

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.