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JUNKLAND

K.A. Rees

awake. Ringing in his ears. He didn't know how long he'd been out to it, he had no recollection of falling asleep, only of waking. Like that time he was hospitalised for gunshot. He reached for the site of the now healed hole just near his left shoulder, just to see; the memory of his pain, instant and tangible. Teeth like razors. The site of the torn flesh fibrillating. In the background noise of pain, there was another sound. At first, he could not recall words used to describe such a sound. Then he remembered a man with cheeks puffed to the size of oranges. Davis. That was him, Miles. One of his blue notes, sweet and low. A lone note of clarity against a background of buzz. It was a sound that he felt in his gut, rather than heard. The sound was followed by recognition of the hot sun shining. It stung his neck. Behind him, the sun was high in the noonday sky. There was something else, a rocking back and forth, like he was being gently—but firmly—shaken awake. Almost the same motion his dad had used to wake him when Gage slept through the morning alarms placed and set, with precision timing about the tiny room Gage shared with his brother. Shared, his brother older by twenty months, did not like to share.

Gage sat up, smelt salt air. His head throbbed. He groaned and closed his eyes again, cranium ringing to the blood pulse throbbing at his wrist. A hissing sound. He knew that sound, pressurised air passing through a restricted passageway. A tyre deflating? It took him a few moments before he realised it was the hiss of the ocean and the undulation was the tide, nudging at him.

This was no beach.

He was lying on a hill of bottle tops, they stretched out, sand dunes in each direction. He ran his hands through them and picked one up. Yes, a solid object here. He got up, walked a few paces and bent down, repeating his previous action. There were different grades and colours of plastic that made up the hill he was standing on. He recognised the thin, stretchy material that was the most recent incarnation, but here and there were older types, thick plastics rich in petroleum bi-products. Some of them must be decades old. Or older. They had not degraded,

maybe a little faded. Gage struck his legs into the caps, grinding down with his weight, expecting to come across something other than bottle tops. He dug with his hands for a while, but his fingers touched the now familiarly repeated shape; smooth round top, perforated edges. The design, barely changed since the invention of the plastic bottle. Before, it had been steel caps on glass bottles. The *Coke-Pepsi Anheuser Corp* had produced an anniversary clip a couple of years back showing vintage footage from the beginning of the corporation. Women on the beach tossing a ball. The camera panning up close to their large grins and overly white teeth. That's where he'd seen the crown caps. But there were none here in this sea of plastic. Gage looked around and wondered. The sun was hot on his exposed head and the back of his throat was dry. He was going to need shelter. And water. The thought of a wet mouth made his thirst unbearable. He started to stumble over the undulating dunes of bottle tops, but the motion was disturbing: there was a vast body of water under the junk he was standing on.

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Off on the hazy, salt-stained horizon stood a giant tree. He looked over his shoulder to confirm there was nothing—and no one—behind him, and began the long walk towards the tree over the oscillating ground.

Gage felt his thirst as a hot throbbing thing in the back of his throat. He imagined a bird trapped there, beak open trying to get the air it needed and it scratched as it scampered against his Adam's apple. *Stuck* in there. *He was stuck here.* The bird raked his throat with its bird claws and pecked at his soft pallet. Gage tried talking to himself but the words rasped upwards into the thick air and died. He trudged on through the endless dunes, his only companions; his thirst and his broken mind.

He approached the tree with caution. Gage saw small plastic hoops and what appeared to be melted bands hanging from its branches. Some of them were huge and they looked ancient. There were machines that used these bands. His mind flickered, looking for the right word. Conveyor belts, yes. Long, drawn out dribbling from the sky like they had melted in the sun. Used for types of manufacturing, now defunct. He stood staring at the tree and realised the bands hanging down made it look strangely inverted. The branches were not stretching up towards the heavens, but down towards the sea, seeking nutrients from the garbage that stretched beneath it. Salt too, was suspended from branches, drops of liquid crystal hanging like baubles. But this was no sandy loam, this soil was made from pieces of plastic glittering in the sunlight: artificial scales. He looked again at this strange inverted tree, his mind trying to orient it. For some reason, Gage thought of *A Christmas Carol*. The novella written in a distant past, a land he'd never set foot upon. It was the London of the the little match girls. An industrialised London. London that was pre-unionised labour, but the machines

had changed everyone's lives. And the little match girls died. Here, like the appearance of the Ghost of Christmas Past, was a spectral vision, a garbage tree growing out of a garbage land. Gage found if he squinted, he could make the scene in front of him look strangely idyllic, but up close he saw it for what it was, the detritus from humanity's garage. Everything here: unnecessary and unwanted. He sat down under a spooled conveyor belt on a mound of bottle tops; they collapsed under him.

A memory rose from adolescence, sitting at the table of a friend of his father's. He and his brother called her *Aunt*, but she was not. She was a drinking pal of his dad's: bourbon bottles, scotch—single malt—when he could get it, rum when he could not—washed down their throats with a freedom loving abandon that Gage and his brother could almost taste. Then, there was the smell on their breath. A cloistered thing, a secret that the two of them shared together—flaunted even, for their audience of two adolescents. He remembered the smell in her kitchen, a fecundity that belonged to the cabin in the woods, Gage had no recollection of where it was, only the mad hatter drive around twisting county roads, potholes, their father often drunk at the wheel, but the smell in the kitchen was rotting leaves—a dead mouse or two. It made him want to gag. On this, he and his brother were united. They wanted to leave, sent none too subtle signals that were none too subtly ignored. As the bottle emptied and his Dad and Aunt turned it up, Gage knew they would be top and tailing it on the moist couch with the mouse droppings caught beneath the arm-rolls.

He remembered it now because of the table. She had an unremarkable laminate affair that seated six. Pressed under the glass, she'd printed out newspaper clippings that caught her eye. The tree was one he remembered. Named after a general, it was so huge it made the lumberjacks look like bugs. But they smiled and smoked and displayed the tools of their destruction. The tree had lived since glaciers carved up the countryside like a whittling knife. Now this ancient thing was reduced to less than the sum of its parts: maybe some rail road tracks, settler cabins, furniture. Wood for combustion. Ash, eventually.

The sun tracked lower in the sky. Gage stood to move on, his thirst a song.

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There were fundamental things wrong with the landscape, odd items stood out. It was organised—all the shapes were there, the order however, was naive. Confused even; a child's drawing of a landscape. The undulating dunes were the same height, with the colours repeated at regular intervals. If they were indeed occurring in nature, they would be different sizes, with colours inter-dispersed randomly. This was made to look like it was random.

A copy.

Gage left the cover of the plastic tree, walking once more across hills of bottle tops. In between the plastic caps he saw twisted ties like strands of artificial DNA. He was walking towards the nearest edge of the garbage patch in attempt to peer over the floating, what? Reef? Island? Outcrop? Gage realised he lacked the words to describe this place, but found himself repeating a litany: *All things intertwined*. Driftwood, mollusk, gribble worm. Shelter. Food for fish, food for birds. Foundation material for sand dunes. He kept walking, the edge was further off than it appeared from the tree.

The sun was a sliver of bright on the horizon by the time the garbage began to thin out. It became marsh-like; he had to be careful he didn't put his foot through the remaining layers of rubbish and fall into the murk. He hadn't seen any fish or other sea creatures. Similarly, he did not see any birds. Perhaps they knew to keep away. Then Gage remembered an obscure piece of trivia he read, in of all things, a municipal council review discussing floating phenomena. The area located off the disputed territory of the Sea of Japan was once a rich breeding ground of shrimp and krill. There were two types of currents that met in that section of ocean. One cool, the other warm. The shrimp and krill brought larger animals, whales and dolphins, tuna and sharks. A chain in the natural ecosystem. Gage looked out and saw long threads of seaweed, before realising that these chains anchored to the top of the amassing reef of plastic, were not actual seaweed, but their artificial twin, a slowly degrading but not disintegrating entangled mass of crap. It was the artificial ecosystem mimicking the actual. Again, the phrase, *all things intertwined*. Gage felt cold.

He remembered the holotags in his wife's prayer book. He could never read what was written there, and not only because she chose to generate Mandarin characters, but because it refused to reveal its writings to him. He was not of the faith. Worse, he was suspicious. He had seen the way she hid it from him and then, when she thought he was not around, how she poured herself into it. Once, in a drunken rage he'd destroyed the flat upending furniture and raking through cupboards looking for the book. When he eventually found it, it remained bound, a flat square. In his state, he thought it mocked him and he cursed it and threw the thing against a wall. It bounced and opened. Fleeting, he saw an image of a piece of driftwood and those words that repeated through his head.

Gage looked over his shoulder again, feeling watched, wondering if he disturbed something in this strange ecosystem on the dead island.

He continued to walk, sometimes floundering through the murk; his thoughts assaulting him as he clambered over the bottle top dunes and garbage that made up the length of the island, until he came to a kidney shaped pond. In desperation, he dipped his hand and drank off the top. Fresh water! He lay down and drank deeply from the pond's edge, clearing away some of the caps that were floating

there. He washed the sweat from his face and neck and drank again. When he recovered, Gage dug down around the edge of the pond attempting to find something other than the ubiquitous bottle tops.

He dug.

The substrate layer consisted of *things that were once stuff*. He found single shoes, dolls heads, refrigeration parts. Everywhere around him was the presence of humanity, but the landscape itself was devoid of any actual human. He thought about the recordings placed aboard *Voyager 1* and sent into space, a love-note from Earth to the universe. Treasured works of art to introduce humanity into the great unknown. And here, on the planet they lived and relied upon, instead of a treasure trove of prized artefacts, here was the stuff that no one wanted and no one cared about. He smothered an impulse to shout, unsure if he wanted to disturb the humid air that passed thickly over the island. He wondered if he was the first person to visit this place. He did feel a kind of wonder of discovery, but it was mixed with a deep seated wrongness he was having trouble parsing: a groove in the record had been scratched, he couldn't get past it.

What had Armstrong felt as he walked across the surface of the moon? Awe, most definitely. Awe of his surroundings and awe in what humanity, what *he* had achieved, culminating in that very powerful footprint and those words that echoed across the ages. Now Gage was here, a similarly alien landscape, but he felt small and frail. That there was something so out of whack with the Earth that a reverse ecosystem could have sprung up under humanity's collective nose.

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The sickness came on suddenly. His stomach churned and he retched water from his gut. A kaleidoscope of emotional responses blended in a wash of colour, it came at him like a wave. His mind churned. He felt exile, abandonment. Chemical dreams.

Gage drifted, he sweated salt from his pores, images formed and unmade themselves behind his shut-tight eyes. He dreamed—

Of seashells. Once homes, now husks: the creatures gone. They washed ashore; little ghosts, little bones.

He was in a passageway, long and dark with walls of stone. Rippled, something had tunnelled through here with a large spiralling cone, shaping away the earth and leaving ridges in the walls circling down into darkness. Gage was mounted on the lip of a gigantic shell. He could feel the life force that once flowed through the shell, still existed. Living memory. In Gage's own memory; a place called Shell Island, more shells washed up on its beaches than anywhere else, but he couldn't remember why.

There was a thing called a beach drift, where the shells wound up lumped on the

sand in a similar way to the sand dunes of bottle tops. He supposed shells still washed ashore in the same manner, but there weren't any beaches left that weren't toxic. Warming had devastated whole environments, thousands of kilometres of coral bleached and washed ashore leaving sands like elephant graveyards. Beaches were dead things. Only bone nomads went there, to find curios to sell in the markets.

Beneath him he heard running water, the tunnel from his dream was narrower now; his vision: closing to a pinhead, blacking out? His hands felt the ridges made by the shell as he tried to run, but thickly, the humidity on the dead island had sought him out, his legs felt weighted as he ran, the pads on each of his outstretched fingers becoming numb. They tingled, then felt raw. The skin was being rubbed away; tiny gashes forming and Gage felt liquid spill over the tip of each of them. His arms ached, but he could not stop running. Sweat poured from the crown of his head down his body, like summer rain, his breathing was heavy and laboured. Pulse throbbing through each fingertip and still his legs ran on, feet crunching a thick layer of shells. To his ears, it sounded as if he was stumbling through densely packed snow, but the teeth were sharper here.

Gage opened his eyes and waited. He had a chemical taste in the back of his throat. His mind felt dry; shrivelled, strips of papaya tucked neatly into a cellophane wrapper. He migrated to his knees, and then onto his side waiting for the nausea to pass. Light. It had taken on the panorama of migraine spots, special fucking twilight zone. His eyelids fluttered shut, the weight of them pressing. His body couldn't decide which was worse; watching the bottle tops rise and fall like he was on the stomach of an unimaginable beast—the creature itself, too large to make out—or inside his dream shell waiting for the walls to close, something trying to crawl inside. This new creature with the keys to take up residence in the mind he called home.

Gage remembered back to the time he got shot. He fingered his shoulder blade, the imprint of the bullet, a shadow passing again through his skin. With each time he recalled the moment the gun exploded. The smoothness of the new skin; a pebble rubbed from turning on the incoming tide. Something else. Something deeper: the shrapnel in his brain. Two bullets, then. He felt the hair grown around the scar; intersections between thoughts, this polished memory.

Was it him, this memory, or was it the creature from the shell? So, the strange dreams. Tree, rings, shells and layers. Gunshot. Still that, his mind being re-made by the passenger. The stranger from this place, here, inside.

Sun had come out from behind the clouds and he was soaked wet through. He stood, removed his tie and jacket, rolled up his long sleeves, thinking how impotent a suit looked in a place like this. In any place, really. His fingers tickled his pocket for a cigarette. What brought him here would surely show itself soon. He

was

K.A. REES holds a Masters in Writing from the University of Sydney. Her poems and short stories have been published by *Red Room Company*, *Rochford Street Review*, *Review of Australian Fiction*, *Australian Poetry Anthology*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and are forthcoming in *Australian Poetry Journal*. She once spent a year at the State Library of NSW as their Café Poet in residence, and was shortlisted for the 2016 Judith Wright Poetry Prize.

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