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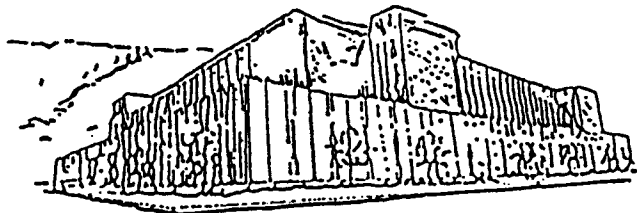
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Blue Lusitania

a novel excerpt

by

Andrew Sean Greer

B.A., Brown University — Rhode Island, 1992

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

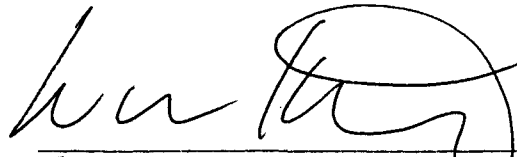
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1996

Approved by


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

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¹ Jacobs, Joseph. *Celtic Fairy Tales*. London: Bodley Head, 1894.

² Jacobs, Joseph. *Celtic Fairy Tales*. London: Bodley Head, 1894.

³ Lang, Andrew. *The Crimson Fairy Book*. New York: Dover, 1903.

⁴ Lang, Andrew. *The Pink Fairy Book*. New York: Dover, 1897.

⁵ artist and date unknown

⁶ Department of Defense. Map #N 29-5.” US Army Topographic Command, 1969.



SAY THIS

Three times, with your eyes shut

Պօժարչի՞ն՝ Երևանի՞ն Երևանի՞ն
Բայ՞ն Բայ՞ն Բայ՞ն

And you will see

What you will see

Chapter One

In which our narrator throws things out the window—an absurd project is proposed—a lady turns into a frog—the longest obsession in history is revealed—furniture is built—

She sat perfectly still in her life. In fact, she sat on her chaise longue, hacked from whalebone and gilt twice to protect it from the salty air of Lusitania. Around her, the castle began to decay. The Witch of Sorba was delighted to see this. But Viriato was not coming home....

- Betty Ann Childress¹

Make me believe it. That's what I first whisper when I listen to a tale. Though I'm cynical enough to raise an eyebrow at sentiment, to wave aside coincidences and absurdities, yet still I want to believe them. I want to think the world could be this way: serious and resonant and playful. So make coincidences turn out to be planned, and make plans ruled merely by chance. Whatever tale you tell—a sad one of lovers unthreaded, of vicious deeds, or ironic reunion—you may decorate it any way you like, but make me believe it.

Because that's how we put our lives together. From the first important detail—a young woman building a chaise longue—to the next—a handsome man perched on a bamboo suitcase—we want to link together everything so that we can say *yes there is a plan here, there is a system*. And if this chain comes **undone**, in a life, in a story, we fall apart. Or else we must believe that this loss, too, is planned. We think the breakage makes us drunk and dizzy, as at Carnival, masked and winged and clad in motley. We

¹ Childress, Betty Ann. *Blue Lusitania*. Atlantic Press, New York City, 1924.

believe this breakage justifies the system, until we can grab onto another link—perhaps the narrator, sitting in an office, reading a letter.

So it's a leap of faith for me to begin a story these days, knowing how impossible it is to paste together something shattered, those glinting stained-glass shards, soldering and hiding flaws and stuffing magazines and papers into cracks where light shows, until nothing quite belongs anymore. I can almost remember when I'd hear a tale, and it would be like a rubber ball thrown clean into the air, arcing visibly, predictably, falling towards me as I would anticipate its growing speed and catch it—buff!—into my arms, roll with it, thinking *it's mine!*

But this story isn't mine. Although I get to tell it, although I play a part in it, I can't own it. It belongs to Monica, who believed the most.

She was an oddly beautiful woman then, I think, someone who looked at herself in the mirror one morning and, seeing the plain face of a Downeast girl, decided it was unacceptable to be plain and set about to transform herself—with wild black curtains of hair, purple lipstick, and pear-colored dresses with ties which flapped like wings—into something unforgettable. One of her eyes was green, the other blue, as if she had an extra sense of sight which, while deepening her view, might also discolor and upset her panorama. She had a hearty, Viking walk. When I went with her into shops of tiny crystal things, the owner and I always exchanged a look which said: *She'll break something, I know, but it's worth it and I'll pay for her.* She banged right into life, unharmed. To me it made her cruel, but from what I've seen most men are drawn to cruelty, thinking—and this could be true—it comes from the closest contact with hope.

Her story is confusing for me to think on. I want to tell you what she really yearned for. If I don't, you'll see Monica as a sneering doll, crossing and uncrossing her

porcelain arms. But I said sometimes the arbitrary links we make can undo, and leave us in a painted, nonsensical world. This happened to my friend. So I should tell you that what she longed for was to find out *why*.

I remember once Monica said she felt inside her a network of fine lines, cracks, a fissured spider web which spread slowly throughout her as if she were made of glass. She said she felt only the most extreme tendrils of its movement, but from those she speculated a pattern, a white-lined map, and from that pattern she speculated a center. Like all networks of fracture—the pebble hitting the car window, the green glass vase cleft by a change in heat, the scissure of an organ parting symmetrically—there is a tiny, white locus from which the ripples of lines billow out. And I believe there is the thought: *if I can find the source, cup it in my hand, all the rest will hold*. I think Monica's mind, in its lower movements, was constantly on this search, and sometimes things in the outside world struck her, not as familiar and ghostly, but as clues just now left behind by the thing which first had broken her.

And that is why this is her story.

It was late at night when I first heard from her, at the Foundation for Global Civility, which I no longer work for, and as the neon sign for Radio City Music Hall blared its red name through my window—one letter at a time, I might add, as if Sixth Avenue were a pep rally: “Gimme an R! Gimme an A!”—I took my time shredding documents concerning a grant to search the Yucatan for an ancient Mayan UFO. On the top my boss had written in green ink: *not risky enough*. “Make it confetti,” she had told me, which meant to shred it, but I liked that word “confetti”—the idea that even a loss at the Foundation for Global Civility was cause for celebration.

I fed it to the shredder, and out it came, fine as hair. I opened up the window and threw handfuls to the street. "We won the war!" I shouted, and the Radio City crowds stared at me. The sign—"Gimme an H! Gimme an A!"—lit all our faces like a volcano. I leaned back inside and tried to forget I'd done such a thing. My computer had this message:

**From: INTERNET:turnbull@echomme.com
To: INTERNET:julius/fgc@pcenet.com
Re: Owen's visit
Maine mail route through Bangor via INTERNET border
Bangor mail route through Boston
Boston mail route through New York via PEACENET border
New York node 4990JD**

Julius-

I think my head is shrinking. I am serious. I am sure it's not because I'm becoming the world's foremost expert on Lusitania - remember those fairy tales my great-grandmother wrote? Nor because Owen C. Nonacs has gotten me involved in another scheme. No, nor the fact that I have a two thousand year old Portuguese ghost sending me computer mail.

Ever feel you're missing something?

So now I am the world's Lusitania expert, with a seven-inch diameter head. I am worried it will disappear altogether. Perhaps that would be for the best.

Love,

Monica

P.S. Give Tony my love, stud.

Of course none of this made any sense to me, because I'd arrived—as we always do—in the middle of it all, not knowing the facts, the conversations, the motives or the stakes. With Monica it was always thus. I wouldn't hear from her for months, and then she'd burst in, like a gurney through an emergency room, shouting and laughing about

something I'd have to piece together. Say she'd arrived in New York because she'd met the producer of a sitcom, or called me trying to get me to join some appliance club with her to double her savings. Once she showed up at my door with a video camera and some strangers off the street, claiming she was going to make me famous as a porn star. All you have to do is meet me to know the project failed.

The only thing I could react to was the P.S. about "Tony." That was a code name Monica and I had. At the time I was stuck deep in love with "Tony," so deep that in baseball games sometimes I had to sit out the pain in my chest. I remember lying on the bench, eyes closed, sunburning, one hand on my heart and one on my mouth because I was afraid this love would escape, like a rejected organ, and then I would die. I believed that. I'd been this way since I was eleven, and the superstitions we make up can stick more than anything else. Monica, for instance, could not bear to step on sidewalk cracks. At first this feeling would unfold daily like a strange fern inside me, but by the time I was working at the Foundation it sat like a ceramic ball in my ribcage.

But because the rest was gibberish, I didn't know what I was in for. I didn't have the facts. I was never there to see the incipient moment of Monica's projects, the instant when her panicked mind latched onto something laughable to save her. Not even earlier that day when she had called pretending to be a Slovakian woman did I have an inkling. The phone call, and then the e-mail, and then, a week later, the package.

But what if I had guessed what was to come? What if I could know Monica would get my boss to fire me while I stood fearful in a pair of polar bear pajamas, convince me to kiss someone I didn't love beneath a rotten windmill in Portugal, bring me to stand in a raincoat on the deck of a sailing ship waiting to see if Monica was dead?

I'm sure there was nothing I could change about my actions. It is the story I was meant to tell.

I've heard her account of all this. And others' accounts, in caves, in rainy phonebooths. I've tried to remember them correctly, but nothing in the versions seems to fit—sometimes the sea monster of St. Beatrix is named Bert, sometimes Koro-siki, sometimes Ib—so I know someone is lying. Probably Monica. No, I am more generous than that. I assume she and others truly believe their versions firmly, as I do mine, although they're based on imaginings. I wasn't there, I don't know what people were thinking, what they said, how they looked—but aren't we always like this? And I believe, after all, this might be how you spin a tale.

So as an old woman wrote, "spread wide your ears":



Monica tells me she was coming back from the hardware store on Mt. Desert Island, Maine, when she discovered Owen sitting in front of her father's house, perched on a bamboo suitcase and drawing figures in chalk on the sidewalk. Say she had in her hand a bag of clamps—the construction of a chaise longue, for some reason, her latest project. She was building it as a kind of pagan summoning device, because everybody knows if you lie on a chaise longue, sooner or later someone will attack you on it. Perhaps it thus had summoned Owen.

She stood and looked at the young man and the things he drew—a serpentine maze, a winged boat, a toad-headed king—the blue blaze of sky all behind Owen on her father's front step.

“Um,” she said to the young man. “Hello, loser.”

He opened his arms wide, musical-comedy style: “Here I am!”

This seemed to be some kind of joke of theirs. But I don’t get it. I am not famous for a sense of humor, and rarely understood the way they talked to each other.

“Welcome to Bar Harbor, Maine.”

“Here I am!” His arms remained outstretched.

Owen was wearing the Glasses. He had spent a year searching Providence pawn shops for a pair of frames which would blare out his personality at once, but since his moods that year were so changeable, so was his taste in glasses. Finally he found them inside a display case—perhaps too highly priced considering the bad hinges—and he bought them immediately: deep brown ovals strung on greenish wire. Everyone agreed they blared out something, but it wasn’t Owen. The Glasses said this: *bookish, odd, centered, private, brilliant, fussy*. And the whole rest of Owen, his lanky height, blond frothy curls, rusty day-old beard, confident slovenly flannels and boots, said this: *excited, careless, boyish, daydreaming, wanderer*. But none of us mentioned the Glasses. All his friends at school, including Monica, found his anger at the subject not worth any teasing. It became clear that Owen wanted so much to be the Man of the Glasses he would block out the parts of him which didn’t fit—and when pushed too far, he would transform entirely.

Monica looked away from him, up to the sky where a birthday party of children was paragliding distantly towards them—red silk insects floating down. She asked, “So what brings you to Maine? War-crimes subpoena?”

Owen made his talking gesture: flicking his forefinger against his thumb. “I came to do you a favor, but it seems like.....”

Monica's face snapped firmly down: "Favor! Your favors have given me more sleepless nights than a bed of nails."

He shrugged and said, "What does that mean? Bed of nails, really. I'm harmless."

"Yeah, like playing peek-a-boo with Medusa."

"I only came up here to do research for my thesis."

She groaned and stared up at the paragliding children. "Oh lord," she said. "If not harmless, you're at least predictable."

I should tell you about this thesis: he wore it like an orchid. It perfumed knowledge from his side. It wafted the aroma of his favorite obsession: dictators. The whole year before, in his few postcards to me, all he could mention was his Czech dictator, an insanely short cartographer whose main appeal to me was his unpronounceable name: Zdenek Zdepanek. At parties, Owen would sit, smile, adjust the Glasses and mention "Zeh-pah-neck" as if he were dropping the name of a movie star. And yet we would hush. We would listen. Because we knew Owen used such bland, obscure facts to build his famously complex and doomed Projects.

At least, I knew that. Or I know that now. Monica surely heard about his thwarted trips to other countries, his brief stint at the John Hay Library as a forgery intern—a job which ended when he admitted taking the job to learn *how* to forge—all the impossibilities taken on with the zeal of a third-grader trying to beat a World Record in jump-rope. That was why she banned him from Maine. Yet something about him that day, his greasy, curling hair, the rip in his black T-shirt, must have distracted her. Perhaps she really thought this conversation was farcical and harmless.

So I should tell you: this conversation wasn't about what they said. Not the odd teasing manner, the theatrical manner of gestures. Look at them closer—they were two merchants in a bazaar, haggling over prices, bartering for goods in an old code no outsider could comprehend. They seemed to care deeply about things of no import, swear oaths by them, but really they were negotiating for what they really longed for.

Owen insisted again, "And here I am!"

"Like a bat out of Hell."

Owen adjusted the Glasses carefully. He said, "You see, I'm in kind of a bind. I've got a couple thousand in student loans about to default...no, no, I'm not here to ask you for money. Those days are over. I'm earning it, I'm working for it."

"This seems astronomically unlikely." She pulled a cigarette from her purse.

"You see, there's this ten thousand dollar prize..."

"Oh ho! I see! Oh, those days aren't over at all!" she said, grinning madly and mind beginning to whir. "Tell me, what're you planning now? Diamond heist? Some interstellar scavenger hunt?"

"...a prize for a graduate thesis."

Monica stood, one arm supporting an elbow supporting the unlit cigarette. She held it cautiously, as if it were a piece of chalk and she did not have anything to write. "Oh," she said.

"Now don't you feel mean?"

Now she moved. She turned from him and lit her smoke. "Never. This is really about your thesis?"

"Really." He looked at her sadly, calmly for a moment as if maybe he might be honest. But he didn't share what he was thinking, just his scheme: "It's money from an

old Portuguese family in town. And I'm sure to win. All I have to do is change my topic a little. You see, it's ten thousand dollars for the best graduate thesis about Portugal."

"Wait. Isn't your thesis about dictators?"

"Aha!" Owen said, raising a forefinger in the air. He was excited again. "That's where I'm brilliant. A genius. In my research, I happened upon a fellow who was not only a dictator, and Portuguese, but someone who might sound awfully familiar. The name 'Viriato' ring a bell?"

"Oh, I meet so many Portuguese dictators...."

"Hero of a series of children's books? Led a country called Lusitania?"

She faced him and removed the cigarette, her eyes wide and angry. "You're kidding," she said.

So notice now—this is what I meant by negotiation. Because just then Owen had touched on something Monica cared about deeply. "Viriato" was the fictional hero of a series of children's books written by Monica's great-grandmother. In the twenties, the tales had been faux-leather bound in red and embossed with fairies and mountains. They waited in her basement next to *Oz* books, Horatio Alger stories, and *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. No one read them anymore. They were stories about a place called Lusitania.

Without knowing it, he'd made her stomach clench and unclench. She was searching, remember, for the thing that broke her, and perhaps this Lusitania was part of it. So keeping in mind the image of a bazaar, see how she rationalized her own desire through this theater with him:

"That's it?" she asked, cigarette ash flying as she jerked her hands out. "That's your brilliant idea—write a thesis about the hero of my great-grandmother's books? Who cares! He's fucking fictional!"

"A-ha!"

"What does that mean, 'A-ha'?"

"A-ha!"

"Stop with the A-has. You sound like a sinus commercial."

Owen smiled and stood up. He began to unknot the rope ties of the suitcase. "Viriato's not fictional, Monica. He's real. Look what I brought for you." He pulled out a newspaper, folded so sections blew to the ground. "Look right here."

She leaned over and saw the headline:

Ancient Hero's Burial Ground Discovered in Portuguese Dunes

Owen's blond lashes blinked excitedly as he pointed out different words in the article. He held the paper for her: "Bones found in a primitive grave outside of Lisbon have been identified as those of Viriato, legendary defender of the Lusitanian people who disappeared after losing their country to the Romans circa 100 BCE." Owen looked up at her, triumphant.

Monica had her lighter out, and was blasting the flame on and off into the air. "That's pretty wild," was all she said. Owen worked his arms quickly to enthuse her:

"I know! That's why I came up here—plus I got booted from my apartment—but I also wanted to see if you had any of your great-grandmother's books around."

"Sure, I think so. In the basement."

“Great. Do me a favor.”

“What?”

He paused and took her cigarette from her. A wind came in, thick with salt, and yellow finches rode it towards them. Owen took a drag, then said:

“Read them for me. I’m going to be cooped up at the library and phoning about these bones they discovered, and half the thesis is about his legend. So if you read the children’s stories, I can compare his modern legend with real history, and you’ll save my skin from government loan officers.” He handed the butt back to her, scratched a hand through his hair to flatten the wild curls.

Monica only blinked. She wanted this. I know because she merely blinked; she didn’t argue any more. I know her, and I know at that moment the smiling, sunburnt boy with the bamboo suitcase seemed like he could save her. She asked, “What’s the catch?”

“No catch.”

Arms crossed, she rubbed her pinkies on her skin. She said, “I want a third.”

“A third! Monica, these student loan officers....”

“Does this look like Morocco? Do I look ready to haggle?”

Now he began to flick his fingers madly. Finally he said, “All right. A third.”

She smiled and opened the door for him. “Wonderful,” she said. “Just reading?”

“Just reading. What trouble can words get you into?”

I have verified the last comment and leave it for you—unmitigated in its stupidity.

Owen was to stay at her father's house, which I remember as warm and dark, smelling of rubber cement. The window panes were old and curved the sky like waves of heat. It was an old house, with a name attached to it and a date: Samuel Waters House, 1853-55. Monica insisted on separate quarters—he would stay at Samuel Waters and research Zdepanek at the Library, and she would stay at her mother's, a squat stone cottage named Pig's Eye, and read up on the fairy tales. She abandoned him there at the screen door.

"Here you are," she said as she walked away.

"Here I am!" he insisted again, arms wide, the Glasses slipping down his nose.

Even if I'd been there, I probably wouldn't have worried about those two. I'd seen them float out on their grand ideas, and noticed with relief they always fixed themselves with waxen wings, a built-in safety to hinder real intrigue. Owen, for instance, had always lost his nerve. And Monica refused to be a leader if the project wasn't hers. So they were safe, vying for easy money, ready to bail at any time.

But even in that brief exchange something had happened, something which would not be easy to let go of. A quick deal—but each one hid from the other what they really wanted. The money was an excuse, because what each of them wanted was too sad to tell.

Owen watched her skip back across the street. Monica's black hair, which usually melted down her back, jumped crazily in the wind. The sun was so bright now it made everything metal into a fountain of reflected glare. He leaned against the pillar and frowned, watching his accomplice's silver earrings pour forth with light.

That was when I got the first phone call. I was always her way of distracting herself from something, but of course when she called I never knew the circumstances. I could never guess at what she wasn't telling me. I was always thrust into a wailing conversation whose speed and wit kept me so confused I never got to ask what upset her so.

She walked away from Owen into Pig's Eye, a house crowded with books and chemical equipment. Her parents were divorced, and while Monica often told me of their manipulations against each other, the fact that they lived across the street meant mostly there was no regret or pain. Doctors Ruth and Oliver Turnbull were still friends, but Monica could not admit it. It was so embarrassing to be in therapy without the story of an abused psyche. It was so telling.

She sat in the living room of Pig's Eye, sometimes a makeshift laboratory for her mother, but now a makeshift workshop for the chaise longue. Sawdust covered everything. Long, sanded boards lay against the late-seventies plaid couch and Monica sneered at the side-rail tenons that her book, *How To Build Your Own Furniture*, told her she had to make. The tricky thing about the side-rail tenons, she told me, was that the foot end had a slanted part, or a haunched tenon, that resisted sideways bending while being entirely concealed, like some kind of clandestine, supporting emotion.

I knew about those emotions. Remember my obsession with "Tony," the way it ruled even my thoughts at work. So I knew about haunched tenons.

Owen had just left for the college library. Monica wanted to work on the chaise, but his project held some bright toy in its distant palm—more than money. She sat on the scratchy blue carpet, the air around her particulate with wood dust which sunlight hazed into a golden, bland illusion. It smelled dry as fire. She could feel the dust

settling in minute snowdrifts onto to her skin, the curves of her outer ear, between her lashes like the fabric of a parasol, and it was comforting to feel thus coated. Monica sat and thought of her great-grandmother's books fading in the basement. She made her brain into a diving bell and slipped through the haunched tenons, through the living room, down the cellar steps and past layers of her childhood in brittle crayon misspellings. It was a bathespheric dive. Her pressurized brain landed on the books. The books about Lusitania.

There was something frightening about Lusitania to Monica. It was not a child's world. How could that be true, when they were books for children? How could they possibly be important legends?

She was forgetting something crucial. She was forgetting that only Owen said they were important. That's when she called me.

"Foundation for Global Civility," I answered, because of course I thought it was a normal call from a normal person.

"Hello," I heard in believable Slovakian accents. "Please to speak to president. Please, now, please."

"Um, I am the president's assistant, how may I help you?"

"Please. I have proyekt to fund. Proyekt is bring many women to America. Bring many women. Is study seeing how capitalism intersect with sexuality, yes? We bring many women, we sell women on street in New York, yes? We videotape the...how do you say? Intercoms? Many womens have intercoms with men. Study. Important study."

I sat there with the phone. People rushed about me with papers and my boss, dressed in a plaid suit, gestured glamorously to her funders. I felt stress rising from my feet to the ends of my fingers, as if I were being dipped in cold tension.

"Monica!" I whispered. "You can't just call up and do these things! What if I'd let you through to my boss? What if my boss had been here and *answered*?"

"Then maybe I would have gotten some money for this project. The intersection of capitalism and sexuality is not a spurious study, you know."

"What do you want, Monica?"

"You're a big baby, Julius."

"Boo-hoo, now what is it?"

"Do you love me, Julius?"

"No. I really don't. I'm really annoyed by you. Listen, it's kind of busy around here...."

"I think I'm going crazy, Julius, I think I'm having a real mental breakdown." This did not seem unlikely, so I turned towards the wall which meant to my colleagues: *private*.

"Are you really?" I asked.

"Yes! Julius, you have to help me!" Monica said.

"What is it!"

"It's...well, it's nothing so specific and targeted...more like a complete loss of subjectivity. I have no place in the cultural coding."

"I don't have time for this, Monica, this is bull...."

"You don't understand! It's like...you know how when babies first see a mirror and it's the point where they begin to formulate their own self? The mirror stage? Well, and I remember this fairly distinctly, I think my mirror stage was in a fun house."

"Goodbye, Monica." I looked around the Foundation office at my co-workers, but they were all trying to put together a folder which had exploded. I was afraid of looking suspicious on the phone. I had just been embezzling a little petty cash from the drawer and wanted to appear normal and happy and wise.

But I also didn't want to antagonize Monica. Here was something famous about her: she had a Pivot. Her language kept her guard up for a while, and she could smile or pound through most things, but when tension accumulated in her, she reached the Pivot. It was the moment when Monica shifted from honest and amused into slick, smiling, and vicious. Even her body straightened at the Pivot—chin lifted, eyes gleamed and she breathed a quiet, condescending laugh. Even over the phone, I could always tell when I had pushed her too far, forced her to Pivot, because she always said this phrase: "Oh really?" It meant you broke something (somehow?) that she cared about. And when you bored her she always said, "That's so interesting." I was trying to disengage myself without hearing any of those words. So I let her continue:

"How's your love life, Julius?"

"I've stepped out of a meeting, Monica. E-mail instead."

"How's 'Tooony'?"

The code name again. We used a code name because that man was her father, Dr. Oliver Turnbull, and the thought of him discovering this passion ashamed me. When she said "Tony" over the phone to me, I winced from the pain. But I couldn't help it. It was a reaction bred in repetition.

I'd known Monica and her father most of my life. I grew up in Providence, where Monica I went to school and her parents both taught. My parents taught, too, but they aren't important here. This story isn't about me. My mother and father were simply this: fine-haired Germans who had always lived on coastlines, intellectuals who never took a side on anything. They never voted, for instance, because if one of them would finally make a firm decision, the other always threatened to vote for the other candidate, canceling out their spouse's choice. Just for the intellectual pleasure. Just to play the game.

Monica's parents began to teach when I was eleven. We both lived in houses with names and dates nailed to them—that's how it is in New England. We argued over whose was older. She claimed her house had been a brothel for soldiers. I claimed mine to be part of the Underground Railroad. This was always our competition: not over progress, but over things like ghosts.

Monica was an adventuress then. I remember her with short inky hair, pink grin, wide spinning eyes taking in the possibilities of summer. She had out-of-proportion legs like an insect's which she used to pull herself into apple blossom trees or to leap from river stones. She had an imagination which could telescope from an anthill to whole kingdoms traced from her great-grandmother's stories. Her enthusiasm sometimes confused me, and I was left awkwardly behind at adventures she'd already abandoned. If I'd had normal parents, I might have been kept away from her. But I wasn't. I was set free to meet her in the street, where she'd pose in—I remember now—a green tanktop with a sunflower in the middle. "Push it!" she'd shout, meaning the flower, and I'd hesitatingly press her warm stomach as if it were a button. I never knew what pushing it would do. Sometimes she began to buzz around like a biplane. Sometimes it made her

fall into a robotic heap. Monica scared me—yes, she did. But we all had a friend like that, and we never know until we grow up why they were precious.

And one could easily ask, was that the same girl? The same, brittle, self-suspicious girl who yearned alone in rooms and let the dust fall on her lashes?

Her father, Dr. Oliver Turnbull, was very studious. He stayed at home and peered at parchment through a diamond-cutter's ocular. While I waited for Monica to come back from her adventures—or what I always needed to imagine as adventures—I used to sit in his study and watch him with that piece of glass stuck in his eye. He let me look, sometimes. He would sit me beside him and hold the ocular for me to squint into—and there sometimes an illuminated dragon or a melusine would writhe in gold-leaf below me. Mostly, however, I would only see lines of Hebrew, which bored me, but I sat there as if an ancient language were truly a great toy to give me. I shifted next to him while Oliver talked about things I could never have understood. I bet he voted for whomever he wanted.

"I love you, Monica," I told her over the phone that day.

"You hate me, Julius, but I've made you everything you are."

"Mmmm."

"Listen, what is the Foundation for Global Civility, anyway? Can it get me some funding? Julius?"

I would have responded, but I was thinking of my heart again, pointlessly hating myself for something beyond my control. I should have seen it as a bodily function, the onslaught of love, but I did not. I saw it as a weakness, like asthma. I silently hung up.

Great pots of coffee were moving by me in preparation for the meeting with BBF, and I pulled myself together, straightened the collar of my shirt.

I think now there must have been, even in Monica's spinning conversation, something else. Perhaps I hung up too soon, worried on my own terms. But there might have been something she didn't tell me. What do I think it was? The hint that even she knew those books weren't just words. I'm thinking of those afternoons with Dr. Oliver Turnbull, reading faded Hebrew through an ocular—the words were the purported focus. But so often—and it was Monica who taught me this—words are just the holes left when all the space around has crowded in.

Monica says she did go down to the basement of Pig's Eye. Say the room was dark, with concrete walls set with tiny windows and hundreds of patient objects leaning against them or encased in boxes. The books lay in a pile near where the night before she'd discovered *How To Build Your Own Furniture*. She pulled them out, one by one, and laid them on the filthy blue carpet. They were rubbed so hard by three generations of book-worshipping children that most of the red faux-leather relief had faded into the vague movement of castles in a sea-change. What had once been whole scenes of Romans, princesses, sea-monsters and magicians bubbling forth from the covers felt like lumps and nothing more. Foothills where once stood mountains. The declining breast of the dune. Eroded by love or neuroses or both.

There were five of them, indistinguishable. Some had bindings flapping daintily from the stitched spamework, some had long strings gutting out like cornsilk or some internal organ. And there was a definite smell, somehow a scent of glues and paint not made since early in the century, so when Monica brought one close to her face it seemed like the cargo of a time capsule, an archeological find.

The first book she opened read:

THE BASILISK

*being the adventures of Viriato when
he was a young boy and the earth
was cold*

I should say that now the Lusitania books are all destroyed, all but one. So when I quote Betty Ann Childress, I am quoting from memory. I've read them all, though, and there seems to me, at least in the way I remember them, something from her stories worth adding here. The images come to mind as other versions of *this* story, for instance, and her language has influenced my own. Of course, when I half-create the lost Lusitania books as quotations like this one, I am delighted to find my own style has influenced hers.

On the next page Monica saw an illustration. It appeared in every Lusitania novel, scientific and intricate, looking impossibly old and full of its own legends, its own language. The thing illustrated on the next page was this: a map of Lusitania.

The story was the second in the series, but began as they all began:

Spread wide your ears....

Monica closed the book and looked at another. It was all becoming familiar. She had read each of these books, over and over again for years. Was there some kind of building, with a secret? A maze, a man made of cheese, a series of riddles? And houses built of bones, and fish and whales swimming in the air around a city? The city: that much she remembered. She remembered what happened to the city of Lusitania in the last book. Every book foretold it with growing sorrow and an almost admonishable sense of the inevitable.

It sank beneath the ocean.

What was becoming more and more important to Monica, however, as she flipped through book after rotting book, was a certain paragraph that lay on the tip of her brain and would remain there, torturous and vague. It went something like "*No dragon came...*" and she would know it if she saw it. She sat down in the basement and began to skim the books for that phrase, but nothing jumped out at her, just the clean engravings of gaunt women peeking into the horror of a cave, fairies locked in wooden boxes, or an old woman's house coming alive around her, the table, the broom, the cups, all laughing uncontrollably.

And as she read them, she thought of Owen in the library down the street, his Glasses probably laid aside so he could read about his Czech dictator, and without the Glasses he would look red-faced and worried. Sometimes his eyes would wander around the room. Maybe he was asking himself what he was doing there. Could be a girl in Providence was on his mind, someone Monica knew nothing about, or maybe even a girl across the stacks searching *National Geographic* with a pencil in her mouth. Maybe, Monica imagined, he was looking at the girl without the Glasses and considering, non-committally, what things about her he might grow to love, or what quirks—the long pink nails, the constant flaring of her nostrils—would become tiresome too early. When Monica used to call Owen in Providence, she always woke him at noon and she would think *who did he stay up late with?* She pictured his room all white with sheets and pillows and noon sunlight and a girl's leg kicking him while he talked to his friend Monica on the phone. So as she read the Lusitania books in that dim, gray light, Monica pictured the library and Owen in it, working on the history while she worked on the

legend, and still she knew his mind was not on her but on other people who in his thoughts gave purer pleasure.

So it was, I think, motives beyond money that drove Monica to read the books, to begin a transformation into the world's foremost authority on the land and sunken city of Lusitania. Flipping quickly through the brown-edged pages, she focused on a phrase because she knew that phrase contained the locus; she imagined if she could just find it she could stop herself from breaking all to pieces.



When I first heard of Lusitania, it sounded like Atlantis. I was suspicious, but by researching the contradicting accounts, I learned a great deal. Atlantis had three things going for it: an enemy, a philosophy, and a history. Its enemy was Greece, so Plato said, and Greece conquered that evil ocean empire and sank it. Its philosophy was mind-control. Its history came after it, because every culture of the West has claimed to be Atlantians: Sweden, England, Ireland, Portugal, and Nazi Germany. Lusitania, however, was its own enemy: it sank itself, so Betty Ann Childress tells us. It had no philosophy we know of. And its history dissolved the day it sank.

We now know Plato made up the city of Atlantis, made up the Egyptian historians who told it to him, and the great sea of mud past Gibraltar which was its supposed legacy. He made it up to prove a point, and it just shows how imagination can neatly write over history.

There was also a more famous Lusitania than the ancient pre-Roman city. In 1915, a German U-boat sank the ocean liner *Lusitania* while the latter approached the

coast of Ireland. It took a single torpedo. Over the course of eighteen minutes, 1195 people were lost in the panic and explosions of the sinking ship. A Vanderbilt was among them. Eighteen minutes.

Some would grant the Germans leniency in this matter; they had warned the passengers through newspaper ads in New York that the ship would be sunk. A seaman aboard the U-20 even pulled a gun on his officer, accusing him of inhumanity. Kapitänleutnant Schweiger, watching through the periscope as passengers beat each other with oars for lifeboat space, could not bear to fire the customary second torpedo. He turned away and ordered the U-20 to dive to thirty feet and return to Germany.

The reason the Germans fired on the *Lusitania* was they suspected the liner of carrying munitions to help the sieged British Isles. They were correct. In fact, the illicit piles of ammunition in one of the stows accounted for the second explosion of the ship, causing it to list starboard and dip its nose into the Atlantic Ocean—named for false Atlantis. Passengers trapped in the elevators never survived. The Vanderbilt would not enter the lifeboats. He gave his vest to a female passenger and was never seen again.

Perhaps there is a destiny in language. Perhaps the *Lusitania* provided clues to the disappearance of its namesake city. When the last of the four stacks of the liner filled with water, the entire vessel plummeted 310 feet to the ocean floor, causing a deep green, foaming vortex which sucked people in, even those with lifejackets, pulled them down hundreds of feet, then spat them out again, gasping and covered in a black layer of soot.

The day was clear and bright when each *Lusitania* sank. As they were sucked under, all the drowned saw the sun glow green under their feet.



Monica says she talked to Owen at the Bar Harbor-Que, and that she met a strange woman. I think of it this way: pale bulbs of opium surrounding Monica in the Minkin garden as she watched Owen make his way across the lawn. In the twilight he looked overheated and confused, but the red of his cheeks could have been anything: excitement, joy, elation. She did not know how to read him.

They'd met as we all had then in college: vaguely but enthusiastically, making friends almost as a child does with anyone in the front yard. He had stringy cult of girls around him whenever he played guitar in coffee houses, but none of us took it very seriously. Monica was always the fiery speaker in classes, and walking down hallways professors would call to her with gossip or books to borrow. So they each had their circles of admirers. And as such people always do, they combated each other at parties with bad mixed drinks spilling in their hands, but relaxation in their clear eyes revealed a laughing kinship I never really understood. There were rules to this friendship, somehow. Privacy was guarded. Visiting Monica in Bar Harbor was allowed, for instance, but they did not yet know how to read one another's faces.

So that night, like a smoke ring, Owen's face changed shape and mood until its form dissipated all meaning into something private. Monica instead imagined how she looked to him: lying on a ramp of grass, head thrown back, brown corduroy dress, red snapdragons in a hill behind her, the dark Victorian cutout of the distant trees, and these green unripe poppies in a semi-circle around her head. She began to think of her

head as an ancient Assyrian fortress in the desert, and these flowers the decapitated heads of her enemies.

Clouds blocked the horizon so the last twilight filtered above and made the vapor outlines glow bright blue. Some of the men asked Monica's mother, Ruth, about this effect. She looked up and said she didn't know a thing about it.

Ruth and her young new husband, Ford, sat on the other side of the Minkin garden, eating corn. As the resident academics on the island, they were consulted on the choosing of computers, on plastic stocks, weather changes, tidal effects, in short anything even vaguely scientific. They were never consulted on matters of taste. They were never consulted on matters of the heart.

Her father, Oliver, the man I'd loved since I was eleven, was not at the Bar Harbor-Que, I'm told. He sent Owen over, and himself stayed home rereading Josephus. Again: he was a studious man.

As Owen came over, Monica herself looked up at this eerie, glowing Heaven. I imagine this because I know the idea of a Heaven intrigued Monica. Her mother's theory was that it would look, in her words, "Exactly like a Black Hole." Monica didn't find this interesting. She said she didn't think that vision was cruel enough.

If Monica ruled Heaven, there would be two laws:

1. water is less dense than on earth.
2. you can't look like yourself; you have to look like someone you once slept with on earth.

The first law would let Monica fly. It would also make the oceans float above the ground and cause the rain to dance in the space between like fireflies.

The second law would wreck havoc on lives, Monica felt. She was intensely curious as to whom people would choose to look like. Do you pick the most beautiful person? The kindest? The most dearly missed? Would you spend eternity hoping to see yourself? Some people would look like each other. Some people would look like movie stars.

Monica thought this kind of Heaven sounded great. Only problem was, if she died she would probably take the body of Magnus Magnussen, the handsome Swede who taught at the YMCA two years before. Magnus, however, had three testicles, and another law in Monica's Heaven would be that everyone walks around naked and everyone has twenty-twenty vision. How embarrassing.

Monica wanted a new look, however, nothing like the men she'd known. No, she told me often, the body you choose in Heaven should be the flesh of revenge.

So Owen sat down and asked Monica about the books, of course. In Monica's Heaven, I bet Owen would look like a beautiful woman he'd captured for one night, a woman he thought beyond his reach. Keep this in mind when picturing Owen: tall, unshaven scholar casting the shadow of a desperate, knockout blonde. His angelic form. You could not picture me with such a shadow, however. Why? Because I was, of all things to be at the age of twenty-five, a confirmed virgin. In Monica's Heaven, virgins were the only ones who truly died.

Some people walked by Owen and Monica in the flame-lit twilight, and one woman leaned against a nearby tree, alone in the deep blue leaves.

"Oh," Monica said. "Oh, I found them." She was referring to the books. She always underplayed the things she cared about.

"You found them and you didn't read any? Not even curious?"

“Okay, so I skimmed them. I’m like the world’s expert now on Lusitania, if you ever want to raise it. I’m ready for the project. You ever hear of the phrase ‘No dragon came’?”

“What?”

She fell back on the grass and looked up at the clouds. “I thought it was famous or something. It seems so familiar, like it should be in the books, but I haven’t found it yet.”

“Maybe you’ll find it later. We’re set, Monica. Ten thousand dollars richer.” He leaned forward close to her. He touched the pendant cross dangling on her breast, set with an opal. He lifted it from her skin and examined it.

“This is pretty. Where is it from?” he asked.

“Africa, I think.”

He looked up at her and sat there—looking—for just a moment. “You have the loveliest things,” he told her. Then he turned away to the party.

Monica touched the cross, centering it, then found her pack of cigarettes and lit one. The orange of the flame against the dark blue pines was bright and sudden.

Owen then got up to check out the buffet. He asked Monica if he could bring her anything, but she shook her head quickly. He stepped away into the darkening party. It was all black now with flames from iron candleholders and the barbeque pits blooming across the lawn.

Monica searched with her hand and found a hidden wine glass half-full of burgundy. She took a sip and moved her dirty plate so she could lie sideways. She picked a poppy. With the knife she began to slice down the opium pods to reveal brown drops of morphine. She was hoping this practice might get the Minkins arrested.

She also entertained notions of opening an opium den once she returned to Brown, converting one of the back rooms of her apartment with carved wooden bunks, green glass pipes, and bronze Kali jars of flaming wheels.

"What a clever girl you are."

Monica shifted around to see a woman squatting even with her. Her face was strangely oval like a croaking tree frog and graying hair fell around it in strings. Wide brown glasses enhanced her eyes.

"It's curious," the woman continued, "that the Minkins would grow this particular species of the genus *Papaver*, when others are so much more common. *Papaver somniferum*. I wonder if they even know. Perhaps their gardener was a Chinese."

"He's an Irish drunk, if we're working on stereotypes."

The woman smiled. "Oh, well he must have been to China." She pointed a beaded arm to the *Papaver somniferum*, oozing morphine, and said, "You wait a few days for that to dry and just scrape it off. Do it at night when they aren't looking."

"Really."

"Of course, you have to inspissate it first. Boil it, make it into a powder so you can smoke it."

"That's very interesting." Monica blinked like a lizard and stared at this woman in the long green cotton muumuu.

"You know," the woman said, "if you scrape the inside of bananas? You know if you boil that down you get a black substance called bananadine? That's a narcotic as well."

"Yeah, that's in *The Anarchist's Cookbook*."

The frog smiled again. "Good girl. They don't mind, you know." She looked off strangely into the patch of poppies, only a few open pink and orange in the night wind.

"Who? The Minkins?"

"The plants. They don't mind if you cut them or scrape them for narcotics."

"Ah."

"That's what they give to us. We have to make sure, though, to give back so as not to upset their spirits."

"Oh."

Small bells on the woman's arms made a glittering noise as she crossed her hands below her throat. "Don't forget that."

"Ah."

"What's your name, young woman?" She was standing and Monica, narcotized with disbelief, stood as well.

"Monica."

"I'm not surprised. I'm Anika." She put out the arm with bells. "Anika Lott."

The Lotts were a famously annoying family in Bar Harbor, but equally famously lucky. The Minkins had invited them as one hangs a horseshoe above a door. Anika was the first Lott Monica had ever met. She felt at once that everything said about them was entirely true. They were a lucky crew, almost as if through some dark magic. Only, there was something more intriguing than just oddity. Something lurking there.

"Nice to meet you, Anika," Monica said.

Anika's face was webbed with red and she flushed at shaking hands with the young woman. The enormous pupils in the glasses dilated for a moment and the effect was astounding. Then they closed tight in a searching way more intelligent than at first

could be perceived. Monica wondered if this woman had been watching her all night, and what could possibly have been interesting about that.

"I'm going to go visit my parents now, Anika, okay?"

"That's fine. I'll see you later."

"Ah."

Monica skipped away to where Ruth and Ford spread oily tapenade on water crackers and something in her whirled in flush excitement. It was unfamiliar. It was so strange to her to feel excitement, and she wanted to push it down again, return to the place she had been just days ago. Monica looked back at this strange Frog Lady who dipped her silvery arms into the weeds, and thought *this kind of person only exists in fairy tales*. And also, *in fairy tales, this kind of person would be a witch*.



I have been to her father's study, where Monica must have composed my baffling e-mail. Perhaps the dust hung in the bronze lamplight and gave a haze to the entire desk. I remember a giant sienna map of Jerusalem covering one wall, and it had different colored lines marked out to show its changing form through the ages. Pins with red flags were stuck in to the south. A framed replica of a Dead Sea fragment hung beside it. Bookshelves of mahogany and false stone gargoyle bookends held tomes of dull colors and dull Latin names: Josephus, Herodutus, "Second Temple Essenic Sects", "Kiriath-Gearim", and a large blue English-Hebrew dictionary which Oliver told me he used for correspondence, not for speaking. He had few novels on his bookshelf. I once asked him why.

Oliver told me he had very particular taste. He didn't like novels of adventure or suspense, or magical ones of vines budding with hearts or dagger suns, or crowds of characters to keep track of on their journeys, stories of multiple hopes all colliding. He didn't understand those kinds of worlds. He liked stories with one main character, told from that point of view. He disliked dialogue and preferred passages of description or subtle, poignant longing. It seemed more real somehow to show the world from inside one person's head, because we never know anything about others, really. Their thoughts are beyond us, he said. Their lives take courses for reasons we guess at but never really understand, and never really want to. The novels his daughter gave him—the heavily populated ones which tried to shake joy from this cramming of humans—seemed fanciful and false. No, a novel should be clean and lit from one corner of the frame. Talk should be scarce, sincerity even scarcer. There should be no mermaids, or angels. There should be just the one person, worn down or indomitable, but realistically always alone.

At the time it seemed convincing, incisive and sad. He was quite intellectually vehement, shaking his thin hands to emphasize his points, his watch jangling loosely at the movement.

Say Monica stared at the computer, a laptop propped by a red-covered book, and say she pressed a button. The machine came to life with a soft bell noise and the screen flipped a few times before recovering and glowed at her in green and white. The background of the screen was mermaid.

She heard her father come into the room.

"Where's Owen?" he asked.

"Asleep," she said, still looking at the screen and maneuvering with a track ball.

“Why is he at that library all day? Isn’t this his vacation? Why doesn’t he spend some time with you?”

Monica turned around. Oliver Turnbull was a long-faced man. He wore the kind of clothes you would expect an archeologist to wear: tennis shoes, blue plaid shirt, jeans and a braided leather belt. He carried space-pens in his shirt pocket. What I always watched most were his small eyes, always half-closed, capable of meaning anything at any time. He was the kind of man who kept his emotions so far from his face that one could project happiness or fear or boredom onto his eyes and make oneself believe it. So much of the time, watching him as I grew up, I made myself the source of these emotions. I was a detective, searching for deep feeling, searching so hard I could believe he felt it. Of course, perhaps all young men in love have that power.

“Dad you ever read mom’s grandmother’s books?” Monica asked.

He fiddled with a book on the shelf. He said, “Sure. All the time. But I really haven’t read most of them since we told them to you when you were just a little....”

“What do you think of them now?”

A look of surprise came over his face, but he did not shift position. “I don’t like them much. Too much of a...the plots were always about children searching for a magic answer. As if there were some treasure of secrets buried under something, a rock, any old leaf. It seemed to make children’s ordinary lives so empty.”

“You didn’t like them looking for a source?”

He shrugged and said, “It’s all right. It’s just so common.”

“But isn’t that what you do?”

Oliver stopped leaning against the doorway and righted himself. He licked his lips. “You mean reading ancient documents? No, honey, that’s not it.”

Monica put an arm over her chair and asked, "Then what do you do, Dad? Why would you study these things," and she motioned to the maps, the fragments, the books, "if you don't think there's a secret here?"

He put his hands out, palms up. "I'm not Jewish but I study ancient Jewish culture. I can be an unbeliever and study people who believe. Right? Yes?"

She picked up a brown pear from the table and sunk her teeth into it, thinking. Juice covered her lips and shone in the lamplight. "Dad," she said seriously, "we need to set you up with a girlfriend."

He laughed and folded his arms again. Oliver had found himself single five years before and had somehow stayed that way, despite the incredible number of women who professed attraction to him. A stable, likable, generous man, he nonetheless had each relationship die within weeks of beginning it. I used to think (again the detective) this meant he was gay, this meant he hadn't yet turned and recognized me there beside him with his ocular in my eye. But that's not what it meant at all.

I remember he once told her: "I'm a bachelor, Monica. Bachelors have short relationships. It's what they do."

"They bachel?" Monica asked. I was visiting, and we were all on a hike around a pond

"Exactly. Some people are just meant to be single."

We were crossing a long pine board over the endless green grass of a marsh. I held the bottled water and said nothing. "That may be true," Monica said, balancing, "but you are not one of those people. I am, and it's for the good of the world, but you're not."

"No, honey. I am." But I did not hear in his voice any note of sadness. He just looked at the wet clouds of grass beneath him. We ran into a female ranger on that hike who, to my horror, asked Dr. Oliver Turnbull to a bird-watching party. During my visit, the ranger and he got along well, visited Montreal on the weekend, but parted because, as Monica told me, "she wanted someone tighter."

"Tighter? Cheaper?"

She shrugged, bored. "Like more together. More a package."

"Oh. People want packages?"

Monica still spent a good day out of every week brainstorming women for her father to date, but in Bar Harbor, Maine, and even in the adjacent towns on Mount Desert Island, Oliver already knew all the women he was going to meet. It worried Monica that he should be so alone, for perhaps that kind of curse is passed down like color blindness and she too might spend her whole life like him.

So Oliver ignored the comment about the girlfriend. He pointed to the computer and raised his eyebrows which meant: *do that instead*. Then he left the room.

Monica turned to the computer and its watery screen. The screensaving program had already begun, and green leviathans floated into the Deep, swallowing submarines and manta rays. Monica pushed a key and the image disappeared. The electronic mail program was already loaded, so she clicked on the modem. She was surprised to see she had mail waiting and, assuming it was from me, chose the icon and unfolded her letter. But it wasn't from me at all:

From: INTERNET:viriato@drunet.com
To: INTERNET:turnbull@echomne.com
Re: -
Drunet mail route through Chicago via INTERNET border

Chicago mail route through New York
New York mail route through Boston
Boston mail route through Bangor
Bangor to Bar Harbor node 3340RG

Leave the dead alone.

FILE REPLY SEND DELETE

Monica's eyebrow rose at a steady rate as she reread the sender's name: INTERNET:viriato@drunet.com. I can vouch that I did not send it, and I think she knew that. It was from someone named "viriato". Her mind must have raced wildly to explain such a thing. E-mail from a long-dead warrior. She looked again at the address and saw it came from Chicago through something called Drunet. Sounded like a hair product. She wondered furiously who sent it. She was in no mood for mysteries, however, so Monica took the easy way out. She clicked on "REPLY" and sent back the following message:

SORRY, WRONG REALITY.

She hoped this would send "viriato" away, puzzled. I wonder if even for a moment it occurred to Monica that it might be her great-grandmother, Betty Ann Childress, using the latest technology to reach her. I bet the idea would have broken on her like a tiny piece of ice. Despite all her apathy, whenever I brought up her great-grandmother, Monica's face changed as if I were speaking of an old lover of hers, or a dead friend. I don't know why that was.

The next thing she did I know well, because it involved me. She sent me the e-mail message I received late that night and ignored. She mailed it to me at the Foundation, my Mayan UFO grant already transformed into confetti, the neon lights

proclaiming letters like a cheerleader, myself running fingers through my wild hair as I leaned over the computer and read my first clue as to what was about to happen:

....Nor because Owen C. Nonacs has gotten me involved in another scheme. No, nor the fact that I have a two thousand year old Portuguese ghost sending me computer mail.

Ever feel you're missing something?

So now I am the world's Lusitania expert, with a seven-inch diameter head. I am worried it will disappear altogether. Perhaps that would be for the best.

Love,

Monica

P.S. Give Tony my love, stud.

Of course I couldn't give Tony my love, and I was certainly no stud due to my passionate virginity. She knew that, and knew about my obsession with her father, and it made me angry to watch her fanning before me all the cards that hurt.

I saved her message and decided to respond later. How could I believe that ghosts were writing her? It was as implausibly presented as her fear of her head shrinking. I leaned back in my chair and pushed my black hair over my eyes. Back then, when I was youthfully unsolid, it was a common habit. On days when I felt particularly inconspicuous, I heightened the effect even more with bland glasses I didn't need, or in winter with an enormous fuzzy scarf. The thing was: I thought of my square head as unnatural, teetering on its thin neck. Like a famous boulder suspended on a precipice. Monica often told me I was beautiful and "Grecian," but she was full of lies. That night I had a lot of shredding left to do, and I was all alone there in the office, so I pulled my collar over my skinny neck and turned off all the lights except the Xerox machine copying relentlessly beside me. I closed my eyes and imagined it was a Mayan UFO.

In Bar Harbor, I picture Monica switching off her father's computer. Neither of us knew as we shut down the files that our correspondence was being illicitly read at that moment on another screen. Instead, I listened to my private aliens, and Monica listened to her father rocking in the other room, wearing lines into the wooden floor.

She picked up her satchel and opened the door, keeping quiet so as not to wake Owen delicately asleep upstairs. There was a yellow note stuck to the screen door: *Called my messages. Received a strange scholarship out of nowhere to study my Czech dictator. Means may not need Lusitania project. Sorry. Didn't want to interrupt you and your dad. I'll be at the library by the time you rise again. - Owen.* Monica ripped the note down and put it in her pocket. I don't know what she thought of it, of the project ending just as it was getting interesting, just as dead warriors were threatening her. She played with the note in her pocket, though, perhaps thinking of Owen who could come and go so quickly. In her bare feet, she went across the cool sidewalk where his chalk drawings had already faded into vague shapes which could have been anything.

As she walked into her mother's house, Monica heard the grandfather clock sound the hour and she realized how late it was. She flicked on a buzzing halogen light and continued work on her chaise nonetheless. All the pieces were cut and all they needed was glue and the clamps she had bought that morning at the hardware store. The image came to mind of something she had seen in that store: the gleam of brass sextants, compasses, astrolabes hanging in the sawdust fog, and one red pirate galleon spinning on its piece of twine.

Monica slid the side rails together with their respective legs, and glued the doveled and tenoned end rails onto them to create the rectangle and finally the shape of the chaise was beginning. Then the crossed stretchers fit in, also glued, and finally the

long, untalented dancer of the back rail leaning smooth-sanded and mortised into the side rails. It shimmied into the slots like a fat woman, oozing Elmer's Wood Glue. Then Monica attached the clamps and stood back.

Bones. A chair of slick, skeletal purpose. But not frightening, or cruel. It did what skeletons are famous for doing: it smiled.



The little fox frightens the Ogre & his wife ~

Chapter Two

In which we are treated to limericks—hot dogs are bought—travel is contemplated—our narrator shows his voyeurism—Monica sees a pattern of conspiracy—a UFO is sighted—

*There once was a woman from Droste
Who announced, when possessed by a ghost,
“While you’re welcome to stay
For a visit, you may
Find I’m really not much of a host.”²*

And Monica tells me the next day was when they came up with the package, and when I first got dragged into their Project. I picture Monica that afternoon in the kitchen of Pig’s Eye, watching a horsefly try to meet her through the windowpane. She could barely hear it buzzing and thumping against the glass. The table was a wooden antique with hinged flaps and a blue-and-gold checkerboard painted in its center. Salt and pepper shakers of wild varieties—glass insects, coiled snakes with human heads, gold-spangled ifriti—played out a game of salt against pepper. A ceramic wizard, with beard and raised indignant finger, seemed to be the last remnant of pepper’s former glory. Defeat seemed inevitable.

A basil plant grew in a white plastic box against the window. Monica snapped off leaves and chewed them. She had moved her father’s laptop from the Samuel Waters House and it sat on a ripped gingham napkin. A red box blinked on the screen, begging for attention, but Monica stared out the window at the horsefly instead. She stared and chewed.

² Childress, Betty Ann. *Silly Underwater Poetry*. Redbird Press: New York, 1930. p. 4.

She had this daydream:

Monica began to think of her head as a pirate ship. The eyes were portals to the captain's room where some blond and shiny cabin boy was getting screwed as the only sexual outlet for nautical miles around. Her little nose was a high-breasted barnacled maid frontispiece, plastered to the boat as if by the cartoonish speed of the vehicle, an innocent naked passerby forced into the comedy of the expedition. Her hair was moussed into masts and ropes and rolled sails. Suddenly men frothed along the fo'c'sle and swung up the ropes and alongside the cannons, crying out in random language and in pidgins they had learned all over the world from people they had killed. She turned her head and imagined the weight and inertia of the heavy clipper as it moved. As is the nature of a pirate ship, it wanted to keep on moving. She steered it towards the computer, towards the message from Viriato. A block of text small as an island. Monica did not know what the pirate ship had in mind, but it would rape and pillage this island simply for the thrill, the cruelty and the adventure of it. Even the cabin boy, being buggered by a squinting captain, sang out the raid inside her skull.

Monica's mouth opened with this vision and the horsefly slamming towards her ceaselessly. Then she heard her mother calling her name and she knocked over a chess piece, a salt bishop who spilled unluckily across her lap, the same jeans as the night before. Monica took a pinch and threw it over her shoulder, hitting her mother who was entering.

"Monica!" she said.

"Mom I'm on the computer now."

"All right," Ruth answered taking a cookie from a tray Ford had been baking, "but when you're done come into the living room. I want to show you something."

Ruth was dressed in jogging clothes as mismatched and garish as the plumage of a tropical bird. Her permed hair hung in a pony tail, dark blond and limp with sweat.

Monica sighed and looked up at her mother. "Don't sit on the chaise yet."

"No, something else. Although you need to move that chaise." Her mother ate the cookie and wagged a finger at Monica as she left.

Monica righted the chess piece and looked at her computer. A red box blinked. It was a message from me. It went something like:

FIRST MESSAGE

From: INTERNET:julius/fgc@pcenet.com

To: INTERNET:turnbull@echomne.com

Re: Lusitania

Peacenet mail route through New York via INTERNET border

New York mail route through Boston

Boston mail route through Bangor

Bangor to Bar Harbor node 3340AG

Monica:

If anything, your head is getting larger...filled with new insanities. Why this sudden interest in Lusitania? You're an expert? You've begun to speak in tongues, which has a nice biblical flair, but comes across as loony.

Oh, I found an article that might interest you now that you're a Lusitania expert. *Times*, Science section. Is this of use?

Nothing new here. Job is going well, no romance. I've ended up living life vicariously through my pets.

Don't fall in love with him.

- Julius

FILE

REPLY

SEND

DELETE

I remember writing it at my home in the Village, competing with her wit over the computer. The air was hot and blue, sweet from the street garbage and the trees. I had thought hard about the comment on loving Owen. I didn't want her to hate me, but I'd sent it.

Monica let her hand roll over the track ball, over and over so the cursor flew across the screen like a bat or a wind-blown glove, an electron whirling at random inside its charged cloud. She kept reading that she was not to fall in love. That I, the most diehard of lovers, would forbid this of her. She landed on DELETE and the message disappeared, revealing underneath the still puzzling note from virato@drunet.com.

Monica picked at the keyboard cover. She hated to lose at games. So sometimes it was necessary to cheat. She brought this screen back into view:

FILE EDIT MAIL SEARCH SETUP

And she chose **SEARCH**. It let her index all the possible worlds inside her portable. She entered "drunet" and considered the possibilities listed for her:

1. **FED RUN NETWORK**. Do we really think our conversations are private? Is the net really a free world? No way! Who are you kidding? If they'll hide aliens from us, and bug our milk cartons, surely the FEDS are the ones who....
2. **DRUDE, THOMAS**. Hi! Welcome to my Home Page! I'm a carto-geology grad student at ASU interested in Speculative Fiction, the Curious Ninnies, and obertext poetry. For stories about our real homeworld on another planet.....
3. **DRUNET**. The Interactive Universe for Druidic Believers. Are you a believer?....

The third entry had a pointing hand beside it, indicating it was the closest hit. Now that I look at them, all three seem eerily possible, but Monica chose the last. She decided to enter that world, no maps, no passport, no Baedekers. A little watch on the screen ticked away her money spent. A large "DRUNET" appeared on the top of the viewbox, and below it:



The Interactive Universe for Druidic Believers

"This is insane."

Are you a believer?

YES NO

Monica clicked on YES. Why not? To click on NO would be to bring up faith and Monica always wanted the easy way out.

Are you a new Celt?

Monica chose NO. Apparently her plan was to pose as Viriato and move about in his two thousand year old body.

No file on record. Please try again later.

"Shit." No dice. She started to pull up the first screen again when some wooden whirligigs outside came alive with wind and made a furious racket: a sequined flying beast, a clockwork girl who spun around a German tower, a boat twirling endlessly with its bells. Once they quieted down, Monica could hear the phone was ringing. She raced to grab it on the wall.

"Hello?"

"Hello Monica. Owen."

"Uh...he's not here right now, can I..."

The voice cut her off: "No *this* is Owen. I just learned something so completely amazing. You have to come and see this."

"Owen! Shut up! There's something really weird going on with my e-mail...."

"So when can you come?"

She asked, "Is this about Zdepanek or Viriato?"

"Both."

"How could it possibly be both? You are the only person with enough missing brain cells to be obsessed with *two* loser dictators. Plus I thought our money scheme was canceled. That note last night...."

"Forget it. Things have changed. Trust me."

"I'm driving over to the cliffs in an hour. I'll pick you up at the library then. This better be good."

"Great. Gotta go."

The line went dead and Monica made a hideous face at the pink plastic phone. On the artichoke wallpaper of her mother's kitchen she wrote: "for a good time call Monica 432-1524." Then she smudged out the "good" and wrote "rough". She walked into the living room to grab her car keys from the fruit bowl.

"Monica!" Her mother sat on the sofa. She had changed into blue jeans and a detailed cowgirl shirt. The chaise longue was in the corner and Ruth Turnbull seemed to be fiddling with a film projector and a complex arrangement of glass.

She yelled out: "Oh honey! Come see this."

Monica frowned. "Mom I'm in a hurry. Owen just called and...."

But Ruth wasn't listening. "I have to present a science class at the Gifted and Talented Camp and I was thinking of showing them this. I just came up with it. Get the blinds, would you honey?"

Monica sulked over to the vertical blinds which showed the crowded garden. She slid them closed and sat down next to her mother on the rough plaid couch.

She told me: when Monica was little, her mother would sit smiling at breakfast and produce from her ugly purse some miracle—a cylinder of red liquid which when shaken turned thick and black; a box of metallic crystals like neon frost; a vial of sulfuric acid which when added to the table sugar grew to a black, encrusted tower three feet high. Her mother created these things quietly, as Monica imagined a sorceress might, not explaining anything until her daughter's face flamed with the pleasure of confusion.

So Monica sat now, but the sense of excitement was gone. It seemed sad to her that her mother was still pulling childish science from her purse, still tempting Monica towards a world overgrown with wonder. It was like offering her daughter a food Monica loved as a girl.

Ruth clicked on the projector and it shone through the glass bulb onto the wall opposite them, white and clean. Then she turned a ceramic knob in the apparatus above and Monica saw small particles begin to appear in the bulb's solution. It looked like a glass Christmas ball, but that was not the part to watch. The wall opposite began to change color, first to yellow, then to amber and on down a familiar chain.

Monica whispered, *"It's a sunset."*

Ruth nodded in silence. She leaned forward and watched the false horizon in front of them change to a brick red and become black as she created night for her daughter. She turned to face Monica with a smile.

Ruth began, "You see, a sunset is only light going through...."

"Don't tell me how," Monica said, holding up a hand. "Just do it again."

Without a word, Ruth emptied the bulb and replaced the solution, turned the knob and made it snow again as a garish sunset appeared before them on the wall. Ruth made the sun set eight times for her daughter that afternoon. I wish I'd been there. I wish I'd seen the look on their faces, both of them, colored by the sentimental light like Easter eggs. But Monica does not tell me about it. She races ahead to meeting Owen. So I don't know what exactly happened. I only know the sun set eight times.

After the eighth, Monica got up without a word and walked out the door. She shook her head and her mother did not stop her, did not ask what about her needed so many dying suns.

At that moment, a set of books began to burn in America. A set of books about Lusitania. I know this for a fact, because the person who did it later told me about the green flame-proof room in which he did all his burning. His entire job was the burning of too-evocative things. To him it was just a job. So as Monica watched her sunsets, this man's arm jerked out and floated a match through the air, and it fell like a hissing bee towards those kerosene-soaked fairy tales.



*There once was a lady from Yone
Who ruled over a land of her own
"It's like Greece, but less damp,
And not nearly as cramped,
And is roughly as large as my throne."³*

But keep in mind:

³Ibid., p. 11.

There are other stories here important only to the people who tell them. I don't know how to believe them, what parts to keep in here, but I have to trust that they are crucial. My parents, planning our brief vacations from the academy, would buy up eight or ten maps of our route—topographical scenes of the Grand Canyon, or gold missile silo locations in Montana—and lay them out on the floor. They spent hours looking over each one. They compared them, placed some on top of others to check for discrepancies, drew red lines of mileage and spirals for when we would get lost, giggled over advertisements for long-dead oil companies. After a time, I would get red-faced and crumble the corners of the older maps under my sneakers. Then my mother and father would look at me, frowning, and dad would lift one from the floor, fold it, and give it to me as our one map. But they didn't want just one—they did it for me, for my impatience. They wanted all the possibilities, the contradicting truths. So here, for them, without prejudice or crumbling of the edges, I lay out all the maps I can think of:

Take Anika Lott, the Frog Lady who spoke to Monica at the Bar Harbor-Que. I only talked to her once—I yelled from the prow of a ship while she smiled gleefully from the dock, probably wondering who I was. She said that crucial afternoon she sat waiting for a message on her computer. I imagine she sat in her Art Hut halfway towards Jordan Pond. Around her lay canvases curlicued with red flames and black circles. She called them all *Love* without number. She sat before her own hulking computer screen, stone-gray and draped with ivy. A mahogany ankh dangled from Anika's neck, and she fingered it worriedly. Anika Lott had been worrying about Monica Turnbull. She had been worrying ever since she eavesdropped on Monica's conversation with Owen. It was her practice to listen to others, to try to piece together something from banal details—the digging of clams, the ideas about government, the

answering machine which screened the calls of lovers—which would connect to her own world. She tiled her heart with them. The last thing she expected to hear about was Lusitania:

Monica: Oh. Oh, I found them.
Owen: You found them and you didn't read any? Not even curious?
Monica: Okay, so I skimmed them. I'm like the world's expert now on Lusitania, if you ever want to raise it. I'm ready for the project.

Upon hearing that, Anika must have thought: *They want to raise it. How dare they.* Anika was waiting now for a response. Her panic at hearing about her sacred Lusitania led her to send out a message of aid to an electronic billboard. She sat fitfully hoping someone would respond. Half of her did not expect anything. I think she saw herself as the only one who cared about Lusitania, that holy place, who cared that two young scholars would defile its memory.

That was why she posed as Viriato on Monica's e-mail, I think. Anika must have assumed ghosts would scare Monica as much as they scared her, but she forgot that to be frightened of something you have to first believe in it.

Anika had precious beliefs herself, and they were precious to her because she thought they were generous. In Monica's Heaven, if she could, Anika would probably look like a great ball of iron, nitrogen, trace gases and a few carbon-based life forms; she would look like the planet Earth. She would look very odd.

A turtle wandered around on her balcony and Anika, twirling her ankh nervously, watched it through her enormous glasses. The turtle approached a stone altar dripping with red wax and dried herbs. It sniffed so slowly. It stretched out its old, veined neck. Anika stretched out hers, as far as it went, as veiny and corded as the turtle's and as curious. She looked about as the turtle might look, smelling, looked

around her private world. She stretched to the ceiling and there, painted in dark blues, was Anika's strange map of the Heavens, pricked with constellations waiting to be named again.



*There once was a man from South Leeke
Who discussed things entirely in Greek
Which was plainly absurd
For he knew not a word
And sat totally silent for weeks.⁴*

And here is another:

Raoul Grossetête, the man about to meet Monica Turnbull, told me he ran a frankfurter stand outside the library. Perhaps it had a red and white vinyl umbrella with *Schraft's* in script all around. He set up the umbrella first. Then he rolled out the metal cart and unfolded its various parts: the sterile basins, the hooks for pretzels, the tray for condiments and fixings, a Plexiglas barrier, a sign of clip-on letters which he hung in front of the quilted aluminum trim. Then he began to boil the water for the franks, which were much more red before they soaked all day. Raoul hated the word "hot dog"—he preferred "frankfurter" because he respected things and their real names. Each of the secret compartments of his cart he filled with their small treasures: sauerkraut, golden onions, moist buns, and the knishes only his best customers knew about. He set up three cans on the Plexiglas—Pepsi, Diet Pepsi, Seven-Up—and waited on the corner beside a giant Douglas fir, waited in the sun while all the sidewalks, ground with glass, sparked in the hot light.

⁴ Childress, Betty Ann. *Silly Underwater Poetry*. Redbird Press: New York, 1930. p. 16.

He did not always sell frankfurters. Raoul also confided in me on that street corner: he had, in his life, felt different from other people. Other men, specifically. He had never been good at shortstop, or liked to roughhouse and he had always been an easy target for the bullies. They called him "Piss-pants", although there was no reason for this, as Raoul rarely wet his pants. But Piss-pants grew into what would by communal agreement be called Your Classic Sissy. He used to hide under coats during Phys-Ed, practice asthma attacks to coincide with Field Day, and swarm all over every Barbie doll that peeked her blue-eyed head out of a friend's sister's room. He was an undeniable sissy.

I've been a sissy myself, to tell the truth. But never as bad a Raoul, as far as I can tell, and he had one problem I don't have:

Raoul wasn't gay. He liked girls. Quite a bit, in fact. Never in his whole thirty-eight years did he ever find himself attracted to men. He kept expecting the change to happen. He even went to a couple "meetings" on the subject, as a kind of prep course on what had been predicted for him his entire life. As a final experiment he drove to a gay bar and had a man in leather caress his groin, but Raoul could not get it up because he was *not interested at all*. It was terrible. He sought counseling. He went twelve-step. But there was no solution: he was simply a queeny straight man.

There came, however, an event that would change his life. While still trying any support group that would allow him, he was at a Feminist Men meeting in Portland when he sat down next to a man who was snapping his fingers and shouting "go, girlfriend!" at the podium. Finally, when the attractive female speaker came up to talk, both men had the patently un-feminist reaction of becoming erect and exhaling loudly. Each heard the other (the exhalation, not the erection) and looked to the man beside

him. It was an electric moment. Two heterosexual sissies making contact. Two brothers finding each other. They became best friends, crocheted, went on double-dates, made *paté en croute*. But their most brave action was yet to come. One night, drunk on Dubonnet and watching the test pattern after *Mildred Pierce*, they decided that the feminist movement was doing nothing for men like them, men who threw a ball like a girl, who liked cats instead of dogs, who ordered spritzers in Yuppie bars. So that night they founded the Ef-feminist Movement: a coalition to defend the rights of effeminate men.

The idea quickly took off. Men all over America began to come out as effeminate, and therefore proclaim themselves Effeminists. In Hollywood, John Malkovitch and Matthew Modine spoke at Effeminist fund-raisers, and a bill protecting effeminate rights was narrowly defeated in the California State Senate. They began to publish a newsletter, Wrist Watch, that would not only inform Effeminists around the nation of relevant news, but also to convince closet sissies to embrace the Effeminist Movement. When Presidential candidate Bill Clinton spoke in New Jersey about oppression due to "race, gender, homophobia and masculinism", they knew they had arrived. Effeminist literary criticism sprung up at colleges (with Norman Mailer and Hemingway as early anti-texts), Effeminist film theory arrived (male characters in lower half of the frame) and a Cultural Effeminism swept parts of the Men's Movement so strongly that Robert Bly was forced to write articles in the *Times* and debate Raoul one-on-one at an Irvine auditorium. This debate, however, Piss-Pants lost. The movement began to deflate. The Cultural Effeminists were disparaged by the Post-structuralist Effeminists as being essentialist and pre-Modern. The former simply called the latter "butch" and the movement began to split.

It was this man, the man who went from sewing ball gowns for Barbies to sewing swishy straight men together into a powerful coalition, the man who held a whole nation captive with his interview on Larry King which ended "a limp wrist is a strong arm", this man was the man who would, a few days later, sell Monica a frankfurter.

"Mustard?"

"No, thanks." She stood there looking around, but quickly as if in a caffeine buzz. Raoul must have thought her beautiful, because he held the bottle up as if to impress her.

"It's good mustard. Grey Poupon."

"Yeah, right, it's French's in a Grey Poupon jar."

"No, trust me honey, it's the real thing."

"Oh, whatever, I'm just going to throw it up in ten minutes anyway." Monica acted bored and Raoul brought himself up to full height.

"Not with my frankfurters you don't, sweetheart!" He snapped his fingers. "I don't serve bulimics! You can scam, sister!"

Monica smirked and put two dollars on the cart. "Give me the hot dogs. I swear I'll eat them, digest them, and shit them out tomorrow, okay?"

"*They're not hot dogs,*" he muttered under his breath and lathered the buns with French's. With precision born from repetition he slammed down the bun lid and opened the frankfurter bin.

"What was that?" she said, leaning forward in the shade of his umbrella.

He sighed and pulled out the franks. "'Hot dog' was a name the American government made up in World War One because they were afraid frankfurter sounded too German. It's an anti-German word."

"That's so interesting." She glanced up into the tree. Raoul tried to get her attention again.

"Salisbury steak, too. That's the anti-German word for hamburger. And you know what they called Dauschunds?"

"Is it two dollars or not?"

He fluttered his fingers with this knowledge. He paused for effect. "Victory dogs!"

She glanced around, picked up her franks and shoved napkins in her jeans pocket, but in doing so the note fell out, the yellow note Owen had left on the screen door. Half of it was crumpled, but in magic marker could be read:

*...my messages...
...Lusitania project....
...rise again....*

Raoul leaned over and read that bit of text—it sparked in his lonely mind. His hands grasped the Plexiglas and one of the Pepsi cans tottered and fell with an empty noise. He whispered, "Where did you get that?"

But she was gone already, hurrying into the yews again, her blue suede sneakers glowing with reflective tape, the franks carried high in her hand. Raoul felt breathless in the steam of the open frankfurter bin, which made the air around him gleam with particulate water and oil—he was panicked. He saw in Monica some kind of plot to raise Lusitania. Raoul knew about Lusitania. Later, he would e-mail a web page asking for help. A sudden wind made all the trees bend wetly, and to Raoul they were pointing the path of this disappeared young woman.

And this is how we find luck functioning—how both Raoul and the Frog Lady could voice their electric cries for help at the very same instant.



*There was a boy named Viriato
Who did not a thing that he ought to.
He ran off with his brother
To war. Said his mother:
“Please go, and I hope you get shot, too!”⁵*

Monica says she met Owen and got the best idea she ever had. When Monica slipped into the College’s library parking lot, she probably had to get out of the car to find Owen. He was not one to wait on curbs. Perhaps Owen was lying in the badly-mown grass with his hands on his eyes and the sunlight and shadow falling motley over him. Monica stood by him for a moment.

“You stupid lazy ass. I’m here.”

He removed his hands and smiled at her. “You’re lovely. You’re late. Get my backpack.”

“Get your own backpack,” she said and hit him with her running shoe. Then she walked back to the car, hopping as she fit her shoe back on.

“I have some intriguing news,” Owen said as he caught up with her.

“I refuse to be intrigued. I am unintrigueable.”

“A lie!” he shouted and kissed her quickly. She stared back at him.

He kept talking: “There was an article this morning, that Lusitania really exists! They found the city!”

⁵ Ibid. p. 22.

"Julius was hinting at that," she said quickly.

Monica slipped into the car and did not unlock the passenger side. Her breath was quick, the air silent, and her blood jumping—she felt completely submerged. A primitive metal figure dangled from the rear view mirror and reflected light into her eyes, which made her blink and shake her head. She heard Owen knocking at the window. It was a constant knock without a breath or pause. In a moment she leaned over to let him in.

Owen didn't bring the *New York Times* article with him that day, and I threw mine away after telling Monica about it, but I found some of the text in my research:

Sonar Map Reveals Ancient Roman City Off Portugal's Coast

Team leader removed for superstition and replaced by expert on Lusitania

By Steven Lee Myers

A diving team working off the coast of Portugal has been able to pinpoint the location of the conquered Roman city of Lusitania. A sonar map of the region revealed a cluster of non-terran formations. Closer examination of the clusters proved them to be pre-Roman settlements.

"It is definitely the city Lusitania which fought against Roman invasion around 100 B.C.," said government official Dr. Michelangelo Jerónimo Manuel da Serrano, Royal Navy, "and the opening of the Vault should prove some theories I have had for some time."

Last week, excavation of dunes near Sintra disinterred the remains of Lusitanian leader Viriato, who led the people in their first ill-fated rebellion. Articles buried near the skeleton revealed

his identity as well as the location of his city.

Some scientists have been angered by Dr. da Serrano's comments. "Scientists should not seek out finds to prove theories," claims Dr. Alexandro da Silva of Lisbon University. "The Vault is only a rumor, and to use it as a tool is superstitious and ludicrous."

The present diving team chosen by Dr. da Serrano has been removed, for "personal reasons." The Portuguese government has no present plans to pursue a diving effort, although ten years ago Jacques Cousteau crewman Zdenek Zdepanek the Third spent months combing the area. Zdepanek is currently diving for a pirate city off the coast of the Caribbean island of St. Beatrix, and could not be

Continued on Page 12⁶

6 [Myers, Steven Lee.] "Sonar Map Reveals Ancient Roman City Off Portugal's Coast." *New York Times* 15 July 1994: C1, C6.

Owen was still talking as he leaned in: "So the cool thing is this dive is really old. This isn't the first time Lusitania was found, Monica, someone found it ten years ago, only the government hated him so much they canceled his dive. Guess what his name was."

"Owen C. Nonacs." The car hummed calmly to life and flies on the windshield vibrated, resurrected.

"No. Zdenek Zdepanek the Third."

"As in related to your Czech guy?" she asked.

"As in. He found out where it was years ago, he got all of the go-aheads and the bribes for the officials, but some Danish guy moved in and all. But Zdepanek is the only one who's an expert on it! The fucking grandson of my Zdenek Zdepanek the first!"

"Don't use that language with me."

He leaned back into the seat, telling his story: "So this morning I called around, talked to Zdepanek the Third's assistant, Alexander or something, who told me maybe I can talk to him. Maybe. This Zdepanek guy sounds like a monster, but wouldn't it be fun? St. Beatrix...the Caribbean!"

"Watch this turn here. You'd never know I learned stick shift a week ago."

"I'm impressed, but there's...."

"Of course, the car itself is automatic."

Mountains passed smoothly by, and pebbled cold ponds, a famous treacherous walk up a cliff and a tarn. Owen missed it, as he was on now to his main point:

"I want money to go down and visit him. He doesn't talk on the phone, apparently. But Monica, if I can get an interview we're in the money for sure."

"I don't get it," Monica said, shaving a tree. "We're trying to *make* money here, not spend it."

"Maybe you can help me convince Brown to fund it."

She stared at him as if he were a crazy person. "Does your scholarship cover this?" She meant the note he'd left the night before, about calling off the dive. Obviously something had changed his mind.

He winced. "Yeah, I don't know about that. Tuatha Scholarship. My advisor couldn't find it in any listings—we're not sure what it is. But still...."

Suddenly Monica swerved the car into a sand turnoff and stopped. Owen was gripping his door handle, staring fearfully out at the dark pines beneath him and the pounding green ocean beyond. Monica took his shoulder and smiled:

"I have a better idea," she said.

"Um," Owen said, glancing to the ocean again, "okay."

She shook her head, grinning wildly, "Not just better. Maybe the best idea I ever had. What are our problems? First, that we're being haunted by ghosts. Second, that we desperately need the money. So yes, escape to the Caribbean, but no, don't ask Brown. I say we ask Julius."

That was me. Can you believe it? Of all the people in the world, they decided to pick on me.

Gulls flew by and Owen frowned. "The gay virgin? But he's broke as we are."

"Julius' foundation is loaded."

"The Foundation for Global Civility?" he began.

"Righto."

"Is going to fund a trip to the Caribbean?"

"Yessir."

He let his face relax and the air came in the car salty and wet. "I think I'm beginning to like this plan."

Monica smiled. "Knew you would." She backed the car up violently and sped on down the road with Owen. "Of course," she said as they gathered speed on the descent from the cliff road, "I have one condition."

"Anything."

"I want half."

"Forget it. Seventeen hundred, tops."

"Five thousand or no Julius."

He stared at her and shook his head. "Two thousand."

She sped on, chuckling. Her hair dragged itself in and out of the open window like a flock of blackbirds. Owen kept flicking his fingers, distressed at having been beaten.

"Monica," he finally said, "what was that you said about ghosts?"

They were silent for some time, and Monica chose long ways to prolong it. He took a deep breath, she says nervous, and let an arm out the window. The demonic speed made her imagine an airplane wing. Their legs were thrown together in a turn, but briefly. Pines grew thick around them, then a long band of sky with geysers of ocean water spewing the tide onto the road.

I don't know why they chose me, why they needed so desperately to follow this Lusitania trail to the Caribbean. Perhaps the message from the ghost, the strange scholarship for Zdepanek, it all seemed too much a coincidence. But if only they hadn't chosen me to torture, I would have been spared some ridiculous trouble.

The rocks behind them blurred with speed and Owen tells me he imagined the crash of the car. He says he was so happy that it seemed only beautiful to him.



*There once was a handsome young virgin
Who would not screw for any man's urgin'
But he met the right man
And such passion began
He could not be removed by a surgeon.⁷*

And that was me—and this part is my story. I was in fact a virgin. I kept trying to make it into a kind of strength, but it was times like that night that weakened my reserve and made me long for the kind of sultry, illicit lives my friends were leading. In New York City when I met men, they always thought they were the ones that could change me. Some came very close. Some very beautiful men laid their best lines and flatteries on me, and some had even had me drunk and naked in their beds before I realized my position and leaped back into my jeans. And I was not getting popular this way. I was not chaste, however, for religious reasons, or for health reasons. I was not insecure in my sexuality or caught up in some Republican family value. I had a stranger reason: I was saving myself for "Tony".

And what was I doing that evening? At that moment in New York, the fairy tales burning, Monica and Owen scheming, Anika and Raoul worrying, I was having a little problem. I was trying to do work at my smudged IBMoid computer, but an unfortunate distraction began to take place: the windows behind my desk faced a set of apartment building and, as twilight thickened, they were one by one beginning to light up in a perverse Advent calendar. Each exposed pane of someone's life became a stained glass diptych or triptych, a kind of saint's progress through the West Village. The

⁷ This joke was pretty common in gay bars in the 70's I'm told. Pretty bad taste.

mannish lady going to the fridge for milk every five minutes, the huge dog eating a shag rug, a boy dressing to meet people he didn't know, the old man still turning on his Christmas lights in June. Very distracting. Especially the man lying naked on his couch, one down, third window to the right.

I remember: he lay with his knees to his side, so I could only see the crossed arms embracing his own muscled chest, the brown skin broken in a vulnerable pink line below his waist, proof he did not always go to nude beaches or to tanning salons. Roman nose and small dark eyes, expressionless. He did not move for so long; he did not call or read or fidget. He did not seem perturbed; he did not seem anything, just lying knees to the side, arms crossed, perhaps watching television, perhaps just watching the repeating activity of the street blotted and stuck all over with yellow and cool green gingko leaves.

My crush on "Tony"—Dr. Oliver Turnbull—began early in my life. I took a vow at sixteen that since I had found the love of my life, I would save my body and symbolic maidenhead for that man, no matter how long it took. It was taking a very long time.

And this made no one more furious than Monica.

"You're crazy!" she would scream.

"No, I've just got integrity."

"What you need to get is laid!"

But no matter how much she tried to pick at the roots of this decision, sometimes promises made in adolescence are the hardest to break. After all those years, another physical property of the universe took care of my oath for me: Inertia.

Another man arrived for me to watch. Also naked, with sun-streaked hair and a birthmark. He put his arm around the other's full and immobile chest and they sat there for some minutes with the tan skin of their bodies surely beginning to spot and stick from sweat, for this evening was starting to heat like an electric coil. They lasted,

however, in the relaxation of a pose, watching the television or the street, knees to the side, arms crossed, and then one looked right into my apartment. I jumped backwards out of view and a spiraling nausea grew within me. I leaned against an old steamer trunk and did a terrible thing: I matched my life against another's.

From my view, I catalogued what I could see. I made a breathless count of photos, cactus sculpture, shivering ficus near the wall, a bedroom I could barely make out and there upon the bed a quilt. I could see it. It was exactly like my own: axe-head pattern on white. It was like a science fiction show, a parallel dimension across the street in which we both bought the same quilt. Their dimension mirrored my own except for one thing: joy. These men found, with the same opportunities as I, a happy and indifferent existence. I saw no comfort anymore in the objects in my life, in describing a man by his rooms; there was my own room, my things, my common quilt, and with these wretched tools two men had formed an inconceivably peaceful love.

They were gone when I moved to look again. Now I could only see the soft white couch and the imprints of their bodies. I knew it well; it too was like my own. I thought: *sometimes when they are too lazy to walk into the next room piled with my pillows and my flattened quilt, the moonlit double of my bed—that bed which for years has proved the fresh mint of their bodies and the secure and tidal motion of their love—sometimes they unfold the couch, open the window (like today) and, making love, let the whole world see the decadence of their beauty.*

So there is another map to flatten out, unwrinkle, and slowly trace.



Neo-Ancient History is the study of the ancient through the lens of the modern. We believe that "history" is itself unknowable, in the way any text is unknowable, and that no amount of study or scholarly analysis can reveal "what really happened". Even the contemporary attempt to represent different unheard "voices" of history (i.e. women's, African-American, lesbian) is problematic, for that voice can only be understood today using present-day linguistic devices we have learned since birth. We have *no way* of utilizing ancient linguistic devices (and in this term we included all "linguistics" such as written and painted texts) because we are *not ourselves ancient*¹.

Therefore, it is the project of the Project to write new histories of the Ancient (neo-histories) from the evidence presented, regardless of possibilities or probabilities. We are applying the Barthesian literary criticism of "the author is dead" to history. That is, if we can not know "what the author means", then any reading of a text is viable and equal to any other. Also, if we can not know "what really happened," then any arrangement of historical events is equally possible. We must finally decide which "history" is *useful*. This is the basis for the Neo-Historical Approach.

We are interested in an arrangement of historical events which had women from the ancient sunken city of Lusitania crossing the Atlantic and settling in the Caribbean. We believe that, probabilities and ocean currents ignored, this neo-history is satisfyingly feminist. Scientific arguments against this neo-history are phallogentric (being based on the Scientific/Phallic Method of the Renaissance Man) and oppressive. Our neo-history does not provide explanations for "historical" enigmas or questions as to tribal movement. We are not interested in these approaches. We are interested in re(in)scribing events that never occurred....

¹ The word "ancient" itself reveals our project. The Latin "ante" (before) combined with "sciens" (to know), meaning "before knowing" Therefore, applying neo-historical techniques is to apply epistemological questions to a period before the problematics of "knowledge"

I'm glad I wasn't there to see them write it. They must have howled over its ridiculousness. They must have given up on really getting the money, and enjoyed instead a game they played with each other.

They put together a FedEx package using account numbers Monica had stolen from her old workplace. They even came up with a logo: two fish swimming. Monica had seen it on DRUNET. The only place to send a FedEx was over at LaBow's where she had bought the parts of her chaise longue.

LaBow's was made from an old watermill on the river, and its bricks were overpainted white which flaked and peeled at the corners. Windssocks hung from a gable high above: whales, silk tulips, faded rainbows. Bells clanged as Owen and Monica entered. Monica noticed at a glance that all the brass navigational devices which entranced her before had all been removed. A woman named Ginger leaned over the counter in a red polka-dot dress. She gave Monica a sly look, motioning to Owen with her head.

"Your father never told me you had such a cute boyfriend."

Owen studied Monica, revised her slightly in his mind, but Monica replied:

"He's not my boyfriend, Ginger."

"Really, I'm not her boyfriend," Owen said.

Ginger smiled and took the package. "You two..." she began. Monica had never known what that expression meant. Suddenly another hand snatched the package from Ginger, who yelped. It was Anika Lott, the Frog Lady, already shivering with paranoia:

"Monica," she whispered, her eyes glowing. "What's in here?" She was wearing a beekeeper's helmet and veil, thrown back like a Safari bride. With prismatic glasses.

"I'm returning my Burpee order. Give it back."

Anika held it away from her and took another look. She stared at the logo of the swimming fish. "This symbol! Where did you find it?"

"Look, lady, give back the fucking FedEx." Monica clamped onto the package and a frantic tug of war began. Anika hit a rack and postcards of Old Man of the Mountain zipped through the air, obscuring the battle. Monica emerged, package in hand. Anika crouched. She busied herself untangling the beekeeper's veil from the postcard rack.

"Be careful, Monica Turnbull," she hissed.

"Oh climb back under your lily pad."

"Be careful." She pulled the veil over her face and walked out of LaBow's.

Ginger stared at Monica.

"What's in here, Monica?" she asked.

"Don't you get started Ginger. It's a Burpee return. Really."

Owen had been picking up the Old Men of the Mountain and fanned them on the counter before the clerk. Monica had learned at last how to read his face, and distrust was dark in every crease.

She brushed her hair out of her face and said, "It's nothing, Owen. Just this weirdo at a party. She's on drugs."

"I'm creeped out," he said.

"So am I," Monica agreed.

"So am I," piped in Ginger.

"That's so interesting," Monica intoned and strode out the door with a ring of bells.

The Lusitania books were burning fast just then, I know. But Monica did not hear the chirp of the pages as they curled and hovered above the flame.



*O—they say there's a city of gold
Where lie secrets and treasures untold.
Every young man who's yearned
For a glimpse, has returned
With no voice, rich and terribly old.⁹*

⁹ Ibid p. 40.

DRUNET

*The Interactive Universe for Druidic Believers*

Are you a believer?

YES NO

"Druids, Monica?"

"Yes. Whoever's writing me is some kind of Druid weirdo posing as Viriato."

It was late the same night, say in her mother's laboratory/living room. The sunset apparatus still lay out, half-forgotten, a knot of glass jiggling like a deep-sea jellyfish. It glowed from the blue light of the laptop. Monica had dragged the chaise longue near and the legs wobbled unsteadily as Owen tried to perch next to her. Monica thought perhaps she should not have left out the diagonal supports, but nothing broke and no one fell. Instead, they both sat on its strange fabric—upholstered with a patchwork of old carpetbags, a new world was created from different scenes thrown together: a lion within a toadstool garden overcast with iris clouds. Monica was at the laptop. Her face was charged with an intensity I always mistook for anger, but it merely meant that for this once Monica was undistractable. Owen leaned over her shoulder to see the changing screen. I believe they were both stoned on pot Owen smuggled in a shaving kit.

"Say yes," he said.

"To what."

"Say you're a believer," Owen said again, glancing at her white hot intensity.

She considered this overmuch: "Am I? Are you a believer? Do they mean a believer in general, one who believes, or like a believer specifically in this Druidic stuff? I don't even know what Druidic stuff is. Do I believe in it, or is maybe my ignorance a form of faith, which is a form of belief."

Owen could not take his eyes off the screen.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Say yes." She did.

Are you a new Celt?

"This is where I messed up before. I think we should say yes," Monica said, braiding two strands of hair into an endless design.

"I think we should say yes," Owen repeated. The screen held all of his attention. He had trouble focusing on Monica and had the feeling she kept repeating the same thing over and over. He thought maybe she'd smoked too much. She always had the strangest reactions to things—for instance, tonight, despite her concentration, Monica's voice was warm and full of uncruel things.

"I think we should say yes," she said. "If it's okay."

If it's okay? He stared a moment at her words and their plain remembrance of him.

"It's okay." So Monica typed in YES.

Are you a convert?

"YES"

Welcome to the DRUNET

enter "convert" as name and "convert" as password if you are new to DRUNET

We are an interactive network for people who believe metaphorically or physically in the innate living essence of all things, and therefore their universal worth. Science has proven that even subatomic particles make decisions and communicate with others of their kind. Soo, too, are all the pices of the world sentient and connected. We worship you, rock, tree, ocean. We worship you, phone, TV, computer. We worship you, god, goddess, pooka.

We are the Tuatha, the old race, always reborn. This is our geasa.

<C>onference, <P>ublic Boards, Private <M>essages, <W>ho's online

Hello, convert, what is your choice?

Monica sat perfectly still in her mother's laboratory chair, the blue light harlequining her face, and nothing moved on her except her head, which rotated like an owl's. Here was something seriously insane, no longer surface, no longer a kind of game. For the first time she realized how desperate people were to believe in things. She looked up at unshaven Owen. He was sucking on a Cheese-It and his mouth was taking on a psychedelic orange tone.

"What the fuck is this," Monica was saying quietly. "Who the fuck are these people."

Owen just stared and sucked on the Cheese-It. It was beginning to hurt his mouth, but he could not stop. His eyes widened at the screen.

"Mmmmph."

"We have plugged into an insane asylum," Monica informed him. And when she said that, she pictured the asylum with its smooth architecture and Victorian light fixtures. She pictured it across the yard, and she and this Viriato were playing a

children's game of telephone, holding tin cans to their ears and listening over this thin electric vibrating twine.

Owen finally swallowed the Cheese-It. Something was penetrating his mind.

This is what he said:

"I get it."

"Get what?"

"What this is."

"It's a swimming pool for crazy people. And you don't have to shower before you go in."

"No," and he reached for another Cheese-It, "what this is to us. I'm really embarrassed. Oh this sucks! Look at this." He reached over and clicked on "P" for Public Boards.

pb1 I love plants!
pb2 Nurturing the inner fern
pb3 More of I love plants!
pb4 Sex Forum
pb5 Current Projects*
pb6 Tuatha Scholarship
pb7 I love animals!
pb8 Bell, book and what?

press <CR> for next screen of items

Owen pointed at the computer screen. He pointed at pb6: Tuatha Scholarship. That was the money Owen had been granted to study Zdenek Zdepanek. Somehow the money was tied to this threatening Viriato. Owen was scared. He turned to Monica, who looked strangely calm.

"We are being hunted by Little People," was what Owen said.

"No," Monica pointed out, "you're being *funded* by Little People. Little People want to pay your bus fare, your interlibrary loan fines. You should like the Little People. I'm the one being hunted. By a Little Person named Viriato."

"Someone is trying to distract me from this project," he whispered, "and also trying to threaten *you*."

"Not just someone—an entire organization, who knows how large?"

"It's a conspiracy!"

"I know. I'm scared."

"You don't look scared!"

"I'm so scared I have lost all ability to express it."

"I'll make up for yours: I'm petrified! It's like getting a grant from the Charles Manson Dismembering Society!" He grabbed an article he had xeroxed from the library. "Look at this!" he yelled, pointing, "I couldn't make sense of it before, but look '*some claim the Celtic religious organization of Druids, begun thousands of years ago in Iberia, still exists*'"

Monica now stared at the xeroxed etching of a goddess surrounded by a cape of flame. The image of fire curled convincingly, and its vision seemed compelling. So it never occurred to her, or to Owen, that the only people after them were Anika and Raoul. That it was only, in the end, two nobodies.

But Monica just then hooked onto a different tale. She asked, "But what does this have to do with Lusitania? Why do they care?"

Owen was still going: "What do they want me to do with this thesis? Bring Viriato back to life?"

"Maybe they'll kidnap us and take us to Stonehenge. On Midsummer's Day," Monica said. She was gripping the ends of her hair so hard it hurt her.

"Or send a Mafia of gnomes after me."

"Or sacrifice us to the Rabbit God."

"That's not funny," Owen said.

"With mistletoe stuffed into bodily cavities."

"Shut up."

"And then they eat us."

"Shut up!" he shouted, scaring Monica to the floor. Glowing orange dust freckled his lips and he had nervously undone the buttons on his shirt. Owen was having trouble staying in space at that moment, fluttering as he was in a private wormhole. He found Monica was the only thing he could focus on. He knelt down in front of her.

"I think I'm stoned now," he said.

"Thank god," she whispered.

What happened next neither of them describes in detail, nor do I want it. I try to read from averted eyes and strained faces what they must have felt. What their confusions and fears must have been. I can never know. But I still imagine:

Say I was there. Say I whispered and put my face above the other's. I held it there for a moment, because I could see a calm relief wash over their eyes. It made me suddenly happy, to see someone so relieved to kiss me. Say I was Monica feeling this shaking joy, looking at Owen I had wanted so quietly all this time. As Monica, I knew that in a second it would be gone, that the moment would fall and we would be kissing, so I paused above him for one more stolen instant. I tried to slow time and watch the ticking pleasure of his blinking, or the muscles in his cheeks, or anything in him I could take as trembling.

Or when we kissed, say I was Owen. Say while she paused above me, I closed my eyes and felt my mind unhinge and separate from the body which was fluid. I felt

her lips along my cheek and neck and I was smiling because it was a strange sensation. It felt like a boat adrift on me. It felt like a golden vessel cutting through my waters, mapping me and making me solid and worthwhile and beautiful. I needed to be those things. Each part of me the boat passed over was a claim she made on me, and slowly I was willing all of this territory to her because I knew she was a conqueror. I felt her taking off my shirt and could not help but laugh, looked down and saw her eyes wide as sails, white and blown full with some foreign wind. She laughed too and pulled me up to kiss her. I conceded that to her also, gently.

And then say as Monica I spread Owen, stoned and smiling, on the chaise longue. I stripped him down as he laughed in his grand relief. For a moment, I wondered if it were the drugs that made him happy with me, giggling and open to me. I stopped and looked down at Owen: thin muscled arms grabbing at my black dress, his body pale and lean and blue-shadowed from the computer, hair curling copper over him and seeming frail around his hard-on, his handsome face leaning back so I saw only the unshaven jaw which made a dark beard just on his chin—then that face pulling up to look at me, lips open in confusion, while I stopped.

Then surely she took off her dress and put her skin against me, Owen, which felt unexpected to both of us. We did not know the other would feel so hot and goosebumped. She held my arms over my head, almost painfully, as she moved her skin over mine. I chuckled to hide a faint shivering, then wrestled with her on the chaise until we began to sweat and I pinned her shoulders against the scratchy Medieval scene. I gnashed my teeth and then, quite softly, moved her black hair aside to expose her neck and kissed her there. She made a quiet noise. We had not said a word for almost an hour. The last thing spoken was “Thank god.”

That could have happened. From the way they each swallow and clench their mouths when they avoid talking of it, I can imagine being there and feeling all that.

Owen once told me an idea about how to save the universe. From his experiences with people and their trembling self-esteem, he said the main problem with the world was fear. He felt he had known fear, mostly kinds of falling. Sometimes, and he tentatively admitted this, he stayed awake in bed, a woman tendriled around him, and could not sleep because he feared that moment just before dreaming when you fall and almost die. He tried, like Monica, to think of Heaven. But Heaven, even the best kind, was distressing.

That was why Owen wanted a new Heaven, one people could believe in. If they could see all of their fears as fears of death, then even failing an exam could be seen as death. He had to make them believe, therefore, that death could be fun. What do people really believe in these days? asked Owen. What do *I* believe in? asked Owen.

Sex came the answer. Everyone believes in sex. Everyone believes sex is fun, and everybody believes sex is the furthest thing from loneliness. What if after you got hit by a car, you had sex with the last person who died? And then the person who died after you? And then the second to last person, and on and on into the infinity until you were fucking Lucretia Borgia and Michelangelo? Millennia of fucking, right and left and right and left through time. Owen called it The Virginia Reel. That was an idea people would embrace, an idea that would save them. Each little death, each failure or rejection, is a peep at that timeless, global, spinning orgy.

Why, then, should anybody fear anything? thought Owen. There's always The Virginia Reel.

Monica and Owen moved the chaise longue into the back garden. They lay naked on it, but spread over them was a multi-colored quilt her grand-aunt had left her.

A corner had been restitched where Monica ate it as a younger girl. They watched the perforated sky seep down, and felt their bodies move coolly against each other. Rubber plants and hanging flowers made an exotic silhouette to frame Cadillac Mountain. From Mt. Desert Island you could see the Milky Way, something Owen had never seen before in his life. It looked as if the planets were breathing into space.

I know Owen didn't tell her about The Virginia Reel that night. Perhaps he didn't want her scrutiny just then, or worse, her laughter. He didn't know she had her own dreams of Heaven. And he wanted so much to believe his.

Monica lay beside him measuring his touch. She had next to her a copy of a Betty Ann Childress book, the instrument of their lucrative plan, but she was afraid to show it to him. She let it fall under the chaise. Her mind grew in a panic of the future, in a vague prophecy of abandonment, but Owen could not feel that through her skin. His hand was caught up around her. She heard each breath and wondered if he were sleeping, wondered with her head turned away if he were watching her.

"Who is after us?" he asked.

"I don't know," Monica said, "something big."

"Why something big?"

"Nothing small happens these days."

"I wonder why."

She saw he was turned away, looking at the Milky Way again. A shiver rose from her throat to behind her eyes and she swallowed. "You came all the way to Bar Harbor, and you got a conspiracy."

"I did," he said, but she could only see his neck and hair.

"Did you get what you came for?"

"I don't know what I got."

"I bet the Druids loved that one."

"I bet they did."

The words were close to her ear, and quiet.

The event was of no importance in their movement towards sunken Lusitania. Its gravity was so small as to have almost no pull on space-time. It was, however, a moment in which Owen and Monica's minds paused from egomania and doubt, catching their breath, calmed for a second in relief. There was no analysis to this moment, no blame or neurosis. For once they accepted that something impossible had happened.

If I had been there that night, perhaps squeezed in beside them on the chaise, or hiding underneath, or sitting on the wet grass, I might have seen something. Not just the UFO. I might have watched a breeze catch the pages of the book under the chair. They might have flipped to the map of Lusitania, then to another page I have since read about that world:

"I see."

He turned to look at her and said, "Now we have to get that money. We have to go to that island. I mean, fuck the project, we have to escape!" He was earnest, but he smiled and rubbed his hand into her hair. It made her laugh.

And then they saw something truly unique that convinced them of their semi-holy quest. There was no explaining it, and it would not figure again in their lives except as memory. As they stared from the trees parting and embracing in the blue wind, a light rose over Cadillac Mountain. To them it was a firefly, until it approached Pig's Eye and they could see it was a glowing shape of some sort, speeding across the black exterior of Earth on some unfathomable mission, stealing the breath of every human that saw it. Owen and Monica were unwillingly drawn into another small, unlikely group that night. UFO sightings were reported all along the Eastern seaboard, including others in Bar Harbor. Ginger at LaBow's had seen it, for instance. Every report said something similar: it looked like a diamond necklace shooting towards Tiffany's.

And indeed it did. It was a ring of broken glass zipping by. Imperfect and chipped so that light struck it and jitterbugged. And then it was gone.

Monica spoke first.

"Jesus Christ, what the Hell was that?"

Owen put his hand on her breast to comfort himself.

"A new fighter plane?"

"It's pretty conspicuous for a fighter plane. I don't think they should fund it."

"Neither do I."

Owen leaned over and kissed her temple. He couldn't reach her face, and it felt a little uncomfortable, but he must have wanted to do it very much. Monica spoke again.



The Basilisk, excerpt

by Betty Ann Childress¹⁰

Spread wide your ears:

A clump of sage wrapped in twine. Boiling in a great iron pot, its leaves writhing out like hair. The cloud of steam is fevered. All above are hung on hooks: braids of garlic, blackened tobacco leaves, golden ornaments hot from the stove and the oven. The walls are textured lava and purple star-eyed flowers fall in through the windows. A great leather book is open, and a page is torn out.

What am I building for you, stone by stone? The kitchen of an old hag, a witch. But where is the witch? Is her cigar smoke curling from the other room? Can you hear her singing to a captured boy who is now a red-plumed bird? No, I tell you, there's nothing yet. She's gone. You have to imagine the witch. You have to simply keep her in mind.

Now: before anyone alive can remember, and before anyone they have ever known can remember, there was a great land by the sea where the Sun last touched the Earth each day, a strange land where strange things happened, and it was called Lusitania. That is to say, strange and wonderful things used to happen there, long long ago in the past. There was a time when the sky rained gardenia petals, when KuaKuas

¹⁰ Childress, Betty Ann. *Treasure of Lusitania*. Atlantic Press, New York: 1924.

sang red mist across the grass, when the earth itself sometimes began to talk, thick rocky lips, and told stories that made people remember the longings of their childhood.

Is this how stories begin? *Long long ago. There was a time.* No, that's only half of how they go: *Long long ago. There was a time. But that time was over by the time our tale begins.* Yes, I tell you, we have to follow the route of story.

So: but that time was over by the time our tale begins. After a while, because of war or grief, all the strange things hid themselves or pretended to be dead. The wars went on, and new people ruled Lusitania, but it was always someone who liked wars, so nothing really changed. All the power to change things has gone mute. Well, almost all....

Picture a little boy. Maybe eight. Long black hair melting down his back which can jump crazily in the wind. His name is Viriato and he lives in a little hut crowded with ducks and relatives. The relatives mistreat him, call him mean things like "dragonicious," and they only keep him around because they get money for him from the Lusitanian Foundation to Aid Children. Viriato, being a small boy of eight, feels he must deserve this treatment.

Is this a hero? *Dragonicious. Feels he must deserve this treatment.* Heroes are bold men, sure of themselves, bursting with life. But why? Why would anyone like that ever need adventure? Why would anyone so bold be a hero in a time of fear and loss?

Why can't Viriato be a hero, even if he believes lies about himself?

— You're so ugly, granddad often says to him; You'd make plants die just by lookin' at 'em. You're uglier than a Basilisk.

Now I know you know all about Basilisks, but sit nicely and spread wide your ears: a Basilisk has the head of rooster with the tongue of a child, two long arms like an insect, with great sharp pincers at the ends of them where hands might be nicer, the legs

of a lizard, and a tail curled like a scorpion's. None of this matters, however, because the meanest thing about a Basilisk is that its pure ugliness can turn anything it looks at to stone. They sit at mirrors and preen and wear roostercomb oil and face de-creamer until their ugliness is perfected, and then they go out for a night of "statuing." That means making people into statues. And anyone who knows better than I can tell me if I'm wrong, but I don't think I am, when I say they are the cruelest most nightmarish beasts alive.

But listen: this is where the quiet power comes in.

One day Viriato is digging fence-post-holes for his uncle, who doesn't really need them, and he finds a large stone, smooth and warm and colored all over with black and red curlicues. He decides to keep it—sees a scrap of paper blowing by and wraps it around the stone to hide it. He sits alone in his cold, damp room and plays with the stone, and at night he sleeps with it under his pillow. I know you think he sounds like a strange boy, but understand it is all he has. Imagine that: all he has in the whole world.

One morning he awakens. It is still dark, but a pearl of light shines through the window. From it, he sees his stone is moving around! Moving in a funny way, though, as if something is trapped inside. You see now: this is no stone. This is an egg. To his horror, Viriato realizes he has been hatching an egg all this time.

And what breaks through the egg? A beak, and a creature something like a baby chick, but odder, deformed. It sits before the stunned, terrified boy and chirps.

It is growing now, and within minutes it is the size of a pig. As it grows, Viriato can slowly make out what it is: long insect arms, and lizard feet, and a tail like a scorpion's. Two great eyes in the rooster head glow a beautiful green and blink at him as they grow to the size of wagon wheels. In a flash he sees it is that most dreaded creature: a Basilisk.

Imagine having your favorite book turn into a hungry dragon and you might have an inkling as to what Viriato feels.

Is this the monster of the story? You know this is an adventure. You know who your hero is. But as for monsters for him to fight, you have some choices: the Basilisk, the grandfather, the Foundation, Viriato himself. Which one would you choose?

The Basilisk chirps again. Then it looks right at Viriato. Now the little boy notices something strange, something I'm sure you noticed right away. Why isn't he a statue? Why isn't this Basilisk turning him to stone? The Basilisk wonders the same thing.

— Why aren't you turning to stone? he wants to know.

— I don't know, says Viriato.

The Basilisk sighs and sits down on the bed, his tail waving behind him. — Oh dear, he says sadly; I'm too beautiful.

Viriato looks at him and, while he never would call someone with insect arms beautiful, he sees what the Basilisk means. Where are the warts, the evil tongue? Where are the black bristly hairs and rusty scales? He looks all polished and almost cute.

— I see what you mean, says Viriato.

— It's all that time in the egg, you see. When my mother laid me, she didn't know I'd be there for five hundred years. Who could know? Oh, the Basilisk says; Maybe I'll just crawl back into the egg.

Viriato sees the creature is very sad, so he says — I have a better idea.

— Um, the Basilisk says, glancing to the boy's face; okay.

— Not just better. Maybe the best idea I ever had. How would you like to really scare someone?

— I'd love it! I'd be so happy!

— We can scare my grandfather! That would show him! Scare them all!

And the Basilisk turns around and Viriato jumps onto the shiny black feathers of his back. They ride out of the damp, cold room Viriato has known all his life, never looking back, never thinking about it ever again. He only takes with him a bag, which contains an apple, a blanket, and the scrap of paper which wrapped the Basilisk egg. Around the house they ride, and there all the relatives are, gathered together in a barbecue to which Viriato has *not* been invited.

— Avast ye relatives! cries Viriato.

With a caw caw the Basilisk thumps forth and the cousins and the aunts and the uncles and the grand-dad leap ten feet into the air and land splash! in the mud. But that is not all. With great sucking noises the relatives pull themselves from the mire and run willy-nilly into the countryside. Every one of them wets their pants.

— Ho ho! yells the Basilisk; I am the ugliest thing in the world! We are the ugliest, scariest, most wicked and dragonicious creatures ever to galumph through the mud!

— On! cries Viriato, happy to leave this evil home of his; on and on and on until we hit the sun!

— To the sun! the Basilisk laughs and they ride into the afternoon. The mud slaps under their feet and the sun slicks their happy faces with light. There is no guilt to the moment, no fear or loss. For once both accept that something impossible has happened.

However, once he realizes Viriato has fled, the grandfather is furious. The other relatives stare at him in fear. He yells that they need the money from the Foundation, and they must go there. He is old, with eyebrows which flutter like dying moths over his

face. It's been a long time since he's said anything kind to any of them. So they shiver, and nod *yes*. Yes, get the Foundation to chase the boy down.

And one more thing:

A pale circle of jade set in gold. The witch passes her beautiful fingers over it and it clouds. Her neck is veined as a turtle's, and under her arm she holds a leather tome from which a page has been ripped. That page is her most valuable spell—the one which will keep her alive. She has found the servant who stole it, but in the struggle the page blew away in the wind. The servant's dead now, and the page is lost. But she has time. The witch whispers softly to the jade: *where is that piece of paper now, my sweetest?* And this vision appears: a happy boy straddling a deadly creature from the past, thumping through the mud....