



SEA MONSTERS
EDITED BY THEA TOMAINI
AND ASA SIMON MITTMAN



SEA MONSTERS

THINGS FROM THE SEA,
VOLUME 2

EDITED BY
ASA SIMON MITTMAN AND
THEA TOMAINI

TINY COLLECTIONS

SEA MONSTERS: THINGS FROM THE SEA, VOLUME 2

©2017 Asa Simon Mittman and Thea Tomaini

This work carries a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or publishers endorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

This work first published in 2017 by **tiny collections**,
an imprint of **punctum books**
created by the **Material Collective**
punctumbooks.com | materialcollective.org

The Material Collective is dedicated to fostering respectful intellectual exchange and innovative scholarship in the study of the visual arts, in the academy, and in the broader, public sphere. We believe that excellent scholarship can grow out of collaboration, experimentation, and play, and we work to create spaces where scholars from many different backgrounds, both traditional and non-traditional, can come together for mutual enrichment.

Tiny Collections are gatherings: thoughtfully assembled things, presented in warm light with a murmured “lookit” for introduction. Tiny Collections are the things we do, together.

ISBN-13: 978-194744141

ISBN-10: 1947447158

LLCN: 2017952203

Book design: Chris Piuma.

Editorial assistance: Lisa Ashpole.

CONTENTS

- v Introduction: Lines in the Sand
Thea Tomaini
- 1 Ocean is the New East
Alan S. Montroso
- 9 Interlude I: Great Fishes and Monstrous Men (Shoreline)
Megan E. Palmer
- 18 On the Backs of Whales
Haylie Swenson
- 34 Interlude II: Great Fishes and Monstrous Men (Undertow)
Megan E. Palmer
- 38 Quickening Sands
Erin Vander Wall
- 43 Interlude III: Great Fishes and Monstrous Men (Tide Line)
Megan E. Palmer
- 45 Conclusion: Sink or Plunge?
Asa Simon Mittman
- 52 Works Cited
- 55 Image Credits
- 56 Author Bios

SINK OR PLUNGE?

CONCLUSION · ASA SIMON MITTMAN

We are sinking. We *are* sinking, as individuals, as participants in a field that is sinking along with us, as members of a species, and as components in a massive, global ecological network. But we are not sinking because of the malevolence of natural forces, not because the sand is hungry for us and for our horses, characterized by “malicious intent,” as Erin Vander Wall describes the quicksand in Walter Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor*.¹ We are not sinking because whales and monstrous fish want to swallow us whole, not because the strange beings of the sea wish harm on us, nor because the sea itself is vengeful, though “the water comes,”² and who could blame it? We are sinking because of *our* collective hunger and callousness. As dwellers in the anthropocene, we can already see it all around us. Yes, of course, Venice is sinking.³ More than two decades ago, seemingly alarmist headlines asked questions about Amsterdam’s future like, “Is it time to build another ark?”⁴ But these cities have been sinking for centuries.

1 Vander Wall, 40.

2 Montroso, 4.

3 Stefania Munaretto, Pier Vellinga, and Hilde Tobi, “Flood Protection in Venice under Conditions of Sea-Level Rise: An Analysis of Institutional and Technical Measures” *Coastal Management* 40, no. 4 (July 2012): 355–80, 356: “Venice and its lagoon are a well-known example of a complex and vulnerable artificially conserved natural system. Similar to many other coastal regions, SLR [sea level rise] in the Venice lagoon is expected to increase erosion; the frequency, intensity and height of tidal floods (locally called acqua alta, meaning high water); and loss of habitat and biodiversity.” See also Y. Bock, S. Wdowinski, A. Ferretti, F. Novali and A. Fumagalli, “Recent Subsidence of the Venice Lagoon from Continuous GPS and Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar,” *Geochemistry, Geophysics, Geosystems* 13, no. 3 (March 2012).

4 “Is it time to build another ark?” *U.S. News & World Report* 107, no. 20 (20 November 1989): 12.



Lors le Roy Alixandre
 leur respondi
 et dist en telle
 maniere etymme
 L'ome qui entent a beneser
 sa honte ou a croistre son loe
 en son pouoir si se doit habill
 donner aux peulz de fortune
 et ne doit mie penser quil
 soit parail a ses Enemis Car
 hardi se mauuaise parole
 ne crist proesse ne valeur
 Et se je me sup habandonne
 en tel peulz Je y ay tant
 maingme q'ien gouidrauy
 plus sairement mon peuple
 touz les iours de ma vie

pou vault. Car Jay deu
 des petites poissons qui
 par enuoy desconfisoient
 les grans qui par force
 ny pouoient auerir
Coment le Roy Alixandre
 et son oft se combattirent
 contre bestes sauuaiges
 lesquelles auoient ou
 font vne corne trentat
 vne vne espee 606

Even Las Vegas has been sinking since the 1930s.⁵ Its sands are slow, but nonetheless are sucking the city down toward their “tenacious depths.”⁶ They do so not because they hunger for us but because we thirst for the waters that lurk beneath them. With every cool drink pulled from the hot, dry sands, people pull themselves downward to their city’s grave. But while Las Vegas is something of a reduction sauce of US and global capitalism, we are all in the same state of descent. All of us are making a large and collective fire on the back of our Jasconius-Earth, which, in fleeing from us, dives down and threatens to drown us all.

The tide rises, and the sea, which has beckoned us for millennia with its beauty and its bounty, the sea, which we have gone to for so long, is now coming for us. Alan Montroso — following Stacy Alaimo and Steve Mentz — encourages us to think not only as the creatures of the sea, but as the sea itself, to dive down with it rather than resisting its perhaps inevitable advance. What would it have meant for the monks of *The Legend of St. Brendan*, introduced here by Haylie Swenson, to have held fast, to have dived down with Jasconius — the great fish or whale they mistake for an island — rather than fleeing back to their fragile coracle? Unprepared, it would mean their death by drowning. But what if, like Alexander in *Le livre et le vraie hystoire du bon roy Alixandre*,⁷ they prepared carefully, bringing with them a few pets and some lamps (Figure 6)? Alexander is imperiled in this narrative by his unfaithful wife, cutting the rope connecting him to the surface, rather than by the strange creatures of the abyss, or the water itself.

When Jasconius awakens, the monks on his back are so surprised that, to them, it seems that “the whole earth was moving, And moving away from the ship.” Brendan,

-
- 5 J.W. Bell, J.G. Price, and M.D. Mifflin, “Subsidence-induced fissuring along preexisting faults in Las Vegas Valley, Nevada,” *Proceedings, Association of Engineering Geologists*, 35th Annual Meeting, Los Angeles: 66–75.
 - 6 Sir Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 348.
 - 7 London, British Library, Royal MS 20 B. xx, f. 77v, France (Paris), c. 1420. For details and color images, see “Detailed record for Royal 20 B XX,” *British Library Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*, accessed September 2015, <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=6533&CollID=16&NStart=200220>.

of course, understands what has happened, and from his perspective on the ship can treat the situation with his characteristic calm.

Brendan said to them: 'Brothers, do you know
Why you have been afraid?
It is not land, but an animal
Where we performed our feast,
A sea fish greater than the greatest.'⁸

Jude Mackley argues that “Jasconius is sentient and aware of the monks, but reacts instinctively to the fire on its back.”⁹ That is, while he nearly kills them all, Jasconius bears the monks no ill will, and a year later — and every year thereafter — he returns to serve as a platform for the Easter celebration, even returning to them a lost cooking pot:

Their cauldron which they lost
The year before, now they saw;
Jasconius has kept it,
Now they have found it on him;
They are more secure on him
And they celebrate a most beautiful festival there.¹⁰

The monks achieve a rapport with the great sea monster in this fictional narrative. In the historical episode chronicled by Timothy Granger in 1568 and explored with sensitivity here by Megan Palmer, the humans fail. They lack a figure of empathy, like Brendan — so compassionate that he decides to relieve Judas’s sufferings in hell, if only for a day.¹¹ Instead, when a group of fishermen find a pod of orcas, they haul them back to shore, string them up on trees — missing the christological symbolism as they do so — and hack them to death for two days. These men, though, despite their butchery, see only their own imperilment, from the orcas’ blowholes that “did

8 Jude S. Mackley, *The Legend of St. Brendan: A Comparative Study of the Latin and Anglo-Norman Versions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 272.

9 Mackley, *The Legend of St. Brendan*, 114.

10 Mackley, *The Legend of St. Brendan*, 283.

11 Mackley, *The Legend of St. Brendan*, 294–302.

spoute a great quantitie of water . . . that they had almoste dround 2 boates men and all, with spoutynge of water . . . & wet all them that were within theyr reache moste cruellie.”¹² That is, while being axe-murdered with their family members, such that “the ryver wherin they weare taken was coloured red, with the blood that issued from theyr woundes,” these orcas were *cruelly* wetting men with their dying breaths. These fishermen of Ipswitch and their reporter, Granger, fail so utterly to think with, or think as the orcas that, even when their faces are reflected back at them in the glossy black surface of their victims, they fail to see the potent non-human identities and agencies of the “fisshes.”¹³

The whale painted for us by Adriaen Coenen was already beached when found by another timorous batch of monks. This time, the whale is on their turf, literally, and so they can afford to be astonished rather than terrified, though their small faces bear tiny frowns that seem to suggest concern. The whale is on its back, dead or dying, but they still cower in their habits, their cowls pulled up and their hands clutching their robes under their chins. As Swenson describes it, “a stranded whale thus seems to be a whale at its most vulnerable, a subdued monster that can be approached, touched, rubbed, and climbed with eagerness, fear, and desire.”¹⁴

There are, though, great dangers to climbing onto the backs of whales. Thorfinn is lured by the promise of famine relief, but loses his head. Brendan’s monks are almost drowned. And surely the fishermen of Ipswitch carved away some element of their own humanity. One cannot hitch a city to the avanc — the miles-long monster-whale of China Miéville’s *The Scar* — without risking total annihilation.¹⁵ All of these interactions result from failing to see *as* the whale, see through its eyes, “perfectly round, many times the size of a man’s head.”¹⁶

12 Palmer, 10.

13 Palmer, 36.

14 Swenson, 22.

15 China Miéville, *The Scar* (New York: Del Rey Books, 2002).

16 Swenson, 19.

I grew up on an island — really, a terminal moraine, the endpoint of a glacial advance, the heap of rocks and sand that were left behind as an ice age ended and the ice receded. An earlier warming of the earth created this apparent island, and now, as ice dies, shrieking in its death,¹⁷ that island, like all islands, is sinking. This 118-mile-long whale-shaped mass will, presumably, not only raise its North and South Fork flukes and slowly dive into the sea, but will then break back down into the detritus of which it was formed.

But, lest this be too bleak, we need to recall that though the fire drives Jasconius to dive down, he *does* return; and Brendan and his men learn how to make their annual feast on his back without causing him harm, and therefore without risking their own destruction. They find a harmony with the cycles of nature, such that their invented holy day coincides — of course, clearly by divine agency in the tale — with the great whale’s annual return.

The challenge posed by the essays in this volume is not the well-worn “sink or swim?” In the face of present and future anthropogenic climate disruption, we cannot debate between staying afloat or sinking — we *are* sinking, alone and together. In his “Swim Poem” titled “Sounding,” Steve Mentz feels how the sea “Grips me as I grip it,” and hears the sound of his own soundings:

The noise flesh makes moving through water.
The hiss and slither of universal infamy, which will make itself heard
If anyone cares to listen.¹⁸

These essays ask us to go flukes-up, to point our noses downward, to *dive*. To dive down to the habitats of the “strange strangers” dredged up for the Sant Ocean Hall of the National Museum of Natural History,¹⁹ to dive into the Orcas’ bodies, “blacke

17 “This iceberg sings,” *News in Science*, 25 November 2005, accessed September 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/science/news/stories/s1516768.htm>.

18 Steve Mentz, “Wet Work: Writing as Encounter,” *How We Write: Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blank Page*, ed. Suzanne Conkin Akbari (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2015), 128.

19 Montroso, 1, alluding to Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

as ynke,"²⁰ to cram ourselves into a fragile Bathysphere with William Beebe and Otis Barton,²¹ and, descending to the depths, to see the alien beings of the Bathyal Zone, and to think about, and for, and *as* them, and as the great ocean by which they, we, *all of us* are surrounded.

²⁰ Palmer, 36.

²¹ For wonderful images of the Bathysphere, its inventors, and a few of Else Bostelmann's beautiful illustrations of sea creatures glimpsed through its tiny, thick porthole, see "Episode 179: Bathysphere," *99% Invisible*, 1 September 2015, <http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/bathysphere/>.

WORKS CITED

- Akbari, Suzanne Conklin. *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2009.
- Alaimo, Stacy. "Violet-Black." In *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 233–51. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Bartlett, Robert. *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Blaylock, James P. *The Ebb Tide*. Burton, Mi.: Subterranean Press, 2009.
- The Book of John Mandeville*. Edited by Tamarah Kohanski and C. David Benson. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007.
- Bosner, Kevin. "How Quicksand Works." Last modified 13 August 2001. Accessed September 15, 2015. <http://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/earth/geology/quicksand.htm>.
- Coenen, Adriaen. *The Whale Book: Whales and Other Marine Animals as Described by Adriaen Coenen in 1585*. Edited by Florike Egmond and Peter Mason. London: Reaktion Books, 2004.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- D'Angelo, Mike. "Blackfish." *A.V. Club*. Accessed 8 December 2013. <http://www.avclub.com>.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Hostipitality." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2000): 3–18.

Farmer, D.H. "Introduction." In *The Age of Bede*, translated by J.F. Webb. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.

Gower, John. "Visio Anglie." In *Poems on Contemporary Events: The Visio Anglie (1381) and Cronica Tripartita (1400)*, edited by David R. Carlson, translated by A.G. Rigg. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2011.

Grettir's Saga. Translated by Jesse Byock. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Heaney, Seamus. "The Disappearing Island." *The American Poetry Review*. 16, no. 4 (1987): 6.

———. Interview with George Morgan. *Cycnos* 15, no. 2 (9 July 2008). Accessed 9 December 2013.

Heng, Geraldine. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Higsons, Ian Macleod. *Writing East: The "Travels" of Sir John Mandeville*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Kadau, Dirk, et al. "Living Quicksand." *Granular Matter* 11, no. 1 (Jan 2009): 67–71.

Khaldoun, A., et al. "Rheology: Liquefaction of Quicksand Under Stress." *Nature* 437 (29 September 2005): 635.

"Killer Quicksand." *Mythbusters Results*. Last modified 20 October 2004. Accessed 15 September 2015. <http://mythbustersresults.com/episode19>.

Long, Darrel G.F., "What is Quicksand?" *Scientific American* (3 July 2006). Accessed 15 September 2014. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-is-quicksand/>.

Mentz, Steve. "After Sustainability." *PMLA*. 127, no. 3 (2012): 586–92.

Mooney, Mark. "SeaWorld Trainer Killed By Whale Had Fractured Jaw and Dislocated Joints." *ABC News*. 31 March 2010. Accessed 10 December 2013. <http://abcnews.com>.

Oswald, Dana M. *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010.

Roman, J. *Whale*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.

Scott, Maggie. "Scots Word of the Season: Kelpie." *The Bottle Imp* 8 (November 2010). Accessed September 15, 2014. <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue8/Kelpie.pdf>.

Scott, Sir Walter. *The Bride of Lammermoor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Serres, Michel. *Biogea*. Translated by Randolph Burks. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing: 2012.

Szabo, V.E. *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

Van Duzer, Chet. *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps*. London: British Library, 2013.

The Voyage of Saint Brendan. In *The Age of Bede*, translated by J.F. Webb. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.

IMAGE CREDITS

cover: *North Pacific storm waves as seen from the M/V NOBLE STAR, Winter 1989.* National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/Department of Commerce.

i: *Dat Eerste Boock Van Menich Derleij Walvischen Ende Ander Selseme Groote Wonderlijke Visschen*, Middleburg, Netherlands, 1584. Adriaen Coenen. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience Topstukkenlijst Vlaamse Gemeenschap, c:lvd:6875805, f. 58v-59r

vi: *Sant Ocean Hall, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.* Alan S. Montroso.

10: “A Moste true and marveilous straunge wonder, the lyke hath seldom ben seene, of .XVII. Monstrous fisshes, taken in Suffolke, at Downam brydge, within a myle of Ipswiche. The .XI. daye of October. In the yeare of our Lorde God. M.D.LX.VIII” (1568). Huntington Library Britwell 18306, EBBA 32270.

13: “The true fourme and shape of a monsterous Chyld, which was Born in Stony Stratforde, in North Hampton Shire” (1565). Huntington Library, Britwell 18293, EBBA 32225.

15: “The discription of a rare or rather most monstrous fishe taken on the East cost of Holland the .xvii. of November, Anno 1566. The workes of God how great and straunge they be / A picture plaine behold heare may you see” (1566). Huntington Library 13187, EBBA 32405.

20–21: Same as page i, above.

46: *Alexander Lowered into the Sea*. London, British Library, MS Royal 20 B.xx, f. 77v, *Historia de proelis in a French translation (Le Livre et le vraye hystoire du bon roy Alixandre)*, c. 1420, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.

AUTHOR BIOS

ASA SIMON MITTMAN is professor and chair of the Department of Art & Art History at California State University, Chico, where he teaches courses on ancient and medieval art, monsters, and film. He has written *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (Routledge, 2006; paperback 2008), co-written with Susan Kim *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript* (ACMRS, 2013, winner of a Millard Meiss Publication Grant from the College Art Association and an ISAS Best Book Prize), and a number of articles on the subject of monstrosity and marginality in the Middle Ages. He co-edited with Peter Dendle a *Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Ashgate/Routledge, 2012; paperback 2013), and is the president of MEARCSTAPA (Monsters: the Experimental Association for the Research of Cryptozoology through Scholarly Theory And Practical Application). He is co-director of *Virtual Mappa* with Martin Foy. He is now at work on the Franks Casket and images of Jews on medieval world maps. He is also an active (and founding) member of the Material Collective and a regular contributor to the MC group blog. He was born and raised in New York, the son and grandson of artists, and in a family of writers of one sort and another.

THEA TOMAINI is professor of English (Teaching) at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *Sworn Bond in Tudor England*, (McFarland Press, 2011), and of *The Corpse as Text: Disinterment and Antiquarian Enquiry 1700–1900* (Boydell, 2017). She has published articles on ghost legends and death fascination of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and she is on the executive board of MEARC-STAPA (Monsters: The Experimental Association for the Research of Cryptozoology Through Scholarly Theory and Practical Application). She is a co-editor of *Preremature*, an academic journal dedicated to the study of the uncanny and supernatural. Professor Tomaini has also published poems in various poetry journals. She has yet to see a ghost.

ALAN S. MONTROSO is a PhD candidate at the George Washington University where he works on eco-criticism and medieval literature. He has published twice before in Punctum-related venues, and his essay “Crip/Queer Cave-Dwellers in *The Book of John Mandeville*” will appear in a 2018 volume of the New Middle Ages series titled *Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World*, edited by Asa Simon Mittman and Richard Godden. His dissertation, tentatively titled “Subterranean Ecologies: Reading Caves in Medieval Literature,” investigates the inhuman agencies, subterranean archives, and speluncular ecologies that arise in representations of caves across various genres of premodern writing.

MEGAN E. PALMER (PhD, English and Medieval Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara) is the assistant director of the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu>). Her recent articles include “Song Across Species: Broadside Ballads in Image and Word” in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 80 (2016): 221–44 and “Cutting through the Wormhole: Early Modern Time, Craft, & Media” in *The Making of a Broadside Ballad*, ed. Patricia Fumerton, Andrew Griffin, and Carl G. Stahmer (EMC Imprint, 2016).

HAYLIE SWENSON is a PhD candidate at the George Washington University. Her dissertation, “Dog, Horse, Rat: Humans and Animals at the Margins of Life,” considers how premodern and contemporary texts represent precarious human and animal bodies engaging in interspecies relationships of care. Her essay, “Lions and Latour Litanies in the Sketchbook of Villard de Honnecourt,” won the Michael Camille Essay Prize and was published in *postmedieval* in 2013. Another essay, “Attending to ‘Beasts Irrational’ in Gower’s *Vox Clamantis*,” will appear in *Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World*, a 2018 volume in the New Middle Ages series, edited by Asa Simon Mittman and Richard Godden.

ERIN VANDER WALL (MPhil, The George Washington University) works with spatial theory and monster theory in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Her research focuses on factual narratives and literary fictions concerning earthquakes, volcanos, avalanches, and quicksand.

BEACHES GIVE AND TAKE, bringing unexpected surprises to society, and pulling essentials away from it. The ocean offers monsters—whales and whirlpools—but when a massive creature is pushed into human proximity by the ocean’s wide shoulders, the waves deposit and erode human assumptions about itself and its environment: words, sounds, breath, water, wind, flesh, blood, and bones wash in and out. Chance encounters reveal us to ourselves anew; we recognize an Otherness and thereby gain an ethical understanding of difference. Learning to read the monster’s environmental signs helps humans determine the scope of the monster’s place in the eco/cosmic timeline and defeat it—until the epic cycle inevitably repeats. We confront our tiny time between catastrophes; monsters live and live and live. Even so, when humans identify and face monsters, we do so at the risk of exposing our own monstrosity. When we look into the inky backs of whales, or deep into vortices, what do we see?

This volume of essays emerges from MEARCSTAPA’s panel, “The Nature of the Beast/Beasts of Nature: Monstrous Environments,” at the 3rd Biennial Meeting of the BABEL Working Group, held at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where the Pacific Ocean lays her face against the sand and waits.

