

Winter 1992

Poem with Cattle

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Recommended Citation

Nester, Richard (1992) "Poem with Cattle," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 37 , Article 34.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss37/34>

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Poem with Cattle

What cattle do, they do with a terrible patience.
It snows and they stand there under the snow,
not bawling, in a ring, as it feathers their flanks.

When the calf with the white face dies they grieve
with an icy grief, as though winter itself
were grieving, not them,

with a glitter deep down in their nerves,
like the glitter of stars, like the wisdom of amputees.
And when they calve they do that far away.

Cows are not like us, they do not eat
what we eat, or get sick in the same way, or lie
down so easily.

They are all stubbornness and sudden fear,
too dumb for anything but death. This farm is like a cow,
and the fields are the stomachs of cows.

It is Tuesday, the year my grandparents wintered
in Florida. Twelve below. Steam
from the mouths of the Herefords dewes the barn roof.

Downstairs they are happy over their chop,
a sea-scum of drool on their faces. In the loft
I am falling, breaking my ankle, feeling stupid

as I watch a week's egg money litter the straw
in moist yellow blotches.

Next week, when the power goes off,

I will read in a copy of *True*
how UFOs land in Vermont, take some cows and leave,
searing the grass in a circle. The Air Force covers up.

I will dream of the wheels of Ezekiel, dream
that I am lifted up from my bed by the woodstove
to be eaten like Christ, muscle by muscle,

that weevils slide through the rooms
of my organs like ghosts, that the farm is chewing
its foot off like a dog in a trap.

Now there is nothing to do but crawl home
over the head-high drifts
glazed with ice.

On my knees I glide past the fences.
The farm announces itself in my bones as I rise.
Mine! Mine! Each step is a victory.