

AT THE SHEDD AQUARIUM ON YOM KIPPUR

atone for me dumb fish finning through cobalt waters
atone for me oh distracted priest
with your incessant motion prayers
swing a curved staring fish over my head
wash me in the tank waters of mikva

leave me on the bottom of the sea like Jonah
burp me out of that big dumb dutiful fish
who stares stupidly at the crowd
waiting for a better dinner
than a lousy cantankerous monkfish prophet
waiting for scallops in Szechwan sauce or classic drawn butter,
or perhaps waiting for an order of brazier-grilled conch and barnacles.

I stand to the side of my people
swimming between schools to Patmos
because I am a lowly Jew
who believes in the sign of Jonah
who believes in IXTHUS, the sign of the fish,

an article of faith that would surely pfisch off Maimonides
for I believe with perfect faith in the lowly Jewish carpenter
whose friends were a lower-class band
of loud-mouthed fishermen, sons of thunder gonif types
who most of the time didn't quite catch what was going on
like a whole lot of us yakking crappie know-it-alls
who might, in a rare moment of silent honesty,
admit that there is no efficacy, no antidote, no bleaching agent
potent enough to scrape and tear off the stinky scales of sin
rough necks who might in a fit of truthfulness
find it plausible to make a philosophical move into unknown waters
penitents who might finally concede
that there's no net and trawler tough enough to haul us back
there's no fast excruciating enough except starvation
to erase the guilt of a dirty world sinking into itself
trusting to save itself in its Titanic luxury liner
trusting to save itself by sheer will, grit, and works.

What bosh this is to the mollusk ears of a common day worker
who will tell you in a minute how futile is his service,
how insignificant his labors in the immense face of God.
Trusting myself to save myself is crazy, illogical, a slippery fish credo,
a millstone dragging body and soul to the depths, as one fated

to be cracked in half like the giant limestone carrier *Carl D. Bradley*,
whose stern rose high and then plunged straight down
exploding to the bottom of Lake Michigan.
Here's where self-reliance jettisons its faithful.
I should shed my pride, strip down to basic faith,
and like Peter, swim to the shores of Galilee,
to dry off in Nazareth's sun rays
to join a band of misfits who hold no money in the bag
except for a coin yanked out of a fish's mouth to pay Caesar.

The fog horn shofar keeps blowing
from the Waugoshance Lighthouse
warning of our wild and unpredictable nature
of our shoals, jagged rocks, and cold undercurrents.
We're in the trap, up to the gills in guilt,
stuck in the snare of self

Atone for me, IXTHUS—
save a drowning man;
pump out the dirty water;
breathe in new life.
Write me in your waterproof book,
oh Son of man, oh fisher of men,
you who got some nasty fish-hook scars
in the house of your salty friends.



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