

## The Shell

When I picked it up from the sand  
the soft creature was long rinsed out.

A tiny, stubby spiral—thick, stark white—  
its opening a grudge; a curved slit.  
The whole thing was crusted over  
with sharp battlements.

Bristling. Perfectly intact.  
It seemed from all sides  
to move, as Michelangelo said sculpture must,  
with an *inner fury*

which contained me,  
locked my gaze  
from the surf's clamorous dazzle,  
the sippable blue lake of sky,  
the stretch of sand that held my companion  
walking slowly up ahead  
since it had been necessary to drop  
the subject we were discussing.

How long could such a small thing live?  
The shell weighed practically nothing,  
wind-rocked in my palm.

Our talk always circles away  
just in time from her terrible job,  
her unbearable husband.

What I admired was the commitment  
in accreting so slowly  
from its infinitesimal guts  
this aggressive petrification  
whose proportionately unwieldy size  
and weight even in seawater  
must have hampered its efforts  
to get around, gather nourishment.

Was this not the very embodiment of passion?  
Embodiment.

She had stopped and was waiting  
with a barely detectable smile.  
She and I had been friends a long time.  
I dropped the shell in my pocket  
where it would chafe my thigh on our walk back.  
But not before I thought about showing it to her,  
and explaining—I knew I would have to explain,  
and even then I knew she would have to be  
polite about not quite seeing—its appeal.

## Shoptalk

In the kind of overly successful deli  
that places tables too close together,  
sitting alone, waiting for my club sandwich  
with coleslaw at a table too small,  
the kind you used to like  
because our knees could touch,  
the photographer on my left one-ups  
another: *I've had 'em get divorced*  
*before I could get the pictures back to 'em.*  
Envisioning his lab with creaky old drawers  
he has to yank open, they're so jammed  
with unsellably smiling people,  
I think of the oak dresser you left me,  
with the bottom drawer that opens easily  
but won't shut once it does.  
I think of your last, Post-it smile,  
and of the years and years since you.  
Since you what?  
All I want is my damn sandwich.  
Touching absently the denim  
worn to nothing on my knee.

## Impromptu

First there was Jim, clamping to my long black hair  
that nine-pound Cleopatra wig  
with nylon bands and bobby pins.

Meanwhile I was on fire for Chad, who coached me  
a bit impatiently Tuesday nights  
on my Joan-of-Arc inflection.

Then Terence said I'd be perfect for the lounge-singer  
turned-whore, and as it turned out  
that was a fairly easy gig.

Max signed me on soon after, claiming I was a natural  
for Eternally Aggrieved Girl,  
which in hindsight hurts me deeply.

So by the time you followed me back to the green room  
to wait in the hallway—whistling!—  
for my scrubbed face to emerge,

naturally I was wary, waiting for the script  
you never bothered to come up with.  
It was damned awkward sitting there,

nothing but milkshakes between us. Maybe, I thought,  
you'd assumed I was the one with a script.  
Finally I decided to give Terence a call.

I didn't like the way you looked at me so steadily  
with your chin resting on one fist,  
as if the table were a table, the boards

a floor. Listening there as if you meant it,  
as if something I could say were true, and every  
moment from now on would be my cue.

## What Do You Want From Me?

I could have answered nothing, you arrogant idiot.  
Or shit. Either shit, you arrogant idiot,  
or nothing, you arrogant shit.  
Or nothing, said nothing.  
How about your credit cards?  
Your barber chair.  
Could have chuckled, made a moue.  
Woof.  
I could have said the question, ha,  
the question is you. What do *you*?  
Or without the ha.  
I could have gargled an *r*, not like Piaf  
but Waters. Not tidal or biblical,  
but Ethel. Ethel Waters.  
I could have said your heart,  
pitchfork at the ready.  
No, hands cupped.  
Clasped. And hope to die.  
Your hand, coat of arms, trombone.  
The brass one.  
I could have blown my nose  
with the noisy insouciance you had come to expect.  
I could have said *love*, duh. I could have said that.  
Better yet, be my brother.  
I could have said I want your brother,  
you have a brother?  
The shadow on your back  
of the new moon every night  
would have been good. But  
*company* I blurted, too little  
to seem true, and he was gone.