

An area close to El Ejido

The sun is beating down through the car window. My left arm slowly frying, with my right on the steering wheel guiding me through a shimmering plastic dystopia.¹ Waves of polythene hide cornucopias of fruit and vegetables. Green opulence. Tangled depravity. But here outside it couldn't be any further from a lush paradise with all sprouting organisms hidden from sight. It's dry. My mouth is gasping for water.

Polythene has a chemical formula of $(C_2H_4)_n$ and density of 0.88–0.96 g/cm³.

Roland Barthes wrote about plastic once; 'a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature'. It is indeed a 'transformation of nature', however, a 'miracle' we can certainly now question. Plastic which results from the transformation of 'original crystals' is transforming nature itself again, creating floating islands, entering our food systems and transforming our geological terrain. Perhaps another phrase from Barthes, 'the transmutation of matter' is more suitable when thinking about plastic in relation to itself and the world. However, this 'transmutation' is not the end state of plastic. The 'transmutation' is continual, with plastic changing our environment as we know it, becoming part of a new terrain.²

As I drive, scenes from *Blade Runner* project onto my retina. I watched that film endlessly as a teenager. I half lived in it as an alternate hazy reality running alongside my own. Perhaps that's why I am attracted to places like this. The undefined, away from the 'norm', speculative, alluring and depressing, an anathema to most. Last week I was standing in a dreary line, waiting for my groceries to be scanned and placed in a flimsy plastic bag. Beep. The two places converge, memory and present, crashing together in a moment of surreal clarity. A polished tiled floor and a dusty brown road, air-conditioning and dry heat, the synthetic and the organic. I scan the reflective horizon, sunlight glances off and stings my eyes, pupils contracting in alarm. The polythene was lashed down by crude metal cables, a maleficent act of violence. It's not going anywhere. There isn't a soul in sight. I pull the car over onto an arid plain, a small wasteland. I love rental cars, they are like a quick affair, affection for a few days then ready to move on after your time together. Sated. A cloud of dust plumed up behind me as the car ground to a halt. This is a good spot. It has a good view. A slightly higher vantage point than other places I had passed. I look out over the horizon. Why had I come here? I had seen this place in a documentary, it caught my attention, I had to visit. I guess it was as I expected. However, it is more vast, more expansive. Yes, I have been searching for this place; fields of crude structures, neither finished nor incomplete that stretch out into the distance, unabated and untamed. The fantastical emerges from the depths of the most hideous beast. I'm bathed in uncertainty as I walk. I am immersed in the undefined.³ I spot a bird up soaring up high; perhaps from there the endless

¹ Plastic, 'an explosive material with a nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose base that can set off violent detonations. The plasticity of the word itself draws it to extremes, both to those concrete shapes in which form is crystallized (sculpture) and to the annihilation of all form (the bomb).' Catherine Malabou and Lisabeth During, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic*.

² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*.

³ With an 'absence of any defining criteria. This absence makes it impossible to declare the work finished or unfinished.' Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*.

waves of plastic would emit a sense of inertia, an unmovable sea. Can I find truth walking within these metal poles and polythene sheets?

A hidden harmony.

Can we ever return? We are walking into darkness through daylight. There is no return to freedom, freedom now only exists within the confines of my skull, clawing at curved bone. Our past steps hang as a shadow over our future, as the planes overhead prick our skin with their searing engines. Damnation. This is not how I pictured the remnants of my childhood, fleeing to sit in ungodly camps. This is no life. I am a dead person, walking into the future with my eyes open. I can see all that surrounds me with more clarity than my brain allows, oscillating between stasis and fluidity. Ingested by an antechamber, with Dante on one side and 'God' on the other. Neither clear, opaque, as illusory visions of a dream. A living necropolis.

Yet I have hope. I am at one with this city of tents; time, duration and destiny unknown. Bricks and mortar create an illusion of permanence which fuels our own delusions of immortality and grandeur, but here there is no such veil. We are constantly in motion, simultaneously on both sides of the precipice.⁴ The fabric of the tents flaps in the summer wind, fleeting and continual. As I have no knowledge of the future, this place spans time with an unstable effervescence. A memorial for the fragile. Still the vastitude of my love of life is undying in the presence of death.

I have been fortunate enough in my life to evade the horrors of a refugee camp or an enclave of war. Yet my mind projects ghostly visions onto the encampment walls of trapped vegetation. Wild thoughts enshrined in the gleaming landscape, while reflecting them back at me in abhorrent absurdity.

A constant cycle of regeneration is underway, stripping off the old to make way for the new. The occasional storm could be cruel to these synthetic cocoons. Yet, unlike a chrysalis there is no butterfly waiting to emerge. Just entombed vegetation. The structures' skins are made and remade, constantly changing but remaining the same. Thin meshes, some black, some clear, line the sides, allowing distorted views as portals into other worlds. I start to walk. Lush dribbling landscapes are housed within, rows upon rows of green prisoners stand waiting, strapped up by sticks and rope. Bulbous pregnant growths weigh heavily on their limbs. Paralysed by their own fertility. Ripe for the taking. Sumptuous. Fragmentary colours adorn their bodies; reds, oranges and purples hang as gross jewels. Salivate.

There are thieves about.

I marvel at this wondrous undergrowth, hidden from above, trapped under plastic skies. I want to dance in the splendour of reaching leaves as insects buzz in delight, they have found it. A fraudulent Eden. But this is no heaven, the sweat of imported workers spatters onto creaking pallets. Ready for export. A farmer surveys his empire, yet, there is no malice in his vision, perhaps he is oblivious. Or perhaps doesn't give a

⁴ Only in 'dying, in that coming to an end, putting an end to continuity, is there renewal, that creation which is eternal'. Jiddu Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

damn. I am stuck outside with the dust, endless dust. I rub my eyes as a symphony of languages floats through the warm air, along soft breezes to ooze into my ear. As African sands are brought north by southerly winds these voices ride on the same currents, but with promises of a better life. A better life? I fear you are sadly mistaken. Trapped in a system that they can no longer escape by being wrapped in the plastic in which they are concealed. Muzzled songs and vacuum packed tongues. A parallel space unfolds in front of me as new meanings and patterns unveil themselves at their wish.

I bite into succulent fruit, juice floods from the corners of my mouth. A mix of saliva and sugar created from my impulsive gorging drips from my chin and falls through the air. Free fall. As it lands it bounces on the unforgiving dust. It then sits momentarily as a reflective orb on this unknown terrain before giving up and understanding its fate. The powdery dirt greedily sucks, they become one. A brown paste forms which starts to bake under the hot sun. Water molecules then rise upwards, ascending past my mouth as my tongue flicks out to lick my lips. I am inside, standing with arms outstretched grasping at green stalks. Looking out I see myself peering in.

‘Wipe your mouth.’

My feet take me down fabric walled empty roads. I am Moses parting the sea, but there is no water to be seen. A delivery truck pulls up to load from a small gate. Road block. No way around. I turn back and retreat to my car. This beauty again, she needs a clean. How much time had passed? Did I step into a parallel universe? What had I achieved while nature took its course? I see order and disorder in everything, the world shows itself, evenly spread particles on the bonnet, placed there by an erratic gust of wind. Weeds creep up over the black rubber tyres and into the hub caps while moss germinates in the cracks. Nature will always take its course, unfettered ruination. I get in. The car jolts into life. I drive to the edge where plastic bleeds into desert. A nether region. Terrain vague.

Something catches my eye, something hidden and disgusting. Is anyone watching me? I keep my car unlocked. Dirty secrets buried in the earth, uncovered by the elements, exposed as perverted dreams. Sheets upon sheets of plastic emerge from the ground, as limbs of hastily buried bodies. A mass grave. Crime scene. Over time the earth and plastic had mixed, a mutation of the soil. A new geology formed from a disregard for mother earth while tiny fragments of the unnatural matter flake off. The prophetic Mary Shelley. I close my eyes, tears bring particles of plastic with them. The saline water rushes towards the ocean, down sinuous channels carved in the parched earth by sudden downpours dragging the plastic with it. Salt reunited. From the shadowy depths a fish rises up and with mouth open wide greedily gobbles the unknown matter in one. I feel the plastic inside me, lining my intestines and my stomach. Bring a sharp blade. Slice me open, straight down my abdomen, would you see any difference inside and the landscape in which I stand?

Dissect. A scientific study.

As I open my eyes, the sun is slowly setting, painting the world in soft amber hues. The rhythmical beat of my heart brings comfort in solitude. I shall not lose any more moments here. I take a last look over the plains of polythene and wonder if it is actually not too dissimilar from our own existence? Even the terrain itself; bone like structures covered by thin membranes with wet substances inside. I feel my elbows, pull on the excess skin, and rock my shoulders back so that the blades extend outwards to search for lost wings. I take a deep breath so that the dry air floods my tender lungs, expansion, contraction. An existence in flux, embedded in a cycle of constant renewal.

They do say dogs look like their owners.