

# **I Dream of Maine**

*An essay on not belonging*

by Phoenix Chapital

Miles away there's a cold, solitary beach in Maine. Gray rocks split the sand at intervals along the shore, and waves drag against them. Far off, a line of tall, green trees emerges from a slouching fog. Somewhere behind that wall of trees, nestled by some forgotten brook or, maybe, down some romantic, small-town road, there's a little red cottage, white framing embellishing it like icing, with a nice, simple wrap-around porch hugging its exterior. A screen surrounds it, the kind that lets you hear the crickets at night as the sun goes down but keeps out the mosquitos. The kind that you sit behind long after it gets dark and that breaks the world beyond into miniature gray-black grids, like speckles. Everything is so much further away, and you feel safer there, on that rocking chair, with that book in your hand and that blanket twisted around your legs, than you've felt before.

What separates this existence from the one you've lived is not just that it isn't fractured by the red, yellow, and green of traffic lights (where are the traffic lights? Where is the traffic?), nor the absence of sound or sense of time that usually permeates the places you've been, the people you've been, the way you've allowed yourself to be. It's that you don't know this place, and could never grow to hate it because you'll never know it. It is lurking in the shallow parts of who you are. You dredge it up when you're lonely. You dive for it when you're impossibly, rarely happy. It floats up, like a raft, when you're so miserable that even drowning sounds warm.

This is my dreamscape, this imagined Maine. I'm not even sure a place like this truly exists. It would be better, maybe, if it doesn't.

There is a fierce desire to forge a place for ourselves in this world. We are always seeking, in some way, to "belong." Labels are like admissions tickets into the belonging clubs of society. We gasp for them like air. But as much as modernity has prompted us to label ourselves, we are increasingly

becoming creatures of such nuance that we defy set categories, break boundaries, and fiercely refuse to be tied down, sorted, *understood*. We have more options for what to be, but reject almost all of them, choosing instead to wander aimlessly in the murk of our own identity.

In Black America, the labels we are given fit us like hand-me-down jeans, cinching our waists and pulling at awkward places that make us waddle uncomfortably instead of saunter down the street. We are in-betweeners, too much of one thing, not enough of another. No label can tie us down, or pinpoint exactly what it is that we are. We are a medley of human existence in a way that is both prideful yet also so often painful. We have long ago accepted that there are certain people in this world that the world perhaps does not have a place for.

This art of not belonging is a peculiar craft to master. We want to belong to a world that doesn't know us. Isn't this fantastically masochistic? That we see spaces not meant for us and try anyway to wedge ourselves into them, to make the room, to secure a seat? What is it about belonging that is so alluring anyway? Is it the company, or the space? We hate having nothing to hold onto. Belonging anchors us to reality, makes us remember that we are here, that we have purpose, that we can act.

The easiest way to find a place to belong to, I've realized after years of fruitless searching, is to create a place inside of your own head. To belong, then, quite simply make up a new world to belong to. Not necessarily some complex fantasy realm, but ones as simple as: In this world, I get the girl. In this one, I make \$300k a year. In this one, I've got that apartment I want right down the block from my favorite coffee shop, and there's a promotion coming my way. In this one, I have that cottage in Maine.

Dream up some new society. Picture yourself someplace that makes you happy, no matter how unrealistic those places might be, and see how far it takes you.

After all, dreaming is a decadence of the soul, not of the flesh. It doesn't matter if we can touch these places or not. What matters is that these dreamscapes have never wronged us. The only act they have committed against us is elusivity. Though it might sting that these things (the girl, that apartment, that promotion, Maine) aren't attainable to us, at least they aren't close enough to draw blood. The truth of it is, we don't know how to have the things that we want. By having them we lose them, in a way. The second they become close enough to grasp we falter in reaching out to grasp them.

Still, I have tried to get closer to this vision of Maine over the years. I regularly pitch it as a vacation destination to my family, though none of them seem to be as enthusiastic about the prospect of spending a summer gazing out at crooked grey rocks as I am. "What would we even *do* there?" My mother has asked me repeatedly. I pictured myself spending weekends on hiking excursions or, more likely given my lack of hiking experience, writing sonnets about the sea. The enigma of this landscape intrigued me, though what exactly I was seeking to capture by going there I couldn't figure out. Yes, Maine is in the far corner of the country, and yes, admittedly, it's no pillar of diversity, with white people encompassing more than ninety of its population, but I wanted it naively and desperately throughout my childhood. I wanted it so much in my youth that it has become a habit of wanting that dogs me even now. It's ridiculous, absurd, and breathtakingly wonderful, this image, that beach, that shoreline.

A friend of mine summers in Maine, a romantic phrase I'm not entirely sure she's ever uttered but that sprung into my mind each time she spoke of the summers spent there in her childhood. Even

now, I can't distinguish the real details of her life there from what I've concocted in my head. She must live by the beach, because of course all of Maine in my mind exists on one long strip facing the sea, and I'm sure that her skin, normally the color of cream, gets pink in the sun, and if she stays out for too long reading (as I'm sure she does), her nose will start to peel. She must wear her brown curls pinned back, and sun freckles undoubtedly appear on her shoulders around the straps of her tank top. We talked once or twice of her bringing me up there to stay with her family. It was one of the many fantasies we entertained while bored out of our minds in American History. With our knees turned towards each other under the cold tan desks, we spoke earnestly of what it would be like. I tried not to show how much I wanted it. Certainly she couldn't tell how I was holding my breath picturing us together on that shore, me reading something by Baldwin and her *Franny and Zooey* for the fourth time, trading verses aloud in a heat-induced haze.

I never went to visit her over the summer. We grew apart until the bond between us stretched so thin it would have snapped if I'd pressed my finger to the middle of it. I became horribly, irrationally jealous that my dream was her reality, that she could *have* while I was stuck wanting. She could kiss a boy on the soccer team, fly thousands of miles from Louisiana to Maine for the summer, and leave me behind.

We don't dream of belonging to places that are easy to reach. In many ways, the want of belonging is a delectable torment, something we revel in wrestling with. The accessible clubs don't entice us; we've got no use for them in our heads. We can't play with them and drool over them and ache for them the way we can ache for the clubs whose doors aren't open to us, whose insides are impenetrably dark, whose shadows we can shape into whatever we need them to be.

When I began to write at a young age, it was these shadows I toyed with. Writing is only taking the shadowy edges of existence and turning it inside out until it suits you and you can put it back into the world in a form no one recognizes. It's just penning dreams to paper. It's a wonderful kind of magic to do this as a kid when the magic of childhood is seeping away. I prided myself on my diversity of genre, and how readily I created conflicting worlds. I wrote flash fiction about a girl climbing a tree of memories, an epistolary tale from the perspective of an anthropomorphic thesaurus, a murder mystery featuring a fiery girl with a photographic memory, and thirty pages of an interplanetary time travel epic set in Maine.

It felt like the natural thing to do. I'm sure I thought I was accurately representing myself. I could draw up characters from the recesses of my mind and wield them like magic wands. Nothing was off limits. I wrote whenever I could, and even when I shouldn't have, scribbling frantically in my notebooks with a purple pen, daydreaming new plotlines during lulls in class. Only, in doing so, I had neglected to acknowledge a very important flaw in all of my work: all of the characters I wrote were white. In my eagerness to write, I had unintentionally written myself out of the narrative.

I can blame, in part, a lack of diversity in the literature I consumed for this error. In my favorite books it was always the white girls who saved the day. They were the ones who found love, tripped and fell into other worlds, became leaders of mysterious academic societies, and overthrew oppressive regimes; and they did all of this with their long ponytails whipping in the wind, blue eyes fixed and daring, pale skin shimmering like moonlight or some other wonderfully indulgent cliché. I couldn't

untangle the carnivorous desire I had to exist in those fictional realms from the more secret, dangerous desire I had to be those girls.

What I had allowed myself to write was no better. There was something sinister about the eagerness with which I unraveled myself on the page, reduced myself to a shape I couldn't recognize, a form so unlike my own. What is more alarming is that I thought these characters truly represented me. I failed to see the disconnect between them and I. Writing about their "flying red hair" and "shocking green eyes" gave me absolutely no pause. It was only when I'd stop writing that a hand would come out of nowhere and grab me, jarring me from my reverie and startling me back into my own brown body.

And I was ashamed. I did it to myself. I could blame no one else but myself. Over and over again I had lost hold of reality to make room for dreaming life.

Do I dream of Maine, or do I dream of a world where a girl like me could fit into a place like that, one so tied to American domesticity and whiteness? One so close to everything I am not?

I fear that, by dreaming of a place I will never belong to, I have resisted belonging to places that are reserved for me. But this is the nature of dreaming. We cannot dream of getting what we already have. The second we get what we want we have to quickly find something else or risk wanting nothing, which is to, in some deep and tortuous way, be empty. So dreaming is not necessarily the problem, nor is dreaming of something out of reach. The problem is also not Maine itself, or even that I have neglected reality in favor of that unrealistic environment. No, the problem with it is this: I do not truly see myself in the places I dream. Just as I did as a middle schooler churning out stories about white girls, I have once again erased myself from the narrative.

My vision of Maine persists, though I have now realized I am hovering above it. The girl in the rocking chair on that darling wrap-around porch isn't me, no matter how much I wish she were. When I close my eyes and picture this scene, see the trees and hear the chirping crickets and rhythmic slap of water against rock, the girl sitting on that porch more closely resembles my friend. That is to say, white, rich, and conventional. There is no place for me, even in the places I've created. Yet still I close my eyes.

How long can I continue dreaming of a world from which I am absent?