

The Lost Book

by Kathleen Aponick

I found it one fall
lodged among the library's
New England histories—
an account of Mount Desert Island,
the island in Maine where
we camped each Labor Day
in the 70s and 80s.

I held it in my hands, its pale green cover
with gold lettering and dark pine trees
grasping thin gilt-edged pages
so fragile I barely turned them
for fear they'd tear.

In a rush, heading for the island,
I couldn't read the book, nor borrow it
for it was a Rare Book. It had to stay.
Yet why hadn't I jotted down
its title, the author's name?

A quick scan revealed—
at least as I remember—something of
the island's rocky landscape,
encounters among native Abenaki
and settlers, first the French,
and then the English.

A dozen years we climbed those rock faces,
hiked the wild pine forests, swam,
paid homage to Thunder Hole, then rode
to where the islanders lived, paths
that often led to untended fields
or someone's old shed.

It seemed quieter, lonelier there
than our suburb north of Boston
though lives of the islanders
in their modest homes were
no doubt as complex, as uncertain
as ours at any time.

At home, looking for a half-remembered
detail of the island's flora or fauna
I went looking for the book.
In vain. No one seemed to know
its whereabouts.

I feared for its safety for I saw it
as a living thing, a world of thoughts set down
by someone caring about the island's
history, its extraordinary beauty,
its layers of residents.

Had the book been culled from the shelves?
It wasn't in the Rare Book Room.
Was it in a used bookstore,
someone's attic, burned for fuel
like those ancient gospel texts
found by a farmer in Egypt?

Was it exchanged for another rare book?
Given to a wealthy benefactor?
Had someone forgotten to return it?
Was it stolen?

Looking and not finding filled me with regret.
How little attention I pay to things that matter.
What else am I failing to save?
What had I missed in my quick
scan of it besides

natives and settlers fishing and hunting,
 settlers trading with natives?
 Were there war stories? Of battles
 between the English and French
 and, in routs just as fierce,
 among the tribes?

Viewing Abenaki relics in an island museum
 I wondered what the book omitted.
 Whose account was this?
 An English descendant's?
 An historian's? A land owner's?

All I knew: it wasn't the natives' account.
 In an Indian tale I came upon
 I learned natives often called settlers
 the Winter People for their cold hearts.
 Had the book explored this?

No history is complete, most written
 by those of power, of privilege.
 The tribes have oral traditions,
 tales and legends passed down.
 Were the stories of the island's natives
 lost in the winds of Acadia?

Years followed as I went on with life,
 a vision of the book appearing now and then
 like a friend who comes to mind
 after vanishing without a trace.
 The book was that lost friend I had
 with a life of its own,
 excluding me.

❖

Lost books, stolen lands, theft of souls
 who surrender land, or sell it for a coat,
 these places where they fished,
 where we summered, rowed,
 viewed the sunset, heard
 the ebb and flow of tides,
 perking muddy bottoms,
 gulls screeching, canoe paddles
 carving through water.

And voices—of natives calling out
 along the Sound where we camped,
 shouts and cries echoing
 on opposite shores
 down through centuries.

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We must find the legend tellers,
 set down what they recall,
 tales passed to them by elders
 and the elders of their elders.
 We must set those legends alongside
 this book's account
 when we find it.

*Today a simple Google search of the island's
 history finds the lost book: Mount Desert, A
 History, by George Edward Street, published in 1905.
 It was removed from the local library shelf and later located
 via the internet. The campground referred to where the poet and
 her family camped was Mount Desert Campground along Somes Sound.*