Homing

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1.

Small bells have gone off
through the planet's night to find me.
A pulsing charge hung with moonlight is
humming in all the resistant lines
criss-crossing anonymous country, dim
timbered hillsides and slowly dying towns,
trailing cutover and poisoned swaths
bulldozed through scrub oak and brush,
humming in scalloped lines strung at the edge
of fields plowed richer and blacker
than the dark space settling down
from black-furred sky into the long furrow.
Humming like the black empress of blues.

The still-unbroken spool of light
which could tell him the story of his life
is ravelling out, sailing out to meet itself
in far stars again. And sucked into the black
hole, will turn to radio, the spank of static
sparks we might hear again if we all come back
to tune in.
I hear the tentative buzz
in the whiskery distance. A family voice.
My mother saying it’s getting real bad.
Asking if I own a decent suit,
have what it costs to come home.
Then my voice. Wanting a last talk, to lift
his bony weight alive in my hands.
Not the service performed by a stranger,
the ring of lies, the lump sum of stone.

So I book the earliest reservation.
Stirred up like flies around the mule’s head
when he shakes, my anger fills as the moon pales.

2.

Red boundaries of daybreak, searchlights
splayed on the tower, strands of blue lights
rushing, each remembered blur: I fasten on
last things. Whatever I touch shivers
as I’m lifted up, wholly delivered
into the company of strangers. I seem
misplaced. I concentrate, becoming purely
this transient feeling, marooned in my body.
I press cold fingers to my branded eyes
and pale squadrons swarm, like grief.
Thrown back, the body shrinks, readied for jettison, the brain case tips out its history, the caged heart tears loose, an engine rocketing into a void.

Climbing, I sink into the serviceable fabric, the loud American plaid, jagged patterns I saw, stitches streaming, as a child counting backwards into ether.

I slip from the tangle of my grounded self, sleep place to place, wake to myself flying, having dreamed the plotted landscape beyond the window's hollow womb, having made my grandfather murmur out of his last dreams an answer why fields are still laid out that way, why worry now with raising anything:

Some things a body's got to do.
Now don't bother me again.

His business, you know, is dying.

The white bird skims the one smoky cloud, moves off. Outside, torn winds roar.
The long descent begins. Under me, clouds march, closing ranks, shadowed. Earth tones, tans bleeding to brown, turning to mud, black where the rain drives home. Spring is late in this late dry year—and will shine in every empty hoofprint, but the season takes its due. The weight comes on with the drop in altitude.

I will make a pallet on the floor near his bed. I will struggle, slipping at the edge of sleep’s white frozen pond. Falling through, I’ll wake to deathwatch, clawing for breath, his voice raw in my throat: *I can’t seem to get right.* He will say it all night.

I will give him the pill at four. I will put on his shoes in the morning.

The clouds close ranks. Forced upright and tense before being swallowed whole, I wait for each rift to glimpse broad quiet islands in the undulant river,
the charcoal trestles of a railroad bridge,
plowed black fingers of fallow bottomland
grappling strips of frail yellow-green corn.

4.

Clouds sock in; droplets spurt and silver
on the glass, mapping troubled streams.
The flapped wing groans to bring us down;
it dips and banks for the final approach.

Cloud cover breaks over scarred roads
surveyors have stitched with stakes,
the unavoidable future of these precincts,
and those dots scrambling over the face
of the dice must be concrete slabs
of children at play in a suburban storm.

Again the grey swirl, thunder drumming,
mist, a cymbal's hiss. Before I'm ready
the heavy air clamps down, pain
squeezing into my facial mask; my ears ring.
We sideslip, drift in the last adjustments.
The ragged veil whips away, a terminal
appears in Midwestern fog, then the catch
as we hit, just before the high-pitched
whine when the engines are hurled against themselves. Already I see, hung for a heartbeat in that second skip, the further journey that will take me west and deep into the welcoming backroads of death, coming into my own, putting on the face of it, falling and rising like any rain: airborne now, and now, earthbound.

—in memory of my grandfather, E.C. Friederich, Sr.