WE ARE IT

Eileen R. Tabios

Dusie, 2019
In her essay “somewhere inbetween: Speaking-Through Contiguity”, Marthe Reed (1959-2018) directs us to Timothy Morton’s reframing of human/other-than-human relationships as “drastically collective”—“All kinds of beings, from toxic waste to sea snails, are clamoring for our scientific, political, and artistic attention.”

“Escape from this truth lies through no doorway, no slippery construct of language or argument: ‘we’ are ‘it,’ inextricable from our circumstances. The point on which all else turns: within this ‘drastically collective’ condition, how, then...live? Indeed, how write?”

—Marthe Reed, Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene
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A SAMPLING OF CLAMOURS
Letter from Sarayaku

Ecuador's government ignored the community's refusal to sell oil-drilling rights and signed a contract in 1996 with the Argentinian oil company C.G.C. to explore for oil in Sarayaku. In 2003, C.G.C. petroleros—oil workers and private security guards—and Ecuadorian soldiers came by helicopter to lay explosives and dig test wells. // Sarayaku mobilized.

Brown as the earth from which you surfaced
we relished your skin as we washed each of you
earth

We relished your skin as we peeled it off
each of you to reveal the color of the sun
skin

We relished sunlight's complexion as we sliced
your mud-kissed body into strips for our teeth
sunlight
teeth

Our teeth chewed and chewed the slices
of your body, mixing them with our saliva
saliva

Our saliva was our contribution and warning
for those to whom we served your bodies

Knowing who we would serve, we spit enzymes for
your bodies into a bowl. Your bodies then fermented
enzymes

for hours until your flesh became juice looking like
"defatted milk," a surface evoking the sheen of cataracts,
flesh

apt for hearkening the blind men who sought oil from
our ground by destroying the source of the treasure
oil

they desired. We chewed and bathed your bodies with
our saliva—we gave freely from our own bodies for we
bodies

should not protect from a distance. You are the source
of our lives: water, fruits and vegetables, insects, animals—
source

a jungle that deserves harmony from those to whom you
give life. So we thank you, Nature, for donating the cassavas.
jungle

With our spit, we created chicha for the petroleros. They
partied all night with your cassavas and our saliva.
chicha

When they woke, they woke to the muzzles of their guns
held strongly in our arms. Warned off our ancestral lands,
guns
they never returned. An ocean away, several years later, a poem surfaces without addressing the torture, rape

and other suffering of the people, “especially mothers and children.” Instead, focus alights on how nature and

humans cooperated for “sumac kawsay,” the presumption one must live peacefully with the natural world and insist

nature has rights deserving of protection. Not only is this a law of the jungle, it holds the key for the planet’s survival.

“It’s not a big thing,” says a Sarayaku elder, his hair decorated with blue bird wings. “It’s just to continue living.”

In 2008, Ecuador’s constitution became the first in the world to codify the rights of nature and specifically sumak kawsay. Bolivia’s constitution has a similar provision, and rights-of-nature ordinances have been passed in communities in the United States.
Marawi’s Pets

“More than 200,000 residents managed to flee...”
—from “Time stands still on deserted streets of war-torn Marawi”
by Jack Board, ChannelNewsAsia, June 20, 2017

Somehow, it always comes down on the animals—

the pets become feeble but still turn their heads here and there looking for the hands often behind the bowls and which petted and cuddled—

They wander emptied streets whose signs recall lives now evaporated—

One poster proclaims “Congratulations, Graduate!” Another sign beckons for health examinations Yet another indicates a school road crossing—

Absence as presence—

resulting in a puppy pockmarking a torn road, flies buzzing around its too-tiny corpse—

Like the orphaned animals, pages torn off calendars ripped from bombarded walls float through the
same forsaken streets—

They will no longer
bear marks of
anticipation
after failing to give
warning with red
ink and capitals
“INVASION!”

No one is spared
this rupture
from homes whose
hearts had been
large enough to
welcome animals—

Somehow, it always
comes down
on the animals—

\[ A \text{ puppy left} \]
\[ \text{to the black cloud} \]
\[ \text{of feasting flies—} \]

Somehow, it always
comes down
on the innocent
Mga Alagang Hayop Sa Marawi
("Marawi’s Pets” translated to Filipino by Aileen Ibardaloza Cassinotto)

"Mahigit dalawang daang libo ang lumikas..."
("Time stands still on deserted streets of war-torn Marawi")
—Jack Board, ChannelNewsAsia, June 20, 2017

Tila baga ang laging
kinababagsakan
ay mga hayop—

Silang pinanghihinanaan na,
ay pilit pang inililinga ang ulo
upang hanapin
paru’t parito
ang mga kamay sa likod
ng mangkok
na minsang humimas,
minsang umaruga—

Nilibot ang mga
kalyeng kakab
mga hudyat ng
lumaho—

May karatulang naghahayag,
"Maligayang bati sa
nagtapos!” May isa namang
nagaanyayang
magpasuri sa mangagagamot
At nariyan din ang palatandaan
na may paaralan sa di kalayuan
Paalala na may mga batang
nagsisitawid—

Ang wala ay narito—

Nagbubunga ng isang bilot
na bumabakat
sa isang daang gulanit, mga langaw
na humihiging paikot
sa bangkay na ubod liit—

Tulad ng mga naulilang
hayop, ang mga pahinang pinunit
sa kalindaryo na pinigtas
sa mga nahagupit na dingding
ay lumalaboy sa mga
daang nilimot—

Di na sila magtataglay
ng mga marka ng
paghihintay
matapos makaligtaang magbigay
ng babala na dapat ay isinulat sa pulang
tinta at malalaking letra,
"MANLULUSOB!"

Walang nailigtas
sa wasak
na mga tahanang
nagbukas loob
mga pintuang
ibinukas sa mga hayop—

Tila baga ang laging
kinababagsakan
ay mga hayop—

    Isang bilot ay naiwan
    sa maitim na ulap
    ng nagpipistang mga langaw—

Tila baga ang laging
kinababagsakan
ay ang walang malay.
The Flooding That Writes Itself

Mudslides brought about by weeks of heavy rains almost buried the village of Guinsaugon in Southern Leyte, Philippines. Gov. Rosette Lerias said most of those feared dead were school children who were attending classes at the Guisajogon elementary school when the landslide occurred.

“It sounded like the mountain exploded and the whole thing crumbled,” a survivor said, after watching his entire village buried under in mud. “I could not see any house standing,” Dario Libatan told dzMM radio.

"The Philippines has gone from a major timber producing country to one where they import timber," [forestry consultant Hugh Speechly] said, adding that in the 1930s, before it began serious logging, the nation had several million hectares of forest cover, compared with only about 600,000 untouched hectares today.


I could not teach
what they refused
to hear.

It is so dark
and damp
and cold.

I wanted to teach
how mountains explode
like people—
that abuse takes
many forms.

How long will this air last?

I can barely see the light
from my mobile phone—
did someone hear
my words text-ed out
about the growing dimness here?

“Ma’am, we are still under
the school. Please help us,
Ma’am. This is Edilio
Coquilla. Please Ma’am.”

The children have not even
began first grade.
I hear their fingers scratching
sounds like restless “insects
or running water”—will
the rescuers be fooled?
Are there rescuers
above this collapsed earth?

I could not teach
the deaf to listen.
No, not lessons about
the environment—how trees
protect land from sliding
down into faraway seas.

I could not teach the guardians
who loved to call themselves
“guardians” of the future:
children now inhaling mud
become mud.

I could not teach
politicians to cease corruption—
to grow environments where
mountains can exist
despite the hunger of
human denizens.

I could not teach how
Hunger becomes a disease
when we feed ourselves
with our children.

This lesson is not about mountains
losing their trees
so people can eat.

The lesson is about a poet
writing a poem
on a desk carved
from an “endangered species”
smuggled out into a land
replete with snow
through bribes
to a mayor, a general,
a dock inspector
a paper-pushing “facilitator”
and his administrative assistant.

And how I shall be thirsty
For the rest of my life
no matter how much water
I drink and drink
trying to release the taste
of mud spewed out
in Guinsaugon, Leyte, Philippines
on February 17, 2006.
SELECTED WITNESSINGS

From “The Ashbery Riff-Offs” where each poem begins with 1 or 1-2 lines from “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” by John Ashbery
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: History

Eyebeams, muslin, coral. It doesn’t matter because these things are what they are today and made larger than they are by the indolence of our imagination. We imbue objects with worth as determined by the artifice of scarcity—as if eyebeams can supplant the results of scholarly research, as if muslin can be separated from its city of origin, as if coral can belong atop marble pedestals in some corner of a skyscraper’s mahogany-walled conference terroir. We break proven ancestral wisdom by taking more from the land than what we give back to it. Then we scar the planet again with laboratory-made pollutants impossible to compost. When we pause to lift our protective visors from decimating fish, plants, and birds, we sip chilled chemicals for water is no longer safe. Then we contextualize abuse as some inevitable path of an abstraction we label History to mask our brute exercise of a power we shall never hold. Darling, even you are indigenous. Darling, you shall pay
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Anthropocene
— for Timothy Morton

Things that don’t seem familiar when we meet them again, lost beyond telling, like the cyborgs we’ve become when, in analyzing our DNA, we discover significant material from viruses. No wonder lakes become deserts, or cities submerge. An image catches your eye and you think, “What a lovely pattern painting!” But upon approaching you realize its beauty is hard-earned: the photographer had shot the ground of a dried-out reservoir in North Korea—what you thought were brush marks are concrete cracks. As well, it’s a photograph of evaporated water—another depressing interpretation of absence as presence. Nowadays, to catch yourself in that convex mirror is to wonder what—not who—is the human. For we cannot avoid this “moment of blinking self-awareness”—we do not only drive ecological destruction; “we know that we are”! When did self-knowledge cease to fuel human progress? Can a philosophy surface without any sense of mortality? Watering lawns is no longer an innocent exercise (though, was it ever, given the artifice of a lawn?). Turning on the air conditioner means bleaching the corals of the Great Barrier Reef. Your lover’s thoughtful gift of sea salt for your culinary affectations? A bounty of microplastics. Then, how to soldier on, clearing a beach of debris while anticipating that, soon, polyethylene islands will disrupt the horizon’s clean line? How to copy Timothy Morton’s faith as he exhorts, To dance disco is to be hopeful! even as orphans increase in number? Let us listen
then to adoption experts—they often advise family members in despair: pretend, then pretend again. After much practice, someday you will wake to authentic attachment. When we look back at history, we have more than the two choices of extinction or evolution. We have the brontosaurus, history’s most famous nonexistent dinosaur—the made-up species provided much pleasure to children, but is it not significant it was False?
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: “Living In the Micro, Not Macro”

There seems no special reason why that light should be focused on love. We’re past the age of boozing, drinking and drugging as if we always will be slim, fresh-faced and smiling. We’re no different from the Ross Ice Shelf (and the rest of Antarctica) as the planet warms around it. Faced with mortality gazing back at us from the bathroom mirror, we measure the slackness of fat belted around our “true” waistline. Faced with climate change, scientists measure ice thickness and the shape of the sea floor to gauge the frozen shelf’s vulnerability to collapse. Once, you whispered, “You are my planet.” What was a room dim with the edges of that night suddenly flared into a sunlit space bright as noon. We could not have known a moment such as that would be the tip of an economist’s curve graphing the “marginal rate of return”—that from such a peak begins a descent where redemption breaks through the implied trajectory only if love surfaces, allowing us once more to behave with innocence. Thus, where illumination is generous enough to rise, let it: reclaim love with its infinite possibilities despite the body’s deterioration, ours and earth’s
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Narcissism

Me on all sides, everywhere I look
I see me, my tendency to nag in
that bird’s pointed beak opening then
snapping as it sucks in a worm. I
see my loveliness ... but also aversion
to social settings in the “Casablanca
Lily” which blooms only as night falls,
its six purple petals widening to reveal
vermilion stamens with cream
tattoos. I see my fears in the jihadist
attack on an Ouagadougou restaurant
killing 17 and wounding eight more—
my condolences, dear Burkina Faso.
I visit an exhibition by light artist Leo
Villareal which opens its gallery with
three wall-mounted works of exposed
LED strips. Scaled to the human body,
the pieces glow and flicker in the dimness,
forming abstract patterns that shift in
seamless progressions. The Cloud
Drawings (2017) are tuned to the pulse
of nature, suggesting migrating wildlife:
drifting amoebae, swarms of fireflies,
clusters of cumulus clouds, and rippling
water—all of it unfolding at a tempo
resonant with one’s breath: my breath.
Obviously, the artist had my bodacious
body in mind. Graciously, I reciprocate
as I always do when I look at fine art: I
see me on all sides, everywhere I look
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Ravished in the Raw

Sifting the April sunlight for clues
I notice buds late to their blossoming,
a flaw that makes one realize
sunlight offers no clues; it only reveals
what already existed before its random illumination. Its light may reveal buds
tardy to becoming plums, apricots,
or pears. The revelation may make you sensitive to the plight of bees—
how chemicals and other human-made pollution are destroying their habitat,
causing them, in turn, to destroy more habitat. War always spirals, unless it defeats itself, thus, ends. But it’s rare for an impulse to want to end itself—
that’s another truth for which sunlight cannot take credit. To what one sees
when light touches down in front of you
(lightly like a plane controlled by the most seasoned pilot, or darkly like a sudden and unseasonal storm), only you can decide your response. Don’t bother hiring bodyguards—they wait on you rather than decide your next move before the sun sets to leave you in the darkness which, like April and sunlight, offers no clues as to how to comprehend how you, once praised by parents and teachers for “brilliant potential,” are still sifting through images of the unripened as if you are royal: able to cause others to blossom
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: A Winter Hunt

This mirror that is no longer mine seems destined to betray. The wind makes snow figurines, only to erase them with a new direction to blow. Hunters and trappers know to look for paw prints by animals who survive through invisibility. The most reliable hint of existence, of course, is spilled blood. The anguish of life leaking away is almost impossible to camouflage, especially through glass bent to magnify sight. Experience is knowing when to trap truth to reveal itself. White ptarmigans only need to stand still on snow to hide—to delay how their hearts, when plucked out by those practiced in lucidity, glow with the red of hot embers. It all seems a fair exchange when a successful hunt means a priori knowledge for avoiding spider holes, weak spots on ice that one falsely thought was frozen enough to support a body and weaponry. Later, perhaps while dining on bird breasts fried with onions and spices, the hunter who exists in all of us might consider how “spider hole” contains another meaning: military parlance for a camouflaged one-man foxhole—perhaps a caution for reconsidering an earlier conclusion. Perhaps the mirror, by bending to be convex, doesn’t betray the image it reflects. Perhaps the mirror bends to magnify reality, thus, better elucidate
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Eggs, Seeds, Or Not

This thing, the mute undivided presence has the justification of logic, which speaks to the power of circles. This thing evokes not the sun so sloppy with promiscuous fingers of light but, the planets circling its heat. An orb can float peaceably along pulled by an Other it does not censor. Or an orb can battle forces aligning it on a certain path, not because the path is strewn with sharply-edged gravel but because it did not choose its path. One of these orbs is an egg. Or, both are but only one is fertile. Poor Mars—such deadening from its persistent deserts So much heat wasted from the lack of seeds shading themselves between rocks smoothened by wind to mirror eggs when reflections cannot procreate
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Assymetry, A Perfume

In the first place, seduced by flowers
In the second, asymmetry as the perfect
blossom is best served not wielding petals
of the same scale. In the third, thorns
If, one evening when insomnia places me
at the porch looking up to count stars, for
the bottle is empty, I catch a Casablanca
Lily unfurling its white skirt to reveal purple
-red stamens, I will treasure its impudence
instead of blame it for the reducing light
Asymmetry: the night contains its own
ways of blossoming despite the stench of its
criminals masking amorality through perfume
liquefied from crushing flower after flower—
they, who dared blossoming without the sun
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Sudan, Focused and Unfocused

Which was enough for his purpose: his image glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180-degree angle to surface not mere reflection but also his context. If he smiles, we can see the cut-up cherry pie whose sweetness reddened a corner tooth ... in turn, we notice the tooth to be chipped, reminding us that when a bully strikes him, he is the type to strike back. If he frowns, we can see the window to his room darkened by a rainstorm ... in turn reminding us that he loves to sit in his yard tanning his skin to a dark amber ... in turn reminding us he loves his artisan beers. The gaze widens to capture the universe whose span is infinite, until it is not. Something always catches the gaze, makes it pause, regress into a narrow focus—like Giovanna Silva’s images of the last male northern white rhinoceros in his book Good Boy 0372: tightly cropped photographs of the pachyderm’s skin. The hide “appears as a dusty, abstract land-scape of crevices, folds, and ridges, its topography craggy and flaking, like bark slowly peeling from a tree... At times, these visual fragments offer clues to our subject’s identity: the wedge of a large toe; the blunt shadow of a horn—which was cut off to deter poachers—that resembles a vast crater; a single ear, cupped like the blossom of a calla lily. Most revealing are photographs of Sudan’s eyes, circled by wrinkles, which punctuate the series with a hint of life. Dark and slightly wet, they resemble oases embedded within a dry, barren terrain, where mosquitos come to rest.” A photograph of a single eye from the rhino’s face in profile is particularly compelling, dampening the page where this poem unfolded from the rare tears of a poet who’s learned to pretend objective distance whenever she directs her eyes and pen to human atrocities. To learn the rhino’s name, “Sudan,” in turn evokes calamities in its country namesake—a widening of the gaze that bludgeons the witness. Let’s narrow the focus back to animals. In Sudan, 21 mammal species, nine bird species and two plant species are endangered. They include the waldrapp, tora hartebeest, slender-horned gazelle and hawksbill turtle. The Sahara onyx already became extinct in the wild. To such
discoveries, the witness becomes like many others who once waxed eloquent on the advantages of an expansive gaze: focus regresses and, suddenly, context is overrated. Still, what art was created from this journey is admirable—we admire Sudan’s images then close the book. Bred as No. 0372, what a good boy is Sudan, his skin a “dusty, abstract landscape”
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Graceless Days

“Water lilies have proven especially effective in absorbing heavy metals from the water.”
—“Plants That Clean Water,” Kellogg Garden Products

“The small accidents and pleasures of the day as it moved gracelessly on” is a description of disproportion: during a graceless day, accidents are larger than pleasures even when they’re not. Christine is walking around a pond, singing to the water after she woke that morning dreaming of her Philippine childhood. Her dreams recalled the U.S. Army bombing a remote atoll in the Pacific. “There was no enemy; the army just wanted to check on the reliability of their missile weaponry.” Decades later, Christine is an ally to the Water Walkers, a group founded by two Anishinawbe grandmothers to raise awareness of water pollution and pray for water’s well-being. Christine tells this story, only to conclude, “I don’t know how to end this tale. All I know is my mother telling me, It’s always women fixing the fuck-ups.”

A visitor to Christine’s pond admires the proliferating water lilies—scarlet centers blossoming to pink luminosity, yellows transforming to discrete whites and violets also opting for more subtlety as the eye travels from center to petals’ outer edges. One might think of Monet’s “Water Lilies” but that would heighten the pleasure of witness. What we see is not art but a natural filtration treatment for a macho accident not at all small—murder comes in so many, too many, forms
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: The Scent of a Melting Iceberg

There is no other way, and those assholes who would confuse everything with their mirror games rub over bullet holes and layer paint heavily as if the punctures blossomed on insensate walls rather than a culture hard-fought into birth. There is fact (gunshot) and alternative-fact (new paintjob). There is fact (gunshot) and alternative-fact ("No one was killed"). There is fact (gunshot) and alternative-fact ("No one was even born"). But the problem with a martyr is the people who enact someone’s martyrdom. They form a culture that survives bullets and a president’s proclamation: bullets are simply egg yolks. Folks, let us not extend the metaphor—let’s discourage the evolution of a politician’s paintjob into metaphorical alkyds that, cheap and easy to make, expand the expanse of alternative-facts. Let’s call a spade a spade. Let’s call a bullet a tip of the iceberg melting to threaten everyone with its polluted waters replete with tar-perfumed carcinogens
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Don't Make Up The Ocean

But it is life englobed, so that it can fit on a palm—perhaps, we hope, we can understand if we can look at life from afar as if we are not part of what we see, like a mountain looking down on a valley. It’s a useless fantasy—still, let us learn from mountains! The mountains are not interested in putting on make-up on the planet—no desire, say, to enhance the ocean with a shimmering emerald blush atop its surface to mingle with sunlight then thread its way through the waves—the resulting bioluminescent color may be attractive to human eyes, but it is mourned by mountains as they grieve over the melting ice atop the Himalayas whose evaporation increased temperatures until the ocean began to suffocate—algae bloomed a pale green blanket across the water through CO2 emitted into the atmosphere. The poisoned organisms then murdered marine populations. Along the Arabian Sea, where fishing sustained 120 million people, 50 tons of fish beached along the coast of Oman starved for oxygen, white bodies flopping with mouths gaping at the sun. Fish rotted. Elders chose hunger to allow children to eat. Still, children eventually starved—they became like fish with mouths gaping at the sun—what a price for Beauty! Thus mountains are not interested in putting on make-up on the planet. Listen to the mountains: “You are all beautiful in our eyes. You all deserve to Breathe.” I and You become beautiful by honoring our shared roots. Take my flesh and eat—

Mountain
Ocean
Fish
Human
Algae

In our nakedness, let us share ancestry, not look at each other as an Other. We all deserve to breathe and we cannot but share the same life-giving breath
Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: “Lord, Please Forgive Them For They Know Not What They Do”

And nothing can exist except what’s there, as advised by the human sergeant to his army of robots charged with cleaning up Fukushima, site of the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl. About 18,000 people died and more than a million buildings fell. Six hundred tons of toxic fuel leaked out of Tokyo Electric Power Company’s reactor, creating radiation levels too high for humans to survive. Thus, engineers created “scorpion” robots with cameras to survey the damage caused by an earthquake and tsunami. Scorpions go back to the Silurian era 430 million years ago—adeptly adapting to a wide range of environmental conditions, they now exist on all continents except Antarctica. Thus, the engineers were baffled when the robots died as they probed the site of the accident. They sent more scorpions but they, too, expired. Scientists explained the phenomena as “too much radiation.” But the engineers insisted on describing the robots’ demise as “dying”—

how parents must grieve over what they birthed. *How God truly must anguish over us!*
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SELECTED WITNESSINGS
The poems were previously published in Witness in the Convex Mirror by Eileen R. Tabios (TinFish Press, Hawai‘i, 2019).

Graceless Days

Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Don’t Make Up The Ocean