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Northern Pike

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FLEDA BROWN

Northern Pike

Just past the railroad bridge
over the Green River, the deep pool—
dragonflies and white moths—
where you can see the huge
fish hovering. And Zach
with his skinny arms, leaning,
and the whack of the line,
the wrenching. I wish I could
save him from his nightmares,
his waking fear of muggings,
of bombs, of what there is
legitimately to be afraid of.
Up came the pike, nearly three
feet long, teeth set on the line.
I didn't see this. Zach came back
with the fact of it in his face,
terror and the joy of terror,
the pike down there in his soul,
making up its mind without
thinking, moving up and down
like a submarine by shifting
molecules of gas from its blood
to its swim bladder, not a motion
of the body involved, waiting
to clamp fish, frogs, children,
sideways in its teeth, nothing
to do with consciousness,
with will, and here is Zach
to tell me, as if I hadn't been there
myself, watching the worst
come up because I fished it
up out of its waiting and almost
went down with it, to the green

and gloom, to the churning
ghosts. As if I hadn't won, too,
when the line snapped,
the weight of it lasting forever
in my skinny arms.