Dark Matters

Rae Armantrout, *Next Life.* Wesleyan University Press 2007. 88pp. $13.95 (paper)

Rae Armantrout, *Versed.* Wesleyan University Press 2009. 121pp. $22.95

Rae Armantrout, *Collected Prose.* Singing Horse Press 2007. 171pp. $17.00 (paper)

Peter Gizzi, *Some Values of Landscape and Weather.* Wesleyan University Press 2003. 112 pp. $14.95 (paper)

Peter Gizzi, *The Outernationale.* Wesleyan University Press 2008. 111 pp. $13.95 (paper)

On the back cover of *Some Values of Landscape and Weather,* we're told that Peter Gizzi is "on the quixotic mission of recovering the lyric." While I had no idea we'd lost it, I suppose the blurbist has a point. Gizzi, who during the late 1980s and early 1990s co-edited the excellent and eclectic journal *O-blék,* writes within an avant-garde tradition that sometimes views melopœia with suspicion, or else discounts it entirely. What place song in the ranks of savage, analytic parataxis? I'm happy to report that whether or not the lyric actually needed "recovering," *Some Values* presents a range of wonderfully musical moments, as in the title poem to the book's "History of Lyric" section, a pre-Raphaelite idyll in a world of electronic static:

> I lost you to the inky noise
> just offscreen that calls us
>
> and partly we got stuck there
> waving, walking into the Percy grass.

A sinking pictorial velvet spray
imagining vermilion dusk.

You lost me to your petticoat
shimmering armor

saying it is better here
on my own amazon.

Why can't we or is it
won't you leave your solo ingle

beside the page. Did we never
consider life lyric interruption

to the idyll, laboring to rescue
real time, lost in affection.

Here the old lyric voices strive to break out of a Creeleyesque jaggedness ("Why can't we or is it"), and even a comforting line of iambic tetrameter ("imagining vermilion dusk") makes an embattled appearance.

One gets the feeling that Gizzi, if he had his druthers, might be a thirteenth-century Occitan troubadour, or an Andalusian singer of the *cante jondo* (his sequence "Masters of the Cante Jondo" is a wonderful attempt at reimaging that particular tradition), or even a Delta blues musician. "Plain Song" strings together comfortable clichés and almost-clichés into an engaging lyric. It begins:

Some say a baby cries for the life to come
some say leaves are green 'cause it looks good against the blue
some say the grasses blow because it is earth's instrument
some say we were born to cry

Two pages later, the poem winds up with a bit of Steinian riffing and some "you say 'to-may-toe,' I say 'to-mah-toe'" back-and-forthing that leaves us, like Dante, in "heaven":

Some say "the good way," some "stuff"
some say yes we need a form
some say form is a simple thing some say yes the sky is a form
of what is simple

*

Some say molecular some open others porous some blue
some say love some light some say the dark some heaven

The "love" slipped into that last line is key: While Gizzi doesn't allow his romantic side as much space as a sentimental reader like myself would like, he's a delicate love poet. "To his wife far off in a time of war" is a beautiful reworking of the "distanced lovers" trope, while "Add This to the House" finely situates spousal affection in the furnishings, fittings, and routines among which it dwells:

Not a still life into which artifice may enter
but a labor to describe the valves
and cordage that entwine this room;
the voltage is enough to kill.
Who in morning dish-gray light
can fathom the witless parable of waking,
the bed, the cask, the zoned spaces
we pass through. It would be lovely
to say floorboards pose in firelight,
coals are banking down, the room
comes up by degrees. Instead, the day
has begun, shadows dispelled by the clock,
by the promise of work, Clorox,
the phone. I can see you by that metaphor,
the house, the door, the car heading out
to meet the sun, then again hours
later returning, your back to it.

Gizzi is acutely aware of his own nostalgia for a pre-modern setting, for "firelight," "coals," and morning illuminating the room "by degrees," but instead must settle for a room "entwined" in potentially deadly "valves / and cordage," a day whose harbingers are the

paraphernalia of contemporary bourgeois life: "the clock, / ...the promise of work, Clorox, / the phone"—another cluster of "objects" closer than the mirror-watcher might realize, or might like.

In "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear," Gizzi lists a number of eighteenth-century artifacts, reminders of a time when Americans were as yet "England's, still colonials" (as Frost put it in "The Gift Outright"): "a dirty blotter / its crusty bottle, a plume," "a treatise on rotating spheres," "a few doubloons, powder horn / musket bag and tricorne hat." But the immediate objects through which Gizzi moves in *Some Values* are mostly *American*, and the new poetic values he seeks to establish are values within an American context. (The short poems "Hawthorne" and "Edgar Poe" nod towards the "American Renaissance," that first major blossoming of a home-grown culture.) "To Be Written in No Other Country" voices a kind of cultural despair. "It is a sorry day for the pollster and body electorate / for the mildewed pages of a wound dresser," Gizzi writes in the face (one assumes) of a mishandled election, an event that would bring sorrow to Whitman (the "wound dresser," of course). "As a youth did Grant wonder / that he would become both a drunk / and president and die like Melville, forgotten, / buried under ambition and guilt?" Contemporary Americans can only look back in regret at the nation's cultural icons, "lost as we are in the kiddy section of Wal-Mart."

Perhaps the most "American" of the poems in *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* is "Revival," a tremendous elegy to the Beat poet Gregory Corso, a first-generation American whose name might be bigger in Italy these days than in the land of his birth. "It's good to be dead in America," the poem begins, and Gizzi rambles on through a genial accounting of the clutter of European culture with which one doesn't have to deal:

> To be dead in America at the movies
> distracted by preview music in the dimming lights.
> I never once thought of Alfred Deller
> or Kathleen Ferrier singing Kindertotenlieder.
> It's good to be lost among pillars of grass.
> I never once thought of My Last Duchess

> or the Pines of Rome....
> It's good to share molecular chasm with a friend.
> I never once reached for Heisenberg
> or The Fall of the Roman Empire.

But as strenuously as Whitman, and after him William Carlos Williams, sought to forge an American culture free of Old-World influences, for the European-American poet the "mind of Europe" (Eliot's phrase) is continually shaping one's experience of the immediate present:

> I was talking about rending, reading, rewriting
> what is seen. Put the book down and look into the day.
> I want an art that can say how I am feeling
> if I am feeling blue sky unrolling a coronation rug
> unto the bare toe of a peasant girl
> with vague memories of Jeanne d'Arc,
> or that transformation in Cinderella.

While the European past continually shadows the poet who attempts to capture daily reality, he is just as hampered by the utilitarian materialism of American society (a materialism, mind you, about which writers have been complaining for a century and a half): "This pageant demands too much, / that we work and not break, that we love / and not lie, and not complain.... It's good not to break in America." Gizzi concludes, saluting the dead Corso, that there is no single "American life," only the disparate lives of Americans brought together in a single multi-voiced song that once promised salvation:

> These parts wobble, stitching frames
> to improvise a document:
> all this American life. Strike that.
> All our life, all our American lives gathered
> into an anthem we thought to rescue us,
> over and out. On your way, dust.

A grim, unhopeful ending to a lively, polychrome elegy: over and out, indeed.

All sorts of red flags (in more senses than one) go up at the title of Gizzi's most recent collection, *The Outernationale.* Eugène Edine Pottier wrote "L'Internationale" in 1871 in the immediate aftermath of the Paris Commune. He meant it to be sung to that weathered French revolutionary tune, "La Marsellaise," but it's most familiar in an 1888 setting by Pierre De Geyter. The song, appealing to the downtrodden of all nations, is certainly stirring—"Debout, les damnés de la terre, / Debout, les forçats de la faim," it begins ("Arise, wretched of the earth, / Arise, convicts of hunger"). Its title designates a proletarian movement that transcends borders. But what is one to make of Gizzi's title, an apparently nonsensical nonce word that pulses with implications: What exists outside the nation-state? Can one be simultaneously a citizen and not a citizen? What, a hundred and thirty years on, has become of the utopian hopes of the Paris Commune, the Bolshevik Revolution, the American Wobblies?

While Gizzi's earlier work either tended towards a spare, notational obliquity or echoed the "Martian" broadcasts of Jack Spicer (whose lectures and poetry Gizzi has edited), his more recent, lusher poetry has a habit of falling into the accents of Walt Whitman. Indeed, much of *The Outernationale* reads like a series of riffs on *Leaves of Grass.* "A child I became a question / sitting on the grass," runs the opening of "Stung," and here Gizzi seems to have reshuffled the sixth section of "Song of Myself," which includes lines such as "A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands..." To Whitman, grass in part represented "the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven." To Gizzi, the color green has less positive connotations. In "Aubade and Beyond," the "signal green" of spring is obscured, nearly overwhelmed in descending "sheets":

> Everything seems to be falling in sheets today.
> Sheets of glare and sheets of wind, paper
> sheets and more, more sun, glint
> near the monument. Such sheets in stone.

"Nocturne," a poem of Edward Hopperish edges and garish, urban lights, presents a series of color slides in which the natural and the man-made collide: "bright-bright Gatorade green / green dusky as gray forest-shade green." "Human Memory Is Organic" seeks to unwind the tangled relationship of physics, time, and consciousness, and finds all of them coming together in a "green" that concludes in "tears" (perhaps *lacrimae rerum*?):

> Let us examine green. Let us go together
>
> to see it all unstable and becoming
> violent and testing gravity
>
> so natural in its hunger.
>
> The organic existence of gravity.
> The organic nature of history.
>
> The natural history of tears.

Once you start looking for Whitman in *The Outernationale*, he turns up everywhere. I find it difficult not to think of the poet of *Drum-Taps* and the Civil War passages of *Specimen Days* when I read "On What Became of Mathew Brady's Battle Photographs." Brady was of course Whitman's photographic counterpart, documenting the war's devastation in over ten thousand plates (most of them made by his corps of photographers). "After the war," Gizzi tells us in a note, "Brady's glass negatives were sold wholesale to farmers to build greenhouses," and the visual record of the Republic's agony was bleached to invisibility in the sun:

> Sunlight and plant light
> glass and stain
> the campaign the conflict
> the dead frozen in air
> the sun and the sweat
> the swell of fetid flesh
> the tears the ache

the heat of loss
the nerves burn
and the shock
of never returning burns
in the belly
and the brain alike
these images lifting off
into air, dissolving
into heat and light
defy gravity
lifting off
they are going now
Mother, they are gone

As have many other poets in recent years, Gizzi has felt compelled to respond to the Iraq War. "Protest Song" is in the tradition neither of Eugène Pottier nor Pete Seeger nor even Bob Dylan, but offers itself as a bitter commentary on Auden's "poetry makes nothing happen":

This is not a declaration of love or song of war
not a tractate, autonym, or apologia

This won't help when the children are dying
no answer on the way to dust

Neither anthem to rally nor flag flutter
will bring back the dead, their ashes flying

This is not a bandage or hospital tent
not relief or the rest after

Not a wreath, lilac, or laurel sprig
not a garden of earthly delights

"This won't help when the children are dying" is terrifically bathetic, as is "Neither anthem to rally nor flag flutter / will bring back the dead," but I suspect it is an intentional bathos, leading up to the more delicate modulations of "not a bandage or hospital tent / not relief or the rest after." The poem protests not so much against the devastations of war as against the uses to which poetry has been put,

the "Martian generalities" purveyed by the "Out-weariers of Apollo" (as Pound's Sextus Propertius puts it) or the tender-hearted laments that serve mostly to salve the consciences of powerless poets. This song is not a "wreath" for the tomb of some Unknown Soldier, nor a laurel sprig to decorate some hero, nor a bit of lilac, that most Whitmanian flower of mourning. Nor is it, in the tradition of Hieronymus Bosch, a "garden of earthly delights," an allegory of sin, fallenness, and corporeal nature. It is an exercise in painful and necessary self-limitation, an acknowledgement of sublunary ills and the inability of the poet's art to mend them.

Whitman, encompassing multitudes, made his poems more than just a paean to democracy: They became a teeming microcosm of the American body politic, all of whose inequalities and contradictions were to be transcended in the gradual upward spiral of democracy. (In his later years, Whitman became not a "right" or "left" Hegelian, but a just plain *vulgar* Hegelian.) *The Outernationale,* while presenting a vivid array or particulars that at times rivals Whitman's, can't muster anything like his optimism. The first of the collection's two poems titled "The Outernationale" begins with another nod to the good gray bard—"Leaves arch over everything / they are so democratic / to us our viewer in a world of secrets"—but then settles into a kind of grim musing: "Something is something / when the administration of money flows backward." Even the freshness of seasonal change is somehow darkened by a life in which the most prominent light is the "little sheen of products / in rows behind glass":

> In summer we open and opening
> we wander and
> before we were happy
> we were unhappy.
> Such is the dialectical
> awakening everyone
> is hankering to embrace.

Watching sports on TV, "We find purpose / in the game and together," Gizzi admits (echoing Williams's "The Ball Game"), but in the

end dusk leaves him in a dreary, questioning mood, unsure of the state of the body politic:

> When the pistons call,
> when I was a wedge of sun
> over steel mills,
> when I asked what happened
> I meant what happened to us?

Gizzi's second take on "The Outernationale" is a long, bravura performance cast in the first-person plural, a meditation on where "we" stand in the natural world and where we're headed. "Start from nothing," he admonishes a listener with "the book in your hand," "and let the sound reach you." The sound is of course the sound of words, which in this poem are apt to break into shards of suffixes: "I was raised into / out of the incubator / -obic, -etic, -istic / the stain of the world got on me." Something like original sin has broken our language, our society:

> If we could only open
> our hardware
> to rewrite the software
> down deep, the body
> coming to, inside
> this wooden structure
> -archy, -ology, -ocracy.

Gizzi is disgusted by the canards of the media and the stench of the city—"The box is spitting electro- / magnetic lies into the room / again," "a boulevard / rich with dog shit and perfume / carbon monoxide and subway grates"—and history seems, when it is not forgotten, to come down to a "bad history." (It's probably no coincidence that Gizzi here echoes the title of Barrett Watten's "counter-epic" of the First Gulf War, *Bad History.*)

To "rewrite" our own "software" is a draftily utopian goal, but perhaps no more deluded than Pottier's call for the "wretched of the earth" to arise and gird themselves for the "final struggle," or Whitman's faith in the "Endless unfolding of words of ages." "The

Outernationale" winds down not with a burst of cheerleading, but a solemn call to consider the heavenly host:

> Throw back your head
> to the milky tears.
> All types and shapes
> of silent light.
> Here the crab, the bear,
> the dipper, the wheel
> and the little tightnesses
> that keep us wanting.
> The wanting that keeps us
> looking hard into the dark.
> The dark we hope to unpack
> and move into
> that one day
> we might find ourselves lit up.

The progression from constellations to "tightnesses," from "wanting" to "dark," and from there—surprisingly—to a new illumination, is like an unexpected burst of fireworks, a hope that lights up all the darknesses of the poem, and of *The Outernationale* as a whole.

If Gizzi in recent years has come to resemble a reticent, dubious Whitman (golly, not much Whitman left in that description), a superficial comparison might be drawn between Rae Armantrout and Emily Dickinson. Armantrout has none of Dickinson's reclusiveness, and very little of her antinomianism, but she resembles Dickinson in the brevity of her poems, her fond familiarity with the Bible and with fairy tales, and the way the cosmic or noumenal irrupts into her poetry by way of an unpacked metaphor or an unexpected turn of phrase. Dickinson's bird, for instance, in "A Bird came down the Walk—," is a closely observed slice of otherness, even as the poet strives to assimilate it to the human world, remarking its courtesy to the passing beetle, offering it a crumb. It's only when the bird takes flight that the poem spreads its wings into a brightly-plumaged metaphorical fugue:

He unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home—

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam—
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, plashless as they swim.

Rather than leaping into metaphor like this, Armantrout prefers a more calculated approach, often arranging her poems into dovetailed and counterpointed sections in which a given motif flickers between concreteness and metaphor. Note how the color yellow (or "golden") moves through "Away," from the witch's house of *Hansel and Gretel*, to the yellow eyes of a crocodile in a children's book (I think this one is Roy Gerrard's *Croco'nile* of 1994), to the bits of color the poet observes in the sidewalk:

The boy and girl leave
the tired woman behind
gladly.

They are off
to find their real mother,

she of the golden
edible house, the
cunning hunger.

*

From your snort of recognition
I can tell

that you are the baby
crocodile,

adrift
on a floating mat
of papyrus.

In your yellow, crescent eye
an insouciant attention.

*

Yellow flecks
of glitter
in the cement—
clusters?—

each a faraway
answer

to an ill-posed problem.

We travel from the human (the children) to the animal (the croc) to the inanimate (the cement) in these three vignettes, and the yellow upon which the poem hinges grows larger and larger in its implications, until the "flecks of glitter" have become a kind of metaphysical stardust.

Like Dickinson, Armantrout is a poet of the quotidian. "My poems," she writes in an essay, "respond to everyday life by using happenstance; whatever happens by within a certain time frame can enter them. So they are penetrable, interrupted and yet, I hope, they hang together somehow (sometimes)." In the hands of a poet less deft and quirky than Armantrout, such a poetics of the everyday—what Guy Davenport once called the poetics of the "shirt-cuff note"—would result in acres of trivia. But Armantrout's intelligence is continually probing beneath the surface of what she observes, drawing offbeat conclusions from ordinary data:

The very old man shuffles very slowly
not between
the white lines of a crosswalk
but down one of them.

Like a figure in a dream,
his relation to meaning
is ominous.

I'm not nuts about that "Like a figure in a dream," which seems all too easy a simile, but I find the vague, "ominous" manner in which he becomes a figure for the radically inexplicable rather compelling. Or consider the way a restaurant's décor leads Armantrout to a keen observation about our relation to the past: "General Foods ads from the '50s line a restaurant's walls. / It's not nostalgic; nostalgia requires a place / to which we might want to go back."

> It's our felt distance
> from the supposed past
> as collectible,
>
> our credulities and
> incredulities
> as collectibles.

While Armantrout's poems have a range of registers, those she most often explores are the flat but suggestive ones of mass media. "Headline Song" (*Next Life*) is simply a string of headlines: "Bush vows victory / over terror. // For the orphans, / nightmare lasts," etc. In "The Subject," the always unpredictable internet casts the web-surfing poet from the world of Hans Christian Andersen into the realm of clock-watching citizenship:

> I was just going to click
> on "Phoebe is changed
> into a mermaid
> tomorrow!" when suddenly
> it all changed
> into the image
> of a Citizen watch.

The poem is all about change, from the reverse Kafkaesque metamorphosis of its first section ("we've just been turned human / in order to learn / that the beetle we've caught / and are now devouring / is our elder brother") to the "restless" stutter of attention in the final section: "'What is a surface?' / we ask, // trying to change the subject." The subject that gets changed, after all, is not merely the

topic of conversation, but the speaking subject herself: Subjectivity shifts in tandem with whatever enters the field of attention.

"We can't change the country," Stephen Dedalus grouses to Bloom in the "Eumaeus" chapter of *Ulysses*, "Let us change the subject." Changing the subject (in all senses), or at least radically dislocating the language, has been one of the signature moves of the Language poets, most of whom would like nothing better than to change the current order of things. Armantrout has been bunged in with the Language cohort for some two or three decades now. "I do feel that I share some elements of a poetics with them," she once told an interviewer. "It's more than our use of parataxis, ellipsis or poly-vocality (or whatever we're calling it now)"—the gentle put-down is classic Armantrout—"I think it comes down to a sense that critical intelligence and pleasure or, better yet, critical intelligence and play are not enemies. They can unite in poetry."

It's the notion of "play" that hooks me on Armantrout's work. Humor pervades her work, as if the poet were wryly winking at us as she holds up her bits of overheard language and everyday observation. For instance, in "Thing" (from *Next Life*), a bit of Christopher Smart pastiche turns into a smarty-pants jab at the right-wing bias of Fox News:

> We love our cat
> for her self
> regard is assiduous
> and bland,
>
> for she sits in the small
> patch of sun on our rug
> and licks her claws
> from all angles
>
> and it is far
> superior
> to "balanced reporting"
>
> though, of course,
> it is also
> the very same thing.

That's none too subtle, and I must confess finding that "of course" a trifle smarmy, essential though it may be to the culminatory rhythm of the last lines. More characteristic is the first little section of "Promise": "Canary yellow of the school bus; / school bus yellow of the SUV." Here Armantrout remarks the odd slippage of our ordinary epithets, how the school bus's yellow gets described in naturalistic terms, while the SUV (massive, ungainly, the epitome of wasteful consumerism and American self-assertion) gets taken down a notch by being compared to a big box used for carrying kids around. A monster approaches a girl's bed in "A Distance," while the "girl's doll" watches "With contempt." "But whose contempt is it?," asks Armantrout.

Armantrout is always tinkering with language, wondering what works and what doesn't, and why. "Try this," she writes in "Reversible": "Shadows of leaves / between shadows of venetian blinds // bounce // like holes // across the scroll of a / player-piano." A serviceable enough simile, perhaps a minor detail in someone else's poem. "But are similes reversible?" she asks:

> Try this.
>
> Trunk of a palm tree
> as the leg
>
> of a one-legged
> ballerina.

This simile, at least, just plain can't be reversed (try it); a one-legged ballerina is after all a preposterous notion, and comparing her leg to the trunk of a palm tree isn't going to make her existence any more possible.

The second section of "Reversible" begins with another bit of ordinary metaphor-making ("That's a bad / Sean Connery, but / a good Prince"—I assume Armantrout means The Artist Formerly Known as Prince), and then strikes out into weirder territory:

We wake up to an empty room
addressing itself in scare quotes.

"Happen" and "now"
have been smuggled out,

to arrive safely in the past tense.

We come home to a cat
made entirely of fish.

There's a wonderful interplay here of old-fashioned surrealism (the room's interior colloquy, the piscine cat—I suppose if you feed your cat nothing but sardines she's in some sense made of fish) and purely linguistic speculation, with immediate events—"'Happen' and 'now'"—tucked into an irretrievable past. But the "safety" of the past tense, in which things don't happen "now" because they've already happened, is undercut by the slightly unsettling resonances of "empty room" and "scare quotes."

One might be tempted to call Armantrout a kind of laureate of the everyday, if that title weren't being vied for by so many poets. I'm inclined instead to think of her as the laureate of the uncanny, the *Unheimliche*, that which is familiar and unsettling at the same time. To read the world as Armantrout does, constantly tinkering with and unpacking its signs, is to render familiar, even shopworn surfaces new and vivid. Viktor Shklovsky called this *ostranenie*, or "defamiliarization." It's one of Dickinson's stocks in trade. When she observes how the bird on her walk "bit an Angleworm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw," there's a sudden shock of defamiliarization in that "raw": While we wouldn't expect a bird to eat his worms otherwise, the rawness of the meal suddenly underlines the alienness of the bird world.

For Armantrout, sad to say, the world has recently turned more alien in a threateningly intimate way. In June 2006 she underwent surgery for adrenocortical carcinoma, a rare and aggressive cancer that is difficult to treat. Her work since then has been written in the shadow of the disease; as she puts it in *The Grand Piano*, the Bay

Area Language poets' ongoing "collective autobiography," "My recent cancer diagnosis is, of course, the ultimate unexpected input. It's as if some god said, 'Let's see you work around this.'"

The metaphor Armantrout has seized on for her cancer is "dark matter." Physics knows dark matter as a kind of paradox, matter that cannot be detected but only inferred through its gravitational effect on visible matter. Like the "undiscovered tumor" that "squats on [the] kidney" of a woman whose photo is on the mantelpiece in "Apartment," dark matter is a silent, invisible, but looming presence. Physicists now estimate that up to 95% of the universe's gravitating matter is dark matter.

The second section of *Versed*, Armantrout's most recent collection, is titled "Dark Matter," and the poems are shot through with a melancholy and foreboding that, while by no means absent in her earlier work, had been offset by jauntiness. She has often transcribed her dreams in her poetry, but they rarely cut as close to the bone as in the middle section of "Around":

> Chuck and I are pleased
> to have found a spot
> where my ashes can be scattered.
> It looks like a construction site
> now
> but it's adjacent
> to a breathtaking, rocky coast.
> Chuck sees places
> where he might snorkel.
> We're being shown through
> by a sort of realtor.
> We're interested but can't get her
> to fix the price.

"The future is all around us," the poem concludes: "It's a place, // any place / where we don't exist."

It's sobering to realize that one ironclad definition of the future is *a time when we shall be dead.* Intimations of mortality have a way of waking one up to the limits of one's powers and ambitions. ("When

a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight," said Samuel Johnson, "it concentrates his mind wonderfully.") Musing on the "dark matter" invading her body, Armantrout can ask brightly, "Who am I / to experience a burst of star formation?" But such playful Whitmanism, in the face of grave illness, is apt to dwindle: "after the first rush / of enthusiasm // any idea / recedes and dims."

Armantrout has opted to face her illness with neither histrionics nor large gestures, but with the same curious equanimity she has brought to bear on the other "inputs" of her daily life. The final poems in *Versed* include a number that gesture towards the grand summing-up ("Passage" begins, "I held the framework / of my life in mind / with some precision"), but time and again they veer from big statements to something smaller, quirkier, and more intimately compelling. The first section of "Hoop" starts at the very beginning, the pre-creation scene of Genesis 1:

> God twirled
> across the face of
> what cannot be named
> since it was not moving.
>
> God was momentum then,
> that impatience
> with interruption,
>
> stamping time's blanks
> with its own image

The poem then moves on to Armantrout's own situation:

> Now her theme will be
> that she has escaped
> certain destruction,
>
> that she is
> impossibly lucky.
>
> This theme should be jaunty
> but slightly discordant,

coming in, as it does,
so late.

Armantrout's survival is not merely a late-arriving, almost incongruously bouncy theme in the midst of a somber symphony, but a fact that marks her out from the crowd:

The character
associated with this theme
should be dressed
in markedly old-fashioned clothing—

a hoop skirt perhaps—
while everyone else
is in cut-offs,

ready for the barbeque.

No backwards-looking pillar of salt, Armantrout has donned, along with a hoop skirt, a Dickinsonian seriousness that sets her apart from her casual peers, awaiting life's next event like a cookout.

"Fact," the last poem in *Versed*, turns a characteristically raised eyebrow toward whatever the day has to offer. Its first two sections juxtapose the Iraq War with the tedium of a hospital visit:

Operation Phantom Fury.

*

The full force
of the will to live
is fixed
on the next occasion:

someone
coming with a tray,

someone
calling a number.

"Operation Phantom Fury" was the code name for the Second Battle of Fallujah; here the phrase also signals, of course, the battle within Armantrout's own body. What delight, then, when in the final section of "Fact" she turns her attention, all her characteristic curiosity and questioning intact, to the enigmas the world continues to pose her:

> Each material
> fact
> is a pose,
>
> an answer
> waiting to be chosen.
>
> "Just so," it says.
>
> "Ask again!"

"I know I am solid and sound," Whitman booms in "Song of Myself," "To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow, / All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means." Armantrout echoes him, albeit in a subtler, more subdued key. "Dark matter" is after all another "material fact" to be assessed, a "converging object of the universe," "an answer / waiting to be chosen." And with what gusto she echoes that "Ask again!"

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