

Mother's Day

By: Marissa Lorberau

I have always been intrigued by the sound that sand makes as it passes underfoot. It is not quite a crunch, not quite a squish. If I try very hard, sometimes it will make no sound at all. However, it is never truly silent next to the ocean, and perhaps that is why I like it. No matter what, there is no escaping the endless slapping of the waves against the shore. The water roars with its own vitality at every break against the beach. By the ocean, you can never truly feel alone. By the ocean, whether you can see it or not, there is always life. When I was young, my father taught me a trick that affirmed this idea. He showed me how to very gently pull up a rock and expose the tiny crabs underneath. As a child, this made me giggle with both fear and delight. As I indulge this simple pleasure 10 years later, I lower my hand down and allow one to crawl into my palm. As a child, I was always too frightened of the little crabs to even fathom holding one. In retrospect, I begin to understand why. There is a strange joy in holding such a tiny life in your hands, but also a heightened anxiety. You feel all the weight of responsibility fall on your shoulders. For me at least, I experience a moment of what it must be like to hold a small child. Much like a loan plastic bottle bobbing along in the embrace of the powerful ocean, the tiny crab is completely at my mercy. However, in both of these situations, there is a sense of turnabout. For just as easily as the ocean or I could harm our tiny responsibilities, so too could they lash out at us. One little crab pinching my palm seems like nothing, but that little pinch can still cause pain. The same is true for the bottle and the ocean. One bottle may seem inconsequential, but billions? As abstract as the comparison may seem, it is honestly very simple. While something that appears so small might not seem to matter, every bottle had to come from somewhere. When everyone believes that their actions alone will do nothing, nothing ever changes. Many of us, me

included, take for granted the seemingly “all-powerful” status of nature to the point that we forget just how vulnerable the natural environment is to human activities. Though each of us may represent only one tiny crab, all 7 billion of us pack the ability to pinch, leaving behind scars that our overconsumption just makes deeper.

It is devastatingly simple to take for granted those who ask nothing in return for their love. This is a lesson that I had to learn twice. The first way I learned it was through experiences with my own mother. When I was a child, she and I never got along. I insisted upon being contrary, and I never understood why she would get so upset over things that seemed so trivial to me. With my tiny pincers, I snapped at her skin and lashed out at every perceived injustice. Yet through all of that, she still fed me, clothed me, told me stories, hugged me when I cried, and loved me unconditionally, because that is what mothers do. It wasn't until I started high school that I began to realize what an amazing person she was and how much we had in common. Since then, we've been inseparable. She is my best friend, my inspiration, my moral compass and so much more. I will never forget all that she has done for me. I will never forget to tell her that I love her. As we repair our relationship, the scars slowly begin to heal. My childhood estrangement from my mother is over and I will never again take her for granted. As the tiny crab in the palm of her hand, I sit contentedly.

The second way I learned the lesson required a few more years. As a child, my parents and I often took walks along the beach. Back then, I did not understand why there was so much trash lying around. Back then, I did not understand why there were colorful little bits in the sand. Back then, I threw my trash in with everyone else's. You see, the second way I learned the lesson involved a mother of a different sort, who suffered under the same neglect and thoughtlessness that I had imposed upon my own mother. This lesson involved our long-suffering ocean.

In my older years, I learned that my mother kept a box of every gift I had ever given her. She kept every cheap necklace, every dollar store card, every school project and every childish illustration. Even in their shameful, disingenuous frivolity, she still held onto every remnant of me. I learned later on that just as my mother kept everything I gave to her, so too does our unfortunate ocean cling to everything we have ever thrown her way. "Plastic doesn't break down like natural materials – it doesn't go away, it just goes from being a floating bottle to tiny plastic particles..." (Greenpeace). Our synthetic gifts slowly degrade in her powerful embrace, becoming tiny shards that eventually pose choking hazards to our hapless siblings of the earth. Our fellow crabs in the palm of the ocean writhe under the impending fear of death by plastic. "Seabirds, whales, sea turtles and other marine life are eating marine plastic pollution and dying from choking" (Greenpeace). Every great and mysterious beast that the ocean embraces knows her love, and returns it. Except for us. However, it is not out of spite or for true lack of appreciation. Much like my childhood self, who so rarely bothered to tell her mother that she loved her, we humans tend to be so caught up in our own affairs that we rarely bother to remember our impact on the ocean. Yet despite all that we do to her, she still nourishes us as best she can, because that is what mothers do.

One of the most obvious troubles surrounding pollution is actually philosophy and the intentional ignorance that we often fall back on in order to make things easier. A young girl said something to me a while back that I have had a hard time forgetting. "Don't think about it, just do it." It strikes me now that this is a very dangerous way of thinking and it is a large part of why environmental issues persist. Many people consider themselves removed from the problem. While marine organisms in peril really ought to be enough of an incentive to care, for many people, it becomes a non-urgent issue because they do not see the human connection in the

consequences. However, we humans are not exempt from the dangers faced by our marine brethren either. Our synthetic creations of modern convenience contain a number of chemicals that pollute our bodies, just as they pollute the ocean. Plastics contain chemicals like PVC, Bisphenol-A and Diethylhexyl phthalate, which are linked to cancers, birth defects, developmental issues and immune problems (Andrews). The "micro-plastics," or broken down bits of plastic floating in the ocean, act as sponges for these chemicals and work their way up the food chain as marine organisms consume them, eventually ending up in the diets of humans (Andrews). In the end, our oceans have been struck with a sickness that we humans can relate to. Even as we battle cancer here on land, our ocean's malignant tumors of plastic continue to grow. Within the ocean's vast bodies, five places have begun to collect the wastes of humanity's collective disregard. These gyres mark the places that ocean currents come together, pushing plastics from all around the world into soupy masses that are perversely compared to islands, though they offer a home only to the decaying, but never truly disappearing, garbage of nature's estranged children. An island is an oasis, teeming with all matters of unique lifeforms. When people envision islands, they think of vacations, beaches, and relaxing under the sun. The supposed garbage islands are in fact little more than vortexes of misshapen plastics, uninhabitable by most creatures. Yet, much like a cancerous tumor, they prove difficult to truly be rid of. Ideas have been proposed by many to try and remove the plastics from the oceans, but it has proven to be a much more complicated undertaking than initially expected, for just as humans and the oceans are interlinked, so too have plastics become an undeniable element within the ocean ecosystem. As plastics break down into smaller and smaller pieces, they become much more difficult to remove without also removing tiny plankton that are vital to the ocean ecosystem. If the plankton were removed, they would imbalance the entire food chain,

resulting in even greater danger for the oceans. "Zooplankton is really fragile, and trying to separate it from plastic in most cases is going to damage these critters beyond survivability" (Wilson). In fact, many scientists have begun to think that cleaning up the gyres directly is something of a "fool's errand," instead suggesting greater amounts of beach cleanups and the prevention of pollution in general. Stiv Wilson, the policy director of the nonprofit 5Gyres, which seeks to educate about and prevent plastic pollution, hails something called "Gyre Memory" as the potential method of eliminating already existing plastic pollution. "Gyre Memory demonstrates that upon each orbit of a gyre, the gyre will spit out about half of its contents" (Wilson). This expelled pollution ends up riding the currents to either another gyre or washing up on beaches. Wilson proposes that beach cleanups and gyre cleanups are essentially the same thing. He also expresses the worry that latching onto grand "gyre clean-up schemes" is a way of distracting ourselves from the real issues and our role in them. By proposing retroactive solutions, people become less inclined to cease their bad habits in the first place because they no longer have to worry about the consequences. Indeed, the best cure for our oceans rests in our hands. It is our preventative actions, not the retroactive ones of science, which could ultimately snip away the tumors that have so long afflicted our oceans. Yet rather than offer our oceans the treatments that we offer our own ill, we have continued barraging them with our own waste, childishly assuming that they'll take care of it. However, we would not expect an ill person to magically heal them self, so why do we expect that of our oceans? Our ocean is a mother to us all. She provides for us as best she can, with food and safe travel. Her waters cover roughly 70% of our planet. Yet despite her size and her might, in this matter, she needs our help. Rather than contributing to the progression of her disease, she needs us to remember all that she means to us. She needs our thoughts, and our care. Just as a mother waits for the day that her child realizes

she is not the enemy, our oceans wait for the day that we realize that she is not all powerful. She can be hurt, she can become sick, and her ability to nurture the creatures of the earth can be compromised. It is up to us to realize that the fate of not only our siblings, but also ourselves, hangs in the balance. It is time for us to stop being reckless polluters and instead begin looking for a cure. Our ocean mother suffers from a disease that we have given her, and it is up to us to save her, and ourselves, from that fate. It is time for us to end our rebellious phase. However, it is 7 billion individual choices, not a social movement, which must happen. The true resolve comes in choosing to move against the flows for your own sake, and for the sake of the world at large, rather than as a member of a bandwagon. Each one of us tiny crabs must make the personal choice to stop pinching the hand we rest in. As more and more people commit to reusable shopping bags, not buying single-use plastics and recycling properly, the oceans can begin to heal themselves naturally. The wounds will close up and our ocean-mother can begin fighting her cancer into remission. You see, our ocean mother has waited for this day for a long time. She has been waiting for the day that nature's estranged children remember to call and say "We love you."

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Reflection

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My journey towards environmental responsibility was a long one. It wasn't so much that I didn't know about the issues, but rather that they required sacrifices that I was not ready to face. Whenever I tried to make changes, I would start out strong but ultimately I always ended up thinking "it's not worth it," and gave up. My relationship with my mother was very similar. We really did argue a lot, and I was a pretty rotten child. I knew that she loved me, and that she only wanted what was best, but I always gave in to my petulance and made a fuss. This piece is my love letter to the ocean, because I've already written the one for my mother. It is my personal way of apologizing for not being strong enough in the past to do her justice. It is my call to action to everyone out there to end our dysfunctional relationship with nature. I think that a lot of people tend to take their parents for granted when they are young, and I think that humans as a species tend to do the same with nature. We tend to just expect that everything will be alright and let them take care of it. However, as we get older, that illusion shatters. I want to shatter the illusion around the oceans. Our oceans are sick and they cannot magically heal themselves. Ultimately, it is our turn to be there for them.