

## Deere, John

*Settlers recounted that plows cutting through  
fibrous prairie roots sounded like cloth ripping or  
the dull roaring of a distant storm, punctuated by a  
volley of pistol shots as larger tougher roots were  
severed.*

— Cornelia Mutel, *The Emerald Horizon*

It was a shaping age. What wasn't about pushing the point deep in, plunging a curious blade wherever into whatever it could open? Just three months before Lewis and Clark pushed off from St. Louis in 1804, their keelboats and pirogues plying up the Missouri, then roving prairies west by horse and wagon over mountains to the Pacific, you were born in Vermont on a farm, where your father's tailor shop was your first world — bolts of fabric, cutting tables, shears, the needles you would have helped polish, sharpen, slipping them again and again in buckets of sand, or bags of emery. That would have taken long honing. Some said you were entranced, seeing day after day the way pitchforks moved in haphazard stacks of hay, or clayey sod. What you saw, thought, it would have taken patience to grind rough edges off those steel tines, careful insistence, a rhythmic diligence for digging, that deft returning — again, again, again — for ease, but also speed. How this must have shaped your idea years later in Illinois to cut a mill-saw blade, shape it to fit over a wood form, what became the plains breaker they called it, slicer of the ancient soil-dark net — you broke the prairies' grip. By now your name is green enamel on legions of tractors: *I will never put my name on a product that does not have in it the best that is in me.* After you became mayor of Moline, you lent your name to public works — water pipes, streetlights, sidewalks, city parks — as if you hoped somehow that what you broke forever below could be mended above.

— from *Ghost Heart*