

The Shell

I

And then I pressed the shell  
Close to my ear,  
And listened well.

And straightway, like a bell,  
Came low and clear  
The slow, sad murmur of far distant seas,

Whipped by an icy breeze  
Upon a shore  
Windswept and desolate.

It was a sunless strand that never bore  
The footprint of a man,  
Nor felt the weight

Since time began  
Of any human quality or stir,  
Save what the dreary winds and waves incur.

II.

And in the hush of waters was the sound  
Of pebbles, rolling round;  
Forever ~~rolling~~ with a hollow sound:

And bubbling seaweeds, as the waters go,  
Swish to and fro  
Their long cold tentacles of slimy grey;

There was no day;  
Nor ever came a night  
Setting the stars alight

To wonder at the moon:  
Was twilight only, and the frightened croon;  
Smitten to whimpers, of the dreary wind

And waves that journeyed blind...  
And then I loosed my ear. — Oh, it was sweet  
To hear a cart go jolting down the street!

*James Stephens*

---

**Questions:**

1. What do you think happened before the poem began?
2. What does the poet hear in the shell?
3. Which words or phrases express the sounds of those things the poet hears?
4. Why was it "sweet / To hear a cart go jolting down the street!"

**Activity:**

1. Listen to the sounds in a seashell. Write a poem about what you hear, including some indication of your feelings about those sounds.