**Jonah**

**Poetry by Thomas John Carlisle**

**Bible Reader:**

The word of the LORD cam to Jonah, son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh, go now and denounce it, for its wickedness stares me in the face.” But Jonah set out for Tarsish to escape from the Lord.

**Person 1:**

**Coming and Going**

The word came

and Jonah went

in the other direction.

God said: Cry

tears of compassion

tears of repentance;

cry against

the reek

of unrighteousness;

cry for

the right turn

the contrite spirit.

But Jonah rose

and fled

in tearless

silence.

**Person 2** **Reprimand to a Naïve Deity**

I will not advertise

this crazy scheme

of Yours.

God, what a farce

that men should sin and find

escape.

I mean, of course,

not me

but all our mutual

antagonists.

Dear God, kind God, don’t listen

to *their* prayers.

**Negotiation with a Higher Power**

I will demonstrate

my immediate obedience

providing You comply

with my demand

for a more satisfying

assignment.

**Bible Reader:**

He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for Tarshish. He paid his fare and went on board, meaning to travel by it to Tarshish out of reach of the Lord. But the Lord let loose a hurricane, and the sea ran so high in the storm that the ship threatened to break up. The sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his god for help. Then they threw things overboard to lighten the ship. Jonah had gone down into a corner of the ship and was lying sound asleep when the captain came upon him. “What, sound asleep?” he said. “Get up, and call on your god; perhaps he will spare us a thought and we shall not perish.”

 At last the sailors said to each other, “Come and let us cast lots to find out who is to blame for this bad luck.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

 “What can you have done wrong?” they asked. They already knew that he was trying to escape from the Lord, for he had told them so. “What shall we do with you,” they asked, “to make the sea go down?” For the storm grew worse and worse. “Take me and throw me overboard,” he said, “and the sea will go down. I know it is my fault that this great storm has struck you.”

**Person 1:** **Uninvolved**

In everyone’s Bible

Jonah is sleeping

in a short bunk

with one porthole

below the water line.

His hope

is to avoid

visibility

and the hangover

from getting overloaded

with everyone’s

meagerness

and need.

**Person 2:** **Full Speed Ahead**

Take my life

and let me be

your brother

for one

maniacal moment

Throw me

into the sea

roaring

and churning

with the vengeance

I habitually

feel.

Pitch me in

before I spew out

the wild respite

of my reason

and resume

my customary

stance and

profile.

**Person 1:** **Fugitive Moment**

One miracle moment

of caring

what happened

to his shipmates.

Then BANG

he slammed down the hatch

of his transient

compassion

as though

such sensibility

would liberate

a Pandora’s box

botching

his beautiful

and private

world.

**Bible Reader:**

Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the sea stopped raging. So the crew were filled with the fear of the Lord and offered sacrifice and made vows to him. But the Lord ordained that a great fish should swallow Jonah, and for three days and three nights he remained in its belly.

 Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish:

**Person 1:** **Sunk**

A man overboard

gasping and drowning,

does he actually look

at his own disappearing

identity?

Jonah could see

only an admirable

ambassador of God

sunk by his own

superior

opinions.

**Person 2:** **Just**

If You just rescue me

from this unpalatable

predicament,

just fish me out

of this hot water,

get me off the hook,

You can just bet

I will not only

be excessively

obliged but also

gladly go

wherever You

oblige me to

even if it means

that tour to Ninevah.

**Person 1:** **Inside Jonah**

We are so obsessed

with what was going on

inside the whale

that we miss

seeing the drama

inside Jonah.

**Person 2**: **Inside the Sea Monster**

I was as low as I could get

when I remembered

God.

Odd

that my distress

impressed me with God’s apparent absence

When God’s promised daily presence

hadn’t meant a blessed

thing.

Finding

myself in that hole

with my soul fainting, and rolling

with the swell of my swollen ego

was enough to keep me

good.

Instead

I saw stars in the dark

and started home on a welcome waterspout.

**Bible Reader:**

Then the Lord spoke to the fish and it spewed Jonah out on to the dry land.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh, go now and denounce it in the words I give you.”

**Person 1:** **The Great Intruder**

It is exasperating

to be called

so persistently

when the last thing

we want to do

is get up

and go

but God

elects

to keep on

haunting

like some

holy ghost.

**Person 2** **Jonah’s Dilemma**

There is nothing

for me to do

but to arise

and deliver

the payload

and move out

of the fallout area.

**Bible Reader:**

Jonah obeyed at once and went to Nineveh. He began by going a day’s journey into the city, a vast city, three days’ journey across, and then proclaimed: “In forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

**Person 1:** **Busybody**

Jonah was a man of prayer,

negatively speaking.

Frequently he

took time

to take God

to task.

**Person 2:** **Counsellor to the Almighty**

Think twice before You pardon,

people repent

even in ashes

but repeat again

of their repentance.

Take the wiser bias

of my advice.

Confine Your charity

to such good neighbours

as Your humble servant.

**Person 1:** **Addiction**

Consistently Jonah

chided his stupid

and incredible

Creator

For God’s addiction

to mercy

as though

it was some

miracle drug.

A Deity ought

to be dependably

capricious

to keep

people in line.

An atom bomb on an overpopulated

slum

would wipe out

delinquency

in a hurry.

Naturally Nineveh

would make a perfect

target

once he himself

was safely

outside.

**Ardent Worshiper**

Incensed

with a red-hot

passion for vengeance

Jonah proposed

to toast Nineveh

as a burnt-offering.

The prostration

or slaughter

of a feared foe

was his idea

 of a zingy

sacrifice.

In his innocence –

suppositious to be sure –

Nineveh,

not he,

needed

the immolation.

No penitence

or recantation

could qualify

to cancel

this heart-warming

holocaust.

He simmered

and sizzled

when the fire

failed to fall.

**Bible Reader:**

The people of Nineveh believed God’s word. They ordered a public fast and put on sackcloth, high and low alike.

God saw what they did, and how they abandoned their wicked ways, and he repented and did not bring upon them the disaster he had threatened.

Jonah was greatly displeased and angry, and he prayed to the Lord.

**Person 1:** **Tantrum**

The generosity of God

displeased Jonah exceedingly

and he slashed with angry prayer

at the graciousness of the Almighty.

**Person 2:**

“I told You so!

I knew what You would do,

You dirty Forgiver.

You bless Your enemies

and show kindness to those

who despitefully use You.

I would rather die

than live in a world

with a God like You.

And don’t try to forgive me either.

**Question**

I hate God’s enemies

with perfect hatred.

Why can’t God

do as much?

**Person 1:** **Hitting the Road**

Bitchy at best

was his bitter bias.

His glint of truth

hardened on his windshield

and hid the road to his neighbour’s house.

**Bible Reader:**

Jonah went out and sat down on the east of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat in its shade, waiting to see what would happen in the city. Then the Lord God ordained that a climbing gourd should grow up over his head to throw its shade over him and relieve his distress, and Jonah was grateful for the gourd. But at dawn the next day God ordained that a worm should attack the gourd, and it withered; and at sunrise God ordained that a scorching wind should blow up from the east. The sun beat down on Jonah’s head til he grew faint. Then he prayed for death and said, “I should be better dead than alive.”

**Person 1** **At Work**

God was busy

although Jonah

did not notice

the way God worked

prompting the cast

in every act

or how the wind

the fish, the worm,

and even the plant

were spurred on stage

at the split second

of inexpectancy.

Jonah was too busy

being Jonah –

a bitter job

at best.

**Person 2** **Not Amused**

I am not amused

at all these convenient

contrivances You employ

to expedite the action:

that extemporized storm

hurled out of nowhere

recklessly wreckful

till You piped it down;

that finny U-boat

You built

to shelter

a down-and-out seafarer;

that bush that shot up

faster than Jack’s beanstalk

only to become fodder

for that wonderful worm.

You weren’t trying

to tell me anything,

were You?

Were You!

**Person 1** **A Matter of Taste**

The ravens fed Elijah and the fish

befriended Jonah when up to his neck

and past it he was wishing he had kept

his head and said the proper words to please

God and antagonize the Ninevites

at one and the same time.

Elijah had

a broom tree shading him while he was crying

to die when he had fled the sinful city.

It could not sweep away his melancholy

and he ate and drank of the Lord’s mercy.

But Jonah’s death-wish under the umbrella

the sudden gourd spread over his hot head

was not despair at failure, but success.

He couldn’t stomach God’s patient bounty.

**Bible Reader:**

At this God said to Jonah, “Are you so angry over the gourd?” “Yes,” he answered, “mortally angry.” The Lord said, “You are sorry for the gourd, though you did not have the trouble of growing it, a plant which came up in a night and withered in a night. And should I not be sorry for the great city of Ninevah, with its hundred and twenty thousand who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and cattle without number?”

**Person 1:**  **Anticlimax**

Annoying and disappointing

to say the least.

After all

this meddling

mercy

bringing in children

and cattle

at the end

as if their fate

were any

concern of ours

unless we should be

able to herd

the cattle out

before the city

is burned and buried.

**Person 2**

I do not hate You, God.

Please understand.

You are O.K., A-One,

the Very Best,

second to none I know,

great and beyond

my criticism so

I say Amen

to You and all Your good

intentions – but

I might be right about

Your indiscretion in

forgiving folks

gladly and shamelessly

upon the least

evidence of regret.

I think

You carry love too far.

**Person 1** **Coming Around**

And Jonah stalked

to his shaded seat

and waited for God

to come around

to his way of thinking.

And God is still waiting

for a host of Jonahs

in their comfortable houses

to come around

to God’s way of loving.

**Passion for Compassion**

Keep open

to pain

his hers theirs

as well as yours

Threshold

deep wide

for untranquilized

empathizers

Agony

can create capacity

to respond

in kind

Acute heartbreak

walks back

to gather pieces

bandage wounds

Sensitive

to all living

all suffering

let mercy thrive