

Poetry Porch: Poetry

My Father, My Virgil

By Gary Whited

Ripe red berries, as sweet as their thorns are sharp,
I avoid them, ride past the buffalo berry bush,
Horseback to check our cow herd, summer ritual

In my early teens, even in the scorching heat.
My father had taught me well what I'd find years later
In Virgil's *Georgics*, though he would never read them,

"How to take care of the cattle and see to their breeding;"
And there I am, riding along taking it all in,
Everything's easy, cows graze, calves rest in grass

Swirled into flattened circles they'd made turning
To lie down. Eager to head home, slake my unquenched
Thirst, I come 'round the south end of the water-filled dam.

There, I can't unsee what I see, a cow whose birth
Canal hangs inside out, what I know my father
Will hate to see—what Virgil will have foretold:

"There'll always be cows that you'll want to sell
Or trade because they don't look the best for breeding, . . ."
And here she is, swollen mess, though she grazes on,

Seeming not bothered, as four-legged creatures can be
With body afflictions, pushing on with their urge
To feed, appearing to be without worry until we

Humans intervene, as I am about to do.
My horse knows her way with cows, we pair this one
With her calf, start the long chase home. We pass along

The dam's west side, green slime shimmers and repulses
Me all at once. Is there, I wonder, a world
Without slime? No one I knew had ever asked.

Cow and calf try to turn, not wanting to leave this place,
Its peace so fresh, even for me, far from
Anyone or anything that troubles, until

I see the slime and this cow I can't unsee.
Virgil will echo what my father says without words,
"I will teach you, too, about the sicknesses

That animals are afflicted with"—his words
Will go on to speak of many ailments in detail,
But nowhere of a cow like the one I'm seeing now.

My father will be my Virgil today, show me how
To put a cow back together, teach me jaw-clenched,
Zeus-like cuss words for thunderbolts, *goddam son-of-a-bitch!*

To let this cow know who's boss and what she's here for.
But how he works with his hands softens the curses.
He washes her parts clean as he can, water,

Disinfectant that smells as strong as how awful this looks.
His gaze steady, he speaks soft, *com'boss—com'boss.*
It's how he sounds when he isn't mad, gives food,

Water, medicine, helps them birth their calves,
Offers tenderness that has no name, handed father
To son over and over at the barn. His shirt

Off, bare arm pushes her swollen parts back inside
As she strains against him, no way for her to sense
His attempt to help as anything but threat. Her hooves

Kick, her head thrashes, against the chute. Finally,
She's right-side in, he's ready for suture and needle
That I proffer, slight tremble in my hand. I know

He's ashamed of my fear, though he stays as silent
About it as the corral boards between us.
His arm buried in birth canal up to his shoulder,

Jaw still tight, how he holds his aim. What's next
I've not seen coming—her bowels explode, let loose
Their load, liquid shit gushes at his head, now turned

Away to not take it in the face. As I watch,
I can't contain a laugh, not well received,
And he can't help but curse the cow and me,

As if we've conspired against him. I fall silent.
We finish the job, turn her loose. While he cleans himself
She walks back and forth, seems not to know where to go,

Nor to recognize her calf, whose young face looks lost,
The way I feel in my gut. I still wish the slime
Wasn't there. Two days later, I rope a calf

Whose force throws me face first into dried manure.
My Virgil laughs, evens the score without a word.