

*THIS: Message in a Bottle to Jimmie Durham*

Kim Satchell

*Sea Glass*

I find a small piece of sea glass with the word THIS imprinted upon its surface. The message in the broken bottle impresses itself upon my imagination. Finds me and then gets my attention. Let's just say. I know such a talisman is not just a piece of glass. Some people call sea glass mermaid tears, lucky tears, sea gems or beach glass among other things. Sea glass is an instance where the interaction between the detritus of human rubbish with the surrounds makes something of strange value. The glistening amber surface refracted in the shallow rock pool caught my gaze. A closer inspection of the shard revealed the cryptic message in what once was a bottle. The classic 'message in a bottle' needs to be broken to reveal the contents. However, this message in a bottle appears as the sole remains of an already broken vessel become touchstone.

Sea glass needs time in the ocean to become complete. Not unlike an aspiring surfer, pirate or Sufi. The rumble and roll of the sea, the give and take of the earth, water, rock and sand, which scours through liquid motion, an abrasive but subtle magic upon the surface and edges of the glass. People have long treasured these pieces, collected them and even fashioned them into jewellery and *objets d'art*. Sand, so they say, has a little bit of everything among its grains. The fragmentary remains of materials thrust from the geological substratum. Then torn, along with organic and inorganic materials from the heights of mountains, by wind, rain and rivulets, which become watercourses through the landscaped watershed, including the built and shaped landscapes of all inhabitants, in turn, gathering bits and pieces that meet upon the shoreline and ocean floor, with what the ocean tosses up in the way of remains. The sand upon the shoreline, in the astronomical numbers of fragments and grains, are thus gathered in the form of the beach. In the movement of ebb and flow, a delicate process makes transformative impressions upon these glassy objects turned by the sea and buffed in the sand. However, held in the form of this piece remains the evidence of broken glass, only partway smooth. The lettering of the solitary word remains intact, legible and tactile. Sea glass aficionados often speculate upon such cryptic clues, attempting to decipher what the fragment suggests had been represented. For example THIS BOTTLE MAY BE RETURNED. Free from the ordinary context of functional use, the word returns, enchanted with more possibilities. Some people assert that it takes anything up to fifty years for a mature piece of sea glass to be complete.



*Haecceity upon the shoreline.* Photo: Kim Satchell

In this piece of glass the brute forces of production and processed material still (you can still determine the original design) stem from a broken bottle. The material is recyclable both in the form of its original design (a bottle) and as processed material waiting reprocess (glass). Glass is basically produced by the fusion of the elements silica (sand), soda ash and lime (coral) through a process of heat and cooling. Glass is also sometimes known as the super cool liquid. Glass manifests naturally in two ways: when lightning strikes the sand, and when molten lava from the earth's core cools suddenly into obsidian. When crushed, glass returns back to its original form and it can be completely recycled. Sea glass derives from a process of further morphology which interrupts the conventional consumption and use of the economic cycle. The material is taken as it were through a refiguring, akin to a redesign process, in the care of the elements. The growing interest and popularity of sea glass has even prompted attempts to manufacture the effect but the results remain inferior in quality and patina.

### *The Afterlife of Objects*

When any object of human design progresses into the afterlife of human products, uncanny things may occur. The effects can be uneven, ugly, beautiful, humorous, benign, instructive and even diabolical. A decolonisation of sorts becomes possible (a rebellion ensues), where the assumptions the products are predicated upon are called into question

and brought into more critical view. The will of the producers loses potency; larger, more complex processes become evident, you could say wise people appear and tell stories, clouds gather and omens are considered. A more sober analysis would concede the will of producers, the voraciousness of consumption and the afterlife of products instantiate a brute form of capitalism. The conversion of non-renewable elements into non-biodegradable toxic waste, underpinned by an extractive economy operating on global proportions, is no more fearsome in size and ironic gravity than in the instance of plastic.

The seas around us have become engulfed with plastic, which breaks into smaller pieces and accumulates in a toxic plastic soup in the far reaches of the ocean, converging in the spiralling of major ocean currents. The plastic gradually 'photodegrades' in the sunlight, consequently fragmenting into smaller and smaller pieces that become sponge-like absorbers of toxins (Moore 2003: 2). These are afloat and arrested, becalmed in the inertia of vast ocean hubs which have long been known for their calm conditions. These gyres are ordinarily avoided by mariners seeking passage across the ocean by means of more advantageous routes, garnered by stronger patterns of wind. This phenomenon and the environmental threat such a process presents have only begun to become known in the last several decades, yet the continued growth of these so-called garbage patches are being fuelled by rabid consumption, population increase and the afterlife of plastic products.

The pressing political and philosophical questions remain. People en masse continue to display ambivalence toward the assemblage of science, technology, private enterprise and government that produce such a challenge. This is a hegemonic assemblage disembowelling the earth through reckless forms of mining and refashioning the earth with a cosmopolitan cultural imperialism, under the aegis of development and progress, which seems impervious to any challenge. Hegemony steeped in the industrial and technological revolution, mired in the ubiquity and afterlife of products. The advent of anthropogenic climate change has only served to highlight the deep malaise. This presents some of the largest and most relevant questions pressing upon the contemporary imagination, yet it is indicative of a broader crisis of the imagination in the twenty-first century (Taussig 2003:312). As Thomas Berry (1996: 20) says 'We need a new story'. The art of the matter is where different voices might become audible. Different sites might become relational and interconnected. These thoughts are interruptions that are a return to a necessary contingency (Saint-Amand 1997). This microcosm of glass might just be a pithy philosophy? A message in a bottle as an invitation to think about THIS place and what it means to be a castaway in a sea of discarded plastic.



*Home, Groper Island and Palm.* Photo: Kim Satchell

### *Message in a Bottle*

In the popular imagination, the place from which a message in a bottle emanates is often a desert island or boat lost at sea, but in any case the point of origin (this also becomes murky) is as important, as where the bottle lands and is retrieved. The endeavour of throwing a messaged bottle into the sea is reliant upon indeterminate means, the ocean currents and the property of sealed glass to float (above and below the water surface) even in the most inclement weather conditions. The destination and reception of the message in a bottle figures in the calculation of time and distance, direction, weather events, the message floats as it were through time and space to become re-placed. What does such a bottle made of glass learn from the open seas in transit? The earliest record is attributed to Aristotle's favourite pupil Theophrastus, who used messages in a bottle to prove the currents of the Atlantic flowed into the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar. This method was consequently followed by Benjamin Franklin's study of the the Atlantic currents off the West Coast of the Americas (Penry 2007: 4). It is a method still used by marine science students learning about currents. It is also used by astrophysicists.

The space program NASA at Cape Canaveral, Florida USA, has sent several interstellar 'message in a bottle' spacecrafts, Pioneer 10 and Pioneer 11 equipped with the Pioneer Plaque, depicting a space map with directions to locate earth in the Solar System (a map accompanied suggestively by a naive and awkward representation of white male and female nudity). The Voyager Mission hurtling through space has an even more elaborate message in a bottle. The Voyager Golden Records (gold-plated, copper discs with sophisticated recordings of life on earth) attempt to communicate with other life forms and offer an invitation to locate earth. The Voyager mission and launch in 1977 comprises two spacecraft heading into space in opposite directions, said to be the widest point between human objects. The likelihood of these attempts succeeding, though questionable, does not alter the value of the Voyager Golden Records, as peculiar time capsules of everyday life. The Voyager Mission has also become the subject and speculation of several science fiction plots. The return or reception of the message in a bottle stories are where the details are matched, from one time to another and from one place to another. These objects are ordinary and extraordinary snapshots from a time and place, date marked, as it were, and storied by the sender and receiver.

A message in a bottle holds long association with the sea, contingent forms of communication, literature and art. In the spirit of the field inquiry tradition, which follows the impulse to just pick something up and wonder, the glass bottle as a found object, artefact, piece, collectable, memento, reminder of time and place, offers modest pleasures. However, finding a message in a bottle adds another dimension. For some, the discovery of the message is often associated with reward. Interestingly, the finder holds a petrified piece of history from the annals of everyday life. The reward comes from an interest such messages hold in their context, circumstances, surrounds. Not uncommon for stories to tell of tragic circumstances, heroics, truncated memoirs, outpourings of love and regret, even the search for a pen friend or email buddy.

Some messages in a bottle just outline vital instructions to the whereabouts of the sender and how they might be helped. Some tell of the final demise of expeditions or journeys, as a clue for those who may come looking, a final message to loved ones, a fleeting record. One such instance concerned Chunosoke Mastuyama, a Japanese seaman stranded in 1784 with forty-four companions on a small Pacific Ocean atoll, after being shipwrecked. As Mastuyama witnessed his companions' die of starvation, and recognising his own fate, he decided to carve the details of their tragedy on a piece of wood, placed it in a bottle and threw it in the ocean. In 1935, one hundred and fifty years later, the bottled message washed up on the beach of Hiraturemura, Mastuyama's village birthplace. The mystery and wonder surrounding such events only seems to heighten the intrigue of such a practice. The value of the message in a bottle was understood by Queen Elizabeth I, when at war with Spain, who received news from the fleet in this manner. Ordering that a position be made for the 'Uncorker of Ocean Bottles' and anyone else opening the official bottles be punished by death. The idea of throwing your hopes on the contingency of a glass bottle at sea is compelling. Columbus on his return to Spain from the New World famously threw a sealed wooden cask to sea with a report of his discoveries, fearing for his life in the midst of a storm at sea. Unfortunately Columbus survived and the cask was never found (BBC, 2010).



*Self portrait, looking glass and camera at hand.* Photo: Kim Satchell

### *castaway*

To be a castaway means that someone is being cast adrift, shipwrecked or has become an object thrown away by someone. The shipwrecked person and the rejected thing have plenty in common, as do all living organisms in the environment. The quintessential castaways, however, are found in the figure of the pirate and their relationships to empire, the ocean, island geography and the coastal remains. Western constructs of piracy have been romanticised extensively, while the harsh realities and the political implications of choosing a position outside the law deserves critical attention, not just in relation to pirates but also for those who are placed outside the law and the protection of justice without choice (Taussig 2004:183, Maréchaux 2009:48, Bey 1985). Refugees and asylum seekers are increasingly positioned this way with migration and displacement at unprecedented levels and continuing to increase unabated. These people have been treated like useless objects and are consequently disregarded by those who throw them away (as inconsequential). They will become a more defining sign of the anthropocene than climate change. To conflate someone cast adrift and something thrown away is easy, when you think of each piece of discarded plastic as a piece of yourself, thrown away after use, which is still out there somewhere, possibly drifting and breaking down. Like historical records.

There are, of course, a number of actual cases of pirates and castaways that are lost and later rescued. The stories resonate with the deep existential questions that are often lost in the oceans of contemporary economies. They are stories of survival by self-reliance and dependence to a large degree on one's immediate surroundings, experiences with which the populations of developed economies are no longer familiar. In some ways the reality and narrative of paring back to necessity illuminates the reliance interdependent human relations have upon the exploitation of place, which many people have become too civilised or domesticated to accept. In these stories of castaways, there are profound implications for the quality of life, the quality of relations and the quality of the environment. They contradict the master narratives of Western societies:

The Master Narrative of the US proclaims that there were no 'Indians' in the country, simply wilderness. Then, that the 'Indians' were savages in need of the US. Then, that the 'Indians' all died, unfortunately. Then, that the 'Indians' today are (a) basically happy with the situation, and (b) not the real 'Indians'. (Jimmie Durham 2002:106)

Alexander Selkirk was a privateer pirate and castaway or, more aptly, a maroon, who actually requested to go ashore because of the condition of the ship, the Cinque Ports' rotting and leaking hull. While he thought fellow crew might join him, he was mistaken and put ashore alone, pleading finally to return to the boat, but it was too late and he was left marooned. The Cinque Ports sailed away only to sink and confirm Selkirk's suspicions, sealing the fate of all hands to a watery grave or a Spanish Gaol. Selkirk's real life story became the inspiration for *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe (a subject of speculation since publication). Alexander's travel adventures began when he changed his name from Selcraig to Selkirk, an act of defiance against the place of his birth, a conservative fishing village. This defiance probably intended as a performance of breaking free of the elders of his home town, when he put out to sea (Leslie 1988: 65).

The island and the site at Aguas Buenas, or Mas a Tierra, in the Chilean Juan Fernandez Archipelago, is a small puzzle piece, where pirate, maritime and geological histories continue to play out. On February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010, a 5m tsunami struck Aguas Buenas with a wall of water, as a result of the spasm of earthquakes on the mainland, one of a series of seismic shifts in the area that occur from time to time (Villagomez 2010: 1). The whole area has a rich archaeological history that continues to be renewed by on-going field investigation of all sorts. Deciphering the everyday life of Selkirk the castaway, at the actual campsite of his now legendary island survival experience, is one of many expeditions to Robinson Crusoe Island, including the search for all kinds of treasure, real and imagined. There are two of the Selkirk relics in the Scottish National Museum, a mug he may have carved himself and a sea chest. Another Selkirk relic of interest is the metal remains of a compass divider, which metallurgical testing ascertained as coming from Cornwall (Nakamura 2005: 1). The researchers picked up the trace of Selkirk in the metallurgical thumbprint of one of his possessions.

The character for Friday in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is said to have been inspired by a Miskito Indian named Will. He also spent time upon the famed Robinson Crusoe Island but, unlike this celebrated novel's version, twenty-three years before Selkirk-Crusoe. Indian Will was abandoned at Mas a Tierra with the Buccaneer, adventurer and scholar William Dampier in command, who also had a hand in the Selkirk story and whose writing provided Defoe with food for thought. The Miskito hunters were often hired aboard European ships for their hunting skills and expertise in the wild. They mixed and traded with pirates, as a

means of cultural exchange and survival, repelling the incursions of the Spanish in the early period of contact. Miskito still live a fiercely independent life in their formidable homeland on the Mosquito Coast, Nicaragua, jealously guarding their close ties with the jungle and the ocean. While Indian Will went ashore hunting and searching for supplies, an enemy ship approaching the island meant Dampier's ship had to haul anchor and sail without notice. Indian Will, armed only with a knife and musket, had no trouble living on this island for four years, before Dampier returned with another ship to secure his recovery. Unlike Selkirk, whose island experience revolved around learning the lost skills for surviving in the wild, Miskito Will's remarkable feat of endurance was exaggerated yet further when, after four years in isolation, when he prepared a meal of meat and vegetables for the occasion of his return to the ship's crew (Leslie 1988: 58).

The quirky aspect of the castaway story, which is also instructive, concerns the possessions they have in the situation. The list of possessions reads with an uncanniness evoked by the life of objects. A rough list of Selkirk's possessions reads as follows: navigational equipment, charts, cooking pot, Bible, tobacco, flask of rum, clothes, a knife, a musket and a pound of powder, a small supply of marmalade and cheese. In sharp contrast to Defoe's character whose list of supplies and equipment is voluminous. These items removed from their everyday context and placed in a survival situation, removed from civil society, take on the magic, awe and dread; they should stir, but so often lose in everyday life (Leslie 1988: 62, 74).

Henry David Thoreau made a list of his belongings and meagre costs at Walden to demonstrate the possibility of living apart and as a part of something else. As Lisa Robertson (2003: 178) says, '[e]ach shack dweller is an economist who thrives on the currency of the minimum, the currency of detritus'. She goes on to mention the importance of the things at hand and what they can do. These are objects to hold onto and revere for whatever reason you find worthy of their affection. For people at sea in cramped quarters depending on your station and daring, these personal objects take on significance. Your personal effects become important in more ways than one. For me, these are books, surfboards (plastic), furniture, things I have found bought, and some pictures, clothes, personal records and effects. How much space do you need and how mobile are you? These questions are conditional upon your existence, the things you possess, and what possesses you. How many things do you need to live as a castaway in a sea of plastic, already possessed by so many things yourself?

To be marooned in the pirate imagination is to be abandoned, they called this marooning. These maroons are jokingly said to have been made the general of the island. Although this abandonment is not without hope, the ultimate challenge is to survive by your wits and skills until the next ship comes in. Although considered a punishment, this also offered a test of mettle. There are those unassuming in their freedom, there are those acting in their freedom and there are those who still wonder what freedom might be like.

Apsley Cherry-Garrard (1997) born Aspley Geogre Benet Cherry, was a survivor of the Terra Nova Expedition to the Antarctica 1910-1913, the story of which became a published work 'The Worst Journey in the World', a title suggested by Apsley's neighbour George Bernard Shaw. He inherited vast estates for his father at the behest of his Aunt's will (this required the name change and which was duly obeyed). Driven by the stories of his father's achievements and a desire to live up to them, the young man's visit to his uncle proved to be a turning point. Aspley received his opportunity to join with Antarctic Explorer Robert Falcon Scott, as a volunteer, when they met at Aspley's Uncle Reginald Smith's place at

Cortachy. This fateful decision thrust Aspley into a spectacular misadventure and resulted in the acclaimed classic, which is hailed as a true life adventure story. Aspley suffered various maladies as a result as of his numerous ordeals. The writing of the story and writing more broadly he found therapeutic like a remedy for the malady. True life adventure or not, writing, words and the material circumstances they evoke are intimately connected.

Writing may act like the remedy for the complexity and contradictions of life. If, however, there is a talking cure, as some therapies suggest, then writing might just be the malady for the remedy. The talking somehow enables a venting and forgetting, a return to normality or the status quo. The well-adapted social animal little understands what price domestication costs and gets disenchantment thrown in for the ease of convenience (and no less trouble). Some writing is patterned by the shape of forgetting, leaving the remains in the imagination, memory and the contingency of communication (Benjamin 1992: 201). The messages in bottles you send yourself from the contemplative shores of personal islands, shacks and caves are bound to the circumstances of everyday life. You send the message beyond yourself and your ability to know, to whoever may open and consider its contents. Of course, turning aside to think and compose your thoughts offers a reward in itself. Even a Captain's log (the diary), a journal or list of materials and possessions, has a sense of enchantment bound up in the will to live, the day to day events and the art of living, the remains of lived experience.

In the Selkirk story there are suggestions that at one time, many years later, after rescue and return to his birth place, he built for himself a cave on his parent's property in Lago. The cave is supposed to have been for him, a refuge and a reminder of the life of solitude. The cave offered a halfway point or in-between place where he could compose himself. There is no list of the items he had in the cave. Dwellings, homes, refuges, boats and shelters are in-between places, where people might practice to expand their ecological sensibility and sense of place, as a return to a way of living less dependent upon the human things and more dependent upon the non-human things. This is a shift in consciousness made manifest in material living circumstances, directing everyday practice toward a performance more attuned to the surrounds. The performance of such a return by anyone, as a form of ethical instruction, deserves attention to provoke thought and action.

Playing house goes to the hearth of our existence. Making home has become a planetary question of consequence for humans. The world dominated by people and particularly those people who have acted as though this planet belonged to them exclusively, as an item of possession, like a throne, kingdom, empire, glorified house and garden but yet with a dump, have destined life on earth to one of survival against the odds. This is strangely set against the notion of the Anthropocene, the end of humanity by extinction future scenario, as a hypothesis and as a deductive fact. For the human disorder does not understand the value or dependency of the planet, as a home for diverse living organism and eco-systems. We need to fashion a theory that would be as concise as haiku and be as complex a philosophy as the questions demand, expressly for a present and future generation to consider as a message in a bottle.



*Satch surfing Sumbawa. Photo Mamut*

For a castaway in a sea of plastic, paddling against the tide is a difficult task and any sense of achievement must derive from staying afloat. For me, the World's Worst Journey (no disrespect to Aspley Cherry Garrard or the hardship and tragedy his story details), is the journey into the plastic. The Voyage across the North Pacific subtropical gyre, undertaken by Charles Moore on the return journey home to Long Beach California, after competing in the 'Transpac', a race from Los Angeles to Hawaii, must rank as one of the most significant discoveries of maritime history and inaugurates a palpable sense of pathos. Having decided to take a straight course on the return leg, through the gyre, Moore encountered the vastness of a plastic soup the size of Texas. The actual scale of this soup is hard to estimate both because of the size and the unknown depth of the mass of plastic strewn through the ocean. But estimates have grown since they were first made and the size of this garbage dump is supposed to be the size of the USA and continuing to grow rapidly (Trueman 2008: 1). To discover this catastrophe and to report of a phenomenon of such dire consequence would have been traumatic and difficult. In Moore's case, life changing, he has become a tireless activist and ocean advocate. The focus currently also highlights the gravity of the situation. Talk is of trying to arrest the growth of the garbage patch (before any consideration of a solution to remove the plastic). This means scaling back upon the consumption and use of plastic in whatever manner possible, particularly taking measures to avoid plastic entering the ocean by any means (Moore 2003: 5).

The Worst Journey in the World is the journey taken by plastic. Entering the ocean from a myriad of points of departure and then wending a way into the currents and flows that collectively become the great ocean gyres. This journey continues into a plastic soup simmering with toxins while photodegrading into miniscule pieces and fragments that finally become indigestible in the food chain. The horror of this is graphically displayed in the skeletal remains of wildlife that have swallowed this toxic brew and succumbed to the

death dealing morsels of plastic afterlife. This is a journey begun in the twentieth century, whose implications and destination are now only becoming apparent. This message in a bottle is for you. Pay attention to THIS.

*THIS: Message in a bottle to Jimmie Durham*

THIS imprinted upon its surface. THIS BOTTLE MAY BE RECYCLED, this piece of glass, This phenomenon and the environmental threat. This presents some of the largest and most relevant questions. This microcosm of glass might just be a pithy philosophy? THIS place and what it means to be a castaway in a sea of discarded plastic, this also becomes murky. This method was consequently followed, this is not reward enough, this manner, this way with migration and displacement. This seems to be something all people face in their own time, this daring, courageous and unflinching woman. This was, this stirs. This makes up the vast hoards of people, groups, their claims and encounters with place, this respect. This defiance probably intended as a performance, this celebrated novel's version, this island, this marooning, this possibility of abandonment is not without hope, this restores the independent will or hitherto imagined autonomy on different terms, this offered a test of mettle. This experience of the more-human condition, this required the name change and which was duly obeyed. This fateful decision. This becoming a consciousness shift manifest in material living circumstances. This planet belonged to them exclusively. This strangely set against the notion of the anthropocene, this mistake must be redressed. This suggests, this garbage, this catastrophe. This means scaling back upon the consumption and use of plastic in whatever manner possible, this toxic brew, this journey continues into a plastic soup, this friend. This message, is more than just THIS.

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a drum of hazardou

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