

touch tank

Kids in the touch tank flay out their dirtied palms
to the rays, to the bamboos and epaulettes and zebras,
to their smooth skin, bare fingers traced along sides,
along backs. Mouths full of teeth and angels
with barbed, stinging ends, these things were not meant
for fingernails, for calluses, for dried out winter skin,
four knuckled and small. There are signs all over the tank:
They bite. Use a flat, steady palm
along their backs. Do not wiggle your fingers.
Do not move. Caution: Wild animals.
They bite.

And even with the warning posted up the walls, the children
roll their sleeves up to their shoulders and steady
their always moving hands so the sharks can come up
and feel love through stillness, through warmth against
regulated water, through their flayed, dirtied palms,
and the children grow wide eyed and loving for things
with more teeth than they could ever imagine,
more than what they have in their baby-toothed mouths.

The sharks and the rays learn touch. The sharks and the rays learn
that there is a world outside of the negatives of their mouths.
Over, and over, and over again,
outside of their mouths
and into something they have no name for.
Only feelings, only warm, only still.