The Aquarium

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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.