Mark Twain's life was built upon, influenced, and motivated by his love for the river. However, Twain was to discover that learning to “read” the water required that he sacrifice and forever abandon the romance of the river. He reflected, “In truth, the passenger who could not read this book saw nothing but all manner of pretty pictures in it, painted by the sun and shaded by the clouds, whereas to the trained eye these were not pictures at all, but the grimmest and most dead-earnest of reading matter.”

As we introspectively examine the kaleidoscope of our own lives, we may discover a pattern similar to Twain’s. Fragile fragments and perfect pieces of time slowly and precisely create the images of our dreams, memories, and perceptions. Breathless, we carefully view the delicate design, marvelling at its existence, believing that something so perfect, so vibrant, will last forever. Yet the imperceptible effects of time and experience gradually change our perception of the pattern, shifting the shards of the images, until our illusions, like Twain’s, can never be reclaimed.

“I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me, and I had never seen anything like this at home.”—Twain

She trotted along the damp, packed sand, silver bucket clanking comfortably against sturdy legs just four years old. As she ran, her short-cropped auburn hair bounced above wide gray-green eyes. They reflected a world that was also gray and green at this early ethereal hour. Her grandfather had told her that the fog liked soft and quiet colors best of all so it silently covered all of the garish red, yellow and purple of the day to save until the sun came out and would then give them back to her to play with during her bright afternoons. He was right, of course. He always was. The mist was thick that day and it had erased all but the gentle hues so that the world seemed soft to her as she ran past gray-brown rocks, heard the hush of gray-green water meeting pale sand and felt the gray mist comb through her hair and wrap around her small shoulders. She had learned to welcome the fog because he loved it so and because it separated him and their adventures together from the rest of the immense world.

He was just ahead, standing on their rock, waiting for her. “I’ll go on ahead and scout out the rock for us,” he had said. “You bring the bucket and come. I’ll be waiting.” So she had followed him, falling farther and farther behind as she poked sea grass into cushioned anemones to watch them squirt seawater in reply, to tug unsuccessfully at lumpy barnacles with fat hands, and gather bits of shells and colored glass to put in the bucket.

The glass was her favorite—small, bright sand-smoothed jewels of amber, green, white, blue, and, if she was lucky, purple. When she first asked him where her jewels came from, he told her that they were pieces of glass floats used by Japanese fishermen who lived on the other side of her ocean. They kept the nets from sinking into the sea, he said, and only once in a very great while one would break loose from the net and drift away, just past the outstretched fingers of a fisherman, and begin its journey across the waves to her beach. She imagined that they must look rather like soap bubbles that she blew with a wand into the air, only these must be hard and smooth to touch, like great glass beads. She liked to think of them rolling merrily under and over the waves toward her, sparkling purple, gold and green rainbows onto the water as they came. It did not matter that, at some sudden, unpredictable moment, the weight of the great gray sea would become too unbearable for the delicate glass and the float would burst into a hundred colored slivers, sprinkled on, then sinking beneath, the heaving desert of water. No, it did not matter, for then it was even more magical that the fragments, tumbled and worn for days, even years, he said, beneath a deep, mysterious sea, would one day splash with a burst of color onto her beach.
and lie still and sparkling, waiting for her bucket.

She reached the rock and looked up. It rose out of the sea, a giant brown sandcastle, big as a room. Seagulls unfurled their wings like white banners on the pinnacle far above her. The old man bent down, his eyes smiling, to take her tiny hand and pull her up to where he stood. His white hair lifted and floated with the mist, a gentle reminder of the two generations that separated them. Gathering her to him, he balanced the bucket on a ledge behind them. “Buckets have a way,” he said, “of jumping into the water when you least expect it.” They sat, safely wrapped against the world as he held her tight against his damp wool jacket, protected and hidden by the fog.

The sea, she thought, was like a soft, gray blanket that reached clear to the edge of the sky, rolling, lifting and falling with every turn of whatever was beneath it. Below their feet, the waves rhythmically lifted the edge of the blanket just enough so that she could peer beneath it into a wet, green world that, just as quickly, disappeared when the blanket dropped. It fascinated her.

With childish impulsiveness she turned, grasped the bucket by its silver handle and leaned over the rock as far as she could, hoping to capture and keep a small part of that invisible world forever. As the sea, instantly menacing, gaped open and rushed up to meet her, he grabbed for her legs and held on, pulling her back to the safety of the rock, his warm, rough coat and smiling eyes.

The bucket was gone. He carefully cupped her face in his hard, smooth hands and spoke silent sermons with his eyes. “Don’t worry about your bucket,” he said. “Won’t the fishermen in Japan be surprised...”

“*The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book—a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger.... There never was so wonderful a book written by man.... The passenger who could not read it was charmed with a peculiar sort of faint dimple on its surface ... but to the pilot it was an italicized passage... for it meant that a wreck or a rock was buried there that could tear the life out of the strongest vessel that ever floated.*”—Twain

She raced along the water’s edge, long legs defying the pull of wet sand and entanglements of seaweed spilled on the shore. He tore after her, young and defiant, both of them one year short of twenty summers spent among the sun and the waves. It was sunset and the air was an ephemeral golden substance that bathed their skin in translucent shades of rose and amber. The light transformed each pebble to a bronze nugget, the shadowy chasms between the boulders to chiseled onyx and the rivulets of the receding tide to strands of pewter. Every minute detail seemed clarified and intensified, standing out in stark relief, outlined in gold and shadowed in silver. As she ran, tiny pieces of colored glass caught the last rays of the setting sun, sending prisms of light through the waves that washed over them.

She was standing on the rock waiting for him when he arrived, both still breathless from the run, and reached for his hand to pull him up to where she stood. His hair, damp now, curled like rust shavings; hers flickered around her face like copper flames. “Here,” he said, “for our ceremony.” With mock formality, he handed her a bottle, a scrap of paper, and a pencil. She carefully balanced all three on the ledge behind them, weighting the paper with the pencil next to the bottle. “We must make a ceremony of this day,” she had said. “We need to seal this day against time so that we will never forget.”

They sat pressed against one another, now another wool jacket rough against her face, her hand steady on his knee, safely wrapped against the world in the light and the wind and the spray. She told him of glass floats on the water and of hunting for tiny jewels among the shells as they watched the molten sea rise and fall and boil around them.

Impulsively, she turned and reached for the bottle, paper and pencil behind them, hoping to capture and keep a small part of the moment, to lock it away where time and other people and
places could not destroy it. So they wrote words old and wise, full of someday and always, scribbled their names, and sealed it in the bottle. They stood and, holding her hand for balance, he leaned as far over the edge of the rock as he dared and flung the bottle against the sky. It turned and flashed once, twice, in the fading light before breaking the surface of the water. Straining in the dim light to watch its path, they saw the tiny, fragile ship rise on the crest of a swell for only a brief, triumphant moment before the sea, instantly menacing, gaped open and rushed to meet the bottle, crushing it against the rocks, splitting it beneath its suffocating weight. The fragments flashed dully beneath the surface before they, with the paper, disappeared.

The bottle was gone. She leaned against him, both of them silent, watching the place where it disappeared. The sun slid from the sky, snuffing out the flame which had burned so brightly a moment before, leaving behind an empty gray room of sea and sky. She turned to face him, cupping his face in an outstretched hand and shook her head. “Never...”

“As I have said, a day came when I began to cease noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river’s face....No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish ... I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone ...”—Twain

Slowly, with measured steps, I trudged deliberately along the shore just out of reach of the incoming tide. Today there was no hurry; no one waited, no one followed. The late-afternoon sky was flat and gray, heavy with rain, and the wind blew intensely, stirring and beating the water into frantic waves that gathered, then heaved themselves ever higher onto the shore. No jewels today, I noticed. The sea had neatly and unceremoniously buried them in an unmarked grave. The rock waited at the end of the beach, now almost an island, as the time of high tide approached.

Reaching its base, I fitted feet and fingers into the familiar crevices and pulled myself to the top. The air was filled with great gusts of spray as the sea fought against the rock, beating it into submission as the storm approached. The wind roared in my ears, tearing at hair and clothes. The wool jacket provided little comfort but I pulled it close around me and carefully balanced myself on the damp ledge.

I stared below my feet into a menacing mass of steel-gray water, gaping wide with dark intentions then snapping shut with grim determination, and remembered now invisible buckets and bottles buried somewhere beneath in a watery vault as impenetrable as steel. I thought of soft mists and jewel-flecked mornings, of old papers and wise words, of sunsets that smoldered over a fiery sea and pronounced a benediction on all who came to partake.

As I moved my arms to draw the damp wool closer against the cold, my hand scraped the rock ledge and salt water stung the wound. The cold was merciless, crawling beneath the protective covering that now seemed so useless, so inadequate a protection against the gaping emptiness inside. Standing, stumbling, I turned away from the sea.

You were right, Samuel Clemens. The poetry has gone.