

Stranded Conch, Alabama Coast

Not quite beached but perched
on a sandbar yards from shore;
water only inches deep
bares the conch to air
and cormorant and gull.

Tipped by surf it lolls,
flesh-side up, shell in sand,
and writhes to right itself,
its meat the dense, freckled
pink of a piglet's tongue.

A blot resembling mussel-shell disrupts
the pink—*operculum*, I'll learn:
a door the conch shuts fast
when it retreats and seals itself
inside its fabled home.

We two in swimsuits huddle, gape
and prod—until a snort
from the shell's long siphon states
the creature's urgency to self-propel
to deeper water. So I push it free.

We stand. Backs ache
from stooping, shoulders from the sun.
Country music booms onshore:
a man acquired a woman, built a home—
or lost those things. I'm never sure.

We wade back to the land.
We carry buckets of the shells
we've picked up—polished, vacant, bright.
The living conch has veiled itself in sand
and sealed its doorway tight.

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