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## A Jonah

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*Nickole Brown*

## A Jonah

*—For the Marine Animal Entanglement Response Team at  
the Center for Coastal Studies, Provincetown, MA*

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  
but 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

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

jaw hacksawed  
by nothing

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 sea  
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 when  
she slapped 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  
endangering his mates—

*a Jonah*, as in  
a man with a quarrel  
big enough with the divine  
to sink the whole ship  
unless he's thrown  
overboard,

a real bad apple best  
trashed before the rest  
rot, a thing best forgotten  
now that

his hair's a wrack line  
of seaweed and scales and his limbs are  
swaddled in the organ warmth

of whatever creature  
was coaxed up from the deep  
to save him, that big fish  
or sea beast with gullet

enough to swallow him  
and swim the three-day  
hangover with the slosh of his  
sackcloth lamentations  
inside.

3.

Nevertheless,  
a quick search revealed  
facts are facts: there is nothing  
without a bite that could have gagged  
that man down whole—

the largest of whales  
are skim nets for  
plankton and could 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 hatred  
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, if that whale has a failed prophet  
to spit out this time,

it's me.  
Me, the one  
who 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 trash can full.



And I'm a Jonah, I'm a  
Jonah—

my head frenzied  
with this prophecy  
but afraid  
no one will hear and not  
knowing what to do

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

when the radio reports  
another huge storm

blowing and then  
another

and another

and another and I roll  
down the windows to  
pitch out

the one prayer  
I keep saying,  
the one

that keeps coming  
back to me

again

and again:

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

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

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

and—God forgive  
me—maybe  
all of us

might have to beg  
to be thrown  
overboard.