

Chapter4
North of Now



1. Victory Chimes

When she wasn't called *Edwin and Maude*
or in delivering in the pizza trade as *Domino Effect*,
the stout three-masted schooner pictured
on Maine's quarter coin affectionately
goes in these waters by the name of '*Chimes*.'

Yesterday I watched her come
silently ghosting up the summer bay
as the first slight breeze began to stir.
Overhead white gulls and puffs of clouds

came coasting while a clatter of dragonflies
stitched back and forth across the blue of sky
whisking clouds like yard sale egg beaters
or a fleet of made-in-China wind-up toys.

What invisible road map, what home port
claims this hatch of dragons? I no more
understand the fabric of their lives
than the passing being of all those dudes
aboard the '*Chimes*. Both elsewhere gone today.

The cup of sky turned upside down
on the saucer of sea
holds the last of summer
which steadily slips away,
leaving only the muted click of change
rattling in some man's pocket, ebbing
light sheening off a spread of two-bit coins.

2. Hurricane Elsewhere

Just as the last berries ripen
a great bird comes flying
up from Louisiana
under its wings holding
hot breath night
all swamp magnolia
and cottonmouth moccasins.
At nearly dawn the wind
blows through with a wake
of fallen leaves to whisper
what comes next for Maine.

3. Billy Collins on Vacation in Maine

I am standing on the deck overlooking the shore
in bare feet with a cup of steaming tea, opera on the radio,
watching seagulls and a lone man in a plastic kayak

which barely zigzags as he chants to seals while
the first clouds climb the rigging above the bay.

A white lobster boat draws unhurried circles
and the drone is carried by the gulls
to wedge between the bars of Verdi's quartet.

I study last night's wine glass on the railing
lit by a ray of sun which goes on to

gather blueberries and ferns and a small sparrow.

Cats watching through the window wear calico shadows
borrowed from the birches like the green
fleece pulled on over my nightgown,

which I pull closer to my shoulders
feeling what it's like to be Billy Collins in Maine.

4. Elvers

I see him walking on the clam flats
by the great butterfly bat wing nets.
What is it about his jeans, cap, and rubber boots signals islander
just as surely as he reads me woman-from-away
before we even speak?

What are you catching?

Eels,
he calls over his shoulder and keeps on slogging.
It seems inappropriate to continue hollering
on the early morning air
so I stand on a rock
and wait.
He's not going to hurry his pace.
I'm not going to retreat.
We wait
for each other to finish our business.

I eye the rigging: four huge gray butterflies or bats,
take your choice depending on how macabre your taste,
or whether you know the symbol for bat wings on Ming pottery.
Dead panels, like a drowned embrace
drape full slack across the mud
to hang when the tide comes back
suspended from plastic pipe strung like soda straws on pot
warplines

bright orange, perhaps from one great spool
strung out across the cove
here to bamboo, there to aluminum tent pole
guyed all in turn by more orange warp and weighted
at the ends by granite.

The man slogs slowly from rock to rock
adjusting the muddy weights with some private precision
righting and pressing the poles to his own satisfaction.
At the confluence of each wingspread
a wooden box, not all that different from a shoe box
except that at each hinder end he's hung a bag like pantyhose.
Carefully he does not glance my way, carefully he inspects
this masonite center of mysteries, reties its knots
and makes his way closer to where I stand.

If he's reluctant he's damned if he'll show it and he says to me
Elvers, glass eels you might call 'em. Send 'em to the Orient.
I want to tell him of the ancient lucky symbol but I say instead
Do you ever eat them?
Nope.
Do you go smelting too?

Why yes, he says,
and quickly calculating what else I need to understand
he manages not to sound condescending
as he tells me you can't go smelting
at the same time you have these traps out. Generously he adds
I go to a nice creek up the cove for smelts.
I like to go for smelts, myself. Fry up a good munch.
Have 'em for breakfast, or whatever meal comes next.

I recognize he's telling me something about the order of his life
so I ask, Do you check these traps every tide?
Yep.
Did you just get some?
No, I'm readjusting them now.
He says without my asking
The elvers only run at night. You ought to come down here then.

It's a sight to see, all the lights.
I ask what time the tide is high tonight.
Two-thirty he thinks.
He's not lobstering just now. Elvers make a nice way to fill in.
He can make a couple hundred a night.
But don't quit your day job? I say
surprised when he does not banter
but says instead
I get kind of tired, but it's nice down here at night. I hope we don't
bother them up at the house. You from the house?
No, I'm not.
Well, You want to come see.
Just a statement he makes, and I thank him and say
I will come some time,
hating that it sounds so much like empty courtesy.
A pause, sheerer than bat wings hangs in the air
as I calculate back and say,
You saw the comet here, then?

He straightens up, hands dripping from the fresh water sluice
of the little creek pushing back the sea.
Perhaps because he's been skirting so near
the beauty of what keeps him here
unmasked delight ambushes his face.
He throws his arms north to the heavens
in a wide gesture full
of the wildness of it all.

Right up there it was, he says.
He meets my gaze and we grin together, cosmic islanders.
I'll come some night, I say.
Me and the wife, he mumbles, just to be sure there was no
misunderstanding,
We'll see ya.

5. Interwoven

Stand with the daughters of Delia, Molly, Mary
Feel their living heat, move with dancing feet

Heart beat gentle, drum beat strong, pound the winter ash
Your grandmothers made baskets for my grandmother

Picked sweet grass by the shore,
brown ash brown hands bent with crooked knife,
pale splints pass fierce through tiny gauge teeth
Berry-bright colors traded for aniline chemical dyes
The flagrant hues will fade to charm, the fragrance linger

Sewing baskets - who last mended a sock?
For collar stays, glove box, hat baskets - fashions change
String - who saves? - even the wastebasket finds itself abandoned
Gold spray paint not enhancing its value

My mother on a rescue mission haunts the yard sales
The shops, the auctions, filling our attic, garage, and kitchen
corners
Till humble baskets achieve antiquedom
And once again the wealthy choose them as possessions

Your grandmother forced to forget she talked Penobscot
Her daughter buys farmed salmon like the rest of us
Makes a reservation to climb Katahdin
The People gamble on college, a computer, casino

Baskets arrive in the new incarnation signed and priced as art
Old basketfuls of baskets safely fill the shadowy study shelves
New ones glow from the gift shop at the museum's front door
Waiting for my granddaughter and for yours.

6. Maine Lake

Two loons
bobbing in late afternoon sun
trade short, silver sounds.
They've come from the far end
where the dark young eagle sits
and moose make swampy tracks

as it was before
the pines were cut for the king,
or spruce were felled
for the Bangor lumber barons,
pulp carried off to the paper mills.

Camps and motors now
have come to the lake where
pharaoh's daughter scans
the rushes for the loons' nest
riding on a pink jet ski.

But it's after Labor Day.
Two loons bob in the sun,
talking quietly
to one another.

7. Maine Woods Tale

To the gentle sound
of wavelets on the stony shore
spirit canoe goes paddling
all the starry night

till cool dawn
draws me from my dreamy reverie
cocooned in cozy comfort
on the cabin porch.

Again, again, but not
the soft sounds the black
ducks make splashing in
to feed at water's edge,
this low, electric hum.

What dense sound
this thrumming, almost
infrasound? Do Maine moose

make a rumble not unlike
the elephants of Amboseli?

The sun picks out a ruby globe
hanging at the cabin eaves,
the glint of red which is a
hummingbird's bandana throat.

So you're the Maine Woods force
I hear! Visitor like me,
and coddled too by comforts
of the modern world,

we'll soon move south
leaving the loons
to laugh with the moose
telling camper jokes.

8. Marijuana Madeleines

"When rope makers couldn't get hemp
from the Philippines - World War II
was happening - we started to grow it
on our farm - and that's how hemp happened
in Missouri. At just about this time of year
we boys would rick it up and burn the corn.
The weed gone wild would make us high
though we didn't even know it,
not till I went to parties as a New York artist,
and I smelled the old Missouri smell".

All morning long, birds ride the ridge
funneling south along the shore,
so I climb the hill behind our house
to drink the wine of this wild world,
lie among crisp lichens, maybe harvest
the first few upland cranberries,
and watch the birds soar overhead

before they launch across the bay.

I think of him, my old friend laughing,
when I find my favorite seat is filled
by a row of plastic pots tucked in
the clearing. Who laid this jungley botany quiz,
baking on bare granite, inside a secret ring of spruce?
How hemp happens here, but I am high on hawks,
fir balsam pillow smell, and good salt air,
Maine artist at a party where I'll stay until the end.

9. Meeting Madawaska

Through the car window I watch
names I've only known
from headlines and the daily weather
take on increasing energy
as mile after mile the road
threads north string-straight
through hackmatack and spruce and pine.
At town lines printed names
on welcome signs rear up
and in the village centers
zip code and post office names
spring into a third dimension,
then morph into a full reality.
Among the store signs and school signs
I step out to be with people just as real as I
with only slightly different music in their voices.

10. Patriot's Day

Spring, finally, comes Downeast
in what seems unseemly haste.
Day before yesterday we shoveled snow, and next
the herons have flown into Haskell's cove,
Neva saw bees crazy at the crocuses by her granite step,
tree swallows by the post office - they know the flies are out again.
Mahogany twists of skunk cabbage poke up under the alders

where last night the salamanders writhed over each other
and butterflies were seen this morning.
It must have been yesterday afternoon
a garter snake almost made it across the road;
you can hear spring peepers singing in the center of the island
and they're getting elvers in the traps over to Greenlaw's Cove.
Eider ducks in pairs fly low across the bay.
Smoke rising at all compass points signals burning for blueberries.
I say "*carpe diem*" to my dishes in the sink
and hurry out to seize the sunshine,
to poke withered pea seeds in the barely yielding ground.
It's what we do here in New England
April 19, the anniversary of the day the redcoats
and the locals lobbed a shots heard round the world,
perhaps an odd observance, but we have to start early
if we're going to have peas for Fourth of July, a nation of our own.

11. Penobscot August

Last night in the warm damp dark
the thin high cry of shore birds
just arrived from the arctic
where summer has already been.
Well before dawn terns laughed in the fog
bringing the full joy of silver sun,
onshore breeze, and harvest gathering by the bay.

Thousand sisters of the Dawn,
What did you think when this was you -
Where will you find your winter lodge this year?
Will there be sugar enough for sour berries,
Sun enough to dry the sweet,
Fat enough, fish enough, food enough?

Life enough?

12. Power

So one fat man
with a wide-tired toy can do the work
of how many old fashioned lean?

the motor snarls,
farts fumes on the morning air
as hired landscapers
cut down chew up suck away
everything from lichens vacuumed off the rocks
to native trees standing presumably in the wrong.

In the raw spruce shadows
across the way - a deer,
red with youth, flicking its ear
waits to check out new trees
planted where its mother used to graze
- they're apples
so in spite of gulag fence
the day will come.

Wren too takes each silent pause
to sing a rich and silvery trill,
and we ponder as we walk
to home where weeds take welcome
what is power
and what makes men take to calling woods
estate?

13. Surry Oaks

An autumn errand takes me to the mainland
- the Continent we say with only half a laugh -
where I am become an artist
choosing crimson reds,
yellows with a nearly equal mix of green,
not dabs of color like the poplars

but a thinner glaze for the lace of larch
which dances light across the swamp,
hackmatack we say with audible echoes of Wabenaki drums.

As the golden brown of toast
tastes richer than plain bread,
so honeyed by the season's sun
the oaks hold out their leaves with muscled arms
behind a plain white house atop a hill
overlooking the quiet cove of Patten Bay.

Since my eyes have formed the dark habit
of coastal spruce, these sheltered trees entrance me.
I feel how they must have looked like gold
to my rough sea-facing island's early fishermen
gone to cut oak for hoops to front their lobster traps,
sail-bearing circlets to bracelet gaff-rigged masts,
strong hackmatack for angled knees
that hold their skiffs and sloops safe on sea's lap.

Or does the feeling come from deeper in,
from genes shared with the bones
in the moldering leaves on the Surry knoll
where Hector Patten lies,
Surry town founder to most, but Grampa-to-the-ninth
as our sons' children like to say?
One sees far beyond bared limbs at season's end
I know of oaks and men; leaves in wind
the golden brown of toasted bread
pile deep with pasts richer far than plain.

14. Ellsworth Schist

That's what they call the Island's oldest rocks,
Ellsworth Schist.
Hear the echo of layer on layer,
volcanic dust softly sifting down

into a great rift gulf, Mane pulling away
—Africa left way over there—
five hundred and some million years ago.

I see a hopeful sheen in the greenish
foliate layers of that rock called schist,
banded with its blank white
quartz intrusions, too complex
to bear thinking of,
the rock in my hand torqued and stressed,
enduring heat and pressure for those
five hundred and nine million years ,
far more that I can bear to understand.

I pocket the pretty schistose pebble
from the beach, a wave-washed lucky stone,
to give to her because I had no words
to answer when she told me
“All I want is dreams
and someone to share them with.”

15. Gluskabe's Bridges

High atop the bridge tower the eagle sees both
Mt Katahdin in the Great Maine Woods distance
And the ocean pulsing in the lee.

Watch with eagle as Penobscot, the Indians' river,
threads the needle's eye, our bridge, on the way to the sea.

Hear the thrum, the song of the bridge,

As all night long a storm tracks by

A back hand strum as southerly winds from out at sea

Try pushing ocean back up-river from the bay.

Hear Gluskabe paddle by in his stone canoe.

With shouts and smacks he urges Penobscot back,

Back by waves, past Eggemoggin Reach, back beyond the quiet
Bagaduce.

He turns to follow the river rippling round what man calls Indian
Island,

To Orono, and on to Millinocket, threading through forest shadows

Till pure and clear the river flows from Wabanaki heart

Beating around Katahdin, lonely peak the eagle sees.

Spilled by the very clouds that bear the eagle

Every drop of water pauses on the mountain side

Gathering in the sighing spruce behind the mountain

For yet another schussing run, riding the rapids downriver

Through the towns and mills, under the bridge, back to the singing
sea.

Eagles still ride river ice blocks where lumberjacks once rode logs.

Now that dams are gone the salmon flicker upstream like shadows
under the bridge.

Summer days belong to gulls soaring backlit over the deck and
cable stays

Like sailors of bygone days who tended the rigging of masted schooners.

Autumn leaves now ride the tides back and forth beneath the bridge,

While on the painted hills the traffic stalls as folks admire bridge spires against the flame.

Where Gluskabe has left his mark on rusty rocks that bank the bridge,

One wonders whether Earth or Man has made the greater marvel.

Yesterday, now and tomorrow, where humans might see separation—
—mountain folks just don't talk like those coastal sailors—

A bridge makes us all one weaving,

Not other, upstream or down, more than flows under, flies above

But the way to cross over, lacing embrace of warp and weft—

All bridges are the weaver's shuttle

On the grand loom of country.

Gluskabe, the Great Maker, smiles.

16. Night Driving

Driving down the road on a summer night
is an auto affair, in with air conditioning,
bare leg on accelerator, radio cranking tunes,
headlights leading a will o' wisp waltz.
Up the high beams pale moths flutter and vanish.

A startled buck shows off his sleek flank, full rack,
and he too steps off into the darkness.
I register gladness not to be hit by some
grand retribution for wild nights of spring
—thoughtless popcorn magic at the drive in movie—
back when I'd flattened scores of frogs bobbing
briefly in my beams, crossing rainy country roads.
Speeding through the dark indifference
of the universe quite other than a daytime Geographic Special,
I meet another traveler, dip my lights, continue,
faithful to the headlights' false whisper of purpose
in a private pleasure world of summer night.

17. Recipe from Aroostook for a Maine Potato

Bake at 425 ° for an hour. Add
butter and cream, salt and pepper.
Eat as if it's all there is. For in the County,
the Crown of Maine, potato's not
an afterthought. All else is side.
You eat the skins first, savoring
the sweet and nutty smell.
Through the valley of the drought and rain,
nearly north of insects and disease,
potatoes bloom for the tough, the smart
and the lucky—table stock, seed that's certified,
fast food French-fried futures,
in a language of top kill and rotobeat,
diggers, pickers, baskets and barrels,
a landscape of well-bermed old potato house,
stark white Four square homes,
huge new machines parked on the skyline.
Up in the County a new potato's skin toasts
crisp to tasty flakes. Cobblers, Katahdins, Kennebecs
and Shepordies all carry the Aroostook look,
pale gold under wide skies, potato dust at harvest
so all-covering growers choose the County soil

for their own final panting.

18. Smudging, Warm Air Rises

In the ancient ritual
of outdoor people,
Penobscot People,
people of the stone points,
I celebrate that first quickening
of air as day rouses
under the heat of the sun
rising sweet on the smiling
cheek of the earth
as birds sing, butterflies stir
and the wild strawberry
ripens for plucking.