

Eileen Tabios

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: R.I.P. John Ashbery

The record of what you accomplished by sitting down
“With great art to copy all that you saw in the glass”
like the gesture heightened by the hand enlarged
as it moves towards us who see you, even as your
face remains reticent in the background as if you are
unsure of your reception. Well, death is the final judge
-ment and, here I am, still writing a poem for you...

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Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Beautiful Lovers

After Marina Abramovic’s TED Talk, “An Art Made of Trust, Vulnerability and Connection.”

Though only exercise or tactic, it carries the momentum of a conviction that had been building. Marina talks about the arrow she allowed a lover to point at her heart. But let’s start at the beginning though we need not always start by beginning. In the beginning there were the Words and they described 76 objects for pleasure and pain: a glass of water, a coat, a shoe, a rose, the knife, the pistol, the razor blade and one bullet. Such is Marina’s description—notice how the Words shift from the general “a” as regards pleasure to the specific “the” for *the* pain. Is pleasure general but pain specific? Is diction the opening for revealing which is more powerful—that backing away from pain overshadows moving towards pleasure? Flash-forward to the Great but crumbling Wall of China which Marina walked for three months to meet a lover. When they met they ceased their engagement(s) together. Would they have parted if they simply ceased giving each other pleasure? Or did they part specifically when they began causing each other (too much) pain? Do these questions affirm a larger suspicion: does memorializing a moment (e.g. with a video) loosen one’s grasp, not solidify it, around history? Perhaps to record is to let something slip. Leak. Drip through unanticipated cracks. Marina, perhaps the ineffable cannot be videoed. He could not love you less by betraying you. You could not love less through betrayal. You are unable to forget the man who cut your neck with a razor before sucking out your blood. But you remember that moment whose scar you still bear, along with another stranger who offered you a glass of water instead of picking up the knife. You remember relishing

the waterfall down your throat. You remember being caressed by rose petals against your throat. But then they scissored through your blouse. No wonder they ran away from you. You signaled "The End" but stood before them etched by blood and tears. They ran away, at first backward to keep you in their sight before turning their backs to make a quicker escape. Your performance was their pain. Love taught you anguish as a form of resplendence

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Witnessed in the Convex Mirror: Felino’s Music of Broken Math

Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up
its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape
Rosmarie’s “quest for agitation” leads to heart
and pulse points easing until she becomes
a Buddha face, a moment of gold in a dim corner
of a winter garden. I recall mathematics broken
but preserved by the poet Felino Soriano—thought
becomes embodied as his face earnest before
a microphone, behind him a saxophonist elongating
a note that halts lovers street blocks away so they
can listen, and in the air overhead his poetry books
shimmying their pages as they circle to form a halo

then free-

floating away to dance with birds and floating leaves
which fell on purpose to land on his shoulders

Watching Felino, a girl twirls black tresses and red
dress as her smile sparkles glee. *Join me!* Papa
Felino encourages his daughter and pulls Mia up
onto the stage. We all come along, too. We join him:
Felino’s shape a music with symphonic accompaniment

How Darkness Grows (Version 25)

I forgot I became a connoisseur of alleys.

I forgot the years when I wore uniforms of darkened wool shaped by machines, lined by grey.

I forgot how stars became asterisks to matters best left in the dark. I forgot the tirelessness of shame.

I forgot fingertips deliquesced to black velvet from constantly rolling tobacco leaves—the only luxury many farmers could afford.