

The Shell House

Lorna Fraser

I am a creature of memories, held within all the shells wrested from the oceans.
Layers and layers of shells, gathered into swirling patterns of texture and colour.
Cemented in place and held by a force not of their own making. Some of the
memories have travelled from faraway shores. Others are fixed closer to home.
Those memories are mine and are not mine.

I didn't think you would come looking for me, but you did. You found this
place on the edge of land. You walked along the narrow road with the sea on one
side of the low stone wall, until the last house came into view. You were surprised I
expect by the smallness of it and the grandness too, this house of shells. A quirk of
architecture; a folly of history.

The rain was grey and sleek as sealskin. The water streaming off you. Your
inadequate coat was soaked through. I saw the doubt in your eyes, but I let you
enter.

And now we sit across from one another while outside the storm roars and
batters against rattling windows. The last logs on the fire are turning from hot red to
blackened groaning crumble. Reluctant candles flicker dirty yellow light. Wax and
woodsmoke irritate eyes and nostrils. Yours more than mine.

I can smell your sweat reaching across the space between us. Like a lover's charm, bought from a charlatan, trying to pull me back to you.

But this is the time of the wolf moon. It howls its power, dragging and churning the tides. Stuck on the outside walls the shells, made glistening by the rain, creak and strain against their moorings.

All we have now is a choice between silence and talking. I shall tell you the story of this shell house. A story of memories that are mine and are not mine, blended like the whorls of a whelk, muted moods of colour fused together, rough and smooth. Mine and not mine...

A memory verdant and cerulean:

The Fall of New England is beautiful, all the brochures say so. I am sitting at our favourite outdoor bar, facing the ocean with all the jewels of autumn behind me. My phone lies on the table next to a well-made Negroni. I almost ordered two of them but stopped myself because that would only have made your absence more obvious. I glance again at my phone, wanting and not wanting to hear the ping of your response.

A young couple arrive in a flurry of laughter, select the table next to mine. The barman comes over immediately. He senses the better potential of a generous tip than he knows I will ever produce. They ask for beers, tequila shots and lobster rolls. The woman notices me staring. I hold back the urge to tell her what she has won't last, that she's imagining the romance of him. He's clearly older. She's his trophy. I've been there. It's not worth it.

Their order arrives. An aroma of sweet saltiness from the warm lobster meat reaches me. You could never believe my refusal to eat the dish that this whole town is famous for.

‘Why come here, Libbie’ you said, more than once, ‘if you won’t even try the seafood?’

We’ve been weeks in this little Maine town, its streets swollen with the flotsam of tourists. It was the lobster debates which started the rift. A crack of imperfection which opened the way for all our faults and frustrations to swim to the surface.

I knew it would happen. I’ve been there before and before and before.

Still you kept on telling me, “Libbie, I love you.”

I could see your longing and confusion when I wouldn’t say it back.

It wasn’t like that our first year together. Every day, you would say, ‘Libbie, I love you.’ And every day I would say, ‘I love you, Paul.’

You were going to be the one to make me normal. Like that woman at the next table. She’s normal. She will make normal mistakes and will have normal successes. She will not think of losing herself in foaming churning breakers, or being engulfed in briny cold waters.

A soft breeze blows across the bar’s decking, a mocking kiss on my face and arms. It pulls at the long hem of my dress. I lean down to catch the material which wants to billow like a sail. Too late, I hear the gasp of the woman. She has seen my legs, the layers of grey and mauve skin, overlaid with pearly translucence. It reaches the top of my thighs now. When it comes back, it happens quickly. For the first few days, I can scrape it off before it becomes too thick and layered.

I didn’t mean to block the shower. You were annoyed, soapy water lapping your ankles. You blamed my hair, blamed me for not emptying the gadget in the

drain which catches all my long strands. I have a lot of hair, another thing that cannot be helped. I heard you curse 'What the hell?' when you bent down to clear the blockage. 'What's this, Libbie?' you said, holding the shiny, soapy clump in your hand.

I had no words to explain it. My goodbye text to you was brutal, but believe me, there would be much worse if I stayed.

I lift my glass to my mouth and swallow the last drops. I will never drink a Negroni again. I must put the colours of us behind and see where the tides pull me this time.

A story that might be true:

A long time ago a woman lived in a small village on the northeast coast of Scotland. She was known as Selina Blue, a solitary sole, who had lost her husband in tragic circumstances.

For many years the village had thrived on the shoals of silvery fish brought in by the tides. But by the time of this story, the herring had long since dissipated and the village was a damp shadow of itself, with a name no one ever bothered to know or remember.

Selina lived in a wee cottage at the far end of a strip of houses facing the sea. All the houses were squat with small windows of thick glass, heavy wooden doors and slates nailed robustly to the roof struts. Every winter, waves would come over the breaker wall and lick the houses with their salty tongues. Selina never minded this. It irked the villagers that her house, despite being queerly finished, never was overly damaged by the storms.

What gave this house its queer finish was the effort Selina put into fixing upon the front stone of the building, many, many shells. These were arranged in intricate, swirling patterns and covered all the frontage of the building. She gathered the shells from local beaches and sometimes procured them from other places.

Agnes Bain, the village postwoman, who was also the shopkeeper and cleaner of the sparsely attended parish kirk, found the receipt of these parcels and the need to deliver them onto Selina quite disturbing.

It was not so disturbing as the day the postal van brought a young girl maybe seven or eight years, with a note in her coat pocket to say she must be delivered to Selina Blue.

A memory of travels and discovery:

When I move onto a new place, I tell myself the choice is random, a cluster of tiny events, conspiring to take me somewhere fresh. But as I get older, it becomes more difficult to make this believable. The pattern in me becomes more obvious with age. It settles with purpose upon my skin. Tiny cells seep into my bloodstream, minute, intimate plankton, travelling through all my organs - my lungs, my heart, my brain.

It would take too long to tell you everywhere I have lived, and even longer still to speak of why, each time, I had to leave.

Sometimes, in my dreaming state, I go back to some of my former lives. The azure mediterranean waters of Kefalonia which caress silvery white sands; the cool waves that lick and smooth the pebbles of the Dorset coastline, or the rocky inlets surrounding Dubrovnik where it's possible to still find calming solitude.

I've tried living in big cities, tiny country villages, remote alpine regions. Even a refuge by a rolling river is not enough for me. After all, rivers lead inevitably back to the sea. The salmon which swims upstream to spawn cannot buck its destiny to turn oceanward again. Like that fish, I am always, always pulled back by the tides.

After Maine, I knew I had to follow the rise of the sun and cross the ocean to find somewhere quiet to realign myself.

The money I took from your account, I turned into cash, with care and stealth. The skills which I've developed over the years are not those of a good person. But then whenever have I said I was good? With cash it is possible to wash out the trail and become invisible.

Lately, I have been living unnoticed in the coastal town of Whitby. It has a melancholic darkness which comforts me. I'm using the WIFI of a dusty tearoom. I have a window seat with a view of the sea and a small sad closed-up funfair. The tea is too strong and the scone too hard. I'm scrolling through listings of holiday lets, looking for direct phone numbers which I can call to arrange viewings and then negotiate a booking over winter months.

When I see the advert, I wonder if it's the same place. After all, the name must be quite common for seaside properties. I skim the text which emphasises the importance of original features and character and extolls the benefits of a peaceful location. I laugh aloud at that. The tearoom owner, glances up from her phone, then continues to ignore me. I click the images with a pulsing beat of excitement in my throat. The exterior of the cottage looks changed, its rough walls coated in white, with arches of shells around the door and window frames. A post code and pin on the map confirms the location.

A scratchy prickle of certainty creeps up my legs. The café's odour of yesterday's chips transmutes into the tang of fresh washed-up seaweed. This is the moment I know where I must go next.

A story of suspicious thought:

Selina Blue did not want to receive the living parcel. She knew of the child's existence only as the tiny baby left motherless and taken by strangers for a better life. She supposed that the child must have been sent back for a reason. But there was no point in searching as to why that might be. It was as clear as an October moon that the child, like Selina, had nowhere else to go.

After Agnes Bain left in a huff of disappointment from the lack of explanation offered. Selina picked up her gathering basket. She took hold of the silent child's hand and they walked together along the shoreline at sunset, to gather shells.

Meanwhile, Agnes Bain's eyes burned bright with the anticipation of gossip to impart upon everyone who came to the shop or church. Old rumours resurfaced. The visiting minister did his best to steer the talk of the parish away from dark tales of selkies and kelpies and devil's curses. He scolded Agnes privately for her bad mouthing of a poor old widow who, much like him, only wanted to live a quiet life. Agnes was huffed, she herself was a godly woman. Not like that Selina Blue who had never set foot inside the church since her man had been lost at sea. Besides, the minister was an incomer. He should have more respect for the history of the place.

It was a habit of Selina Blue to sit at her upstairs bedroom window and watch the moon rise above the midnight blue North Sea. Her cottage had two such bedrooms, attics with tight dormer windows both looking to the watery horizon and

skies of billowing grey clouds. The second bedroom had lain empty since her daughter had given birth in it. Now she must cross that threshold once again and make the place a new sanctuary for the child who been sent back.

For a time, Agnes Bain, and some of the other folks in the village, asked each other why did an adopted child get returned? Agnes voiced it aloud to her husband and son at the dinner table, 'What awful thing did that wee mite do, to make her get sent back like an unwanted parcel?'

This was the thing about the village and their view of Selina Blue. They knew her strangeness, some more than others. They did not care for the way, after certain deaths, that Selina would make a new pattern of shells on her cottage walls. And that sometimes, shells would be laid around the boundaries of gravestones.

Though no one ever saw Selina pass through the church gate, not even old John McDonald who lived opposite and spent his evenings watching for untoward happenings.

Again, Agnes felt it important to advise her family that, 'There's darkness in the women of that family, and that wee lassie cannot escape that.'

What her husband and son might have responded between their swigs of warm beer, to wash down the mutton, may only be imagined.

A memory moving closer:

My new landlord introduces himself as Neil Bain. He is honest enough to tell me that, '...the cottage is a work in progress, only been advertising a few weeks, with no expectation of anyone wanting to holiday over the winter.'

It's hardly surprising that he takes my offer of cash up front for six months let, with the option of renewing come April. Naturally, I pay him less than the advertised rate. He's quick to recognise the advantage of notes in his hands and not the bank's.

I tell Mr Bain I intend to move in immediately. He looks bemused, for I've come with little luggage. But he has the money now and the satisfaction that his property will be lived in over winter months when lack of occupancy brings greater threat of damage to property.

At the door, he pauses to shake my hand, 'There's no shop in the village anymore,' he says, 'But a van comes round on Fridays with basics, essentials. Or you can go into town for the Coop. It's only a wee drive...'

He glances over his shoulder at the narrow road between the cottage and the seawall. I sense his confusion. He's not a bad looking man, probably sixty something, not tall, not short, a decent build with maybe a little too much belly.

'I came by taxi, Mr Bain. The weekly grocery van will be fine for me. And I've got the taxi company in my phone if necessary.'

'Right you are,' he gives me that look of appraisal that men cannot help themselves with, 'Call me Neil. You've got my number if you need anything.'

Oh, he would be easy to reel in. No, no, no! I mustn't go there. I'm here to recover, not catch another. I'm glad to see him drive away in his dirty grey car.

It has taken a lot of energy to get myself here. Tiredness aches in my bones, as if I were an ancient old crone. I must allow myself time to become accustomed to this place of living where past, present and future tumble together.

Downstairs has been made into a single room, with a new staircase against the back wall. One side is for living with sofa, chair, television and open fireplace. The other side is for cooking and eating. A pine table with two chairs is by the front

window. He hasn't got the furnishings quite right, too much Ikea, not enough antique. Like the outside, the walls have been whitewashed. A few framed prints, all featuring shells. I think he will need to try harder to justify keeping the name.

Upstairs, there is only one bedroom and a bathroom, with a shower and a fake old bath with claw legs and Edwardian tap. My legs are tingling and itching again.

I let the bath run, taps turned steamy hot, they spurt at first before finding the rhythm of the flow. I drop my clothes on the floor. Then I open the window wide. Like the other rooms, this too faces the sea.

The tide must be high, I can hear the slap, slap, slap against the sea wall and the screech of cruising seabirds. The air is briny fresh in my nostrils.

I unwind the long plait of my hair and sink down into the warm bath. My hair is a spreading russet kelp on the water. It covers my breasts. I adopt a slouchy sitting position so I can straighten my legs. They are relaxing now, soothed and glistening. I bring my legs together, no gaps, and cross my ankles, so my feet point outwards. My long toes spread and gently flick the water. I am caught in a surprising net of contentment. My eyes begin to close, I dream of swimming. Then of you.

You are not the only man who has tried to pursue me and shape me into a package of his desires. It never ends well.

When I turn against them, as I am driven to do, it is too late. I must live forever with the reflection of betrayal in their eyes. They know it at the end. They know they're in a nightmare with no waking. They will be dragged down, down, down, till the last painful breath is washed out of them.

There has always been something different about you. Your smell is pine and birch and bracken. Your skin and hair golden, rich from the sun. I wanted so much

to believe that you were more than human. That it would be enough to drown my urges. I should have been more vigilant. I never thought for a moment that you would find me again.

A story of sad ending:

Selina Blue had long since made her skin thick enough to withstand the bitter stings of the likes of Agnes Bain. She had expected to live a long life of loneliness. The shells were her solace.

It had started simply enough, the solitary walks along the shoreline, bending down to pick a pink ridge limpet, or tiny pearly periwinkle, perhaps a cluster of dusty dog whelks or fanned cockles. She found a knack for searching out larger pieces and, as the years passed, she made efforts to get shells from further shores. At first the shells, were to protect herself but when three lads of the village drowned in a rogue June storm, she realised her wider purpose.

She had mourned her husband, but she missed her daughter more. It was because of the manner of her daughter's leaving. No accident but a purposeful choice to embrace the curse of the Blue and become her other self. Selina never spoke her daughter's name, because that name had been lost in the waves. Often though, she heard her singing, ripples of notes rising and falling and it made Selina's heart sore. For all her gathering of the shells, there was no bringing her daughter back.

Selina wore always a long skirt and thick black boots. She wore them indoors and out and day and night. The villagers could not have known that she sat and walked and ate and slept in that same outfit for many, many years. When the day of

her passing finally came, no one realised her soul was gone, for she was not often seen by then.

It was Agnes Bain's son, who had always had a nosiness about him, who finally entered her cottage. He found her in bed wearing jumper, skirt and boots. The undertaker who was called to remove the body, said if it were not for the clothing the corpse would surely have disintegrated in the lifting.

In his dealings with the dead, the undertaker was a kind man, which perhaps explains why he declined to offer further details of what he saw that day.

The village folk were not so charitable. They had him put her in a plain wooden coffin, took it out in old John MacDonald's boat and tossed Selina Blue into the deep, dark depths of the North Sea.

A memory of contentment:

My first weeks in my new old home are as calm as the weather. In the queue for the grocery van folk chatter about the unseasonal warmth and lack of winds. Some of the older ones, and there are not many young ones in the village, say it cannot be a good sign. That we will surely pay for it when Winter decides to show its will. There is an only to be expected curiosity about me.

'I'm a writer,' I say in answer to their questions, 'I need someplace secluded to finish my book. I have a deadline. Sorry, no I can't tell you details. It's a biography, someone important. I have signed confidentiality.'

It's not true of course but it's a plausible explanation. Even if they see me walking the shoreline, they will think oh, she's getting some fresh air, or she must be thinking about her next chapter, we had better not disturb her.

Back from an early morning beach walk, I'm depositing a cluster of shells on the table when I see Neil Bain walking towards the house. The dawn smirr of rain has turned into a persistent greyness. I open the door before he can knock, perhaps because he might not have knocked. He strikes me as the type of man to exert his landlord status. I place myself in the centre of the threshold.

'Hello Neil. Not a nice day for a stroll. What can I help you with?'

'Just checking everything's okay with the house for you?'

'All fine, thanks. I'm rather busy though, with my project.'

He peers past me, his mouth twisted in a half frown, 'Good, good. Only thing is, I wanted to check the water heating was working ok. I've got it linked to an app you see, and the energy consumption is higher than expected.'

I give my shoulder a little shrug, to show I'm not bothered. I've no intention of telling him about my twice daily baths.

'But Neil, if I'm the first tenant, how do you know what to expect? I mean, it's only me here. Maybe you underestimated.'

'Aye, well ok. I'll head off for now.'

He turns with a defeated air. That's when I hear it. The cackling laughter. I know it's female from the whirling pitch of it. '*You can get him lassie, like all the others!*'

I slam the door shut, run upstairs and turn on the bath taps. I find lately that I prefer the water a little cooler, more soothing for my legs. Under water they lose their achy heaviness. They soften and do not itch.

I am at peace with myself here. Time passes and the salt air seeps into my pores. I feel a settlement. The urge to run has gone. I suppose I had to leave, so I

could come back when I was ready. This is all good. It was all good until you managed to find me.

A story of a change and consequences:

This part of the story belongs to the child who was returned to Selina Blue. The child's name was Liberty. For the first year or so, Liberty was a shy child who spoke little, observed much. She did not understand why she had been brought to this small cold place filled with suspicious whispers.

Selina did her best. She tried sending the child to the wee school, but the girl wouldn't have it, kept running back by midmorning. The teacher came once or twice, to complain and finally to advise that the problem of education would be solely upon Selina Blue.

It seemed then that there was nothing to be done but collect more shells. Liberty was a willing apprentice in this endeavour. The front of the house was now covered completely, so they moved onto the side walls.

The years passed gently and Selina grew fond of the girl in a way she had never thought would again be possible. Selina knew the truth of things not yet revealed to the child. And she had nothing to offer Liberty except silent hope that the change of body, heart and mind would not take its destined course.

Selina began to watch for the signs, feeling a lump in her stomach, hard and rough as a barnacle-covered rock. At night she slept with clusters of shells under her pillow, talismans to ward off the curse of the Blue.

Then came the night of Harvest Moon. Selina was on the window seat knitting a winter jumper. Liberty had filled the tin bath by the fire. Over the past weeks she

had been bathing more frequently. Selina saw her granddaughter cast off her clothes and knew the time had come.

Liberty smiled at her grandmother before slipping into the soothing water, her toes reaching out to touch the end of the bath, legs breaking the surface. The water caressed her fine young body, sparking flutters of internal pleasure for which she had no words. As for the changes on her skin, she couldn't explain either, yet she was not at all worried by it.

What had been a small thing, a glimmer of shimmers, had progressed in a refusal to be ignored. Overlapping silvery folds from knee to ankle. Liberty raised her leg fully out of the water to admire the iridescent, pink, mauve, aquamarine, blue, scales. Touching them sent a shiver of pleasure through her young body.

When she looked up, Selina was standing over her. 'I'm sorry my dear,' she said, 'It is the curse of the Blue. The other lassies, the normal ones will get the curse of their monthlies but you, like your mother, like me, you will have only this, regular as the moon and tides. I will help you adapt but when you reach sixteen, you must make your choice. You can return to the sea and sing your siren song forever. Or you can stay on land and bear the consequences. For me, I chose land and paid the price of loving. After he drowned, I vowed I would not hurt another man. The shells are a remembrance of that.'

A moment of now to become memory:

Dear Paul, now you know my true name, not Libbie but not so different. You should have stayed in Maine and forgotten me. You would have been safe then. You're shivering. There are no more logs to put on the fire. The candles are guttering their last spits of wax. Look to the window. The damp mist of morning blooms.

You came seeking answers, why I ran, why I took your money, why I broke your heart. Such a romantic! Listen to me, I must finish the story, no more memories. We are only here now, waiting to find our ending.

All the others before you, I didn't let go unpunished. I lured them to their fate. You were different. I think with you what I felt must have been a true bond. My grandmother had a love like that once. It did not end well. His drowning was her doing. And her penance was to stay forever upon dry land and hide her true self. She lived all her life in this house to keep the curse at bay.

But I was young and eager for adventure. I wanted to go out into the world. I believed I could control the curse, so long as I ensured necessary sacrifices.

Remember the bar in Maine, the Negronis we drank. Remember how we couldn't wait to hold each other, meld our sweat while the lazy ceiling fan turned humid air. That was your world. Now you have come to mine.

The dawn sky is turning pink and apricot on the horizon. Birds will be soaring above the swell of the waves.

Come with me, Paul. We will take the boat out. Come Paul, come, perhaps you will hear my mother singing. She will be pleased I have returned with a gift for her. Yes, that's it, take my hand, walk with me, let the soft notes of my own song enchant you. It will be a pleasant thing when we get out to the deep waters. We can embrace as we let the boat roll and cast us over. I will be with you when you fall. Your ears will be full of sweet notes, as your lungs fill with salty release.

Then I shall flick my tail, swim back to shore, lying in the shallows until the tide turns and I may walk again. I shall pick a good shell for you and fix it to the cottage wall. It will be the first of a new pattern. I am Liberty Blue and I have come home.

