

Harrowing (Holy Saturday, 2020)

Surely a league under the sea
must be in the first division
of places from where
there's no way back.
A swirling swill wave
sucks you under
only once, you'd reckon.
Only that's not to reckon
with God,
whose eye can quicken
the downright dead.
And shiftless, shirtless Jonah
hunkering in his bunker
holes up down in the ship's hold
where he thought,
"Ha ha, God! You can't catch me,
going to that sinful lot in Nineveh!"
Some prophet, he.

Jonah begs the sailors,
(whose fear and faith are greater)
"Throw me out,
pitch me in
to the writhing, roiling, boiling sea!
Watch me go
and serve me right.
(Finally, God can't catch me there!)"

But what profit would God gain
from his loss?
The Father, who knows and loves each feather
of his wayward dove?

In the number of God's creation
He calls upon a great fish
scaled up from somewhere.
A huge mouth to feed.
"Have this for safe keeping.
Three days should do it."

Jonah lies there like a coin
Gulped unspent to the bottom of a bulging purse
Lank in the dank belly,
staring amazed, outraged, aghast

at the terrifying, perplexing mercy
of the God who will not let him
off his sharp, gimlet-eyed hook.

Spat, spewed, puked and pewling
he writhes, arising,
from his three-days belly-bound.
“All right then, God, so be it.
This is not over yet.”

“No, this is not over yet,”
says Jesus, fierce and full of love.
For people have turned this Jonah
into a cheery jingle
with a fat, grinning blubbery whale:
a sweet, smiling tale
for the kiddies to colour in.

There are no magic markers
to ink in the blood and bruises
on his insulted body,
pierced with the dot-to-dot
of iron nails and the slash
of a sword.

There is no colour
to fill in the all-engulfing abyss
of being swallowed
deep into the belly of death.
Keep your grinning whale!
This man is shut beneath the earth,
buried beneath a boulder.

Three days should consume
the first parts of the flesh,
should begin to work out the smell
of rot even from under the unguents
hastily set there
by men not used to such undertakings.

Three days for the spidery, sealed-up grave
to become a quiet home.
That would be a kindness,
a mercy, even!
But this tenant will have none of it.

He sweeps into the dark
and turns all the lights on.
He squares up to the landlord
and rails against his rackrent,
pulls off the padlocks
and will not be told that
this is the end.

Resting in the shadows,
he sets his blades to harrow
to the fields' margins and the depth of hell
and waits.

The dark is very dense.
The light gleams a thin wry smile around the rock
which rolls...

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