

## Carrying the Shell to Iona

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*It's no wonder the Highlands have been called melancholy.*

—Felix Mendelssohn, 1829

It was an interlude, only—

one overcast afternoon of mist, then rain,

then mist again. And a sky fit for mourning.

I had hoped to uncover some architecture

of meaning, but perhaps I'd brought too many words  
to this landscape that seemed past language.

Not a *pilgrim*, exactly—

though I'd come with a purpose. I carried a shell,

remnant from the coast of the gray Atlantic,  
where our Scottish ancestors first arrived—

some piece of the story I shared with the brother  
I had lost. And it wasn't hard to think of *loss*

in this place some called *thin*, others *melancholy*.  
All the layers of stones, layers of stories.

All the mossy walks and echoes of ancient prayer  
strung across a broken arch, the weighted air.

A lone hydrangea remained, intricate blossoms  
now a pale, washed-out brown, some

bit of summer left behind—

though the line of bright green where the shallows

met the shore was as luminous as I'd remembered.  
But the seas were rough on the way to Staffa,  
our small boat rocked by cold waves and spray.  
The puffins had left weeks before.

And the water too high to enter even  
the smallest cave, a dark parting that carried  
my brother's name,  
one he shared with someone famous here—

a black mystery I could not go inside.  
It was enough, I hoped, to witness it.

When Mendelssohn sailed to Staffa,  
the sea was also high, too wild for him

to enter Fingal's Cave. And he was ill.  
Still, the boatmen told him of a light

that filled the space within, one holy day  
each year. He made music of that journey

he imagined. What might one need to believe  
in such a light? On the long flight home

across the ocean, I held the shell.  
I didn't leave it there. It's with me now—

indecipherable, silent still.  
Smooth and cool within my hand.