

## BEHAVIOUR OF FISH IN AN EGYPTIAN TEA GARDEN

As a white stone draws down the fish  
she on the seafloor of the afternoon  
draws down men's glances and their cruel wish  
for love. Slyly her red lip on the spoon

slips-in a morsel of ice-cream; her hands  
white as a milky stone, white submarine  
fronds, sink with spread fingers, lean  
along the table, carmined at the ends.

A cotton magnate, an important fish  
with great eyepouches and a golden mouth  
through the frail reefs of furniture swims out  
and idling, suspended, stays to watch.

A crustacean old man clamped to his chair  
sits coldly near her and might see  
her charms through fissures where the eyes should be  
or else his teeth are parted in a stare.

Captain on leave, a lean dark mackerel  
lies in the offing, turns himself and looks  
through currents of sound. The flat-eyed flatfish sucks  
on a straw, staring from its repose, laxly.

And gallants in shoals swim up and lag,  
circling and passing near the white attraction;  
sometimes pausing, opening a conversation:  
fish pause so to nibble or tug.

Now the ice-cream is finished,  
is paid for. The fish swim off on business:  
and she sits alone at the table, a white stone  
useless except to a collector, a rich man.

*Keith Douglas*