

AGGRESSIVE MIMICRY

When the big blue octopus, *o. cyanea*,
disappears each night into the warm salt bath
of sleep, clinging fast to the glass of her tank
as if against the ceaseless tug of absent sea,
she guides us, her audience, on a whiplash
tour of sites unseen. At home, wild, her blank

canvas turns seamless context, neither self nor art
but their inverse, a mimesis that, captive, stripped
of urgency, exigence, might smack of cheap
pyrotechnics or prismatic self-regard
were she awake. Wired by instinct to decrypt
everything we see, never mind how deep

it swims, how alien it seems, when her body
parrots background that is not there—how *mottled*
seagrass in tidal breeze becomes *coral's motley*
copycat, a sub-pelagic tragicomedy
of lights and darks—we intuit the same bottled
subjectivity uncorked each week in guilt-free

sessions on our therapist's couch. *She's dreaming.*
So says the craggy cheer of this PBS
voiceover. He's peered square into the bitumen-
black box of her *mollusca* brain and found teeming
interior life. Or, more likely, *thinks* he has—
it's hardly a surprise when our all-too-human

search for truth locates something human blinking back.
Natural, even, I think, if by natural
we mean selective. The throbbing ommatophore
of her distant kin (eons-removed), the sad-sack
amber snail—they pinwheel and rave, fluoresce and swirl—
spur wide-eyed wonder, sure, but pricks of fear,

as well: that what makes us noteworthy, makes us *us*,
is not (how to put this) *ours*. Like so much brilliance,
the snail's story begins in filth and appetite
beyond its meager grasp. There is a ruthlessness
called genius and *snail* is the vessel. When, by chance,
it swallowed the fecund shit of a parasite-

stricken swallow (though any songbird would suffice)
it became a hatchery for nursling flatworms.

This DIY discothèque is all *their* doing,
a reno so thorough even instinct's revised:
once wallflower, shadow-dweller, our snail now warms
itself on risk's utmost leaf. Saw that on BOING BOING.

Repurposed, these snails—part fluke, the rest slug-ish—or,
more precisely, their pulsing eyes, are meant to ape
a caterpillar's brisk (by comparison) inch-
by-inching. Within the ravenous cynosure
of a common raven, they're near enough in shape,
stripe to look the part, standing still. It's fucking *cringe-*

worthy, this theft of a self we know naught about—
we're caught off-guard, upended by gravity
long-assumed then (poof!) gone. Zombified, Day-Glo,
succineidae scatters its seeds of primal doubt,
re-writes grit-and-gumption as passivity:
our snail no longer moves across that slight swallow

branch but now, instead, *is moved*. Driven. I get it.
When I was twelve, my Pops, up late for a Larkin-
esque leak, found me squat atop the travertine sink,
inspecting my scalp in the rarefying light
of the vanity. Guile-free, as-yet-undarkened
by sex, and *still* I so feared the demonic ink

of Satan's brand I staged the self-same inspection
most nights for weeks. Bless my heart. Just one sleepover
screening of THE OMEN (☆☆☆☆) had left its mark:
this nightly sacrament, less *sacred reflection*
than inaugural, baptismal dive to recover
data from seafloor wreckage. God? Another shark

in the water. I wanted to know why I did
the awful things I did even when I didn't
want to want to do them. But who here doesn't?
Weeks later, behind the wheel, my dad half-chided,
half-counseled me about the (ahem) incident:
your mind will play tricks on you. And so my descent

pushed deeper, dismal: who was I if not my mind?
Now I know. A toy-sized Cartesian with early-
onset existential panic, undiagnosed.
First, the good news: the snail doesn't die. What's left behind
re-sprouts eyes, sallies forth, though it's paid too dearly
just to prove my point. I've always been a bad host,

always that last, unwelcome guest in my own home.
You'll learn to ignore it. Or so shrugged my father,
battling storm-slick 1, to Wonderland Roller Rink
and all my friends. The wipers' weary metronome
swept *away, away* the polyrhythmic patter
of the rain. It hurt to feel. And it hurt to think.

Poor Pops. How do you soothe a child sick with nothing
but himself? And what's that *it* I seemed born to lose?
I'm on the case. And like any dogged gumshoe,
I follow my nose—*tell-tale scent, rank self-loathing*—
to where- and whomever it leads. Spoiler: all clues
point inward. We're not the man we thought we knew.

Case closed. But not quite *solved*. Familiar questions lurk
in nature's every recess. Octopi (-puses?)
boast two hearts, a brain in each inquiring arm,
though the riddle, I think, is how this latticework
of sovereign cells never (*never*) falls to pieces.
She spills her ink, simply disappears, when alarmed.