

MICHAEL LAVERS

Works and Days

Light, so heavy Earth groaned like a boat,
the horsemint, milkweed, sorrel, vetch,
red gorse and pink marsh vapours that dissolve
coarse clouds and without losing breath bloody
the moon; a yellow house, a flock of goats
who feed on ruin and wail and will not spook;
the silver grass around the lake, and angels
falling just to feel fall's cadences:

I want to say whatever's missing,
here it is, inside this wind that's reached
the cypress bough outside your window,
waking you. That's all it was. I'm here
now and will stay a while, and then morning
will come. We'll try *The Earth is like unto
a parable: for those with ears to hear*
and *Nature's not a shambles* and, as your mother
put it once, while whipping cream, *Life
will be appreciated or else*, my prodigal
accountings of chronologies which now
belong to me, too soon unsponsored, and to you,
too soon their little heirs, this hope to save you
if not all then something. First things.
Patch work. Before the rains begin:

In the beginning there was silver grass
around the lake where she who made all this
built up a house and multiplied her flock.
He pointed up at her, and she said *Moving water*,
then he pointed to himself; she said *Mooncalf*. He grew
and made small horses do big things and planted
when the stars, he thought, so clearly said
Plant now. But knapweed.

Hawkweed.

Medusahead.

Thistle, marsh.

Thistle, plumeless.

Loosestrife, goatgrass, buckthorn, dyer's woad
are not the consequences of some ancient curse.
They're things, and things are always growing
harder to explain. Man comes and tills the field
and lies beneath. Sometimes fantastic
effort simply fails. We live and die and think

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there was a day before this sour air, a time
when angels hovered, thick as cowbirds on an ox.
But Earth was never better than it is right now.
Each winter juncos bend their song to dearth,
the Earth's, I think, best rhyme.
Then lynx tracks annotate the trail behind you
where, just now, blank snow. A box of oranges
still faintly green. And sixty-four species of birch.
What is Olympus if it can vanish in a cloud
or Eden if its fences are so small?

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Autumn was here first;
the yellow leaves do not need your approval.
You're not obliged to sorrow or to joy,
but in seasons of joy, be absolute;
in sorrow, weep and be not comforted.
Some proof demand of heaven but not much;
this is the only planet not named after a god,
the acres where Seth was conceived and where,
feeling he had a special claim, he jawboned
William to the ground. Then there was Mary,
five years old, who screamed in unknown pain
for seven days, until she died. The Earth is full
of evil things, the sky full of the vultures'
patient whorls. So they dug a hole
and buried her and went to bed. And then
got up again. For what? Coffee and milk
and a nice quince jam? What is the best thing?
An apple? Fresh saskatoons?
That's how easily we are seduced:
a six-month winter, but the first loose scab
of ice, the first card table dragged outside
for brunch, stippled in honey, and we're sure
the world's always like this, flaunting
its gaudy maples like new money.
Lynx tracks on the trail right behind you;
light, nothing and everything at once,
that color where greenfinches end
and goldfinches begin.

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And Seth gathered anew.
And the Lord filled all his granaries, and cattle
well stricken in age were multiplied:
*While earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest,
and cold and heat, and summer and winter,
and day and night shall not cease.*
That was their promise. It wasn't meant for us.
Too many things and not enough forms,
and so we drift. The wind won't turn the torn rags
of our bodies into sails. The milk pail of the galaxy
has spilled; the willows bend and break
and drape their heavy clothes onto the stones.
Days bend and shed their sunlight like a skin
while into pitiless darkness frays the moon.



Somebody wasn't buried fast enough.
Or somebody was kissed, and the sewers
of some vermin's veins, finer than Rome's,
invaded ours until even the hawkweed
shivered in aftershock. Miles of silver birch
unraveled atmospheres of gauze
but couldn't staunch the rheumy, rife,
and restless air. Distance, that old god,
was dead. How can we think of thinking
to explain? *The world is that which happens
to be the case?* Better a love of shaping soil,
upturned rows well tamped, before time
stops to catch its breath, set down its spade,
and scrape its boots of you; small order, finish,
straightness realized; harvests of sweat
and sound perfection, absolute
control over a practiced hand that can exactly
hover like an osprey in a sunspot's sliver,
still inside the faddish current
of hot air by vast fine-tunings
of its feathers' flickering, or fold
and fall, gutting the salmon-colored air,
a limitless dominion
over small but salvageable fields.



The bees grow louder right before a frost.
Better some botched opus than a perfect silence.
Better a century of creaking floors
and carpet she capitulated to
to cover bloodstains and the smell
of afterbirth the hardwood exhaled
in hot sun. Better, even, the goat
army that sacked it, breeding on the beds,
eating the wallpaper, the glue,
the curtains, Shreve's dress uniform,
the roses, the ten inches of topsoil,
than blank fields. Better the lurid steaming
of the windfall plums, the hatchling tensure
when the foaming mooneye bites,
the blood's curt countercoil and—enough:
fewer adjectives, more nouns. *Serein*: a fine rain
falling after sunset from a sky in which
no clouds are visible. *Serac*: a ridge of ice crowning
the surface of a glacier. Ants queuing
to higher ground, the prairie sounding charlock,
rapeseed, Job's tears, milkweed, sorrel—
faster, before everything goes, let's put them
in our little book: the fireweed, the wood lily,
the whispering of snow.



I'd yield everything and live well on a line or two
of winter sedge, the mare's salt lick, a muddy spring
where some slim muse would say *Fatten your sheep,*
and then be silent! But your birthright
will not be abridged: abundance also
fell under our stewardship. And joy.
Ann made a dress, a white pine was a witness,
and what rings they had
spread from a rising trout. Granaries, half built, rose
no further, and the wheat fermented into
fumes that made even the mayflies dizzy.
We were the only yield that year, the ears
a honeymoon's hexameter conceived.
Whom would their temperance



have pleased? Remember
all the silver grass around the lake?
All kinds of things exist. Why shouldn't we
be happier? ...*a world which though wicked
enough in all conscience is perhaps as good
as worlds unknown* is tempting, I agree,
but no. Salvation from our smoking detritus
in clichés of *a better world?*
Unsatisfactory. The end must be
to cultivate perpetual astonishment
right now and watch light bail
darkness from the flooding sky.
Earth's earth. The rest is silence,
and I've had enough of that already.
Gods, and Mooncalf naming grasses
by the sound they made in wind, then Shreve,
Mary, five Wills in a row, then Beulah,
then the quack touch doctor who preached
mostly Babylon and knew the resting place
of Noah's ark, the names of all the priests
of Baal. And then Lord Al, of nothing
that we knew, and all *nomina dubia*
the night will swallow in its senseless sea.
*Do not the chaste lines of this ark
deny the dominion of space?* It doesn't matter—
just keep going: Afton, Mom, me, you,
the little center of this crumbling chiasmus,
you, me, Mom, and Afton, who filled
fifteen black folios with clippings:
brown blue-ribbon calves, the nurses' strike,
fat birth announcements, lean obituaries,
Sarajevo, Munich, D-Day, each faded
photograph a little grave of light.

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When the moon threatens to jump if you heed it,
keep your head down, hoe your acre, think
*This is the row I will consider now. This one,
no other.* And yet, aim at no less than all the world.
Mooncalf lay with Beulah. Elizabeth

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bore twins so early they were kept in bread pans
in the oven for a week. That happened—
not just another of my indolent exaggerations—
in the season of blue damselflies, when all
the violet saxifrage was still in bloom
and swaths of wapiti browsed the mustard fields
and diamond willows courted, coiffed in crows.
This had something to do with soothing you
and calling, with dumb songs, your nightmare's bluff,
with turning fear into some air that can unravel
wind before it tears more genera
out of the tree of life, and you wake up
to ravaged, famished versions of reality.
*What about I did not, however, commit
suicide because I wanted to know more
about mathematics? Too academic?*
*The beauty of literature: I lose a cow,
I write about its death, and this brings me
in enough to buy another cow. Too literal?*
*It should have been impossible not to love
all things in a world so filled... I cannot
make it any clearer: there were
lynx tracks on the trail right behind me.
Too many things and not enough forms.
Not to add to the stock of available
reality but rather to describe existence
and convince ourselves to it, to walk
the field's length and then walk back. Repeat.
It's simple, but I've lost my way.*
Sixty-four species of birch. Fresh saskatoons,
the strings of bees that sow the wild rye west,
Heaven and Earth, what else? Commit it all
to memory: the silver grass
around the lake, the small hole in the snow
from which a thin umbilical of breath
upcoiled from the bear's enormous sleep,
that uncle throwing Hesiod in the fire—
First the Tower of Babel, and now this.
*What could I learn from someone
who spells labour with no u. Barbarians, your poets.*
All connoisseurs of shade. Shepherds,

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I pointed and said *Look...* But you
weren't even there.

Man comes
and tills the field
and lies beneath.

In the beginning, silver grass around the lake.
I'm here now and will stay a while,
and then morning will come.

Rest,
crow. Rest, dove. Rest, rest.

And so she wept
and knelt down, kissing the earth,
saying *Here is a good land: a little
clover and a little sedge; here I will build
a great house and till fields where my goats
can multiply*, carving the future plot
in creek sand with her foot. And this is all
that's left. It's all I know.