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To Make A Shell

Anything that makes a shell can make a pearl. I spend three hours in the Field Museum of Natural History, three hours reading the wall text and watching the films and moving from darkened chambers to brighter ones and back to dim and repeat; three hours of history and ecology and jewelry and all I carry out with me is this: anything that makes a shell, can make a pearl. There was something, too, about pearl divers, about oyster farms, about half-pearls; but as I leave the exhibition, the details are already hazy. More memorable is the exhibition gift shop I've only waked through: a full-on jewelry store with a few books, the novel *A Pearl*, and just strings upon strings of pearls in white and lavender and silver and green. I try to remember what I so recently read, about how pearls become all their different hues, but it is too late. I have not even left the museum, but that explanation, like most of the exhibition, has already slipped away.

A finished exhibition routinely takes up hundreds of square feet, is months even years in the making. Thinking about that exhibition of pearls, I think about all the research time, all the materials and design costs, all the administrative efforts to shuttle loan forms and insurance statements and condition reports back and forth. I think about the crating and de-crating until hundreds of items are in place and there are alarms to go off and guards to ask that you not stand so close. What a preponderance of infrastructure, and yet for all that, if all goes well, I walk away with a sentence. One sentence! It's a lot of theater to deliver one line. But that one line is—at least it can be—absolutely everything.

Impressions are a special province of the museum. There's simply too much on offer to absorb, even in the smallest museums, and so the specifics tend to dissolve, reduce, cloud together. What's left is a pastiche of information and edification, the high points and the boring stuff all leveled into a comfortable buzz. It is to be expected. But what's interesting is the rare instance that escapes the mélange. Occasionally, one meets an idea so new or so foreign, so absolutely strange and charmed that it resists digestion, cannot be parsed or rephrased, but sticks in your mind whole. I've met them in various forms, but for me, those resonant moments almost always come in sentences—in single, striking phrases that hold indelibly, intact.

The Audubon Insectarium has custom bug chandeliers, a theater with aggressively vibrating seats, and a garden with a koi pond where a butterfly will likely land on your shoulder, if you wait a while, even if you are a twitchy second grader and all the butterflies seem to be landing on your little sister. But in all the Insectarium, better even than the list of official state insects, what's astounding is this: *all arthropods molt*.

The docent who imparts this fact to me is middle-aged and wearing a safari-worthy khaki shirt with the Insectarium logo embroidered over the pocket. She sits at a little tan folding table that is as temporary and unassuming as a lemonade stand. The table itself is empty, save her folded hands and a Plexiglas box with what appears to be a live tarantula, but is actually its molt. The molt is just as fuzzy and fearsome as a living specimen, except that observed over time, the molt remains perfectly still, spread out in the case like a tiny bearskin rug.

How, I wondered, was it possible I had lived three decades without knowing, without someone having told me that *all arthropods molt*? Sure as a snake sheds its skin. Which meant the wispy spiders I'd seen dead on my windowsills or blown into corners weren't spiders at all, but their husks! I may have squealed. How much better was the world for knowing that, if you're careful, you can coax a molting tarantula out of its skin until it stands next to its pelt like a twin, one vessel full and one empty?

How curious that the first of these indelible sentences to catch my attention was imperfect in its phrasing—which is to say I don't remember the unforgettable sentence, not exactly, but I've never forgotten the thought.

At the time, perhaps it is there still, the Museum of Science and Industry had fabricated an over-sized model of the human heart. It stood as tall as I did, would have held me in a single chamber if I could have curled up inside. It was red and round, and somewhere in the heart fun-facts printed alongside it, all of them printed in blue, was a statement to the effect that every hour a person spends exercising correlates to an extra hour of life expectancy. As if time could stand still. As if it were free. As if you might run and run and never die unless you stopped to rest. I added it up: six years, maybe. More, maybe.

And now one of my favorite things in any museum anywhere is the *Tragedy* button in the Laysan Island Diorama in the Hageboeck Hall of Birds. I love that there is a button marked "Tragedy." I love that it is red. I love that you can push it, and that if you do, a recorded voice will grimly describe wholesale extinction and decimation and then

characterize the non-native rabbits responsible for it as “nibbling their way to oblivion.” It’s so perfectly absurd. Tragedy marked as something isolated and tidy and dry. As if anything awful could be labeled so simply. As if anyone would opt for tragedy in the first place, select it from an array of choices, and so neatly begin the fall.

And yet I do. I push it repeatedly. Away from the museum, I recite it to other people. The language is almost laughably flip, yet it confronts what is harsh and unbearable and desperately sad. I adore it. If there was no diorama, if there was no museum there at all, just a red tragedy button and that five word phrase, I would be no less delighted. If I had to, I would even give up the red and the button, so long as I could save what is said. I would miss the exhibition, mind you, the dark paneled wood and the circle view, but none of that is so easily carried.

A great beauty of language is its currency, how tidily it travels. Museum language, however, is a curious case. Museum language is by its very design posted in one place. From there it might illuminate something more distant, but otherwise it never travels, instead stays still and fixed, embalmed in laminate, and remains preciesely where you found it.

But if it is immovable, it is also impermanent. Much museum text lives only as long as its exhibition. Indeed, there’s no guarantee a given line from the wall or a label exists anywhere else at all. Sure, it might have stowed away on an exhibition card or in a coffee table book, might be buried in an archive or floating somewhere online. In this day and age, you’d hope there’s a file saved somewhere. But not infrequently, you’d be

surprised how often, it goes up and comes down, and usually that's all. And that, usually, is enough.

Yet as ephemeral as it is, sometimes the language, some bit of it, lasts. The right sentence can eclipse the marvels of a year's worth of museum going. And one sentence from a three hour visit, well that's a magnificent compression, an absolute bargain! And, oh, how glorious it is to carry one such sentence, to take it away—and so take it as your own, and with it make the world anew.

Anything that makes a shell can make a pearl. *Anything*. Including you (if you can make a shell), because pearls are made out of the exact same stuff as shells. Oysters may be iconic because their particular gastronomical set up makes it especially likely they'll end up with the stray irritant to start a pearl, but all shell-makers can do it. Imagine lobster pearls, for instance. Mussel pearls, small and shining. Snails, now that you know, the very ones oozing over your garden right now, may be harboring pearls of their own.