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The Aquarium

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DORA MALECH

The Aquarium

My ticket paid and ripped, I wander under
water, through spines, speckles, snouts, suction cups.
Around one corner, I swallow abalones
whole. Around another, freed of my blood,
my bones, and brains, I find myself now blessed
with tentacles and toxins. Here, my left eye
migrates toward my right and I swim sideways.
There, because I fight when caught, I'm sought
for sport. Voyeur, I watch writ large two seahorses
making, if not love, at least new seahorses.
The video loops and loops and loops before
I let them go. Creatures like tumors, creatures
like sunspots, pulsing and drifting, I come
to at the lip of the "touch pool,"
an invitation to recall my hands.
Such pleasure to pry starfish painted by nature
to summon sunset from Plexiglas habitat
and imagine invasion renders a galaxy
for a moment urgent. I stand with others
poking snails now, nursing fantasies
of science and agency, moving creatures
from one corner of a glorified dish to another.
An older woman with an official lapel pin
shows a family the crab that decorates itself,
adorns its shell "like a lady might, or"—
playing to the crowd—"some gentlemen might
too." What in the wild would be wound of
other organisms—sponges, algae,
anemones—a crown to hide beneath,
a beauty born as byproduct of need,
here's a tangle of string, aesthetic accident
of instinct. Adjacent this pliable seascape
that merits the docent's discussion, other tanks.
In one, a baby shark, or shark writ small,
a shape I know to know as danger and
here what wonder right within my grasp,

form I feel I've come to touch, but when I lift
the lid and reach into the water there
erupts such a uniformed reprimand
I drop the lid, and not quite run, but "exit,"
the voice explaining in my wake "we had
an incident." This anecdote does not
surface into story, sure, no great scarring
to me nor shark nor tank nor institution,
my friends merely amused to find me hiding
by the otters, face pressed so close to my
reflection as to fog their seamless play.
But why so much to touch and the *don't touch*
right beside and signless? And why the rules
of the "touch pool" clear to everyone but me?
Wishing and wishing and never well enough
alone, outside, my eyes adjust, light left
upon an ocean too deep to fathom, light
right to shine a shallow fountain's change.