

# WE ARE IT



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**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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### **Acknowledgements**

# **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***

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

***teeth***

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

***saliva***

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

***ocean***

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

***mothers***

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

***humans***

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

***nature***

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

***Sarayaku***

*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 puppy left  
to the black cloud  
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 Cassinetto)*

*"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 tahananang  
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 Guinsaigon 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.*

**—news accounts from BBC News, Manila Standard, Malaya, Philippine Inquirer and New York Times, February 17-20, 2006**

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 smoothed 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 landscape 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**

Bibliography: “Mother Earth Water Walk” (<http://www.motherearthwaterwalk.com>), “Plants That Clean Water” at (<http://www.kelloggsgarden.com/water-conservation/plants-that-clean-water/>) and a Christine Balmes post on Facebook (Aug. 4, 2017) from which the poem quotes with her permission.

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

Bibliography: Algae from Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algae>); “The Ocean Can’t Breathe: Mexico-Sized Algae Bloom in the Arabian Sea Should Concern You” by Alixandra Caole Villa in *Nature World News*, March 28, 2017; and “Marine population halved since 1970 – report”, BBC News, Sept. 16, 2015

