

“Waste Not, Want Not”
by May Cotton
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The denizens in my mind / take me back in time
a clear line of sight / deep into the roots of light
setting these dark images in line
waste not, want not

I am being flooded with images. They come from everywhere—from my vague awareness of ancient history through to critical influences in my own life—the Farm Depression into which my mother was born, the Great Depression by which both of my parents’ lives were shaped, and then in my childhood 11 years of Girl Scouting balanced by the lessons of Christian Stewardship. These are the sources of my abhorrence of litter, of recyclables in a garbage can, of wasted food on a plate. From deep within, I cannot abide waste of any kind, and looking at it so closely makes me tremble.

Better to look back with tenderness on the scraps of fabric we saved for the quilts we never made. Instead they went into bags to be passed on to others who did make quilts. When our clothes became too ragged to wear, the buttons were cut off and threaded together—an established set to be added to a new garment later on. The old garment went into the rag bag. Soft cotton undershirts made great dusting clothes, but the stiff dress shirts went to the garage to soak up oil after they began to fray and their buttons had been relegated to the notions box. The darning egg gathers dust in the closet, a novelty now used to illustrate a story. These days the holey socks go to a textile drive supporting a favorite charity.

In young adulthood, there was no dog to eat the table scraps, so I took to freezing them until I had enough to make a soup. After several failures, I saved only the vegetables and meat, but still the soups I made were nasty. Eventually I stopped making soup altogether and now save the scraps for tiny servings at future meals. I love having a friend with several dogs who will gladly enjoy the many bones that come from our quarter of beef. The dogs don’t mind that I’ve cooked them to pieces first; they think the bones are first rate.

Even though it sometimes becomes tedious (and in the winter, smelly, with only a monthly pickup) it feels so right to peel my vegetables into a container to save them for compost to add to the green waste. Yesterday when the Waste Management guys came around for their various collections, they each found a bag of fresh cookies on top of the containers. I got a wave from all three. Surely these men who carry off my recycling, my trash, and my green waste deserve a sweet treat now and then. I am so very grateful for their place in the system that allows me to feel better about the things I throw away. One of the joys of living in Spokane is having our trash burned in the Waste to Energy system which generates electricity from garbage.

Another joy of living in Spokane is seeing old cars reclaimed from the scrap yard to roll

in colorful rows to their classic gatherings. My father would have enjoyed these unplanned parades. We used to see rusted hulks littering the hillsides back in Wyoming, but gradually they've disappeared, towed into the garages of hobbyists. Only the inaccessible shells of ancient giants remain, lurking above the rapids in which their drivers surely died.

Looking deeply, I cast my thoughts upon what I saw as the utter rape of pristine land in the Idaho desert by men with machines. I refer to the type of violence that shows no concern whatsoever for the victim of the ravaging. A victim of rape is not the only victim. Everyone the victim loves is also victimized; until the victim heals, the resulting PTSD will adversely affect everyone the victim comes into contact with, whether either of them realizes it or not.

I have expressed this in terms of human victims, but it is much the same with the Earth. If you rip out too many of her trees, the mountainside will fall. If you pump too much waste water into her depths, she will reward you with earthquakes. If you pollute her atmosphere, she will make it very hard for you—and everyone else—to breathe. We do not own this planet. We are guests upon it, and we are only just beginning to see what our collective bad behavior has wrought.

Perhaps God really did command people to “go forth and multiply,” but someone forgot to record the rest of the instruction, which would have been for us to use the brains we were given to know when to stop! We seem to have forgotten that the technology we've created does not make us God. It does not give us the power to fix what we have already destroyed.