

From *Florida Straits*, by Gregory Byrd

Tarpon

Mrs. Palumbo made roses out of scales
the size of my small hands.
She made rose after rose
and set them in driftwood
and even the tourists who bought them
didn't believe the petals
came from these big fish.
Even I didn't know what she did
with the dead fish men brought her.

Then Dad and I found a four footer on the rocks
and carried it to the old woman's back yard.
She must have seen the fish,
or us walking past the living room window,
for she came out in her old butcher's apron
carrying a bucket of water and bleach.
She sat and pulled each scale from its place,
soaked it in the bucket with the others and spread
them across her concrete dock to dry in the sun.
When she finished, Dad and I dumped
the carcass for the stone crabs.
The next morning I found that she had pieced
each scale into petals until a translucent
rose bloomed on every dead
piece of buttonwood near her.

Now, when I drift in my boat across shallow flats
or fish the cool residential canals
I do not think of the way tarpon
will burst the surface for a sharp fly,
the way they will strip line and burn a drag,
but of Mrs. Palumbo's slow and spotted hands
that made death blossom.