

Jonah

By Alex Nemser '02

I was in the whale:
The walls gave when I pressed them,
But the ribs hung above, poised, sprung, abundant.
In the slick vacuum of that space, I was
Explorer, policeman, janitor, king—maybe how the soul feels.

Scrambling up to divert the current of its swallow,
I caught krill with my shirt and ate it—
It tasted like my situation.

I prayed there, choking
On the seaweed tendrils of my love.
To the fish outside,
It may have seemed the whale was praying,
But their prayers come in bubbles,
A flick of fins, gill snap, beat of suction, release, refill.

When I came out, I felt the glare.
Too slippery to face
The unencumbered heartbreak of the Lord,
Mistaken for the rainbow of the gourd,
I lurked around the base of the low wall.

I heard the singing in the orange evening,
My sight dyed with escape,
Losing consciousness to
The repeated joyful music of the repentant city.

Wet and warped, I recapped
The whale's lesson on two loves:
One swallows whole, the other tears to pieces.

Dreaming of a wilted gourd, I assumed it was I,
False prophet, whispering like a windpipe at the wall.

The cattle in Nineveh knew to cry,
Their skin was *like* sackcloth;
The men of Nineveh knew, their repentance was primary:

Their wine was red color and dirt, pressed in hairshirts,
Ground lilies and yellow bulbs poured over black stones.

That Nineveh life was a bowl of wine with blue leaves floating in it,
Drunk into the air in a week,
Leaving only the dye of the wine,
A deep ring of sacred, forgotten color.

O deviator Jonah, my broken jaw is yours,
Teach me, water-logged with longing,
How to be a stoplight glowing red
At the intersection of the dead—
Speak your new prodigal prayer.

I laughed—I was in the whale.
Am I in the whale?

The Swimmer

By Alex Nemser '02

Slump-shouldered on the jetty, he seems
A shining, casual simulacrum
Made from sand, sea glass, and quartz,
Flung up in imitation by the surf.

A gold kaleidoscope of waves and arms,
His figure reappears and is projected
Among the crests, a butterfly quavering
In front of a cavalry of flashing cameras.

He surfaces: where we are most at home,
Exactly there, searched for and found,
Our own clutching breath pulls us up,
The burning salt of a word in our throats.

Submerged again, he flips over to look up
As if through a capsized glass bottom boat
To follow a dissolving jet trail,
The shadow of a silver tail whipped past.

To An Astronaut

By Alex Nemser '02

It was no planetarium:
neither mystery nor commentary,
only a blue encounter with the code.
What little you saw in the cosmos that was yours
lasted only a few seconds,
flashed somewhere at your back,
and was consumed.

At times it seemed a harsh system,
shifting according to its plan,
eluding tabulation,
quivering with the conviction of its orbits.
Mostly it was a wavering display
of senseless iteration,
the backdrop black as the blank eyes of a pharaoh,
asleep in an eternity of access.

At the farthest point,
half-asleep with vertigo,
you saw the green horizon as a circle.
Returning to earth, you found yourself the bearer
of a secret knowledge,
like that shared by two children who have watched,
over an afternoon, the death of a horse.

The colony in space is years away:
you will not live on it.
But Earth is no home for our mutant minds,
which harbor heaven and flee their anchors,
dodging cruel-edged thoughts and floating up
to embrace a looming memory
of troubling and treasured proximity.