A D R I F T

For my father

ADRIFT

THE CURIOUS TALE OF THE LEGO LOST AT SEA

A voyage into the changing nature of beachcombing, dragon hunting, plastic in the sea and sand, and the lasting legacy of a cargo spill.

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with Dr Curtis Ebbesmeyer and Mario Cacciottolo

UNICORN

Not just Lego – some of the thousands of pieces of plastic picked up from beaches after winter storms

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Author's Note

I love Lego. I played with it as a child. My own children played with it. We still have boxes full of Lego in the attic, ready to be handed down to future generations. Searching for lost Lego from a cargo spill began as a bit of fun, a treasure hunt with my children. Ultimately, it opened my eyes to all the rest of the plastic in the ocean.

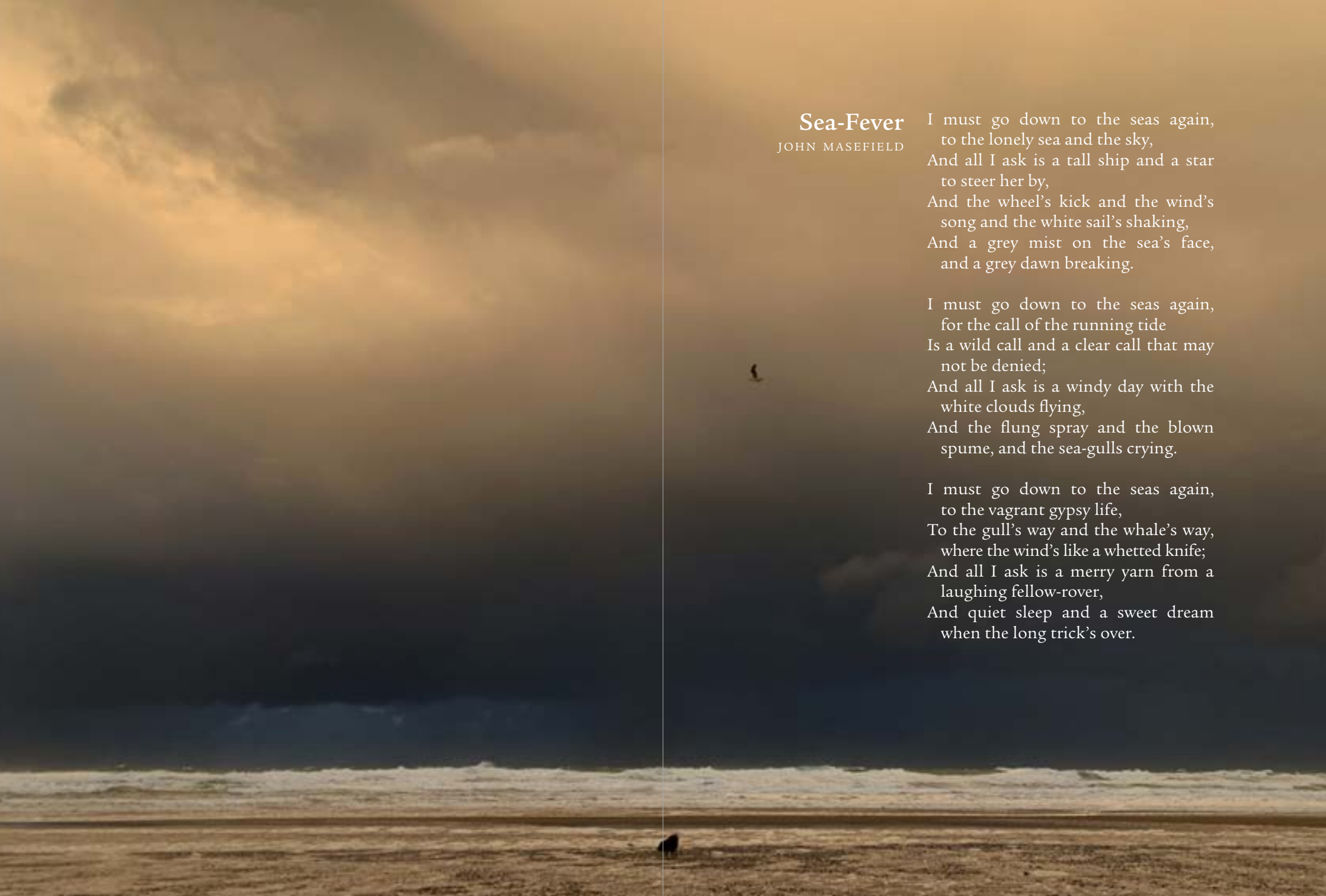
If you search carefully along the strandline after a wild winter storm, you might still find them. Tiny yellow life jackets and grey scuba tanks. Bright green plastic sea grass and little spear guns in red and yellow. Blue, black and red divers' flippers and miniature cutlasses. Perhaps a dragon or an octopus, just 3 inches long. Maybe even a small yellow life raft. They're from an armada of Lego that fell off a ship in 1997. And they're still turning up today.

When my children were young, searching for Lego on the shores beneath our family home on the south coast of Devon became the highlight of any trip to the beach. Every weekend would involve a treasure hunt. A cork, a feather, two Lego flippers, a heart-shaped stone.

It was a tradition that stemmed back to my own childhood in the 1960s, when my parents would pen lists of things to find on family holidays in Cornwall and we'd fossick for shells and sea glass among the sand and shingle.

I still remember the day a neighbour found a green Lego dragon. Even today, some twenty-five years later, she signs her Christmas card to me 'Mary, keeper of the green dragon'.

But the holy grail of each beachcombing trip was a black Lego octopus. We did eventually find one. It was in a remote cove in South Devon, its arms tangled in seaweed.



Sea-Fever

JOHN MASEFIELD

I must go down to the seas again,
to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star
to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's
song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face,
and a grey dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again,
for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may
not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the
white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown
spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again,
to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way,
where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a
laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream
when the long trick's over.

Things to Find

cork
feather
cockle shell
Blue sea glass
Two Lego flippers
mermaid's purse
sea potato
Lego pirate's cutlass
heart-shaped stone
black Lego dragon

1

Lego Galore

How millions of Lego pieces ended up in the sea

The curious tale of the Lego lost at sea began on Thursday 13 February 1997, when a cargo ship laden with goods was hit by a storm.

The *Tokio Express* had set sail from Rotterdam in the Netherlands when it became engulfed in mountainous seas 20 miles off Land's End, Cornwall.

In what the ship's captain later described as a 'once in a 100-year phenomenon', a rogue wave tilted the vessel 60 degrees one way, then 40 degrees back, sending sixty-two shipping containers toppling into the ocean.

One held nearly 5 million pieces of Lego, on its way from the toy company's factory in Billund, Denmark to North America, where it was to be made up into sets.

By a strange quirk of fate, much of the Lego was sea-themed; 4,756,940 pieces of plastic, bound for seafaring adventures.

No one is sure what happened next – whether the container of Lego burst open on impact, scattering its contents into the ocean, or whether it carried on floating for a while, slowly releasing its cargo as it drifted to the seabed.

But in the days that followed, helicopter pilots flying over the area reported seeing 'a slick of Lego' floating in the sea. And beachgoers started finding Lego washed up on Cornwall's wild and windswept shores.

Beachcomber

GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

Monday I found a boot –
Rust and salt leather.
I gave it back to the sea, to dance in.

Tuesday a spar of timber worth thirty bob.
Next winter
It will be a chair, a coffin, a bed.

Wednesday a half can of Swedish spirits.
I tilted my head.
The shore was cold with mermaids and angels.

Thursday I got nothing, seaweed,
A whale bone,
Wet feet and a loud cough.

Friday I held a seaman's skull,
Sand spilling from it
The way time is told on kirkyard stones.

Saturday a barrel of sodden oranges.
A Spanish ship
Was wrecked last month at The Kame.

Sunday, for fear of the elders,
I sit on my bum.
What's heaven?
A sea chest with a thousand gold coins.

LEGO BONANZA FOR BEACH-GOERS

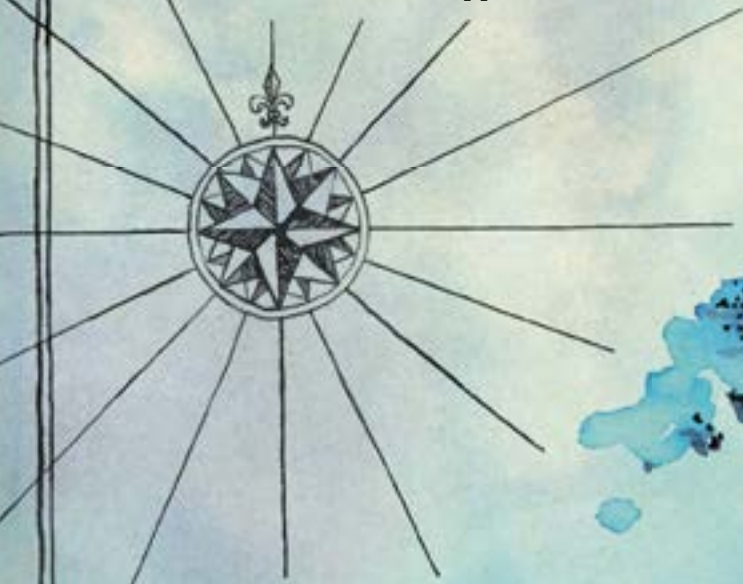
© www.Seapixonline.com/Trevor Coppock

BEACHCOMBERS are searching the coastline for Lego after a shipping crate filled with millions of colourful pieces fell from a ship during a storm 20 miles off Land's End, the most westerly point of mainland England. The bus sized container was one of sixty-two lost overboard from the cargo vessel *Tokio Express* on 13 February 1997 when it was hit by a freak wave during severe gales. Inside the container were nearly 4.8 million pieces of Lego, sorted into red, green, blue and yellow boxes. Many were sea-themed.

The Lego was on its way from the toy company's headquarters in Denmark to North America, where it was to be made up into kits.

Wheelbarrow wheels, beer, hose parts, garden tools, furniture, French perfume, car parts and cigarette lighters were reportedly in some of the other containers lost overboard.

The stretch of water where the shipping containers toppled like dominoes from the *Tokio Express* is treacherous. Over the centuries, many vessels have foundered here. From ancient wooden sailing ships to a German U-boat destroyed in 1945 with the loss of her crew, the shifting sands conceal dozens of wrecks. Beneath the waves, too, lie the remains of cargo ships torpedoed in the First World War, their holds once laden with salt and copper ore.



Sometimes, as I stand at the water's edge and gaze out to sea, I wonder if the containers from the *Tokio Express* are still resting on the ocean floor, or whether they have long since rusted away. Maritime charts for the area show the locations of many 'fishermen's fasteners', the name given to unseen objects on the seabed that snag fishermen's nets. Could some mark the remains of the lost shipping containers?

TOKIO EXPRESS

The nearest landmark to the area where the containers fell overboard is the remote lighthouse on the hazardous Wolf Rock. Lying 8 nautical miles out to sea southwest of Land's End, the Wolf is said to take its name from the ominous howling sound made by the wind whistling through its hollow void.

The story of the Lego lost at sea began for me not in Cornwall but in the neighbouring county of Devon.

In the early 1980s, my parents had moved to an old house on the south coast known as 'The Eyrie' or 'Eagle's Nest', perched high on the cliffs overlooking the sea. From there we'd watch wild storms blowing in from the Atlantic, sending huge rollers crashing on to the rocks beneath the house.

'The sea will provide,' my father would tell us, as the skies turned black and the waves thundered in. And it was there, on the shores below our home on the cliff, that we first started to find the Lego.

We noticed the smaller pieces first. Tiny life jackets strewn along the strandline, spear guns and scuba tanks scattered across the sand, flippers and flowers floating in rock pools. We gathered the pieces up in their hundreds, storing them at first in old ice cream tubs on the kitchen windowsill.

Then, as our hoard grew, we transferred them to big plastic tubs that my father had once used for brewing beer in our old wooden shed, which was lashed to the clifftop with pegs and guy ropes to stop it blowing away in a gale.

It was the dragons that captured everyone's imagination. There were 33,941 inside the container that fell off the *Tokio Express* – 33,427 black dragons and 514 green. While the black dragons washed ashore in their thousands, the green ones proved to be far more elusive, with very few ever reported.

Only the dragon bodies made it to land, though. All were missing their arms, tails, upper jaws and bright orange wings, which led to some confusion as to what they were. One beachcomber later recalled finding Lego dinosaurs washed up, while another spoke of Lego seahorses.

Tales emerged of children filling buckets with dragons and selling them at car boot sales for 10p each. One beachcomber described how her mother had made her rummage through mounds of rotting seaweed for weeks, desperate to find one. Council vehicles were said to have mechanically raked them up from the strandline.

A former member of the coastguard told how – as a new recruit on one of his first call outs – he had been sent to search the coastline for lost Lego and missing shipping containers, later recording all the dragons he found on a database before putting them in the bin, an action he now regrets.

Margaret Jones took up dragon hunting in her mid-eighties, eventually finding twelve. She discovered all her Lego dragons on the south coast of Cornwall in the late 1990s, often taking her grandchildren along to search. 'Mum loved the beach and beachcombing,' says

Dragon hunter Margaret on Polzeath Beach in 1999 when she was 87. She lived to a happy 98.

The Polkerris haul, which included nine dragons

A FAMILY DIARY ENTRY FOR 27.03.97 READS

'Polkerris – Menabilly. Found lots of Lego on the beach.'

her daughter Gwynneth. 'She shared her dragons around the family. I still have a green dragon and a black one living on a bookshelf in Norfolk.'

Another daughter, Ruth, also has vivid memories of dragon hunting. 'I remember my mother finding numerous dragons on Portwrinkle Beach in Cornwall in 1997,' she recalls. 'My husband recorded the Lego in his diary. An entry for 27.03.97 reads: "Polkerris – Menabilly. Found lots of Lego on the beach", while another for 11 August 1997 reads "Polkerris – found lots of Lego including flippers and helmets."'

After a hunt through their garage, the 'Polkerris haul' was found, including eight black dragons and one green one.

Dragons found by Suki Honey

Dave Smethurst

Beachcomber Dave Smethurst found two Lego dragons during his regular, extensive beach cleans. In a six-month period, he single-handedly removed 48,947 bits of plastic from beaches around Cornwall, carefully counting and recording it all.

Sadly, Dave died in 2016, but every year on the anniversary of his death, his children and grandchildren do a beach clean in his memory.

'I still remember the storm,' recalls Mary, who was beachcombing with her two-year-old grandson when they discovered an elusive green Lego dragon washed up at Bigbury Bay on the south coast of Devon. 'We started finding the Lego soon afterwards. There were flippers, scuba tanks, spear guns and sea grass everywhere.

'The dragons were the real find. We only found a few of them. My grandchildren loved to hear the story. We told them how the dragons had been floating in the sea and how happy they were to have made it on to dry land.'

Did you know that a collective name for dragons is a flight?

You can also have...

- a *thunder* of dragons
- a *blaze* of dragons
- a *horde* of dragons
- a *drive* of dragons
- a *weyr* of dragons
- a *wing* of dragons
- a *doom* of dragons

Of all the Lego that washed ashore, the black Lego octopuses were the most coveted, often being described as the holy grail of finds from the spill.

Although there were tens of thousands of dragons on the *Tokio Express*, there were only 4,200 octopuses, making them highly prized among beachcombers.

It is said that octopuses are masters of disguise, blending into the background to escape detection. Lego octopuses are no different. When tangled in seaweed, they can be almost impossible to spot. I found my first Lego octopus back in 1997 but didn't discover another for eighteen years.

Lego octopus tangled in seaweed – would you have spotted it? This one was found by Suki Honey in southeast Cornwall.

LEGO TO LOOK OUT FOR...

Some bits of Lego from the spill turn up more regularly than others. These are the pieces beachcombers find most often.
The numbers show the quantities lost overboard rather than those found by beachcombers.

88,316
SETS OF FLOWERS

These originally came in sets of four, with each flower attached to a central sprue, or doodah, as beachcombers call them. In the container were 32,000 white sets, 40,316 red and 16,000 yellow. If they had separated at sea there would have been 441,580 flowers and sprues adrift, although many sets washed up intact.

54,000
PIECES OF SEA GRASS

These were destined for Lego sets such as Sting Ray Explorer, Shark Cage Cove and Discovery Station. Easy to recognise but harder to find these days.

97,500
SCUBA TANKS

'Old grey' scuba tanks featured in many ocean-themed Lego sets from 1997, including Diving Expedition Explorer, Deep Reef Refuge and Discovery Station. Still a regular strandline find.

79,680
SPEAR GUNS

Lost overboard were 53,120 yellow spear guns and 26,560 red. While yellow spear guns featured in 1997 Lego sets, such as Deep Reef Refuge and Shark Attack, red were included in Deep Sea Bounty and Shark Cage Cove.

8,100
GREY LINKS

Not the most exciting of pieces as far as beachcombers are concerned, these 'old grey' links featured in Discovery Station, a Lego Divers set released in 1997.

26,600
LIFE JACKETS

Bright yellow life jackets came in quite a few Lego sets from 1997, including Scuba Squad and Deep Sea Bounty.

50,000
BROOMS

These were included in sets such as the Witch's Magic Manor, Night Lord's Castle and Witch's Windship. When they're mingled in with seaweed and driftwood on the strandline, these little brown broomsticks are difficult to spot.

26,400
BITS OF SHIP RIGGING

Measuring 5 inches long, these came in several Lego sets from 1997, including Pirates Perilous Pitfall where they were used to create the shipwreck and the Witch's Windship, where they formed part of the gondola pulled by the green dragon.

92,400
CUTLASSES OR SWORDS

A favourite find, these featured in various Lego sets from 1997, including Pirates Perilous Pitfall and the pirate ship Cross Bone Clipper. Once we found a Lego cutlass in a tadpole-filled pond in the dunes, carried there on the crest of a wave during a storm.

352,000
PAIRS OF FLIPPERS

These divers' fins or flippers were shipped in pairs: 209,000 black, 121,000 blue and 22,000 red. If all the pairs had separated at sea, there would have been 1,056,000 pieces of plastic adrift: 704,000 flippers or fins and 352,000 sprues or doodahs. Not all broke apart, however.

2

Carried in Waves

The lost Lego looks for land

Adrift! A little boat adrift!
And night is coming down!
Will no one guide a little boat
Unto the nearest town?

So Sailors say – on yesterday –
Just as the dusk was brown
One little boat gave up its strife
And gurgled down and down.

extract from **Adrift**
Emily Elizabeth Dickinson