

We are five on the beach: me, the young couple, the sister, and the child. She is the center of mass and attention. She tramps about in socks turned a sodden gray, points inquiringly at birds and rocks and sticks and demands their names in Portuguese and German. Every so often she squats carefully and comes up with a momentary memento, then discards it as the next shiny object catches her eye. The adults race ahead and call to her from afar, accept her gifts of wet sand and intertidal detritus, walk behind her and revel in her unfiltered id. "I never want her to lose this joy," says the mother.

I look at the latest offering in my hand. She has conferred it thoughtlessly, already fixated once more on the water-logged beach. The shell -- her shell -- our shell -- is bone-white, flawless, uniformly furrowed like a newly-planted field waiting for the summer rains. Is this a token of trust? A treasure to be safeguarded for a later date? A reminder of the fragility of life? All these half-shells were once whole, wedded by the life they protected within their embrace. Now they lie here gutted and forgotten. The one I hold in my hand is perfectly intact, but this is an accident of time; if it remains on the beach, it will lie in state, gently decomposing until a fateful footfall or tumbling stone splits it forever, each shard retaining a negative memory of that which made it complete. From here the process accelerates: water, wind, and sun will break down the pieces into so many grains of sand on this faceless shore. Perhaps a lucky few will be plucked by sentimental hands and lie in a jar of pebbles as decoration for a vacation rental or collect coins and dust on a dresser in a far-flung place where shells are exotic rather than kitsch.

But how many shells are lucky enough to enjoy this fate of preservation, if it is indeed lucky? The natural order of things: a quickening of life in the primordial soup of the world, delicate growth, a moment of repose at maturity, and a slow decay into nothingness once more. What is gained by evading this final step for a few fleeting moments, your best days embalmed for future generations to desecrate and ignore? Jews say that you die twice: once when your body dies, and a second time when your name is uttered for the last time. But what of the corpse who lingers in the corner long after his identity has been lost to history? It is no matter. The shell in my hand, the shell in her hand, all the shells on all the beaches in all the high and low places, all our miniscule monuments to ourselves -- our homes, our achievements, our failures, our anonymous works of art that grow dim before they even leave our hearts -- all will wind up as part of this great lifeless mass on which we stand.

The girl walks between her parents, one tiny hand in each of theirs, the three of them huddled in a self-affirming way: "This shell shall endure." But what is optimism in the face of truth? If all goes well, she will outlive both of them, burying each in turn before joining them after a short while. When will she transform from pulpy flesh into something hard enough to weather the sands of time? Is it possible to grow tough in the cocoon of a parent's embrace? Or is it only when we are cast from the womb and are forced to breathe on our own that we become truly human?

The rising tide sneaks up on me; my feet are soaked beyond degree by the frigid January ocean. This, too, threatens the child, though in her ignorance she is perhaps better-equipped to grapple with it than we adults. She splashes through the foam, drenched to the knee, screeching ecstatically as if pained by the silly pleasure of being cold and wet and young. On the horizon, the sun bleaches the water until it is the same color as the sand, a formless expanse of life and death mingled at her feet.