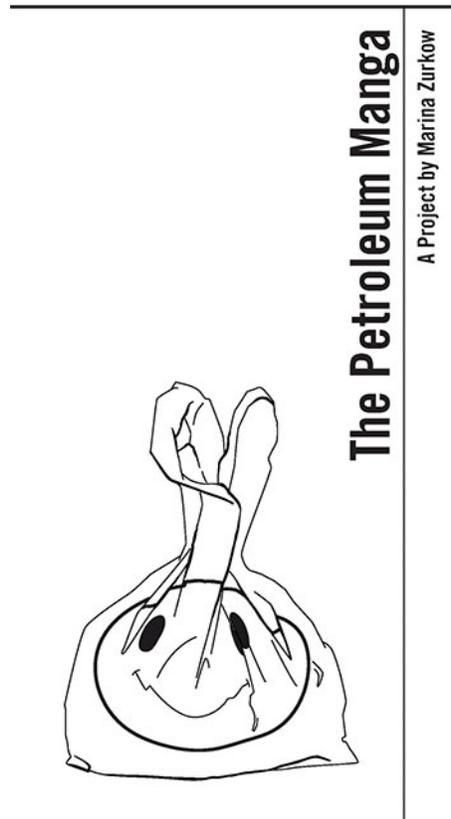




Marina Zurkow's 'The Petroleum Manga'

Reviewed by Michael McLane



THE PETROLEUM MANGA
EDITED BY MARINA ZURKOW

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Have a Nice Anthropocene: Nurdles, God Particles and Petroleum Manga

Hundreds of literary anthologies are published every year, and there are nearly as many themes and criteria for inclusion in these publications—ethnicity, language, age, geography, etc.—as there are anthologies. A catalog of petrochemicals assessed and personalized by nearly three dozen writers might seem like an unlikely theme to center a collection around, but this is exactly what Marina Zurkow curates in her unnerving and eerily charming project, *The Petroleum Manga*.

Petrochemicals are an all-inclusive theme, in that no one on the planet can escape the results of the plastic age. Be it a floating mass of plastic detritus in the Pacific Ocean that's the size of Texas and growing, petrochemical based riot gear used to suppress dissent around the world, or cancer clusters erupting near anywhere petrochemicals are processed, we have literally off-gassed ourselves into that new epoch called the Anthropocene. This has all been done in service of cell phone cases and plastic bags, Glocks and harp strings, Vaseline and gas masks, all of which are lovingly miniaturized or aggrandized throughout the book via Zurkow's own illustrations.

Petroleum Manga features an eclectic collection of contributors, from novelists like Lydia Millet to "object-oriented" ontologist Timothy Morton to experimental writers like Michael Mejia. This diversity is all the more effective when discipline and genre are taken into account; the book's passages alternate between poetry, fiction, essay, history, philosophy, and chemistry. The selections are prescriptive one moment, speculative the next. And the lyric is given ample room to operate. All contributions are grouped in sections according to the chemical used to create the object(s) at the center of the work—Acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) (used in face masks and combs), nylon polymer (guns and umbrellas), anhydrous ammonia (fertilizer and meth), and so on.

From the book's opening passages, it is clear that hydrocarbons are muses, familiars, and demons to be exorcised all at once. Duncan Murrell's forward begins:

What does a petrochemical want?

This is the animating question we hope to raise here, although by "animating" we don't mean to

suggest that a hydrocarbon could possess the qualities of thought and desire we typically think of as being some characteristic of the human.

We hardly notice the plastics and the dyes that dominate our physical world every day. We neither appreciate their beauty nor confront their danger...

Though they may not possess the qualities of thought, these chemicals are certainly animated, both in terms of their appearing in a manga context and in the sense that they move, disperse, and act upon the writers who chronicle them. Plastics are tricksters—agile, shapeshifting, and ultimately completely indifferent to their creators after their creation, as Hali Felt writes in *My Jams*:

...Those layers fuse together into whatever their creator wants them to be. A phone case, brass knuckles, a combination of the two: a weapon both medieval and ultra-modern, an infinitely customizable weapon of brute force. When you create and use those plastic knuckles, fists will fly, bones will be fractured, and bruises will spill out across the skin. There will be the body before the fight, and the body after.

Stark, lyric, and brutally beautiful, this passage condenses two notions that are revisited many times throughout the text—plastic as an "infinitely customizable weapon" and the notion of the body before and after. This latter idea acts metonymically for the world at large: the world before and after plastics and the world before and after humans. In *Industry*, Melissa Kwasny's description of working in a plastics factory as a teenager jumps headlong into the speculative, shifting from the literal effects of the work on the body to a philosophical finale that explicates the binary of mortal bodies and immortal plastics:

Shame at not understanding until later. In balloons: what the sea says. What the landfill says.

Shame at our bigness, ugliness, now age. Shame at our shameless grab for attention. That we must stand taller. That we can forget names. That we are increasingly left to our own devices. Overrounding the corners, over-praised. Where is the life within this one once we've erased it? When we think of ourselves in the future tense, already gone? God-particles, thus. Almost eternal.

The convenience and the good that plastics provide human lives is indisputable, and the collection does not try to look away from this fact. The conflicts and binaries noted above become all the more complex when writers explore the use of petrochemicals in the medical industry. From medications to bandages to prostheses, the role of plastic in medicine is vast. Nowhere is this problematic point driven home more poignantly than in Nicole Walker's *IV Bags*, which details her daughter fighting for her life:

If it's true that we are held up by nothing but neutrinos falling down on us from the future from which they emerged, than the IV bag holding you up, today, my daughter, is the sign of that black hole collapsing. Oh the substance that drips through tubes into you. Let it be more matter than anti. Let it be more light than darkness. Let it be more quantum than gravity. Gravity will only take you down and this IV bag will help you rise up. I would give anything for you to rise.

For this reader, this is one the most critical junctures in the text. It is the place where the desire and the love of an individual comes most into conflict with the ability of petrochemicals to save a single life, at the potential cost of many more. At that moment, environmental social justice, global warming, and binaries fall apart, and we are left with a singularly intimate, rending moment that no didacticism can allow us to escape. These moments are not rare in Zurkow's project.

In the midst of continuing climate change denial and widespread eco-apathy, the field of environmental humanities is gaining increasing traction worldwide. The interdisciplinary focus of such studies is made largely in service of finding new ways to parse and personalize the scientific data that so often overwhelms the public. At the heart of this process is story, the ability to highlight environmental threats and crises as local and personal, down to the individual body. Though this kind of literature has a long legacy, from Rachel Carson to Terry Tempest Williams to Sandra Steingraber, it is all too often pigeonholed as "nature writing," and marketed as such. Such labels have become reductive and alienating. The *Petroleum Manga* simultaneously embraces this interdisciplinarity, both in the writers it includes and its format, and rejects the narrow thinking of marketers and genre in favor of a larger ecology of literature. Its catalog of doe-eyed dolls, toys, and disembodied accessories (from condoms to eyelashes to bras), alongside accoutrements of the police state and the military-industrial complex, serves to not only highlight the agility of simple illustration, but to drive home the ubiquity of plastics and petrochemical derivatives in our lives, and how we've made a wilderness of them that is far more dangerous and far more enduring than the spaces their creation and use are slowly undoing. The plastic shadow of humans will exist long after we are gone, a ghost more tangible than the body it once inhabited. As Timothy Morton writes in his piece *Plexiglass Chair*, which floats across two pages like a lingering dialogue above an illustration of two abandoned chairs:

*—After humans have become extinct, there will be clusters
of chairs*

—There are always more chairs than people in a space.

—Design 101 classes teach you to design a chair

—*Chairs shorten human life.*

—*Humans have become chair vectors.*