

Plastic

SIMMONS
B. BUNTIN

AFTER MIDWAY: MESSAGE FROM
THE GYRE, PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHRIS JORDAN, SEPTEMBER 2009

Children are plastic
the doctor says
as he cuts away
the splint of my daughter's
shin, revealing a scar
curved like the forewing
of an albatross
as it levels over open
ocean — carved
by the shattering
door, the plate glass
scattering like sunlight
on waves as she
dove through that hard
reality, her soft body
easily severed:

plastic
like the sensuous
bottle of soda
she slides
into her backpack
after school, the air sighing
from the red lid
before the final twist,
bottle surfacing
in the recycling bin,
cap sinking
in the day's trash:

plastic
as in malleable, fix-
able, her pale flesh
healing in the dark
corridor of the cast, dead
skin black as the ocean
at night, sloughing away
like the feathers
of lying birds:

plastic
like the odd collage
of litter discovered body
after decomposing body
in the Midway Atoll,
dull plumage and bleached
vertebrae vivid
against the contraband
of buttons and bottle caps,
combs and cartridges,
bobbles and lighters lifted
from the flotsam
of the Pacific —
bright bobbers resembling
the fish and quick squid
the albatross catch
for insatiable chicks:

plastic
curved by the luminous
sweep of the sea,
curved through genetic
structure, curved
into crisp gills
and blue beaks
and the mouths
of children severed
like so many seabirds
by the dazzling waves.

What's for dinner, mom? Few albatross mothers (or any mom in the food chain) can refuse her chicks' cries for More! But when it's dinner time and you're stuck out in the boonies, say near the Midway Atoll, 2000 miles from the nearest continent, what are your choices? Just do a fly-by to the Great Pacific Gyre and take-out from the food court, a continent-size vortex-driven collection of human waste (what else can we call it?)

The ultimate junk food diet — exceptionally high concentrations of pelagic plastics, chemical sludge, and other debris — is killing tens of thousands of sea-loving creatures through starvation, toxicity, and choking, as Chris Jordan's moving images reveal (chrisjordan.com). Ninety percent of the Gyre's flotsam is plastic.

According to a 2006 UN report, "Over 46,000 pieces of plastic litter are floating on every square mile of ocean today. In the Central Pacific, there are up to 6 pounds of marine litter to every pound of plankton." (See tinyurl.com/UNEP-IUCN) Another UN report estimates that a million birds and 100,000 mammals die annually from plastics.

