of the self's separation from intimacy with others (it's there in a number of poems, especially "Later"). Can lyric poetry – with its contact/contract between speaker and addressee – offer a way out of such isolation? Or are these poems simply acknowledging the inevitable?

I agree with you. Loneliness is a feeling and/or a theme that runs through a lot of my poems. So, if the poem offers a way out of isolation, the resulting escape must not last long because I keep repeating it!

I don't think poets really write directly for the reader, though they do hope to be read. In some sense we are talking to ourselves, maybe singing to ourselves. The very separation between "I" and "Me" – a separation which is central to being a conscious subject – creates loneliness, I think. There is no escape from that.

John Schmidt: I know that you take inspiration from popular physics. Your fascination with this science sometimes manifests itself in the content of your work, but it also seems to be in play at the level of language you use. You also come from a poetic tradition (that of Language poetry) that questions the innocence of words, their ability to divorce themselves from specific contexts. How do you think language re-presents and reflects the world, as opposed to, say, the theories of quantum mechanics and general relativity, and how do you think this plays out in *Versed*?

I'm more interested in what poetry and science have in common than in the ways they're different. The ways they're different are obvious and many. Scientists prove things and poets do not. Mathematical and scientific truths must be repeatable by peers, etc. On the

other hand, both poets and scientists try to describe the world. Both deal in metaphor. Poets are aware of metaphor; scientists are aware of it some of the time but not always. At least that's my impression. Both scientists (or mathematicians) and poets are attracted by beauty and especially the beauty of form or symmetry. I am always very moved by the way scientists sometimes say (for instance when they speak of string theory) that there must be some truth to it because the math is "so beautiful." They believe as Keats wrote, that, on some level, "Truth is beauty/beauty truth." Despite this, scientists know that what they "know" is provisional. It can be contradicted by the next experiment. They live with uncertainty. I feel that my poems also live with uncertainty. I often write about what puzzles me. The conclusions I reach are consciously provisional. Sometimes they are immediately overturned in the next stanza. Scientists and poets are lured by something beautiful they sense in the world, something that (thus far at least) no formula, mathematical or verbal, has been able to fully capture.

Robert Stanton: Since winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Versed*, you have (unsurprisingly!) given a great number of interviews, in print, on air and online. Some writers – Robert Creeley comes to mind – seem to cultivate the interview as a literary form in its own right. Having including two interviews in your *Collected Prose*, I was wondering what your thoughts were on this 'genre'. What can an author (or a reader, or an interviewer even) get from an interview that they can't get elsewhere?

Being asked a question gives one permission to speak. That's the first thing. Then, the necessity to ask good questions makes someone (the interviewer) think seriously about the author's work. And it makes the author think about her own work in a different way. A lot of what any poet does is intuitive. I don't mean to strike a Romantic pose here. That's not me. Still, I think it's true. Sometimes an interviewer will ask me about an aspect of one of my poems that I hadn't noticed, but which, when I take a closer look, is, in fact, there. So you can learn from giving interviews!