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.