

a poem for my sons when they yell at God

by [Jacob Stratman](#) in the [June 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

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.