

## WILLARD DIXON

*Big Sur*, 2017/2018  
Oil on linen, 48 x 52 in



COURTESY ANDRA NORRIS GALLERY

## BRIDGET A. LYONS

### Littoral Luck

Fate and Destiny:  
a perfect sand dollar  
and the dating life

It's not often that I find a treasure on Cowell Beach. Just a stone's throw from the sand, visitors who've had enough of the Boardwalk's roller coasters and deep-fried delicacies pluck the best aquatic jewels out of their high-water resting places. But Santa Cruz has a generous tidal pattern that regularly replenishes the bounty. Nightly surges send enough water up the beach to scour it clean on the way in and deposit new detritus on the way back out. At just the right time, you might find something cool. If you're lucky.

A few days ago, I found a sand dollar—an entirely intact, inch-and-a-half-diameter little gem. It was grayer than any I'd ever seen, and not just because it was wet. I've since let it dry on my nightstand, and it's still slate colored. Like all sand dollars, it has that iconic five-petaled pattern at its center, the one that makes me marvel at evolution's crazy-good design sense. It also has these shadowy striations radiating from its core, a secondary layer of texture that invites some past-life investigation. Who was this creature? How did it end up here? Did it travel a random trajectory or was it destined to be marooned on this particular beach?

Of course, I felt charmed as soon as I spotted it. I took it as some kind of sign that things would finally start looking up for me. After all, I was in the right place at the right time to stumble across this incredible nugget of beauty. That must mean I'm in the right place at the right time—period. Right?

\* \* \*

When I find a sand dollar on the beach, the fragile, sun-bleached skeleton I hold in my hand is called a test. Back when it was a living ocean dweller, that test was covered with little spines, which in turn were covered with little hairs—both features that help explain why this organism gets thrown into the same class as sea urchins. These spines enable the sand dollar to crawl across the ocean floor in search of food. The hairs, called cilia, help it move that food toward and into its mouth, the little hole on the underside of the test, smack-dab in its center.

The test is comprised of plates that, like many beach-combing take-homes, are made of calcium carbonate—shell material. It has holes in it, called pores, and that pentaradial pattern I love so much is actually an

*I often think I'm being punished for ditching all of these nice men, for passing them over like all the other shells I saw on the beach yesterday, the ones that weren't as whole as the sand dollar I picked up.*

arrangement of them. Water flows through the pores, aiding in digestion, gas exchange, and locomotion. Pores help our bodies breathe, but they help these curious creatures move. I wonder if, for them, movement is like breathing.

I have no idea why their skeleton is called a test, despite the internet deep dives I've made in my attempts to find out. I do know, however, that the name somehow feels symbolic to me.

\* \* \*

I'm not the first person to exploit sand dollars for some kind of significance. Some Christian traditions have adopted that five-petaled pattern as a representation of Christ's crucifixion wounds. The stranger on the beach who watched me lay claim to my gray-toned test told me that—probably in a vain attempt to resurrect my long-dormant Catholic impulses. It is also said that sand dollars have the star of Bethlehem on one side and the poinsettia, a traditional Christmas flower, on the other. I suppose this makes them doubly pious, for people with faith.

Then there's the fact that we call them sand dollars. Early beachcombers thought they looked like giant coins,

and everyone knows that money brings luck. Or luck brings money. This is another thing I don't know much about.

\* \* \*

I've never been lucky in money. For a while there, I was lucky in love. Not so much these days. I haven't been on a date in twenty-four months. Sure, I've been busy. And I have moved around a lot, moving being something like breathing for me. But I've also stubbornly refused to use online matchmaking apps, despite my recognition that they're the only way anyone meets someone anymore. All of my recently coupled-up friends found their partners on dating sites, and I am no longer allowed to complain to them about my permanently single status.

I don't want to meet a man through an algorithm. I don't want to analyze calculated narratives or compare checklists generated by a machine. I want magic. I want fate. I want the kind of luck that leads me to a perfect sand dollar on a beautiful May evening.

Of course, I'm not sure I believe in magic or fate. As a result, wanting doesn't seem to be working, and I spend a lot of time walking Cowell Beach alone, searching for treasure.

\* \* \*

Sand dollars are not solitary creatures. They pack themselves tightly into small spaces, sometimes at densities of six hundred or more per square yard. Each organism buries an edge of its disklike body in the sand, making the colony look like an art installation of Frisbees poised precariously on their sides.

I haven't always been the solitary creature I am now. Before I moved to the coast, I was in a series of long-term relationships, all with kindhearted, supportive ski-town men. I ended them because I felt hemmed in, like a hermit crab that needed a larger shell. I assume sand dollars never experience this sensation, since their plates, and therefore their tests, grow with them.

I often think I'm being punished for ditching all of these nice men, for passing them over like all the other shells I saw on the beach yesterday, the ones that weren't as whole as the sand dollar I picked up. None of those guys aced my perfection tests—they weren't fun enough, or spiritual enough, or adventurous enough, or something

enough—so the universe feels the need to show me what life is like for people with exacting standards.

Only, I don't actually think that the universe has a consciousness like that. At least, I don't think I do. Even if it did, it wouldn't be the slightest bit interested in the trajectory of my little life—much less this tiny facet of it. If everything happens for a reason, an idea I once tried to embrace, I'm pretty sure that reason has nothing to do with fulfilling my wishes. But, then again, I still wished on the washed-up sea star I saw on New Year's Day.

I realize that my finding meaning in dead sea creatures is more than a little contradictory.

\* \* \*

One of those nice men was here last week, along with his girlfriend of three years. She's the one who moved in with him six months after we broke up, after I told him that I could never live with someone obsessed by the Illuminati, reptilians, and chemtrails. She's an astrologer. And she's lovely—positive, openhearted, and far more physically beautiful than I was in my prime.

I paid him to help me do a few home improvement projects in my new condo. I let them sleep in my bed and watched them make breakfast together in my kitchen, while I burrowed into my oversized chair with my computer and worked. They went on long beach walks, did yoga in the wet sand, and visited the gluten-free bakeries in town, always moving at about half my speed. They were virtually inseparable, a colony of two. This surprised me, since he and I had had to make time to cross paths when we were together. He'd rarely left his house, and I'd been juggling four jobs, traveling for work, and running off to ski or bike with less-homebound friends.

I thought I would feel sad—or happy, or jealous—as I observed them going about their days. Instead, I felt nothing. They were like another species, one whose anatomy and behaviors were so foreign to me that I might as well have been watching them through the glass at the aquarium. "We're so lucky we found each other," he told me, when I commented that they seemed to be doing well.

\* \* \*

As long as the water is relatively tranquil, sand dollars will stay on their edges, packed into their colonies like upright

dinner plates. When the seas get rough, they lie flat on the ocean floor or even burrow down into the sand. They don't have a lot of predators, but a giant carnivorous fish called the California sheephead will happily munch on a whole array of them, as will the pink sea star, the sand dollar's distant cousin.

If sand dollars find themselves in really turbulent conditions, they get heavier. Adult sand dollars do this by growing heavier tests. Juveniles eat sand grains.

\* \* \*

When I decided to leave that relationship, I took off. I moved to Utah when a friend serendipitously offered me what seemed like a lifeline of a job. When I realized that position was less of a lucky break and more of a way to drown in that friend's ever-growing ocean of financial stress, I drove across the country to visit my parents. On the way back west, I stayed in Austin and Santa Fe, hoping maybe I'd feel some sense of belonging. I didn't, so I finally sat down and made a list of all the qualities I was looking for in a new hometown. Santa Cruz fit the bill, and I landed here, just a few blocks from Cowell Beach, where I walk almost every day. I spent a couple years in a tiny apartment here, trying to make rent payments on freelance job checks and hoping the right gig or the right person would float along and give me a reason to stay. I gave it a couple years before I left. I figured Santa Cruz wasn't the right place, or maybe it wasn't the right time.

I'm back now, though, in this condo that I actually own. It's only a quarter-mile away from my old apartment, which means I can walk on the same stretch of sand. I missed this seaside community while I was gone—the smell of eucalyptus, salt air, and decomposing kelp; the sounds of barking sea lions, breaking waves, and screaming roller coaster riders; and the way the ocean wrinkles itself all the way to the horizon. It's not perfect, but it's pretty close. I guess it passed some sort of test.

"You're putting down roots," the ex-boyfriend said. "That's good." Roots might be an overstatement. It does feel like I have taken on some weight, though. A mouthful of sand, at least.

\* \* \*

“Now that you have a home, it’ll be much easier to meet men,” my friends keep saying. Maybe—although it sure seems like you bump into more people when you’re moving. If you’re in a lot of places over a lot of time, aren’t you more likely to be in the right nexus of the two? Even though human beings are packed like upright sand dollars into this city, I manage to pass entire days without any kind of social contact—which is why I probably need to start internet dating, so a computer program can do for me what opportunity has not. I suppose if I meet someone by swiping right on a logically selected profile, I can finally shake this feeling that forces such as fate and magic exist. That would be progress. Then, when I wonder who I am and how I ended up here, I can just stick to the facts. Sometimes, the seas were tranquil and I lived in a colony. Other times, the swell forced me to burrow in the sand. Neither one is better than the other, despite what I might wish for. There’s no such thing as luck. There’s only personal preference.

I wonder if my sand dollar liked its life on the vertical axis better than its time spent flat on the floor of the Pacific Ocean, if one of those lifestyles felt more right.

\* \* \*

Sand dollars leave their reproduction to chance. They release eggs and sperm into the water and count on the fact that, since they’re living so close together, the tiny cells are bound to find each other and get the job done. I’m not sure what to make of that.

\* \* \*

My beach trinket is sitting on my stainless-steel desk-table now, where its silvery color blends into the metal. Its irregular, pitted texture couldn’t be any more different from the impersonal smoothness of the surface it rests on, however. Even though I cleaned it well, grains of sand fall from its dry mouth every time I pick it up, making gentle tinkling noises as they do. I guess it’s getting lighter.

There’s a band playing at the Boardwalk tonight, on the stage they’ve set up just above the high-tide line. I can’t say I really need to hear their eighties hits retooled for aging voices, but it’s always a fun scene down there—lots of people packed onto the sand, singing, smiling, and swaying to tunes from our collective past. It feels good to be in the crowd, even if I rarely talk to anyone there. The air crackles

with possibility, as teenagers toss tokens into jars and make bets on roulette wheels, hoping they’ll win giant stuffed giraffes to take home.

On my way out the door, I tap my sand dollar—lightly—with my index finger. Just in case.

**Bridget A. Lyons** is a writer and editor living in Santa Cruz, California. A graduate of Harvard University, she holds an MFA from Northern Arizona University and has had previous lives as a middle school teacher, wilderness guide, yoga instructor, energy bar maker, and graphic designer. Lyons is a Pushcart Prize nominee whose work has been published by *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Whitefish Review*, *Hawk and Handsaw*, *Atticus Review*, *Foothill Poetry Journal*, and *Wanderlust*.

## WILLARD DIXON

*Cloudy Horizon*, 2019  
Oil on canvas, 42 x 40 in



COURTESY ANDREA NORRIS GALLERY