“What was it like in there?” Jonah looks thoughtful. “Dark,” is all he says at first, but when he’s interviewed by a local newspaper, he points out that the whale’s stomach smelled terrible. “Well, not completely dark,” he adds, when he gives the commencement speech at his old high school. “You see the ribs arched over like . . . like a cathedral, and the whale swallowed some phosphorescent fish.” He’s paid a lot of money to write a magazine article in which he describes building a bed out of abalone shells, and learning to appreciate raw tuna. In his best-selling memoir he goes into detail about the sloshing pools of acid that flooded the stomach when it was digesting, threatening to dissolve him, how he had to balance himself on a mound of shark skulls. He played tiddlywinks with periwinkles, he tells the audience on a talk show, getting a laugh. He doesn’t write the screenplay, but they fly him to Hollywood as a consultant. CNN reports rumors that he made everything up. He doesn’t go to the premiere. He holes up in his apartment with the lights off, eating sardines with his fingers.
When we draw our heads inside, you don’t exist anymore. We hear you out there droning on about this or that, taking notes or threatening something, but we’ve gone back into our shells. The backs of our shells all look alike, but inside each one is different. Mine is currently baby blue with hexagonal patterns and yellow highlights. Most days I’m out swimming, but sometimes I trudge ashore looking for a good place to lay some eggs. If I glimpse you coming my way or if I even see one of your big footprints in the sand, that’s it. I pull inside. You won’t hear a peep out of me, even if you give me a hard kick, or pick me up and turn me over and measure my belly. I seldom snap. And it’s not because I’m afraid of you. I just dislike you. I prefer listening to the echoes of the latest sea music in my shell, or repainting my dome in shades of ocean. When you let me go, I wait patiently until I can’t hear your palaver anymore.