



Illustrations by
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POETRY DESK

Maine Triad

John Congdon

I. The Mill

The Mill sits over the edge of the water.
Built at the end of the seventeenth century,
Powered by the tide,
It turned pine logs into planks and timbers
To be sent down the coast to the shipbuilders in Bath.
Then later, it was a lumber shed,
A chicken coop,
A country store.

She moved here to take over the store
Two marriages ago, six children, dozens
Of grandchildren and great grandchildren
Too many to keep track of,
And too few days left to waste on counting.
She knows she loves them all:
The lobsterman,
The lawyer,
The artisanal ice cream maker
And they all come to visit, cramming the Mill
And the main house up the hill
Until every bed is full and every couch and every scrap of floor
Is covered in sleeping bags and dogs.

All gone home now. She took them
To the airport herself.
Too crippled (as she says) to stand without help
Or walk without her walker
(With the carrying net a local boat captain made for her,
Sitting in her kitchen with an aquavit in one hand
And his netting needle in the other),
But put her behind the wheel of her car, and Watch Out!

So we sat in the main house and drank tea,
Talked business (quickly and satisfactorily concluded)
And then talked of other things,
And the quiet of the house settled around us.
She talked of the Mill.

How husband number one and she had run it as a store
Before giving that up, but keeping the place,
Turning it first into a home,
And then the guest house
(One of her grandsons had told me of what it was like
To lie in bed in the dark and hear
The tide running through the old millrace
Under the floor.)
And then her studio
Where she painted the fog banks over the bay
And the light through the windows
And the red flower on her windowsill
Against the grays and buffs of the winter
And wrote her poems.

How they plugged the knotholes in those old floorboards
With Bacardi corks to keep out the drafts
And during the storm of '79
(When she and husband number two were away)
Their neighbors up the road came down to move things
To the upper floors to keep them from being flooded away.
Annie was standing over a knothole when a wave came in,
Blew the cork out like a popgun
And a fountain of seawater jetted up her skirt.
"Charlie," she said, "I think we'd best be going."

(Annie wanted to make it to 100, and almost did,
But her mind started to go, and it got worse and worse,
And one day, Charlie shot her, then himself.
When she told me this, she looked me in the eye,
And said, "I pray she didn't see it coming.")





She showed me paintings of the view from the windows, the view
Down the hall with all the doors open, the view
Down the odd, awkward stairs that spiraled
Across inconvenient landings,
Out the window to the Boathouse.

I don't believe in magic, but I agree with her:
It is a magical place.
There is a rightness to it, a sense that apart from all that is broken and
soiled,
That all will be well.
The residue clings to it of all who have been happy there.

"My body is here," she said, "But my heart is there."

II. The Road

The road to the Mill lies long down the island.
It does not cut through the land,
But curves and twists,
Clinging to the earth like a vine
Of poison ivy, hairy roots
Holding fast to the cracked bark of an old tree.

The land here is ancient,
Scraped smooth by the last ice age,
Hard granite with a thin layer of sandy soil.
The ponds dotted about
Were not formed by flowing streams or beaver dams;
They were scooped out by the ice
And have no outlet for whatever rain falls in them.
No sandy beaches on their shores,
But a ring of hard rock between water and scrub
Kept clean by the freeze and thaw
Of the annual ice age
Of winter.

Roads do not sink into the land here
As they do in other parts of the world,
Gradually deepening, trees leaning over
Eventually to meet in a green tunnel beneath and between the fields.
Here, they lie atop the ground,
With three hundred years of gravel added,
An artificial esker laid down for men to travel
Between the black pines—
Cold in their shade,

With flickers of warmth when you pass through
Bands of sunlight
Before plunging back into dark—
Their roots shallow, too weak
To pierce the granite,
Woven through the sand in a tight mat that holds them up
Yet does not give firm purchase;
Everywhere, trees lie amidst their fellows,
Blown down
By the hard winds of the winter storms.

The land is wild, and yet the mark
Of man's hand is everywhere.
Not just in the road, but everywhere.
First, they cut down the trees,
Shipped the big ones over the sea to England
To mast the king's ships and plank their hulls.
Then they tried to farm—no luck there,
The sandy soil too poor for crops,
The thin topsoil too quickly blown away
Without even the tree roots to hold it.
But they cleared the land,
Plowed the rocks out of the fields, piled them at the edges
Into tall walls, no need for other fences.
Then they brought sheep and cows,
And that kind of worked.
The sheep are gone now,
But there are still a few cattle farms,
With a dozen or so head grazing.
The trees grew back, and the walls
That divided this field from that
Now run through the woods, a memory
Of use long gone.

Some summer homes, but not so much of the wealthy
(Not yet, anyway, but they're coming);
Mostly year-round folk
And fishermen
And the few farmers
Whose teenagers rebuild old Chevrolets
And race them on the back roads.

But three hundred years have not changed the granite,
And the pines are still dark,
And the sea still moves.

III. The Sea

The sea, they say, is rising.

Far away in Polynesia
(Another land of many islands)
The coral is dying.
There is no higher ground.
Men and women add blocks under the corners of their homes,
To raise them up beyond
The waves that come up when the wind rises.
But soon there will be no land at all,
And the dead will float out of their graves,
And they will be left in their houses on stilts
Over blue water
With their island gone.

When the sea rises
Over this island,
And the water soaks the sandy soil
And sweeps away all the houses
And all the barns
And the Mill and the Boathouse,

When those who remember are gone
And those who remember those who remembered are gone
And all that we have and all that we are
And all we have loved and all we have held
Are swept away in the rising tide,
Will all that remains
Be an abandoned wall
Sunk in a drowned forest
At the bottom of a barren, acidic sea?

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John Congdon was born near Albany, grew up primarily in New England, and has been an Orthodox Christian since 1986. He holds a degree from Oberlin College in Ancient Greek Language & Literature and has been a cabinetmaker, violin repairman, art restorer, delivery truck driver, and furniture salesman. A professional fundraiser, he lives in Ohio with his wife, two children, and two pitbulls.