

## THE FISH

Elizabeth Bishop

I caught a tremendous fish  
and held him beside the boat  
half out of the water, with my hook  
fast in a corner of his mouth.  
He didn't fight.  
He hadn't fought at all.  
He hung a grunting weight,  
battered and venerable  
and homely. Here and there  
his brown skin hung in strips  
like ancient wallpaper,  
and its pattern of darker brown  
was like wallpaper:  
shapes like full-blown roses  
stained and lost through age.  
He was speckled with barnacles,  
fine rosettes of lime,  
and infested  
with tiny white sea-lice,  
and underneath two or three  
rags of green weed hung down.  
White his gills were breathing in  
the terrible oxygen  
- the frightening gills,  
fresh and crisp with blood,  
that can cut so badly -  
I thought of the coarse white flesh  
packed in like feathers,  
the big bones and the little bones,  
the dramatic reds and blacks  
of his shiny entrails,  
and the pink swim-bladder  
like a big peony.  
I looked into his eyes  
which were far larger than mine  
but shallower, and yellowed,  
the irises backed and packed  
with tarnished tinfoil  
seen through the lenses  
of old scratched isinglass.

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They shifted a little, but not  
to return my stare.

- It was more like the tipping  
of an object toward the light.

I admired his sullen face,  
the mechanism of his jaw,

And then I saw

that from his lower lip

if you could call it a lip -

grim, wet, and weaponlike,

hung five old pieces of fish-line,

or four and a wire leader

with the swivel still attached,

with all their five big hooks

grown firmly in his mouth.

A green line, frayed at the end

where he broke it, two heavier lines,

and a fine black thread

still crimped from the strain and snap

when it broke and he got away.

Like medals with their ribbons

frayed and wavering,

a five-haired beard of wisdom

trailing from his aching jaw.

I stared and stared

and victory filled up

the little rented boat,

from the pool of bilge

where oil had spread a rainbow

around the rusted engine

to the bailer rusted orange,

the sun cracked thwarts,

the oarlocks on their strings,

the gunnels - until everything

was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!

And I let the fish go.