

The Carta Marina (1539)

by Lucia Perillo

Sure the land is tempting, with its many silver mines,
but because the sea has monsters we pay attention
to the sea. Already two whales with spike-manes and tusks,
by glowering at a galleon, have gotten its casks.
And the fish with one horn and the other with two wings
ply nearby through the waves for salvageable mayhem.
See the human rise up in the giant lobster's claw.

Later on will come science. And scientists, with more
accurate depictions of the lobster's swimmeret.
For now, though, the implausibles reign, these phantasms
derived from B-movie radiation accidents—
though neither the A-bomb nor Hollywood exists yet.
So what did the 16th century do when it dreamed?
Could it tune in our waves with the machine of its sleep?

Because it's strange, what the mapmaker drew from TV.
Godzilla and all his other mutant brotherhood
anticipated in the dorsal fin zig-zagging
down the whales' backs. Their strange armor we believe in
because we've been poked, and we bleed. Who but a sailor
needs to know the true size of the sea? The rest of us
just want to know why sometimes we wake up with scratches.

But hey, I thought science would give us jetpacks by now.
I thought technology would render boats obsolete
But the hard facts failed us. Only soft facts could we trust.
Like the corpse off the north coast, being gnawed by three fish.
And say you're that man—what use to you are maps and books?
No, now you're sailing without help: even the sea ice,
breaking up, looks like printed pages that have fallen.

