

Whatever Discomfort, Find Beauty

E. A. FARRO

Never Summer Range, Colorado

That is how it is at elevation: you wake up to winter, eat lunch in summer, and put on a wool hat to sleep.

Cook oatmeal for the team at the picnic table; the hot coffee will stop your shivering. By the time you arrive at your field site, the sun will be above the trees and you'll be shedding layers.

Pulling cores of sediment out of the lake is like putting a finger over a straw in a milkshake and pulling the straw out full of milky sweetness. You work from a wood platform strapped to two canoes. Push the core barrel down through the hole in the middle of the platform. That is your straw, the mud at the bottom your milkshake. Each push starts easy, sliding through the water and loose mud, and then the slight resistance of water lily roots.

It is one thing to push; it is another to pull it out. Your legs will tangle in unbearable closeness with your team as you grunt and desperately give it all you have. Ignore the panic; it will come out. Remember to start low, use your legs and not your back. That everyone ten years older has herniated discs is a warning

and not a badge of honor. There is no secret club to be admitted to, and if there is, it isn't worth it.

You taste the mud as each core comes up: *silt or clay or sand?* Evidence of past changes in lake level, times when the lake dried up, and out here was sandy shoreline. You eat salami, cookies, and chips with muddy hands. If you had a mirror, you would see the streaks of sunscreen and dried mud on your face. There are clumps of mud in your hair and on your clothing.

The sun is brutal and hot in the thin mountain air. No matter how sweaty you are, keep your hat on. Splash yourself with the lake. Remember, if you swim, you swim in your clothing, and your bra will never dry.

Ignore the fear in your colleague's voice when he shouts, "Moose!" It is bigger than you imagine; meaning, you didn't know how it would make your body feel. You cannot run; your boat is anchored in place. So take in the strong limbs, the reeds and water dripping from its mouth, the way the lake appears a puddle when a moose walks through.

This animal, it is part of the forest. But you? Your life is a blip, a yelp, a fleeting moment out of the thousands of years archived in the cores of mud piled up on the platform behind you.

When you need to go, don't wait. Don't decide to stop drinking water, don't ignore the tightness in your throat, don't tell yourself you will ruin the team's groove. Just ask everyone to turn around and sing "God Save the Queen."

Squat over the hole. The moose doesn't care, the mud doesn't care. Look at the way light filters through pine needles, the outrageous lily flowers, the zing and zap of dragonflies.

God save the Queen!

The closer you get to the bottom, the more urgent it becomes to reach bottom. Bottom, as in the land carved out by glaciers in the last ice age that became the basin for water to collect. The sun is falling quickly, the penetrating eye of a giant beast peering through the forest. Pull on your long-sleeved shirt. When the orange light turns the tree trunks to glowing embers, put pants on over your shorts. The air is still; listen for thrashing insect wings and jumping fish. This is why you are here. You insist, in your reasonable and rational way, on incessantly naming, measuring, and describing. All that just to participate, to be included, to be part of the great inhale and exhale.

Take out your headlamp and jacket. Pause to eat chips or chocolate, whatever

is at hand. You can't stop now. When water and mud slide down the barrel and into your sleeves, let it warm you a moment before it chills you. Keep singing, keep swearing, keep everyone talking. With each push and pull, remember that it is time that is flowing through your hands.

