SEVEN ENTRIES from THE NEW BOOK OF IMAGINARY BEINGS
In their preface to The Book of Imaginary Beings, Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero write: “A book of this kind of unavoidably incomplete… We invite the eventual reader in Colombia or Paraguay to send us the names, accurate description, and most conspicuous trains of their local monsters.” Our New Book of Imaginary Beings is a way of accepting this invitation.

A difference worth mentioning between this sequel and the original is that our range of sources has been expanded: we are hunting for imaginary beings in cinematic and digital territories that Borges did not live to see.

As before, we invite readers in Colombia, or Oregon, or Chongqing, to send us reports on whatever mythical beasts and fictional creatures they have caught sight of, peeping out of screens and pages.

The following entries were composed or compiled by myself, Elaina Kim, Jonathan Maniscalco, and Wendy Provett (who is the fictitious author to whom we attribute entries revised only slightly from sources such as Wikipedia.)

- Zachary Bos, editor

i: The Astomi Race

[jm] The Astomi are said to dwell near the headwaters of the Hydaspes River in the Punjab. They are small, human-like creatures, covered in crude cotton-wool clothing. They lack any mouth and are nourished on the scent of flowers and pleasant-smelling vegetation. When they go on long journeys
they carry apples to be sure they don’t run out of good things to smell.

That particularly strong or disgusting odors will kill the Astomis is attested by a note found in the accounts of Alexander the Great’s campaign in India. In his diary, Alexander’s general Coenus relates at second-hand a report of one of his officers:

Following the battle against the forces of king Raja Porus, I broke away to relieve myself beneath a wild almond tree. I was astonished to find on the other side of the tree a group of ‘wizened children’ ravenously inhaling the perfume of the almond flowers. They showed signs of being greatly disturbed by my stench—I was covered in the usual filth of battle. They scattered into the surrounding jungle as if in terror, save for one of their group who was overwhelmed by my odor and had collapsed soundlessly. I had already been too long away from the camp and left the body where it fell, not knowing whether the creature was alive or dead.

ii. The Mockery Bird

[wp] The island of Zenkali is populated by most eccentric immigrants who come there from all around the world, along with two indigenous tribes, the Fangoua and the Ginka. The Ginkas used to worship a dolphin god, while the Fangouas worshipped a strange avian, the Mockery Bird, a flightless bird about the size of a goose. It sported blue feathers, long legs and a large beak, similar to that of a hornbill. As an example of sexual dimorphism, the male Mockery Birds carried a large hump on their beak, while the females had only a small,
bony shield. The bird was named after its call, which sounded like laughter (much like the kookaburra’s).

The Mockery Bird was hunted to extinction by (hungry) French colonizers. Mysteriously, when the bird was lost, a tree species, the Ombu tree, also disappeared. One Professor Droom recognized this coincidence as evidence of symbiosis—that situation in which ecological conditions congenial or essential for one species are beneficial or essential for the other.

Dr. Droom discovered that the Mockery Bird had fed on the ripe fruit of the Ombu, whose seeds it spread in its spoor. The caterpillars of a certain large species of tropical moth fed exclusively on the leaves of the Ombu tree; this very same moth species pollinated the Amela trees, whose fruit is the sole export product of Zenkali. So all species on the island, including humans, were linked in an ecological and economic chain that collapsed when the Mockery Bird was exterminated.


iii. The Isonade

[Nipponese sailors traveling along the western coast of Japan are warned to keep a weather eye open for the Isonade, akin in form to a huge shark with hook-like barbs on its tail. Much as the giant namazu catfish of Japanese legend is associated with earthquakes, the movements of the gigantic Isonade are said to be the source of sudden changes in sea currents and winds from the north. Despite its size, the gigantic fish is
said to move with such quick grace in the water that seafarers may not ever see the body of the beast until they are already under.

Sailors who have survived any encounter with this monster describe their escape as accidental. Their stories invariably begin on a day with fine weather for sailing, before a sudden change in the direction of the wind. Often not suspecting danger, the crew will begin their adjustments. Then they notice the water around their boat is no longer its expected deep blue but a much darker color—caused by the shadow of the great creature under it! Moments later their craft is caught in the hooks of the Isonade and dragged under. The sailors who survive are those who abandon ship or somehow make their panicked way to shore, escaping the horrific mouth of the monster that feasts upon their crewmates.

**iv. The Pale Man**

[zb] A cannibal Pale Man figures in a Basque tale recorded by Wilhelm Grimm and published in a *Bilderbogen* (broadside) circulated in Berlin and Mainz with other uncollected stories and folksongs. As translated by Lucia Hauer:

*In Alava near Vitoria in the Zubialde caves, a blind man made his living gathering and selling coins left by pilgrims as offerings at the cave mouth. The bishopric allowed him to do so since the blind are sacred to the Holy Spirit; and because the caves near Vitoria have long been sacred to San Madre Mari whose intervention the pilgrims come seeking: female saints are less unsparing in such matters.*

*One day when the blind man was at the market to trade*
a few coins for bread he was spied by a notorious thief. After following the man home, the criminal leapt at him, wielding a cruel stick and demanding he surrender the rest of the coins. The blind man protested he had no more, but the thief did not believe him. He took his victim by the arm and dragged him forward into the cave to see for himself what pilgrim treasure was hidden there.

Unaccustomed to the dark, however, the thief could not avoid the chasm in the floor of the cave. He fell and pulled the blind man down with him. The thief landed badly. Broken bones jutted through flesh like spit-ends through a joint of meat. He shouted curses until he was hoarse, blaspheming the Holy Spirit and the Holy Fathers, San Mari and her consort Sugaar, even Santiago the wanderer.

Meanwhile the blind man, who was hurt little, sucked moisture from the damp rock wall of the pit and kept silent so the dying thief would not set upon him again. And when eventually the thief died, the pious blind man knew the thief had done him a kindness in dying first, for otherwise the blind man might have died of hunger.

Grimm likely adapted this story from a Spanish original; his library included a copy of Memorial histórico español by Charles V’s chronicler Esteban de Garibay Zamalloa. No manuscript of the brothers’ proposed Baske Sagen is known to bibliographers.

Similar tales abound in Catalonia, Galicia, and the other peninsular kingdoms. Legends of a blind prelate, and the eating of children, are attached to a cella memoriae in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Mothers throughout northern Spain even today frighten their children into obedience with stories of Zurbil Gizon, the villainous Pale Man with eyes
in the palms of his hands who lures sacrilegious boys and girls to his underground lair to be devoured. In the 1980s in Lisbon it was common to find graffiti murals on alley walls depicting a macabre white-skinned figure surrounded by a motif of red suns. Folds of loose skin droop from the creature’s neck and limbs as on the bodies of the elderly or the starving. The creature’s red-fingered hands are splayed open over the face, and the palms have eyes on them.

Notably, preliminary drawings of Goya’s “Saturn Devouring His Young” depict Saturn with stigmata on the hands, and blank spaces where the eyes should be. The skin in these pastel drawings is pale, not ruddy as in the finished painting.

The first book of Toriyama Sekien’s Gazu Hyakki Yakō (“The Night Parade of A Hundred Demons”) includes a woodcut illustration of the cannibal Tenome or “Eyes-on-Hand,” a man-like creature with eyes in his hands rather than his skull.

v. Lambton’s Worm

[ek] In the pious country of northeastern England, one summer’s Sunday afternoon, John came down to the banks of the River Wear. His father Lord Lambton had told him to go to chapel, but fishing was vastly preferable to prayer. Was not Christ a fisher of men?

John settled on the grassy bank and dropped in his line, hoping soon to see a pike dancing on the hook. What he fished out instead was an ink-black worm as big around as his thumb and as long as his fore-arm. John took the slimy creature up to the great house, hoping one of the footmen would know what to make of it. However, the worm escaped his grasp in the kitchen
garden and disappeared through a crack in the well-cap. “May you live not long down there among the snakes and toads!” the disgusted boy cried.

In the years that followed, John matured into a young man distinguished by his skill of arms. When the time came he left for York to join the Duke’s men and travel with the King to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the worm from the Wear grew in size and appetite until a day came that it crawled from the well like a black serpent, hungry and huge, limbless and scaleless, with yellow eyes and a foul odor like rotting hessian and river-muck.

As John fought the infidels abroad, the worm ravaged crops and scattered herds, devouring hayricks and small sheep and all the grain in the district. Farmers faced it with flails, and manly soldiers with swords, and the priest with censer and holy writ, but like a dragon of old the worm turned aside both blade and Scripture and continued to wreak its havoc.

Sir John returned from the Crusades to find his father’s estate in ruins. Vowing to destroy the creature, John bade the armorer craft for him an iron chest-piece studded front and back with barbed spearheads, thick as bristles on a boar. He went also for aid to the village wise woman. She blessed his armor and promised he would prevail against the worm, but she had a warning as well: he must not fail to kill whatever living thing he first met after slaying the worm, lest misfortune befall his family.

Clad in his strange armor and girded by a courageous faith, Sir John rode out. Where he found the worm in a sheep-pasture he bravely dismounted and ran up to the creature, defying it to attack. Attack him it did, swallowing the knight whole! The barbs on Sir John’s armor quickly caught in the monster’s throat. Fatally hurt, it spewed a black bile and thrashed like an eel in a trap. The worm died quickly and Sir John with slashing sword
cut his way out of the carcass. Just then his elderly father came rushing up, anxious to know his son had not been killed in the violence.

So his own father was to be the ‘living thing’ Sir John was meant to slaughter next! “I have killed a monster; I will not become one!” he exclaimed. He embraced his father and they went together to their ancient home, leaving the stinking body of the fiendish worm to shrivel in the sun.

As foretold, the Lambton family never flourished again though the worm was slaughtered. For five generations, the men of the Lambton men met early and ignoble deaths. The curse, if such it was, ended when the last of their line died without leaving a son to carry on the Lambton name.

Commenting on this story, Arnold Ross Sinclair writes in his *Moral Fables of the North of England*:

The weird story of Lambton’s worm is in its essential structure an economic fable about the general decline that accompanied the Crown’s bizarre and expensive crusading in the Levant. The worm plot, assuredly of earlier origin, fuses an unremarkable episode in British wyrm-lore to the specific history of the decline and eventual failing of the Lambton estate. Thus fused, the chimeric tale transforms its source material into an allegorical and utterly conventional admonition that children should attend to their religious duties.

**vi. The Glaistig**

[jm] In the Scottish highlands, the Glaistig, also known as Maighdean Uanie or the Green Woman, takes the form of an attractive woman dressed in green. Her skin is grey, her hair is
golden-blonde, and below the waist her body is that of a goat. She waits beside streams and rivers asking men for to help her cross. Those that do are led astray, for the Glaistig is a creature of mischief. Men who act unchivalrously toward what they believe to be a maiden alone in the wild suffer for it, with a torn-off finger or, if the trespass is severe, a slit throat.

The typical tale finds a man who is traveling through a forest stopping when he hears an enchanting voice rippling through the trees. He seeks out the source of the music, which grows more enticing as he draws closer. Coming to a riverbank, he sees it is a woman singing, a beautiful woman wearing a long green dress with flowing golden hair. He approaches her and asks what has brought her to this place. She replies that she is unable to cross the river for the water is too deep and the current too strong. Is he a true Scotsman to help her across? But then as he makes to take her hand and help her find a way to cross, he sees not shoes peeping out of the bottom of her dress, but the hairy hooves of a goat. This breaks the enchantment and he runs from his doom, as the Glaistig screams her fury after him.

The Glaistig differs from her Irish cousin the Banshee in not being wholly wicked. In some households children are told she will behave as the Brownie does, doing chores while the family sleeps in exchange for a bowl of beer or an oaten cake left on the table overnight. A famous story has it that once upon a time a Glaistig became the cattle guardian in the village of Ach-na-Creige. In exchange, the people left a daily gift of milk poured into a holed stone for her to drink. One evening a boy put boiling milk in the hole, to see if the Glaistig would burn her mouth. In the night, the boy’s mother woke to his screams, and found that his tongue had been torn out.
vii. Strandbeesten

[zb] The indomitable Dutch built the dykes, flood-gates and canals of the Zuiderzeewerken, to prevent the North Sea from flooding the quiet polders of Flevoland. In doing so they created a new landscape of sandbars, tide-races and marsh flats, extending into the Waddenzee, set back from the main body of the ocean, along the calm waters of the dam-girded Zuider Zee. Recently, these wind-washed reaches have been populated by a breed of bio-mechanical life-forms, the Strandbeesten. These “strand beasts” come in various types—some are large as houses, some small as dogs; some have great reciprocating cilia that wave sinuously in the wind; others march along as stolidly as any millipede. But each species is built of identical segments linked abreast in long rows.

These ‘beach-monsters’ were devised by the sculptor Theo Jansen, who took his inspiration from the whirling arms of the wind-mills lining his country’s artificial coastline. The first species he constructed out of aluminum strut-work, and later ones out of polyvinyl chloride spars joined with steel bolts and nylon bearings. As Jansen developed increasingly elaborate internal mechanisms that would be able to reproduce their own structure without human intervention, his building materials evolved, and he began to use wild materials exclusively: linkages of sea-grass and mussel-shell, limbs of sea-cane and phragmites.

In design the Strandbeesten are like walking scaffolds. For strength, the multitudinous legs are composed of triangles. Each limb is tied to a central cam-shaft, offset from its neighbors so that as one leg begins to rise another begins to fall.
In this way, the movement of dozens to hundreds of legs is coordinated.

They walk but do not eat. The Strandbeesten catch the wind and translate it into forward movement. When, if in following its wind-driven path, a Strandbeest chances upon the right sort of flotsam—cordage or lumber or durable shells—cunning wind-powered mechanisms activate which take up and arrange the raw feedstock into new legs and body parts, and eventually into the final form of a new body-segment identical to those which comprise the parent body. With the new segment attached, the Strandbeest continues on its way, blown over the dunes and shallow marshes as the wind urges it to go, free as tumbleweeds, a manufactured fauna for the manufactured land.

In the course of its life, the connections between adjacent units may wear down to the point of splitting apart. Thus released from each other, the ‘daughters’ will then move freely and as autonomously as the parent. In this way the mechanical Strandbeesten reproduce. Students of biology will recognize in this something like the proliferative strategy of the tapeworm.

This same seaside region is home to a species of biting midge, _Aedes herzbergii_, known locally as _zwermenmug_, “swarm-fly.” Researchers at the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences in Walcheren report that numbers of this species have plummeted since the Strandbeesten first appeared. They conjecture that the mechanical walkers knock apart the piles of sea-wrack the flies breed on. No one loves a biting fly, of course (indeed, the anti-Semites of Den Helder to this day refer to this pest by the common name _Joodsemug_). But the loss of any species has unexpected, often undesirable, conse-
quences, in the complex system of the web of life.

One wonders even whether it is feasible to locate the Strandbeesten in that web. What place have they in the classical systemae naturae dividing creation into rational kinds? The progenitors of the Strandbeesten were made of metal—not animal, but mineral. Successor generations were composed of plastics derived from plant material transubstantiated into petroleum over geological eons. In their latest evolution the Strandbeesten are vegetable, made of cane and rushes. The wind they are powered by is created by the action of the sun on the surface of the planet; the energy that burns in the cells of a plant comes from the same source. Are they plants, then?

No one is surprised that the Strandbeesten defy categorization. It is only to be expected that a manufactured animal would fail to fit neatly into the natural categories of creation. Invention disrupts. And whether there is an order in creation, setting aside the interventions of man, who can say? In this matter, skepticism is the safe course. There are too many creatures which seem to be as much mineral and vegetable as animal: the extinct conodons and crinoids, and the still-extant bryozoans and corals; the bizarre piurre animal of South America; stone-spined urchins; and limpets and chitons that are so much like welded rivets in their fastness. Even in the classroom: think of the mercury beating heart, and of the weird stone flowers of Glauber’s chemical garden.