

## **JOHN HENRY SLEEPING IN HIGH GRASS**

Mowers miles away, mud flies on top  
his hammer like they own it, his chest  
cresting and falling in shapes shifting  
between sunlight and leaves, black steel  
his destiny, John is motion at rest,  
tides of moon and waves in still waters,  
suns igniting hearts of molten iron,  
a hardened conviction, rose petals in rain.

Sleep is a dream, the real world a poundage,  
work a sentence for being his mama's son,  
the hammer in his crib, the supernatural

a drum song of woodpeckers, cow bells  
in the field, heaven a home going back to  
a place before the bugle call to be born.

## WHERE THE STEEL OF PLOUGHS

Is made a frozen custard stand sat  
on the way out of the city, Baltimore  
shrinking in the rear view mirror  
of our '54 Ford, my mother's arm  
in the window, the air in her hair,  
the Irish in her a fire in her eyes.

We made this trip on Sundays,  
my father wanting to drive to where  
he worked, on this his day off, to see  
the victory again, a check each week,  
no hot fields down home in old clothes,  
his house now brick with a basement,  
a lawn, petunias in the backyard,  
his children in big city schools.

One summer we all tore up  
the front yard to kill the crabgrass,  
back again in the feeling of farming,  
a grub hoe in my hands, I was like  
a man, picking it up and wielding  
the thing, John's hammer against  
the mountain one more time,  
learning to be a human machine.

In kindergarten my mother turned  
to see me following her home, returning,  
going back to what I knew, with all its  
joy, all its hurt. Leaving universities,  
I put my feet on the lawn again,  
to kill crabgrass, to study gratitude.

## PREACHERS

Worked in the steel mills, black men  
from Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia,  
studying the way God whispered  
in the hot air of the coke oven, how  
the saints waved the smoke rising  
up over Baltimore harbor, a pastiche  
announcing the hope of generations.

Slow strides up the aisle to pulpits,  
steps learned between rows of peanuts,  
corn, tobacco, cotton, rows crossed  
over in blood from the thousands sold  
down under, raised like sweet calves,  
flesh harvested, made righteous by  
what fails a people, by what promises.

They built cities on Psalm 139,  
calling on the last testing of hearts  
of believers so they can lay stones,  
one on the other, hand over hand.