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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 wearily 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 a couple of nicer sites, this one has an element. I take out my camera and in the middle of a shot, a violent gust loosens it. I don’t smile back. I know she’s toughing this.

Not far from midnight and in the thick belly of clouds. The urge is to check my watch, but I resist. I downshift and head onto Route 7, Newport, Maine.

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 rattles 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 wind should break 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, the vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than I can imagine.

The next morning, sunlight dapplies 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 the soul of it. What we may find up there, I know from past alpine experience, may lie well off the map. The Abenakis, superstitious about Katahdin, called it Pamola. We hoist our backpacks and hit the trail.

At the shores of Chimney Pond in Katahdin’s South Basin, I bend down and rinse my face, the icy mountain-fed water like shards of glass against my skin. We’re now two hours in. Ahead is one of the East’s greatest glacial cirques. From the northwest a strong gust blows. My eyes follow where I believe the trail will go as it gains altitude along the ridge of the bowl—stunted trees giving way to naked, sheer rock. Beyond this is the nothingness of the cirque and I’m down. I crouch for a moment and try to yell something to Tara. The wind, though, won’t have it and Pamola swallows my voice in its fury.

For the past 11 years I have hiked New England’s highest peaks, but this is the first time I’ve ever stepped in fear. It is then I realize what Thoreau spoke of only 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?

Michael Joseph Bennett is a writer working on a novel set in New Brantree.

News of the weird

- Easter news: Yearly, instead of Easter communion in Cutud, Philippines, volunteer Catholics are crucified, with real nails. Fourteen endured it this year (wailing in pain), which marked the first year that HIV-conscious townspeople were assured by church leaders that only clean nails were used. And in San Diego, an atheist group beat Christians to the permit office this year and won the right to hold a nonreligious Easter sunrise ceremony at the landmark, 40-foot-high cross at Mount Soledad in a city park.
- In January, Steven Hicks, 38, and Diana Hicks, 35, were sentenced to six months in jail in Cape May, N.J., for child abandonment. While their unruly son, Christopher, 13, was hospitalized last January, the couple surreptitiously packed up and moved to Inglewood, Calif.