

# Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine

---

Volume 6  
Issue 1 *"I Think You're Muted': Voices from the  
Coronavirus Pandemic"*

Article 6

---

2021

## Mixed Bag

Mary Vermillion  
Mount Mercy University, [vermill@mtmercy.edu](mailto:vermill@mtmercy.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive\\_thrive](https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vermillion, Mary (2021) "Mixed Bag," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: [https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive\\_thrive/vol6/iss1/6](https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol6/iss1/6)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by theRepository at St. Cloud State. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine* by an authorized editor of theRepository at St. Cloud State. For more information, please contact [tdsteman@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:tdsteman@stcloudstate.edu).

---

## Mixed Bag

### Cover Page Footnote

For providing me with feedback on earlier drafts of this essay, I thank Benjamin Thiel, Carol Tyx, and members of my writers group: Eileen Bartos, Marjorie Carlson Davis, Marianne Jones, Kathleen Renk, Mary Helen Stefaniak, Kris Vervaecke, and Ann Zerkel.

In 1965, the year after I was born, a Swedish company patented the one-piece polythene shopping bag.

At the end of the twentieth century, a movie titled *American Beauty* lavished attention on an empty single-use lightweight plastic bag. The movie was honored with five Oscars, including Best Picture. I taught it once, a year or two later, early in my college teaching career. Assigned a composition course called Writing and Film, I focused on Best Pictures of the Nineties. I didn't like *American Beauty* as much as the other winners, but I was captivated by the plastic bag scene. Two troubled kids, Ricky and Jane, watch Ricky's footage of a plastic bag as the wind lifts and twirls it over skittering leaves in front of a desolate brick building. Ricky tells Jane that it's the most beautiful thing he's ever filmed. "This bag was like, dancing with me," he says. "Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. And that's the day I knew there was this entire life behind things, and . . . this incredibly benevolent force, that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever."<sup>1</sup>

My mom once kept a Kleenex box crammed full of plastic shopping bags in a kitchen cupboard. The box enabled her to store the bags while keeping her cupboard tidy. When she needed a bag, she simply pulled one out of the box's slot. She ingeniously reused the box so she could more easily reuse the bags. I'm not sure when she starting doing this, but I discovered the box the summer before COVID, when I was helping her move out of her home and into an assisted living community where she did not want to go. The box was full, swollen. She'd been using fewer of the bags to line her trash cans because she was using fewer rooms. It had been a long time since any of her bags had carried her homemade cookies and pies to church bake sales. But she had kept saving the bags. She hadn't given up on that.

Before the pandemic, I almost always brought reusable bags to the grocery store, but when I forgot, I made sure to reuse the plastic bags I collected. While travelling, I tucked them into my suitcase, using them to

---

<sup>1</sup> *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes (1999; Los Angeles: Dreamworks).

stash dirty laundry or protect fragile gifts. I saved most of my plastic bags for the homeless shelter where I volunteered. We used them to distribute hygiene items, clothes, and food. But because of COVID, I no longer volunteer there. Or travel. Or shop with reusable bags. They are no longer allowed in most Iowa City stores. In fact, once the pandemic started, the few states that had banned single-use plastic bags did an about-face and banned reusable ones.

Two decades before COVID, and a couple years before *American Beauty* won its Oscars, a sailor discovered the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, one of several gyres in our oceans where vast amounts of plastic waste accumulate. “I was confronted,” he said, “as far as the eye could see, with the sight of plastic.” In the week it took him to cross the gyre, he “never found a clear spot.”<sup>2</sup> The debris in such gyres is too deep and dispersed to measure.

As Ricky watches the plastic bag he’s filmed, he says, “Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world I feel like I can’t take it, like my heart’s going to cave in.”<sup>3</sup>

Under water, plastic bags look like jelly fish. Sea turtles eat the bags and die.

The man who wrote Ricky’s words was inspired by a plastic bag he saw floating in front of the World Trade Center.

“Do you ever feel like a plastic bag? / Drifting through the wind / Wanting to start again?” That’s what Katy Perry sings at the start of her wildly popular feel-good anthem “Firework.” She went on the road with Hillary Clinton during her presidential campaign, and after Hillary’s

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Moore, “Trashed: Across the Pacific Ocean Plastics, Plastics Everywhere,” *Natural History*, Nov. 2003, [https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/master.html?https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/1103/1103\\_feature.html](https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/master.html?https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/1103/1103_feature.html).

<sup>3</sup> *American Beauty*.

acceptance speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, Perry's "Firework" ignited the crowd:

'Cause baby you're a firework  
Come on show 'em what your worth  
Make 'em go "Oh, oh, oh!"

News cameras panned the upturned faces of young girls. Gazing at Clinton in her stark white pantsuit, they were seeing their own powerful futures shine brighter than the moon, moon, moon.

In 2017, the star of *American Beauty* was accused of sexually assaulting several young men and women.

Fireworks are crap for the environment, and not just because they pollute our air. The raw materials used to make most fireworks are mined from mountains. The leftover rock is thrust into valleys, blocking and tainting rivers and streams. But the last fireworks I saw filled me with hope and joy. They flashed across my TV screen after Biden's acceptance speech, strobing on Kamala Harris in her suffragette white and the huge crowd of masked revelers.

Even before the pandemic, plastic bag bans sparked controversy. Were they truly good for the environment? Obviously, the bans reduced the flow of plastic into our oceans, but the bans' impact on our atmosphere seemed less certain. Plastic bag bans may have increased greenhouse gas emissions because reusable bags, especially cotton ones, are dirtier to manufacture than their single-use plastic counterparts. Now, the plastic industry argues that reusable bags are a different kind of dirty—carriers of the virus.

When I re-watched the plastic bag scene on YouTube, I still found it hauntingly beautiful, and I was glad—I like finding beauty in unexpected places. Yet I was also disturbed and ashamed. Filled with knowledge about environmental degradation, how dare I find beauty and meaning in a plastic bag? I started to read the comments below the clip, hoping to find someone who shared my mixed feelings. Instead, I found that the commentators were deeply divided like America itself. That clip was either

the best of scenes or the shittiest. Some commenters hailed Ricky as a poet and a philosopher; others slammed him: “He could have used that 15 minutes he spent staring at the trash like an idiot to pick up some trash along the highway or on the beach.”<sup>4</sup>

How should any of us use our minutes? How do we know what is worth saving, worth trying to preserve? What do we hold onto, and how do we carry it?

Civilization started not with men and their spears, but with women and their containers and carriers. So argued feminist Elizabeth Fisher in what she called the Carrier Bag Theory of Human Evolution.<sup>5</sup> This theory inspired Ursula K. Le Guin’s essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.” “Mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind,” writes Le Guin, “but what we actually did to stay alive was gather seeds, roots, sprouts . . .”<sup>6</sup> For Le Guin, the stories we tell about ourselves as a species ought to focus less on killing—more on holding and sharing. As she imagines early women, she suggests, “It is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it’s useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people . . .”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Sartain, 2020, Comment on “*American Beauty* ~ Plastic Bag Scene [HD],” YouTube video. 3:34, “QuestionUreReality,” May 17, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qssvnjj5Moo&lc=UgzqooDJOBVOCaZTDot4AaABAg>.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Fisher, *Women’s Creation*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), discussed in Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women Places*, (New York: Grove Press, 1989; 2017), 166-167.

<sup>6</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women Places*, (New York: Grove Press, 1989; 2017), 165.

<sup>7</sup> Le Guin, “Carrier Bag,” 168.

Takeaway containers, bubble wrap, gloves, face shields: plastic waste is surging. Yet before the virus struck, we humans were already dumping eight million metric tons of plastic in our oceans every year. Every minute, we used two million plastic bags.<sup>8</sup> How can we possibly hold those numbers in our heads and hearts? How can we bear the surging number of deaths—more than two million people—each of them with family and friends, each of them with myriad others whose lives they touched?

Polythene was an accident. An experiment gone wrong. In the 1930s, in Northwich England, scientists inadvertently created a white waxy residue. During World War II, it was used to insulate radar cables and thus to protect Britain's food supply from German submarines. Perhaps because of the plastic's life-saving history, its developers were each given a tiny triangular keepsake made from the first manufactured ton. One of these developers, chemist George Feachem, placed his in his wallet, where it remained years after his death until his grandson found it. "It's touching," the grandson said, "to think that this discovery meant so much to him . . . that he kept this memento, not hidden away, but in his wallet, on his person for all those years."<sup>9</sup>

My mom does not keep a Kleenex box filled with plastic bags at Garden View, her assisted living community. But a box does remain in her home across town. She'd like to go back there, she tells me, but maybe she should also think about selling the house. Every phone call, she says, "I just don't know what to do," and I tell her there is no need to rush a decision—no one is going anywhere right now. But I think we both know she is not going to return to the house my father designed for them. We both know there is no going back.

---

<sup>8</sup> "Fact Sheet: End Plastic Pollution," EarthDay.org, March 7, 2018, <https://www.earthday.org/fact-sheet-end-plastic-pollution/>.

<sup>9</sup> "History of the World: The First Piece of Polythene," Manchester BBC, Sept. 29, 2010, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/manchester/hi/people\\_and\\_places/history/newsid\\_9042000/9042044.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/manchester/hi/people_and_places/history/newsid_9042000/9042044.stm).