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An American Map

Anne-Marie Oomen
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We often take our geography for granted, even when traveling. We look where the guidebook points and stick close to the hotels and clearly marked trails. But the line of a river, the cleft of a hill, pale lines of quartz running through granite—these features of the natural world can inform and enlighten as well as a history pamphlet, and deserve the notice many people tend to withhold from habit.

Nature, in Anne-Marie Oomen's eyes, isn't something to be revered from the safety of tour bus windows. She and her husband, David, traverse parts of the country with steadfast courage and treat their mistakes, like wading too deeply into a powerful tide, as moments to learn from. They push their bodies, their minds, and their souls through tough patches of trail—like the Appalachian Trail—in pursuit of experience and in the hope that a little more understanding of their world might sift up through the molding leaves and packed dirt. Oomen, writing instructor and author of several books, pays close attention also to the people she encounters, both on her travels to far-flung spots like El Yunque and on trips to different libraries in her own state of Michigan. The intersection between people and place is where she finds the real story.

One of Oomen's many talents as a writer is for lovely, complicated sentences that offer a careful understanding of the actions taking place and an acknowledgment of the deeper undercurrent that stirs below the surface. For example, her essay on fly fishing with her sisters—both one of her funniest and her most touching—contains this line: "In it are bits of flight and sky set in rows, the fuzz of nature looped to the tiniest of hooks, and she chooses one for me, and I take this mimicry of buzz –a midge—between my fingers. I can barely see the tiny metal loop where I will have to tie the line." Oomen is the only one on the lake that day who doesn't know how to fish and it is left to her sister, Marijo, with whom she has just had a terrible fight, to teach her. With this line, Oomen taps into the complex relationships between sisters—the difficulty in taking, giving, and receiving.

Part traveler's guide, part soul-searching memoir, part political commentary, *An American Map* is a richly painted canvas of the small but resonating experiences of a woman in love with, and inquisitive of, her home country.
ANDI DIEHN (May / June 2010)

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