Poem with Cattle

Richard Nester
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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 dews 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.