

## THE FISH

A twitch on the thread—quick, pull. At first you hoped.  
 Each hollow trough, each surge of a passing wave  
 Sent a tremor through your fingers—every time  
 The billow yielded only a dripping lead  
 And a curving naked hook. The blind sea rolled.  
 Tossing from side to side in a restless sleep  
 The boat lay limp like a woman rough-used by the sea  
 Itself submissive to the unseen wind.  
 Your jibless mast-head played the metronome  
 Beating time to the giant music of the swell;  
 Wind on wave, deep heaving of the flood,  
 Salt spray hurled skyward in a crescent like  
 Salt spray blown seaward in a crescent—like  
 A powder whiplash flailing at the prow  
 And leaving weals of salt. Time after time  
 The waves swell high, break, foam and sink away . . .  
 The wind blows loud, roars, chokes and fades away . . .  
 The bows climb sheer, hang, poise and fall away . . .  
 All these a rhythmic chorus with one breath,  
 The powdered breath of salt. You did not sleep.  
 How could you sleep? Spray smacked your smarting cheeks,  
 Wind blew your hair across your fresh-blown face,  
 Laying moist fingers on your lidded eyes,  
 Denying sleep. . . .

A fierce tug on the line  
 Jerked you back. You pulled at once—leaping between  
 Delight and horror that the line you wound  
 Was tearing a pointed hook through flesh. Your mind  
 Ceased pulled horrified, your hands pulled on.  
 Far out, the fish went limp, instinctively  
 Reserving life-strength for the end. At last  
 You saw it, smaller than you hoped, afloat,  
 Its belly gleaming silver in the wake,  
 Uprturned and still, soft-fleshed and shamming death.  
 You flicked it out: hung up, it sprang to life,  
 Dancing before your eyes, slim-lipped Salome,  
 Swaying and pleading for life. It had to die.

You grasped the fish, hurrying clumsily  
And blindly, feeling nothing. When you had  
Wrenched out the hook between its bleeding lips  
And bared the tissues of its bloated flesh,  
Skin split—the straining cord whipped back released,  
A springing flood of peace swept both of you.  
Slow pulse of sweet relief, but for the fish  
A sweetness chilled with overtones of death.  
Not yet.

What seemed your blood, there down your arm,  
Dim throbbing through half shades of consciousness,  
Felt cold, and cleared your mind, and was in fact  
The flat-ribbed tail-fin of the salt-damp fish  
Flapping against your wrist. Sparked into haste  
You beat its head against the mast, and felt  
The numbing of its senses, deadening  
The feeble straining muscles. Stark disgust  
Threw wide your fingers, streaked along your arm  
And dropped the lifeless body in the crate  
Against the bulkhead. Now at least you breathed  
And felt at ease. The torment of those last  
Few strained convulsions slackened off with death—  
Or what seemed death. Poor fool! Look down.

Your fish

Is flapping feebly, twitching down its spine  
And quivering; the lustre of its skin  
Is bruised with dust, the eye stares fixedly.  
What must be dead is mortified by life  
And racked with spasms. But you felt no shame,  
Pity or fear, your mind had lost the strength  
For all but faint distaste. You held the fish,  
Then lashed it savagely against the deck  
And threw the battered pulp far out to sea.  
A flash of silver vanished in the waves.  
With sickness in your throat you went below  
And lay half-sick till port.