Drier than that

It was a very bright day, she thought as she surveyed the lake, but somewhat brittle. A fluorescent chill was in the air. She watched the stream of words leave his mouth and waft toward the horizon, and then surreptitiously turned her attention to a dragonfly as it danced above the water to the rhythm of his rowing. Suddenly, with an energetic movement the oar cut the sun in half -- the surprised dragonfly lost a beat, and the water leapt at its polished wings.

"Yes," she murmured at his question, watching the iridescence from the insect's wings sparkle on the surface of the water. Limp.

"Then you are opposed to it?"

"Yes," she said with sudden weariness. She imagined her body decaying coldly under the lake.

"Why?" he said. He looked intently at her, drawing deeply on his cigarette.

"Tedium," she smiled. She looked him in the eyes and fought to ignore the diligent rhythm of the oars. She returned her gaze to the water's surface. A floating leaf stared blankly up at her. She prudently reached out a hand and picked up the leaf, which dripped cold reflections. She traced its veins.

"You won't reconsider?" he asked.

"I don't think so," she said as she began to tear the leaf apart.

"I don't understand." He rowed with determination.

"You couldn't possibly," she explained, dropping silent leaf-bits into the water. "I only trust myself." The disintegrated leaf spread precisely over the surface: a serene, colorless picture.

She looked away. The water-swollen body of a tiny dead fish caught her eye. Without thinking she plucked it from the water and hid it in her hand. She held it there while he talked, its gray moistness against her skin.

"You're not being logical," he insisted. The tempo of his rowing increased.

"It's not a matter of that," she said evenly. She opened her hand so that only she could see the fish. With her other hand she discreetly pulled off a fin. No blood.

"Then on what do you base your decision?" he asked.

"Empirical evidence." She sat with her hands in her lap for a moment and then nonchalantly opened her one hand wider so that he could see its contents. The fish lay inertly on her palm, its belly distended and hard eyes unseeing. Her companion stopped rowing and looked at her. As he sat there, motionless, she fleetingly met his eyes, tiny glass spheres, and was amazed by their impenetrability. She smiled at him as though they shared a secret, putting the fish and then its fin back into the water. He didn't return her smile: she watched his features chill. As he resumed his rowing she leaned over the edge of the boat to look at the small waves the oar stirred up, the tip of each glittering like a knife. She searched among the splintered reflections in the water for her own face. Piecing it together, she smiled and was reassured to see a mosaic of her smile emerge on the steely surface of the lake.

Betsy Amster