

## THE HEREFORD

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*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.