

Poetry Porch: Poetry

What's Left Behind

By Elizabeth Birch

I collect skeletons of former lives
—quahog, oyster, and scallop shells—pieces of the past
scattered on the shoreline.

Running my fingers along the surface,
I search for wampum purple, sand's mineral leftovers,
and imagine the history of each shell,
the mollusk that discarded it days ago,
and the wayfarers and Wampanoag
who crouched to examine something similar
in this same spot generations ago.

Is this what connects me to the past—fragile shells
some much younger than I and some older than I can imagine?
From a speck of sea dust to a mollusk's meal to the hardening
and growing wall of a home, tucked between sea rocks and weeds,
soon pulled into the currents, pushed past diving gulls
and pinching fish, then thrust into sunlight, deposited in sand.

I touch so much in each shell. I harvest
what's left behind, carry it home in my pocket, hide it away
in my cabinets, windowsills, and drawers.

In Plymouth, we exist beside exoskeletons of history—
old houses, a replica of a ship deconstructed for parts,
a rock with a year carved into its surface and concrete
filling a centuries-old crack. We consume
these things as if they are summertime sweets,
as if they're melting, as if we are.
As I learn to *live* in this old town of square houses,
I wonder what else is left behind.

This salty beach air. This moss. This acorn top.

The quiet that surrounds tales of murdered Indians. The street names.
The folklore that dances in our brains.
And what will I leave behind?
A sunroom full of shells and feathers and bones?
Journals full of half-written poems and apologies?
Grateful people. Broken people.

Who will pick up my pieces
when they wash up on the shore?
Who will feel my subtle striations and admire my purple core?
How hard will you inhale as you hold back a comment
about me that's better left unsaid?
And who will pay for the un-saying?