



PONDER REVIEW

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[PR]

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VIEW FROM A PROMONTORY

This time I choose to go in by myself to ask for a trail map. Because he is black and I am white, I am forever slightly on edge about acceptance and discrimination when we arrive at a new location, whether restaurant, lodging or information desk. With the Northeast experiencing a heat wave, the air is hot and muggy like Tennessee, and gnats swarm around my mouth and nose. A sheet of paper taped to the wall inside the ranger's shack warns hikers to check for ticks, and I feel crabby.

"Do you have a lot of Lyme disease out here?" I ask.

The young guy says, "We do."

The old guy differs, "Not a lot."

Back at the car, my husband and I spray our shoes with repellent in a dusty gravel parking lot.

"We don't have to stay long," I say, adjusting expectations. The trail through the trees looks ordinary and overgrown.

In our mid-50s, married for close to three decades with now-grown daughters, we've spent the week making our way by rental car along the southern shore of Nova Scotia. This is the third summer we've left the heat of home to explore a little piece of Canada. So-called "anniversary trips," our short sojourns are efforts to leave behind routine and responsibility to share in something new.

Among stands of spruce and fir, we come upon an empty house from the 1800s, where we read historical markers and peek in at windows. Built for a successful fisherman with a large family, the weathered wood structure is not large by modern standards. From the wraparound porch, we investigate several rooms, envisioning husband, wife and children preparing vegetables, mending hook and line, eating pan-fried cod by candlelight, sleeping two or three to a bed. Our sense of time shifts to a larger scale, and we are no longer rooted in everyday reality. Across the trail, eroding headstones in the family cemetery mark three generations of drowned fishermen. As we continue on, past modern camp latrines, our imaginations swirl with ships, sons, wives and daughters from 200 years ago.

Emerging from the trees at a coastal headland, we climb enormous rocks jutting into the Atlantic. From this perch, the vista is striking: in the lower foreground a stream flows into the sea, and beyond that an immaculate beach surrounds a shallow, horseshoe-shaped bay, fir trees in the distance. It appears a beautiful, finished creation.

Across the inlet, a young couple and baby picnic and nap on a dune.

Again, space and time shift, elongate, conflate. The small family seems far from us—worlds away—in a landscape where natural elements dominate: boulders, ocean, dunes, bay, sky and the rhythmic crashing of waves.

We take off our sneakers, roll up our pants and step into the cold, mottled water, full of swirling plums and browns. We cross, stepping carefully on rocks where the water is deeper. Man, woman and baby disappear. The vastness and variety of the natural world draw us in, and wordlessly we begin to wander, each on our own.

For thousands of years ancient peoples camped and fished here. And for thousands of years the sea has eroded this craggy shore to form a bay. Out in the ocean, like primordial hairy beasts, massive rocks sit covered in dark, wet sea plants. I awaken to see that we humans are a part of something strange, surreal, extraordinary.

In the chilly stream where I wade, deep blues and burnt purples flow around pools of turquoise. Specks of light jump and sparkle on the surface. Rivulets carve the sand, forming plateaus with sharp, defined edges that, in shadow, look like broad calligraphy strokes, like Japanese ink painting, against putty-colored slabs of sand. Sliced lines, jagged curves: the water creates a map and a language. These bold marks, these changing and impermanent hieroglyphs, engrave the packed wet grains of granite underfoot.

My husband and I meet up on firm tableland.

“How long should we stay?” he murmurs.

“A while longer.” I am entranced by this living text.

In silence, we follow raccoon tracks at our feet until they fade where the tide washes them out. Semicircular lips of foam creep forward in small waves along the beach. Ripples indent the sand.

I can see the gift of life—the exquisite tension between human experience, mortality and eternity—and even begin to understand that of death, of being released from the efforts and industry of our years on earth. I clasp my husband’s large warm hand.

The water inscribes the coast, as it has since the last ice age, in a shimmering act of renewal—a process in which we are all participants, creating our own brave marks and patterns.