Plato's Breath

Freisinger, Randall

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THIRTY-FIFTH BOMBING MISSION,  
CERIGNOLA, ITALY  

for Richard Hugo

When the man comes saying time 
to fly, you know the implacable 
drawl five miles up through flak, 
your bombsight screwed 
to children cadging shadows 
in a place without borders 
near Odertol.

At the Red Cross 
in Foggia, coffee's shrove, 
Goodman, Dorsey, Bunny Berrigan's 
trumpet solos. You think of the empty 
field near Spinazzola where the war went 
slack and you surrendered 
to wind that urge to murder 
and create.

When only hours 
later on the skirts of Canosa a woman 
begged cigarettes, in spite 
of the field you denied her.  
How easily we slip 
into this ungenerous world 
of denial and possession: this 
you brood years later 
at the factory, wading streams 
for browns, drinking whiskey 
at hotel bars.

Near forty 
you return to find that field 
of wind farther from town 
than you remembered, surprised
you came so far once
only to speed by it
now in a car with nothing
to say, no thought of stopping,
leaving it behind,

the way we turn
wordless from an open grave
when silence is our sole
remaining lien on the dead.