

The Astronaut Takes a Wormhole

The rocket worked perfectly except for landing on the wrong planet.

—Wernher Von Braun

Around six p.m., when the sun slides
in and out of focus, makes things hazy
like what's real might not really be.
Suddenly he's back in time, watching
his eight-year-old self playing alone,
tetherball in the schoolyard at dark,
punching the ball with a clenched fist,
ducking to watch it arc quick around.

It's like slingshot acceleration, he thinks,
as his younger self swings and jabs,
never flinching at the feel, the smack
of the ball against his bare knuckles.
The way astronauts get close to a planet,
use the pull of gravity to rotate around,
build speed, need the force of another
to shoot off clean in a new direction.

He wants to grab, clutch the ball before
it reels around, wants to warn the child
to stop dodging, to look before he strikes,
warn himself that isolation is only solitary
a while before it becomes plain old lonely.
He thinks from the future, wants to leave
his hiding place back in time, walk up
to the boy a man, and change his course.

But he's made a promise not to break
the continuum between time and space,
so he hides on the abandoned playground,
watches as the boy winds the rope tight
around his bare fist, arcs back and flings,
studying, waiting for the movement to stop
before leaving the ball hanging lifeless,
slowly walks home alone in the dark.

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