

PATRICK ROSCOE

Shells

“**B**URY OR BOIL,” REPLIES Rogacion when Mitch asks our houseboy what to do with the shells. We’ve brought them home from the coast for our mother. They need to be rid of what’s starting to rot inside them before she arrives from the clinic in Canada in three weeks. It isn’t clear to MJ, Lily and me how long our mother’s going to stay; whether this time she might remain. Mitch wouldn’t answer when my sister asked. “She’ll be the old Ardis again,” he vowed in his jaunty way instead. Maybe then our father recalled how badly the same promise had been broken two years before. How it wasn’t either an old or a new version of our mother who haunted these Ngondo hills for several months. The muscles of that woman’s face would twist at the sight of us three children; a jolt, some powerful electric shock, made her twitch and stiffen if we approached too near. What happened once the rainy season began, how that got bad then worse, until she had to be sent back to Canada—suddenly, ahead of time, with a nurse. Mitch peers toward the fields spread below our cement-block house, as though sisal might conceal an elusive key to a difficult puzzle. Everything worth finding hides. My father’s eyes clear. Fingers snap to announce another of his famous inspirations. “Shells,” he exclaims.

Things went badly last time because we failed to welcome Ardis with presents, Mitch seems to suggest in the days leading up to the big shell-gathering expedition. Three years apart from us were sufficient to turn our mother into a member of some savage tribe that must be appeased by the right token. Or it isn’t the amount of time away from her family, grown to five years now, but where that exile has occurred, that makes Ardis a threat. As if Canada, not Tanzania, were the more dangerous, uncivilizing influence. Like any primitive, our mother would be simple as well as savage. Vulnerable to being tricked into swapping her most valuable possession for the cheapest trinket. It might as well be plastic combs that gains us what we want.

It's not enough to drive an hour to the coast and gather shells from some convenient Dar-es-Salaam shore. Commonplace conches might do for the damn Brits, but not for Ardis, not for our Cedar Bay girl. We can manage far better than that. Mitch claims to have extracted, from his most reliable source among the ancient men he likes to squat with in the village dust, the name of the best shelling spot in the Indian Ocean. An unspoiled island off shore from Kanduchi, known only to natives; a speck of land not on the map. Good old Christophe, the best shell man in the business, would take us out in his *ungalawa*. Such outriggers were navigating these waters long before the white man arrived. Thatch sails, palm-trunk pontoons: the crudest kind of handmade craft. An authentic African adventure all the way, another Robinson Crusoe experience for the whole gang to enjoy. "Don't you remember Lanzarote and Ios and Formentera?" our father wonders to his less than enthusiastic gang, showing us implements, resembling fireplace poker with bent ends, that will assist the imminent hunt for treasure. As if we ought to understand that every island encountered since we wandered away from Brale, British Columbia, has served as one more stepping stone in a plan whose secret purpose is to offer Ardis what she needs, what we don't have.

"You never find what you're looking for in plain sight," warns Mitch, when Lily and I bring him shells quickly gathered from the island's stony beach. We definitely won't run into any damn Brits here. An hour out from a shore now beyond view, this scrap of rock barely interrupts the ocean; it has no fresh water to drink, no bushes or trees for shelter. The sun is fierce by midmorning; already it has inflicted another of his headaches on MJ. A bad one, I can tell. My brother sits stiff as a wooden voodoo doll near to where the best shell man in the business has crawled into a slice of shade cast by his boat, after a vague wave to indicate where treasure waits. For once Mitch doesn't accuse MJ of being a stick in the mud; doesn't sulk because his oldest son won't participate in making a fantasy real. "Everything valuable always hides," Mitch reminds Lily and me again, brandishing his tire iron as though it were less a tool than a weapon drawn against some invisible enemy. Three birds—resembling oversize, prehistoric pelicans—circle patiently above. I don't know what these birds are called; nor the names of shells we're searching for, what they look like. "We'll recognize them when we see them," declares Mitch in the extra-hearty tone that, even at age ten, always makes me doubt him. Rather than reliable fellows and the best men in every business, don't we need one or two plain facts to help us to interpret this landscape, and to elicit its secrets?

Shells valuable enough to be offered Ardis apparently lurk in tidal pools where soupy water slaps, gurgles, sucks at ankles. Under rocks, in fissured pockets, intricately swirled or spiked shapes conceal their pinks, their golds from sunlight that bleached my sister's head and mine white soon after arriving on this continent. (MJ's still-dark hair evidences how much his headaches keep him inside; as for Mitch, it isn't so easy to change an old dog's coat, he smirks.) You have to turn over rocks with your tire-iron lever; you have to wrest shells from the wet, salty darkness to which their mantles cling for life. Mitch dismisses each specimen Lily and I offer. "Good try," he says, "but I guess you don't have the old man's eye." He wants us to witness his discoveries instead of making our own; he needs us to share his excitement on capturing one more exotic prize. "Found another beauty," he crows again. Lily and I flutter starfish limbs in a separate tide pool, pretend we can't hear. "He doesn't have a clue what he's doing," my sister scorns. We watch our father's tanned back glisten as it shifts the landscape for our mother's sake. Muscles jumping beneath skin like kittens drowning in a sack. Then glare drains away definition, blackens Mitch into only shadow. The *ungalawa* no longer provides any shade; exposed to the sun, Christophe still snores. MJ's pale face has turned paler and an angry blister blooms on one corner of a moving lip. I know my brother will silently count until he reaches the number that marks that this too has passed.

Five buckets of shells slosh in the back of the white Peugeot, spit and hiss all the way home. A strong smell, briny and gamy at once, becomes increasingly heavy as we drive inland, thickens as though we are nearing the same pungent element we're trying to leave. "Phew," exhales Mitch, cracking his window an inch wider, while MJ gags again.

"Bury or boil," Mitch mutters like a mantra all evening. After our houseboy offers us this choice, something distorts his fixed mask, exposes itself in his eyes, makes him move quickly away from the house. (*Disgust*, I think, twenty years later.) Rogacion spits, once, at the end of the yard. Without sending a child over with an excuse, he fails to show up for work the next morning or on following ones. Village sources won't shed light on our houseboy's whereabouts. Sometimes the toothless old fellows don't seem to understand Mitch's Swahili, pretend it's a whole other lingo they speak. My father's face shadows, as it does whenever an obstacle comes between him and the dazzling, elevated source of a dazzling, earthbound dream. "Boy," he says, shaking a disappointed head and dishing out a version of one of his boyhood Regina suppers on Rogacion's first AWOL evening. "Some fellows sure are quick to jump ship even when the old gal isn't sinking." A row of

five buckets just inside the door emit an aromatic question, pungently pose it throughout the house all night.

Bury or boil?

Mitch lowers a test bucket of shells into bubbling water. "Quicker this way," he hazards, leaning back from an overpowering stench steam rising from the pot. On the surface black scum gathers, thickens, obscures what's happening to the shells below. "Maybe we should have done this outside," my father grimaces, wrinkling his nose. Suddenly he grabs his stomach, lurches out the kitchen door. Lily turns off the stove. We find our father kneeling on the grass, near his portulaca patch. Heaving, gasping, panting. Unable to breathe an alien element.

We allow the house to air out all morning before venturing back inside. Then Lily reaches through a crust of scum. Are the shells she removes the ones Mitch dropped into boiling water? Can inner death alter outer appearance so completely, so quickly? Reduce lustrous beauty into its plain, dull opposite? Effect a change more permanent than, for example, all the fleeting transformations of Gary Cooper, MJ's chameleon, before his disappearance? The kitchen whispers about forbidden treasure whose tempting glitter tarnishes at the lightest touch. Lily shakes an emptied shell to determine whether it's lighter without its secret. She holds it to one ear, reveals her crooked teeth. The smile fades. A pearl leaks from some deep chamber of shell, slides down my sister's neck, hangs there. She touches a finger to the viscous drop, lifts it to her mouth, licks lips.

"Look," says MJ.

A small crowd has formed at the end of the yard, where it meets the mission road. Village children and church beggars and the cassava women whose baskets appear to brim with large white maggots. They look expectantly at our house, murmur unease across the yard. The crowd gets bigger, louder. As if steam has shaped a lingering signal visible only to African eyes. *Approach*, it invites. *Come and see*. At the same time, the perfumed air might be warning: *Not too close*. "Everything's a movie in Morogoro," Mitch says lightly, when our restless audience still hovers outside in the dark.

My father plays the Peggy Lee records in his room that night. Her voice slinks out the window, seduces the crowd beyond to disperse, teasingly instructs Mitch what to do. By morning, he has learned that burying is slower than boiling, but less malodorous. What's in the earth will devour what's in the shells without diminishing the latter's beauty, he adds.

How deep is deep enough?

Not having all the answers will always throw Mitch off. "What do you think, gang?" he asks, hesitating with the shovel. If the hole is too shallow, it might not invite access of deep life-forms that can devour the essence of a shell. Worms thick as pythons, I imagine, which with one flick of fangs extricate every meaty morsel from the most withholding mollusc. Maybe wild dogs would detect a subterranean stench, be attracted to something rotting below, want to dig it up at night. Not for eating but to carry off and scatter like fragments of gleaming skull through the brush. Or it would be hyenas that skulked out from the dark and danced atop an aromatic grave that would be laughingly exhumed by dawn. Yet shells buried too deep might be destroyed. Crushed by the weight of too much dirt, dissolved by too much darkness. At lunch Mitch slips home from teaching to inspect the patch of earth that holds our secret at the far end of the garden. He stamps already hard-packed ground as though to keep what's down from forcing itself up; to discourage any unwanted element from breaking surface, bursting through. Maybe my father recalls Old Country spells shared by dusky Regina aunts, incantations originally uttered by women in black around smoky village fires. He sprinkles a ring of lime around the spot, sets a stone in the centre, adds ash on top.

At midnight Lily shakes my shoulder, whispers so MJ won't wake.
"He's out there again."

My sister and I kneel before the bedroom window, squint through the screen at a flashlight prowling the darkness beyond the lemon tree. "What is he looking for?" I dreamily wonder, as though the purpose of my father's investigation of the night were to invoke a question whose answer would illuminate not only this dark moment but also the meaning of the whole obscure search that MJ, Lily and I have been taken on against our will. I must fall asleep with my head on the window sill. At morning, the texture of the bedroom floor patterns my stiff knees. A temporary tattoo. Intricate as one decorating the Carnelian cowry, say.

MJ notices that the sugar man doesn't come by anymore, though we're always good for a shilling of his cane. All the Africans who habitually take a short cut across our yard appear to give it wide berth now. My father's classes become sparsely attended when they were notably popular before; even the Dutch nuns, whose pink faces poke concern through the doorway while he's teaching at the mission, prove conspicuously aloof. "I'd almost welcome a couple of damn Brits at the door," Mitch mentions one

quiet evening. Perhaps the atmosphere around us remains subtly fragranced by warning of dangers contained within this sphere. Say we've grown too accustomed to the scent to detect it. Maybe it clings to our clothes, skin, hair. The strongest soap won't be sufficient to decontaminate us of longing; no amount of fresh air will eliminate need's last rank trace. Still one more invisible, permanent brand.

"A week," my father guesses when we ask how long it will take the earth to clean out the shells. For the first time I am attuned to how desperately the famished globe beneath me starves; it would gobble up the most unappetizing nourishment. Any carcass, carrion, corpse. In sleep, sounds of chewing, slurping, munching rise around me. They're muffled, almost inaudible; they're insistent. My dreaming stomach groans with phantom hunger. I salivate with sympathy in sleep.

Lily salvages the shells robbed of beauty by boiling. She strings the smallest of them into a dozen bracelets to adorn her thin wrists all at once. Every swivel makes them click like teeth. A larger, sharp-spiked specimen dangles around my sister's neck. Her jewellery resembles the ceremonial kind that is assumed after completing a tribal initiation or test of courage or rite of passage. Some shells are carried around like good luck charms in Lily's pockets, others placed in significant locations. In the bowl Ginger ate from before he ran away to join the pack of wild dogs. In the nook of the mango tree where we left never-collected letters to Sister Bridget until it became her turn to disappear. At the spot where we found Gary Cooper, at the spot he was last seen. Five years have been enough to ensure that this geography will always be defined by the associations to loss with which it swarms.

As the date for Ardis to arrive draws near, our father's eagerness for the event wanes. A flashlight no longer plays through the darkness where shells are buried; he doesn't dash to the site at noon. "She can take them back as souvenirs," he offhandedly mentions once, acknowledging that our gift may be insufficient to induce Ardis to stay. More and more, my father looks resigned to failure; inspiration has let him down again. At this point, climbing up into the jungle in search of the rarest butterfly would be too little, too late. To enchant Ardis into sharing the spell in which we are uneasily sunk will require some far more potent totem. A rhinoceros tusk, the claw of an Arusha lion, a shrunken human head.

We have to unearth the shells a day before Ardis arrives. They need to be cleaned of dirt, then polished. Mitch inches shovel into ground, tosses the tool aside, burrows with bare hands to save a metal blade from inflicting damage. The hole reaches the depth at which the shells were buried without revealing them. Mitch digs deeper. MJ, Lily and I look down into yawning darkness. Not one sliver, not a shard of shell. Rising breaths of cold make me shiver in the burning afternoon. My eyes lift from what isn't below, detect movement beyond the frangipani's gaudy screen. A dark stirring transforms into a trio of village children. Our witnesses scamper away.

As if it were an open, obscene grave, we turn hastily from the hole. Inside, the house appears all at once derelict for reasons related less to Rogacion's recent neglect than to long abandonment by the life it once contained. Floors waxed dark red have dulled the colour of dried blood; a company of army ants feeds from dirty dishes; cocoons and webs have sprouted in the corners. Mitch makes a half-hearted stab at marshalling his troops to swing into Operation Clean Up. It's hardly worth the effort. Accustomed to an antiseptically clean, painfully neat clinic, Ardis would be unimpressed at being brought even to a spick-and-span house from the Dar airport tomorrow. Mitch swipes his rag at dust like he's swatting away a persistent ghost. MJ retreats to bed with what he says is another headache. Through the bedroom window, I glimpse Lily slipping toward our father's overgrown garden. The contents of her arms are indistinct in failing light; then my sister herself is blurred by distance, finally buried beneath black.

"I knew it," says Lily, when our mother is not among the passengers of what was supposed to be her flight. Without a magic magnet, minus shiny, seductive gifts, we lack the power to pull her to us. Mitch is subdued during most of the drive back home. "We'll get a letter that explains everything," he says, without conviction. By the time we near Morogoro, my father has bucked up enough to start laying out a new plan. A sojourn at the Mombassa shore will be just the ticket to make us all a-okay again. When the Peugeot pulls into the driveway, Rogacion is hanging laundry on the line. My father walks past the houseboy and through our cleaned house. His bedroom door doesn't open when, several minutes later, I knock to announce news. In our absence, the hole at the end of the garden has been filled in, smoothed over, made to vanish.

A letter must have arrived to explain Ardis's failure to do so; that memory must have seeped from me to linger in the Morogoro air like a signal visible only to some cassava woman's keen eye. Everything valuable

hides. Although the sugar man begins to show up at our door each day again, and the path across the yard becomes redefined by all the feet to cut across it, and Mitch's classes teem as before with students attracted to his eccentric take on history—even then the air around us remains somehow offended by what we have done: how we tried to fulfill our need at this landscape's expense. It was wrong to take the shells. Within a decade, some varieties will become rare enough to require protection by law. Valuable as my father wished them to be.

I move in dream through each Morogoro night. A secret path is marked by chips of white whose gleam draws me away from the cement-block house, invites me deeper into darkness. Past the farthest reaches of Mitch's gardens, through the frangipani, into brush beyond. Leopard Cone, Hump-Backed Cowry, Prickly Drupe, Spider Conch, Orange-Mouthed Olive: now I know their names, what these shells were called when filled with life, when beautiful. The white that guides me across the earth exactly matches the white that's strewn above. My footsteps could be tracing patterns of Pisces through the sky, following the Milky Way forward. I hear muffled rushing, the echo of a roar. The river appears, a black glint for Lily to kneel beside. My sister looks up at me, looks back to the white object in her lap. She is trying to rub three wishes from what's hollow, what's hard. Her prayers are answered or her hope for them dies. Lily holds the shell up as high as her arms can stretch. A sceptre, an offering, a symbol.

Ardis's aborted visit seems to end our Tanzanian experience abruptly, though we linger for three more months. "She'll come to see us in Sri Lanka," Mitch ventures, getting out his maps. "Or in Seville." As if location were the sole factor in deciding whether Ardis does or does not come back.

I never again see the shells Lily rescued from a dull, plain fate. Where loss occurred now goes unmarked; what's absent may become forgotten. My sister appears vulnerable without her ceremonial baubles, unarmed against an inimical world. A sound of clicking teeth no longer betrays her furtive explorations. I don't hear Lily slip from the cement-brick house in the middle of the night or come in later from the dark. Mitch frowns at his maps, mumbles about Seville or Sri Lanka, prays to Peggy Lee for new inspiration. MJ whimpers through another Morogoro afternoon. "I'm burning up," he says. For a moment I think I smell incineration. I can feel MJ transform into smoke and ash inside. There are ways besides burying and boiling, I might tell Rogacion. "It's almost over," I lie to my brother instead. As if we haven't, MJ and Lily and I, already told each other goodbye.