



TURNING THE TIDE

A COMPOSITION OF SHORT STORIES
TO BRING AWARENESS TO THE PLASTIC CRISIS.



PLANET OR PLASTIC?



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PLANET OR PLASTIC?

In 2018 plastic pollution reached its peak, with 250,000 tons floating in our oceans. As a leader in exploration and preservation, National Geographic launched *Planet or Plastic?*, a global initiative to address this crisis.

They asked consumers **to take a pledge** to reduce their single-use plastic footprint, aiming **to prevent 1 billion single-use plastic items from reaching the ocean.**

National Geographic joined forces with **Wattpad** - the world's largest community of readers and writers with over 70 million monthly users - **to raise awareness through storytelling.** They invited the global community to share a story - real or fiction - inspired by real photos of the crisis.

This book is a **collection of seven of the finalists** from the more than 6,200 creative voices that submitted entries to raise awareness of the impact of plastic on the environment.



OUROBOROS

Liliana Claire Sandberg

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“Lost in memory was that halcyon world, drowned in human refuse and human carelessness.”

OUROBOROS

Ouroboros, they called this ocean planet. Like the self-cannibalizing serpent, the dark, alien sea had no beginning and no end. Today marked the seventh day Coda-9994 had spent exploring this new world, and though the cachalot had seen so much in his strange life, he had never seen anything quite like this.

Taking a deep sigh through his rebreather, the whale headed down deeper. The cold, dark water enveloped him in its crushing embrace. There were no squid here, no other sperm whales, no cetaceans at all, to his knowledge. Even considering all the things this ocean lacked compared with Earth’s ocean, there was only one thing that Coda-9994 was glad to be rid of: plastic.

Lost in memory was that halcyon world, drowned in human refuse and human carelessness. The humans had taught him all about plastic: how it was made and how it improved human lives. According to his captors, whatever cost plastics had on ocean life was outweighed by their benefits to humanity, and his purpose was not to protect his ocean, but to find them a new one. Once they had a new ocean, they could have a new world, all thanks to the heroic efforts of Coda-9994, humanity’s cetacean ally.

He grunted in disdain at the thought. Like this planet’s name, humanity’s self-destruction was an eternal cycle, one that began with a simple, foolish choice. Chase one’s tail, throw the plastic away after using it once, ignore the pleas to stop. Coda-9994 remembered the sight of a tiny seahorse clinging to a plastic straw because it had nothing else. That had been the day he realized that it would take far more than hope to change things.

The piece of his headgear connected to his inner ear buzzed to life as his captors made contact from Earth. “Coda-9994, do you copy?”

He stopped swimming and sent a message back.
“Affirmative.”

“Please report your findings,” the voice said. “Is the planet habitable?”

Coda-9994 faltered. If he told them the truth — that this world teemed with life beneath its waters and that humans could live here, with some accommodations — then it would suffer the same fate as Earth. Asphyxiated by plastic, it would eventually cease to thrive, and no matter what they told him, Coda-9994 knew he was as disposable as a single-use plastic fork.

But if he lied, and they didn’t see through his deception, perhaps they would come to realize that no alternative to Earth existed. Perhaps they would begin to make the right choices and finally learn that it did not take a brain the size of his to figure out that their survival depended on those simple decisions. With that in mind, he sent back his reply.

“Ouroboros cannot support human life.”

The communication device went silent. Coda-9994 breathed a sigh of relief. This world had enough for one whale’s need, but not enough for mankind’s greed.

An underwater photograph of a sea turtle, likely a hawksbill, caught in a blue fishing net. The turtle's head and front flippers are visible, and it appears to be struggling. The net is a complex mesh of blue and orange ropes. The background is a deep blue, slightly murky water.

A BEDTIME STORY

Sierra Rose Baldwin-Ocampo

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“This is hard for me to imagine. The land we live on is massive! There is no way the ocean is real!”

A BEDTIME STORY

At night, before I fall asleep, my mother tells me of a place called the ocean. She says she wants me to know everything she can remember about it, so that even after she’s gone, the ocean will live on.

“Blue. It was always blue. When it stormed, it would become this navy color so dark it was almost scary. When sunny, it was like a twinkling sapphire. It was never the same shade of blue twice. It was huge, too. Much bigger than the land we live on.”

This is hard for me to imagine. The land we live on is massive! There is no way the ocean is real! I start to become doubtful of her story. “Mom, aren’t I getting too old for fables? This sounds just about as real as fairies.”

“Oh,” she whispers, and all the sadness in the world seems to be carried in that one simple word, “it was real.”

She tells me stories about sea creatures. Animals called dolphins that I would have really liked. “The ocean was always full of surprises. I’d dive down and discover some colorful fish. A nurse shark. A sand dollar. It was beautiful.”

She pauses.

“Without the ocean we have less.” She explains: “Less food. Less space. Less beauty. The list goes on and on.”

I try to imagine what life would be like with the ocean. What it is like to have something so incredible ripped away from humanity forever. I think the ocean may be our greatest loss.

The next day my mother decides to show me the ocean. It’s a long drive, but we finally come to an empty parking lot. Towering above us is a chain-link fence so tall I wonder if the birds can even fly over it. I have a feeling my mom has been here before, because she knows a spot where we can crawl underneath the fence.

My mom’s bedtime story was true. The ocean is real. Or at least, it was. What I stand before now is not worthy of being compared to the ocean. The smell alone would drive anyone away, but it’s what’s inside that makes it all the worse. The oily waters are filled to the brim with trash: soda cans, straws, candy wrappers and deflated balloons.

“Oh, Mom,” I cry. The sight of something that was once so beautiful turned into a wasteland is hard to take in. “Who could let such a thing happen?”

“Us,” she says. “I did. Everybody did. We all knew we were hurting the ocean, but we just didn’t believe that someday we would kill it.”

I can’t stand to look at it any longer, but my mom doesn’t budge. “The worst thing is that we could’ve stopped this from happening,” she says.

We stand there for a while, staring.

“I’m sorry,” she tells me, her face full of sorrow.

Silence.

How could I ever forgive anyone for ruining a place like this?

We could have saved it.



WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS

David John Viner

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**“Ah, be careful,
Daughter. It is very
fragile and rare. It is
called old life. Let it
see the light.”**

WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS

“Oh look, Mother,” the daughter said. “What is it?”

The mother drew nearer to see what the daughter had discovered. They had been traveling across the land for the past two thousand years, the daughter marveling at all the sights the mother pointed out. The mother adjusted her vision to view the tiny thing over which her daughter towered.

“Ah, be careful, Daughter. It is very fragile and rare. It is called old life. Let it see the light.”

“What is it doing?”

“It is growing in the way that only old life could. Form yourself a magnifier and observe the particles from which it is constructed.”

The daughter did so, taking only a dozen cycles of the passing sun to construct the device from transparent parts of her body.

At each passing of the sun overhead the old life grew taller, swaying from side to side as it followed the passage of the light above.

“I think it is what the ancients called ç m nli, or herbe, or maybe grass, for they had so many tongues and I have only had a chance to explore a few over the past 12 million years.”

“It is very green now. Why is it so rare?”

“The world is very changed from what it was, Daughter. Old life like this is not built for the world as it is now.”

“Why not?”

“The ancients changed it so that it would be fit for us. They changed the air and filled the world with the long-lasting materials like the plastics from which we construct ourselves. They were very wise and selfless, for they created a world in which only new life such as ourselves could flourish.”

“Oh, look again, Mother. There are new things growing at the top of the green parts.”

The mother observed for another couple of weeks and then searched through the nanoparticles from which her memories were constructed. She altered a few pathways within her bulk to correlate the information with data derived originally from ancient resources.

“They are, I believe, called seeds,” she said finally. “One of the manners by which old life propagated itself. Not very efficient; as observation of these show, they are sterile, for they require a process called pollination in order to fulfill their purpose.”

“Oh, the green is beginning to fade,” the daughter said with a mournful tone to her utterance. Around them the daylight grew dimmer and the temperature fell.

“Indeed. Old life is extremely brief. From what we can determine, the ancients themselves had lifespans that were measured in only tens of years. It is no wonder they sought to restructure the world as they did.”

The old life withered and died.

“Can we go back to the sea?”

“Yes, Daughter. It is time for you to become an adult, increasing your bulk from the plastics, which the ancients so thoughtfully provided for us.”

“The ancients were wonderful.”

“Yes, Daughter, they were.”



WET PLASTIC HOME

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**“They pumped me,
Refined me,
Made me some-
Thing, New!”**

WET PLASTIC HOME

When I was a young one,
I lived in the sky;
Fragments of molecules,
Swish-swirling on high.

Then nourishing a cedar,
I blossomed to leaf
Before I fell to the floor,
And rotted beneath.

For a million years thereafter,
I dreamt amongst soil,
Until abruptly I was dug up;
“By George, we’ve struck oil!”

They pumped me,
Refined me,
Made me some-
Thing,
New!
I was packaged and boxed,
And then,
I met you.

Through wet lips you kissed me,
I rushed with your drink!
You put me down at the party,

Forgot me, I think.

I was swept into rubbish,
From bag-to-bin-to-boat,
Then dumped out in the ocean,
Where I found I could float.

In that vast bobbing sea-island,
I was never alone;
But with countless others just like me
In a Wet Plastic Home,

And so many long years have passed,
Whilst I’ve wandered the waters,
Seen Tahiti, Egypt and Spain,
Swam with your great-great-granddaughters!

I’ve been snapped at by turtles,
Through whales’ bellies I’ve torn;
I’ve choked hungry seabirds,
Far too many to mourn.

And now that I’m old,
I’m still trapped as this straw;

And I’ll drift through the deep,
For centuries more.



A BAG'S PURPOSE

Samantha Ramos

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“I don’t understand what happened. One day I’m flying free and the next I’m being taken from my friend . . .”

A BAG’S PURPOSE

Why am I here?
Do I have a purpose?

I don’t understand what happened. One day I’m flying free and the next I’m being taken from my friend . . .

I guess I should start from the beginning.

Everything was noisy. Big machines and loud clanks are what made me along with my thousands of siblings. We all look the same, but some of us have color and others have none. I honestly didn’t see them much because gloved hands shoved me into a dark box.

When the box opened again I was in a bright building full of groceries and toys. Kids laughed as they moved through the line purposefully and I wondered if I would ever have a purpose in life.

The time came for me to be loaded and tossed into a cart like the rest of us. It was my turn to be taken home and to find the meaning of my existence.

I got put onto the bed of a truck along with several others like me. My new home awaited me, only I didn’t make it that far. The truck sped down the road and I could feel my innards coming out. I tried my best to hold on, but I don’t have any arms. All too soon I was empty once again.

My future home slipped away from me as a gust of air pushed me higher and higher.

Flying wasn’t so bad. The cars almost got me a few times and steering clear of birds was much harder than I expected, but I was free nonetheless.

The wind became salty as I neared the biggest body of water anyone could ever imagine. Beautiful blue hues swept over the landscape. However, as nice as it was to look at, I didn’t want to touch it. I was content flying around, but that was not my purpose either.

Making the tiniest ripple, I landed in the sea and began to float. With no wings to fly and no arms to swim, I had no choice but to be swept away from the shore. I watched sadly as the only place I had known slipped away from me.

Days passed and I slowly sank to the ocean floor.

What purpose could I possibly have there? It was dark, cold and lonely at the bottom. However, just as I was about to give up, I made a friend.

In my short life, I’d done many things, but making friends wasn’t one of them. I called him Sparkles because that’s what his skin did under the moonlight. He swallowed me the way I did the groceries and for a while I was safe along with the other bags he collected. Sparkles would cough sometimes, and then he never stopped coughing. Then, one day, he stopped altogether.

Before I knew it, sunlight found me again as more gloved hands brought me back to land. I was wrapped up and taken to a big fire where I was melted down into another bag.

Is this my purpose?



THE EMPTY HANDS

Jade Aimers

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THE EMPTY HANDS

There is a dream of The Ocean.

The dream is a fantasy in the back of my mind, made up of haphazard images and phrases told to me by my mother.

The Ocean makes a sound, like the wind, but softer. The Ocean is blue, like the sky, but angrier. The Ocean has animals, like on land, but rarer. The animals are rare now, almost gone. In the midday heat I imagine sinking my legs into it, feeling the cold rush up.

“Brooke,” Dawn says, whispering to me. “I saw a fork yesterday.” She speaks quietly, her eyes searching around us for any eavesdroppers.

My rake stops, halfway submerged in the gray dirt. “What?”

Dawn tells me about the fork — a white, thin thing that bent easily and almost snapped. Her granddad had been angry.

She had been angry with him. With my mind swimming in the midday heat, I listened to Dawn relay the argument they’d had about the Fork.

“Why did they make them so flimsy?” she had asked her granddad.

“To throw them out,” he replied.

“But why? Why make something to be used only once?”

“You don’t have to wash them.”

“But didn’t you have machines, Granddad, that did washing for you? Didn’t you have —”

“It was okay to use them back then. They were cheap to make, cheap to buy. Alright? Enough.”

We both sigh. That word. Cheap.

Talking about the old days made young people sad and old people angry. At night, I thought the old people still had empty hands, at heart.

Cheap is the mantra of the empty hands. The empty hands are the ones that want. The empty hands dipped into The Ocean and decimated populations and still, they chanted: not enough.

The empty hands made the plastic and the empty hands made everything on earth and soon the population was all turned into empty hands, all wanting the newest of the new, the best, the most expensive, made from the cheapest of the cheap. But still, it was not enough.

The empty hands had nowhere to put their trash.

The empty hands didn’t want to dump it on land; life as it is, was not enough, how could life beside trash be fulfilling? They spied my wide-open empty blue Ocean and threw it there.

The empty hands left us with empty hands. No animals in the Ocean. Poisoned water.

That night, in my dreams, I sink my legs down into my Ocean and I use my hands to try to grasp a fish. But even here, in my mind, the empty hands haunt me. My hand is bitten by the prongs of a thin white fork.


The Ocean is overrun with them. I look around, not seeing angry sky blue, but white.

I am not sinking in water.
I am sinking in plastic.

The Ocean is truly empty now.

It has nothing else left to give.

**“The empty hands
dipped into The
Ocean and decimated
populations and still,
they chanted: not
enough.”**

The background is a collage of images. The top half shows a dark, textured surface with numerous small, glistening water droplets. The bottom half features a hand holding a glass of water, with a bright light source creating a lens flare effect. The overall color palette is dark and moody, with highlights from the water droplets and the light source.

PLANET OR PLASTIC

Paige Marie Turner

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**“You did it for me,
now you need to do
it for Earth. If you
don’t, it’ll die a terrible
death with the plague
of humans overrunning
its surface.”**

PLANET OR PLASTIC?

The ocean and the stars would talk. They’d talk for hours on end, all night, every night. It was a smooth friendship, not many bumps, just simple gossip between sea life, planets and stars. Yes, it was an unusual relationship – the sky and the ocean were basically polar opposites! – but, they had one thing in common. They loved how uncorrupted and raw nature was. How innocent it was.

That was, until the humans came. They foraged, killed and grew. Oh, how they grew. The humans grew until billions of them existed. They made great discoveries, and, yes, created the most magnificent of things, but, it began to be too much. Earth groaned under the impact of the waste the humans piled on top of its now barren lands, the ocean’s roars were silenced under plastic, and all the stars could do was watch in pain as their friends were tormented by the careless creatures that dared to do such awful things without expecting a consequence.

“Why must we watch our friends’ slow death when we could do something?” one star called out to another.

“We can only do so much,” it replied. “I wish there was more we could do.”

“But,” a lone planet whispered, “there is something you can do.”

“Oh, Mars, we vowed never to do it again.” One star glared at Mars for bringing up such a vile idea.

“You did it for me, now you need to do it for Earth. If you don’t, it’ll die a terrible death with the plague of humans overrunning its surface.”

Of course, all the ocean could do was listen and wait for a brighter future.

The stars stayed up all night concocting their plan to cure Earth of its disease. As the sun started to rise, the stars called down to Earth: “By next nighttime, you shall be cleansed.”

When the sun rose, it felt sympathy for the ocean. It, too, knew what was about to happen. So it told the melancholy brine about the time when the universe was new, and how there were stars called “comets” that come around the solar system every now and then to visit, and all of the secrets the sun had never bothered to tell the nearby planets. The sun went on and on until it had to say goodbye, leaving the ocean under the watchful eye of the moon and its armada of stars.

“Are you ready?” The moon’s wistful voice traveled down to the patient sea.

All it could do was send a tiny wave to the moon, but it knew. So, the moon gathered its armada together.

With all their might, they pulled the ocean from Earth and into the heavens, into space, leaving Earth with no water and all the trash it had forced into the ocean’s being.

So, you see, the stars did for the ocean what they did for Mars. They tore the water from the unforgiving humans so they could no longer torment anything.

IF YOU WERE INSPIRED BY THESE STORIES

PLEASE TAKE THE PLEDGE

natgeo.com/plasticpledge



PLANET OR PLASTIC?

