Chambered Nautilus

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 Wendell
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