

Displacement is an issue that recurs throughout Talvikki Ansel's poetry. In *My Shining Archipelago*, which won the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize in 1996, Ansel meditates upon transplantation and alienation in the sonnet sequence "Afterwards: Caliban," a long poem that imagines the life of *The Tempest's* Caliban in London, after he has been taken from Prospero's island. In *Somewhere in Space*, "My-corrhizae" suggests that human beings who spend their lives confined to cities and workplaces—with the associated stresses, alienation, isolation, and sensory deprivation—are like transplants with bare roots: we are far more likely to survive if we remember our connections to the natural world.

In other poems, Ansel seeks to find emblems for human displacement, as in "Places to Swim":

In town this week, two people found goldfish
balanced in paper cups
in their mailboxes.

Although *friluftsliv* is never mentioned by name in *Somewhere in Space*, many of the poems in this collection seem to participate in, and contemplate, the concept. In "How It Sounds" (a poem whose very title might purposefully cause a reader to ask the question, "What is 'it'?"), Ansel considers the stimulating effects of the natural world upon the senses, and how the perception of phenomena might cause an observer to try to better understand the sources of such stimuli. The speaker tries to imagine

The first sounds our ancestors heard,
clambering up the rock cliff, would we
recognize the Bulwer's croon,
eider's groan and mutter, wind-shift
in the spruce boughs
and depths to sound?

The profusion of details summoned by many of Ansel's poems might overwhelm an unwary reader

and even suggest a sort of randomness in the grouping together of such things—until that reader begins to perceive the quiet architecture and logic of these poems. In "Valentine's," for example, the speaker describes a dreary winter scene that seems to bear little relation to the poem's titular day until she notices,

a gull, wing flap like a towel
drop clams from a great height
onto the icy road.

Talvikki Ansel's genius is for both fusion and profusion. In the midst of such extravagance, the poet's subtle design is at work in the apt, but unexpected, turn or the shockingly appropriate image. With the connections that she makes (and even the traditionally different modes of discourse that she brings together in her poems), Ansel breaks down old, artificial dichotomies—between nature poetry and social critique, Romanticism and intellect, science writing and literature—with the instincts and ethos of a Metaphysical poet. At the same time, the lavish sensuous experience of these poems may instill in the reader a feeling not unlike that of getting back to nature after having lived too long on an asphalt island.

—Carol Quinn

Bonnie Arning. *Escape Velocity*. Colorado State University, 2017.

The universe is a vast emptiness, speckled with a few planets glowing a multitude of colors as they reflect the light of slowly dying stars. This elegiac beauty is precisely what Bonnie Arning captures in *Escape Velocity*, a book of poems that contains the darkness of space, and the light of its stars. These thirty-six poems, broken into four sections of nine poems each, begin with the slow circles of the spheres, focusing on cosmic origin and stellar metaphor, then

grow more fierce, becoming meteors that leave a devastating impact as the content turns to a miscarried child and physically abusive, suicidal husband. Form and function become tools for her to express the unrelenting ache for love in isolation, balanced only by the visceral shame of victimhood.

These two distinct themes are both established in the first poem, “Marriage Ephemera.” Arning writes about wanting to “pinpoint the moment” the narrator began to find her lover abhorrent, expressing her overwhelming distaste for him through the image of his jar full of animal bone fragments. These shattered pieces of livestock hint at the beatings mentioned in poems later in the collection, while the final lines hint at the attempts to capture humankind’s comparative smallness despite its huge ego. The poem ends with, “I worry all our knowledge of godhood / has been transformed into coordinates for darkness and light.”

Finding one extreme tucked away within the other is a common theme in Arning’s poems. “Las Vegas Strip, 4 A. M.” does this with anger and compassion, as the narrator talks of a desire to intimate with a man raging at passers-by. This poem, in the poet’s words, is about “the desire to ignite / make a torch of our bodies that won’t stop burning / against all the rage we can’t be rid of.”

Love and resentment find their place throughout her work as well, and while they’re polar opposites to some, Arning weaves them together with the inextricability of plucking one strand from a spider’s web. “Tight Spaces” begins with laughter, as the narrator reminisces about her and her love eating curry, and “drinking jasmine from tin cups.” As the poem progresses, bits of violence appear, foreshadowed by the spots of blood on the lover’s neck after he shaves. By the end, they’re screaming at each other, an argument that culminates with the narrator hurling a coffee pot into the wall, shattering it. She’s unable to pick all the pieces up, so “months later we still find slivers speckling our feet.”

Enhancing this thematic choice is her inclusion of two erasures, including her poem “Stand Burn,” which takes phrases from Eminem’s “Love the Way You Lie.” It begins, “because / tell you what / steel windpipe / breathe still,” the phrases coming erratic and disjointed convey trauma and distrust. Much like the song, the poem ends, “because I love / you I love you lie / you lie I love you lie.”

Despite the focus on domestic violence, Arning is careful never to paint the narrator as a hapless victim. This is no damsel in distress, but a woman well aware of her own power, where it comes from, and her decision not to use it. “Siren Song” recalls the image of the broken coffee pot, opening with a description of the narrator’s father teaching her to use magnets to find iron, “each black sliver coaxed from the earth by force of its desire.” This driving force leads her to say, “I know love—white arm of lightning,” as such passion can be dangerous for all involved. She acknowledges her own part in the destruction of those who had loved her in the final lines, “I have been singing the siren’s song for years now— / learning at what frequency a man will dash himself upon / the rocks. I am the magnet his body desires collision against.” Arning is not shy or coy about the ferocity of love and lust.

In balancing this against powerlessness, the poem “Victim Mentality” opens with an anecdote about the narrator’s grandparents. When her drunk grandfather gropes a waitress, the grandmother extinguishes a cigarette on his arm. In facing her abusive husband, the narrator thinks of this incident, knowing it happened “so no one could distinguish / which one of them was worse.” She applies this to her husband with the intention of striking him first so she can say, “Don’t worry... there is no victim here.”

Several poems marry space and spousehood, using the absence of other people in space to refer to the loneliness of a bad marriage. In “A physicist tells me,” the narrator discusses escape velocity—the

speed necessary to leave earth—and how no matter how far the object goes, gravity can fade. “The forces that propel you forward and pull you back / both diminish equally—but can’t disappear.” The poem “Red Giant Woman” takes on the second person perspective, referring to an unknown third person, and the abused woman imploding like the titular star. She writes, “You / have a heart that was made to shrink / tremendously. Now burst.”

It takes a very skilled poet to merge a concept as infinite as the ever-expanding universe while still focusing so precisely on domestic abuse and the loss of a child. One is a grand canvas open to interpretation, yet the other requires peeling back layers with the psychological equivalent of a surgeon’s scalpel, to expose intricacies. Make no mistake: this poet is sure to be one of America’s most well-known poets, and soon. Through *Escape Velocity*, Arning gives us poems that find brilliance in dark matter, with words that hold more gravity than stars. In her own words, “Here are all the black acres of paradise.”

—Kevin Holton

Mahogany L. Browne. *Smudge*. Button Poetry, 2015.

With her 2015 chapbook collection *Smudge* (Button Poetry / Exploding Pinecone Press), poet, activist, and performance poetry champion Mahogany Browne explores the cruel complexity of inter-racial discrimination, familial strain, and anxiety within the African-American community. The “you,” to whom so many of these poems are addressed, might just as well be written back to another knowing reader who, too, has been the victim of bullied insults and ever-present reminders of a socio-cultural “ideal”: light-skinned, “good” hair, perfect curves. Consider, for example, the following passage from the collection’s opening poem,

*You brown dirty dark black blackest night midnight blue
bl____k girl y o u*

*so
blk*

somehow you forgot your name.

The full use of “black” and “blackest” are weaponized. They become two words within a string of abusive descriptors and quick alliterative pacing that read more like fisted jabs. One feels pummeled and picked apart, reduced to abbreviated shorthand (“blk”) or in pieces, incomplete (“bl____k”) as the speaker laments her unrequited “desire to be wanted.”

Even the physical layout itself (*Smudge* is set in landscape, not a traditional portrait style) can be said to represent the speaker’s own sense of self, uniquely different and apart from the common shape of her contemporaries. It also provides ample room for Browne’s ranging, spatial forms to flow across the page, as in this excerpt from “When 12 Play Was on Repeat”:

*When you are a deep amber & your jheri curl is a
distant memory & your shape is swollen in the perfect
places & the boys remember your name & your first and
last crush sings to you come here with a lilt in his walk
& his tongue wags you towards him with its pale pink
and you smile because you remember the sun wrinkles
your darkness—*

Here, the page-spanning lines and foregone punctuation pull our eyes from left to right, building suspense and anxiety with each new detail. The scene comes together as memory itself, an associative collage of indelible detail and emotionality that feels absolutely present. The intimacy of the poem is further enhanced by its narrative structure, using interior monologue to reveal the speaker’s inner voice. “When 12 Play Was on Repeat” reels