

A Jonah

1.

It's hard to see,
but imagine a length of benign
floss between your teeth, an easy
string caught between
canine and incisor that's

pulled back and forth and
back and forth and back
and forth and on and on
moving much like
this poem until

it slices
your gums, gurgles your throat
with the rust of blood, then slowly
surely clefts
your palette and infects the orbit
of your left eye, pitting the bone
with sepsis that peals a note
high and hot every time

you open your gory
mouth, a swollen trench
that makes eating

ring
the sharpest dinner bell
of pain.

Now, imagine your smile
big as a kitchen, your leviathan
jaw hacksawed
by nothing

more than a simple rope—
a lobster line, to be precise,
a hollow braid silently
black, a thing made
to trap—a careless,

hungry thing that
rocks itself seasick,
tearing deep
into your face.

Now, eventually,
some kind strangers will take
pity and risk their lives
to cut you
free.

Then, moving through
your days doing what it is

you do, you will be
snagged again

before that
tiny zodiac rushes out
to cut you free
once more,

then again

and again—

four times,

which is the final
count for

Spinnaker, a humpback
named by those who tried to save her
for the mark of a sail seen
on the flat slap of her tail—

Spinnaker, they called her,
a daughter washed up before she even
had the chance

to let
down her own
milk.

If you don't yet get it,
here's how the story goes:

Despite the fight
between those who put down
those traps and those who cut
that unintended catch
free,

the gear of four different
fisheries spoiled a young
whale's flesh, and when she
finally beached,

she died with
a rope lacerating her rostrum,
and if that wasn't enough,
her mouth was
full of

gillnet from yet another ship.
Nevertheless,
long before her body was
found, those same fishers

did what it is
they do and laid down
fresh lines, all over
again.

2.

I want you to see this
because it's hard
to believe, because I wouldn't
have understood myself
until yesterday

when I stood in
the cathedral
of Spinnaker's bones

vaulted, her skeleton now
a display strung overhead,
because from the rafters
what was left of her

spoke, her very skull
not just a jigsaw to be
solved, a shattered
hieroglyph of forensics

but the terrible,
irrefutable evidence
of us.

And though the church
of her told me to
repent or at least
pray, under that massive cage
all I could think of was
the biggest whale of a
cliché—

and not just the bit
everyone knows—Jonah's journey
under and down—but
the story we forget:

What got that man
into trouble
in the first place,
running away
on a boat bound
opposite to where
God told him to go

before a storm kicked up
rough enough for him to beg
to be tossed into the angry
water before everyone else
drowned.

Even now this myth
has sailors put an article
in front of his name to
call out a bad-luck jack

3.

Nevertheless,
a quick search revealed
facts are facts: There is nothing
that could have gagged
that man down whole without
biting him in pieces—

the largest of whales
are skim nets for
plankton, beasts with throats
that would choke
on so much as his
chest-pounding fist,

and even a whale shark
big as a city bus
opening the cave of her toothless
mouth could barely get one of his
skinny legs down
her four-inch throat.

But science never
stops us from believing,
does it?

Struck by the bleached
monument of Spinnaker's remains,
all I wanted

was to concentrate
on the disgust
I felt

for those who caused her
death, to conjure ways to entangle
them, but how could I

resist the living
submarine of Jonah's
resurrection, the chance to be born
again but from the
throat?

What I mean to say is
though it's easy to blame those
with their endless lines that make
ghosts with their ghost nets,
if that whale has a failed prophet
to spit out this time,

it's me.
Me, the one
that stood helpless
in the empty

of that whale,

because like everyone,
I avoid

swimming in the stinging
jellyfish swamp we've made
of our shores,

and like everyone, I've gone
numb reading all the numbers,

the numbers of
carbons and acids, of
temperatures and fish,

of bears the color of snow
staggering, the wet slop left
of their coats slung loose
across their starved hips.

But afraid, I run
to the mall to try
on a pretty top;
afraid, I run

to the salon to treat
my hair, and defiant,
I run

to the coffee shop to sit
and sip, pretending
that reading more numbers
will do the trick.

Oh, Jonah. You knew,
didn't you?

Now, I'm you:
I've heard the news
and have fled.

Worse, I lived
half my life fed
on fish dredged up with
those commercial trawls,

and still, I down
sweet, carbonated water from
plastic, enough bottles to choke
the sea with a whole island
of my sprawl.

And I'm a Jonah, I'm a
Jonah—

my hunger big
as any and my trashcan full.

And I'm a Jonah, I'm a
Jonah—

my head frenzied
with this prophecy
but afraid

I drive fast
and drive away,
my car with
a full tank

blowing and then
another

and another and I roll
down the windows to
pitch out

that keeps coming
back to me

and again:

or worse
who tore through
town screaming
and was thought
insane,

and—God forgive
me—maybe
all of us

no one will hear and not
knowing what to do

when the radio reports
another huge storm

and another

the one prayer
I keep saying,
the one

again

Oh, help me, Jonah,
patron saint of cowards
who didn't ask to carry
the message

because now I can't help
but feel that for these storms to
cease, that I

might have to beg
to be thrown
overboard.

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