Flounder

BY NATASHA TRETWEY

Here, she said, put this on your head. She handed me a hat. You ’bout as white as your dad, and you gone stay like that.

Aunt Sugar rolled her nylons down around each bony ankle, and I rolled down my white knee socks letting my thin legs dangle, circling them just above water and silver backs of minnows flitting here then there between the sun spots and the shadows.

This is how you hold the pole to cast the line out straight. Now put that worm on your hook, throw it out and wait.

She sat spitting tobacco juice into a coffee cup. Hunkered down when she felt the bite, jerked the pole straight up reeling and tugging hard at the fish that wriggled and tried to fight back. A flounder, she said, and you can tell ’cause one of its sides is black.

The other side is white, she said. It landed with a thump. I stood there watching that fish flip-flop, switch sides with every jump.
Tracy K. Smith,

Political Poem

If those mowers were each to stop
    at the whim, say, of a greedy thought,
and then the one off to the left

were to let this arm float up, stirring
    the air with that wide, slow, underwater
gesture meaning Hello! and You there!

aimed at the one more than a mile away
    to the right. And if he in his work were to pause,
catching that call by sheer wish, and send

back his own slow one-armed dance,
    meaning Yes! and Here! as if threaded
to a single long nerve, before remembering

his tool and shearing another message
    into the earth, letting who can say how long
graze past until another thought, or just the need to know

might make him stop and look up again at the other,
    raising his arm as if to say something like Still?
    and Oh! and then to catch the flicker of joy

rise up along those other legs and flare
    into another bright Yes! that sways a moment
In the darkening air, their work would carry them

into the better part of evening, each mowing
    ahead and doubling back, then looking up to catch
sight of his echo, sought and held

in that instant of common understanding
    the God and Speed of it coming out only after
both have turned back to face the sea of Yet

and Slow. If they could, and if what glimmered
    like a fish were to dart back and forth across
the wide wordless distance, the day, though gone

would never know the ache of being done.
    If they thought to, or would, or even half-wanted,
their work—the humming human engines

pushed across the grass, and the grass, blade
    after blade, assenting—would take forever.
But I love how long it would last.