

Sand Dollar

by Maeve Brennan

She returned sand dollars to the sea, and it didn't feel like January, it just felt numb. She was clinging, rocking, unraveling upright - and it had never felt this cold in her little vessel, the one she had inhabited but wasn't quite home. Compact bones, they hugged her weak lungs and comfortable thighs and feet that they had told her would not last a lifetime - would not make her a mover, a dreamer. And she was pinkening, prickling, stiffening those bones that hold her, people told her they never noticed her stature, so she worked long to stand tall, release her arms from her chest to her sides, to stop averting eyes, to take up room in her vessel and the world. But all that was aching reversed sometimes, with a jolt, and a whisper. And she was small, smaller than ever, as her vision entered a familiar channel, lined with a panic and a suffocation of lost choices and missed chances and appreciation doused in ichorous longing. And she caught lots of things with ease, but the hardest thing was watching them hover out of reach and the acceptance of this unclosing distance. For it was hard, even when she knew herself too well, to know she had a damaged mind. And sometimes, the numbness in apathy was suddenly exaltation as everything became still.

She returns sand dollars to the sea; there are trees lining the tunnel and floor becomes a beach, palms and ones with leaves that crinkle as they fall, crinkle under the weight of bodies upon towels with feet arched like crescent moons to face the sun. And there are hills to her right, something out of a postcard: those dry, brushy hills, minus the Hollywood sign - she doesn't like them much. The tide is out, a couple of hours before noon, and so there's only a tiny strip of sand exposed - burning volcanic particles. She takes time to see each pattern below her soles. They slowly feed her soul: the horizontal repeating wounds with tree-like, vein-like interruptions, the abstract lines left by little creatures, little artists. It comes rushing in that the patterns she has seen in other peaceful places and other beautiful creations are essential imitations. Water is a regal blue that shifts, more green or white being spread across it by the sky - artistic license. Trickling, rushing, rhythms regulated by other beats: the beat of the city, the beat of her heart, the beat of footsteps. Music. There is only going and coming back here - everywhere, it seems. Warm wind on the temples, playful waves. One bird drifting, riding the wind. She lets her hair tickle her waist, her toes tickle the earth. Her dress is of linen. Fabrics make her calm, and patterns and letters, even messy. And she has a notebook she would hate to lose, but she doesn't mind a bit of grease or ocean salt or wear on the binding - she likes books to breathe. She picks up one shell that had been concealed by the fingers of the sea, released at that very moment or it wouldn't have been seen, it would be taken back. It is tiny and splayed: peach skin, a petal of a peony, a pitcher of cream. Pink, white, silver, yellow, orange, blue - these words are not enough. With shell in palm, then pocket, her mind slips back: there could be treasure underneath her feet, treasures in her life she could find or she could miss with every choice. Skills she might not master and people she won't meet, and it feels so empty, this life. But now, she knows what is

destructive and what is deliberate and finally remembers that she, only she is in control of this body. And she plants her toes in the volcanoes, the stones, the generations. Now, she finds a sand dollar, and it is alive and it has a purple sheen, stranded on the rippling beach. With a swift movement, without rumination, she knows what is right and throws it to the sea. It leaves an indent. It is alive. There's a slight smile, the best kind.

And she's cold again, but it's different this time. Numbness now warms, a little danger awakening. Sometimes that mind will forget what matters in the wonderment of other materials, she will never have it all but she must let it be. She is an infinite being in a finite world. She is small and there are things that will go on. Existential thoughts, that she was too pretentious to know are existential, are a little selfish now; it is vulnerable but veritable to know you are wrong. And she knows what it is like when people leave her, and she made them into just what she wanted them to be.

Now she knows she is small, only a component. But she seeks to find power in the fact that every choice is definite, is her own - some angry, and some delicate, and some both. She'll save wit for the ones she loves. And she hasn't read all she wants to, become masterful at much, but she is on her way.

She thinks:

Maybe there's something to be said for the half smiles and the wind, the fruits and cafés and salad dressing in a mason jar, for finding people who you can walk beside with your hand in the crook of their arm, like you did with your aunt one Sunday. For wit and affection and perplexity stirred in a pot of hot coffee, absorbed like frothy sunlight, for feeling alive in the night, invigorated by the deep blue. Sometimes, saggy couches hold the love of too many bodies to count, and you love each one, and sometimes your mum writes lists of songs just like you do and you feel lucky to look just like her. Sometimes you speak without memorization but with readiness, or you write on a plane and your mind is in love with the sky and you forgot there was something that was bigger than you that would always move in circles, that there were places where sunlight dappled the streets and paths and the brown eyes of a dog - and you could bask in the light and it would be passed, transferred. There's something to be said for lying on your side and listening to sounds that don't make you stiff anymore, they were controlled by people that you thought you knew and now become songs of everything you'll be. And the tunnel comes back, it comes back again, but when you are lonely, closed in and closed up you'll look up and see a blue spruce and you'll feel still. And you'll want to be there for those moments, you really will, please do. And the people, they will change, and some will go, and some will be gained, but there will only be more sunlight.

And maybe there's something to be said for looking up, looking down, looking all around. A gift, a brass pencil and a steady eye - she is outlined by the pink of the shells, the ones she held like butterfly wings after they were given to her by the sea. And now she is back where she thought she was, though somehow farther behind and miles ahead of her time. And she'll grasp for those moments, the still will come again. She'll feel so cold, so warm, she'll return sand dollars to the sea.