THE HEREFORD

Robert Crum, award winner

The smoke of dying fires rises
from the orchard, thinning the moon
until its reflection fills the cowpond
where a brown and white Hereford,
earlier that evening, wandering
off shore and sinking its hooves
in the cool mud, got stuck.
It's out there now, still lowing,
baffled but calm, like some dutiful god
of all domestic animals.
The swallows are gone
that for an hour flew circles
above its head, and in the pasture
the fireflies come on;
a panfish surfaces
just beyond the Hereford's tail.
Anyone leaving the orchard now,
tired and hungry after pruning
the ranked, stubby trees all day,
and trying to decide whether to eat first
or sleep, would think nothing
about that bawling from the bottom-land.
But no one is leaving the orchard.
No one is opening the door
of the dark house. No one
sinks back into the overstuffed armchair,
his shoes still on.

And the night passes into the night.
The cricket panics before the mouse,
the mouse before the owl,
and the owl inside the pole-trap
the farmer set the night before.
All of which leaves the Hereford
unconcerned. All of which leaves the Hereford,
in fact, asleep. Never safer than now
with its knees locked in mud,
it nods its large head, and the rings of water
roll away from its nose all night.
All night the smoke and the moonlight
fall like the fabric of a dream
over the open land. And the mist rises
and thickens around the cow,
who will awaken inside this local cloud
watching the white distortions of its face
growing slowly clearer in the star-abandoned air,
floating there before it
over the imponderable water.