

Sean Forbes

Isla Providencia

First Prize, Wallace Stevens Poetry Contest

On his final trip to Providencia
I asked my grandfather to bring back
a piece of the island, so he wrapped

a conch shell with three towels, deep
in his suitcase among plastic jars
jammed with stewed plums and orange rinds.

*A gift of hidden sources—make of it what
you wish, he says, placing this common
Caribbean souvenir in my lap, leaving me*

to imagine Henry Morgan discovering this shell,
cupping it over his right ear, swaying to the sirens'
cunning whistles, declaring Providencia his final

resting place. My grandmother tells me that a Lazy Hill
woman's dying wish was for a conch shell to be laid
on her grave since she loved the mollusk's tough muscle.

I pretend I am a Carib warrior, inserting my fingers
into the shell's curved aperture, like Poseidon, wielding
this weapon above my head against British and Spanish.

How easy the turn to violence. The shell's beige,
pink and ivory no longer protective covering,
but the blood and bone of pirates, Indians, slaves.