

Andrew Vaisius / TWO POEMS

LANDLORD

If I think of it now I think of **blockage** a purple field of Canada
Thistle and at the top of the rise, twenty fava plants in a row I
Kept weeded in spite. For six months my body drained onto his
Land: piss, sweat, shit. I bathed in a lake I came to regard as

His own. Dizzied by pulling weeds under the blaze of summer,
And crazy with the angle of the kitchen floor in the tenant
Shack, I could hardly spit straight. Everywhere slant. The night
Lake's surface the only level for miles, and I longed to drift away

Over it while I could still count fingers on my hands numbing
Up when the stars and northern lights sparkled over the rows
I hoed in the sloping garden. He presented the children with a
Strip of thistleground to seed, and damned if they didn't produce

A pea, a carrot, a lettuce, and left another in the ground for thanks.
In his patch on the path a dwarf forest grew, and I refashioned
Fairy tales of wolves, witches and bears when I pinballed my way
Through its pink light and drooping seed heads. I hated his

Asparagus pushing up in a wreckage of perennials and abuse. My
Family got so few, and the few we ate he salted with begrudgement.
Every sheet of toilet paper in the biffy he counted. Every time I
Blew my nose he summed it on an abacus in the shadow of the

Blue tractor with the blown hydraulics. I'd curse his footprints,
But Colorado potato beetles overheard and reported. I hauled
Water from the lake, silty and shallow enough to render dipped
Pails useless unless I hoofed seventy-five steps more along the

Shoreline and up the hillpath overgrown with stinging nettle and
Wild rose thorn. I learned not to waste water, so bottles appeared,
Half-filled, on counters, tables and sills. I boiled tea with ten
Sticks on a woodstove in morning darkness. These were attitudes

More than skills without tools within hand's reach. Bailing twine
And binder wire pleaded his equipment together by knot and kink
For an afternoon, a month, a year, until they too snapped or
Slipped into the soil and were reclaimed. Rust crawled over shovel-

Blade and cultivator wheel, the sizer on the seeder, and gooseneck
Of the broken-handled hoe, rust calling back to powder, to nutrient,
To plant xylem . . . **and the green grass grew all around all around,**
The green grass grew all around Mornings I'd pummel downhill

And evenings ache up. Between the major passages of the day my
Throat parched and knees buckled as my back zipped with spine-
Fire like an Otis run amok. Truth eludes grasp when thistle pins
Fester under the skin singing castrato at every bump, each brush,

Even a breeze across their teensy broken nibs feeling long enough
To hang my hat on. I'd dig them out with a needle till my thumbs
Resembled cratered moonscape. Burning in white sunlight I plot
To murder him with my stirrup hoe, strike the curmudgeon down

And bury him beneath a persistent patch of sow thistle just for the
Pleasure of watching it wither. He sustained life dourly, gracelessly,
With split-open gumboots he wore without socks, even in winter.
Stories seep out of the ground like ooze from a plugged septic tank:

The Swiss couple coming to learn English but held static on the
Farm until his new house was raised on their backs; or the seeds
He sells to his own kin at full price; his sister's puppy he slew
With the stroke of his hoe for tramping in his garden. Once he

Borrowed his brother-in-law's pick-up for a trip into town, and left
The tank empty in gratitude. No excuse snaky enough not to use
For not spending a penny. I suspect I am a story too, for his
Relations to recount when the fields locked in winter crystal can't

Be broken into by a master thief with a pickaxe and sledge, and
Summer becomes myth, memories, vegetables, pendant raspberries
Ready to drop with a slight shake and a wide breeze off the lake
Full of never again.

PEACE

Before the bloom after father died the room darkened and I became
Never more a son. Leaving a cracked carburetor, a baitbox of
Nightcrawlers gone stinky, a waxed rosebush brittle and dry in a
Corner of the garage, he'd talk no more. We seldom talked in the

Years before he died. Like cough drops on my tongue I sucked the
Words and kept dumb when he called long distance. We both were,
Then, too far from our birthplace Chicago to smell the summer
Alewives rotting along the shore in waves, or to stretch for the extra

Points booted into the cheap seats at a few dozen fans of the woeful
Cardinals, or to mention **anything** about Hizzoner Richard J. Daley.
The flea market along Maxwell Street with its thrown down dares of
Hubcaps, alternators, golf clubs, broken faucets, pulleys — all lorded

Over by squinty-eyed squires with three-toothed smiles and ladies-in-
Waiting tugging at coarse matted hair crowing in wild pitch replies to
Price, which divided us more surely than the low wall of junk at our
Shoetips — made me ache for elsewhere. Sun reflected off chrome in

A multiplicity of jagged spears. The seller's scorn spit out like a
Tobacco bit from the end of a cigar; mine born of fear. If my father
Ever haggled enough to buy some grease-gummed whatnot I cannot
Remember. I wanted home, a clean solitude with no come-ons or

Demands on preteen morality. He'd drive me to the Cicero street
Fair to hear sausages split and drip over open fires, to see the pile
Driving arms of his buddy Nick, baring the barbs of an anchor
Garlanded with roses under his cuffed white sleeve — ash dangling

Off the butt glued to his bottom lip by feet staggering humidity and
Beer — serving them up with a sexual savoirre faire to caramel
Coloured girls in untucked snowstorms and rolled bobby socks, but
We'd never talk about it. Never talked about it. My father led me

Away from home, attic dust on war-censored love letters and the thin
Back porch he erected to sleep alone in three seasons of the year.
He took me past the garage, the stripped-down cars, power saws and
Machine order, took me by bus in midwinter to the smoky chaos of

The second balcony in the Chicago Stadium where we teetered on
Slatted seats miles above portioned ice to scream bloody murder,
Roar abuse, slap ephemeral victory's back, or glaze over in defeat.
Innocently he led me away so I could not speak in peace.