

# Nathaniel's Mission

by [Jeffrey Burghauer](#) (August 2023)



*The Storm at Sea, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1569*

*From a translation of *Siege of Jerusalem*, the anonymous 14<sup>th</sup> c. Middle English epic.*

**Now here is** Nathaniel, a virtuous Greek  
Whose bosom companions included the seas—  
An intimacy born of passion to seek  
Extravagant spices on sweltering quays.  
He hadn't a home and he hadn't a wife.  
He fathomed what Freedom was for,

And found he could only adore  
The habits involved in itinerant life.

Josephus said Cestius Gallus had sent  
Nathaniel to Rome on an errand (it felt,  
Across a vexatious enigma's extent—  
Across a convulsion) to Nero who dwelt  
In Power's supreme, indestructible home  
    To tell him the bothersome news  
    That Palestine's mutinous Jews  
Resolved on withholding their tribute to Rome.

This vagabond crossed all that cankerous land.  
This vagabond crossed all those rancorous waves,  
Courageously shaking the horrible hand  
Confining marines to their watery graves.  
This vagabond mastered the body he had,  
    Secure on the shivering bow  
    With Love and a terrible vow  
To lecture the weather when weather was bad.

The clatter of clouds was so powerful that  
The sky seemed intent on convulsing apart.  
Observable Nature appeared to combat  
The world as described by a nautical chart.  
The clatter of Heaven unraveled the rain.  
    The Daylight's lithe shoulders can seem  
    To scatter their garments of steam.  
The cinnabar sun was submerged in the main.

Nathaniel's convulsing, hysterical ship  
Maintained a condition recalling a lad  
Who's suddenly found himself seized in the grip  
Of shame that's attendant on learning he had  
The previous night inadvertently proved  
    Himself a preposterous bore  
    And frivolous moron before

The face of the woman he recklessly loved.

Nathaniel delivered himself underneath  
The hatches, permitting the water and wind  
To drag their fragmented and furious teeth  
Across a deserted exterior. Skinned  
Sea surfaces hollered. A Promise's ghost  
    Coerced that demoralized rind  
    Of lumber into the unkind  
Direction of some enigmatical coast.

Nathaniel's thin vessel was tumbled among  
Viridian towers of water. The chips  
Of razorish ice now exquisitely stung.  
The sail burst in pieces. The powerless ship's  
Precisely constructed Liburnian shell  
    Ascended through nautical curd.  
    The bow pointed firmamentward;  
The stern was a forefinger pointed to Hell.

The waves now aggressed with such savagery, such  
Demented, obscene, miscellaneous force,  
Such ire inside of its tenderest touch,  
Such total ferocity rendering hoarse  
The throat of the Tempest, the throat of the snow  
    (A Reason-bewildering draft,  
    A passionless passion), the craft  
Was borne by a gale to the Port of Bordeaux.

## [Table of Contents](#)

**Jeffrey Burghauer** is a teacher in Columbus, OH. He was educated at SUNY-Buffalo and the University of Leeds. He currently studies the five-string banjo with a focus on pre-

WWII picking styles. A former artist-in-residence at the Arad Arts Project (Israel), his poems have appeared (or are forthcoming) in *Appalachian Journal*, *Fearsome Critters*, *Iceview*, *Lehrhaus*, and *New English Review*. Jeffrey's book-length collections are available on [Amazon](#), and his website is [www.jeffreyburghauser.com](http://www.jeffreyburghauser.com).

**Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)**