

## SHELLS

*by Helen Gowan*

At dawn I walk at water's edge, feeling the gentle tug of ebbing sand as grain by grain it rolls back toward the sea. The tide is at its lowest. The storm far off the coast has roiled up the shells and now the littoral is specked with castoff shells, here a single cockle, there a treasure of them where the shape of the shore has funneled them to the bank. The sanderlings scatter before me, darting to the water's edge to poke out choice morsels with their slender beaks, retreating, darting seaward again endlessly, endlessly.

I am gathering shells. I lived by the sea for many years and refined my search so that I only stooped to pick up those that were unknown to me, those that looked perfect, or better than one I already had gathered. Now I live far from the sea and each time I visit I think it may be my last time. I gather old shells, the shattered remains of mollusks which spent their lives attached to a pier, or buried in the sand, or feeding in a marsh, and now their shells float, sink and float, are battered by waves, are cast upon the sand again and again until they are worn smooth, faded, shattered, just a reminder of what they once were.

I just guess at their identities. Here is a cockle, most common, small ones still perfect and colorful, large ones thick, heavy, inside old ivory, outside burnished ochre, burnt sienna. Half of an old white oyster, one that escaped being used for paths and road fill. This may be a giant Atlantic cockle, ribbed, inside a rosy tan. Here are the fragments of a sand dollar. These are knobbed whelks, one gray, one pinky-tan. The gray one is really old, its knobs almost worn smooth. The inside surfaces are shiny as a china plate. Here is the prize of the day, an inch long fragment of a banded tulip. My shell sheet says it grows to three inches long. I feel lucky to have spotted it.

I gather my shells and turn back toward the cottage. I will have to decide what shells I will pack in dirty socks to bring home, and which ones I will leave for the next beachcomber.

When I bring them home to Denver, I will arrange them on my bookshelf and shift them, dust them, sometimes wonder where I gathered them. How will anyone know, when they come to dispose of my outgrown possessions, how these shell fragments were gathered, how warm the water was, how hot the sun by mid-morning, what a joy it was to make a new discovery, how much it meant to me to stand there at the water's edge, looking far out to see dolphins, looking nearby to see my gray-haired children plunging again and again into the surf to catch the greatest waves. Are these the same children I dressed alike in red so that I could keep track of them as they frolicked in the shallow water? These children keep a solicitous eye on me now.

I am an old shell. I have lived my life sometimes tethered to a place, sometimes floating freely with the tide. I am ready for the shelf.