

# The Map Maker

Val Billingham

One more fairytale for adults



Drenched Orchid

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First published 29 November 2010 by  
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ISBN 978 0954888952

Typeset in 12/14pt Arial  
This book is distributed in electronic format

For FHCBL

## The Map Maker

Eight or fifty or three hundred years ago, a plantation of black wooden towers stood upon a pebble beach. These were the lofts where the fishermen brought their dripping nets to spread and dry and be mended. The sheds were tall because the sea was deep; a net that trawled fathoms of water sieved fathoms of air in the drying. Inside the net lofts, the fishermen searched through the great webs for rents where the sea creatures had struggled for their freedom. In winter they crawled over them to wind up the ravelled cords and knit together the fibres. In summer they sat outside on the harbour wall with their legs cocooned in layers of mesh, hooking them whole again and looking out to sea. As they worked they talked of how the world was flat and how all who went upon the seas must one day sail over the horizon. They related how some were swept there by a sudden storm, while others drifted on imperceptible currents. They told tales of those who were sent a sign, and they speculated on the form such a summons might take.

In one of the tall sheds the nets no longer hung. It was the building nearest the harbour, where the street of the chandlers and rope makers and tar boilers began. A window had been cut into the planking at breast height. Behind the window was a desk. Upon the desk were pens and ink, compasses, protractors, set squares and rules. Behind the desk, stacked upon shelves, were rolls of parchment and vellum, linen and paper. Upon more shelves stood books of mathematics and astronomy, cartography, the winds and the tides and the movements and signals of ships. At the desk sat a woman, neither young nor old, her long dark hair tied up in a ribbon to keep it from smudging the ink. Her name was Penelope and she was a maker of maps.

By day, Penelope sat at her desk in the window. The seamen and tavern keepers sometimes came to watch her as she drew her spare lines upon a smooth surface. They admired the skill with which she applied her instruments and the precision and truth of her charts. This was how her reputation spread abroad and brought her custom. Every so often, someone would make a purposeful journey to her window, enquire about a map, and hand her money through the casement.

Where once the nets had hung, the space was now bisected by a ceiling and above that a floor. In the evening, Penelope would take a candle to light her way up the winding wooden stairs to a room above her workshop. There she would look out of an upper window straight out to sea and wonder about the ocean far beyond the cloudbank, where the waters streamed in eternal cascade over the silver edge. On spring mornings she would awaken to the noisy squabbling of the gulls over their nestlings' breakfast under the shelter of her eaves.

One morning in late spring, Penelope opened her ears to no sound but the churning of the sea upon the pebbles. She knew at once that the chicks had fledged. When she went to the window there they all were, toddling after their parents upon the strand, foraging between the rowing boats and the lobster pots and beneath the great figureheads of the ships, berthed so close to the town that their bowsprits projected into the street. As Penelope's gaze turned upon the shops and taverns, still shuttered in the early morning, she saw a stranger walking down the street.

The stranger wore a captain's uniform upon his tall and slender shape. He carried his hat under one arm. His hair was the colour of flint and the pale sun struck sparks from his braid and buttons. As he walked he searched; when Penelope saw his gaze fix upon the window of her workshop, she hastened down the stairs.

Penelope and the Captain reached the window together. The Captain stood with his hand raised to knock upon the glass. Penelope paused with her hand upon the latch. The Captain and Penelope looked at each other, he with eyes of deepest blue, she with eyes of clearest green, a pane of glass and twenty seasons' voyages between them. Then the Captain laughed and bowed and rapped upon the pane and Penelope laughed and curtsied and opened up her window.

Leaning in to the workshop, the Captain spread a tattered roll of parchment upon Penelope's desk. It was a map which once had been fresh and now was so faded and eaten by insects that soon it would be illegible. It showed part of a southern country across the water, a mansion in the heart of that country, and a road that led to the mansion and led away. The Captain told Penelope that he needed a copy of the map, for he was afraid that the original would not survive the journey he must make. Poring over the map, Penelope saw that it had once been beautiful, that the maker of this map had adorned it with miniatures: a cliff-hewn village rising on terraces, a river that wound through margins of iris and the tumbled ruins of an ancient amphitheatre. When Penelope looked through her magnifying glass at the drawing of the mansion she saw, in letters so faint she might have been their last reader, the word *treasure* written beneath its threshold.

Penelope looked up from the map to the Captain at her window. "Before I can make your map I must first know the story it is to tell," she said. "For the surface of a map is a stage; the features set out upon it are the characters and I must know the parts they are to play."

"I do not understand," said the Captain.

"There is but one country which this old map of yours depicts," said Penelope, "but there may be as many maps of it as there are travellers in it, for all seek their own adventures and each adventure needs its own map. For some the adventure is the search for gold within the earth. Then the map will show the rocks that hide it and the streams that betray it and the mines from

which it is torn. For others, the story is of sport or trade, and then the map will show the forests where the deer pass invisible under the leaves, or the orchards where the ripe fruit falls from the twig into the basket. For others the story is the quest for power, and then the map will show the decadent city to be conquered, the roads down which the army will march, the mountain passes to be defended and the wide, deep river where the conqueror declares 'enough!' and sets his boundary. If I am to copy your map, I must know its adventure and how to reveal its story."

Then the Captain understood. He told Penelope that the story of the old map was the story of a sailor who met a siren upon the seas; how they journeyed together to a tumbled-down ruin in the land to the south and transformed it into a beautiful mansion thronging with loved ones and guests and laughter. But the siren was an enchantress, her magic became malign and in time the Captain was driven from his own home to spend his nights again upon the waters.

The story of the new map, the Captain said, was the story of a man who had awakened from a spell and of how he would make one last journey to the mansion, for the treasure it contained was his and he would claim it and bring it away with him at last.

So the Captain departed, leaving his map. Penelope sat down to smooth out the waves of the sea and flatten the mountains upon the surface of new parchment. With her pencil she waved away the faint magic of the enchantress, leaving only the set purpose of the Captain. She straightened out the winding road to the mansion so that he might tread it with confidence and directed it to the word *treasure*, once more written with a firm hand at the journey's end. The northern edge, where her own seashore lay, she embellished with the pebble beach, the net sheds and the ships berthed at the harbour wall, for she wanted the story of this map also to be a story of return.

When the Captain came back he was delighted with the new map Penelope had made him. He asked Penelope to sign it with her name. She showed him where she had already placed her maker's mark: a tiny spider depending from a miniature web in the top right hand corner where the net sheds were depicted. The Captain and Penelope lingered long at her window, talking. After the watchers of the town had gone home, she invited him in.

Sitting among her maps, Penelope told the Captain how, when she was a little girl, her mother would set her upon barrels and table tops and bid her dance and sing for the sailors and fishwives and tavern folk. But Penelope hated in those days to be under the gaze of a crowd. She could not dance or sing, only run away and cry. Penelope's mother was much displeased with her and complained at length to the townsfolk about the cruel fate which had given her a daughter and not a marionette.

On the days when she ran away, Penelope would seek refuge with her grandfather in the workshop at the bottom of their garden, where he sought

safety from the summons of the womenfolk. Penelope's grandfather, she told the Captain, had been a map maker. It was he who first had taught her, while they bent together over a trestle of planking beneath a roof festooned with cobwebs, to scour a surface and cast true north. Penelope feared the great spiders that crouched in the rafters and scuttled out to fish the air for flies. But her grandfather would not disturb them and admonished her: if you wish to live and thrive, let the spider run alive.

Then the Captain teased Penelope that she slept in a bed hung with cobweb curtains. Penelope answered the Captain that she detested real spiders and that every corner of her home was swept free of them, as she could prove. Thus between them they built a staircase of pretexts on which they climbed together to the chamber above.

Lying in bed with the Captain, in the warm hollow deep down between passion and dreams, Penelope told him how, from the iron-bound boxes, the padlocked old chests and the creaking corner cupboards in his shed, her grandfather would sometimes bring out one of his collection of ancient maps. At his workshop table or on the patchwork of her counterpane at bedtime he would unroll it for her and show her its story, of a land and a time when people thought that on the mountain tops lived giants and that dragons dwelt in the caves beneath; of forests where the unicorn ran and oceans where mermen harnessed the white horses to their chariots and drove them six in hand thundering into the surf.

"Come with me upon my journey," the Captain said, for he loved to hear Penelope tell him stories.

Happiness surged in Penelope like a river flooding through a bed of iris, for none had invited her to adventure before and none such as the Captain had ever tapped upon her window. She traced with her finger an eight-sided web in the fine fair hair of the Captain's chest and wondered what treasure could lie waiting for him in the mansion in the south; whether it might be doubloons or emeralds or pieces of eight. Whatever it might be, Penelope knew she held her own fortune already in her arms.

So Penelope shut up her workshop and went down with the Captain into his ship for the voyage across the water. She saw how he greeted all the sailors by name and how willingly they set their hands for him to the rope and the wheel and the anchor chain. The journey by sea was short. When they landed on the foreign shore, Penelope saw how the porters knew him and how he could say the names of their children; how the carriage-drivers vied for his custom, as much for his conversation as for his fare. He knew them all and all loved him. It was the same the whole length of their journey. The innkeepers knew him, and the waiters and the errand boys, and all greeted him with delight. He smiled on them all and tipped them well and asked kindly after their families. Sitting with him in the carriage that drove them south, Penelope loved him too.

Lying in the beds of the inns along their route, spent in body but not yet seeking sleep, the Captain would ask Penelope for a story. So Penelope told the Captain how, long ago, in the time when the gods still came down upon the earth, Arachne the weaver boasted that her tapestries surpassed those of Pallas Athene herself. She told him how, when the goddess in disguise reminded her that all skill is god-given, Arachne wished for a contest to prove her superiority and how, incensed, the goddess granted her wish.

Holding the Captain in her arms, Penelope related how the girl and the goddess set up their looms back to back, each all the while planning what should be the theme of their tapestry, for each knew that victory would be won by more than stitches. Then they took up their shuttles and began to weave, each certain of vanquishing the other.

For the subject of her tapestry, Penelope said, Pallas Athene chose her own great victory over Poseidon, god of the sea, the gratitude of Athens and the tribute to her of its naming. Her shuttle flying, the goddess thought that in this way, as well as by her dexterity, she would put Arachne in her proper place. As for Arachne, she bent to her weaving, never stealing a glance at the goddess' work. So the day of the contest passed. At last Pallas Athene stood up, her tapestry complete. So did Arachne. Then the goddess had her first sight of her rival's work. Upon Arachne's loom she saw that the mortal had woven such a masterpiece as would indeed have graced the halls of Olympus. But more than that: she saw, laid out in twenty-one scenes of exquisite detail, the infidelities of Pallas Athene's own father Zeus; his seduction of Leda, of Europa, of Danaë and of many other mortal women. And Pallas Athene was enraged.

With blows of her fist upon the pillow, Penelope showed the Captain how the furious goddess smashed with her shuttle Arachne's loom and ripped her tapestry to ribbons. She told him how, turning her shuttle upon Arachne, the goddess struck the girl's face and split it in two. At this, the Captain groaned in sympathy and covered his head and asked why Pallas Athene was so angry; was it because of Arachne's surpassing skill as a weaver, or because of her impertinence in revealing the many seductions of Zeus? Penelope said she did not know.

Even then, Penelope went on, stubborn Arachne refused to bow her riven head to the goddess. Rather than admit defeat, from the shreds of her tapestry she braided a rope and from the beams of her broken loom Arachne hanged herself.

Who then won the contest, the Captain wanted to know (wiping away a tear for Arachne, for he was tender hearted): Arachne or Pallas Athene? Again, Penelope did not know.

When she saw the body of her rival swinging from her own work, Pallas Athene took the herb aconite and sprinkled its juices upon the dead Arachne. Arachne returned to life as a spider and her work was transformed into a web.

There she would dangle for eternity, Penelope said, weaving a tapestry endlessly rent and repaired.

Was Pallas Athene's aconite then a blessing or a curse upon Arachne? the Captain asked Penelope and again Penelope had no answer. The Captain teased her for her ignorance and they tumbled together among the blankets and pillows with much laughter. In the carriage and the inns along the road and in the darkness of the beds they shared, the Captain and Penelope debated his questions many times but found no solutions.

The carriage wheels turned. In days of journeying they passed from field to forest to baking earth, to a land where stone-walled houses turned their backs against the summer sun and the winter wind. Penelope's finger coursed along the map, approaching nearer and nearer to the place where she had copied the word *treasure*. The road became treacherous in its dips and curves; the Captain told Penelope that many a carriage overturned in these parts. He pointed to the river splashing low in its stony bed and told her how in spring it would swell to a torrent that carried away carts and cattle; how, forcing entry through cellars and doors, its implacable waters could drive people from their hearths to seek refuge in upper rooms.

They climbed a hill to reach the town upon it, where their carriage could hardly squeeze between the twisting streets of stone and Penelope feared for the horses hauling them upwards upon the steep cobbles. At length they came to a courtyard. The Captain ordered the driver to stop and helped Penelope down from the carriage. There she saw before them in hammered iron and flaking verdigris the gate of the mansion she had last seen in the expiring whisper of ink upon the Captain's faded treasure map. Taking a key from his pocket, the Captain opened the gate.

The mansion where the Captain had lived under the spell of the enchantress formed part of the rampart of the town. As the Captain showed Penelope through its halls and galleries he pointed to the signs of its antiquity; to a stone bearing ancient lettering set high in the wall, to a newel post formed of an eight-sided column, to a water trough which once had been a sarcophagus. The Captain showed Penelope richly furnished drawing rooms and dining halls, cellars and bedchambers that once had seen great happiness and celebration, immense anger and misery, and now were only empty and cooled. He took her onto the balcony and showed her the gardens and the lake and the crescent of mountains beyond, their colour altering with the arc of the sun. All that Penelope saw of the mansion and the town and the land was rich and beautiful beyond anything of which she could have dreamed. The sadness of the Captain as he told her of his life there and the sight of him now taking his leave of it went to Penelope's heart; her love and pity for him rose and brimmed the banks of her heart like the spring spate of the river they had crossed.

Then the Captain said, we must find a chest and fill it with the treasure I have come to claim, so that we may take it away in the carriage. Now at last, thought Penelope, I shall see what is this treasure so carefully inscribed

upon the map. They found a chest bound with iron and placed it open upon the floor of the hallway. Then they went from room to room and Penelope helped the Captain to gather up his treasure. The treasure of the Captain was this: a purse one of his daughters made; sheets of the music another played; a gaming set of his son's and many miniatures of the Captain and his children that captured each a fragment of the happiness of days gone by.

Then Penelope's love for the Captain overflowed and flooded the chambers of her heart because she saw that he knew what real riches were. And a dread rose on her horizon in the shape of the waters that spilled over the edge of the world, because the Captain had been already twenty years upon the sea when Penelope was born and must probably reach its limits before she did.

When they had put the Captain's treasure chest into the carriage and travelled back along the road that had brought them to the mansion, when they had crossed the sea and disembarked at the harbour by the net lofts, Penelope and the Captain found that their two hearts had fused together. It caused them great anguish to separate them but they tore them apart at last. Penelope returned to her workshop and the Captain to his voyages, for he had many ports to visit.

When Penelope sat again at her desk she took a new sheet of parchment and made for herself a map of her journey with the Captain. The story of Penelope's map was a love story, its features the ship and its sailors, the harbour and its porters, the carriage and driver, the inns and innkeepers along the way, the bedchambers and the stories told in them, the road and the river, the town and the mansion and the Captain's iron-bound chest. And next to every feature, in a clear hand, Penelope wrote the word *treasure*.

In the years that followed, Penelope and the Captain went on many adventures together. The Captain was eager to show Penelope the land of his birth and they voyaged there together. They travelled a road that wound from crystal ocean through wild pine forest and over snow-brushed mountains. They crossed a great plain where the wild herds stampeded and followed a mighty river valley where bears came down to the water to fish. They stayed in cabins along the way and once, when they could find no bed for the night, they took shelter in an old granary. There they picnicked upon potato cakes an old goodwife had given them and embraced upon blankets spread upon a shifting palliasse of grain.

The Captain showed Penelope the cabin to which he had been brought as a baby, the pond where the cattle of his infancy drank and the fields where the farmer of his childhood had taken him into his fold. He showed her the road that his forebears had built and they followed it north into the wild country. There they found a welcome with the hunters and farmers of those parts, who pitted themselves against snow, gale and ice, the land and the wild creatures upon it, sickness, misfortune and tragedy, to clear for themselves a space to lead independent lives, uncomplaining and unremarked. Only now and then, by an accidental parting of their calico or buckskin, one or another

would reveal the gleaming mail of the hero underneath. All of these features Penelope plotted upon the maps she made on her return and all of them she labelled *treasure*.

Another time they voyaged to a land where an ancient river had hewn a gorge through a great desert, where long-dead kings had built palaces and temples to their own glory and that of the gods. Penelope and the Captain went down into the rock to the chambers where the kings had piled up their gold and turquoise and ivory in a venture to take it with them into the afterlife. But the tombs had been robbed and the temples looted, the jewels pried from their settings and the gold melted down and reformed into the wealth of foreigners. At night Penelope and the Captain sat at the table of a whitewashed inn high on the cliff side while the smiling, dark-skinned innkeeper brought them the fragrant food of his country. They looked across lantern-lit gardens down upon the shadows of the valley and the lights upon the river and spoke of their love. On her return, it was against the vignette of the white house on the hill and not those of the temples or the tombs that Penelope inscribed the word *treasure*.

Many other journeys together succeeded these. All of them Penelope made into maps and fastened them upon the walls of her workshop and her bedchamber. Under her hands the maps flourished and were beautiful, for inspired by her love for all things to do with the Captain, Penelope went daily to the market seeking out precious embellishments: pigments of blue lapis for the rivers and the oceans, yellow ochre for the deserts, green malachite for the forests. She bought gold leaf so that the points of the compass might ascend upon her maps in the full corona of the sun. The beauty of Penelope's maps began to compete for space with their truth, so that sometimes there was compromise. Penelope wrote their legends upon them in crimson haematite for they were the words of her heart.

In five years of making the maps of her travels with the Captain, Penelope decorated the walls of her net loft with a rainbow refracted through the prism of her love. She bought glass-headed pins and set them into the maps to mark the dwellings of those whom she had met and loved upon the journey. A silver-headed pin she fixed upon the drawing of the Captain's ship on her map of the harbour; a pin of cut green glass she pressed into the drawing of her sail loft upon the shore. From the market she brought back coloured threads and wound them around the pins so that the many lands and people that she loved were woven together in a silken mesh all the colours of a maple forest in fall.

As she wove she pondered often the Captain's question: whether it was the skill or the subject matter of Arachne's tapestry that brought down the wrath of Pallas Athene. Was it because Arachne had so woven the swan upon Leda's lap that the goddess could count every feather and ruffle the down upon his breast? Perhaps she had so wrought the shower of gold falling into the spread skirt of Danaë that every coin had its obverse and its reverse, its denomination and its date. Maybe Arachne had sewn the snorting of Europa's bull so finely that the breath of Zeus himself seemed to rise from

the tapestry in a cloud. Was Arachne's mastery of her craft so great that the goddess knew, either the mortal must be humiliated or Olympus itself must fall?

Or was the virgin goddess, sprung immaculate and fully armoured from the forehead of Zeus and not his loins, unable to countenance the scenes of his earthly pleasures which taunting Arachne spread before her eyes?

Standing back to look at the great collage that now encircled her walls, Penelope thought, perhaps in this webbing that spreads from map to map I may one day catch and lie supported, for there is no other to hold me if the Captain sails for the horizon and I am plunged into loss and grief. Then Penelope was reminded of the spiders that crept in and spun hammocks for themselves among the rafters of her grandfather's workshop, of how loathsome they were to her, how she used to wish he would kill them or drive them out for they had no right to be there. But her grandfather was kind and let them be.

In these days the Captain began to have problems in his trade. Foreign rulers suddenly imposed taxes and impounded his merchandise. Pirates menaced the coasts where he sailed. Great storms at sea swept men and cargo overboard and threatened to sink his ship. All this caused the Captain much anxiety and drew him often away from Penelope and the harbour town. Sometimes they would be sitting at her fireside and he would put his hand to his ear and say he heard the foghorn and he must go and check what beacons were visible. Sometimes he would rise early from her bed and say the tide had turned and he must sail.

At these times, Penelope would look out of her window at the threatening storm and worry about the Captain, attending so late and so unmindfully to the news of the predictable tides, setting out to sea all of a sudden, in a ship increasingly battered. She kept herself occupied making maps for her customers and plying her trade through her workshop window. But her own map collection languished on her walls, for the Captain had no time now for the voyages they took together. He was always preoccupied, and so distracted that the co-ordinates he gave her for his voyages were not always accurate, so that the maps she made for him did not tally with his course and the signals he ran up between the masts were not always the right ones. This only made her worry more about the Captain because she loved him.

One windy evening they were sitting by the fire in the workshop, the Captain's mind elsewhere upon the seas. Penelope had a sea chart spread out upon her table. She was trying to plot the co-ordinates the Captain had given her for his last voyage upon a customary route. She had been struck by a sudden doubt about whether the co-ordinates were accurate, but the draught coming under the door kept lifting and shifting the map so that she could not see whether she could make sense of them. All at once, the door was buffeted by so strong a gust that the latch lifted and the door blew open.

Penelope started up to close the door and stopped. Sitting on the doorstep and looking into the room was a silver crab the size of Penelope's hand. Penelope saw the crab look around the workshop until it spied the Captain. Before she could slam the door it had scuttled across the threshold and onto the planking floor. Penelope set her back against the door and shut out the wind, all the while watching the crab as it crawled across the room. The Captain was watching it too; watching it with fear and dread. When it reached the Captain, the crab climbed onto his boot. He did not shake it off but looked on in horror and fascination as it scaled the length of his shin, pulling itself up by its two great pincers onto his knee. Penelope and the Captain, both rigid and helpless, observed the crab run on its eight legs across the Captain's lap and fasten itself onto the buckle of his belt, where it sat waving its claws at him and surveying him with the stalks of its eyes.

Then the Captain let out a great cry and leaped to his feet. He tried to dash the crab from his belt buckle into the fire, but the crab could not be dislodged. The Captain undid his belt in haste and tugged it out of his belt loops. He cracked the leather strap like a whip, dashed the buckle against the wall, threw it into the fire. But he felt pain at his waist and looked down to see that the crab had slipped from the buckle and burrowed under his shirt, and had fastened its claws into his flesh. The Captain and Penelope looked at the silver crab and saw that it was wrought of the same mineral that she used to colour the waters that fell over the rim of the world.

In bed that night, Penelope was distraught to see how the crab stayed fastened to her lover's waist and how the wounds it made in his flesh oozed blood and lymph. The Captain turned his back on her and curled his body around the crab in his distress. Penelope thought of how her Grandfather had told her that cobweb could be used to bind wounds and stop them from bleeding. Then she regretted that she had driven all the spiders from her house. She could only stroke with her hand the Captain's shoulder and his hip and the soft hair of his arm and his thigh, to comfort him. The Captain gave no response and Penelope thought, my touch is so light upon him now compared to the clawing of the crab that he cannot feel it any more. And they both wept, separately, each upon their own pillow, because they feared that a summons from the end of the world was come.

In the morning the Captain arose without waking Penelope and he was gone by the time she stirred, leaving no directions for his journey and no expected time of his return. The map was still upon the table and when Penelope began to roll it up she saw that the co-ordinates were not true, for they seemed to be triangulated upon a reference point that was unknown to her. Then Penelope sat by the ashes of the grate and thought how the mismatching of the charts had begun before the coming of the crab, and she had no heart to light her fire, though the cold wind still blew outside.

Many days passed with no word from the Captain, though Penelope sought him often upon the quayside and set a candle in her window for him at night. She scoured her books of mathematics and astronomy, cartography, the winds and the tides and the movements and signals of ships, trying to

divine how long was the voyage to the rim of the world and whether the crab were indeed a messenger from those reaches. She found clues in them that the voyage could be long indeed, that there were many islands to be explored on the journey and many adventures to be had; that there were lands where the scorching sun could shrivel the silver parasite so that it died and fell away; that many returned from the cloudbank. But though she found clues she could find no charts of those voyages, for those who had received the summons had no thought of making charts and none save they could tell what transformations in the reading of their instruments such a messenger might wreak, or what they saw in the shifting fog of the horizon. And Penelope wept to think how the window pane she had opened at the Captain's knock had closed again between them. From her lonely shelter she cried for the Captain, outside in such a hailstorm as only he could feel.

One day soon after, Penelope was walking up the street beneath the projecting bowsprits of the ships in the harbour and there at the end was the Captain's figurehead, and standing in the prow of his ship the Captain himself. He looked down upon Penelope and she was horrified to see that the crab was grown to the size of a breastplate and had fastened itself across his heart. The Captain called down to Penelope from the distant height of his prow that he was setting sail, that he would visit this harbour no more and no signal would come from him to her, for the crab had summoned him to sail away from the lands of the continent and voyage among the islands of the outer reefs and he had no wish for her upon his journey. As Penelope watched, stricken and speechless, the ship unfurled its sail and slipped its mooring, the figurehead turned and pointed out to sea and the Captain, her lover no longer, sailed away.

The pole star had fallen out of the night sky and in the mornings the sun no longer rose. Walking around the harbour Penelope let her tears fall as they would, her sobs shake her as they might and neither cared nor noticed whether people stared. The pavement pitched under her feet, the buildings rolled and the gulls shot screaming across her view. She had to stop in the street and clasp her face with her two hands to prevent the breath from fleeing her body.

The ominous co-ordinates of the Captain's charts, the arrival of the crab and the devastation of the Captain's departure towing her world away with him pulled Penelope's mind in three directions so that she was unable to chart a steady course through any of them. With automaton hands she unspun the silken web of the friends once made and loved through knowing the Captain, let it drop to the floor and swept it into the dustpan. With numb fingers she took down her treasure maps, crushed them, piled them in the grate and watched them flame and curl and collapse into ash. Her precious pigments and sheets of gold leaf she gathered into a basket and with slow steps took them to the market and gave them away.

Then a townswoman who saw her doing this brought her into a tavern and coaxed from her her story. Before long, many of the well intentioned townfolk were taking her arm in the street and offering her their wisdom.

Look, they would say, at all the fine sailors and fishermen and innkeepers along the quay and in the market. Seek another man along the waterside. And Penelope in her despair was grateful to them and said only that it was too soon. But only once had she seen a man in a Captain's uniform approaching her window, but once had her eyes of green locked with eyes of blue and she knew no-one else of all the town would ever make her hasten to put her hand upon the latch.

Alone in her bedchamber, its walls ghosted and pierced by the lost maps of her treasure, Penelope sat and tried to chart the shaken landscape of her heart. On rolls of linen and remnants of vellum she would draw the outline, one lobe torn off and bleeding or riven from the other by a chasm and kept barely alive by the slenderest capillary bridge. Within the outline she would try to map the features of her grief: the worries and distractions and absences of the Captain, the arrival of the crab, the suddenness of the Captain's departure, the whole community of those she loved all swept away in a tidal wave of loss; but the features were too big and too many for all of them to be held in her broken heart at once. She could not simplify them to their essentials nor arrange them in a narrative. They tumbled and came apart in the swamping salt water as the gigantic waves of grief retreated and advanced, crashed through the limits and streamed over the edge of the map so that she could not gather them into a picture.

Sometimes the good townsfolk would lean in at her window and try to tell her how to make her map. Draw a high wall around your heart, they would say, taking the pen from her hand, and set a door in the wall like this, from where you can look out to sea. But set a time at which you will close the door and when that time comes shut it fast and bolt it, and make a window from which you can look in another direction. Penelope would nod and agree, for she knew that this was good advice. But she could not draw a wall around what she could not comprehend.

She could not draw the map of her heart because she did not know its story. She could not tell where her road started or what country it traversed, still less the direction in which it led, whether to home or to the wilderness. So she turned again to the chart with the co-ordinates the Captain had given her of his recent voyages. But the Captain's chart was too confused for her to reconcile them and the thought grew within her that there were undiscovered islands in the story of the Captain's chart as well as storms and imposts and pirates. Penelope put her head upon her arms and wept to think where her journey now might have its origin, that she did not know it and feared to know it, but that she could not chart her forward course without it.

Then it seemed to Penelope that she looked up and the Captain was standing at her window, his face full of sorrow and compassion for her. The Captain put out his hand and drew Penelope through the window and down upon the pebbles and the sand. He led her through the breakers and beneath the surface of the sea, deep into the ocean for many leagues, through forests of kelp and groves of coral, between the skeletons of ships and the

graveyards of their crew and cargoes, into canyons where the sun no longer filtered through the gloom and the fish trailed lantern lures in the darkness.

There the Captain stopped and pointed to a fissure in the rock where something silver glistened. Penelope saw that it was a tiny crab, struggling to free itself from the crevice where it had just been born. She watched it emerge, drop to the floor and scuttle past them the way they had come. Then she knew that this was the same crab that had fastened upon the Captain and that this was its beginning.

The Captain motioned to Penelope that they must follow. The crab skimmed and swam its way along the ocean floor until the water grew shallow enough for them to see the hulls of ships passing far overhead. Penelope saw that the crab had grown. At the same time, the Captain gestured to her to look up. Far above them through the glassy green water she could see a keel and knew that it was the Captain's vessel. As the crab moved, so did the ship, so that if the crab moved to the right, the ship listed starboard and if the crab darted to the left, the ship heaved to port, as though an invisible anchor chain connected the two. This, the Captain seemed to say, is what has dictated the movement of my ship upon its strange course of late. The anchor of my ship has come alive and has been dragging it where it would, though I did not know it. This is the cause of the confusion of my charts. This is the unseen triangulation point. Then Penelope understood and said, now I can begin the story of my map.

By this time they had come into shallow water. Penelope could hear the sound of the surf and the calling of the gulls. The crab was almost as large as it had been when she had first seen it upon her threshold. All at once, the crab leaped upon the Captain and fastened itself to his arm. The tarnished crab upon the Captain's arm grew to the size of a shield and he swung it between himself and Penelope so that she could no longer touch him. Then she looked up indeed at the sea birds squabbling on her windowsill and the crashing of the waves against the breakwater and knew she had fallen asleep at her desk; that all was a dream sent to comfort her and that she was no closer to understanding the story of her map.

Penelope looked around her workshop, at the books of the meanings of flags and signals, at the maps and charts drawn with precision, and thought of the reasons why a ship may hoist one sail to leave harbour and change it to another when out of sight of land. She thought of how her grandfather had once held up a parchment to the light and shown her, beneath the clear outlines of one map, the traces of another, erased but still visible to those experienced in looking for them. He had taught her that this was called a palimpsest. Penelope held up the Captain's chart to the light and thought that there, too, she could discern traces of another map imperfectly erased and overlapping with her own.

Penelope folded her arms in her shawl and walked along the shore in the bitter wind, watching the tide churning the common pebbles, reflecting how the lozenges of bottle glass, the gulls' precious eggs and the pearls

loosed from a mermaid's necklace would all alike be ground and smoothed and worn into grains of sand. She saw the ragged boys combing the beach, scrabbling for green copper pennies to buy rum at the tavern door, while the flawed denarius, the sole coin struck from a faulty mould and dropped from an Emperor's fingers, they tossed back into the surf, a worthless bit of metal.

As she walked among them, the landladies and the stall keepers and the fishwives asked in low voices how she did, for all knew Penelope's sorrow by now. And the old women, more than one, whose faces were netted with lines, whispered to her of their own lost loves of fifty years before, how they haunted them still and still brought forth their tears upon their pillows.

When dusk fell, Penelope returned to her net loft, lit her candle and climbed her stairs to her sleeping chamber, where she had lain so often with the Captain. The window was open. Penelope made haste to fasten it against the night. She set the candle on the dressing table and put out her hand to the latch. Thereupon a great spider dropped between her face and the glass.

Penelope screamed. She jumped backwards until the bedpost stopped her. The spider hung black against the twilight, its abdomen the size of a plum, its splayed legs almost touching the window frame at either side. As it hung, it twisted slowly upon its thread.

Pressed against the bed, Penelope shuddered and shook and ducked her head to shut out the sight of the spider. She tried to summon her legs to spring to the door, but they would not obey her, for any forward motion took her closer to the horror in the window. She could only clasp her hands around her heaving chest and bend her body almost double, so that she was sitting on the bed. She drew up her knees and thrust her feet under the quilt, pulled the covers over her head and curled up, quaking with fear. There she passed the long cold wakeful night, listening to the scrabbling of the spider upon the window frame, dreading lest it approach nearer to the bed and drop down upon her, while the chill wind blew through the open casement.

When daylight came, Penelope knew she must escape from the room and summon help to exterminate the spider. Still she quailed beneath the bedclothes, afraid to confront whatever might be before her. At last she found just enough courage to make an opening the width of a finger in the blankets in front of her eye.

A web was spun across the window, a marvellous embroidery of silk and lace finer than the froth upon the strand. The sea mist had come in during the night and hung teardrops upon every thread. In the dawn light, every teardrop was a diamond or a pearl. As Penelope watched, the sun rose beyond the window and kindled a tiny flame in every water-jewel. The spider descended to the centre of her web, no longer black but translucent amber flecked with gold. She spread her arms and seemed to say to Penelope, see this chandelier I have made for you; see this chandelier I have hung in your room.

In dread and wonder, Penelope crept from her bed and drew nearer to the spider. She was sick with fear and yet she approached. Shaking, Penelope sat down at her dressing table, the spider depending an arm's length before her face, regarding her with ancient, implacable wisdom. Penelope forced herself to survey the spider's many eyes, her sharp mandible, the bristles upon her segmented thorax and her eight jointed legs, all as though made from the sap of trees long since turned to stone. Inside the great orb of the spider's abdomen, Penelope saw that the flecks were flakes of insects; fragments of dragonfly, lacewing and moth, now become gold and obsidian.

All this, the spider let Penelope observe. These were once living, beautiful creatures, she told Penelope without words; all these fragile flighted things I have killed and consumed, so that I may draw out my own entrails to weave my tapestry. Then Penelope remembered the Captain's question, whether it was a blessing or a curse that Pallas Athene bestowed upon Arachne when she revived her with aconite to be a spider.

Inside Penelope's head, the spider said, do you not know what you are?

Penelope's fear overcame her all at once. She sprang from the chair and darted through the door and down the stairs to her workshop.

Penelope sought refuge all day at her desk, working at the maps her customers wanted. She drew them from the craft she learned from her grandfather, the knowledge she got from her books and the instruments she held in her hands. They were spare things, she thought, stories of ordinary lives, told plainly in black ink on parchment, sprung from her head and not from her viscera. They flowed under her hands but did not arc in rainbows as her treasure maps had done, lighting up her heart. All the time she thought of nightfall, when once again she must ascend with her candle to the room with the spider, and the spider's unanswered question.

When Penelope returned to her bedchamber, the glistening, sea coal spider had caught the moon in a silver driftnet. The tide of moonlight had washed a great black latticework over the walls, ghosts of the meshes that used to hang there long ago. A gigantic shadow spider sculled the ceiling. Penelope shrank against the bed, but collected herself enough to creep across the floor and set her candle once more upon the dressing table.

"I know what I am not," Penelope said to the spider. "I am not the maps I make for money. Those maps are what I make, not what I am."

And yet it is to them that you give your time, the spider seemed to say.

"I must eat," Penelope protested.

What is the good of eating, came the words of the spider in Penelope's head, if only to make more of what you are not?

Penelope was silent for a while. "I am the treasure maps," she said at length. "I am the collages of everything there is in my heart." But this did not seem enough to Penelope to explain her being.

Where are your treasure maps, asked the spider; where are your collages?

"Destroyed," said Penelope, and a tear stole down her face.

Then you have destroyed yourself, said the spider, yet here you are.

"My heart still beats," said Penelope. "My memories still live."

Then you are not your treasure maps, said the spider. You are not your collages. They are what you draw from your entrails. But on what beautiful living things must you feed for this to be so?

"To make a map there must be a journey," Penelope said. "For a treasure map there must be treasure."

Yet you sit in this loft, said the spider.

"I am afraid," Penelope said. "I am afraid to journey in search of treasure."

Afraid you will not find it, asked the spider, or afraid that you will lose it?

"I have no heart for the venture," said Penelope. And she wept bitterly for the graveyards of crew and cargo through which her dream had taken her, thinking of the hopeful merchants investing them in the fair ships that now lay as skeletons upon the sea bed. She wept for the love for the Captain still within her, for the terror of his uncharted voyage in the grip of the crab and for the moths and lacewings and dragonflies that once had taken flight on a summer's day.

The spider shook her web with impatience. She spun out her thread and descended to the dressing table, sitting there with her eight legs drawn up. It came to Penelope that the spider wanted her to put out her hands but she quailed and hid them behind her back.

Without a map the journey is but aimless wandering, said the spider, and the treasure found and buried can never be retrieved. Without a journey, a map is a sterile thing, to be kept in a cupboard, to fade and to be consumed by vermin and insects. Without the journey there is no treasure, for without venturing forth the treasure can never be discovered. Without the treasure, the journey is but the round of the beast of burden, whose plodding has no

need of a map. The map, the journey and the treasure are but three parts of the whole for such as you. Do you yet know what you are?

The spider waited.

With fear and trepidation, Penelope brought her hands around from behind her back. She put out her hands and rested them, palms upward, on the table. The spider raised herself and set her front feet on Penelope's fingers. Shuddering, Penelope felt the awful scratching of the spider's eight scaly legs upon her wrists, the smooth and horrible weight of the abdomen in her palms, as the spider lowered herself to sit in the cup of Penelope's two hands. The spider looked at Penelope with her myriad eyes, each one reflecting a splinter of the moon.

I am a daughter of Arachne, said the spider to Penelope. And so are you.

Then the spider raised her fangs. Penelope knew that this was a challenge and that the spider's venom was aconite. One bite, the spider seemed to say, and you will weave legends of your treasure maps. The children who play now upon the beach will take them from their chests and cupboards and spread them, glowing and wondrous, before their grandchildren, and they before theirs. But you shall journey alone. Refuse and you may sleep again in the inns along the road with one lover after another, but again and again you will tear down and destroy the treasure maps you have made together and weep bitter tears over their ashes.

Then Penelope was afraid of this choice that the spider set before her. She cried again for the Captain and wanted no other maps than the ones she had made from his love. She wept for the confounding charts of his later voyages, for she knew not what sirens and witches and one-eyed giants might have bedevilled him there, for nameless islands where exhausted sailors put into harbour desperate for relief from the tumultuous ocean, for herself all unknowing where in those regions her current path began, where she stood now upon it and how to draw its onward route. Then Penelope recalled the ancient maps her grandfather had shown her and how there were no more mermaids and dragons and unicorns, for the maps themselves had shown the way for men to enter their realms and in seeking the truth destroy the wonder.

"There are some journeys that should not be mapped," Penelope said to the spider. "For love of the Captain I would write *terra incognita* across the chart of his voyages and seek no more to know what he has encountered there, even though it meant my own map begins and ends in wilderness and I am condemned to wander there."

Then you must live paralysed, said the spider, like the caterpillar in its spun cocoon, the miracle of the butterfly still its own secret, stung by the wasp and eaten alive by its larva.

The spider retracted her fangs. She lifted herself off Penelope's hands and returned to her work in the window.

Every day that followed, at the window from which Penelope first saw the Captain, the weather rent the spider's tapestry into shreds and every night the spider wove it anew. The spider threw spools of silk across the walls of Penelope's chamber where her treasure maps had hung, joining the empty pinholes that marked her lost loved ones in a new gossamer web. The spider spun hangings for Penelope's bed that she longed to display to her departed lover and hear his voice acclaim, for the fantasy of just such draperies had first brought him to that bed. Through the open casement the wind began to bring tokens of lost affection; silver bark, marbled feathers, withered petals and a five-pointed leaf, red as heart's blood, that clung to the cobweb curtain, making a phantom collage.

And Penelope thought, it could not have been Arachne's skill at stitching gold and swansdown and vapour that enraged Pallas Athene, for after all they were but stitches. Who but the gods could make the ore or the swan or the bull? Nor was Pallas Athene ashamed of the pleasures her father took with the women of the earth, for all earth was the gods', to trifle with as they wished.

No, Penelope understood; the goddess had looked upon the panel of the swan and had seen how in the same bed Leda turned unsatisfied from the probing bill of Zeus to the welcome embrace of her husband. She had looked upon the panel of the bull and seen upon Europa's face the ecstasy of her liberation from Asia, her pleasuring of mighty Zeus a token tossed to the ferryman. And she had looked upon the naked avarice of Danaë for the gold, not the god, that was falling into her lap and knew that it was the superior knowledge of human beings that Arachne laid bare; the knowledge that for earthly pleasure the gods must degrade themselves to something less than human, and that those for whom the gods had debased themselves did not revere them even in their embrace. Therefore had Pallas Athene been furious.

Pallas Athene's aconite was both a blessing and a curse to Arachne. Penelope imagined the spider's fangs piercing her skin and the aconite entering her blood. She saw herself set apart, for who can live with the woman who lives with the spider? She saw herself becoming thin with the years, her hand translucent upon the parchment, a palimpsest of lines and veins, feeding on her treasury of solitary wonders, pulling out her own entrails to weave her work, like the spider that lived now in her chamber.

Arachne won the contest, Penelope concluded, or Pallas Athene would not first have struck her and then felt pity. Arachne won because her tapestry encompassed the whole of the world as it is known to humanity; the splendour of Zeus and the slime on the feet of the swan, the mud on the bull's flanks, the counterfeit coin among the gold. Only the gods delude themselves that those of the earth are blinded by their glory, for they fear that if mortals knew of the soil upon their feet, their worshippers would not love them. But mortals know

that this is not so. Those of the earth know that it is earthy. If the gods come down to share mortal pleasures then they cannot but be besmeared. What virgin of Olympus, created and not conceived, can understand the mire of passion? Pallas Athene learned it for the first time when she looked upon Arachne's tapestry and the revelation smote the goddess of wisdom so hard that she spun with the force of it and struck Arachne. But Arachne could not gainsay the truth; that mortals prefer the love of imperfect gods to the worship of distant glory. By her tapestry Arachne stood; she could do no other.

Standing at her window looking through the cobweb curtain out to sea, Penelope thought of the sailors and fishermen and other travellers who came to her for their maps. She thought of how they consulted their maps upon their customary journeys, for well-worn paths that led to trade and barter. She thought of their delight in tales of treasure hunts as mere entertainments, and how none save one had ever thought that it might be a marvellous thing to travel with the map maker. She thought of those who urged her to choose another from the harbour or the town. And she thought of the old women who lived among them, more than one, who stood at their windows and looked out to sea for loves lost fifty years before.

Penelope longed for the Captain, voyaging in deep uncharted waters. She remembered how her grandfather had told her that spider silk, if pulled in the right direction, was as strong as steel, stronger than the rigging of the Captain's fragile craft. Penelope thought, there is an invisible line stronger than the strongest steel hawser that runs from his ship to my heart, wherever it may sail.

The spider descended between Penelope and the window, the offering of the aconite suspended with her in the air. Penelope thought, I have no need of a spider's bite to set me on a solitary path. But ever afterwards the spider lived with Penelope in the net loft upon the pebble beach, her blessing and her curse an unclaimed gift of the gods.

Leaning in to the workshop, the Captain spread a tattered roll of parchment upon Penelope's desk. It was a map which once had been fresh and now was so faded and eaten by insects that soon it would be illegible. It showed part of a southern country across the water, a mansion in the heart of that country, and a road that led to the mansion and led away. The Captain told Penelope that he needed a copy of the map, for he was afraid that the original would not survive the journey he must make. Poring over the map, Penelope saw that it had once been beautiful, that the maker of this map had adorned it with miniatures: a cliff-hewn village rising on terraces, a river that wound through margins of iris and the tumbled ruins of an ancient amphitheatre. When Penelope looked through her magnifying glass at the drawing of the mansion she saw, in letters so faint she might have been their last reader, the word *treasure* written beneath its threshold.

A tale of the map maker Penelope and her lover the Captain, the legend of the spider, the arrival of the crab and deep, uncharted waters...