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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.