

Mandolin

Dog days, flat heat, the sky tight
as a Holiness tambourine. I am walking the road
gouged out to make way for Saddle Ridge Acres
and mourning the slaughter of timber,
but someone down the bulldozed slope
is striking true notes like fireflies in the August air.

For troubadours of the courtly age
this sound was a lute, a pear-shaped, four-stringed gourd
to set the mood for chivalry and wit,
but it picked up a set of shadow strings
and outlived vaudeville irony,
the sweet tremolo of parlor play,
and ragtime just jaunty enough for cakewalks,

till what I hear is the amplified flatback
Orville Gibson gave it, an ebony bridge
with bronze strings too taut to jump the nut,
and this musician playing somewhere, I'm guessing,
down by Buckle Creek, near the narrows
where water rills quick and clear,

is tuning to the seven-year insects
resuming their shivaree in the evergreens,

not quite the holy call and response,
but something secular and just as desperate.

It's a miniature instrument for delicate fingers
strong enough to shiver a fret,
and in this heat I drink it in like water
from a mint spring as I remember
how young Ricky Skaggs, already
a picking prodigy and keen to blend gospel
with his old-time riffs, asked Bill Monroe
the secret to becoming a great player
of the bluegrass mandolin,
and the master looked hard into the sky's mystery
and back at the plectrum of tortoiseshell
shaped like a deer tick in his fingers
before he answered the boy:
"Son," he said, "you got to whip it like a mule."

And that is the fiery melody I hear
over the cicadas' amber serenade
of breakdown, blues licks, and frantic reel.
Even on this worksite the county fathers call
progress, I bow to the enduring thirst for melody

and thank a lonesome picker, as the full moon
round as a cat-skin banjo sails
over the remnant saw-toothed pines.
For hopeful good measure and the ghost of harmony,
I cut a shuffle step, kick my heels, and twirl
in the rusted dust on the margin
of this sleeping, mongrel world.