

Conversation Pieces
Volume 83

We've Been Here Before

Poems by
Anne Carly Abad





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To Mom, Kung Kung, Alphonse, Victor, and
Andre, the treasures of my soul.

To Denver Ejem Torres, Krip Yuson, Ms.
Christine Bellen Ang, Ms. Alma Anonas-
Carpio, Chief Joel Pablo Salud: Thank you
for believing in my work first and getting me
started down this (endless) road.

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In the spaces between dreams and reality, the strange and the familiar intersect. As if walking into different pockets of existence, each poem is a world of its own, but with beings who experience joy and pain the same ways we do. Suddenly, there is this undeniable sense—of being able to cross the liquid boundary between the self and the Other.

Foreword

The Looking Glass

Ultimately one seeks to find his or her place in the world. The mirror is often the first thing we greet in the morning. But it is a mute thing. Can one trust what the mirror sees?

When a woman is told she is hideous, her reflection can become her worst enemy. And seeing it daily can hammer into her mind the belief that she is indeed ugly.

But the same mirror can also shine light on the dysfunctions of a society that contributes to the distorted images individuals see in their looking glass. Just by asking people “What do you see?”, much information can be gathered about the gaps between one’s reality and what others see.

When a society fails to reflect upon the standards of beauty and acceptability, these standards can take on a (monstrous) life of their own. Thus, much of the work in this collection explores and iterates on the alienation and rediscovery of the self and body.

The Other

It’s been said that the Self is formed through the looking glass of others. But what if the Other is beyond reach? Technology has connected us but

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perhaps in much too superficial ways. News of the death of a child from a stray bullet and the photo of his grieving mother sadden us one day. Yet we are up the next morning, sipping a cup of coffee that refreshes our amnesia.

By giving the otherwise obscure Other a different face, be it as a fairy or an animal or a machine, I believe I am able to get much closer to the subject. I want people to look and do a double take. This time, they can't just look away.

A lot of the fear and hatred toward people or things other than ourselves stems from a lack of understanding or an inability to "get close." The sense of unapproachability puts many off from even trying to be in the other's shoes. We look away from what we don't want to see. Though this is natural given the limitations of our purview, I believe creating a (scenic) bridge toward the Other has become more important than ever in our changing world.

Suspending the Why?

The ability to stop asking "why" for a moment allows one to look at things with a more open perspective.

Why is there a robot in there? Why is there a demon?

Why not just let the worlds within each piece unfold and tell their stories? Poe freely used the atmosphere and shadows to depict the roiling darkness within the human mind. Elements of fancy may have always

been a key ingredient in poetry before verse was dichotomized into speculative and literary. Suspending one's disbelief gifts us with some much needed pause while also teaching us to enjoy a brief flight on the wings of a free imagination.

And imagination is what we need to think beyond yesterday, today, or even tomorrow. After the trip, we must ask this—what do we do next?

A Philosophy of Chairs

The chair awaits untempered flesh
tenderness arguing with wooden inflexibility

every application of weight and warmth bends it
bit by bit, until a certain curvature forms

a story of bodies that sat and cried
or laughed or ate or lounged or loved

And the chair becomes flesh
in its most receptive form, inviting
all who see it to rest and have intercourse
with corporal memory

a frame for a frame
differing only in hardness

The Assessment

Was there something so wrong with her
that they had to go through this daily
test, test, test

or was there something wrong with them
the masters who kept insisting
she call them “friend”
“brother” or “sister”?

Why did they celebrate her
when she overcame her ataxic tendencies
scooping up soup without the slightest tremor
yet now mourn her timid vocabulary?
Unresolved Echolalia
as they liked to call it
how she sounded too similar to them
those iterations of I LOVE YOU
they would not accept
from something they'd built up
and could as easily dismantle

by striking every inch of her
with the yardstick of humanity
that even they could not attain.

Above and Below

Lone bridge
over still water
we stand where
we can see each other

in the realm of mirrors
you and I are mute,
a sneer above is laughter below.
The lake doesn't tremble
the way our hands do.

Walking away
in different directions
we leave
the goodbyes unsaid.

Autopsy

She darts out of the house, clad only in her screams.
I stop, but the car beside me collides with her, anyway.
She lies on the ground and a purple map spreads on
the skin
over her liver, as though telling me to read the events
that led to her madness.

Days later, gossip brings news of her death. She had been
running away from her husband, ran away while they were
making love, because she'd smelled another woman's
perfume on him.
She'd died of blunt force that liquefied her guts.

I will ask them to open me up as well when I die,
because I think the woman and I, we might have been
sisters.
Hurt gathers in our gut. We were made the same way.
They will slice me up across the midsection,
and my ulcerated stomach will spill every biting word
I've had to swallow.
My liver would be cirrhotic, and they will wonder at my
history
of never drinking alcohol.
They will note several holes in my bile ducts,
but I won't be able to explain how I kept everything in.
The criminals have left me
with only a name for freak disease.

The Weight of Forgiveness

No parent
calls her child ugly

but you did.



They say the bearer and the giver of pain
both carry its weight
for as long as they live.

But forgiveness, once ice, thawed under time's heat,
its waters buoying,
but I can't swim.



Even when I moved out,
there were too many ways
to be hideous:
my droopy eyes, the crooked canine in my cave of a
mouth,
the fat folds around my hips
(you did tell me to stop with the cookies);
it was easy to sink.

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I smile, we talk, we laugh,
over a cup of bitter coffee,
overbrewed.

It would have felt more real
had my memories of you been written on water.



I return home to a spotless house
and I scrub
every corner, as I often do. I wash down floors
with soapy water, flushing out
imaginary dirt.

Rehearsal for When He Wakes

When they roused me
from my thirty-year slumber
my first memory was of that time
when I told you you made the best pie.
Who'd have thought I'd find a man who cooks
better than I ever could?
I wish I will never run out
and you lectured me once more:
the fleetingness of things
is the only faculty with which we enjoy.

Yet when you said goodbye,
as the avian disease took hold
I never did let you go.
Call me mad if you wish,
but when I allowed us to be frozen
I had nothing but your welfare in mind.
I knew they'd find a cure for death
and though you might cry sacrilege
such a thing exists in nature
the hydra cheats, as do bacteria.
Why must crumbling doctrines stop us?

The cryogenicists are here now
I am alive, soon, you will be, too
and we will be so for long.
They say you will be different
having gone through death

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before preservation.

They say you won't know who I am

Would you like to tell him? They ask

but I was just leaving.

You have forever

to forgive me.

Sea and Stars

Some types of water elude
forecast—this storm
from out of nowhere

flood-lakes and highway-seas.

I ride a bus that plies
what's left
of an overpass.

Through misted glass—
cars down below,
red tail lights waver
as the mother element swallows them up.
Primordial fluid reduces them
to coral fodder.

Somehow they are new again.

I caused you many floods
and left you to drown
as wounded creatures are wont to do.
I got used to you
climbing back up my jagged banks
but this time you refused to rise
from the roiling depths.

You blossomed,
I keep telling myself.
You must have escaped to the other side

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clear of ominous clouds
heavy with my scathing moods.

I'd seek you out, I would but
I must remain with my own storms
face them until I, too, am made new.

The First Stone

- (i) We are closer to the animal than we think. Birds peck at their food. Chicks are fed, beak to beak.
- (ii) We open our mouths for the stream of data gathered by the machine. Chew time is time wasted.
- (iii) The gag reflex becomes a vestigial process. We are adapted to swallowing in one go.
- (iv) The machine rounds us up in a circle. It shares the story of a dark-skinned woman winning the crown, most beautiful in the world. Her image peppers the stream.
- (v) Somehow it is wrong to be beautiful and dark at the same time.
- (vi) Someone throws the first stone.
- (vii) The queen smiles through broken teeth and bruises. Her crown remains clipped to her hair.
- (viii) Only the machine remembers her now. No one asks where she is.
- (ix) Some beetle larva drink with their skin.
- (x) We stop eating with our mouths.

A Story

he told his story
the one about finding
treasure from trash
the one about rusty scraps
turning into silver
in his father's hands
the one about how he made it
through college

I'd have celebrated
his victory
had I not realized
his story is mine too
only mine had a mother
who wove words so well that
they paid her to teach
them to speak and write
in a foreign language
that would win them a job
spinning hay into gold
instead of silver

funny that despite these
hands like Midas'
we still get to eat
only blotched bananas
and gold turns back
to hay once the sun
isn't shining

Ace Hardware

Bodily adornments
have come a long way
from MAC, Dior, Guerlain;
Vera Wang, McQueen, Gucci...

Ace Hardware has become *the* boutique,
supplying the grease, the nuts, the bolts,
the drills, the wrenches, and the hammers
for all our bodily needs, not to mention

an entire section for customization. There,
I set my eyes on metals & polymers:
a novel hand of etched titanium,
alabaster legs of carbon fiber,

ears of filigreed palladium
and lastly, I order a new heart to be
crafted from silver, gold, platinum,
and all manner of luxurious alloys,

but oh, when I bare myself
to my husband, all he sees is the heart.
Where's the old plastic one? he cries
for the heart he has been married to

for over ten years. How to tell him
it's still me but better,
when all he hears is my alien beat,
a rattling that has him refusing sleep?

Give her back, he demands, or he'll leave.
I've no choice but to dig the old one out;
leave my new heart out there in the cold
as biting as the gilding in my bones.

Sorry, were those your sneakers?

In due time, you will have met
everyone in this world
just as you will have learned
all the words you need
to curse the shit days
to praise dat fine ass
to name the beat of a heart,
ecstasy or grief.

You, too, are a cliché
with the flowers and the open doors—
the one that falls hard—
not because you're a giant of a man
(which you are)
but because you trip easily

and with the same ease
do you pick yourself up
from me.

I say to myself I won't be
the woman scorned
so I adopt a lame cat
and celebrate my kindness
with a radical faith
that makes me invulnerable
to brokenness.

I eat knives in the morning
and drink glass at night.
While stewing new shoes,
I decide to lick blue flame. It's good.
I suck it in like spaghetti.

I make sure to be full at all times
so that when we meet again
you'd not have met any like me.

You will try to remember why
you tripped
and you will call it delusion.

I am not who we thought I was.

Ceramics

Come morning, she replenishes her image
with the powder-fine adoration of followers
that leaves her skin with a porcelain sheen.

She then presents herself to the pedestal,
candid as can be, paying no mind
to the gaze of the cameras
nor the quiet circle of executioners,
faces hidden behind eyeless masks,
branding irons in hand, red and hissing.

The moment of her unveiling airs
with gasps from afar.

The executioners grill letters and sigils
into every corporal surface,
black butterflies on her nails,
a sponsor, fingers curling like locks of hair
on her head,
ink paintings on her irises.

She smiles today.

Like long distance lovers,
her audience romances her chimeric configuration

until the camera magnifies a crack
on her rib, where no blood, no water flows out.
They scream like crows and pull their hair out.
She is a freak

and the cracks spread
on every viewing screen, creeping down
her rib, to the bottom of her stature.

But it is really nothing to worry about;
soon another like her will come,
more grotesque but easier on the eyes.

Woman Came Last

It wasn't so much that God forgot
than he wanted to forget
his matripotestal beloved
who left him because he took his sweet time
dreaming of worlds rather than making them.

On a bed of bated breath
he awed her with vibrant colors
animate, exercising different hues
of willfulness.

I could do this, he boasted,
or what if this or these—
visions
of creatures came and went
long, short, twisted, tentacular
flat or flexagonal;
lightless lands or shimmering vacuums.

Beauty grows dull in excess, she once said
while pruning the leaves of restlessness.
So when he finally chose light
and made Adam, it was too late.
She wasn't impressed.
She whittled away in the way of excitements
leaving more silence than memories,
and in the distance of her growing absence

his idle hands couldn't help but save
her image from the fragments,

not his most creative,
but even God runs out of ideas
in the face of something missing.

Caskets to Sleep In

The day we stopped dying
the world fell into frenzy
parties frothing with beer, music and naked bodies,
nations singing new anthems *from now on we live forever*.
We discovered eternity in dozens of ways
soldiers getting shot in Iran then standing up like nothing
happened
the pope slipping and breaking his neck then standing up
like nothing happened
farm chickens being beheaded, then standing up like
nothing happened...
I don't know if it was enough to kill me, but I ate some
botulinum-ridden lasagna
and recovered from vomiting like nothing happened.

Hundreds of years of beer and merriment in,
we built Stephen Hawking a new body, but by then
the frenzy was the only thing dying
you-never-gonna-die jokes made tempers snap
because the Millennium dawned and it dawned on us
that, like the permethrin-resistant lice plaguing our days,
every single one of us was here to stay.

We sent out search parties to find Death,
deployed submarines in caves and trenches
and, as a last resort, gave tracker dogs dry corpses to sniff.

Finding nothing but ourselves, we resorted to suicide
attempts

but ended up with spilled guts, burnt bodies
and blown up heads—all too easy to grow back with
stem cells.

Rumor has it, someone jumped into a volcano
his body cremated yet his brainwaves could still be read.

These days we can't die, we can at least pretend
and maybe in the process, extort death from Death
with the newest trend, caskets to sleep in
where we endure airlessness and ennui
to create mental movies of *Closure*, *The End*, *La Fin*.
Lie down, hide inside, stay dead as long as you can.