

"Fear of Fish" was published in Stickman Review volume 20, number 1, May, 2021
http://stickmanreview.com/V20N1/ratner_fish.html

Fear of Fish

The old rowboat full of splinters and moss
floats across the pond in a silent crawl.
My brother, my father, and a stranger
in the stern swear fishermen's oaths,
pinch and hook worms,
laughing and hoping for the big one.
On my side of the boat the water rips.
A strike. The boat dips, an underwater flutter
explodes in brute green. *Reel it in!* my dad shouts.
Got her, the stranger cries like he's opening
a crate containing a mail-order bride.
The hooked fish slaps the water in an arcing panic,
the line yanks it toward us.
I think of fish as friends, their fins
silkscreened on my bedspread.
In Miss Dewey's music class we sing
about fish like they are godly things,
signs of Christ, the blooming of life.
Our Christmas tree glows with fish,
rising against the sun, the equal of man.
A hook in its mouth and a hurl up,
the wriggling beast flies into the boat
slamming itself onto the gunnels
in the throes of death, a finned gladiator.
The stranger pounds it with a hammer.
I scream, tears thrumming in my throat,
not sure if I feel for the fish or for me
cringing at this convulsing creature smashing
itself at me, assuming I am the fisher.
Shut up! screams the stranger. *No!* I shout back.
Life leaks from the scaly thing.
It withers on the ribs of the boat.
My brother Pete grabs it like it's a hunk of limpa bread
and shakes it at me. *Squeeze it. Its shit comes out!*
He holds it like an executioner wielding an axe.
Liquid pencil lead drips from its hole.
There is no further talk.
The boat docks with a hollow thump.
My father does not intervene. It is me versus the stranger,
the stranger versus the fish, my brother versus its corpse.
No one wins.