

The Fourth Cycle – Saving Jonah.

CONTENTS –

<i>Fragment – Irish Catholic.</i>	95
i. My voice.	96
ii. The Friendly Waves.	98
iii. The Twelve.	100
iv. The Storm.	101
v. The Rock.	102
vi. The Ninevite sinking boat.	104
vii. Drawing apart.	105
viii. Forty days.	107
ix. The Anointed One.	108
x. Rags of Death.	110
xi. Shining through.	111
xii. Brazen Jewell.	113
xiii. Love’s cry.	115
xiv. Why?	117
xv. The end of days.	118

Fragment – Irish Catholic..

*We come with spiteful news
after years of dread,
eager to accuse -
the starving dead.*

*Defiantly we sing
and walk the winding road
toward some distant reckoning.*

*We turn our backs on shame
and, with grim unbending code,
we find an enemy to blame.*

i. My voice.

On that sweet afternoon of banishment
(before the misery began)
I brush the cool and friendly grass
of Paradise with naked feet,
until the woman and the man
raise their heads and watch me pass.
She makes a loud lament.
He roars with righteousness and heat.

Adam and Eve undo my covenant.
They shut me out from Paradise.
I offer nourishment,
happy to keep their life
secure, but they will not recognise
my ways, as separation turns to strife.

I know a man, who has no child.
He leaves his father's home and follows me
on a journey to a distant land.
I promise children – like grains of sand
on the shore – and years go by frustratingly
till Abraham is reconciled
to famine and war and the parting of ways
and he and his wife become withered and ancient of days.

He cuts his ancient foreskin with a knife
and his ancient childless wife
cackles with helpless tears
at being pleased after all these years
and, this time, giving birth.

From my mountain high above the earth
comes my covenant, my voice.
My word leads Israel. My people rejoice;
they offer sacrifice and speak of mystery.

They build a temple to my name
and, in a courteous and priestly game,
chosen ones seek high serenity.
They turn their face from inconvenience -
abandoning my ways
for love of gold and smiling dominance.

The hurt runs deep.
I will drive them from the land.

I long to let my fury blaze
and call down death
and make the children weep,
but I hold back my hand.

Tired, after a stooping day
with wood and stone and passing words of play,
you come to wash your feet and take your food
and, with a blessing on this neighbourhood,
you lie down to sleep and hear
me whispering of how these days will end.

I call my Nazarene. I send
him with no staff, no rucksack - naked feet -
through the gates of death where he will greet
the silent ruins of hate and fear.

ii. *The Friendly Waves.*

(Jonah 1:1-3.)

*I hear you calling me
to cry out in your name,
so I take leave of Israel,
but not for Nineveh, that place of shame
and smiling villainy.*

*I cross the friendly waves to dwell
in some safe and distant land,
where I will block my ears
from your regrettable command,
and in the lonely passing years
I will curse the Ninevite.
My prayer will come before you every night.*

*I call down melting heat
to torch their flaxen hair
and stain their shirts with blood
and make their marching feet
shrivel in mid-air.*

*May their flesh turn into slime –
like some half-formed creature-hood
ripped out before its time.*

*If I stand among the towering heights
and mindless luxury
and wild excess
and warn those Ninevites,
that you have full measurement
of all their wickedness,
will you guarantee
swift and painful punishment?*

*I fear you may relent
and foolishly destroy
the only comfort of my small
and conquered race – the sweet joy
of proudly guarded hate.*

*For the sake of Israel,
I make this plea
from across the soothing swell
of the placid sea:*

*loathing needs the hope, the likelihood
of gnashing teeth and dripping blood.*

iii. The Twelve.

(Mt. 3:1-8:25; Mk.1:1-4:39a; Lk3:18:24a.)

In the slowly moving flood
he stands beneath the darkening sky,
and lays bare, with rugged art
and haunted eye,
the longing and the lies of the heart.

The wicked and the good
all come to Jordan's bank. They confess
and let their grief be washed away.
Follow in their steps and, like a stray
and curious child, listen as they groan.

For their sake I would go with death
into the realm of nothingness,
but every movement every breath
of theirs depends on mine. So stand alone
and be my champion.

Wrestle with me in the sand
and let my love on earth break free
among the hills and valleys of this land
and on the stony paths of Gallilee.

Gather the Twelve and watch them boast aloud
of how Jerusalem will hail your warriors.
Take those champions and bring
them far from the gaze of the admiring crowd
to Genazareth's inviting shores.

Pay your fare and climb into the boat
and, with the water's rhythm, fall asleep
and rest until the waves leap
high and grimacing
and fear grips their throat.

iv. *The Storm.*

(Jonah 1:4-16.)

*The haunting eloquence
of terror in the captain's frown
awakens reverence.
I pray that we might not drown.*

*The sailors seek a reason for our fate
and in their lottery my name
is drawn. They summon me to state
my country and my hidden shame.*

*I tell of how you made both sea and land
and how you wait for them to cast
me out into the angry deep.*

*The oars move eager and fast,
as they row toward the nearby strand
but the waves grow wilder still.*

*They stop and weep
and, praying that it be no crime to kill
a man of Israelite blood,
they honour your mysterious ways.*

*They cast me out into the sea
and, as I sink, I hear the harmony
of mourners in sweet brotherhood
making vows and singing praise.*

v. *The Rock.*

(Mt. 8:23-16:19; Mk.4:39-8:29; Lk.8:22-9:20.)

With a startled frown,
your companions shake you from sleep
as Genazareth turns pitiless
Rebuke their fear and calm the deep.
Let the wind and sky grow still – the waves, lie down.

On firm dry land,
the victory parade is soiled – the nakedness
of demons calling out your name.
Do what they ask. Let them command
two thousand swine, with strangled cries,
to leap into a watery grave.

She has touched you with her twelve year shame
of blood, yet you speak her praise,
as your companions, with disdainful eyes,
recoil from her polluted ways.

They call on you to save
a twelve year old with healing power
and you arrive at death's appointed hour;
they scorn your talk of reawakening
until the child, with life restored,
fulfils your word.

In rival pairs they bring
good news and proudly speak your name
and the blind and the lepers and the lame
spread the word and sing their gratitude.

Lead them, laughing with bewilderment,
to a quiet place of rest, but solitude
is soon undone, as ragged bands
of pilgrims queue for nourishment.

Bless and break the bread
as ancient love spills
from your weary hands
and the hungry crowd is fed.

Where eagles fly
among the stony hills
of Caesarea Philippi,

your perplexing ways have caught the breath
of a swaggering and loud
and restless fisherman.

He has seen you block
the power of storms of demons and of death.
He has seen you tremble like a flame
before the unrelenting crowd.
He longs to be your champion.
He speaks your name.
Call him 'Cephas,' 'Peter,' 'Rock.'

vi. *The Ninevite sinking boat.*

(Jonah 2:1-11.)

*The water and the weeds around my face
draw me down into the deep –
into that cold and haunted place
where icy fingers creep
along my careworn skin.*

*Terror stricken thoughts begin
their unwavering climb
to life and breath and light.*

*Above the surface - silvery white
and wavering in the sun –
I long to see, this one last time,
your holy temple in Jerusalem.*

*As I raise my outstretched arms,
my saviours smile and haul me in
and greet me with well-practised charms
and lock the trap-door overhead
in the Ninevite sinking boat. Like a shark
in search of prey it plunges to the dark –
into the canyons of the dead.*

*For three whole days and nights they grin
and whisper in the strange half light
and, when they jeeringly invite
me to take leave of my imprisonment,
your friendly hand begins to raise
me up and on the waiting shore,
when I tumble in the sand,
I laugh with wild astonishment.*

*I offer thanks and bow before
the God of Israel. At your command
my life, my hands, my feet, my hunger sing your praise.*

vii. Drawing apart.

(Mt. 16:20-20:28; Mk. 8:30-10:45; Lk. 9:20-18:14.)

Peter dreams impatiently
of how Jerusalem
will rise and cheer
our wild conspiracy,
but he grows pale with fear
on learning how the city will become
an engine of your defeat -
and your rising when the journey is complete.

Climb with Peter James and John
to this high place of solitude,
where two good men of wounded song
will tame their attitude.

Moses hears the angry murmuring
on the journey to the promised land;
they curse him for their blistered feet
and the cruel midday heat
and bitter suffering.

Elijah seeks my hand
in his cavern of despair
after slaughtering his enemies.
I lead him gently through the desert air
and touch him in the silent breeze.

You stand in vivid and unearthly light
as Peter makes his wide eyed plea
to build three dwellings on this holy ground;
the ancient sound
of fatherly delight
fills your friends with dread.

Weave your troubled way
down into the dead-eyed crowd,
where foaming mouth and quaking head
lie bereft and grey
in their grimy shroud.

The twelve, with claims to proud command
and hidden sword held high,
scorn the traitor's hand
and, when the child comes passing by,
you hold him close and gently speak
of welcome for the foolish and the weak.

Tell them how my love must be
at it is spoken at the start –
no divorce, no drawing apart.

The words lie awkwardly.
Your friends all fear your foolishness
and you are solemnly advised,
as the newly chosen king,
to make your smile unwavering
and your voice an unfamiliar sound.

The cheerful and despised
and friendly hoard gather round
with little ones for you to bless;
your friendly arms defy
all frowning reverence.

A youth approaches with the elegance
of privilege. You greet him tenderly,
as the twelve politely note
his measured and remote
and serenely winning ways.
They dream contentedly
of noble brows and smiling influence,
until the young man's folly is revealed
by your disquieting gaze.

Now go and lead the lurching dance
into Jerusalem's high festival,
where enemies will proudly shed
your blood and you will close your eyes
in death and, on the third day, rise.

viii. *Forty days.*

(Jonah 3:1-4.)

*Night and day has come and gone
amid the gleaming towers and cool conceit
of Nineveh. In threadbare alleyways
long hidden from the sun,
I walk with fervent feet
among the painted masks and tangled roots.
I call your name and speak your praise.*

*From kingdoms near and far
they come to Nineveh, their shining star.
Among the silent shoots
rising from the ancient ground
before the city gates,
they make a prayer – a pining sound –
that they might live contentedly
and offer sacrifice within her walls.*

*The city's welcoming recalls
how the monster of the deep awaits
the shimmering multitude
with lazy open mouth – invitingly.*

*Ninevite legions sweep and sway
and scour the earth for victory and food
with marching banners on display -
a monster's head with monster's teeth.*

*Among the city sights I stand and gaze.
I hear the streets and laneways seethe
and I am silent, overjoyed
at being made your messenger of light.
Who will curb the heedless appetite
of this brazen city and her crime?
I raise my voice this one last time:*

*“Your folly shall end in forty days!
“In forty days shall Nineveh be destroyed.”*

ix. *The Anointed One.*

(Mt 21:1-232:39 Mk 11:1-12:44; Lk19:28-20:47.)

You lay your story bare
and proudly speak my name
and watch the scholars, with their artful game,
frown with distaste. They do not care
to hear this talk; they will not say the word
and what will not be said cannot be heard.

Tell that tale of tenants in a tower
welcoming the owner's son.
They strike him down,
hidden by the ripening vines,
and seize the long desired inheritance.

The scholars know they are accused. They glower
and, with half-buried signs
of raw malevolence,
they smile and choose
to leave, lest they might lose
the joy of popular esteem.

With a different kind of smile
they come with Herod's men
and yet another scheme
for your demise. Once again,
with clenching teeth and laboured breath,
they leave with empty hands – their guile
on stark display and, in their eyes, your death.

When scholars gather, rivalry is sweet.
The rivals hear your news
and come to raise their brow
and appraise your views.

What will happen to those hands, those feet
that voice and those arresting eyes?
When death comes, how
will your proud body rise
again? They pose a question smilingly:

*"If seven brothers die,
and each in turn has wed the self-same wife,
who will take her for eternity?"*

You cheerfully reply
that nobody will miss
the elusive ways of married bliss
in the ecstasy of risen life.

In one last reckoning,
speak of the Anointed One,
and ask your questioners whose son
is he. As they name the shepherd king,
remind them all of David's song
about the son whom he calls Lord.

Watch them leave - with your unwanted word
in their ears like a booming gong.

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.*

xi. Shining through.

(Mt 24-25; Mtk 13; Lk 21:5-38.)

When the fig falls like a tear
to earth and, from these muddy origins,
the tree takes root and the tip
of the twig is tender with life,
the end is near.
The hour begins.
The time is ripe.

In that proud fellowship
of admiration and contented sighs,
your friends gaze at my house, my earthly home.
Tell them of the day
when this temple, stone by stone,
lies forsaken on the ground.

Haunted prophets pray
with wild accusing eyes
amid their trembling followers. They greet
the starving mouths, the rumours and deceit
with frowning righteousness,
but those who hear your voice - your gentle sound -
wait in peace, as warring kingdoms groan.

Once-friendly faces howl your name
with treachery and lawlessness
as your friends are handed over - called
to the accusing microphone.
They feel no hurt, no shame.
Your breath is guiding them. The nations hear.
Good news is taking root.

Weep for Jerusalem - hauled
beneath those slouching wings
by which the holy is defiled.
Abandon the city; flee to the hills
as vultures appear
with eager eye and dangling fruit
and the mother clings
to her wailing child,
as the cup of lamentation fills.

The moon and stars are fallen from the sky,
the gentle dreams undone

and all can hear the resolute cry
of the faithful champion:

*Rise and see
my madness shining through in victory.*

xii. *Brazen Jewell.*

(Jonah 4:1-8)

*I knew it then, so long ago,
when I still lived in my own land.
It was the reason I took flight
from your command.*

*You are too slow in anger and too weak
in punishment. You let your mercy flow
with too much ease. Your foolish ways invite
contempt. When you respond
with calm forgiving
sweet humility, it is beyond
my weary heart. The world grows bleak.
I might as well be dead as go on living.*

*Did you not fill my veins with crimson blood
and have I not the right to nurse
my people's wounds and hate their enemies?*

*Receive my prayer, my solemn curse.
Am I not the creature of your heart?
In your justice may it please
the great Lord Adonai to take my part
and let your hand, with fire and raging flood,
strike Nineveh with fear and pain.*

*I leave the city by the eastern gate
to build a shelter from the sun.
Here I sit and watch and wait
till Nineveh, that loathsome stain
upon the earth, is gone.*

*In the lazy noonday light
a lonely stem is reaching timidly
above the dry and stony ground,
spreading playful leaves and blissful shade.*

*Above me, through the hours of night,
it stands. I curl contentedly.
The city's wild and mocking sound
is softened in the dark and made
into a distant lullaby.*

These eyes, half open to the lonely sky

*of dawn, see a shadow hovering
with unkind and patient skill.
With rising fury and distress
and dark bewilderment
I see my leafy shelter withering
and bowed to earth, as if for burial.*

*The torturing sun begins to climb
till it brands my head with punishment.
I curse your ways – unfathomable, cruel
unnatural and all-forgiving.*

*Why go on living
when Nineveh, that brazen jewel,
sits in her foul crime?*

xiii. Love's cry.

(Mt. 26:26-27:60, Mk. 14:22-15:46, Lk.22.19-23:53.)

Take and bless
the bread, the cup. Tenderness
is resting on the tongue
with simple touch and, on
the lips, your blood – all barriers removed.
Let them taste how you have loved.

Peter rises, wavering on his feet
and frowning ardently, until you meet
his eye on this last night of liberty.

The ageless unrelenting flood
comes to whispering Gethsemane
with sweat like drops of blood.

Judas comes to kiss your cheek
and, on this evil hour,
he slyly takes his leave
as you are lead away
among the watching crowds.

The High Priest calls on you to speak.
Tell him you will come with Power,
like sunshine on the morning clouds,
and watch him tear at his well-tailored sleeve
enraged by your blasphemous display.

Pilot cannot understand
your silence. A wave of his hand
could save your life, but how can he ignore
the High Priest's hatred and the mob's wild roar?

Simon of Cyrene knows all too well
how the whip may soon begin
to lash his hide. With accusing stare -
and recoiling from the smell –
he grips the wood and lifts the weight
from your stooped raw skin.

Your executioners reach out with care
to take your clothing as a well-earned fee.
They cruelly raise you up and wait
for the thrill of the naked scream.

You hear the women's voices distantly
as in some half-forgotten dream,
and, when the torment is complete,
silent mourners come to hide
your lifeless body, pale and crucified,
under a linen sheet.

xiv. Why?

(Jonah 4:9-11)

*I had begun to bless
your name once more. My defeat
was heartened by your friendly shade,
so why have you betrayed
my final shred of happiness?*

*When you called me out of Israel,
why could I not travel to some sweet
and distant land to hide? Why could
you not let me drown when I fell
into the stormy sea? Why was I found
by smirking enemies and, when my voice
warned Nineveh about the wrath to come,
why did you listen to their flood
of whining misery? Why do you rejoice
at the mournful bleating sound
of sinners seeking unearned peace? Some
strange madness makes you want to rid
this cruel world of punishment.*

*Why did you allow my hopes to turn
into a putrid source of grief?
When you watch your creatures and lament
their twisted ways, why do you care
for their sorrows and count every hair
on their heads? Why not let them burn
and fade away? The blessing, the relief
of punishment would bring such ease.*

*Why do you not turn your face
from this desolate land
where I share hatred with my enemies?
Why do you come into this poisoned place?
Why do you hold out your hand?*

xv. *The end of days.*

(Mt.28.1:10, Mk.16:1-8, Lk.24:1-11.)

With spices for your feet and face
they weep and bless
at your final resting place
and, as the softly rising sun
lays bare the emptiness,
the story has begun.

The women tell their news and, like a stone,
it falls into the void,
where men and women feed on cruelty
and miserably groan
and contempt is bitingly enjoyed.

Go down into the belly of the deep,
where stooping shadows keep
all hope at bay with bleak forbidding eyes.
Stand among the carriers of hate
and boast about your merchandise;
shout like a bragging street
trader when the hour is late:

*Eat my flesh, drink my blood;
good drink, finest food.*

A furrowed brow looks on.
Take his hand and greet
my servant Jonah. Be the rising sun –
the long awaited food and drink
to end his lone mid-winter's night.

In the blink
of a playful eye invite
the world to battle Jonah's rage.
Walk round him roguishly. Wage
war on his hatred. Prance
like David in his wayward dance
till the tightly held spear
jabs your side at the end of days.

Jonah and his enemies appear
with naked feet.
They meet
at your wedding feast and watch you raise

the cup of memory and thought
and much loved liberty, sought
with tears and blood.

They gather round
as burning wounds and long remembered harms
are cast aside by the enchanting sound
of those who greet my foolish Fatherhood
my laughing eyes, my eagerly opening arms.