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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter I- The Aquarium

Call me Isaac. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would obtain a small bottle of brandy and visit the aquarium. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. To shrug off the cares and concerns of this terrestrial existence by entering the dark aquarium, the dank and begloomed tunnels lined with windows into the alien undersea world, it is a fine thing indeed, made finer by disengaging the clutch of sobriety and coasting along in a state of neutral drunkenness. Any sight, no matter how mundane, can be appealingly gilded when viewed through the lens of alcohol, while the extraordinary viewed under similar circumstances will take on the air of the divine. I can think of few more illuminating ways to spend a quiet afternoon, fewer still so inexpensive.

The aquarium itself is the pride of Manteo, a pentangular edifice of some obscure Masonic origin, allegedly constructed on a nexus of several ley lines. Upon

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entering the building, one feels an immediate and intentional sense of vertigo as he is greeted by the suspended skeleton of Old Magellan, an ironically titled blue whale who, some years earlier, lost contact with his pod, and, in an attempt to regroup with his lost cousins, somehow found himself inching through the shallows of the James River ten miles inland. Though there was initial talk of hauling Old Magellan back out to sea, it was ultimately decided that his vast size, coupled with his limited intellect (as evidenced by his startlingly poor instinctual capabilities), would render the hauling a fool's errand, and he would be of more utility as a scientific tool and low-cost food source for the impoverished riverside denizens. And indeed, many a James River fisherman still sweeps his shack with a broom made from Old Magellan's bristly baleen, whistling a jaunty tune with a whale-skin cap heavy upon his head. Meanwhile, the skeleton hangs ominously in the aquarium's echoing foyer, the long serpentine vertebrae pointing the visitor towards the ticket-stand, where he may purchase an affordable license to view a selection of Neptune's menagerie.

I placed my nickel upon the ticket-boy's counter, keeping my left arm tucked tight to support and conceal the

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brandy-bottle hidden within my coat. "Pleasant weather, eh?" I remarked to the pale lad.

"I suppose so," he replied glumly, handing me the ticket and immediately turning to make some mark in his logbook, a record of my patronage. I consider it quite the pity that so many of our youths do not appreciate nor take pride in their work, instead offering their customers bored, cow-like expressions of callow indifference. I am of the opinion that those who do not take easily to the work-a-day world would be better served rejecting it entirely, and I am proud to say that I practice my preachings.

Having received my permit from the doughy lad, I stepped boldly into first chamber, a modest room containing a horseshoe-shaped tank of starfish, urchins, and, recursively enough, an assortment of horseshoe crabs. The tank was set just above waist-level and open-topped, allowing the curious amateur marine biologist opportunity to plunge his hands into the water and grope the sea's more resilient fauna. I was alone in the chamber, as luck would have it, and after checking to affirm that the ticket-boy had resumed his distracted study of the cargo beneath his fingernails, I pulled the brandy-bottle from my coat and took a long pull. Immediately I felt its palliative warmth radiate from my core and filter through my extremities, and

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a sense of goodwill began to burble up from my heart. I replaced the bottle in my coat's inner pocket and rolled up my sleeves, spying a sizeable horseshoe crab trundling in my general direction. I reached my bare arms into the water and hoisted him up by the lip of his armored face-plate. Such a sight! A living fossil, a clicking, writhing mass of tiny claws and impenetrable shields! Old horseshoe is not made of common iron, but of copper; its tincture blues his blood. He is oceanic royalty, a living mystery, an ancient, a true ambassador of the sea. I cradled him to my breast.

"Friend horseshoe crab! What wonders have you bespied from your watery home? What secrets do you carry, locked safe within your scutum? A penny for your thoughts; I'd offer it up, but I know you to be a reticent type. Oh, if we should—"

"Sir." The baleful squeak of the ticket-boy! "Sir, please don't remove the animals from the tank. There is a sign."

"Is there?" I said, heaving the crab back into his tank with a punctuating splash. "Then perhaps you should cite yourself, you creature, for your fishy complexion makes me wonder which of these tanks you crawled from!"

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The ticket-boy turned away and muttered some unintelligible piece of rudeness, which I took as my cue to delve further into the aquarium's mysterious depths.

The second chamber, much larger than the first, was appointed with stuffed and mounted sharks of all types. Here the stately nurse shark; above it, a menacing hammerhead, his small mouth filled with vicious needles. By his side, to provide contrast, the diminutive cookie-cutter, that leather-punch of the sea, a socialist parasite who takes his pound of flesh in his interlocking jaws and, satisfied, leaves the table. Here the thresher, that disproportionate oddity, the upper section of his tailfin near as massive in length as the entirety of his remainder. My favorite, however, mounted between a sinister mako and his cohort the bull, a frilled shark, a true rarity, the oldest of them all and looking much the worse for it, spindly and corpse-like with ragged teeth like tiny barbed ziggurats. Such strange creatures! When one gazes into the shark's black eye, he must wonder at the intent of the creator of such a beast, or perhaps question that artisan's sanity!

Beneath the mounted sharks I spied a patch of sharkskin, bolted to the wall and worn white from years of repeated rubbings. It was, I suppose, a teaching aid, a way

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to let the curious lay hands on these creatures in safety and sample their odd texture. As I rubbed the rough skin with my right hand, raising my brandy-bottle to my lips with the left, I heard a keening coming from the adjacent tunnels, the wail of a tormented wraith! I was caught off guard, I admit, as I had previously assumed the only bipedal inhabitants of the aquarium that day were myself and the ticket-taking lump in the foyer. Though the moans of agony were troubling to the extreme, I found myself grappling with an overweening curiosity. It couldn't be denied; I steeled myself with another quick belt of brandy and descended the short flight of stairs into the observation tunnel.

The tunnel was long and winding, ominously dark. No bulbs or lanterns hung from the ceiling; the only illumination was that which shone through the back-lit aquarium windows which lined the left wall. The only sound, the gurgling of the tank-pumps, and, of course, that poor soul's wailing. I hurried past the tanks in search of that tortured spirit, casting furtive glances at the creatures to my left, the sea-basses and sea-wrasses, red drums and moray eels, strange spiny lobsters dwelling within rocks a-quiver with anemonic life. Wonders, wonders, but no time for them now; a child of God was in need of succor!

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As I rounded a corner past a tank of lionfish, those poison beauties, I caught glimpse of the source of those gusts of sorrow and stopped as if fastened to the spot. This man was no mere voice of sorrow; he was sorrow made manifest. A tall man he was, though frail to the extreme, his long grey hair and scraggly beard unable to conceal his hollow cheeks and bony chin. His right eye was gone, or injured at least, concealed by a black patch; his right hand, gone too, replaced with a brass hook honed to a razor's keenness. His clothes were a-tatter, his wool pea-coat an antique patchwork, less coat than patches, a Garment of Theseus. His pants were similarly torn and frayed, and yellowed toes wiggled visibly through a hole in his thin right boot. He wavered on his feet, a whiskey bottle clutched tight in his left hand, stirring a brief horror to flit through my mind: my God, be this a vision of mine own grim future?

The man tapped his hook against the glass; the painted triggerfish within darted about fearfully. He spoke, his voice cracking and piteous:

"Have you seen her, you gay harlots? You striped and speckled sea-whores? Mary, by name, a mere four letters, though what power they contain! Lord hath but four letters, yet their power stirs men to action! Fuck also. A rose by

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any other name, so they say, yet no word could contain her beauty, her wit, her sensuality. My own words fail, certainly, mere shibboleths for agony and loathing. I ask again, have you seen her? You painted viragos have two eyes, I but one, and oh but I may yet pluck out its twin! What use is this eye should it never look upon my sweet Mary again? I curse it! What use is this remaining hand, should it never again brush her locks from her cheek? I reject you, you crabbed claw! What good is this heart, oh God, that beats only for Mary, pounding her name in Morse's Code? I pray it will one day beat near her heart once more; failing that, may it be pierced by Palnetoke's silver arrow! Oh, you withered husk, I damn you, and if in doing so I damn myself, may I further damn the whole bleak world and every rotten son of a bitch in it! In taking Mary from me, this world has shown me no mercy, and I'll show it the same! An eye for an eye? Fie! I'll take the whole body! Should any man oppose me, I'll take this claw and rend the flesh from his bones, I'll stab and puncture and slash and whittle and—"

At this point during his bereaved lunatic soliloquy, the broken Cyclops began to stagger and gyrate in a most unseemly fashion, whipping his brass claw through the air in a pantomime of grotesque violence while weeping

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pathetically. I briefly considered approaching him, offering up some comfort and small dose of compassionate wisdom, but upon further examination, I decided the most advantageous course of action would be to depart as speedily and silently as possible. The rag-man, though frail, seemed whipped into some potentially hazardous frenzy, and if he were capable of mustering such enmity for the beautiful and innocent triggerfish, I imagined that my presence would only engender more strident vitriol, and possibly another, lengthier monologue. I retraced my course through the aquarium, bid adieu to Friend Horseshoe, Dough-Lad, and Old Magellan, and strode through the exit doors and back into the light of day.