



**Prism**  
*literary-arts magazine ♦ Spring 2000*

# Chambered Nautilus

*2000 Provost's  
Literary Award  
winning poem*

*Spring 2000*

I always enjoyed sleeping  
alone.  
And waking, the way  
the whiteness of the sheets smiles and stretches  
to greet the light without  
a wrinkle in its brow.  
Before they moved him  
to the ward on the hospital's western wing,  
he gave me his volume of Holmes  
and touched his pale lips to my cheek.  
I didn't need the doctor's prognosis,  
dark and vague, to read  
his cool language.  
Thirty years of silent study  
afforded me that skill, at least.  
Long nights, kept awake  
by his snores of academic exhaustion,  
I would try again to solve  
the equation of his neatly proportioned  
dreams, each swelling to overshadow the last  
and shield his fleshy ego from the stinging salt.  
Year by year, I watched the shell thickening, spiraling outward, setting  
his spineless back writhing in sleep.  
I could have told him he would have to leave it  
behind, the mother-of-pearl, the  
logarithms, his precious  
Oliver Wendall  
Holmes, who now lives in the bottom of my reading basket  
under the weight of a collapsing Bible.  
These days, watching the sunlight rustle  
the bed curtains seems  
morality and devotion enough.  
And why should I waste time with the words  
and blueprints of others lives?  
These mornings are for me to build,  
these gleaming chambers are mine.

~Tulley Long