

## Sea Shells by the Seashore

Sea shells by the sea shore  
    in our home endothermically warm  
Sea shells by the sea shore  
    home to all that code the day we were born.

The twilight cloudstream of orange and red streaks the horizon above the bay on the gulf coast of an immense sea. Imagine a toddler is lifting pails of wet sand from ankle deep water. The child takes each pail and dumps it out on a large grey rock, then scoops up water and washes the sand off. This has been going on for over an hour.

On that rock is collected an impressive array of shells. The child cannot speak well yet and occasionally says, “Doo dat. Dat dit,” pointing to the shells.

The child is watched by loving parents.

The names of the shells the child collects might be Rock Shell, Top Shell, Limpet Shell, Bubble Shell, and Scallop Shell. The names could be Buttercup, Turnip Whelk, Rose Petal Tellin, Baby Bonnet, Violet Snail, Turkey Wing, Callico Scallop, Glassy Teardrop, Sunray Shell. All those shells with all those names lain upon the rock.

They are ready to be observed: their growth rate, whorl, apex, aperture, mass. The math of the shells and the Latin of their proper names. “Doot dat. Dat dit dit.” The child says pointing. “Deet!”

Some shells are less than half an inch across, and others are a handsbreath. Their

colors vary as well: from deep brown to the pink of smooth flesh. Some are the spiral shell of snails; others the ridged fans of scallops. Most are chipped and empty. A few hold hermit crab squatters. Not one is occupied by the original owner.

The child arranges these forms on the rock, fascinated. What compels the child's fascination? Is there a recognition of kinship to the sea creatures? Is it a dawning awareness of the body's enclosure that lights the child's play?

A dutiful zoologist would appreciate the child's activity: organizing life into categories of form.

Zoologists use taxonomy to arrange shells, a system of nesting sets that codify all living things. There are seven divisions in the classic taxonomic systems, from the most general (Kingdom) to the most specific (Species). Biology students use a mnemonic to remember the number and order of the divisions--Kings Play Chess On Fine Green Sand--Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species.

There are five Kingdoms. Humans share the kingdom Animalia with seashells. We share a common ancestor: Mastigophora, a unicellular creature with a nucleus--a thin membraneous shell enclosing the shell's code. We differ from shell creatures in the next broadest category, the Phylum. Seashells are from the Phylum Mollusca. Four classes compose Mollusca--one class for snails and slugs, one for chitons, one for clams, oysters and scallops, and one for cephalopods like octopi, squid, and nautili. Members of Mollusca are higher invertebrates--sophisticated, but lacking a central nerve cord.

Humans are from the Phylum Chordata. We are vertebrates; we have a nerve cord. Our spine provides structure and serves as the conduit for the transmission of nerve signals. It allowed time to raise us vertically, to stack layers of cell upon layers of cell, and to keep all those cells in communication--from head to toe. Standing up, we can bear the weight of our creaturliness and measure its expanse as the world we're living in. An aching back tells us that gravity takes its toll, but that's the price of growing up.

The toddler has no such aches and knows no such divisions. Yet some deep connection sends the child to the rock again and again with more specimens.

When I was a little older than that child, I was running around the living room and banged hard into a shelf on the top of which set a large pink conch that my mother had found on a beach in Mexico. The apex of the shell--the nascent mollusc's early homes--made a direct, driving hit on top of my noggin. As with all scalp cuts, the bleeding was profuse and I crumbled to the floor in pain and confusion.

My mother bandaged my wound, wrapped me in a blanket and carried me to bed. As she lay with me, folding me in her warm, fragrant love, I understood what home was. Lying there in security and peace, thinking about the shell that pierced me, feeling the wonder of my mother, I intuited the womb, that first home.

When Venus is born on the waves, Botticelli portrays her carried to shore by the vessel of a bivalve shell. Venus is born in the womb of the sea, just as our ancient ancestor, Mastigophora was. She rides on the smooth feminine curves of a shell.

A mollusc from the cephalopod family, the Paper Nautilus, is a symbol of the maternal in a poem by Marianne Moore, "Paper Nautilus." She writes of the mollusc's thin shell in which its young develop. The eight arms of the Nautilus cradle this shell, "as if they knew love/is the only fortress/strong enough to trust to." That huge predatory conch taught me about the easy breach of the body; from my injury I sensed the fortress of my mother's love.

As I grew, religious instruction taught me a new paradigm of home--we are from heaven and will return to our true home after our earthly pilgrimage is finished. Though taught an intellectual theology, spared too much of the Augustinian stricture, "Don't enjoy life; use it to get to heaven," the allegory of the fall told me we are NOT home, and errancy is a condition of our exile. But, I would think to myself, THIS is compelling, how can we not belong here?

William Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" answers this question in Platonic terms. In heaven, before we were born, we had complete knowledge of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. As we grow, we forget divine knowledge and become creatures of social habit and petty purpose, as if our "whole vocation/were endless imitation." What we experience on earth (shadows on a wall) is either mistaken for the Good, True, and Beautiful, or reveals the deficit of our experience. We live incompletely in an apparitional world.

When our first son was just a few days old, my mother-in-law, a scholar and poet, put her hand on his head and quoted "Intimations of Immortality":

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The soul that rises with us, our life's star,

Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar:

Not in entire forgetfulness,

And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God who is our home.

Those words, so familiar from years of teaching literature, stopped my breath. They were perfectly, beautifully apt; they were also disturbing.

It was a disturbance akin to the one I felt during my son's birth.

My wife was undertaking her monumental struggle and I was trying to help. We walked the hospital grounds together. When the contractions came more quickly, we walked the hallways of the labor and delivery floor. Outside, I tried to be calm. Inside, I was in geologic tumult. A chasm was struck within me.

I felt an ontological awe at this fissure. The chasm, as we neared the moment of birth, became wider and steeper. It was awful and threatened to immobilize me, reduce

me to dreadful, ecstatic, paralysis. My wife struggled there, where her body was being opened to make room for another consciousness. It was as if the veil of the divine was lifted and “waarrrrrrrrrrhhhhhhhhhh!” out slipped a bloody, squinting, purple child, crying, trailing clouds of glory.

“From God who is our home,” my mother-in-law reminded. Here we were, in the home we had recently bought, counting on his arrival. Yet, he wasn’t really ours; he had left his home to be with us. We were his “homely nurses”; he was our foster-child.

Biologically, he was a unique combination of my wife and my chromosomes, but the programming was shareware, and old Mastigophora had a hand in its code. Our son was the expression of a nearly four billion year old creative drive, which itself extends from an 11 billion year old drive that gave us a universe in which to raise our young. He was, as we were, book to the narrative that binds us in its telling--we’re the shell that holds the shell’s code. He belonged to us as much as we belonged to ourselves--less than we thought.

Wordsworth has it that our soul’s home is “afar.” Yet, this IS compelling. Maybe the Good, True and Beautiful are not transcendent (afar) but immanent (right here).

When the boy was passed to me and I held him, I chose immanence. The ontological gap closed and I found myself in the livingroom with a newborn, in the fortress of our home. The Good, the True, the Beautiful manifest. We brought home the proof of it. I would pass immanence to my son, the way my mother had passed it on to me.

There is a danger in holding the mother and child as such weighty symbols. Things change. My son is no longer an infant and I have little gnosis (but some praxis) of the force he emanates. Things die. My mother’s love embraces me from the past. Time breaches dwellings, bodies, memories. The self of the moment is never the same self twice.

The world manifests impermanence. We move into other people's homes and call them our own. And we're never completely comfortable anywhere. We dissect life in all its forms to see where we fit. When we see that we fit too well into the kingdom Animalia, we claim transcendent origin.

Looking skeptically at the present, we see solipsism in humans, predation in creatures, and entropy in the universe--fall for the many and death to us all!

Transcendence or immanence or neither/nor. It is and it is and it is. We come from somewhere, the transcendent. We live somewhere, the immanent. And we're not certain what either is.

In the sea, on the shore, or nowhere at all, the child lifts the pail. Perhaps the child is in a sentence. The child lifts a pail in the sentence and drops water on the rocks. Sea shells are arrayed there, haphazard and brilliant. They are artifacts of a complex accident that includes the child, the ocean and the sentence.

To see purpose beyond accident, Wordsworth writes, we have to see with our soul. Only the soul has worthy vision to speculate toward the essential:

Our souls have sight of that immortal sea  
Which brought us hither  
Can in a moment travel thither  
And see children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling everywhere.

Wordsworth sees the children on the shore--they have stepped out of the sea. But Wordsworth doesn't see the sea dwelling on the shore. The shoreline is impermanent. It changes in the present: the timelessness that is as we are. Immortality soaks the feet of the children as they sport right now.

One of the children is dumping pails of immortal seawater on rocks. The child could be my son or anyone's child, myself or anyone else, studying what immortality

leaves, as it will this body, shell to self and shelf to self's code.

It is good for the soul to holiday, with its mate, the body, at the immortal sea.

Simple directions and you don't need a map: its shore is everywhere we are.

We all have temporary homes on its coast. Kings play chess on fine green sand there.