I intended to spend time at the beach. I imagined myself walking along the hot and stony sands of the western Michigan coastline, stopping to inspect pieces of driftwood — my summer obsession. I desired to get swept up by the thing. The idea. The story.

Spurred, spurious, spurned — taken in and turned out. Washed up. What remains, relic-like, of a mighty rooting.

My own rootedness pulled at me. Tugged me home. Family illness redirects. My intentions adrift, I reached. I imagined.

Of Ymir they made the earth, those gods of old. His blood the seas. His skull the skies.

Driftwood. A motion-material; collaboration between earth, air, sea. No longer belonging, a moving with waves and washings.

Until it lands on sand with granule hands.

Hewn.

Flesh became earth and from the earth came new flesh — male and female. Beginning of man A liquid carpentry.

Drifters, those who are easily moved by their material, become too attached and are taken and sea-tossed. They often find themselves washed up, worn down, and marked by their journey. Submerged deeply, when they surface, they are something other.
Two trees were taken, made adrift. Fashioned by sea-foam into a new form. Askr they called him, the Ash. Her they called Embla, the Elm.

Drifting changes the drifter.

Moved by the story, I made an Askr, spurious Askr. Far from a Norse god, a first man cannot lay in my hands. Spurred by his story, I shared how I could — an invitation to drift.

This is a reflection on my preparations to participate in the “Walk on the Beach” session at the 2014 BABEL conference. My contribution was a sculpture of Askr who, according to Norse mythology, was the first man. Askr, his name meaning Ash tree, was born out of a piece of driftwood. I loved this idea of humanity emerging from a piece of sea-tossed wood. It led me to explore the relationships between the material components that shape us — in this case, earth and water — and the stories we craft to understand our non-human collaborators. The more I thought about these storied collaborations, however, the more I began to think about what happens to scholars and artists — storytellers — who fall in love with their material collaborators and collaborations. Love moves, and it often takes control. It can leave us adrift.