

INTRODUCTION

Women of the Dawn traces the lives of four Wabanaki Indian women. (*Wabanaki* means Dawnland, and it is the collective name given to Algonquian-speaking tribes living near the North Atlantic coast¹ – where the light of dawn first touches the American continent.) These women shared the same first name, Mary – bestowed by Catholic missionaries, but distinctively pronounced by Wabanakis as “Molly.” Beyond a name, they shared a tragedy born of European contact. In the face of this tragedy, they all dared to bridge the gap between their own worlds and that of the European strangers who invaded their continent. Yet each woman possessed enough passion and perseverance to resist being swallowed up by the pervasive ways of the newcomers and to hold on to a vital core of herself and Wabanaki culture. As mothers, they bore seeds of continuity, rooted in the past, branching toward the future.

The book spans four centuries. It begins with Molly Mathilde, who was born on the eve of the Wabanakis’ disintegration, and ends with Molly Dellis, born at the dawn of their regeneration. Because Molly Dellis actually researched Molly Mathilde’s life, the stories form a circle, and Molly Dellis serves as narrator for each biography. Echoing the fact that all four women canoed the region’s woodland rivers and moved from one stream to the next by way of foot-worn portage routes, the book carries readers from one profile to the next by way of brief “portages.” The portages are vignettes of Molly Dellis at critical passages in her personal life, moments when she contemplates the experiences of her female forebears in search of insight. Gazing into the distant mirror of their lives, Molly Dellis comes to know these women and brings them forward into her own life. Holding them in thought, she faces herself and gathers strength to carry on. Their stories become her story.

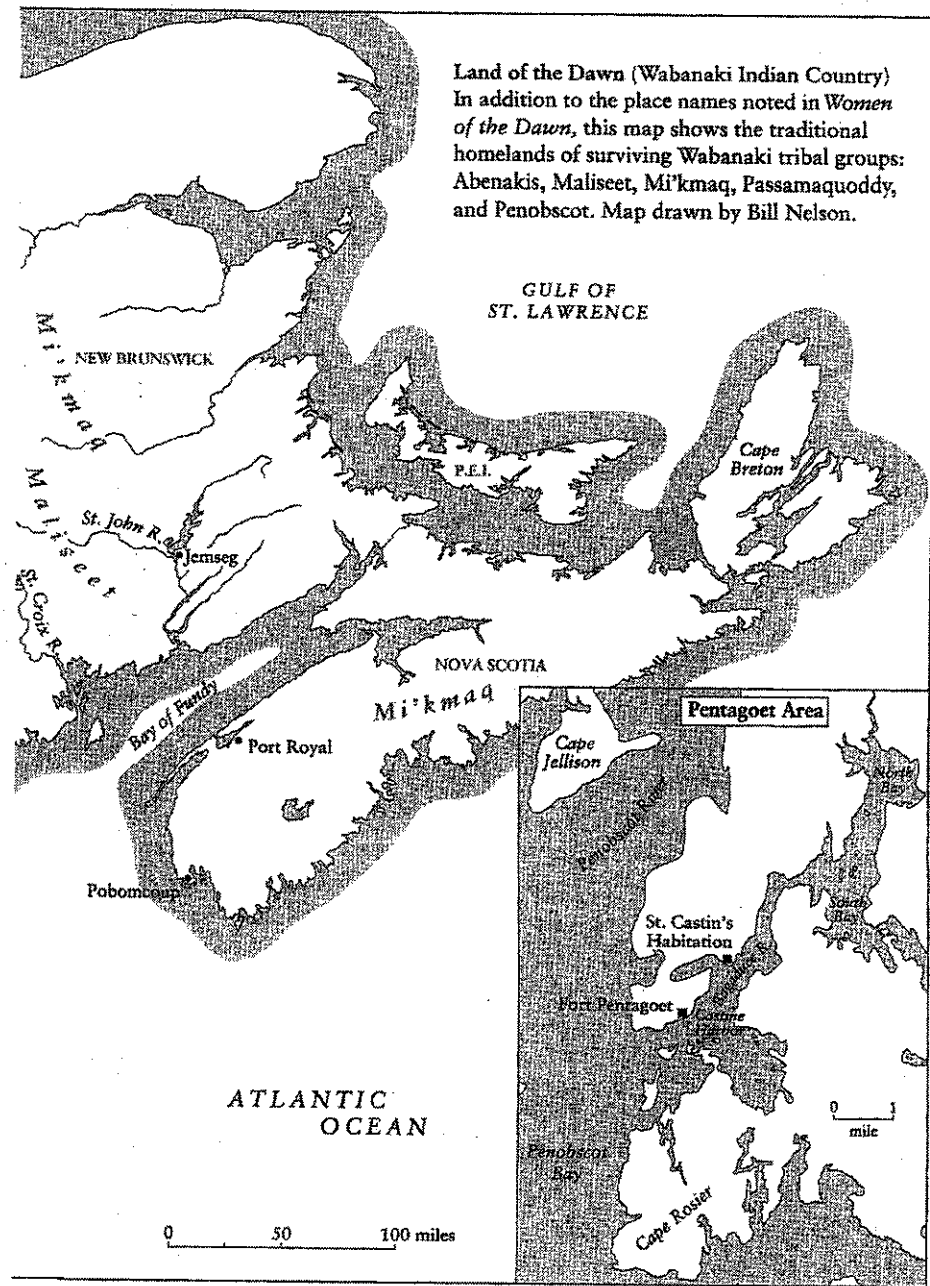
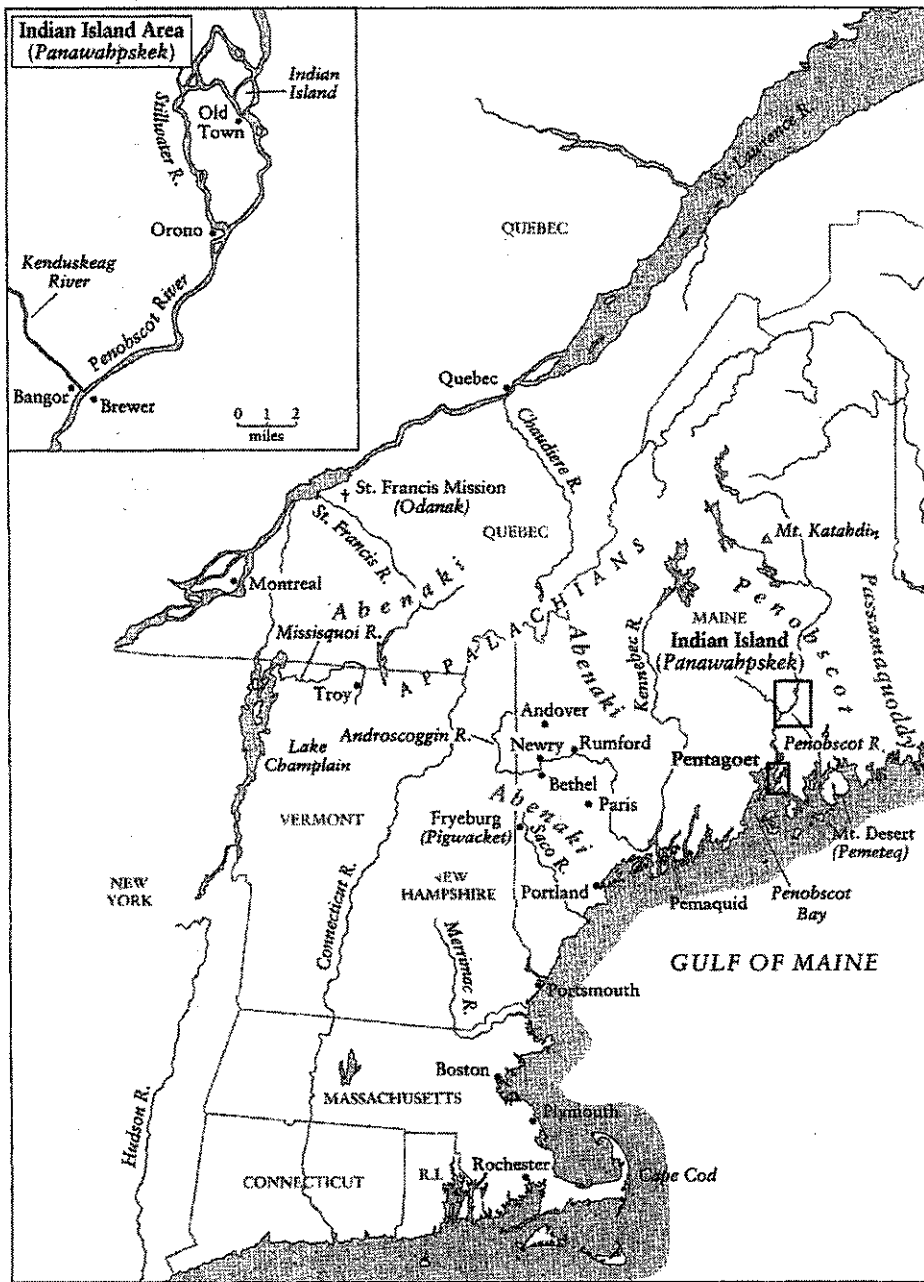
Combined, these brief biographies tell the long saga of colonization in northeastern America from the rare vantage point of women.

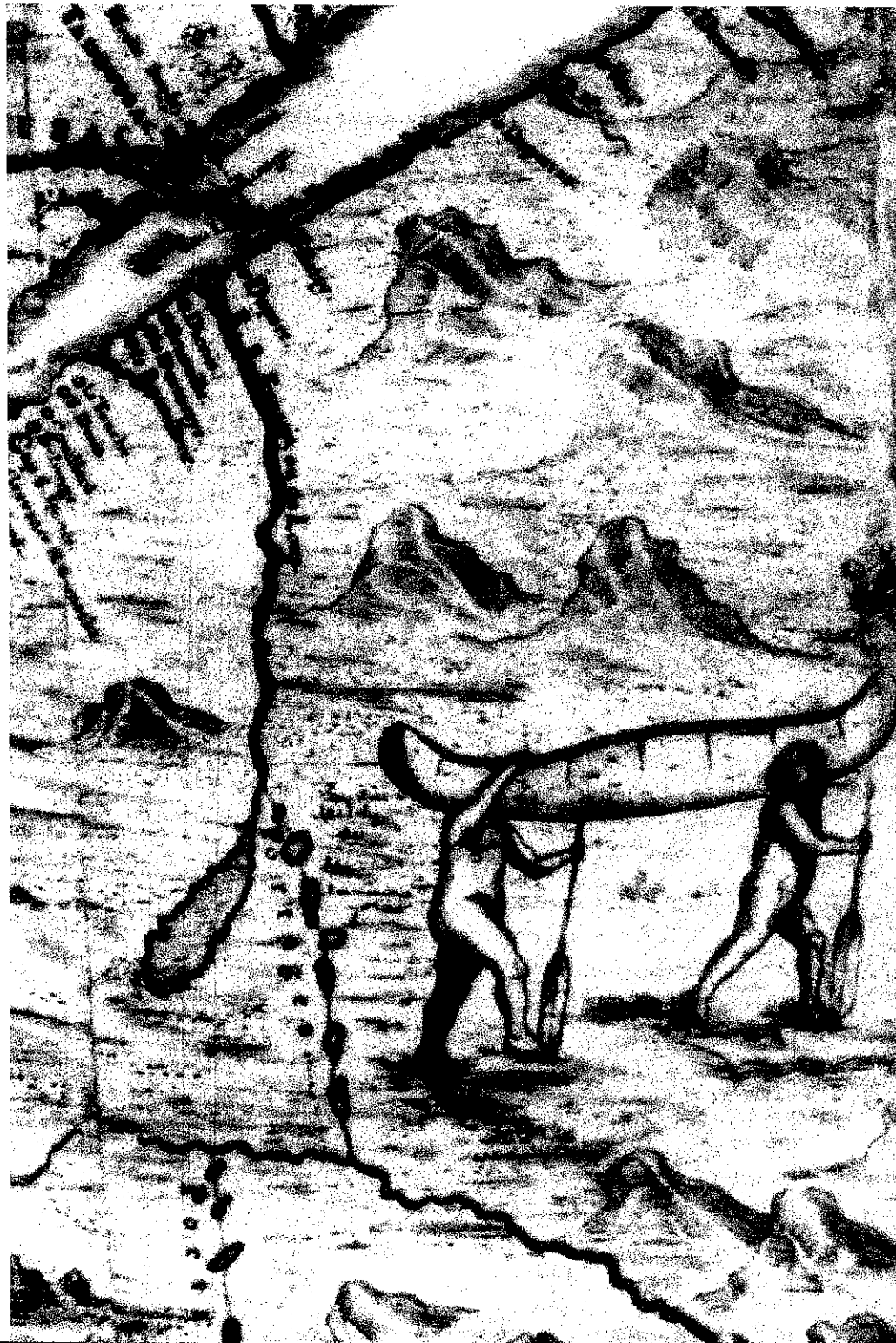
1. Today’s surviving Wabanaki communities include the Abenakis, Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot.

They wed fact with feeling, and each story is a step in a spiritual pilgrimage from innocence to shrewdness to bitterness to wisdom. The journey is represented metaphorically by linking each life to a particular season – the bountiful ease of summer, the foreboding of fall, the destitution of winter, the promise of spring.

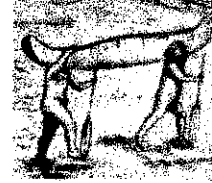
Beyond biography, history, and spiritual journey, *Women of the Dawn* is a challenge to stereotypical views of American Indian women; the individuals in this quartet are gloriously distinct from one another. At the same time, the shared aspects of their lives – especially motherhood and their struggle against colonialism – show the vital roles that Native women play in the cultural survival of tribes. Each woman, in her own way – and in her unique time and circumstances – faced the question, *What of the past will be carried into the future?* The answer to that question lies not in this book, but in the lives of all of us, Indian and non-Indian alike.

Readers interested in this book’s theoretical orientation, research methodology, and writing strategy may refer to the Methodology and References section at the end of the book.





PORTAGE



Long ago, Indians who lived in the Dawnland moved through vast forests on rivers that laced the land and linked its farthest reaches to the sea. In the winter they tied snowshoes on their feet and trudged the frozen waterways. During the rest of the year they traveled more easily in bark canoes, poling upstream or paddling downstream with the current. When a watercourse became dangerously difficult or diminished to a trickle, or when people wished to move from one river valley to another, they pulled their lightweight boats ashore and carried them over age-old portage paths through shadowy woodlands. Each portage spoke of challenge and change and new beginnings.

February 1935: Manhattan, New York City

On a late winter afternoon the sun slipped below the windows of the New York Public Library, and the main reading room fell into shadow. A petite, dark-eyed woman drew her coat around her shoulders and continued making notes in minuscule script. Her regal silhouette caught the attention of others in the room as they paused and absentmindedly glanced up from their books. One person after another felt their eyes wander in her direction. They gazed at her finely cut features and the elegant slant of her neck. They stared at the odd style of her raven-hued hair, parted in the middle and wound into two glossy coils, one over each ear. The bold ones scanned her figure, pausing when they reached the firm curve of her calves. Then, reacting to her disciplined posture, they straightened up a bit in their chairs and turned back to their work.

Molly Dellis Nelson had firm legs because she was a dancer – a Penobscot Indian dancer from Maine who had lived and performed in Europe. A year earlier she had left Paris to give birth to her child at

home. The Great Depression coupled with Europe's intense political turmoil kept her from going back across the Atlantic with her new daughter. But France remained in her thoughts. Seated at one of the public library's heavy oak tables, she pored over leather-bound books chronicling the seventeenth-century relations of Indians and Europeans. In particular, she hunted information about an Indian woman whose first name matched hers. Records referred to this woman by her Catholic baptismal name, Marie Mathilde, but her own people probably called her "Molly," the Native pronunciation of "Marie." Whatever she was called, this daughter of a great Penobscot River chief was an ancestral guide for Molly Dellis's worldly explorations, for Marie Mathilde had made a pioneering step across a vast cultural divide: she had married Jean Vincent d'Abbadie, the Baron of St. Castin.

The centuries-old story of Marie Mathilde and the French adventurer had quickened Molly's imagination since childhood. Now, however, it was an obsession, for she too had fallen in love with a Frenchman named Jean – Jean Archambaud, a *Paris Soir* journalist and the father of her child. Jean had sent her pages of notes about St. Castin, gathered in French archives and libraries, and now she aimed to flesh out Marie Mathilde's life to see how it fit with that of St. Castin. With an ocean between them, Jean and Molly hoped to coauthor a story about a love affair that foreshadowed and somehow fortified their own unorthodox union. More than this, Molly sought insight into bygone days that might help her mend the fractured traditions she had inherited. A journey into Marie Mathilde's life was a pilgrimage toward a time when Indian hearts were yet unbroken, a chance to piece together her own splintered soul.

A chime sounded, warning that the library would close in fifteen minutes. Molly sighed. It had been a long day, and she felt weary and restless. Putting down her pen, she closed her eyes and bowed her head so she could massage the back of her neck. Then, head still bowed, she dropped her hands to her lap and in the solitude of her thoughts tried once again to envision this seventeenth-century Penobscot Indian woman.

It was not easy to picture her, for in Marie Mathilde's day European explorers, traders, and officials took almost no note of women.

References about her in colonial documents and history books were made in passing, all in connection with her father and her husband. Novelists and poets, including the great Longfellow, had penned melodramatic phrases about her legendary beauty, but their verbal portraits captured little more than the Indian princess of popular imagination. Like tin mirrors, they revealed nothing of her soul. Molly knew better than to trust these delusive depictions, for she too had been chronicled by writers who savored idealized image over genuine substance. None saw beyond her stage name, Molly Spotted Elk, an icon of the romantic Indian, a commodity created for public consumption. At times their hollow words worked on her like demons, leaving her as empty as the icon itself. Her fear of this emptiness, as much as her love for Jean, drove her research. If she could truly *find* Marie Mathilde, if she could grasp and understand this foremother's ephemeral presence, perhaps she would achieve the fullness of her own being.

The final warning bell chimed. Molly stood, pulled on her winter coat and gathered up the paltry notes she had made that day. Given the scarcity of written information about Marie Mathilde, she could see only one way to reveal her soul. First, she would find the contours of this woman by painting around her, by marking out the natural and historical setting in which she had lived. Then she would step inside, inhabit the silhouette and give it form by building with insight on the few known facts of her life. With patience, Marie Mathilde's portrait would emerge. Somewhere beyond the veils of history and literature stood a real woman, one who had left an imprint on life etched from the challenges she had suffered and the choices she had made. What traces in the faces and characters of her Penobscot descendants came from her? What secrets did she know that were now buried? Had she, centuries ago, planted the seeds of Molly Dellis Nelson's yearnings?

As Molly stepped out into the icy dusk of the winter's evening, her thoughts remained so centered on Marie Mathilde's story that she barely noticed the cold.

CHAPTER THREE

Moon of Blinding Snow

Molly Molasses (Mary Pelagie), ca. 1775–1867

Just to stay alive was an achievement during winters in Wabanaki Country. Temperatures plunged far below freezing and downpours of snow shrouded the landscape and hampered mobility. Some creatures burrowed in for the season. Others retreated to warmer climates. Those who faced the weather head-on risked much. Often, after the snow fell and settled, cold, wild wind whipped it back into a blizzard. During the Moon of Blinding Snow most storms had more than one life.



IN 1865 Molly Molasses was ninety years old and bitter to the bone. Most folks in Bangor stepped aside when she passed, looking down to avoid her hard gaze. Others, mesmerized by her keen dark eyes, paused long enough to drop a coin into her outstretched hand. Some gave because they pitied her, especially during Maine's merciless winters when she clutched a worn woolen blanket around the slope of her shoulders. Many gave out of fear, for they had heard that this old Penobscot Indian woman was a witch. Better keep her happy, they whispered to each other, or she'll use her magic against us. Molly Molasses fanned their anxiety with her volatile temper, convinced that their uneasiness propped up her pride and increased the success of her begging. To those who gave silver instead of copper, she offered a photograph of herself. She liked the picture of the stern proud woman wearing the traditional peaked headdress of her people. Along with the photo, she handed out a poem written for her by a local bard. The ode, "To Moll Molasses," ended with this stanza:

*I write these rhymes, poor Moll, for you to sell –
Go sell them quick to any saint or sinner –
Not to save one soul from heaven or hell,
But just to buy your weary form a dinner.*

Her life had not always been like this – just as Bangor had not always been the lumber capital of the world, cleared of trees and crowded with twenty thousand inhabitants from a foreign land. During her childhood, hefty white pines instead of brick buildings had linked earth to sky, and rather than the screaming of sawmills, the sounds of the Penobscot River had filled the air. Her family had camped often in glades all along the Penobscot between Bangor and the tribe's main village on Indian Island upstream. They had fished

the river to its upper reaches and traveled its tributaries to fish and to hunt or trap beaver, marten, and other four-legged animals. She and her little sister had come to know the trails that snaked through the vast forests between these streams as well as they knew each other.

For a long time, when the French and English still warred over Indian country, this stretch of the Penobscot River valley had been a safe haven for Molly's people – a place where Wabanakis living along the Saco and Kennebec Rivers, as well as those on the lower Penobscot River, retreated when threatened by scalp bounty hunters. At the end of those horrible wars, scalping had stopped, but the King of England assumed ownership of all Wabanaki Country, and English colonists began pressing onto Penobscot land. The first homesteader came to Bangor in 1769, six years before Molly Molasses's birth. About the time she was born, two settlers built log cabins and a small sawmill at the falls just south of Indian Island. Others trickled in during the next two decades, but throughout Molly's girlhood there were more Indians than whites in the region. She grew up well versed in the old ways of her people.

While Penobscot boys gleaned the importance of hunting and warfare, Molly Molasses, like all Penobscot girls, came to appreciate the value of women's work. She learned how to raise corn and where to gather berries, lilyroots, fiddleheads, and waterfowl eggs. Her mother taught her how to scrape and soften animal hides and sew them into moccasins and clothing; how to fashion watertight bark containers and lash together a wigwam; and how to pluck a porcupine, flatten and dye its quills, and use them to embroider clothing and barkwork. Moreover, like every Penobscot child, male or female, Molly learned the benefits and hardships inherent in each season of the year and discovered the balance of firmness and flexibility needed to fit one's life to the variabilities of nature.

Perhaps most important, Molly learned about the Penobscot spirit world and *m'teoulin* (magic). As she listened to stories told by the elders and watched how her people lived, she came to understand that all life forms had a spirit force and that there was no line separating the natural from the supernatural. As for *m'teoulin*, it was a power given by the Great Spirit to a very few for the good of the whole.

Those who possessed it were able to contend with unseen forces. They could interpret dreams, drive off disease or death, predict where game could be found, and send a *bao-higan* (spirit helper) to inflict harm on enemies. For generations *m'teoulin* had run in Molly's family, so no one was surprised when it became evident that Molly had this gift. As the years went by, magic, more than the everyday skills of women, would help her survive.

At odds with such beliefs were Catholic priests determined to save Indian souls. Building on the traditions of French "blackrobes," Catholic priests from Canada visited Indian Island regularly during Molly's young years. In addition to giving religious instruction, hearing confessions, and performing marriage ceremonies, they baptized children and gave them Christian names. That is how she got her name: Mary Pelagie, which Wabanakis pronounced as Molly Balassee. Later in her life, white folks would make a word play on this and call her Molly Molasses.

During her childhood, Molly and her family centered their life on Indian Island, the tribe's ancient gathering place. This 315-acre hump of land sat in the Penobscot River, thirty-five miles from the coast, just above a waterfall at the head of the tidal river. Most Penobscots came to Indian Island each spring to plant corn and in the fall to harvest it. Many also spent the winter months here, but they left the place often, traveling by river to seasonal fishing and hunting grounds. In the spring, a good number of them portaged around the falls and paddled their canoes downstream to the ocean to hunt seals. They camped en route in riverine coves and sometimes stayed in one spot for a week or more to fish. Molly knew all the ancient names of their traditional stopovers. The names revealed what could be found in each place. *Mar-tarmes-con-tus-sook* (At the young shad catching) lay just above Stillwater Falls; just below the falls lay *Mur-lur-mes-su-kur-gar-nuk* (Alewife catching on the way). *Asick* (Clam-bed), near Stockton, was the first place they could find good clams on their downriver journey to the sea. The hilly place white people called Camden, Molly knew as *Martar-kar-mi-co-suk* (High land). Most years, when traveling back upriver at summer's end, her family camped for a time in meadows along the Kenduskeag (Eel River), just above its confluence with the Penobscot at Bangor. Beyond the good eel fishing promised by its

name, this was a fine place to hunt moose in autumn and early winter. Continuing upriver, they usually stopped just before Old Town at Tar-la-lar-goo-des-suk (A place of painting), where Molly's mother and the other women painted themselves before entering the village.

When on the move, Molly's family lived in small, conical, birch-bark wigwams, which they could assemble quite quickly. When her father left their campsites to hunt, he slept on a bed of fir boughs in the open air, under a lean-to or a tipped-over canoe when it rained, wrapped in furs when it snowed. Back on Indian Island, they lived in a longhouse with members of their extended family. Several longhouses were arranged in rows. Men built the frames for these dwellings out of pine tree trunks fastened with spruce root, and women stitched together sheets of bark to make the roofs and walls. Inside they tucked bark containers here and there and hung woven bags from rafters and lodge poles to hold utensils, medicinal herbs, and other useful items. Like wigwams, longhouses had earthen floors, and they were furnished with animal hides to sit upon. In the winter, women covered the cold floors with thick carpets of fragrant hemlock boughs blanketed with bearskins. The boughs and skins, along with a crackling fire and a cluster of other bodies, kept everyone warm. Dogs, cherished hunting partners, huddled near the fire as members of the family.

Within most homes, an observant eye could see many signs that the community was not isolated. Iron pots simmered over the fire, muskets leaned against the wall, and canvas sacks of sugar slumped in a corner of the room. These items and many more came from trade with white folks. They had been available to Indians in the region for many generations in exchange for furs and, more recently, crafts. Fur trade was hardly the huge international enterprise it had been in previous times, for demand had decreased as had the population of fur-bearing animals. Nonetheless, Molly's father, along with other Wabanakis who had survived the colonial wars and the American Revolution, still depended on hunting and selling furs to eke out a living. Even the smallest white frontier town had at least one merchant who dealt primarily in furs, and there were always settlers who would purchase a skin or two now and then. Time and again, as far back as Molly could remember, she had watched her father go off with his

gun, knife, and hunting dog in hope of bringing home meat to feed his family and animal hides to sell.

One of the best hunters in the Penobscot tribe was John Neptune, eight years Molly's senior. He was a member of the Eel Clan, which had a reputation for magic and for relying on eels as spirit helpers. His family, like Molly's, often hunted and fished along the Kenduskeag or Eel River. Lanky and agile as a teenager, Neptune grew into a tall, robust young man. His face was intriguing, for his features were at once fine and formidable: cheeks elegantly high but boldly broad; penetrating eyes gentled by sleepy lids; a firmly set, yet small and delicately shaped mouth; and a great beak of a nose that appeared almost petite head-on. In character Neptune was equally striking -- a resolute fellow with a sharp intellect and dramatic oratory skills. Moreover, as everyone knew, he possessed m'teoulin. While this was quite common in his clan, Neptune's magic was uniquely powerful, so powerful that people said he could find green corn in winter and ice in the summer, and that he could make his voice heard a hundred miles away. From the time he was a young man, everyone realized that he would have a place of leadership within the tribe.

Neptune's commanding presence aroused the imagination of women. In the course of his long life, he would marry three, lay with many others, and father untold children. When Molly reached womanhood, her charms rivaled his, for she, too, was unusually handsome and astute. Her eyes, dark wet pebbles, shone with uncanny brightness in the smooth planes of her cheeks. Her generous mouth, set well below the flared nostrils of a small nose, turned up ever so slightly at the corners, giving her an expression both winsome and wily. Eventually, Molly became one of Neptune's consorts, and everyone knew that it was he who sired her small brood. They also knew that she was probably the only woman who could match wits with him, since she also had the gift of m'teoulin.

Of Molly's four children, only two survived beyond childhood: her son, Piel (Pierre) Molly, born about 1791, and her daughter, Sarah Polasses (Balassee/Pelagie), born several years later. Unlike their parents, Piel and Sarah saw white people often throughout their childhood.

Surveyors laid out the first plan of Bangor in 1784, and by the turn of the century three hundred settlers had moved within its bounds and a thousand more to its outskirts. Upstream, another two hundred newcomers settled even closer to Indian Island, building their homes in the newly established towns of Orono and Old Town. Most came because they sniffed the promise of prosperity in the vast forests of the region. For many, this promise came true.

Echoing earlier devastations of Wabanaki lands in the Saco, Androscoggin, and Kennebec River valleys to the south, settlers began felling Penobscot valley forests and milling the trees into boards and other wood products for export to faraway places. The Penobscot River itself held the key to their success: it offered a cheap means of moving logs; its tributaries served as arteries for carrying supplies northward into remote logging camps; and its magnificent falls provided sawmills with power to process the timber. Within a few decades, Bangor would become the center of Maine's booming timber industry. In turn, the landscape and the lives of Molly's people would be transformed more swiftly and thoroughly than anyone could have imagined.

Loss of land stood at the heart of this transformation. For years Penobscots had seen it coming and tried to stop it. In the summer of 1776 – one year into the American Revolution and Molly's life – Joseph Orono, the head chief of Penobscots at the time, had traveled to Boston to complain about settlers taking over Penobscot lands and cheating in trade. Addressing the Massachusetts Congress, he had offered to help American rebels in their war against England in exchange for fair dealing and a promise to stop the theft of Penobscot lands. In 1786, three years after the war ended, the new government of the State of Massachusetts reserved two hundred thousand acres of land for the tribe. Although it was just a fraction of his tribe's ancestral domain, Chief Orono accepted the deal because it seemed to offer security. He was wrong. Time and again, white loggers, hunters, and settlers trespassed on Indian lands, taking the trees, hunting the wildlife, and building dams and farmsteads. When Penobscots complained, the government in Boston proposed new treaties that called for giving up even more tribal territory in exchange for a yearly distribution of goods (such as pork, salt, rum, cloth, blankets, and

ammunition) and a guarantee that the diminished Indian reservation would not be encroached upon. Repeatedly, hoping a new border would hold back the white tide, Penobscots accepted the compromise.

In 1800, when Molly was twenty-five, Chief Orono died. It took six years for the tribe to agree upon a man to fill the traditional role of head chief. They finally chose Old Atteon Elmut, only to have him die in 1809. His replacement, Joe Lola, also died after serving just three years. At this point the tribe turned to Molly's old friend, John Neptune.

Now in his forties, Neptune was already an established leader with a far-reaching reputation as a dauntless orator and dramatic storyteller. Whether addressing a formal assembly of white officials or delegates from other tribes, or sitting under a tree spinning yarns about hunting, he knew how to enthrall an audience. His black eyes radiated intelligence and authority. Even in broken English he commanded attention and communicated vividly. He had represented the tribe in Boston and negotiated on behalf of his people in legal and political matters. On one occasion, he had even convinced a judge in Maine to turn around the death sentence of a fellow tribesman. Quoted in the local newspaper, his frequent public statements concerning the land rights of his people had found a bigger voice. Molly suspected that he used m'teoulin to balance the Penobscots' disadvantage. Certain that no one was more prepared than he to lead the tribe through difficult times, she tried to rally support for him among the women. Although they could not vote directly in the tribal council meeting, women liked to *boodawazin* (talk politics) as much as any man, and each had her own way of influencing the men in her home circle.

Some Penobscots, however, had doubts about Neptune's character. He was a self-willed man with an ego so large they feared it could work against the traditional role of a head chief as someone who was first among equals. With this in mind, they put him forward as second chief and chose the more gentle and kindhearted John Attean as head chief, giving him the official title of "governor." Attean lacked Neptune's shrewdness and charisma, but he was worthy of their trust.

Following Wabanaki tradition, delegates from allied tribes – Maliseets from the St. John River valley and Passamaquoddies from

the eastern seacoast — attended the inauguration in autumn 1816. For this momentous ritual Attean and Neptune wore long coats of scarlet broadcloth, adorned with beaded collars and silver brooches and armbands. Visiting chiefs, also outfitted in ceremonial attire, offered speeches and belts of white and purple wampum beads. A white-robed priest read from the Scripture in Latin and led the congregation in singing the “Te Deum,” an ancient hymn of praise to God. Toward the end of the splendid ceremony Molly and the other women joined the assembly and performed an honor dance, circling the ground in shuffle steps, accompanied by song. Although Neptune left the event wearing the mantle of second chief or lieutenant governor, he knew he wielded more influence than Attean. Molly and everyone else understood that, in effect, Neptune was the real leader. In fact, to Attean’s chagrin, Penobscots and townsfolk alike soon began referring to his formidable companion as “the governor.” It did not occur to anyone, least of all Molly, that the challenges ahead would be too daunting even for John Neptune.

By 1820, four years after Neptune’s inauguration, Maine had grown to the point of splitting from Massachusetts. Gaining statehood, it assumed jurisdiction over the Indian reservations within its boundaries. Some three hundred thousand settlers now inhabited the state, and several thousand of them had planted themselves in the Bangor area. Penobscots, in stunning contrast, numbered fewer than four hundred, and most of them still moved about seasonally. Molly, now forty-five, often camped in the company of Neptune and his relatives, as well as with her own children or with her sister and her offspring. Her son Piel was nearly thirty now. A spirited and generally good-natured man, known for telling tall tales, he had an oddly fierce appearance owing to the fact that a man had bitten off a piece of his nose in a drunken brawl. Happily, his sister Sarah had reached her mid-twenties with all features intact. She had inherited the beauty of her mother’s youth and all the finer aspects of her father’s features with the exception of his mouth. Hers was full and sensual. Sarah dressed like most Penobscot women, but her comeliness brought a special flair to the usual scarlet leggings and beaded moccasins, the loose frock that she slipped on over ribboned petticoats, and the long

strings of bright-colored glass beads that cascaded from her neck down her breasts. Typically, she wore an embroidered peaked cap made of red and blue broadcloth, but sometimes, like her mother, she laid aside this traditional headdress for a black top hat imported from Europe and adorned with a silver-plated band.

Moving about, Molly and her family usually avoided white folks in the same deft way they portaged around dangerous rapids and waterfalls; yet just as they paused at a falls during salmon fishing season, they camped near towns when they needed the goods newcomers offered. But town “fishing” could be tricky. On one occasion when Sarah ventured into Bangor to barter some ash-splint baskets for molasses and cloth, a prominent businessman demanded more than Indian wares from the young woman. When Molly heard that he had raped her daughter, her blood boiled. She hiked into town, marched up to the lecherous swine, and demanded restitution. He paid her off, but in Molly’s eyes he had given no more than a down payment: for years to come, every time she encountered the man, she glared him down until he offered additional compensation.

Conflicts came in many forms but always pointed to the fact that Penobscots had less of things they once had in plenty, including freedom. Because many settlers hunted, at least “for the pot,” if not for fur trade, the usual game available to the Penobscots diminished. Loggers took trees from land reserved for Penobscot use, yet settlers harassed Indians if they stepped onto a homestead to cut a few brown ash trees for basket wood. Most tribespeople had first-hand stories of being sold bad pork or wormy crackers from town shops, or being ousted from an age-old campsite, and many Penobscot men, flush from selling skins, ventured into taverns, downed some rum, and ran into trouble. Alcohol consumption among Indians and newcomers (especially lumberjacks, river drivers, and fishermen) had reached startling levels. Rum production within the state was 450 thousand gallons a year — nearly four gallons for every adult. Fueled by the liquor, even the smallest insult or dispute could ignite a fight, such as the brawl that had cost Molly’s son part of his nose.

While Molly fended for herself and her children, Neptune tried to quench the fires of conflict for all Penobscots. He met with some success. When he traveled to Maine’s state capital to meet with

Governor Rufus King and protest the destruction of Indian hunting and fishing privileges, he managed to secure some new rights, along with promises that old rights would be honored. He made public statements that at least raised the question of who was trespassing on whom. He lobbied successfully for a more sympathetic agent for the tribe, and he encouraged a charitable society in Bangor to improve the lot of Penobscots by establishing a special school for Indian children in Old Town. The school, like some of Neptune's other accomplishments, proved to be short-lived. It closed after one term, owing to a lack of funding.

Then, perhaps to boost his ego in the face of recurring setbacks, Neptune did something unthinkable. Ignoring all codes of honor, he seduced Chief Attean's wife, and she became pregnant. This breach of trust and the shaming of their head chief outraged many in the Penobscot community. Neptune had made countless protests against whites violating Indian rights, and now he himself had committed a serious trespass. Almost overnight he fell from grace in the eyes of many, and soon thereafter he began a self-imposed exile seventy miles away at Moxie Pond on the upper Kennebec River. Molly, no stranger to that region in her own travels, passed some time there with him, chastising and consoling her old companion.

While Neptune was gone, the Catholic mission built a church on Indian Island. To some Penobscots it seemed that the new bell tower and spire, pointing upward toward heaven, symbolized a rebuke to their fallen second chief. The same year the church went up, Chief Attean moved out of a communal longhouse into the first private wood-frame house on Indian Island. No one realized that his shift into a white man's dwelling foreshadowed a split in the tribe far greater than the break that led to John Neptune's exile.

The great breakdown in Penobscot unity began in 1830, at the start of a decade in which the tribe would face unimagined changes and pressures. By then Neptune had made peace with Attean and regained just enough goodwill to return to Indian Island. There was, however, nothing that he or any other Penobscot could do to alter what was about to happen to their homeland. During that decade the timber industry in the Penobscot valley out-produced all other

areas in North America. Bangor, with a harbor broad and deep enough for one hundred full-rigged ships, became known as the "Lumber Capital of the World." Timber products milled upriver were rafted to Bangor or transported on the Old Town-Bangor railway, completed in 1836. From Bangor's expanding wharves, merchants shipped the goods to Boston, New York, and as far as the Caribbean and Europe. In turn, they imported commodities from around the world, especially molasses, sugar, and rum from Cuba, Jamaica, and other Caribbean islands.

One successful industry spawned another until textile mills, shoe factories, and brick factories cast long shadows over a river that was becoming heavy with sawdust and sewage. In Bangor, thriving businessmen built mansions and entire blocks of buildings — warehouses, shops, hotels, banks, and theaters. With improved transportation, people and goods moved easily and swiftly. Folks who had cash could travel by rail to Bangor, where they could board a stagecoach to Augusta and other inland towns or book passage on a steamship to Boston and beyond.

The flourishing timber industry also fueled land speculation during the 1830s, propelling Maine's population toward half a million and Bangor and Brewer's to ten thousand. The combined population of Orono and Old Town, next-door to Indian Island, jumped to six thousand. Every time Molly returned to the island, something of the familiar had either changed or vanished altogether. By the end of the decade, sixteen noisy sawmills disturbed the peace at the falls just below the island where Molly had watched Neptune and other men aim their spears at salmon with admirable precision. Lumberjacks destroyed hunting habitats, floating logs clogged major canoe routes and favorite landing sites, sawdust suffocated traditional fishing grounds, multistory buildings covered old campsites, and strangers — countless strangers — appeared at every turn. Molly feared the worst for her people.

With their traditional way of life so severely hindered, Penobscots found themselves cornered into yet another land surrender — their last. In 1833 they received fifty thousand dollars for one hundred thousand acres of land. The money went into a trust fund controlled by the State of Maine. In the years that followed, interest from the

invested money went toward a school on the island, salary for a government-appointed Indian agent, and the annual purchase of goods that had been promised to Penobscots in earlier treaties. Penobscot territory, once several million acres, now totaled a mere five thousand: 140 small islands lying in the thirty-mile stretch of river from Old Town north to Mattawamkeag.

Molly could hardly comprehend, let alone keep track of, all the losses. It made no sense that vast stretches of forest were now off-limits. She was baffled when her son Piel told her that a settler had accused him of "poaching" and forced him to forfeit the large moose he had just stalked and shot. Confusion turned to anger when a farmer chased her and her daughter Sarah with a shotgun when they went on "his" land to cut some ash trees for basket making. When the Indian agent offered to supply Molly and other Penobscots with seeds and equipment for farming, Molly saw it as a ploy to get them to stay put on the island. She swore she would never give up her freedom, but a good many others accepted the agent's offer only to find out they could not survive on farming alone. In late autumn most Penobscot men retreated northward to Moosehead Lake and other wilderness areas to hunt, although even there the game had greatly diminished. Some women and children stayed on Indian Island, but others, like Molly, set up wigwams on the edge of one town or another and survived the cold months by hawking baskets and other crafts. When they had nothing to barter, they begged or bought on credit. Often, by the time the men returned from wintering over in the woods, the furs they had brought with them had already been sold by the women and the money spent. Those who had a good year were surrounded by others who had not and by the sense that their own turn at defeat lurked just around the river's bend. Gradually it dawned on Molly and every other Penobscot that they were being swallowed up by the dreams of strangers. For them the dreams had become nightmares, grim realizations that they were losing not only a way of life, but a sense of who they were.

In the face of mounting change and turmoil, Penobscot unity grew fragile. Molly could feel it and see it and hear it all around her. Many women, including herself, felt edgy, and their voices, once soft and lyrical, were often shrill. Men, too, were short-tempered – with their

wives, their children, each other. Many lost confidence in themselves and in their leaders, and some began to question outright if Attean and Neptune were the right men to lead them through such difficult times. Attean seemed unsure, and Neptune, while as forceful as ever, had lost his moral authority. Attean may have put Neptune's affair with his wife behind them, but others proved to be less forgiving. Many felt that beyond insulting their chief, Neptune had become arbitrary, self-willed, and overly fond of rum; moreover, he had fathered numerous children with other men's wives, and he had abused the power of m'teoulin. A great schism formed between those who were fed up with Neptune and those, like Molly, who still felt a deep loyalty toward the aging chieftain. The conflict peaked in 1838 when Neptune's opponents called for a meeting to choose new leaders. Claiming that the time had come to end the tradition of chiefs serving until death, they intended to replace the custom with the white man's practice of holding regular elections.

They got their way. In the fall the Penobscots hosted a Wabanaki Confederacy meeting at Indian Island, inviting allied tribal chiefs and delegates from Passamaquoddy Bay and St. John River. At the gathering, two standards were raised: that of the "Old Party," headed by the well-seasoned elders Attean and Neptune, and a "New Party," led by Soccalexis and Orson, who were about half the age of the old chiefs. Neptune was first to rise and speak:

Brothers: we boldly come here; we face the storm; we fear not; for our hearts are firm as rocks that never move. Shall Neptune and his Indians give place to bold words? Shall he say, come, take his rights and power away? No, – never; for quite twenty-two years ago he and Attean were made governors for life; ay, for life.

Grasping for m'teoulin, the seventy-one-year-old leader found his power and wound his words around the audience. He could feel the crowd being squeezed into submission. Then he sat down and Soccalexis stood. Focusing his gaze on the visiting chiefs, the younger man responded with unexpected force. He went so far as to compare Neptune to a wolverine, the embodiment of ravenous evil doing. After much speech making, the votes were counted, and to Molly's surprise, Attean and Neptune lost by a considerable margin. But Neptune was

not a man to accept defeat. Encouraged by their clans, he and Attean held tradition's ground and refused to step down. The old and new parties and their two sets of chiefs existed side by side, and so they continued for many years. Given the depth of conflict in the tribe, however, Neptune decided to leave the island again. Molly, along with some thirty other supporters, went with him. For several years they centered their lives in Brewer, across the river from Bangor.

The Brewer area was familiar to all Penobscots, especially to Molly, whose family had often camped by its spring when she was a child. Since then, hundreds of settlers had transformed the lush riverside into a new town, but Molly and other members of Neptune's small group set up camp on any unfenced site that provided firewood and water. Living in scattered wigwams on the town's outskirts, they made baskets, moose-hide moccasins, and other goods with which to barter. In fall and winter most men still moved upriver into the deep forest to hunt, hoping to return with a good supply of dried meat for their families, plus furs and moose hides for trade.

Whenever Molly had something to trade, she pulled her worn, peaked cap over her graying hair and followed a winding footpath through scrubby second-growth forest toward town. Most often she dealt with Jonathan Hardy, a white trader who had settled in Brewer during the early 1830s. Beyond his interest in buying furs, Hardy had an unusual curiosity about Penobscot traditions. On occasion, he even wandered out to the Indian camps to visit, but more often Indians came to him. When Molly or Neptune called at his home, he usually invited them in and offered them a chair next to the wood stove. After bargaining over this or that, the conversation would turn to nature, legends, or hunting stories. Some nights Hardy's wife, nestled in her bedroom, fell in and out of sleep listening to Molly and other Penobscots chatting with her husband until the fire burned low and the room turned cold.

Molly liked Hardy a bit and found this troubling, for despite his kindness, he was part of the reason she and her people were facing hard times. Sometimes, as she walked through the woods from her wigwam toward town, disturbing thoughts tumbled about in her head. What had become of her? Who was she? A sixty-three-year-old woman who seemed to have lost possession of her life. A woman with

no husband. A mother who could not rely on her grown children to help her because they, too, were dazed by the changed circumstances that surrounded them. At times she felt as if her magic had been shattered – like sunlight that is cut to pieces by leaves and falls in fragments to the forest floor. She didn't dare ask her old friend Neptune if he had similar thoughts, but she had noticed that his spirit helpers were also failing. Perhaps they, too, were baffled by the way the enemy seemed to have two faces: one cold and selfish, the other rather kind and helpful, like Hardy.

Thinking about the future of her people, Molly came to feel that they had just two choices: give up freedom and become like the whites, or hold on to freedom and be looked down upon as poor drifters. She thought she had chosen the latter, yet even she had gone so far in fitting her life to the ways of the newcomers that she sometimes felt uprooted, lost in a place so familiar yet so strange. Unsettled by such thoughts, Molly turned her attention to the sights and sounds of the forest she knew so well: the colorful clusters of bunchberries and bluebead lilies, the songs of warblers and thrushes, the rustle of wind combing through the leaves and needles of trees, and the dull and determined thud of her own moccasins padding toward town. By the time she reached her destination, she felt surefooted enough to stand her ground, especially in the all-important matter of trade.

When it came to trade, Molly could match wits with anyone. If someone did not want to do business with her, she handed over a basket or some other item as if it were a gift. Sometimes years later, her keen memory enabled her to call for a balancing of accounts. "Now Hardy," she would say, "once we young we gib you berry nice knife; now we old you gib us fo'pence."

Sometimes Molly took her wares to the general store where it was harder to drive a good bargain but where the choice of products was irresistible. Heady scents of coffee, spices, and raisins permeated the room. Bottles of patent medicines, sacks of flour and sugar, and dry goods such as boots, clothing, and textiles, crowded floor-to-ceiling shelves. Glass cases filled with candy, tobacco, and other sundries tantalized the taste buds. Near the counter stood the potbellied stove and a great keg of molasses. This last item was savored by all as

a sweetener for cooking and as the basic ingredient for rum, the favorite drink in the region. Like many settlers, Molly and other Penobscots sometimes made their own brew. Beyond distilling and drinking rum, people talked about the liquor a lot – its availability, its strength, its effect. One day someone, making a play on Molly's second name – Balassee – began calling her Molly Molasses, and the name stuck. In time, settlers claimed that she got the nickname not only because it rhymed with Balassee, but also because she used to knock on their doors and beg for the syrupy stuff. When anyone asked Molly the root of the name, she liked to smile slyly and say, "Cuz I sweet." Of course, if the name had anything to do with sweetness, it was only as sarcasm, for Molly was anything but sweet. Whatever sweetness she had as a child had turned bitter during a life of hardships.

One day, when surveying the goods in the general store, Molly picked up a mirror and looked at herself. The image startled her: an old woman whose deep wrinkles told only of sneers, frowns, and suspicion. Seeing that the corners of her mouth no longer turned up as they had in her youth, she placed her index finger at one end of her lip and lifted it, slowly. Then, inching closer to the mirror, she scrutinized her reflection, trying to see beneath a face twisted by disappointment and distrust to discover again the pretty girl who had known hope. Standing there, staring at herself and lost in thought, she did not hear the store manager approach. "Do you want to buy that looking glass?" the blue-eyed man asked curtly. Jolted from her reverie, Molly put the mirror down hastily, and the child whose face she had almost glimpsed vanished like a dream one fails to recount immediately upon waking.

By the mid-1800s, a fair number of Penobscots were farming small plots on upriver islands still in the tribe's possession. Most continued to feed their families, at least in part, by hunting and fishing, and they still sold furs, hides, and feathers to traders and shopkeepers. In addition, many made and traded baskets that farmers needed for harvesting and for household storage, but the profit from these enterprises was not enough to get by on. Of necessity they also began to turn to other means of making a living. Most avoided factory jobs

where one worked fourteen-hour days for paltry wages. Some labored seasonally as loggers or river drivers. Men and women alike made and sold moose-hide moccasins used in logging camps.

Others took to the road and became entertainers in vaudeville and medicine shows. Molly marveled that white folks paid to see dressed-up Indians acting wild onstage. In everyday life, they mocked Penobscot customs as backward and snickered at the way she and other old Indians dressed; yet in front of a grand building in Bangor she saw posters of strange-looking Indians wearing a bunch of giant feathers on their heads and doing hunting or war dances. Right beside these pictures hung posters that showed white people sitting in chairs playing fiddles and other instruments, or play-acting in something folks called "theater." Molly, like most Wabanakis, recognized the financial opportunities of white fantasies about "injuns." Even Penobscot children had discovered that if they went to a pier, a park, or a train station and began dancing in costume or shooting at coins with a bow and arrow, passersby might give them a copper. Penobscot adults had found that showmanship helped sell crafts and medicines. Several of Neptune's children, grandchildren, and in-laws became traveling entertainers, making and selling crafts, and performing as medicine-show doctors. Molly's own son-in-law, Attean Lola, and her sister's son-in-law, Sabattis Mitchell, also billed themselves as Indian doctors. Traveling long distances by stage, train, and steamship, all of them set up canvas tents near wharves, train depots, and other New England crossroads. Some of the more successful Penobscot entertainers, such as Frank Loring, who was known as Big Thunder, rented halls seating several thousand and sold tickets for their performances.

The advantage of showmanship was that it paid fairly well and enabled Molly's people to move about rather than be confined to small tracts of reservation land. In a way, it echoed the seasonal migrations of their traditional life, except now they were hunting for audiences rather than for animals, and they had to make caricatures of themselves and their traditions to earn their living. This hardly matched the pleasure or honor of real hunting or of real rituals performed offstage for the well-being of the soul, but those who joined in thought it was better than wasting away or vanishing into mainstream society.

Moon of Blinding Snow

Molly herself would have none of it. Instead, she continued to rely on driving hard bargains for crafts and pressing for handouts. Her skills in these areas increased every year. When irritated by the way someone treated her, she arranged her face in a disfiguring frown, and using a voice that seemed to come from deep within her belly, she threatened to strike back. She did this so effectively that some of her own people even began to fear her. Aware that she had m'teoulin, they whispered among one another, "If she says you die, you die." Everyone knew better than to cross her.

Beyond intimidation, Molly Molasses sharply targeted her goodwill. Once she even told the white trader Jonathan Hardy that her son-in-law, Attean Lola, had stolen Hardy's moose hides. After giving the hides to Hardy as security for a loan, Lola had sneaked into the man's shed and snatched them back. Learning of this, Molly slipped over to Hardy's place, knocked on the door, stepped inside, and sat down by the fire. After a time she said, "You got dem four moose hide, Hardy?" He told her "yes." Several minutes later, she asked him again, and once more he said "yes." A bit more time passed, and she said, "You *sure* you got dem moose hide? Best you see." Hardy went out to his shed and found the hides missing. Figuring out what had happened, he walked a mile or so to Lola's camp and demanded the skins. After several denials, Lola gave them back. This satisfied Molly. After all, she had principles. Like other old Penobscots, she did not tolerate theft. Also, she knew there would be no mutual give and take if you did not hold up your end of a bargain. As she figured it, her meddling would help her the next time she needed a favor from Hardy, and it would surely win her some extra time in front of his warm hearth.

John Neptune, like Molly Molasses, continued to visit Hardy's place, even after he had moved back to Indian Island. Despite his scarred reputation, the old chief remained an impressive man, and many white folks and Penobscots continued to call him "the governor." A rousing speaker even in his seventies, he served several terms as tribal representative to the Maine State legislature in Augusta. When he was about eighty, a pair of local businessmen launched the first steamship made to ply the Penobscot River north of the Old Town falls

Molly Molasses

and named it after him. Frequently, Penobscot youngsters scurried aboard and tried to claim free passage, pointing to Neptune's name on the boat and proclaiming, "He's our grandfather!" Given Neptune's notorious past, it was a just claim for many.

Prominent people knew "the governor," or knew of him, and sometimes came to his doorstep. Among them was the Massachusetts naturalist Henry David Thoreau, who visited him at his house on Indian Island in 1853. Now eighty-six, Neptune sat on the bed that filled half of his simple wooden home. He wore a black frock coat, frayed black pants, a red silk handkerchief about his neck, and a crumpled straw hat atop his head of long, still-dark hair. Although careworn and slightly intemperate, the old tribal leader could still charm a guest and spin a fascinating story. As he talked to Thoreau, several women gathered around the chief, including a third wife whom he had recently married. Neptune told Thoreau about his upcoming hunting trip and then regaled him with a tale about a time long ago when moose were much bigger, so much bigger that they were actually whales. It was a time when he, too, was bigger.

In the decade that followed, Neptune's mind and eyesight grew dim. One cold night in 1865 he dreamed that he was camping out and his fire had died down. Shivering and still asleep, he pulled his straw mattress from the bedstead and laid it next to the stove. Soon the bedding caught fire and smoke filled the cabin. Although Neptune survived that night, he died soon after of pneumonia. He was the last living Penobscot born before the first white settler built a home above the tidal falls on the river of his people. In nearly one hundred years of life, he had witnessed -- and challenged -- extraordinary changes.

No one understood this as well as Molly Molasses, whose entire life had been intertwined with Neptune's. In their camaraderie, each had built on the strength of the other, and in his death Molly could not help feeling weakened.

With Neptune gone, the blizzard of change sweeping through the Penobscot valley chilled Molly's bones. She wandered like an aimless ghost through a land she no longer recognized. *More white folks than trees*, she thought grimly. On a gray winter morning she walked to the water's edge and stood on the wharf watching the river leave itself. In

Moon of Blinding Snow

the Moon of Blinding Snow, continents of clouds covered the sky, and the stream – on the verge of freezing – flowed dull and dark. Her eyes moved across the current to the far shore where crows hung in the naked branches of surviving trees. All at once they lifted themselves skyward, and as they disappeared into the storm Molly thought she heard someone whisper her name in the beating of wings. Snow fell heavily, and she felt its weight on her shoulders. The flakes that landed in the river melted and disappeared, and Molly wondered, *Of what can the heart be made that cannot be melted?*

She already knew the answer: bitterness, sarcasm, and detachment. In truth, these qualities were not the contents of her heart; they were shields she had set up to guard that heart. Now, in the Moon of Blinding Snow, she could see no other choice than to enlarge the measure of those shields and clasp them tightly to herself. With Neptune and all her other agemates dead, she embraced defiance as her sole companion. Hand in hand they walked the streets of Bangor, Brewer, and Old Town, shaking the self-serving assumptions of settlers that her people were about to become extinct. Wherever Molly went, she spoke her mind and acted as she felt. She collected gossip and threatened people with it. She demanded free passage on trains, stages, and steamships – and got it. And she drove ever-harder bargains when it came to trading. Molly Molasses became “the old woman people talked about.” A shadow they feared. A dark wound exposed. At times she seemed frightfully rash, driven by raw feelings – or by spirits. Some thought she was mad, but what is madness but sensitivity of the soul at odds with cruel circumstance? Things were terribly off-kilter in this so-called New World, and in her last years Molly demanded the balance, telling people, “You owe me.”

Ironically, she who had never wanted to market herself as an entertainer became something of a one-woman traveling show. An encounter with Molly Molasses was an event that bankers, lumbermen, and store clerks alike talked about around the dinner table with a sense of triumph, as if they had bumped into a ghost and survived. As if she were not human. This was the problem with the barrier Molly had built around her heart; it was also a wall that hid her soul. A wise woman knows this. Certainly a woman with m'teoulin.

Two years after Neptune's passing, Molly Molasses followed him.