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Jonah and His Daughter
by Ioana Pârvulescu

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Ioana Pârvulescu

Jonah and His Daughter

*translated
from the Romanian by*

Alistair Ian Blyth

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PROLOGUE
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

*Dear Iona,
Great, thank you! Your interview will be held in French. I send
you your schedule:*

*16.30: Librebook stand (no. 130) – Facebook Live interview
with Anna Rydholm (Social Media Team of European
Commission)*

17.00: Librebook stand (no. 130) – Cocktail

*18.00: Place de l'Europe (no. 205) – “What’s the European Union
Prize for Literature?”*

19.00: End

Best regards, Roberta

Ever since I started corresponding by e-mail in English, people have often referred to me as *Iona*. In English, the spellchecker automatically changes the *oa* in *Ioana*, a name it doesn't recognise, to an *o*, which it thinks more plausible. It's true, *Iona* does occur as a woman's first name, and here I only have to think of violinist and conductor *Iona Brown*. At first the alteration vexed me. With its full complement of vowels, my name encapsulated the name of my maternal grandmother, *Ana*, and my paternal great-grandmother, who was also an *Ana*, not to mention the many *Ioans* in my family, the name of the street where I grew up, *Strada Sfintu Ioan*—Saint John Street—and the saint himself, whose feast falls on the eve of my birthday. *Iona* sounded too abrupt to me, too masculine. In Romanian, *Iona* is the name of a minor prophet who was quick to anger. But the more I studied it, both the name and the biblical character himself became very dear to me. I began to understand *Iona*, to understand *Jonah*. Like all true artists, he was exceptionally courageous, and he was the first, in his own way and long before Jesus, to have vanquished death after three days. I think he was the only person to have stood up to God in a natural way, through dialogue, perhaps because he imagined that a human being, created after the image and likeness of the Lord, could speak to Him as His peer and dare to say something other than what was strictly expected of him.

The reason his story is so beautiful and so human is because it is about deadly monsters that play a double part and which in the end are life savers, about the need for darkness, about fear and running away, about passion, about getting involved or standing aloof, about being human or separate from humanity, about dying, being born again and, yes, wishing to die many times, even if you believe yourself to have been chosen by God. About how you can become cruel, even while being good, and how you can become good, even while being bad. It is a total story. It sets the imagination working. It sets you in motion. It

puts you to the test. It makes you feel things you've never felt before.

And another thing I noticed: everybody smiles when it comes to *Jonah*.

I realised that reality was tugging me by the sleeve: to write about the life of *Jonah* became almost an obligation. The task seemed as hard to me as that which God gave the rightful bearer of the name. I had countless reasons not to complete the task, to try to get out of it. In the end, nobody else knew about it apart from me and, presumably, God. The same as *Jonah*, I tried to run away, to flee in the opposite direction. How easy it would have been to write a minor novel about some (disastrous) love affair set in the present day! But no, the idea pursued me wherever I might be, like the eye of God, which sees all. And at intervals I would receive yet another e-mail: *Dear Iona*. In the end, I couldn't go on hiding.

The descendants of the patriarchs are here, they live among us, as someone once said, without knowing who her ancestors were, more likely than not. If we reckon that there are an average of three generations per century (in biblical times, there were actually more), then we are separated from *Jonah*, who probably lived in the eighth century BC, by around ninety generations. That wouldn't be all that many, if it weren't that the trail gets lost. On one side of my family tree, I have a record of twelve generations: surnames, first names, certificates of baptism and marriage. Farther back than that, history is silent. But if I were able to keep digging back in time, I would finally reach the parents of parents who were contemporaries of *Jonah*.

For a writer, a thousand or two thousand years are, as the Psalmist said, but as yesterday: they sweep by like a dream.

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BOOK ONE

**Much Sky,
Earth, Water**

You could have been my son

‘Peace be with you!’

The man thus greeted made a deep bow of the head, as was customary, but he spoke no reply. He sat on the ground, his heels tucked under him, and from beneath his long linen shirt could be divined firm, rounded thighs. He was hollowing a piece of wood in his lap, probably to make a wine cup like the two finished ones that rested beside him among wood chips. He looked up at the stranger garbed in white, and the sun, a little past its zenith, stabbed his eyes. He shaded his brows with his hand the better to see the face of the guest. He could see only that it was an old man with a grey, wavy beard covering his hollow cheeks and that he wore rings in his ears. The hands, which once must have been very delicate, held the reins of a mule, and on each forefinger, there glinted a ring set with precious stones, one of them gold, the other silver. Despite his small stature, something lofty, even commanding could be read in his bearing, betokening one who knew what he wanted and why he had come.

‘A drop of water for me and my old beast, if you would be so kind. The servants will make do for themselves. We have come from the ends of the earth ...’

The man on the ground looked at him suspiciously, without saying anything, prompting the visitor to explain:

‘From a place called Tarshish. “The ends of the earth.” True, this day we have come only from Jaffa—’ and here he pointed his head to the south—‘but at my age it is still a long and weary way ... I set foot on dry land in Joppa. I have also come through Jerusalem. A place of huge crowds, people of all different

stripes, too. Hustle and bustle and din everywhere. I can't abide all that: the clatter of horses' hooves day and night, the shrieks of women scolding their children, the gawpers every step of the way, the constant shouts of the market traders hawking their olive oil, their fish, their grain, their dried fruit, the howls of the thieves whose chastisement is meted out on their hides, and by night, the hoarse whispers from the craws of ... Actually, for me, I think some wine would do better than water,' he said with a sigh and a meaningful look at one of the finished cups, 'since the animals don't have any use for such a beverage. I'd personally rather not let water pass my lips if at all possible.'

The man on the ground rose to his feet without delay, obeying the strict laws of hospitality. He took the dun beast by the reins, quickly led it to the nearby well, and set it to the trough. The mule plunged its muzzle in the water straight away, spraying droplets all around. Shortly thereafter the guest received sweet wine in a freshly whittled cup. The old man drank with the same insatiable thirst as the mule, likewise spraying drops of his drink. The host stood looking at his guest with impatience, however, as if he could hardly wait to be rid of him.

'You must be Jonah ben Amithai,' said the old man cheerfully. 'I knew your father well, may his memory be praised forever more. Or maybe he's still alive? I would be overjoyed to find out he is.'

'No,' said the man named Jonah curtly, without volunteering details.

He noted only that the question ought to have come first, but it was obvious that the guest was one of those fearful people who countenances the worst before hoping for the best.

'When, or, rather, how did he die?' asked the stranger with obvious curiosity, pointing an extended thumb at his cup, a sign easily understood, at which Jonah poured him another measure of the honey-coloured wine.

'Ten days. Today's the tenth. Didn't wake up. Morning of the Sabbath.'

'In his sleep, you mean to say? What a lucky man! And it was you who found him?'

Jonah nodded, increasingly morose. He didn't care for long talk, and this old man's tongue itched to wag, keeping Jonah from his business. It was business he wished to finish. And that meant in silence. The grief caused by his father's death was in any event still too raw to share with every unannounced traveller passing through Gat-Hefer on his way from Tarshish, or 'the ends of the earth', wherever they might be, too raw for him to fritter away the day with every stranger, even if the stranger in question had, so it would seem, known his departed father well.

'I'm your father's cousin,' said the old man, as if hearing what Jonah was thinking, 'and I met you once, if you can call the occasion that—it was when they cut your foreskin and gave you the name Jonah, or "Dove". All our names are loans from the Lord and they're reflections of the world, but I expect you know that from your father. You were such a lovely little baby when you were eight days old, my little Dove. After they unwrapped your swaddling clothes, you paddled your thin little legs, like a frog, not at all like a bird, screaming at the top of your lungs with your thin little voice all the while, till you were red in the face. You wouldn't stop. To tell the truth, I'd never have thought you'd grow up to have such thick legs and such a deep voice! Or cheeks bristling with such a curly black beard! I wasn't even sure you'd live, even though your shrill squeals showed you wanted something from this life ... I wonder, is that young, beautiful mother of yours still alive? Or has she departed to Adonai too?'

This time he put the question in the right order.

'Yes,' muttered Jonah.

'Yes, she departed, or yes, she's alive?'

‘Yes, alive. Not young.’

‘Praised be the Lord! Because she’s alive, I mean! I really must see her straight away. Tell her that Jacob ben Benjamin is here, her relative from Tarshish, from across the Big Sea. Or rather, a relative of her husband, Amithai, unfortunately deceased, as you say. Which would make me your uncle.’ The old man then added in a voice suddenly tremulous, shaking his head along with his gold earrings: ‘Didn’t they ever tell you about me?’

‘Not at home,’ answered Jonah, in a voice trying to be gentle, but which came out rather harshly.

‘All the better! Better that way! I need to get used to the thought that instead of a rosy-cheeked, cheerful woman possessed of those contours most pleasing to the male eye, with breasts like two young roes that are twins, as the wise Solomon put it last century, utterly inaccurately, yet so enticingly—just between ourselves, your mother’s dugs were swollen with milk at the time—her long neck wrapped around with strings of pearls, her black hair, glossy beneath her gauzy veil, her teeth like pearls, her lips aflame with the promise of delight, and that instead of a ripe young bride, dressed in gauzy linen, I shall see an old crone. I shouldn’t be surprised if she were toothless too!’

‘No,’ said Jonah, who had never heard anybody talk like this before. ‘No, no. She’s beautiful. Has all her teeth. Black hair.’

For him, so sparing with words, it was a long reply. It showed he was troubled.

‘Glory unto Thee, O Lord! I fled to the ends of the earth from her and the cousin she chose in wedlock, since in youth the blood runs hot and will not be denied. Youth is a terrible time, believe me, nephew: rife with errors and downright ridiculous.’

Jonah, still a young man, made no reply.

‘You could have been my own son, my little Dove: Jonah ben Jacob ben Benjamin. You would have turned out nimbler of speech, for poor Amithai, blessed be his memory, trundled his

words like boulders, he found it hard to dislodge them from his mouth, but even so, it was plain to see that not I but he was the “True”, as his name betokens: A good heart and a good cousin, albeit irascible and superstitious. But I won’t find fault with him now that he has so easily slipped away into sleep. That lad always had the luck ... You know, my child, folk ought to bid each other a “good death” rather than a “good night”! If you show me where, then I’ll lay myself down to sleep till your mother comes, even though I hope the good fortune of dying in my sleep does not befall me on this of all days, before this white-haired old man has a chance to see once more her who has lost neither all her beauty nor her teeth.’

It seemed that they had nothing more to say to each other, even though the essential thing, which is to say, the purpose of the visit, had still not been revealed. Jacob didn’t share it with him, for a reason known to him alone, and Jonah wasn’t in the habit of speaking when not asked, nor was he curious by nature, and so, after he took the stranger up to the flat roof, shaded on two sides by an old vine, and where there was a straw mattress, he went back to his whittling, with a frown on his face. It was then that he heard a cry that froze the blood in his veins. It was difficult to tell whether it came from man, woman, or beast, but from the sound of it, it was mostly likely beast. Jacob, who had only just gone up to the roof, descended in a hurry.

Gat-Hefer nestled among rolling hills, where the aridity was less intense than in the rest of the land. In spring you could see verdure speckled with red poppies, and in summer, among the thistles, a host of yellow wildflowers bloomed in the stunted grass. Between the boundless silk of the sky above and the stony earth divided into family plots passed down from father to son for all eternity, the Galileans of that small settlement toiled —like all those before them and all those that would come after them—and, full of hope or fear, they awaited the coming of the Messiah. The women milled the flour between two round grindstones in the yards of their houses, where they also baked the bread and raised the children. The men broke the soil and cleared it of stones, they cultivated the vines, which they toiled to water when the rain refused to fall, and they made the wine, which was rather sweet, but at least lent them joy and an appetite to life, while life itself ever followed the same allotted course. They would often make the journey south to Jerusalem or to Jaffa, a town they could even glimpse from home, white in the distance. They would go there on business, to barter goods and learn the latest news. Or else Jerusalem and Jaffa would come to them, in the form of merchants and travellers full of stories, like Jacob ben Benjamin, who was good at talking and nothing else, in Jonah's opinion. But very soon, this judgement on Jonah's part would turn out to have been hasty. For, Jacob had other skills than facility at spinning a yarn.

The cry had come from neither man nor beast, but from a mother. While the woman was bickering over nothing with a

neighbour, her child had quickly clambered like a little beetle up the quite low stone rim of the nearby well, from which Jonah had drawn water for his uncle's mule and whose heavy lid had been left open. The mother had kept an eye on her child the whole time but let her out of her sight for an instant, a single instant. Such evil accidents the folk of Gat-Hefer named the will of God. The child had fallen down the well just as the woman turned to call her, and so she saw with her own eyes the horror she would never forget. The shaft was deep, and above it was a pulley from whose rope hung two large, wide-mouthed clay pots, an empty one above, the other down below, in the water. The two men ran to the well, the old man more slowly than his nephew and breathing through his mouth stertorously.

Jonah grasped the rope with both hands. His foot was too long to fit inside the vessel. So, he curtly ordered the women, who were wailing incomprehensibly, and his uncle, who was still panting, to lower it down the shaft while he clung to the rope. Luckily for them, right then the neighbour's eldest son came running up, a sturdy youth. They lowered Jonah making fierce exertion. Jonah swayed on the rope and the stone walls of the shaft flayed his skin as he banged against them. The mother gnashed her teeth and her fingers turned white from how tightly she held the rope. The neighbour, who was pretty and slim, and her son let out the rope hand over hand and braced themselves with their whole bodies. The uncle stood and watched. Abruptly, the weight yielded, a vessel full of water rose to the top and the neighbour propped it against the side of the well. The mother of the fallen child peeled her fingers from the rope and shook them to relieve their numbness. They had heard a splash and then silence. In the black water that had till now reflected a small, round, empty sky, they could now see nothing but the top of Jonah's head. Nobody could remember when the well had been sunk, but it was the first time it had swallowed anybody.