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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

First person

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 up 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 important thing going for it: It's level. Besides, Tara has assured me of its good luck. Thirty was her old basketball number in high school.

High above, icy cirrus clouds float in from the west and forecast rain to follow. It is twilight. The road has left me in a meditative mood. From one of the backpacks I pull out an old Library of America edition of Thoreau's works. Sitting on the tailgate, I find my place in the failing light and begin to read: *Not far from midnight we were one after another awakened by rain falling on our extremities; and as each was made aware of the fact by cold or wet, he drew a long sigh and then drew up his legs.*

Rain patters against the fiberglass cap and flecks my subconscious with pinpoints of morning reality. I rise from my sleeping bag and slowly become aware of the surroundings. Tara wakes, peers out fog-soaked windows, then pulls her sleeping bag over her head.

After breakfast we drive on. The rain continues. In Milo we turn onto Route 11 and into the heart of spruce and fir country, Maine's northern tier.

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 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 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 grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you 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 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 clouds that floats like a perpetual dream, covering the summit I've yet to see.

Halfway along the Cathedral Trail, wind from the northwest becomes an erratic, chilly push that threatens to spill us over the sheer lip of the ridge. Here the steep trail requires balance and a well-placed hand-hold. Resting for a moment, I turn and smile at Tara. When she doesn't smile back I know she's toughing this one out. I take out my camera and in the middle of a shot, a violent gust loosens it from my grasp. Soon we will be above tree line and in the thick belly of clouds. Zipping my backpack shut, I look down at a small violet dot that is Chimney Pond.

Two more hours pass and slowly the grade relents. Stretching out below and to the west is the flattened table land described by Thoreau. But the view only goes so far before it becomes white. Our immediate environment is comprised of three basic elements — boulder, cloud and wind. Light-green lichens encrust

every rock and represent the only discernable form of life. Fatigue grips my legs as we move on, slowly now, like missionaries, carrying the light of vertebrate life through ancient worlds.

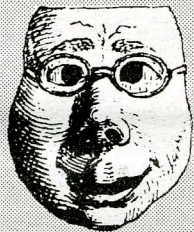
Soon we reach the top. Tara sobs quietly as we hold each other in an exhausted embrace. There the rain begins, and for the first time I am worried.

Our planned route down is along the Northeast's most notorious mountain trail. The Knife Edge is a jagged sliver only a few feet wide in sections bordered by straight drops of 1,500 feet on either side. About a tenth of a mile down, stepping on rocks dangerously slick from moisture, I'm hit by a gale that knocks me off balance and nearly off the mountain. Again I take a few more steps before another gale blasts out 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 Braintree.

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.