

## What Do You Write About?

Rae Armantrout

We're all familiar with it. The person beside you on the plane who leans in and asks what you *do*. Perhaps they first ask if you're traveling for business or pleasure. If you're a poet, you've probably been dreading this. The "P" word makes most people uncomfortable and you know it. Will you take the easy way out, say you're on vacation—again? But what if it's a stylist at your hair salon, or, worse yet, a stranger you've been left to talk to at a party? My first move is to say I'm a "writer," not a poet. But this, of course, leads directly to, "Oh, what do you write about?" A natural enough question. And, for some writers not that hard to answer. For me, it's always been torture. Should I just say it, "I write about ephemeral states of mind occasioned by shifting phenomena?" Or maybe, the answer is, "Whatever intrigues me at the moment." Oh dear, that could sound slightly flirtations. Quick, add something more! What about, "I write about the tricks our language habits play on our thinking?" All the above are true. I write about the world as it intersects with my mind. That's the real answer. It's not what they want to hear.

Lately, however, something new has been happening. I haven't changed, or, at least, I haven't been aware of changing, but the world as it intersects with my mind seems changed. It's full of wild fires, viral loads, Black kids killed on video, depleted seas, and mega storms. The fires I've seen for myself since I live on the west coast. I have seen leaden, ocher skies and felt ash falling on my cheeks. And I've heard the ambulance sirens heading for the nearby hospital. Plus it's all been on repeat in the media. If these things are on my mind, they will eventually come into my poems. My last book *Wobble*, my new book, *Conjure*, and my forthcoming book, *Threat Landscape* might have sufficient references to environmental disaster in them that I could call myself an eco-poet. Let me count. In *Conjure* 15 poems out of 107 can plausibly be said to deal with environmental disaster. That's not so many. Perhaps those poems got more attention than the rest. Sixteen poems in *Conjure* had something to do with babies and children. I can and have woven those themes together to say that the book was born from my concern for the world my new granddaughters would face. That's plausible. It's even true. But there are a lot of poems in the book that it does not account for. I worry, a bit, that the tendency to identify books of poetry by theme is reductive—but it can be seductive too.

When I was trying to count eco-poems in *Conjure*, I realized how difficult that is to do. My poems tend to be written in sections that weave topics – or references – together – or bang them together to make sparks. Let’s take the poem “Costumes” for example. It’s in three parts.

## COSTUMES

Man in pirate get-up,  
slumped  
in a folding chair  
on a corner  
by the onramp –

half seen by drivers  
angling for position.

\*

On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, we rested  
surrounded by lakes  
of pig effluent, dunes  
of coal-ash. By that time,  
it was late summer.  
Soon we would scare ourselves  
a little  
and give thanks.

\*

Just when we were sick  
of our appetites, our choices  
the children came along

and presented them  
in miniature—

not as monsters,  
but as pets  
we'd want to feed.

The first section is a funny-sad portrait of a tired, broke man in costume. He had been holding up an advertisement but, in his pirate outfit, was now slumped over in exhaustion. The second section book-ends the release of so-called pig effluent from factory farms and coal ash from mining sites between the Biblical Creation and Halloween. In the third section we see children in costume as monsters. Being children, they make monstrosity cute. So is the poem about the unwillingness of this society to take care of the poor, is it about pollution, or is it about the way children bring joy to life? All three really.

Then there are these two poems, also from *Conjure*. They both have something to do with what you might call nature; but one is overtly political and one is not. They were written about a year apart. I'll start with the one called "Nonesuch." I wrote it in March of 2017. I'd officially retired from UCSD at the end of 2014, but had come back to teach a class that quarter. I arrived in the parking garage a bit early and found a spot on the top outer edge. I was looking directly out into the crown of a eucalyptus tree in flower. Now, generally speaking, I am not crazy about eucalyptus. They look a bit dusty-- somewhere between green, brown, and gray. And they are all over the campus. But this one suddenly struck me as very beautiful. Which was odd. Why this one? What was beautiful about it? Was it different from others or had my taste suddenly changed? What makes something beautiful anyway? When I am struck with questions in this way, when I'm unexpectedly puzzled— that's often when I start writing. So here is "Nonesuch":

#### NONESUCH

This eucalyptus,  
with its elliptical leaves

dangling, light and dry  
as an abandoned chrysalis,

with its modest bunches  
of pale pink flowers

and languid pose,  
is my unattainable ideal.  
Of a piece,  
in pieces,

past it all  
and in plain view --

nowhere  
in the blasted web

of stars

is there any  
such beauty.

I think, if I do say so myself, that the first 3 stanzas are a pretty good description of what I was looking at. But it's more complicated than that. An abandoned chrysalis, after all, is debris left behind after a butterfly or moth has fledged, an afterbirth. A butterfly is beautiful. What about an abandoned chrysalis? What about a tree as "light and dry" as one? We might need to recalibrate our expectations. Dry sounds bad, but light sounds good. The poem seems to be trying to strike a balance somehow. Pink flowers sound pretty, but the fact that they are pale and modest tells us not to get our hopes too high. My identification with the tree—which by the way, is something I didn't know would happen when I began writing—becomes explicit in the 4<sup>th</sup> stanza. Somehow, at the start

of my old age, I felt both dry and light. I was carrying less baggage. Those of you who know the eucalyptus, know its leaves hang down in bunches. They are therefore limp as if tired, or to put a nicer spin on it, “languid.” To be languid is to be glamorously relaxed. According to the poem, this is my ideal. However much I might aspire to it, it’s not one I am likely to achieve.

The tree with its separate clumps of leaves is both in pieces and of a piece. Am I in pieces — maybe not quite yet. But my poems often are. This poem, as it goes on, turns out to be an homage to a eucalyptus, a way of accepting of growing old, and, also, a kind of poetics statement. Does it answer the original question, why does this tree seem beautiful? Maybe. But why should anyone else care? The poem seems pretty far from the upheavals of our time. Is it too private? Perhaps it could be regarded as too self-indulgent, too much about pleasure.

Here is the second poem, “Previews”:

#### PREVIEW

1

There are world-wide, catastrophic storms  
when earth’s network  
of weather-control satellites  
is sabotaged by unknown enemies.

As fire rages through the western forest  
Jeff Bridges snarls,  
“If you want a piece of me,  
come get me.”

2

The baby says, “MMM, MMM!”

to the stuffed fish  
then hits it  
against her closed mouth.

“Ah, Ah,” she says,  
holding it at a distance.

She opens and closes  
the palm of one hand. “Bye-Bye,”  
we say for her.  
“Bye-Bye, Fishy!”

The second part of this began in the summer of 2018, on a family outing to Green Lake park, when my granddaughters were around eight months old. I suppose based on my usual methods, that I wrote the earlier section a few days before that. We had gone to see a movie which was preceded by previews for two disaster films. The prose paragraphs in the first section describe the plots of those movies as far as I was able to decipher them. The first movie takes place in a world where the mega-storms produced by global warming have been brought under control by a techno fix involving satellites, but, uh—oh, there’s a Bond-type villain who wants to ruin everything. No doubt the hero takes care of him by the end. Whew! We can relax and go back to mysteriously controlling the weather. The second movie is a docudrama about an actual team of smokejumpers, elite firefighters, who were overrun and killed by a wildfire in Colorado. Jeff Bridges plays their leader. He talks tough to the fire, ‘If you want a piece of me...’ etc. Famous last words. I’m not criticizing this movie btw. Perhaps it brought attention to the growing danger of fire. I was just struck by that macho, heroic stance. It seems so inappropriate to the scale of the problem. As I write this, in late December 2020, a fire is burning out of control in San Diego County, where I come from. That should be the rainy season.

So is “Preview” a political poem? It points to a problem without commenting on it. The problem here is the way our entertainments, such as movies, tend to give us small and unrealistic solutions to huge and thus far unmanageable problems. It has long been a habit of mine to use my poems to display aspects of popular

culture I find troubling or damaging. I trust the reader or listener to see what I see. Does this mean that, by definition, I am preaching to the choir? Would a truly political poem include more direct commentary? I worry about such things now.

The second part of the poem, like “Nonesuch,” starts with an instance of description. I had made a video of that afternoon at the park. When I watched it later and heard myself saying, “Bye-bye Fishy” I saw that nice day in a more ominous light—in the context of ongoing environmental destruction, and species extinction. I thought about the sad, depleted world these girls will inhabit, assuming the human race survives.

When I read this poem to an audience, they often laugh. They laugh, because of the oddity of hearing motherese (or grandmotherese), an adult form of baby talk, set in the context of environmental collapse. They also laugh, I’m guessing, to show they get it. Their laughter makes me feel good—which means I am more likely to read this poem at the next reading, and maybe more likely to write this kind of poem? I don’t know. Does this mean “Preview” is a better poem than “Nonesuch?” One could argue that, on the contrary, the language in “Preview” is a bit flat, by comparison. Assuming that’s true, did it happen by chance or was it determined by the subject matter? Does flat language convey greater urgency? I don’t know. I want to leave those questions with the audience. I do know that, now, if I wish to focus on poems such as these, I can say I write poetry about the environmental crisis. I doubt, though, that this answer would lead to good conversation on that plane trip or at that party I mentioned earlier. I’ll have to stay with the my original statement—that I write about the world as it interacts with my mind moment to moment—despite whatever mystification that may provoke.