

# ON THE BACKS OF WHALES

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On the 8th of May, 1547, a large fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*) became stranded on the coast of Holland near the tenth-century abbey of Egmond.<sup>1</sup> The 68-foot-long whale lay on its back on the cold sand “with his belly turned upwards. The belly was mottled, white and black; the back was black.”<sup>2</sup>

This description of the Egmond whale was written by Adriaen Coenen, a fishmonger and sketchbook artist who recorded the event in his *Whale Book*, or *Walvisboek*, a compendium of illustrated entries about whales and other aquatic creatures, including mermaids, squid, dolphins, and swordfish.<sup>3</sup> Coenen worked from 1584 to 1586 on the *Walvisboek*, which is currently housed in the Royal Zoological Society in Antwerp. Working with Dutch compilations that he either owned or borrowed, Coenen relied on typical sources in making *The Whale Book* — Pliny, Isidore, Albertus Magnus, and Mandeville’s *Travels*. However, he seems to have relied as much on what Florike Egmond and Peter Mason call “first-hand observation close to home, practical experience and the exchange of information with others in the know in his immediate

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- 1 Florike Egmond, Peter Mason, and Kees Lankester (commentaries), *The Whale Book: Whales and Other Marine Animals as Described by Adriaen Coenen in 1585* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 111. In keeping with the texts under consideration, most of which use “fish” as a term for all kind of pelagic creatures, including mammals and fish, by “whales” I mean a variety of sea creatures, including fish and pinnipeds as well as cetaceans.
  - 2 Egmond and Mason, *Whale Book*, 111.
  - 3 For a high-resolution digital facsimile, see *Vlaamse Erfgoedbiblioteek*, “Adriaen Coenen, *Dat eerste boock van menich derleij walvischen ende ander selseme groote wonderlijke visschen*,” accessed July 2015, <http://anet.be/digital/opacehc/ehc/o:lvd:2789552/N>. For this page, see <http://doc.anet.uantwerpen.be/docman/docman.phtml?file=ehcpreciosa.8a2cca.s0063.jpg>. In addition to the *Walvisboek*, Coenen also produced a *Fish Book*, or *Visboek*. For a high-resolution digital facsimile, see *Nationale bibliotheek van Nederland*, “Blader door het Visboek van Adriaen Coenen, accessed October 2015, <https://www.kb.nl/bladerboek/visboek/browse/book.html>.

surroundings.”<sup>4</sup> Although Coenen draws on the usual host of monsters and wonders — for instance, the *Visboek* includes mermaids, sea monsters, and wild men — many of his images are naturalistic enough for species identification; as Egmond and Mason point out, his careful cataloguing “offers rare insights into that time-span of climatic change around 1580 that introduced the culmination of the Little Ice Age in Europe.”<sup>5</sup>

As with nearly all of his entries, Coenen’s description of The Egmond Whale is accompanied by a watercolor painting of a strikingly realistic, if disproportionately round, animal (see next page). In the image, a group of monks clusters around the whale’s fluke, taking tentative steps onto his back, while a group of villagers stands behind him.<sup>6</sup> The whale’s eye is perfectly round, many times the size of a man’s head, and it is difficult to tell whether the whale is alive or dead. While the hesitation on the part of the monks and most of the villagers suggests a possibly still-living whale, a sense of caution is not shared by everyone.<sup>7</sup> Two men peer inside the whale’s mouth; one runs his hands over the baleen plates.

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4 Egmond and Mason, *Whale Book*, xi.

5 Egmond and Mason, *Whale Book*, viii.

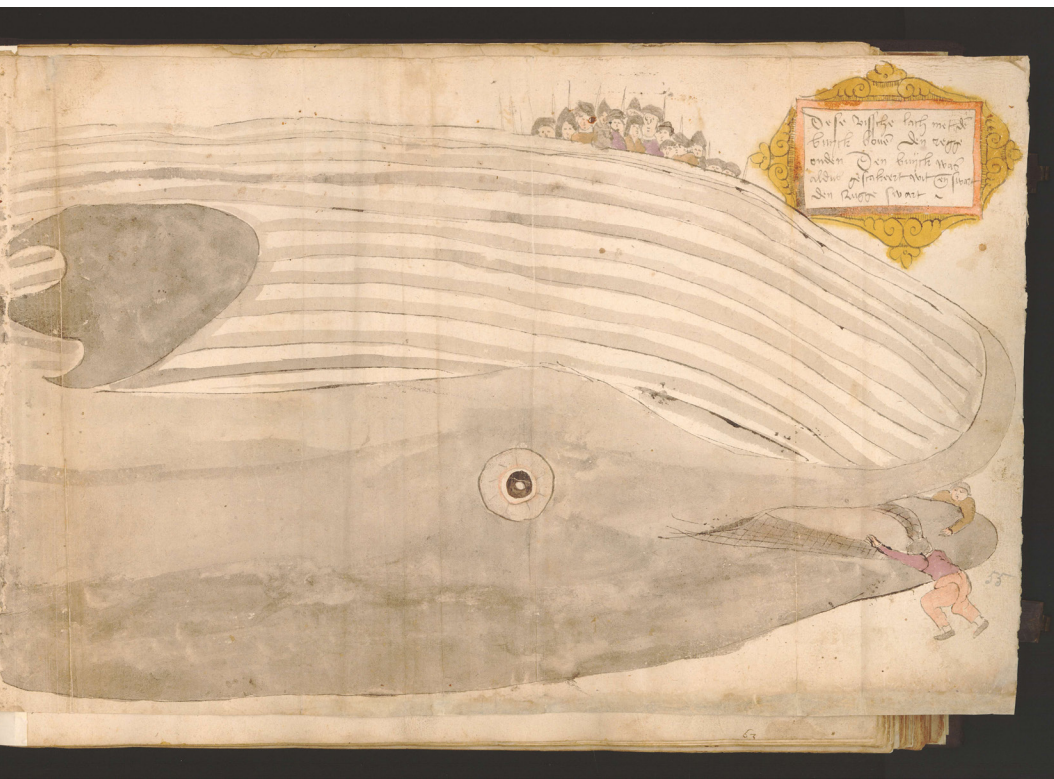
6 It is difficult to accurately sex whales, especially from an image, and my use of the masculine pronoun here is not meant to definitively sex the whale or to unthinkingly rely on the universal “he.” Instead, my use of the masculine pronoun is meant to echo Egmond and Mason’s translation of Coenen, which often uses “he” instead of “it.” Whale penises — which are often unextended and thus unseen, hence the difficulty in sexing a whale — are frequent causes for wonder in images of beached whales, and they are included in many of Coenen’s images. See also Palmer in this volume, 35 and 43.

7 Although perhaps it should be, as beached whales — their stomachs filled with gases from decaying fish — have a tendency to explode. This is graphically evident in a viral video from the Faroe Islands in which a man in protective clothing pokes at the stomach of a dead beached whale. The stomach explodes, sending the whale’s stomach contents flying and the man running for cover: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/nov/27/sperm-whale-explodes-man-opens-stomach-video>. My thanks to M.W. Bychowski for drawing my attention to this video.

1577

Dit is die fariete den die vest die sijnont is mppromd  
 op den 8 dach in mei Anno 1577 dat van den een kint  
 die ander toe is voer lant of die fariete was is die  
 van sijn navel tot die sijn toe 24 voet lant wide  
 die sijn toe is voet lant 44 die deesse was lant 74  
 voet alre voet den aff dunn wide was die 2 dree  
 dat comt o ffe oft tot die noes toe 12 voet 1/2 dat  
 omke oft tot die kenne o veer lant die den lant 6 voet





Dese wyfliche kint m'ist  
kintre boude den wyf  
enden den kintre was  
aldre g'f'roest mit en s'ne  
den kintre swast

Whales can find themselves stranded for many reasons, including disorientation, old age, or illness. Without human intervention or a lucky wave to draw them back out to sea, they do not last long. Normally all-but-invisible to those of us stuck on land, and signaled only by the occasional faraway plume of water vapor, 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. A whale appears, and we cannot help but climb aboard.

An image from Antwerp's Plantin-Moretus Museum, painted by an unknown artist and closely modeled after Coenen's watercolor, could represent an imagining of the scene a few minutes later.<sup>8</sup> The nervousness has worn off a bit, and the villagers are beginning to clamber over the whale. A man holding a staff stands with a foot buried in the whale's genital slit. Near the whale's head, two villagers lounge as though sunning themselves. Their casual posture and apparent mastery of the belly of the whale is belied by the way the monks are still clustered around the fluke, hanging back. As in the original image, here the villagers — many of whom are still standing, apparently on the beach, peering up at the whale — carry sticks, or possibly spears.

In depicting this strange mix of fear, fascination, and carnivalesque desire that revolves around scaling a whale, these images evoke other works that dwell on the backs of swimming and stranded marine mammals. From medieval examples of Jascopus, the massive animal island visited every Easter by Saint Brendan and his monks, to the whales that beach themselves in medieval Iceland and over which men kill each other, to present-day incidents of captive cetaceans that form intimate, and sometimes dangerous, relationships with their handlers, whales draw us close and incite us to wonder: what can we see from the back of a whale? This article explores that question. Rather than foster a sense of human mastery, I argue, textual encounters with whales and other marine creatures instead emphasize the essential vulnerability of both pelagic and terrestrial bodies, as the interactions between humans and

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8 The image is listed as "Aangespoelde vinvis te Egmond [*Rorqual washed ashore at Egmond*], Drawing, 1547. Object number: PK.OT.00826." A facsimile of it appeared in a 2012 exhibit at the Folger Shakespeare's Library, "Very Like A Whale," curated by Michael Witmore and Rosamond Purcell. For a color image, see *Museum Plantin-Moretus*, "Aangespoelde vinvis te Egmond," accessed July 2015, <http://search.museumplantinmoretus.be/Details/collect/277601>.

cetaceans both engender and betoken crises in which we all have a share. Passages of this essay explore my own experiences of closeness with marine mammals; these passages are set apart, like a whale's fluke against the horizon, and mark the bea(s)ts of this series of visitations on mammals and monsters, violence and hunger, and — above all — the pains, pleasures, and intimacies of touch.

}— *Although I've lived at or very near the Pacific Ocean for over twenty years, this is the first time I've been whale watching. I'm in Depoe Bay, Oregon in 2009. I'm 23. It's a queasy day, for the sea and myself, but the gray whales that swim near our boat distract from the nausea. I try to take pictures, but the boat is too active and everything comes out blurry, mere watercolor-like dabs of fins and flukes. Near the end of our trip, one whale spouts close to the boat, its otherworldly, unimaginably briny breath enveloping those of us on the deck. To quote Joe Roman, it is "as if the ocean itself had come up for air."*<sup>9</sup> — {

## JASCONIUS

In the eighth century, a scribe wrote down the story of an Irish monk named Brendan (c. 486–575).<sup>10</sup> Traveling in a coracle — a light boat made of wood and covered with animal hide — Brendan and fourteen of his fellow monks visit a series of extraordinary islands and encounter myriad miracles and marvels,<sup>11</sup> including enormous,

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9 Joe Roman, *Whale* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 1.

10 D.H. Farmer, "Introduction," in J.F. Webb, trans., *The Age of Bede*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 11; and J.F. Webb, trans., *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*, in *The Age of Bede*, 235.

11 Working with a 1215 treatise by Gervase of Tilbury, Bartlett, 2008, draws an important distinction between these two terms: "on the one hand, miracles, which are beyond nature and caused by God directly, on the other hand marvels, which are natural even if inexplicable and unusual" (19). Aquinas, too, draws this distinction, "consigning monsters to nature, where they shared a home with marvels" (19). While these authors are writing much later than the *Voyage* scribe, this distinction is evident in the Brendan story, which relies heavily on the miraculous. However, it does not seem to me that this distinction materially changes the possibility for affective intimacies between human and animal bodies, so I do not dwell on it here.

undomesticated sheep; birds that sing hymns; Judas Iscariot, imprisoned in eternal torture; and a mysterious crystal which may or may not represent an iceberg, all in search of the “Land of Promise of the Saints.”<sup>12</sup> One of these islands in particular has become emblematic of the voyage. This island is:

rocky and bare, there was hardly a grain of sand on the beach and only an occasional tree here and there. The monks landed and passed the whole night in prayer in the open, but Brendan stayed on board. He knew perfectly well what kind of an island it was but refrained from telling the others, lest they should take fright.<sup>13</sup>

With the exception of Saint Brendan, who knows something his fellows don't, the monks disembark onto the strangely bare beach to pray and rest. The peace and homely comfort of Brendan's sailors is short-lived, however, as *The Voyage* soon describes:

When they had built the fire up with sticks and the pot began to boil, the island started to heave like a wave. The monks ran towards the boat, imploring their abbot to protect them. He dragged them in one by one and they set off, leaving behind all the things they had taken ashore. The island moved away across the sea, and when it had gone two miles and more the monks could still see their fire burning brightly.<sup>14</sup>

Just when the monks think the ground is safe beneath them, the still unidentified, mysterious “island” upsets their footing, their expectations, and the seemingly unbridgeable difference between the fluid ocean and the solid ground. It even takes their fire. Brendan explains:

‘Brethren, does the island’s behaviour surprise you?’

‘Indeed it does! We are almost petrified with fright.’

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12 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 258.

13 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 241.

14 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 241.

'Have no fear, my sons. Last night God revealed to me the meaning of this wonder in a vision. It was no island that we landed on, but that animal which is the greatest of all creatures that swim in the sea. It is called Jasconius.'<sup>15</sup>

In his poetic retelling of the story, "The Disappearing Island," Seamus Heaney embellishes on the monk's desperation and their relief at finding themselves on (temporarily) firm, dry ground. In Heaney's version, the monks have "found [themselves] for good" and "made a hearth"; indeed, they are beginning to make a *home* "between [the island's] blue hills and those sandless shores" when the ground swims away from underneath them.<sup>16</sup> In an interview about his poem, Heaney describes this incident as being "both matter-of-fact and dreamlike, unexpected and foreknown, like poetry itself."<sup>17</sup> The early description of the island's landscape emphasizes this dreamlike quality while also uncannily evoking a real whale. The island, which has a sandless "beach," is described as "rocky" in a moment of resonance with the whale barnacles that cling in huge, calcified clusters to the bodies of baleen whales. In spite of this resonance, though — which may or may not have been on the mind of the anonymous author of the *Voyage* — the whale's body, with its strange, "occasional" trees and "sandless shores," must seem an inhospitable and alien landscape even before it begins to move.

This story commonly reappears in bestiaries and natural histories and on maps throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Coenen's *Walvisboeck* contains a version in which the danger posed by the mistaken identification of whale as island is actualized. It "often happens," Coenen writes, referencing Olaus Magnus, that sailors moor on these whales (what he calls "*Aspidochelon physiologus*") without realizing what they are. Invariably, the sailors make a fire, and when the whale feels it "he swims away, the people are drowned, and he pulls the boat underwater."<sup>18</sup> In this version, Brendan's anomalous and miraculous encounter becomes a commonplace, something that "often happens."

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15 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 241.

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

17 Seamus Heaney, interview with George Morgan, *Cycnos* 15, no. 2 (2008).

18 Coenen, *Whale Book*, 16.



In contrast to the whale Coenen describes, Jasconius miraculously protects the monks. With his injunction to “have no fear,” Brendan assures the monks of God’s providence in taming “the fury of a monstrous beast,” and the periodic resurgence of this theme will echo the cyclical return of the monks to Jasconius’ back every Easter. But how soothed are the monks, really, especially if Brendan has to keep reminding them not to be afraid? In spite of Brendan’s unshakeable confidence in the whale as a wonder of God, assimilated docilely into a religious narrative, something of the monks’ fear and uncertainty lingers in this and other stories of encounters with marine mammals.<sup>19</sup> In his essay, “Hospitality,” Jacques Derrida begins to get at why this might be. He argues that the conceptual importance of maintaining the sovereignty of the host ultimately both limits and defines hospitality: if there is no host, there can be no hospitality, but as long as there is a host, the guest is at his mercy. Consequently, “hospitality is a self-contradictory concept and experience which can only self-destruct”; the words “hostile” and “hospitable” are hopelessly entangled.<sup>20</sup> These questions grow even more complicated when species lines are crossed, and Derrida asks “what can be said of; indeed can one speak of, hospitality toward the non-human, the divine, for example, or the animal or vegetable; does one own hospitality, and is that the right word when it is a question of welcoming — or being made welcome by — the other or the stranger [*l’étranger*] as god, animal, or plant, to use those conventional categories?”<sup>21</sup> Echoing the slippage in Derrida’s phrase “welcoming — or being made welcome by,” narratives describing the whale-as-island ask the

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19 Coenen, *Whale Book*, 5.

20 Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2000): 5. Derrida further explains the slippage between hostility and hospitality by noting “a paradoxical trait, namely, that the host, he who offers hospitality, must be the master in his house, he (male in the first instance) must be assured of his sovereignty over the space and goods he offers or opens to the other as stranger. . . . It does not seem to me that I am able to open up or offer hospitality, however generous, even in order to be generous, without reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home, without any implication of ‘make yourself at home’ but on condition that you observe the rules of hospitality by respecting the being-at-home of my home, the being-itself of what I am. As a reaffirmation of mastery and being oneself in one’s own home, from the outset hospitality limits itself at its very beginning. . . .” (14).

21 Derrida, “Hospitality,” 4.

same question over and over again, but in reverse: can the animal show hospitality to us? Do we even want it to?

}— *Growing up in southern California in a house near the ocean, I saw dolphins frequently. My first memory of an encounter with a larger marine mammal, however, takes place at SeaWorld. I'm six or seven, and at the whale show. One element of the show then, and probably now, involves choosing a child out of the audience to interact with and eventually sit on the orca. The orca's stage name is Shamu, just like every performing orca in SeaWorld shows since the first one, a female, was captured from the ocean and survived. To my intense jealousy, my charismatic little sister is chosen. She poses and smiles, and immediately develops a deep and lasting affinity for marine animals. Twenty years later, I cringe while watching the trailer for Blackfish, a film by Gabriela Cowperthwaite that uses as its point of departure the 2010 death of Dawn Bracheau. An orca trainer, Bracheau was killed by Tilikum, an orca she had been working closely with.<sup>22</sup> Bracheau was the third person killed by Tilikum, and the documentary tries "to demonstrate a cause-and effect relationship between captivity and violence, contending that orcas snap and kill people out of chronic frustration and boredom."<sup>23</sup> Watching the trailer, I think of my many childhood visits to Sea World, and I wonder how to weigh the intimacies of captivity — intimacies my sister felt, that trainers and keepers feel with the animals in their care — against the violence that inheres in spaces of forced encounter. —{*

## MONSTERS AND MARVELS

For the people of the medieval North Atlantic, "whales could be monstrous at sea and mundane as meals . . . they were good to eat, but bad to encounter, both fascinating and frightening even when dead on shore."<sup>24</sup> As Vicki Ellen Szabo here suggests, whales occupied various and sometimes contradictory places in the

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22 Mark Mooney, "SeaWorld Trainer Killed By Whale Had Fractured Jaw and Dislocated Joints," *ABC News*, 31 March 2010, accessed 10 December 2013.

23 Mike D'Angelo, "Blackfish" (review), *A.V. Club*, 18 July 2013, accessed 8 December 2013.

24 Vicki Ellen Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 23.

medieval imagination. On the one hand, they had actual, physical bodies that could be encountered on the shore and that were important sources of a variety of goods including oil, meat, and bone. But they were also monsters with the purported ability to capsize ships. A 1572 map by Olaus Magnus gets at this dual role that whales played. Clustered closely together on the map between the Faroe Islands and Norway are three whales. One whale lies beached and presumably dead on the shore of the Faroe Islands and is being flensed — stripped of skin and blubber — by three men. Another whale, anchored by a hook to a ship, hosts two men who are building a fire on its back. The third creature is a serpent with a long tail, coiled around a ship and threatening to drag it into the deep.<sup>25</sup>

These three tropes of the whale — as commodity, as island, and as threatening sea monster — are evident in *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*. After being instructed by a number of human and nonhuman characters to repeat their voyage for seven years, hitting the same major four islands on the same four holidays, Brendan and the monks spend every Easter on the back of Jasconius. Every year “they found Jasconius in the usual place [on Easter eve], climbed out onto his back, and sang to the Lord the whole night, and said their masses the next morning.”<sup>26</sup> While away from these four islands, they experience both miracles and marvels as well as a host of tribulations, from hunger to thirst and bad weather. Most of all, they experience fear of the waves, winds, and monsters of the deep:

Looking round one day they espied a creature of gigantic proportions writhing along in their wake. It was still far off but was charging towards them at top speed, ploughing up the surface of the water and shooting out spray from its nostrils. It looked as though it would devour them. ‘Good Lord, deliver us!’ they yelled. ‘Do not let the beast consume us!’<sup>27</sup>

Shooting plumes of water into the air and rippling the water like the invisible waves it moves through, the whale charges. Cool as ever, Saint Brendan prays, and in his prayer we find a host of other monsters: “Lord, deliver your servants now, as of old

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25 Chet Van Duzer, 2013. *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps* (London: British Library, 2013), 82–84.

26 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 266.

27 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 252.

you delivered David out of the hand of the giant, Goliath. Deliver us, O Lord, as you rescued Jonah from the belly of a great whale.”<sup>28</sup> Brendan finishes his prayer, and another sea monster, “spewing out fire,” appears to attack the first: “The wretched animal that had assailed the servants of God was chopped into three parts before their very eyes; the victorious monster swam back the way it had come” as Brendan gives praise unto God for his mastery over the creatures.<sup>29</sup> It is easy to read this moment in light of what Szabo sees as a binary in medieval thought between the “fantastic whale” (also the “good whale”) and the “bad whale,” or, in even simpler terms, as an emblematic clash between good and evil.<sup>30</sup> And yet this moralistic reading fails to fully account for the violent quality of this scene, from the “wretched animal” that is ripped apart before the monks’ eyes, to the lingeringly contingent quality of the service performed by the victorious sea monster. The enemy of my enemy may be my friend, but he is also, in this case, a scary, unknowable other, a fantastic version of the slippage in Derrida’s nominal term, “hostipitality.”

What happens when a whale changes from a monster to a miracle? What intimacies are lost? The next day, the brethren find “the rear quarters of the dead monster. . . Lying on the beach. ‘Ha!’ cried Brendan. ‘That creature was going to eat you; now you are going to eat it.’”<sup>31</sup> At Brendan’s insistence, the monks strip enough meat from the carcass to last them three months for, as Brendan warns, otherwise “animals will come in the night and pick it clean.”<sup>32</sup> This seemingly small reminder is expanded upon by the text when, three months later, the monks decide to see if Brendan was right. “When they reached the spot where the carcass had been, they found nothing but bones.”<sup>33</sup> The next morning, as Brendan prophesies, another whale washes up on the shore. The effect is of endless, God-given bounty, but also endless need. In the harsh North Atlantic, nothing as valuable as a whale carcass can be wasted by either man or beast.

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28 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 253.

29 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 253.

30 Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes*, 31.

31 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 253.

32 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 253.

33 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 254.

## DRIFTAGE

Elsewhere in the *Walvisboeck*, Coenen describes another encounter with a beached whale. On the second day of July, 1577, a “living fish” became stranded in the shallow water of the river Schelde where it was “finished off with picks, hooks, and other instruments.”<sup>34</sup> What in 1547 was a celebratory and festive encounter (albeit with a dead animal) is here depicted as a scene of violence and pain; Coenen describes how the whale “roared in a terrible fashion and made an enormous hullabaloo before it died, so that the water was tremendously stirred up, churned up and troubled from bottom to top. Afterwards it was dragged with ropes and small boats to Haefden,” presumably to be eaten and turned into fuel.<sup>35</sup>

Szabo emphasizes the importance of the ocean as a source of food, especially in times of scarcity: “Whales, along with fish, sea birds, and other marine mammals, supplemented cultivated resources and allowed people to survive simple short-falls or long-enduring famines.”<sup>36</sup> This is the situation described in *Grettir’s Saga*, a thirteenth-century narrative taking place in tenth-century Iceland. A famine has descended on Iceland, the narrator asserts, “so devastating that its like has never again been experienced.”<sup>37</sup> But Iceland’s hardship is exacerbated by the fact that even the ocean has stopped providing: “few fish were caught and no whales or other driftage washed ashore.”<sup>38</sup> A famine without whales and other driftage is a famine indeed. “This situation continued for several years,” the narrative tells us, until one “spring . . . a man named Thorstein” finds “a whale where it had washed ashore on the farthest tip of the headland, at a place called Rifsker [“Rib-bone Rocks”]. It was a big finback whale.”<sup>39</sup> The next few paragraphs of the *Saga* chart the ripple effect created by Thorstein’s discovery. Thorstein sends his men to tell Flosi and his other neighbors, who tell others, until the story spreads throughout much of eastern Iceland. In the meantime, Flosi’s men “began to cut up the whale. The pieces that were sliced off were dragged up onto the land. There were nearly twenty people at the beginning,

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34 Coenen, *Whale Book*, 10.

35 Coenen, *Whale Book*, 10.

36 Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes*, 14.

37 Jesse Byock, trans. *Grettir’s Saga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

38 Byock, *Grettir’s Saga*, 27.

39 Byock, *Grettir’s Saga*, 27.

but their number quickly increased.”<sup>40</sup> As more men arrive, two factions form and a battle breaks out:

Thorgeir Flask-Back led the assault, and went for Flosi’s men atop the whale. Thorfinn . . . was cutting the whale. He had placed himself forward at the whale’s head, and stood with his feet in foot-holes which he had cut out for himself.

Thorgeir said to Thorfinn: ‘Here is your axe back.’ Then he struck at the man’s neck, slicing off his head. Flosi, who was up on the gravel shore, saw this and urged his men to counter-attack. They fought for a long time . . .<sup>41</sup>

The men fight over the whale, and *with* the whale, wielding not only their flensing tools but also the whale’s great bones and huge chunks of its meat. Many die. Standing on the head of the dead whale, Thorfinn carves out foot-holes in which to stand. This detail emphasizes the bloody, intimate, tactile connection of the flensers and the whale, the slipperiness of its great head, and the need for footholds so that Thorfinn will keep his balance and have enough leverage to cut into the tough flesh. The text immediately asks, however, if balance, or mastery, is possible on top of something as precarious and valuable as a whale. Thorfinn carves foot-holes, or perhaps footholds. These holes are not only ledges to give him balance on the whale, but also spaces from which to carve out a better subsistence in the form of provisions against the harsh Icelandic environment. But Thorfinn immediately loses this balance, and he himself loses his head just moments after cutting away at the head of the whale.

Saint Brendan’s cry over the dead sea monster — “that creature was going to eat you; now you are going to eat it” — is perhaps a moment of exultant mastery, in which the human subject crows over the humbled whale, but perhaps we are also glimpsing a moment of relief, a sense of being spared — this time — from the oceanic ecosystem that continually threatens Brendan and his companions. A third possibility is even more likely: neither simply exultant nor humble, Brendan’s cry

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40 Byock, *Grettir’s Saga*, 28.

41 Byock, *Grettir’s Saga*, 30.

makes space for moment of equivalence, an acknowledgment that the hunger of humans and of whales drives them to similar actions, and that one hunger is no more monstrous or demonic than the other.<sup>42</sup>

Thorfinn dies, his blood mingling with the whale that has also recently lost its life on this beach. A sea monster, charging a small coracle in the northern seas, is itself killed by another monster as the monks it originally attacked look on, horrified. An orca, kept in a space infinitely smaller than that which houses its wild conspecifics, is involved in the death of three of its trainers. A whale feels a fire burning on its back and wakes, forcing the humans riding it to flee. A man climbs onto the belly or back of a whale and finds not mastery, but pain, fear, wonder, and a shockingly shared vulnerability. But is violence the only possible form of human/cetacean intimacy?

*}— I'm eleven years old, living on the coast of Oregon and spending time with a friend. My family is having a bonfire at the beach, and we have snuck away in the darkness to sit on the rock wall near the jetty. My friend knows this spot well and wants to tell me a secret about it. She says if we sing, the seals will come up onto the rocks a few feet below us and listen. The Siuslaw River is full of seals, including one that my step-siblings and I have named "Sammy" and who we know by the scars on his face — the record, probably, of a run-in with a boat prop. We give him bits of fish when we throw our crab nets off the docks. So I believe my friend. We sing, and twenty years later I carry a steady conviction that the shadowy forms that we saw in the darkness below our feet really were listening seals. —{*

## SONG OF THE SEA

Brendan, too, shares a song with the sea. As the story relates, the monks celebrate St. Peter's Day at sea, watching "the movement of life beneath the boat" like medieval members of Team Zissou. The water is:

so clear, indeed, that the animals on the ocean bed seemed near enough to touch. If the monks looked down into the deep, they could see many different kinds of creatures lying on the sandy bottom like

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42 Thanks to Asa Mittman for suggesting this final reading.

flocks at pasture, so numerous that, lying head to tail, and moving gently with the swell, they looked like a city on the march.<sup>43</sup>

Predictably, Brendan's monks are frightened by this strange congregation, and with good reason. The sea, so far, has been a place of miracles, but also monsters and death. Furthermore, the metaphors here keep shifting. First the fish and other creatures seem like docile cattle. With breathtaking swiftness, however, they morph from this pastoral image into a martial one, "a city on the march," and possibly against Brendan's band. Insisting yet again on God's ability to "make all creatures docile," Brendan

sang at the top of his voice, causing the brethren to cast an anxious eye in the direction of the fish, but at the sound of singing the fish rose up from the sea bed and swam round and round the coracle. There was nothing to be seen but the crowds of swimming forms. They did not come close but, keeping their distance, swam back and forth till mass was over. Then they scurried away on their own tracks over the paths of the ocean, out of sight of the servants of God.<sup>44</sup>

How do we read this scene? While it certainly serves as another example of the recuperation of the frightening sea into the aegis of God's plan, we should also read this as a moment of coming together, of shared aesthetic pleasure in a confidently voiced song. Importantly, the sea creatures do not linger, or even touch the boat. They are not available for food nor — in spite of the monk's fears — does it seem that they are seeking to eat the brethren. They are just listening. As I have climbed from back to back across these essays, I have considered what our curiosity about whales and other sea creatures might teach us about our shared vulnerability to a precarious world. But these stories also quietly insist that we be attentive to the ways that those creatures might also be curious about us. Acknowledging our shared capacity for and vulnerability to violence, these stories of human and cetacean contact gesture towards the possibility for shared pleasure alongside the pain.

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43 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 257.

44 Webb, *Age of Bede*, 258.



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