

King's Dock

R.D. Skillings

1 There,
2 Where the Kennebec River
3 Runs both ways,
4 Where the wide tidal water
5 Moves with massive pull—
6 Shore once of King George III,
7 Muddy boulders, piling stubs—

8 A many-windowed sunlit house
9 Shipwright-built on a steep rise,
10 High lawn by mid-July
11 Mushy with wormy pears,
12 Lower field flattened
13 With salt hay at full moon.

14 A long-neglected, blackened
15 Revolutionary War plaque
16 On a lichen-scaled glacial rock,

17 The ragged stump
18 Of a baby blue spruce
19 Hacked down one Christmas,
20 Unmissed until spring,

21 A casque of while lilacs
22 Luxuriant, untended,
23 Enclosing a dank
24 Antiquated stone well,

25 Glints of mica, feldspar,
26 Quartz and flint

27 Comprise my memories
28 Of childhood innocence.

29 Mother and Father
30 Raked fall leaves
31 And filled the well,
32 Always empty
33 On Memorial Day
34 When we returned
35 And I ran to confirm

36 It had happened again:
37 Something become nothing.

38 I was eight
39 On VJ Day.
40 The kitchen radio
41 Static roared
42 And they danced
43 Around me,
44 Their only progeny—

45 Minnow-pool-wader
46 Dragonfly-follower;
47 Beholder of daddy longlegs
48 Moles, caterpillars and toads;

49 Scrambling cut-finger; nester
50 In tall grass; thrilled hider
51 From imaginary enemies,
52 Cloud-faced God, voracious maw,
53 Ghosts and comic-book crooks;

54 Knee-banged rock-climber,
55 Beguiled by the only real danger,
56 Lured by my parents'
57 Dire warnings and fear

58 Of the medium mysterious,
59 Blue from the house, colorless,
60 Transparent up close,
61 That could snatch a stick
62 Boat away
63 Quicker than I could reach,

64 Gold-spangled, hypnotic
65 Suck and swirl or gray
66 Wind-riled slaps and spray,

67 Still as a dark mirror
68 At full flood tide,
69 Reeking mudflats
70 At dead low ebb,
71 With a ledge far out
72 Where seagulls stood.

73 One night
74 Beneath the aurora borealis,
75 An exhausted buck, snorted for the shore,
76 Only its own length away,
77 Succumbed to the quickening current
78 Of the close-dredged channel,
79 Turned and slipped broadside,
80 Then backwards
81 Faster and faster
82 Past the dark lawn where we stood
83 Amid a blitz of fireflies,
84 Whispering, *Come on, Come on,*
85 Shouting, *Come on,*
86 For a brief while
87 Of disbelief and fading hope
88 Trying by flashlight
89 And flickering sky
90 To hold its wide eyes
91 Black nose, sky-thrust,
92 And antlers in sight.

93 When I was ten
94 Father had gates set up
95 At the driveway's end,
96 Four rough granite blocks
97 Like two pair of giants' dice
98 Piled two by two
99 Astride the grassy track,
100 Five feet high,
101 Raw as new tombstones.

102 How grand they must have seemed
103 To his ambitious eye,
104 How promising
105 His squat block columns
106 Bargained from a quarryman friend,
107 Raised among strewn stones,
108 Rose-buried bones of an old wall.

109 I climbed them
110 And sat like a king,
111 No other children near,
112 And watched the wildflower
113 Pageants blaze,
114 And fade and then bow down,
115 And studied bee-writing.

116 But on the sultry air,
117 No matter what the hour,
118 A riveter's pound
119 Like a sleepless whine
120 Rang echoes
121 From the Iron Works
122 A mile down river
123 Where warships were
124 Always a-building.

125 The other way
126 Was Merrymeeting Bay,
127 Dauntless flights of honking geese
128 And the old secret life of inland Maine.

129 To afford a more prestigious house,
130 Live nearer the center of town,
131 Father sacrificed King's Dock
132 And summers on the river
133 When I was twelve, the gulls
134 Yet to inaugurate the gates
135 As bivalve anvils

136 And lucky others since have lived
137 In the light-filled house
138 On that idyllic hill
139 On the Long Reach,
140 Now Bath, once a part
141 Of Sagadahoc,
142 Where the English
143 Displaced the Dawn People,
144 The proud Kennebec Abenakis;

145 Whence, pushing ever north and east,
146 The relentless Protestants in 1724
147 Massacred the Norridgewocks,

148 Scalped the sagamore Abomazeen
149 And their soul-loving counselor,
150 Lexicographer and bulwark of New France,
151 The fierce black-robe Sabastian Rale;

152 Then took Louisbourg and Quebec
153 While the river sang
154 With sawmill and hammer
155 The primeval forest's doom,
156 Till Awanochs alone

157 (*Who? Where from?*)
 158 Owned all the Dawn Land,
 159 Home of the Great Being,
 160 Great warrior, great lover of life,
 161 Who wore the stars, sun and moon,
 162 Whose forbidden face was seen
 163 In the white gales of Mt. Katahdin,
 164 Whose rocky feet and legs
 165 Roared down to crush the heedless;

166 Where in 1775
 167 The cocky posterity
 168 Of the victors
 169 In a bloody century
 170 Of five intimate,
 171 Hardly demarcated
 172 Border wars
 173 Against the heretical
 174 Abomination
 175 Of French Catholicism
 176 And its allies,
 177 The native spawn of Satan—

178 Whose forbears' loud dogs and lean cows
 179 Learned to scout tomahawk and arrow,
 180 Share their masters' terror
 181 Of the dancing floors
 182 Of the torture islands,
 183 Ritual sites
 184 Of fires that burned all night,
 185 Down to their own time shunned
 186 By every living thing
 187 But the mournful herons and quawks—

188 These,
 189 The inheritors,
 190 Considered themselves
 191 An up-and-coming lot,
 192 Makers of a new empire,
 193 Sweet Beulah Land
 194 (Plenty of boots and staves,
 195 Shingles and fish)
 196 And at word of Lexington,
 197 Eight days on the way,
 198 Without a shot
 199 Ordered off King George's forty carpenters,
 210 Hewing masts and spars at His Majesty's Dock,

211 Arrested the Royal Agent, Mr. Parry, Esq.,
212 Speedily raised a volunteer company
213 That marched to Cambridge in six days,
214 Fought at Bunker Hill
215 Behind the rail fence,
216 Came nabobs home unscathed,
217 Not a known Tory
218 To be found
219 In the town,

220 Redoubtably peopled the whole reach
221 From Whiskeag Creek
222 All the way to Winnegance,
223 Phippsburg and Popham Beach,
224 Fished, built clipper ships,
225 Plied the seas, grew rich,
226 Declined with wood and wind,
227 Throve again with steam and steel.

228 I ride the annual August cruise,
229 Restless, drink in hand,
230 Heir to my native pessimism,
231 And marvel again
232 At the families of elms
233 (Long vanished from the coast)
234 Flourishing still on the hills upriver,
235 The light-touched deer
236 Grazing in the dark gulfs of meadow,
237 Mist lifting off the glassy water
238 After a muggy day,
239 And I mull natural beauty's
240 Power to compose and console
241 And I feel the self
242 Dissolve a little
243 And wonder how we shall fare
244 When none can see their death
245 As less than the end of all.

246 The day fades,
247 Inscrutable stars appear,
248 And the Sasanoa,
249 Emanating murmured lauds,
250 Laughter, smoke and beer,
251 Wheels in the vast silent bay
252 And slips on the tide
253 Back down river, berths
254 Beneath the monster bridge,

255 Beyond which the salmon-colored
256 Argon lights glare all night
257 On the grotesque shapes
258 Of guided-missile frigates.

259 THROUGH THESE GATES PASS
260 THE BEST SHIPBUILDERS IN THE WORLD.

261 We are the Nuclear People,
262 Begetters of future woe.
263 The Stone Age Race
264 Left little trace
265 In thirty thousand years—
266 Shards of artful implements,
267 Ochre of the Red Paint People,
268 Mounds of the Oyster Shell Men
269 Who surely loved to eat.

270 The Abenakis saw no signs,
271 Never pondered earlier times,
272 Dreamt of no predecessors
273 Except their own ancestors,
274 Wise guardians, illimitably the same,
275 Familiar and kind. The forest savages
276 Learned well the names
277 And nature of their supplanters.

278 It would do no good
279 To cut one's throat.

280 In memorial dream I light
281 Pungent bayberry candles
282 Five feet tall
283 That can be smelled far out to sea—

284 To the mild Madockawando
285 Who burned Dover, Wells, York, and Saco;
286 To Abomazeen's captured squaw
287 Who betrayed the hidden path
288 To napping Norridgewock,
289 Ended helpless, blind, in rags
290 Begging in the snow at Christmas
291 Outside Ft. Richmond;

292 To the Sagamore Barons de Saint-Castin,
293 *Coueurs de bois, père et fils*;
294 To their Penobscot squaws and children;

295 To lost New France
296 Where the tribes
297 To this day
298 Might have held place.

299 At King's Dock
300 Father's four granite blocks
301 Have sunk half from sight,
302 Two beneath
303 And two above the ground.
304 Rife weeds and vines enwreath them.
305 The house on the hill is dark.
306 The glimmering river is still.
307 Listen.

308 But the steeple deity doesn't speak.
309 That gurgle is a drain. The brain
310 Has eaten everything, even art, and spat it out.
311 The superfluous soul dispersed.
312 The grave of hopes is full.