

The Pioneer

The pioneer stood by the river, his quest a question:

Where are the tilled and sheltering hills?

Where is the bitter ocean, the tide's sweet give and take?

How can sheep and shops overcome the wolves?

But he cut the trees, built a house and field
to keep himself until he made a mill
to make a town. He made the land his own
by grinding himself in the milling of time.

Yet no matter how high he built the walls, the dams,
the cemetery on the highest point above
the river—it was not high enough.
The moon seemed to mock him from the sky.

He could not finally arrive, attend at rest
like the native people—he always felt a need
to keep walking, backward or forward
he couldn't decide...

After his death, after his mills rotted and collapsed,
(as if the children of the settlers understood)
his name was erased from the village map.
Instead they chose the tribe's name for *firefly*

rising like sprites from the pastures and meadows
every June and July. Or was it named
to honor a chief of the tribe said to have died
a few feet from where he was born?

By John Kaufman