

a poem for my sons when they yell at God

by [Jacob Stratman](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue

*Jonah Leaving the Whale, by Jan Brueghel the Elder,  
oil on panel (38 x 56 cm), ca. 1600*

*“It is a childish work—the whale has the head of a dog  
and Jonah looks suspiciously fresh.”*

—[www.artbible.info](http://www.artbible.info)

In candied red, the white-bearded  
prophet emerges hands still clasped in prayer,  
clean, really clean, maybe too clean, first-day-  
of-school clean, baptism clean. It is a childish  
painting, perhaps, the punished coming up  
for air after a three-day, divine timeout,  
his begging and pleading inside this flesh  
box, sincere or not, but he’s out, old and fresh  
in a world around him, Brueghel is sure  
to make clear, swirling blue-black and solid  
brown, the earth’s bruising, perhaps a wish  
of healing yellow in the distance, a light  
faded behind the eye’s focus. The dogfish  
eyes big and rolling back mouth open

like the cave like the tomb like the brown creek  
carp we refuse to touch hate to catch squishy  
and formless but counted nonetheless. But  
he will dirty himself again after Nineveh  
under the vine cussing at God telling  
God His own business, and he will forget  
the welcoming red the fresh fruit color  
of that cloak—the thin (or thinning) clearing  
in the background beyond sea and storm,  
even the mouth as exit as release.

He will soon forget to consider how  
suspicious it is for a man like him  
sitting in death's darkness for three days  
to come out so clean so bright so forgiven.