

## James Longenbach: On "The Fish"

In her famous poem "The Fish" [. . .] Bishop was able to demonstrate the value of openness and discovery within the poem's unfolding of its thematic content. She provides at the beginning of "The Fish" no sense of its conclusion; instead, the poem seems to discover its direction only as we read it, and (as in Bishop's parable) both the target and the hunter are in motion. The fish and the fisherman become apprehensible to us through the sequence of similes characterizing the fish. (Metaphors, suggesting firmer equivalencies, are avoided.)

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 though age.

This fish is not "imaginary" (Bishop emphasizes its brute otherness by dwelling on its sharp gills and sea-lice) but it is, unlike the iceberg, "imagined": that is, it makes sense tentatively--only as values are attributed to it. By its very otherness the fish seems to teach the speaker how to imagine and therefore appreciate her world. The epiphany in the poem's final lines, when everything is "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow," becomes possible when the speaker turns from the fish and sees a rainbow in the oil spread out in the ugly rented boat. Having begun by setting down the poem when still "incomplete" (to borrow the terms of her essays), Bishop ends by demonstrating "not a thought but a mind thinking."

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