

x. *Rags of Death.*

(Jonah 3:5-10)

*In the panic stricken hall
their eyes are on the king.
I see him rising from his throne
to set aside his lavish robe and call
for ugly itching rags and for the pale
forbidding ash of death. He stands alone
and, in the habit of command,
he calms the high pitched wail,
the fretful whispering.
His word goes far and wide.*

*“ All born of woman and all progeny
of herd and flock shall take no food
or drink. Let sackcloth’s bristly covering
wrap the smoothest skin, the roughest hide.
Let all now turn from death and blood
and cruel ways and, with a heartfelt plea,
cry out to God. I am the king. “*

*Throughout the city, when the news is heard,
they speak with happy puzzlement
of how they have foreseen the king’s decree –
every detail, every word –
with sackcloth and the agony
of hunger and the parched tongue.
It is a worthy measurement
of how both king and people are as one
in their sweet repentant ways.*

*You called me to cry out
that all would end in forty days,
but Nineveh has learnt to dress
in rags of death and miserably shout
your name. They slyly surrender their fate
to your besotted foolishness
and you perversely choose
to kiss their crime and place its punishment
on me. I have become the innocent
and wretched carrier of wicked news –
mercy on this people whom I hate.*