

THE RED RIVER VALLEY

I was still cutting my first eyetooth
When my father carried me piggyback over barbed
Wire to the stubble field and planted me.
I remain rooted to a worm-walled furrow.

Seagulls rose and rose off tableland.
I landed, alone, amid waves of black clods,
An unrisen beauty of barley beards.

He stood me and let the field clasp my feet.
I saw acres of plow-signed summer fallow,
Signs in the dew and white steam hovering with a new name.

He could not know I would soon
Grow to match his steel-reaper's arms.
Sprouting a quick stem, my roots delved deep into red clay.
There, arrowheads still whistled through
The hayloft of my grandfather's barn.

My boyhood held a drowsy seed tended
Under the shining loam soil.
Mustard weed bloomed, hiding the moonset from crickets.

When ripe, mother and father took me
Through the tepee doors of the sun-bent corn stalks.
I found yellow kernels of knowledge; rain holier
Than gasoline, more sacred than diesel smoke.

I saw a combine coming for them
Along the swath, throwing dirt and chaff
Over the rusty marrow of their bones.
I recalled the prayers of my mother on her knees,
Her soul turning under colters, knuckles clodded

With the fresh rosary of gopher mounds.
I sent these taproots back, but few held
Though great-grandfather homesteaded here.

Bonanza farmers reaped a chalice of wheat,
Reddened quickly in the noon sun
And turned into August wine of bereavement
To thresh away the husks of our gilded season.

That night away from my father's field,
For the last time a hired hand in his granary,
I dreamed of blind Jacob's scythe
Raised against a crop of stars . . .
Restlessly wandering over a dark, cold river valley.