Dancing with the Spirit of Pamola

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Dancing with the spirit of Pamola

By Michael J. Bennett

It is four in the afternoon as we pass through the city limits of Waterville and edge closer north toward Millinocket along Maine's I-95. We are visitors to these parts, natives of what northern New Englanders call the flatlands or what we call Massachusetts. For hours the road has hummed its interstate monotone against the Ford F-150's frame.

Next to me, girlfriend Tara warily begins to clear junk from the bench seat in preparation for interstate sleep. I lift my hand from the floor shift, and softly her head falls like Timothy grass onto my lap.

In the late summer of 1846, Henry David Thoreau set out with three companions along the Penobscot River toward the peak called Katahdin, or "highest point" by the native Abenaki. From his experiences came The Maine Woods, a book left in manuscript at Thoreau's death. Thoreau never reached Maine's highest point in '46. In part, our 1995 trip is a search for what made him turn back.

An hour later and I've had enough. Vacation is when time is read by the tint of cloud, a slant of sunlight. The urge is to check my watch, but I resist. I downshift and head onto Route 7, Newport, Maine. Five miles ahead is a campground where we'll stay for the night.

At tent-site 30, Tara seems rejuvenated as she swings up the cap's latch and drops the tailgate. Though there may have been points of morning reality. I rise from my beholder, even some vital part, seems to be slanted. Tara has assured me of its good luck. Thirty was her old basketball number.

It is twilight. The road has left me in a monotonous, erratic, chilly push that threatens to spill me over the sheer lip of the ridge. Here the wind from the northwest becomes an erratic, chilly push that threatens to spill us over the sheer lip of the ridge. The mist driving ceaselessly between it and me. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose gritting of his ribs as he ascends. He is more than one can imagine.

The next morning, sunlight dapples the side of Tara's smooth face. We plan out an eight-hour course that forms a neat, orderly loop on the topo map. But cartographers plot the schematics of terrain, not between the sacred lines: This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night... Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?

Hours pass. Finally there is Baxter State Park. Having no reservations, I wait anxiously as the ranger radios a colleague on duty at Roaring Brook Campground. With the weather in our favor I hope for a cancellation. Suddenly good news. We're in. Site 24. My old basketball number.

At camp I boil water for tea and gaze into the mist above. Katahdin remains hidden, a riddle wrapped in wind-whipped cloud. Again I take out the Thoreau. A breeze runs through camp and ruffles the pages, exposing them like deep fissures of thought. I was deep within the hostile ranks of clouds, and all objects were obscured by them. Occasionally, when the windy columns broke into me, I caught sight of a dark, damp crag to the right or left; the mist driving ceaselessly between it and me. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose gritting of his ribs as he ascends. He is more than one can imagine.

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