

## In the Belly of the Whale · Patricia Hampl

SHE WAS BEGGING ME to let her out. “I’m scared,” she whimpered. “I’m scared of the dark. No kidding, I really really really am.” She held to the word, clinging to the long vowel like a life-ring: *ree-ee-lly ree-ee-lly ree-ee-lly*. No anger, no outrage. Just that panicky voice, clutching sincerity.

This was the voice of Sheila Phalen, my best friend. I had pinned her in Sister Immaculata’s broom closet, an airless cube at the back of our second grade classroom, next to the cloakroom. The hempy, not-quite-dead smell of wet wool rose from the jackets hanging on pegs in the cloakroom; black slush puddled on the floor from the boys’ rubber overshoes. *I’m really really scared. Really.*

Anyone would have taken pity on this voice, limp with fright. Not me. I hove in, drove my shoulder harder against the narrow closet door, put some real muscle into it: *You just stay there till you’re good and scared. You just stay there.*

I had my reasons.

Maybe I take naturally to the Book of Jonah, having lived fretfully over the years with this memory of casting Sheila Phalen into the belly of darkness. Yet the parallel is not exact: Sheila never struck me as a Jonah, and I had no godly lessons to teach her, just a grudge to work out. But Jonah’s whale-cave and the awful black hole of that broom closet where I meant for Sheila to stew have remained linked darkneses.

There is another connection: Jonah has always seemed a bigger story to me than the space it occupies in the Bible, just as that endless moment with my shoulder slammed against the door of Immaculata’s broom closet has refused to become unimportant as it recedes in time.

Some stories, like certain memories, are strangely vivid precisely because their narrative is smudged and incomplete. The meaning in such instances becomes elusive and therefore oddly demanding. The Book of Jonah is like that—perhaps most Old Testament stories have this incomplete, haunting

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quality. It is the curious tone of myth, a capacity to enchant in the ageless story-telling way while refusing the satisfaction of a fully finished drama. Such stories and such memories don't want to entertain or even simply edify you. They mean to bother you. They draw to the surface half-finished memories with their own bothersome details. Jonah in his whale has always flashed before me Sheila in her closet.

Sheila and I were best friends. She knew it, I knew it. Every morning we walked down Oxford Street together on the way to St. Luke's, and back again after school when I walked the two extra blocks beyond my house to the corner of hers. Then she walked back with me a full block to the mid-point of the distance separating our houses. We had devised this method to put off to the last moment the geographic imperative that severed us until the next morning.

We shared the bond of first friendship, and the soupy union of being Sister's favorites. Once during lunch hour we had gone into the closet, two teacher's pets fetching fresh erasers for Sister's blackboard. There in the dark we had discovered a cardboard box almost as tall as ourselves, filled with reams of paper, tossed every which way. We fished out the papers—weeks and months of discarded class work. It was a scandal, we saw that right away. We understood that Sister Immaculata, who made much of collecting our work each day, had simply dumped all those Palmer exercises, all those poems to the Holy Family—everything—without ever casting an eye upon any of it. We had stumbled upon a shocking scholastic waste site.

It was a political moment, the beginning of institutional mistrust, primal disillusion rooting against the established order.

With such a history of intimacies and corporate secrets between us, how had it come to pass that Sheila had fallen under the spell of Helena Eldridge, new girl from Chicago? Helena Eldridge with her blonde ponytail that really did swing and snap like the tail of a bold and frisky pony. Helena, who took ballet lessons and made a showy habit of walking back from the drinking fountain with her feet pointed outward. How had Sheila succumbed to the false values of this parvenu with her arty ways, in recent weeks giving over wholly to Eldridgian modes of speaking and thinking, even to the point of pestering her mother for ballet lessons. *We don't take ballet lessons, Sheila. We go skating!* I expostulated to no avail.

The day before had broken me entirely. We had left school together as usual, Helena Eldridge nosing along beside us. But at the point where Helena should have sheared off, turning down Lincoln Avenue to her house in a lonely new-girl sort of way, Sheila, unbelievably, had turned with her. *We have ballet stuff to talk about.* They toe-pointed their way along Lincoln together, leaving me slouching down Oxford toward home alone.

How many people recall the first time they heard of the cowardly man swallowed by the big fish? He's always been there. Like all abiding tales that carry heavy psychological freight, Jonah is not a story you merely read or hear, but one into which you are born, as into a family, recognizing the blood relation.

The Book of Jonah is the Rhode Island of the Old Testament, a snapper of a tale whose minimalism is fundamental to its power. There are other lean books in the Old Testament. But who knows them—Nahum, Haggai, Obadiah? Like Jonah, they are tucked roughly in the middle of the Jewish Tanakh; in Christian Bibles, these books are crammed up close to the detailed narratives of the New Testament's Synoptic Gospels. But most of them are warnings and alarms, cries and even curses. Only Jonah carries the ancient force of story. And Jonah, unlike its slender neighbors, is the story known in the bones, the story you can't remember ever not knowing, like a memory so old it isn't a memory but an ounce of yourself.

"Up!" Yahweh commands Jonah son of Amittai in the book's first line. "Go to Ninevah, the great city, and proclaim to them that their wickedness has forced itself upon me."

Our hero's response? "Jonah set about running away from Yahweh, and going to Tarshish. He went down to Jaffa and found a ship bound for Tarshish; he paid his fare and boarded it, to go with them to Tarshish, to get away from Yahweh."

It is worth pausing to note the perfect pitch of the writing in these lines. The caged, circular feel of panic is rendered with utter conviction. The statement begins with Jonah "running away from Yahweh, and going to Tarshish"; at its fevered finish he is still frantically boarding the ship, "to go with them to Tarshish, to get away from Yahweh." The repetition of action is masterful, the once, twice, thrice charge to the safe barricade of Tarshish, the no-exit breathlessness of the prose.

It is appropriate that the story's style should be so subtly nuanced. After all, Jonah is a writer—what else is a prophet? At this point, he is a writer with writer's block, fleeing his vision. Later, he must contend with being a writer manqué, a prophet whose words don't prove true. But that's on the next page, a world—and half the plot—away.

The nature of Jonah's instinctive fear remains unspecified: Is he afraid of what the inhabitants of "the great city" will do to a bearer of stern news? Or does he fear the grandeur of the enterprise itself? We don't know. Which is as it should be. For Jonah's fear is the great fear, the nameless one at the core of each of us. It must not have a defining *reason*. This is no place for analysis. The thing must be felt.

Once aboard the ship bound for Tarshish, Jonah falls asleep. He is seeking, like the faint-hearted soul he is, an even deeper safety: the sanctuary of unconsciousness. No luck. "Yahweh threw a hurricane at the sea, and there was such a great storm at sea that the ship threatened to break up."

The sailors, all gentiles of unspecified animist faiths, take fright, and "each of them called on his own god." They also throw cargo overboard to lighten the ship's load. To no avail. They are astonished to discover that Jonah is actually sleeping through the tumult. They wake him, beg him to pray to *his* God as they have to theirs. The storm thrives on.

In desperation, the sailors cast lots to see who aboard the ship is the negative charge amongst them. Stripped of its superstition, their casting of lots is telling. *They* know, low-level gentiles though they are, that *somebody* has to take responsibility for things. Jonah's plan is to sleep it away, forget, repress, and sail on to sweet dreams of yesteryear. But the sailors determine to live the real storm, to achieve real peace. They know they must do something, find the source of trouble.

No surprise when the lot points to Jonah. Now here is the surprise: the sailors do not instantly haul him to the gunwales and toss him overboard. They settle in for a colloquy there on the heaving ship in the midst of the tempest. "Tell us," they say, "what is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country? What is your nationality?"

Jonah comes clean. "I am a Hebrew," he says, "and I worship Yahweh, God of Heaven, who made both sea and dry land"; he confesses that he is fleeing Yahweh and that this flight has angered his God.

A moment of truth, of allegiance. Jonah, for the first time, is not a coward in flight. He is a man living his fate.

The sailors still hesitate, loathe to do what clearly needs to be done. They seem to have an inbred repugnance against doing harm to another being. This first shred of mercy in the story emanates from men who have no reason to spare the life of an alien. Nor is their rudimentary compassion allied to generosity. It belongs to the balancing act of justice. Theirs is a stony, but real mercy, grounded in their fear of punishment: “. . . do not hold us responsible for causing an innocent man’s death,” they cry to God. The sailors’ bedrock decency sees Jonah as “innocent” even though the lot has come up against him (a fact which would seem to give them their proof).

The sailors’ decency roots compassion not in individual choice, but in the nature of life itself. Compassion *feels* like an emotion; it is experienced as an intensely personal, individual thing. But its first appearance here in Jonah’s story, in the voice of the gentile sailors, plants it in a fundamental natural order more basic, more immutable, than human feeling. True, this first flash of compassion does not carry the day—but it’s not supposed to. This isn’t the moment for compassion.

Jonah himself makes this plain: “Take me and throw me into the sea, and then it will calm down for you. I know it is my fault that this great storm has struck you.” Still the sailors demur. They row hard, trying to reach the shore, still unwilling to cast him into the deep. “But in vain. . . .”

Finally, they must do as fate and Jonah direct: they toss him overboard “. . . and the sea stopped raging.” This makes converts of the sailors who offer sacrifices to Yahweh and make many vows to Him.

For all its mythic drama—calamitous storm at sea, divine threats, the cameo appearance of the monster whale—Jonah is a story with a lot of white space. It is made for reflection, for the supreme human act: contemplation. It is a story which intends for you to keep writing it on the remaining blank of its third, and final, page.

The filling in of blank space that Jonah invites—or positively requires—is not more action of a whale-swallows-man variety. By tale’s end, the secret preoccupation of the story has etched itself sharply into each gesture of the action. That preoccupation or obsession or longing (it is all of these) is revealed clearly only at the end and comes there—as all good endings

must—as a revelation. But the obsession is threaded through the whole text. Enter, on my own stage, Sheila Phalen.

For the story's obsession, first hinted at by the sailors loathe to save themselves at a stranger's expense, is compassion: Who gets it, who gives it. Who withholds it. I'm slammed up against Immaculata's closet door again, Sheila Phalen whimpering inside. The lesson begins to come home: at the heart of the refusal of mercy is not cruelty—but fear.

Sheila appears to be the frightened one. But her fear is straightforward, a natural terror of the dark, just as the sailors have an appropriate fear of the raging storm. Jonah lacks this appropriate fear; he sleeps right through the storm. His fear is abject, chronic. It is a fear of his fate, his calling. Which is to say, a fear of reality. And my fear is—of Sheila, of all things. The real Sheila, who is a free Sheila. I'm afraid to let her out for I must release the ballet-loving Sheila, disciple to Helena Eldridge. Looking back, I've always thought I was punishing her, though I have the distinct memory of being mystified as I threw my weight against the closet door: *why am I doing this?* I wasn't punishing Sheila, after all. I was holding her, hanging on to her former self, fearful of the real Sheila. *You just stay there till you're good and scared—like I am*, was the unspoken end of that threat.

I don't remember letting Sheila out of the closet. I don't remember how I came to slam the door against her to begin with. Yet this shard of memory remains suspended like a judgment over my head (amazing how often I think of it, even as an adult): the raw evidence of my cruel streak. The transparent tableau, still palpable: my shoulder planed against the closet door, Sheila's voice a riot of blameless supplication. The heady, abstract sensation of refusing mercy. The icy satisfaction of it. The, yes, pleasure. Really.

Cruelty belongs, then, to fear, and compassion belongs to justice. It is necessary to learn these relationships, to trace the integuments that bind us to our actions. Once he is cast into the belly of the whale, Jonah makes no mention of being afraid, except retrospectively. In fact, the whale is a kind of underwater safehouse, a submerged hermitage. The usual Christian association is the Jonah/Christ equation: Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale = Jesus' three days in the tomb.

But Jonah's three days are no death. Alone within the big fish, he finally smashes through his block and becomes a writer. And not a polemicist, not

a preacher. But a poet—and specifically a lyric poet in the memoirist mode, writing from his own immediate experience:

The waters round me rose to my neck,  
the deep was closing round me,  
seaweed twining round my head.  
To the roots of the mountains,  
I sank into the underworld,  
and its bars closed round me for ever.

The beautiful psalm Jonah composes in the dark is a telegraphic account of being cast overboard. He describes the experience literally as his close call with death, but also metaphorically as a larger spiritual death:

All your waves and billows passed over me;  
then I thought, 'I am banished from your sight;  
How shall I ever see your holy Temple again?'

The poem is also a pledge, a promise whose language is as open and buoyant as the earlier language of his attempted flight to Tarshish was coiled and tight:

. . . I shall sacrifice to you  
with songs of praise.  
The vow I have made I shall fulfill!

This is a confident man, free at last to make a pledge, assured he can keep it, for he is promising simply to live his fate, to be a singer of songs.

The Book of Jonah is a tour de force that manages to shoe-horn two stories into its few paragraphs. The first is Jonah's story, the second is God's story *for* Jonah. Both are suffused with the mystery of compassion. Compassion is a wild card, an enigma, love's most elusive variation. You can't understand it, you can only taste it. This is the cup Yahweh is determined Jonah will accept.

Once vomited (or spewed, the verbs favored by scripture) onto dry land, Jonah is given Yahweh's commission again. Same words, same job: "Up! Go to Nineveh, the great city. . . ."

This time Jonah lives up to his poetic pledge. He makes the arduous journey to the great city, and with a stroke of beginner's luck this first-time prophet is heard. The people of Nineveh put on sackcloth without argument; they fast and renounce their evil ways. God, seeing their efforts, relents. He spares Nineveh from his wrath and leaves the city in peace and prosperity.

This is bad news for Jonah. In fact, "This made Jonah very indignant; he fell into a rage." Yahweh's mercy has rendered him a false prophet. God has caused him to proclaim the destruction of Nineveh—but Nineveh is doing very well, thank you. Jonah is appalled at how badly Yahweh has used his messenger. His assignment has come to nothing—as if God, like Sister Immaculata, had simply dumped his careful, brave words into a trash box and gone willfully about his business.

Jonah is furious at God for being compassionate, the very quality the supposedly "stern" God of the Old Testament is usually accused of lacking. Jonah had always suspected God of having a soft spot. Jonah's anger has a tell-tale crabbiness as well as the fury of one betrayed: "Isn't this what I said would happen when I was still in my own country?" he cries to God. "That was why I first tried to flee to Tarshish [note the revisionist history here], since I knew you were a tender compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, who relents about inflicting disaster."

He ends by playing the same high card he played with the sailors: "So now Yahweh, please take my life, for I might as well be dead as go on living."

Yahweh, like a mellow Rogerian therapist, merely murmurs, "Are you that deeply grieved?" Jonah, denied even the glory of death, goes off to sulk.

Jonah leaves Nineveh and sits to the east of the great city, waiting "to see what would happen to the city."

But Yahweh is done with Nineveh. He trains his new story on Jonah himself. It is a parable of a single paragraph, the final one in the Book of Jonah (in the Tanakh, it is two brief paragraphs). God ordains a castor-oil plant to grow over Jonah to shade him from the sun and to "soothe his ill-humour." It works: Jonah perks up for the first time since his great public failure: he loves the plant, glories in its shade and comfort.



But the next day God causes a worm to destroy it. The plant withers and dies. In the morning God sends a scorching east wind and the sun beats down on Jonah's head. For the third time in the book, Jonah begs for death: "I might as well be dead as go on living."

"Are you right to be angry about the castor-oil plant?" Yahweh asks.

"I have every right to be angry, mortally angry!" cries the sweating, aggrieved hero.

Then Yahweh, reserving the last word for Himself, strips off His modest Rogerian mask, proving just how stern His compassion is: "You are concerned for the castor-oil plant," He says, "which has not cost you any effort and which you did not grow, which came up in a night and has perished in a night. So why should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?"

A strange argument. The oddity of God's parable lies in its off-kilter logic. He has not set up a situation in which Jonah experiences sympathy for another being which is an obvious parallel to God's tender-heartedness toward Nineveh. Rather, God arranges for Jonah to experience a dumb object, the castor-oil plant, giving *him* comfort. And this is no pet, no other-self—it's just a mute plant, hardly more than a piece of environmental furniture. Yet its loss, allowing the sun to bake down on him, causes Jonah to let out his death-wish wail.

At this point Yahweh hammers home His fundamental point about compassion, making it look very much like a law of nature. Compassion, as the parable has it, is not generosity, it is not born of fond feeling, nor is it mercy, though we tend to use the words interchangeably. Compassion is the acknowledgment of connection, the refusal to see the world as divided into distinct units which can do without each other. It is, literally, a "suffering together with" (*com/with* + *pati/suffer*). It is primal union. Interesting too, that the Hebrew word for compassion, *rachmanes*, derives from the root *rechem*, meaning womb. There could be no more human origin for a word—and of course the whale's belly is the womb where Jonah is re-made, and from which he is re-born.

For the truth is that all creation is connected, attached, together, intertwined—compassionate. Jonah needed that plant. His fury at its destruction is anger at *his* loss, not at the plant's loss of life. If Jonah is

inspired at all by something that might be called “kindness,” it is only in the most archaic source of the word: he recognizes the plant as being of his own *kind*, of his sort, somehow. But that’s the point: compassion is not a personal form of enlightened social welfare for everybody else. It is reality, it is how things fit together in the universe. To lack compassion is not merely to lack a human quality—it is to not quite exist, to be missing an essential working part of reality.

To Jonah’s liberal soul, Yahweh plays the radical teacher with a flair for drama. He does not try to convince Jonah to feel for the other, but to find the astonishing root of compassion within himself, for himself. The key to the lesson is that the separating boundary between self and other is understood—in a blaze of scorching sun—to be illusory.

The parable makes God’s compassion decisive. Jonah must acquiesce to this compassion now that he has lost a creature which pleased *him*. He knows now the God-like sensation of possession, the pleasure of it, the comfort. He knows the urgency of attachment, and can never upbraid God again for being slow to anger, rich in faithful love.

The great city is full of fools—“more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left,” as a somewhat exasperated Yahweh puts it. If Jonah mourns a dead plant, “Why should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city,” Yahweh asks, “. . . to say nothing of all the animals?”

This is a teaching book, but Jonah, being a writer, is a slow learner, stubborn, self-righteous, not given to trust. And who is this Yahweh? Jonah has told the sailors he worships Yahweh. But he talks to God as if He were a rival author, part of the competition forever a book ahead of him. The Book of Jonah ends on Yahweh’s question. Jonah does not reply. It is never clear if our hero gets the message, if he does bend, finally, to Yahweh’s stern compassion there in the broiling scriptural sun.

But I must not leave my own broken-off story unfinished, seeing that recently I’ve come into possession of an ending. I saw Sheila Phalen’s father’s death notice in the paper about a year ago. Name of funeral parlor, time of visitation. I hadn’t seen Sheila in twenty-five years, a million years, forever. She had married, I knew that. Had moved away from St. Paul years before, had five children, or six—some large Catholic number. I’m not sure how I came to know even these few details, maybe from my

mother who still lives in the old neighborhood. Sheila and I had never exchanged so much as a Christmas card across the span of our adulthood, but I was in my car, headed at the appointed hour toward the address given in the death notice. Instinct was driving me there, certainly not friendship anymore.

I recognized her right away, very thin, almost austere, her thin father laid out on ecru satin behind her. He had been a book lover, always lying on the couch in the living room, reading, when I came over to visit. It was almost less strange to see him lying still in a coffin than to see him lying there without a book open in his folded hands.

Sheila detached herself from a group of women and came right toward me the minute I stepped into the room, as if she'd known I was coming, both of her hands out to grasp mine, a great serene smile shining from her severe face.

We all live a version, not a story. Even a memory with parts missing or lost has as many readings as there are players in the action. Who knows how Sheila came to her version? But with her reader-father laid out behind us, she gave it to me, my old friend whose cries of terror I had refused to honor all those years ago. "You came," she said, looking into my eyes the way someone does who knows every door in your house and can go anywhere. "I knew you'd come. You always were so kind."