

what the pasture knows

by Rucker Manley

i do not remember blood on the ground
the day the cowboy came out to the house

culdesac stringy down ever-sweating face, the cowboy
pulls the lever and cowclamp in the temple grandin way.
he comes no clint eastwood, wears no stetson
and gives the young gentlemen hormones with names
like resistol and thyroxoid and summatrippin

in the old days they used rubber bands,
little blue vices around premasc dangles.
but the men prefer scalpels now, laughing
as they offer me the blade and bucket:
"you wanna take a cut?"

the calves age by step into castrati, march the guthrie line,
bleating with impatience, leaving me the sole delay.
the cowboy catches my hesitation, tells me to get off
my phone (by the way, he says, he has none of his own,
"not even to call my mother") — mister, i gotta ask:

"you tell me that you can't have too many bulls
they kill each other, fight over heifers, dig holes
and behave like mongrels. so you
have to take the little jewels—
is this oral tradition or gods awful truth?"

"the pasture has no place for soft stomachs," he say—
"like sowing deer seed to call bucks to cull
so we can kill them before the coyotes do
—you must understand that if you leave mongrels
with fat to chew, their numbers will grow"

the cowboy captures my lingering gaze,
pushes the scalpel again:

"son, i know this is hard to swallow, but
this is how we cut our teeth

if you want to molar-crack bone and drink marrow
you will take this goddamned knife and get to work"

at the end of the day, our bucket sloshes with rubies
he grabs the handle and scatters our collection
to feed the dogs and water the earth, prizes arriving
for the consumers