

Coming Apart

It's coming apart

like in a Road Runner cartoon
or special effects Superman movie,

tearing jagged cracks

through our propped-up economy:
pavement heaved upwards by skulking forces,

fangs dripping — overproduction,
unemployment, inflation, deflation,
recession, depression —

ripped apart at cellular speed,

rifts swelling between toilers and takers.

It's coming apart, there's no going back.

It's coming apart. Don't be caught

on the wrong side
of the cracks.

Milkweed

Throughout the long summer,
did they know,
these captive seeds
so tightly squeezed,
that they were meant
to soar?

The Vise

The vise was already well-used by the time I was born. Perhaps you bought it used, or just used it often. I would climb onto your work bench, drawn by smells of oil, leather, and rags, awed by the tools placed in easy reach — fascinated most by the red vise bolted to a short end of the bench. Was it the color that attracted me most, so alluring among all the workaday grays and browns? Was it the raspy teeth, almost delicate, yet strong enough to grip and hold much bigger things? Was it the little lever that dropped up and down, down and up? Or was it the way the vise worked: so quiet, like you; so reliable, like you. When my brother was old enough to climb on the workbench, we took turns squeezing each other's fingers in its jaws, never hurting, just testing, for we learned by your example that harming human flesh was not the work of tools or humans. You are gone, the vise remains, over a century old, its red barely discernible, its function unimpaired. Like you, the vise was there to hold us steady and upright.

Follow the Straight Line

The driver ahead possesses insufficient horse sense. He communes with curves like a rotary

cutter with cloth, tracing each bend precisely. I suspect he doesn't know

there's a straight line through each twist, and that following it keeps the car stable.

Roads and life throw us swerves, some scenic, some treacherous, and spinout dangers skulk

at every undulation. Too much attention to daubed-on details, too little to the true path,

and you're a casualty on life's painted roadway. Aim yourself through the serpentine —

feel the car straighten up and glide forward, hear the awe of traveling companions

when lurch and sway disappear. Follow the straight line through the curve.

My Father Was a Horse Thief

Joe longed to be a cowboy, wear a white hat,
ride a black stallion and thunder after bad guys.
The Packards, Studebakers, and Arrows

of his new land held no lure for Joe: moving
pictures with western heroes called. Every night
after chores, Joe bolted down the street

to the saloon, where Old George Clark hitched
his horse to the rail. Joe stroked that horse,
fed it, and pictured himself in the saddle, looping

a lasso and roping bad guys who wore black hats.
The stallion didn't belong to him, but Joe was a kid
and Old George Clark drank his nights away and the horse

was there. One night in the drizzle Joe couldn't resist:
unhitching the reins he sprang into the saddle with a loud
Giddyup, just as he had seen done in the movies.

Snorting, the stallion burst into a destination trot
that no amount of desperate *Whoa's!* would stop.
When it reached home the cayuse finally halted,

and not a *Giddyup* in the western world could start it up
again. In the gloom and rain Joe trod three desperado miles
back to the saloon and waited: waited to come clean to Old

George, who at closing time reeled out and peered around.
Joe stammered, confessed that he had taken the horse
for a ride and it wouldn't bring him back, but Old George

wouldn't be tricked: he figured he must have walked
to the saloon, and so he walked home. Thunder rolled
as good guy and bad guy hoofed it home in shades of gray.

Squirrel

City

life drove me wild,

a glut of noise and nuts.

In the forest I hear myself

chatter.