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"Able to Keep"

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"Able to Keep"

Pete Topstra never liked this Easterner,
The preacher due on huisbezoek at three.
"He doesn't understand the farm," said Pete,
And how can I respect a man like that
Who doesn't know a gelding from a stud?"
Pete looked to see if Jen had heard, but she,
While baking rolls for Dominie's annual call,
Pretended not to hear a word he said.
"I like him—not because he's citified;
You needn't sulk because he looks refined.
He brings the Word—isn't that enough for you?"
When Pete heard Jen's good will, he feared he'd lose
His argument, but he did not intend
To yield his spite to her easy girl love.
"He does things differently—what man would kneel
In front of the whole church to pray long prayer?"
"You kneel in prayer beside the bed at night."
"At home it's not the same." Pete stepped outdoors
To let the breeze cool off the argument
He would not win and thought of how the man
Would preach on doctrines that did not make sense:
"He said a saint couldn't fall away from faith,
But Mulder, since his pigs got sick and died,
Don't come to church no more. Does that make sense?
If he didn't fall away, what did he do?"
"The gospel should be plain," Pete said aloud
To himself, "Make right seem right and wrong, wrong."

The noise of a rusted chevy encroached
On thoughts like these—brakes squeaking, doors rattling.
Pete calmed his dog and welcomed Dominie.
"Come see my Holstein herd," Pete said with pride
When Dominie Vande Klerk stepped from his car.
"Thoroughbred cows and a thoroughbred bull;
You won't find better stock in Iowa."
As Dominie walked with Topstra to the fence,
His rumbling sermon voice contained reproof:
"These cattle are not yours, Peter. They are
Jehovah's. You are but their caretaker.
You must thank God you are able to keep
Them for him; they must give you much pleasure."
"What did I just say?" Pete thought. "He muddies
Simple farm life with notions from the East.
What right has he to question what I call
My cows? Who nurses sickling calves to health?
Who puts clean straw beneath the cows each night?"

I treat my cows like kids—they're fed and clean,
No mud-baked hides like Hofstra's down the road;
No stinking strawless pens with nameless herds.
I know my cows by name and they know me.
What preacher dare say I mayn't call them mine?"
Pete Topstra huffed within but said no more.

Back at the house he thought the elder'd read
The text on bigger barns Pete could have said
By heart. "Read that to the Hofstras with their
Thousand steers," Pete had planned to say. "I have
Not lusted for new barns." But Elder Jans
Read words from Timothy. Pete thought he heard:
"...He is able to keep that which I have
Committed unto him against that day."

When Elder Jans had finished with the Word,
The Dominie started plowing Topstra's soul:
"Brother Pete, do you see the need for grace?"
"Ya, our best works are like the mud in March
Before the sun dries up the soupy mess."
"And then you see the need for vicarious
Punishment for your sin?"

"Ya, Dominie,
That don't seem quite right, but I see the need."
"Your sanctification, Peter, are you
Making headway warding off the devil?"
"I get to church twice on Sunday unless
I have a cow about to have a calf.
A cow can die while you lead us in prayer
About the people out in Africa."
"I know, I know. But who is worth more, Pete,
The sick cow or the man in Africa?"
Pete, stung by Dominie's question, didn't reply.
"Are you tempted by worldliness, Topstra?"
Pete wondered how the Dominie came to this.
"I'm not tempted by the world: I don't drink
Or smoke—he thought of Dominie's pipe but didn't
Look up—don't go to town on Saturday nights,
Don't dance, play cards, or go to picture shows."
"But the world is here on the farm too, Pete;
Which do you love more, your clean Holstein herd
Or church? You think the world of them? They are
The world. The devil uses cows like cards—
To woo your thoughts from heaven to things of earth."
"Farmers don't lose their way like city folk,"
Pete said softly, though he felt it loudly.
"You been to men's society of late?"
"No, when I get done with chores, it's too late."

"But first things first, Hofstra."

"I know. My herd
Comes first. I raise my Holstein herd from birth;
I don't buy herds of branded steers and cows
Like Jans." He wanted to add, "And I don't
Gamble on fat steers like other farmers,"
But Dominie was looking at Jen now
As if to say, "Enough, I know your heart."

"Now Jen, you lead the Ladies Aid at church.
The ladies say they're blessed by how you make
Theology from Romans relevant."

"Let them thank Paul—better yet the Spirit—
For showing us how Christians brought the light
To darkened Rome. The commentary helped."
"You find the time to read it week by week?"
"I never miss. I think about Paul's words
While darning socks or mopping dirty floors."
Pete winced and wished his wife were half as good.
Before he left, Dominie closed with prayer,
A prayer that wouldn't have been as long if chores
Were waiting for him as for me, Pete thought.

When Dominie had gone, Pete walked out to
His cattleyard to feed his Holstein herd.
"Mere word games," he said to himself. "If God
Gave these cattle to me, then they are mine,
And no preacher who never earned the right
To call a cow his own can say they're not."
He walked into the yard, his voice and shape
Attracting cows who knew that he was good.
Pete thought, "I've found the good life on this farm."
He scooped the golden corn from wagons heaped—
No fancy elevator boxes scarred
His yard. He fed his cattle with his hand
As God's own David must have fed his sheep.
"Mine," he said aloud. "My cows know my voice,
And I know them." He felt one with the Lord.

A low bull voice seemed to respond as if
The bull had heard him—another sermon
That this was not his Holstein herd, Pete thought,
But he ignored the voice and walked a path
Through cows. The pawing bull spun dirt and moaned
In one corner of the yard as Peter
Flung corn to troughs where cows' heads looked at him,
Depending on their master's hand for life.
He counted his cows and heifers—all there—
And started for the gate, when suddenly

The roaring bull was galloping at him.
"I'm a goner now," Pete thought, running hard.
He leaped up on the board fence, his belly
Hitting the top board, the bull's sharp horn tip
Piercing the calf of his one leg, drawing
Blood before he kicked it lamely over.
Pete scurried to the house to get his gun
From where it hung above the door—and yelled
For Jen to get him a half-dozen shells.
"What on earth is wrong now?" Jen asked.

"The Bull,"

Was all Pete said. He shoved two shells into
The barrel as he ran out heavily.

The bull pawed dirt thirty feet from the fence
When Pete laid the barrel on the top board
To take aim. He fired two shots at the paw-
ing bull, but the shots went high, beebies bounc-
ing off the bull's high forehead. Though he was
Barely stunned, the bull raised his head and glared;
His front legs went stiff, his low rumble stopped.
The silence gave Pete courage and he stepped
Through the small wooden gate until he was
But ten paces from the blue-eyed killer.
He aimed the gun between the eyes and shot.
The bull's two front legs buckled and he dropped
To his knees as if praying for mercy.
Pete saw the bull's proud neck, now bent, his nose
Resting in the mud, his hind feet still straight
As fence posts. "You had to push me, didn't you,"
Pete said in anger, "but this herd is mine,
Dead or alive." But when he saw blue blood
Flow from his bull, he blamed the Dominie.
"He got me mad, and mad, I got careless."
He stepped close to the kneeling bull and shot
Once more, this buckshot for the Dominie.
He hoped the bleeding bull could understand
The need for vicarious punishment.
The last blast between the eyes dropped the bull.

Pete turned to see Jen by the fence, apron
In her hands. "I've just killed the bull," he said.
"Your thoroughbred bull?"

"My thoroughbred bull.

It was him or me. Quick get me a knife.
I'll bleed him and then we'll call the butcher."
When Jen returned with the long blade, she said
Softly, "Your thoroughbred bull."

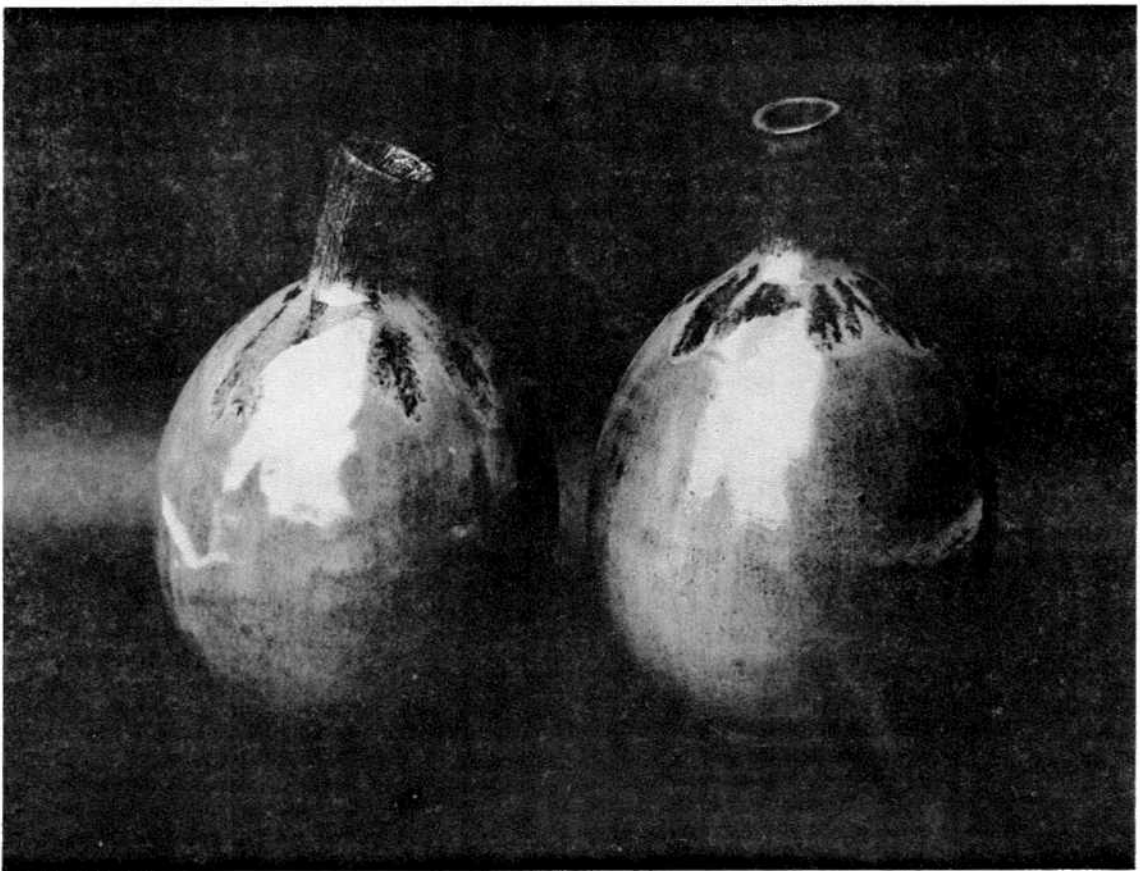
"Him or me,"

Pete said. "This full-blood bull didn't know his place.

He thought he owned this yard, that I was just
A caretaker. You call the butcher. See
If he can't come yet tonight. I can't cut
Him up."

"He thought he owned the place but now
He's dead," said Jen. "But rather him than you.
At least," she said, to make the best of it,
"We'll have some good young meat to eat for once."
"Yes, choice steaks," said Pete, swayed by his wife's mood
Despite the death of his thoroughbred bull.
"Why don't you call the Dominie tonight,"
He said, forgiveness throbbing like a tooth;
"See if he don't want the liver again.
But don't tell him this one's the thoroughbred.
I don't want my bull in Sunday's sermon."

Mike Vanden Bosch



Gourds by Joanne Alberda
12" high
Stoneware, albany green glaze