



Island Poems, Prose & Drawings

Candice Stover

Betsy Alexander

Les Menard

Edward W. Evans





Betsy Alexander



Les Menard

“**Betsy Alexander** has, in her words, ‘always enjoyed writing verse,’ and her four collections of poetry attest to her love of language and her skill at transforming life into graceful lines. She is a rhymer, subtle and sharp, and only rarely turns to free verse to express herself (‘playing tennis with the net down,’ Robert Frost described the writing of such poetry). Alexander’s favored sites are Mount Desert Island, where she has long summered in Somesville with husband Sandy, the Bahamas and Florida (she makes her winter home in Tallahassee). These and other locales have left their imprint on her writing, and Alexander’s profound attachment to these places – to their inhabitants, their flora and fauna – gives her poems the glow of home.

“The four books Betsy Alexander has published to date – *Knee-deep in Summer*, *Riptide & Rainbows*, *Sea-glass Reflections* and, most recently, *One Candle* – grew out of her friendship with **Les Menard**, a Bar Harbor artist who was paralyzed in a diving accident many years ago, and who draws with pen in mouth. The poet was a nurse’s aide at MDI Hospital, the artist a resident, when they set out to combine their talents. Menard’s illustrations respond in a direct manner to Alexander’s images.”

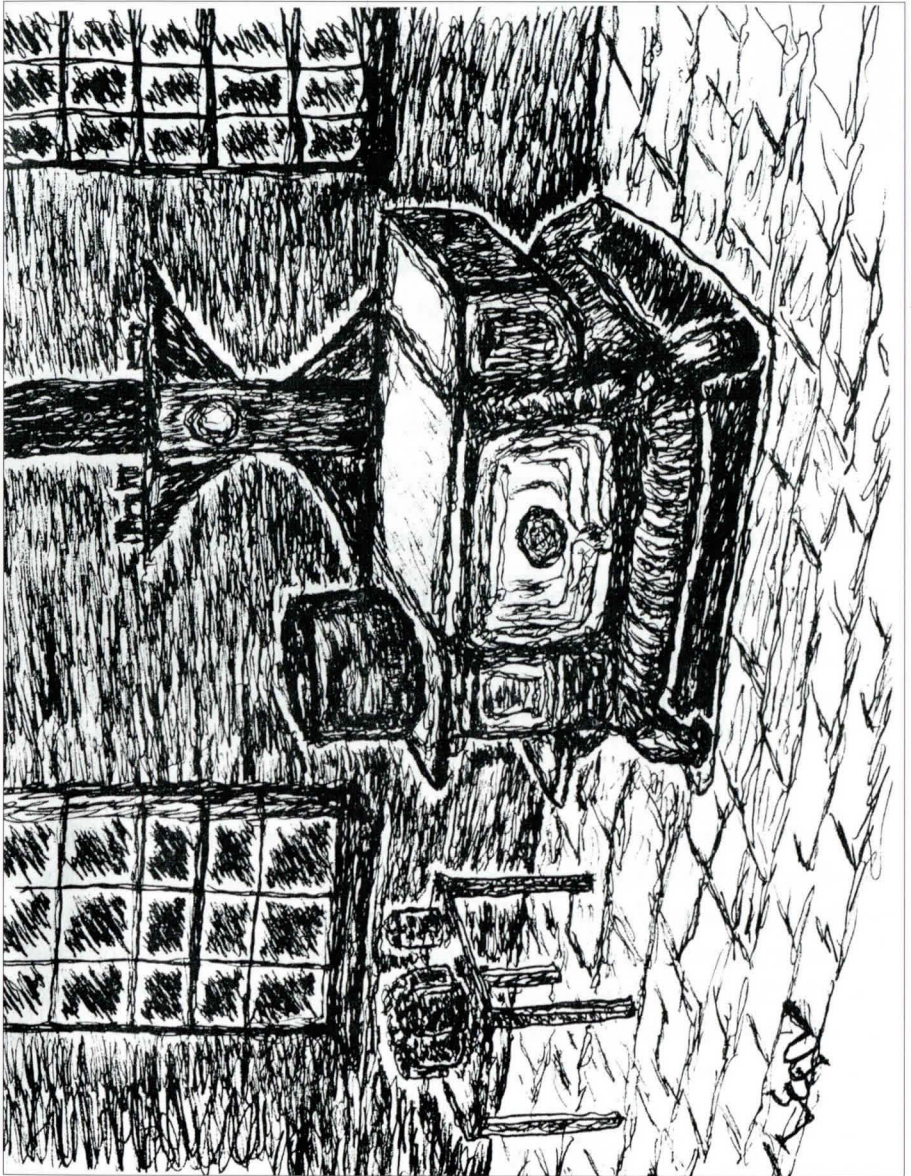
Carl Little, in “Betwixt the Hills”, the joint newsletter of the Somesville Library and MDI Historical Society (June 1991)

Candice Stover . . . A Poem about Betsy Alexander

Anticipation: One View

Oh! to be that woman with wisps of grey hair
lightly blowing from a twist gathered at your
nape, as you pedal your trusty Schwinn along
a sun-struck Maine road in July, only the morning
newspaper and a basket of wild raspberries riding
in a cardboard box mounted to your handlebars.
To be that woman, bare-headed, in a red-and-white
striped shirt, waving, exclaiming as you pass,
“What a beautiful day!” To be that woman, leaving
a wake of song in your path, choosing Beethoven’s
Ode to Joy. To know the words by heart, singing
them aloud on a bicycle. To be that woman. Oh!

. . . from *Holding Patterns* (Muse Press, 1994), selected by Mary Oliver as winner of the Maine Chapbook Award. A native of Maine, Candice Stover has traveled and taught widely, including two years in Shanghai, China. The author of several poetry collections, her most recent is *Poems from the Pond* (2007). She lives on MDI, where she teaches at College of the Atlantic and swims in, bicycles or walks to *Somes Pond* almost every day.



Betsy Alexander

Seed Pods

Who would ever wrap a gift in silver fur?
Maybe if you knew the queen, you would for her.
I boast no royal blood, yet I have seen
My next year's lupines wrapped as for a queen.

What boutique makes deliveries on wings,
Transparent and as fragile as pressed glass?
This custom for a thousand, thousand springs
Has planted maple seeds among the grass . . .
And hand-carved delicately-fashioned wooden scales
To wrap wee bundles on the balsam trails.

Simplicity of color and design,
Yet functional, with beauty in each line.
Each tree and blade her next year's gift bestows
Abundantly, gift-wrapped, from rice to rose.

Deer Beds

Some days I like to stretch myself full length
And fill the hollows where the deer have lain.
I feel my spirit drawing peace and strength
From grasses drenched by summer sun and rain,
September frost and early morning dew,
To feel the sun's hot brightness on my face,
Eyes closed against its glare above the blue
Of the September sky. Oh, blessed space
Where back and head and arms and legs may feel
The cradling of this rolling, sun-sweet sod.
I could no better worship should I kneel,
Nor in a chapel, be as close to God.

In Memoriam

He was both gentleman and gentle man;
He spoke less with his lips than with his eyes,
Found real enjoyment, *as not all men can*,
In listening. Sometimes a small surprise
Of sweet, hard apple brought him by a friend,
Or cabbage (king size), he had grown himself,
He'd almost shyly press at visit's end,
Into your hand, from off his chairside shelf.
And yes, he was as well, mechanic rare,
Skillful with tools, respected wide and far.
A man would gladly drive miles for repair
Or Hoyt's opinion on an ailing car.
And so as he lies down in final sleep,
It seems so right to all who know and care,
To see him holding pliers that he may keep
Celestial chariots in excellent repair.

Fantasy of Fog

Like hanks of shaggy wool it slowly rolled,
As if from novice hands at carding comb;
Unchecked, the fleecy strands dragged in the foam,
The bell buoy's muffled warning dully tolled.
Then as if by those unseen hands controlled,
The strands, untidy, wet, and poorly carded,
Were jerked away, and tangled and discarded.
Competing herring gulls began to scold.
Winds caught the fog, rumpling the gold bay,
Playful cats' paws skittered beyond the pier,
Stiffening breezes tidied up the day.
The throb of lobster boats at work, drew near,
Gulls circled, screeching, pressing for their pay,
Dead bait, an on-shore wind reality,
Folding away my fleecy fantasy.



Not One Small Star

I turn, and feel the folds of dark
Wrapping me 'round like heavy cloak;
The trunks and limbs of the vast park
One whispering mantle, not one bright
Small star to split the hopeless black
That (pressed against me) holds me fast,
Like evil hands against my back.
'Til suddenly I glimpse at last
Two tiny candles, birthday size,
That break the ghastly spell for me,
The lanterns of the horned owl's eyes
Shine from the gnarled old maple tree.

The Call To Muster

They harkened to the muster call
Of Sunday's leader, when that band
Took to the air from Manset's shore,
And flew so low I thought they'd land
And sojourn there another day
Of gold and blue; they did not stay.
The twenty-seven pairs of wings
Wobbled above St. Peter's spire;
I heard no call, but watched the V
Spread straight and southward, higher, higher;
They stole some glitter from the sun,
Its fire outlined their wings in flight.
I sped with them, and wild dreams spun,
(As always) at the sudden sight
Of wings that lean their pinioned length
Against the wind if foul or fair,
A V for Victory over winter,
Embossed on blue September air.

Village Meeting

We sat in a circle, both doors open wide,
Like children on low, folding chairs,
And anyone passing by, glancing inside,
Might have thought we were saying our prayers.
Such long, solemn faces, with all eyes downcast,
While we waited for one or two more;
As our president hurried in, *He was the last*,
Someone stood up, and closed the front door.
I'd expected an air of elation today,
But with three prima donnas on hand,
Any visitor would have seen quite a display
Of disharmony, *Not what was planned*.
Resignations were tendered by four of the twelve,
Amid protests and pleas to delay,
And I think we agreed for the moment to shelve
Their complaints until some future day.
Next came long recitations of tedious chores;
There are martyrs who revel in pain;
Every group suffers a couple of bores
Repeating again and again,
"I don't remember our voting on that",
And, "That's because you're never here!"
Reminiscent to me of a juvenile spat;
Did the treasurer sniff back a tear?
And this is the group that should jubilant be,
With some long overdue goals complete,
Who in full view of mountains and path to the sea,
All sat silent, and stared at our feet?
Perhaps 'twas the weather; *it was rather dour*,
But I pray we'll recover our verve,
For our record and name won't suffice to be sure,
If not one member stays on to serve.

Reluctant Winter

When first she came, her touch was light,
I greeted her as friend, grew fond
Of her pale grace and quiet charm,
But now she's "The dish-water blonde".

A guest who's overstayed her time;
Her indecisiveness, the way
She puddle-prints the kitchen floor,
I can't bear her another day!

She seems about to take her leave;
(You've had guests linger at the door?)
I edge her nearer, smile glued stiff,
She sidles back to whine some more.

What once seemed "grace", insipid seems,
The purity of pristine white
"Dishwater blonde", her lisping speech
No longer charms; is dull and trite.

I didn't even ask her here.
She came unbidden months ago.
I'll take these jonquils to her room.
Spring's coming, and she'll have to go.

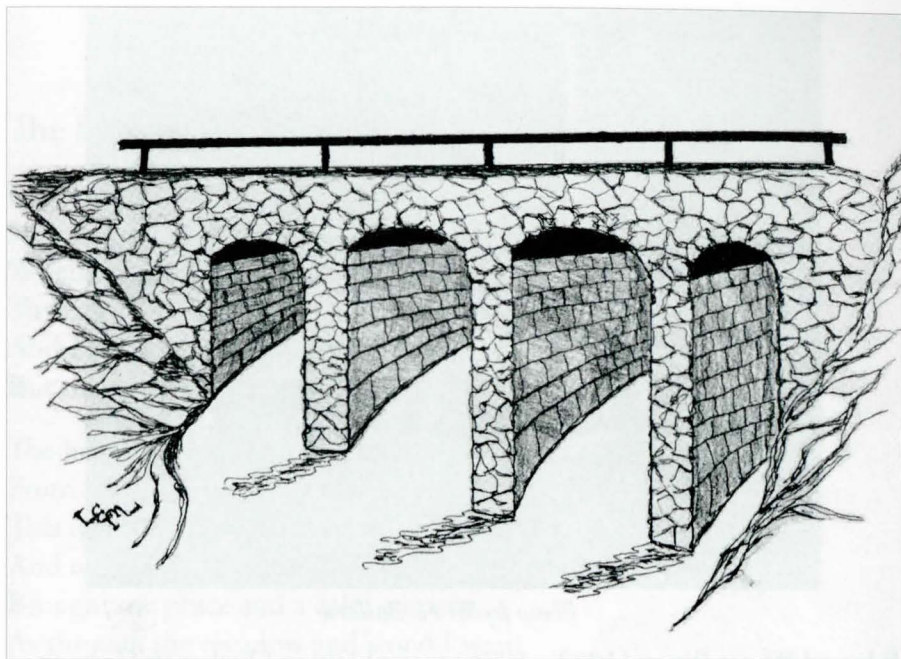


Betsy Alexander and Les Menard

*Favorite memories
of Maine's forty-two summers and two winters, with Sandy,
in our 1780 house on Oak Hill Road . . .*

A chickadee pecks a sunflower seed from my hand,
I thaw the frozen toothpaste first thing on January mornings,
the blue of the first lupine,
Sandy's delectable summer vegetables and luscious rhubarb,
the heartbreak in the loon's cry,
sailing down Somes Sound, the skipper and I, under such
 skies,
morning siestas in a sun-warmed deer bed in our field,
the swish and flutter of clouds of monarch butterflies in our
 milkweed meadow,
biking to the post office,
knowing we can name a friend in every house we pass,
the visits of our children and grandchildren,
making grave-stone rubbings,
and churning butter with the Jr. Members of the Historical
 Society in the days of the little original museum,
the presence and silence of those who, in ages past, have slept
 in our beds, dined at our table, read these same books,
 cooked and heated with these same wood stoves.
These sights, sounds and scents are forever with us.
This ever new and fresh old island.

Gratefully -
Betsy Alexander



Poems:

Riptide & Rainbows, 1982: In Memoriam; Fantasy of Fog; Seed Pods; Village Meeting.

Knee-deep in Summer, 1981: Reluctant Winter.

One Candle, 1998: Deer Beds; Not One Small Star; The Call to Muster.

Illustrations by Les Menard:

Page 72: *Riptide & Rainbows*, 1982, page 18.

Page 76: *Knee-deep in Summer*, 1981, page 35.

Page 79: *One Candle*, 1998, page 24.

Page 83: *Riptide & Rainbows*, 1982, page 31.

The photograph of Betsy Alexander and Les Menard on page 79 appeared in the Introduction to *Riptide & Rainbows*, 1982.



Photo by W. H. Ballard

Edward Wyatt Evans (1882 - 1976) was a lifelong Quaker in Germantown (Philadelphia), where he served on boards of Germantown Friends School, Haverford College, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, and the Pendle Hill Study Center. His professional work in international law and work for peace were offered through service on behalf of the American Friends Service Committee, and he was instrumental in founding the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He and his wife, Jacqueline, first brought their family of five children to Southwest Harbor in 1923, and he was a summer resident thereafter for over fifty years. His love for his family and for the simple pleasures of the natural world shows prominently in his “occasional poetry”, a gift much enjoyed by many generations of the extended family.

Caroline Elizabeth Cope (1840 - 1944) was an older cousin of Edward's who lived very nearby in Germantown. She was born deaf and mute, but was very lively, communicating mostly by writing notes. She had a live-in helper, for a long time Margaret Wysong, a nurse and friend. Every summer Carrie came to Maine, renting a house in Northeast Harbor – on the last street on the right when going north out of Northeast Harbor, just before the Asticou Gardens corner. She loved it. Carrie lived to be 104 years old, cherished by her family.

Edward W. Evans

The Evening Air Whispers

I am the least of the winds that blow,
So soft and gentle thou scarce canst know
Whether I leave thee or whether I stay;
Thy ear scarce catches my whisper low,
And I seem, as over thy cheek I stray,
But the parting breath of the dying day.

The healing coolness was given to me
From her quiet breast by the summer sea,
This delicate fragrance the wild grape lent,
And each blade of grass and each leaf of tree
Brought me peace and a calm content,
As through the meadow and wood I went.

Take these my blessings, thou passer-by;
We are but messengers, thou and I.

June 4, 1910

To Pine Cones Gathered in the Summer for the Winter's Fire

Pine cones, burn, that we may see
The woods once more by shining sea;
And smell the balsam's fragrancy,
And hear the hermit's melody.
The embers from your glowing spark
Shall light us through the winter dark,
With a peaceful heart and quiet mind,
Midst city's turmoil, till we find
Spring has returned, and we regain
The well-loved woodland trails again.

1935

To Caroline E. Cope

(for her 94th, 97th, and 103rd birthdays)

I

July 28th, 1934

A few years ago, on the day of my birth,
I started my life by arriving on earth.
In spite of my youth, I made, so they say,
A howling good start as I entered life's way.
I started with vim, and ever since then,
When the same day comes round, I've been starting again.

Whatever of trouble the year may impart,
On the day of my birth I take a fresh start.
November may blow all the leaves from the trees;
The cold of December may cause me to sneeze;
The rough wind of March may bring tears to my eyes;
June may surround me with skeeters and flies;
But around comes my birthday; I take up my pen,
And write, "Good-bye to trouble. I'm starting again."

July twenty-eight's the best doctor I have,
It's better than physic or tonic or salve.
It doesn't prescribe disagreeable doses.
It doesn't discourse about forms of phytosis.
It issues no warnings of all sorts of ills,
And better than all, it doesn't send bills.
But to all my past troubles it sings an Amen,
And whistles the tune "You're starting again."

II

July 28th, 1937

"Tis your birthday, dear 'Aunt'," said the absentee host.
"I marvel at how young you are keeping,
"And I note how you merrily laugh at the years,
"Do you do it by eating or sleeping?
"I observe with what zest you pursue social life,
"Without ever seeming to rue it;
"You trip hither and yon with the greatest of ease.

“Pray! How do you manage to do it?”

“Young man,” said the “Aunt”, “if you want to keep young,

“You must learn more than’s taught in the schools.

“You must study the art of enjoyment of life.

“Let me give you a few simple rules.

“You must go to a party three times every week;

“You must take in the museums, too;

“And let me impress on your mind at the start:

“You must frequently visit the zoo.

“The lions and tigers are pleasant to see;

“They’ll give you a roaring good time;

“The python will swallow a pig while you wait;

“The diving sea-lions are prime.

“But the monkeys, the monkeys, the monkeys, my boy,

“Go witness their capers and strife;

“They’ll recall to your mind a lot of your friends,

“And they’ll take ten full years from your life.

“By observing Dame Nature you’ll learn to keep young.

“You’ll see, if you’re still and don’t chatter,

“How the humming-bird sips from the sweetness of life,

“Without overdoing the matter.

“And knowledge you’ll gain if you’ll look at the sky,

“And read on its star-spangled page.

“You’ll learn from the stars how your eyes ought to twinkle

“No matter how great is your age.

“These are rules that I give you, young man,

“To guide you in what you should do.

“Most important of all, you must never forget,

“To frequently visit the zoo.

“That I’m able, my boy, to keep on being young,

“I attribute to things not a few,

“Which have helped me to find much enjoyment in life,

“But, chiefly, I credit the zoo.

“Yes, the monkeys, the monkeys, the monkeys, my boy

“Go witness their capers and strife;

“They’ll recall to your mind a lot of your friends,
“And they’ll take ten full years from your life.”

III

*July twenty-eighth
Nineteen forty three,
Which makes, as I figure,
One Hundred and Three*

“What is old age?” said a small boy to me.
“What is old age?” as he climbed on my knee.
“Well, my laddie,” said I, “to learn of old age
“Get the Book of the Years and turn to the page
“That is marked at the top ‘Year 103’.”

“And what does it say?” said the laddie to me.
“On the page that is marked ‘Year 103’.”

“It says: when thus far you have drunk of life’s cup
“You are like an old dog looking down on a pup,
“And when some young chap crows: ‘I’m ninety today’,
“You’ll give him a pat on the head and you’ll say:
“ ‘Keep on, little man, and some day you’ll grow up’.”

And the lad on my lap said: “What else can you see
“On the page that is marked ‘Year 103’?”

“It says that old age is an old Princess Charming,
“Who greets each new year with a smile that’s disarming.
“Though it happens, of course, that the body grows frail,
“Her patience and courage and cheer never fail,
“And she tells Father Time not to think he’s alarming.
“In youth and in life her interest is keen.
“She sheds grace about her; her ways are serene.
“Though the hours move onward from daylight to night,
“The spirit’s a candle that still sheds its light.
“And this, says the book, is what old age can mean.”

“And is it all true?” said the laddie to me.
“I’m sure, my dear boy, it’s as true as can be,
“For someone I know is one hundred and three.”

The Fable of the Resourceful Manager and the Pile of Wood

by Aesop, the Younger

(The occasion for these lines was the election to the Haverford College Board of Managers of an alumnus who was thought to have a considerable amount of this world's goods.)

In a thoughtful mood, near a pile of wood,
A Resourceful Haverford Manager stood.
A splendid fellow, who well could claim
That in daily actions he lived his name.
But on this occasion, it's understood,
His mind was bent on gathering wood.
Now that pile of wood he'd no title to,
Yet hopefully he proceeded to glue
His eye on it, for he said: "It's a well
Admitted fact that you never can tell
How much the gods may do for you
If on the wood your eyes you glue.
And I covet that wood, for in cold and storm,
It will keep dear Alma Mater warm.
Commandment Ten has its place, no doubt,
But I wonder if Moses would feel put out
If I should assume that, in this case,
The Tenth Commandment must give place
To those other words of some wise, old elf,
That the Lord helps him who helps himself.
I have pondered this and devised a plan
By which, I hope, and think, I can
By honest means corral that wood
For dear old Alma Mater's good.
I've a vacant place at my Board, and I'll
Approach the owner of that pile,
In friendly fashion, without guile,
And ask him in with us to share
Our fellowship and frugal fare.
I'll treat him like my long lost frater;
He'll fall in love with Alma Mater;
And after a while, you see, she'll be
Residuary legatee.

Without undue deliberation,
Or long drawn out premeditation,
With no delay, or hesitation,
The plan was put in operation;
It worked, and ran, smooth and serene,
As a well-made and oiled machine.
At last the day by Heaven was sent
To open up the testament.
It read: - "My well-loved pile of wood,
Comprising all my worldly good,
With all the bark and all the shavings,
Which represent my lifelong savings,
With all the chips and sawdust, too,
I give, devise and bequeath to: "
Here followed several pages more,
O'er which the Manager did pore,
And yet, somehow, he never came
To dear, old Alma Mater's name.
The Resourceful Manager heaved a sigh;
He wiped salt water from his eye,
And did some high-powered meditating
About testators and testating.
A look of infinite sadness spread
Over his noble face, as he said: -
"The will o' the wisp is a dangerous illusion,
But the will o' the wood is a greater delusion.
I have often heard, but now I know it,
The truth declared by our Quaker poet,
That of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: - 'It might have been.'
Yes, Whittier, when you wrote that line,
You said a mouthful, I opine;
Yet you were only partly right.
Your words of wisdom did not quite
Bring deepest truth into our sight,
For of all sad words of pen or tongue,
The saddest are these: - 'We have been stung'."