

A Sense of Place: Maine in Winter

By Roxana Robinson

Anyone can love Maine in the summer: those bold, blue skies; the slanting, brilliant northern light; the icy, briny water; the pink granite shores. You can climb Parkman Mountain—my favorite hike—and look out from the summit across Somes Sound toward the west and the slow, blue rise of the Camden Hills, or to the east, out onto the glitter of the Atlantic and the scattering of islands, water meeting sky somewhere out beyond your ken. The sun is bright on your face, and you're wearing a T-shirt and hiking shorts. Nature smiles on you in Maine in the summer.

It's in the winter that Maine puts forth its challenge. And Maine in winter is one of my favorite places.

I spent a winter on Mount Desert Island, where I was finishing a book. During the day, I wrote up in my study, and at the end of the day, in the late afternoon, I went out with my dog to ski along Little Long Pond. We had a cold winter that year, a lot of snow.

I parked out on the road. No other cars were there. On one side was the cold, blue stretch of Bracy Cove; on the other, the long stretch inland. I put on my skis and then ducked under the chain. My dog was a big, black standard poodle who loved the snow, loved expeditions, and loved Maine in winter. When I put on my skis, she bowed low, flattening her front legs on the ground in excitement, her dark eyes gleaming. As I started off, gliding onto the track, she bounded away from me, all four legs splayed in joy. The snow was cold and dry, and it crunched slightly as I slid along.

The carriage road started off in the open, rising toward a wooded curve. Beyond that stretch of trees, the view opened up again to a small field sloping down to the boathouse. The road ran high along here, along the bottom of the woods that covered the hill to the east. Beyond this came another stretch of trees enclosing the trail like a tunnel. Around another curve came my favorite moment: my heart lifted at the wide, wide field, scumbled and soft with dried grass beneath the snow, slanting in a long slope down to the shoreline. Beyond it were the smooth, white plain of the frozen pond and the marsh, full of dry hummocks and tall rushes, a camouflaged beaver



Little Long Pond. *Courtesy of Bob Thayer*

lodge somewhere among them. Beyond the marsh, snowy hillsides rose up to the woods. Along the hilltop was the green-black fretwork of the pines. Beyond the woods were the mountains, dark and still against the cold winter sky.

That winter, each afternoon, my dog and I moved through that silent landscape. We were alone there. The only sounds were the wind drifting through the trees, the hissing of the snow beneath my blades. The only movement was the drift of icy skeins of snow shifting against our faces.

Beyond that broad field, the trail went into the deep woods again. The track seemed narrow here, and the trees closed overhead. The woods were all around us, and the hillside above us was dark and quiet. At the fork, where another carriage road comes in from the east, I turned back. My dog knew our pattern. She waited there for me, then bounded off again on the snowy track, her dark fur vivid against the white. As we came back, my skis whispering through the snow, it was growing dark; Maine in winter is frugal with daylight. Heading into the second set of woods, now dark and impenetrable, sometimes I couldn't help myself; I thought of bears. Creatures lived in these woods, and things were different in winter: starker, deeper. By the time we rounded the last corner, sliding down toward the road, it was completely dark. Night had fallen, and the wind was arctic against my face.



I ducked under the chain again and planted my poles beside my skis. My dog stood beside me, watching the winter night. Out beyond Bracy Cove, the bell buoy sang its soft, minor note of melancholy. I knocked the snow off my skis and loaded them into the car. My dog leaped into the back seat, eager for whatever came next. As I drove home, the headlights picked up the bright glimmer of snow, but no answering beams. We were alone on the roads. Nothing was abroad in that deep, cracking cold.

At home, after dinner, I sat on the big sofa in front of the fire, my black dog spread out on the floor beside me. I was reading *Anna Karenina* that winter. Each evening, the cold spread across the landscape with the shadows. Even sitting in front of the fire, I could feel the night outside the black windowpanes, deep and pure. Winter had us in its fist. That's a place I love.

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Roxana Robinson is the author of nine books. Her latest novel, Sparta, won the Maine MWPA Fiction Award, (as did her previous novel, Cost), won the James Webb Fiction Award from the United States Marine Corps, and was a finalist for the Dublin Impac Award. Four of her books were New York Times Notables. She has written for The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Harper's, and The New York Times, and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. She teaches in the MFA Program at Hunter College and is president of the Authors Guild. She has been coming to Maine since 1978.