

CASEY CHARLES

The Wilderness Experience

Call it a quest for vision, a map reading, a ritual.
The reason they shouldered sixty pounds through the Beartooths,
why they slathered repellent on their faces,
sloshed through mud from Clay Butte to Native Lake.
The first night, rain. Smoke chased them around the fire.
Freeze-dried food rehydrated with filtered water, boiled
to prevent giardia. They hung the remains from a juniper
and crawled under rain flies to read sideways by flashlight.

They wanted to observe detail, to cinch the gear down tight,
push bodies into definition. To see castles in peaks.
But after they forged the cold pain of streams in meadows,
the swarms hungered down their tender ankles, bloodletting.
How did the Indians endure them, Clark and Lewis?
In soaked shirts, they stumbled into the base camp
and waited for wind or cold dark, eaten for dinner.
At midnight, emerging to pee, Scorpio surprised them.

To prime a stove or thread a tapered leader through an eye,
land a spotted brook at dusk near rising mist from waterfalls.
To let the alpine under their skin. This is why they came.
But the whine insaned them, even as they bouldered over the pass
to fish Cloverleaf Lake, half iced, light blue bleeding into the deep.
The cutthroats weren't biting, and even the sting of the sun
could not surpass the black clouds that kept them from bathing.
Anglers hooked, on tent net landed, swimming in drinks.

They put up four nights and when the wind pressed hard
they could sit in shirtsleeves with handfuls of trail mix,
overwhelmed by a vanishing wilderness, ten-thousand feet.
Lean back around the fire ring and see the milky stream,
argue about the origin of species, sparks divine or random.
But then each morning the return of entomology, the stink
of Off, the white welt. Mosquitoes sucked the blood out of them.
They fled their wonder, home to scratch until their skin broke open.