Plastics and Plasticity:
The Ugly, the Bad and the Pretty Good

Long before humans started teasing long, repetitive molecules from crude oil, anthropologists described human behavior as plastic—a trait recognized for at least a couple of thousand years. Our capacity for altering individual and collective patterns of activity and relations defines us and helps ensure our survival—thus far—but at a significant cost to ourselves and the rest of the world. The lethal legacy of plastic is only a recent, ugly ripple we have set in motion that is extinguishing so many of our covoyagers. The malleability of oil is matched only by our own malleability.

Plastics are a consequence of our relentless scratching about for energy subsidies over the last dozen millennia. Fire for cooking, heat, and speeding up grassland succession; domestication of plants and enslavement of animals; gravity irrigation and water wheels; new soils to replace exhausted ones; human slaves, serfs, and wage-slaves—all like oxen, producing more than they eat; colonialism; neocolonialism; coal and oil; river-killing concrete monoliths, split and fused atoms. We count in dollars or Renminbi but are really seizing more and more calories—the currency of nature’s economy—and depriving others of those calories. Control of energy enhances the ability to get more of it just as it magnifies our plasticity.

Energy subsidies allow us to colonize ecosystems and other species the same way one country does another, reshaping the colonized to the purposes of the colonizer. Inevitably, the colonizer is deluded into thinking they are wise lords rather than a drunken bull in a china shop. Control of energy reinforces hierarchy and centralized technology, and allows some states and corporations to manage the lives of billions in ways despots of old could not have imagined. We reach into intact rain forests for the substances to make our cell phones and impose a death sentence on creatures once safe from us—phones which tell the police Here I am. Our plastic computers tell our commercial masters which of our buttons to push to make us buy and keep buying.

Today even the grandiose have fallen on hard times—Sad-dam Hussein’s many palaces turned out not to be made of marble and granite but plastic. Disneyland comes to mind, where faux mountains are constructed—tame, simplified, above all “safe” in some superficial way. But neither our plasticity nor plastics are safe.

Our plasticity is one and the same as our capacity for alienation—they are like the twin threads of DNA. We make bad deals with the world and say it is good. But we can’t hide—what we do to the Earth we do to ourselves. Our plasticity means the plastic isn’t just out there, it is in us. “This is what is the matter with us,” D.H. Lawrence wrote toward the beginning of the age of oil and plastics. “We are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth

and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the tree of life, and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on the table.”

Along with the truly ugly and worthless, the simply bad, the stupid and pointless toys, and some worthwhile things for which there are non-plastic alternatives, there may be at least one plastic device which borders on the redemptive. The Center for Biological Diversity distributes them free, admonishing us to—

Wrap with care...save the Polar Bear.
Use a stopper...save the Hopper.
Don't go bare...Panthers are rare.
When you're feeling tender...think about the Hellbender.
Be a savvy lover...protect the Snowy Plover.
In the sack...save the leatherback.
Potential: A Questionnaire

1. Imagine that you are a single heterosexual woman in your late 20s. You have just had sex with a single heterosexual man in your own bed, having adhered to the solution (number of dates) of your own personal equation considering the variables of desire (x) and the perceived social norm of your peers (y). After brief discussion, the two of you judiciously elected to use a condom, his brand, the Trojan Supra (which sounded more like midsize car than what the label assured you was a premium microsheer lubricant condom, though you kept this observation to yourself). Which of the following disposal methods is most attractive in a prospective mate?

a) he feigns (perhaps) the need to urinate; in the bathroom, he neatly wraps the condom in a tissue and tucks it in the wastebasket beneath a flattened box of Advil and three nail polish-stained cotton balls
b) he drops the parcel damply, delicately on the floor beside the bed, leaving it there like a forgotten party favor
c) he ties off the condom, for tidiness and/or aerodynamics, and, making certain that you are watching, he flicks the condom in the direction of the metal Hello Kitty waste can sitting beside your dresser

2. To what off-label uses have you put a condom?

a) smuggling an illegal substance into the U.S. via your abdomen or rectum; you were young; you lived by your wits and your orifices and organs
b) microphone protection; your employer/hero/lover/candidate was about to give an outdoor speech under darkening skies (the story of your life)
c) as costumes in a late Sunday afternoon finger puppet show for your twin eight-year-old niece and nephew
d) to keep soil samples dry during field work in Colorado

3. When you hear the word “condom” the first thing you think of is:

a) water balloons
b) performance anxiety
c) the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s “Grand Challenges Exploration 11”
d) your bleak, childless existence

4. Imagine that you are a single heterosexual male in your early forties; you have just had post-dinner-date carnal relations with a woman (OKCupid profile name Loves_Men, actual first name Jean or Jeanie) in the backseat of your Volvo; you supplied a joint and a half-flask of tequila and she supplied the condom. Having served its very important purpose (you assume for the moment), the condom is now a logistical problem. You:

a) insouciantly drop the cum-filled sack into the cup holder between the two front seats
b) this scenario is simply too hard to imagine, any of it: wedging yourself in the backseat, let alone with another person, being out past 11, having sex with a woman, an indifferent woman, a loose woman, a fertile woman
c) pull your pants up over your chilled ass and flaccid penis and wiggle your upper body into the front seat and fumble around in the glove box for a fast food napkin in which to wad the rubber, replacing the package in the glove box
d) do what you always do: tie a swift knot and chuck the damn thing out the window; you have done your public health duty; you have maintained your pledge to not reproduce; what more could the world want from you?
Polyurethane (PU)

Taxidermy Forms

We were in the waste, a box of Pampers, an injured hound, and a life raft, though we were in the desert, it was a desert, the waste. Why did we have the raft? Would it find a new leg for the dog, would it find the baby for the Pampers? The baby was named Decimal, and she was taken by the whispers, the ones that blow across the sands of the city.

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Pampers, a hound, and an inflatable dinghy. Something is going on with the hound, it is missing a leg and has no tail. It is like a gristle of pain, this hound. A sack of Pampers is the antithesis of pain but it’s there for sure. And the dinghy, is it for rescue or is it just to mess around with in the waves.

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We remember the waves, we remember the way they used to caress our ankles. We remember the baby, Decimal, thinking about the waves then splashing around in them for the first time. There are some of the same materials used in a diaper, an inflatable raft, and the materials used for a hound that has suffered.
Spring snow comes softly into the tiny mountain town, from the canyons, which have already turned opaque. A church bell is ringing, anachronistically. No suicide bombs, no gang rape, no nuclear winter, no drone strikes, no polar extinctions. Just a village buried in inconsequence. As if it were a dream we can't re-enter. In the beginning, the authors say, the world was black and white, before the clay wrapped itself around itself, forming an inside and outside. Hole in the bedrock where the water breaks. Dear Sister Outsider. Our Lady Underground. Atmosphere, a ripped frock the shade of swans. We know the soul can become unbalanced, out of tune like a guitar, that snakes and rats will leave their holes when they sense disturbance in earth's core. What does calm say, sinking into its dark-skinned ditch? What does peace say, in the continuous line-making of its horizons? What does oil say, the figure we have chosen for our voice?