

“Sanctuary” by Donika Kelly

The tide pool crumples like a woman
into the smallest version of herself,
bleeding onto whatever touches her.

The ocean, I mean, not a woman, filled
with plastic lace, and closer to the vanishing
point, something brown breaks the surface—human,

maybe, a hand or foot or an island
of trash—but no, it’s just a garden of kelp.
A wild life.

This is a prayer like the sea
urchin is a prayer, like the sea
star is a prayer, like the otter and cucumber—

as if I know what prayer means.

I call this the difficulty of the non-believer,
or, put another way, waking, every morning, without a god.

How to understand, then, what deserves rescue
and what deserves to suffer.

Who.

Or should I say, what must
be sheltered and what abandoned.

Who.

I might ask you to imagine a young girl,
no older than ten but also no younger,
on a field trip to a rescue. *Can you*

see her? She is led to the gates that separate
the wounded sea lions from their home and the class.
How the girl wishes this measure of salvation for herself:

to claim her own barking voice, to revel
in her own scent and sleek brown body, her fingers
woven into the cyclone fence.