

Collecting Seashells

I

Dad and I walk along the shore of a beach that is too cold for visitors but fits perfectly on our list of free Sunday activities. He collects seashells while I pick up kelp, stuffing it into my plastic pail. At this age, I want to believe that if you hold the things that frighten you, they cannot scare you anymore; this is partly true. I pick up spiders and snakes and lit matches, but I will still scream that afternoon when I feel seaweed wrap around my leg. I will still fear the sea monsters, while going to look for them. At home, each room seems to be decorated with seashells and poetry books, competing for space. The books have claimed the furniture, the seashells hold soap bars beside the sinks. My father's house is soap and verse.

II

When my mum is pregnant, my dad tells her the story of Caitlin Thomas, wife of the poet Dylan. She was a memoirist, a traveler, and a fiercely passionate woman. The name is chosen when I surprise everyone by being a girl. Caitlin Thomas was also tempestuous, a borderline alcoholic, and allegedly threatened to throw herself off of a cliff after Dylan died. My mum is not overjoyed to hear the darker side of the story, but it changes nothing.

I am irrevocably Caitlin.

My grandparents in England also have seashells in their bathrooms and kitchen. They are made of glass and porcelain and clay and I am afraid to touch them. I don't want to break them because they're so pretty. I wonder if my dad thought about taking one of them with him when he followed his American girlfriend across the Atlantic.

III

Dylan and Caitlin's relationship began to break down when Dylan started taking international trips to perform readings of his books. On his last trip

without her, he went to New York and left her at home with their children and their house and perhaps the seashells in their bathroom. When he was admitted to the hospital in New York with pneumonia, Caitlin flew to America. She was so drunk and angry upon arriving that she was put into a straitjacket and committed to a psychiatric facility while she detoxed.

Caitlin: a name of Irish origin meaning an emotional and wholesome person with a strong belief in her own abilities.

The greatest story about Caitlin Thomas is that she threw herself into Dylan's grave at his funeral. She was known for her eccentricities and anything less would probably have been a disappointment. I have watched film of that day and she stays upright as long as the camera is on. She holds onto the arm of a friend, at one point swaying towards the grave, but remains standing. I cannot say what happens when the camera turns off. The newspaper that writes about the funeral will mention that she forgets to wear a traditional widow's hat. I wonder why that matters at all.

IV

I have never asked my dad for his inventory, but I do wonder what he brought with him across the ocean. When I was a child, each time we visited my grandparents, I would bring back something trivial. I would buy stuffed animals for fifty pence or toffee candies that we do not have here to add to my collection of "England Things." I spent every summer unsure if I was English enough to be English or American enough to be American, but certain that I needed something from both places to feel that I half belonged in either. My dad collects a version of the seashells from his childhood home. I wonder if Dylan was Caitlin's home. If, every time he left, she felt like a vagrant.

V

I have decided that when I grieve for my person, I will grieve so fiercely that I forget to wear *anything* to the funeral. Around my neck will be a string of seashells, woven together by kelp. I will carry a poetry book with me or two or three, having abducted them from the fireplace mantle. The procession will consist of sea monsters, in all shapes and sizes. My neck will smell of

soap and I will keep my arms free. I will not feed my grief with alcohol, nor will I wear a goddamn hat. I will mourn for my home, whoever they might be; uncensored, unashamed, truthfully. Like her. Like Caitlin.