

# Recovery

i

However much your body disturbs you  
it needs to be loved

like this beach  
you clear of bottles

filled with sour congealment,  
screwed grit and fish scales.

Where fork prongs and splintered cups  
strewn across grass and shells

are called *confetti*  
which you collect and bin

because in the deep  
nothing breaks down to nothing.

ii

You know not to draw a line between sea and mud,  
nor flesh and thought, but  
when you collect the deflated declarations  
of births and old age that wash up far from any party  
and clamber back across wet rock  
with armfuls of doughy balloons,  
you wish you could avoid the tang  
of airtight and waterproof promises,  
a smell beaten flat, reminding you of incubators  
calibrating humidity and warmth for the prematurely born.

iii

The carrier bag scabs  
the saltmarsh. You pick at it  
until it pulls free  
revealing a crinkled muddy sheen.

iv

A thinning sack of hide  
discoloured to mud  
animates the strandline,  
loosening itself  
to bleached grasses, shadows of shingle.

Daily you grow braver,  
stand closer to the porpoise

Some days are worse than others, depending on wind direction, strength of tide throwing the dross up the beach. Other days, if the tide gets to it before me, the rubbish is drawn back out of sight, away to wherever, until the next splintered hoard arrives, until years of watching the rotation of accumulation and dispersal means it never really withdraws.

Plastic's integrity, as a petroleum-based product, is resilience. The belief that anything derived from oil, which comes from millions of years of compression, ought to be 'cheap' and 'disposable' is as outmoded as the belief that time is money. Eight per cent of oil produced is used in plastic production. The carbon in oil locked in plastic does not breakdown quickly, and even more slowly in the environments of cold dark currents of the ocean. Time, in the sense of plastic, is infinitesimal change. If something takes so long to develop, it's only inevitable it takes an equal duration to decompose.

Plastic's ability to extend to being bag, building and biro is a testament to human imagination. We looked at cellulose, at silk, at ivory and thought of ways of emulating their qualities to enrich and cushion our lives. If plastic were to be eradicated, we'd lose our fleeces, computers, wiring; movies; car interiors, takeaways...

gag back fear and disgust  
to check how far it diminishes from its pod.

It arrived without fin or face.  
Its ribs become more pronounced.  
The skin sags to a dull charcoal,  
slowly losing memory  
of forestomach, main stomach,  
pyloric stomach, intestines, all that filled it  
and never made it ashore.  
Flies zipper a blue so metallic  
they also seem unreal.

When foam tumbles free from another wave  
and packed white polystyrene balls  
disperse to settle alongside the corpse,  
it seems for a second  
all beaches are inherently broken  
and the only other complete body here is the sea.

v

With a clutch of tiny blue and yellow  
beads rolling them in your palm,  
you wonder how long until they turn the shore  
as technicolour as a child's drawing.

You collect them in a neon pink castle bucket  
while vapour trails scrawling across the sky  
remind you of rubbing out mistakes  
often enough to scrape away the page.

vi

Mother and daughter of this place, you  
collect scourers and wipe-clean hygiene pads  
made to ease a housewife's life.

You lie in its lap, combed by the tide  
whispering *Sssh* through your guilt  
and you think of all the bone saved,

the tortoiseshell, the tusks and teeth  
whose extinction has merely been delayed  
by the age of domesticity.

vii

Rusted and white the old light stands askance  
as its Victorian keeper. Dented she rises  
from the mussel beds and sandstone  
still as strong as a spring tide.

We would also lose the remaining elephants,  
tortoises, whales, forests and other natural  
products plastics replaces. Plastic promised  
insurance against decay as well as disease.

On one hand plastic is cheap, easy to replace. It  
had to become disposable to be viable. If it  
lasted as long as it was intended, there'd be no  
demand to turn a profit. However, on the other,  
slowness is its essential nature. In fact none of  
the plastic ever produced has entirely disap-  
peared. The microbes have yet to catch up with  
our pace of living. We have yet to catch up.

The collection is organised: recyclable bottles  
and jars; larger buckets, tubs and car parts for  
the local tip; crap thrown away with the rubbish;  
rope for reuse; and the interesting or attractive  
things whose provenance is undeterminable go  
into a box of the Unknown.

There were two. One high, one low. Aligned,  
they marked the channel to the dock.  
You, heiress, ankle deep in the estuary,  
now turn under sky's vast unblinking blue.

viii

Of course you have to fetch the doll  
lying at the far end of the beach.  
Her purple curls bounce free  
from a fresh mound of shale and weed.  
Face down, undressed  
but for knickers and yellow boots,  
arms and legs spread out.

A little more weed, and she would've been invisible.  
Instead she's day-glo.  
You have to turn her over, as if to check a pulse.  
Her large eyes still in place,  
although one cheek torn,  
her mouth is there, small and straight.  
One foot hangs off a plastic spring coiling out of her leg  
like a mangled bone.

With her in your arms,  
you're a girl again, in a nurse's uniform,  
ready to push your oversized, doll-full pram  
across the striped lawn,  
far from the ragged strandline of sticks,  
seaweed, fishing line, the line of sea itself,  
which can never be straight.

ix

Words are all around you. Partial words, split  
between cartons, bleached packets and detached labels.  
You lay them out, weighted by stones.  
*Mix every fun milky pint pot Supa value Nitrogen.*

Then spread them apart. Read them in slow, urgent speech.  
*Mix grit every weed clam fun winkle milky pint weed  
pebble pot Supa value Nitrogen foam.*  
You sound detached, like you're speaking in tongues  
which makes you think of your father.

You don't often, certainly not every day since his death  
like some. Now you do, he's a smoky presence,  
a half-hinted at voice. You don't know if it's even accurate  
and fear you've ziplocked some part of yourself away.

Most of the ocean is unknown to us, but it is not an absence. It is not a nowhere that is nothing to do with us, a place simply to be crossed to arrive elsewhere. It is an everywhere. It is the most visible element of our single hydrological cycle. It, like mountains and deserts, is a reminder of the geological time our daily lives forget. It provides over half the oxygen of the planet. It has absorbed over half of all man-made carbon dioxide. It is a regulator for our climate.

While regular inventions promise to remove plastic from the sea, much of it is so small they'd be removing similarly-sized essential plankton from the water too. The most effective way is to prevent plastic getting into or returning to the ocean, and this is slow and laborious, a somewhat foolhardy, certainly endless task.

Marine debris is well documented, alongside pledges to remove microbeads from cosmetics, to stop using plastic shafts (in half the world) for their "cotton buds" while synthetic fibres are washed out of our clothes into the sea on each spin. If it isn't already invisible, sinking below the surface or trapped in gyres miles out to sea, plastic is being pulverised into microscopic debris by tidal currents.

Polythene yanking at barbed wire  
 is as much a bird as the wing rotting  
     on the beach, hidden  
 once high tide sucks at the shore.

Slack water  
 and its momentary stillness settles.  
     Salt feathers your skin.  
 A curlew whistles above.

Between layers of cloud the sun dazzles.

It stops you from seeing  
 the image of an albatross skeleton pregnant  
     with plastic lighters and bottle tops,  
     and ignites your hope.

The ebb reverberates. A tanker  
 ploughs out to sea, navigating the light,  
     needing so much throttle  
 for its smallest manoeuvre.

The ocean contains the smallest and largest organisms in existence, and supports the oldest living creature in the world. As debris plastic is eaten by zooplankton, which are eaten by crustaceans, which are eaten by squid which are eaten by seals which are eaten by whales. At each stage it disables creatures' movements, bloats their stomachs with non-nutritional bulk, and releases toxins that render them sterile. At each transfer the toxic concentration increases.