

Farmer Karma

I was a boy farmer
because I had to be
because my father
was a man farmer
and all my granddads
back to almost Adam
had been boy farmers
and man farmers
and that was that.
I hardly even realized
that I hated farming
but just did it because
and forever because.

I learned how to
sharpen a hoe
and cut through my
hot-day reluctance
in order to kill Canadian
thistles in mechanical
planticide. Dad told
me that the county
thistle warden might
assess us a fine if we
had too many thistles.
Chop, chop, chop,
I spiraled into each patch
and then on to the next,
never finishing them all.

I learned how to start
the John Deere Model A
tractor by yanking
the top of its flywheel
mightily to the left
with the petcocks open
to reduce compression
until things got to popping
then closing the petcocks
for more power.
That Model A and I were
partners who bounced
across years of bumpy soil
pulling a drag or a disk
or a 3-bottom plow.
High in the bucket seat,
teeth into the gritty air,
I was as much a slave
to the A as it to me,

as much a slave
to the farm
as any farmer is.

I shoveled grain
inside bins where
dust polluted the air
and filled my lungs
so full that
a time or two
I almost died
from asthma.
But dying would be
a slacker's excuse,
and the grain had
to be leveled.

In the haymow
there was also,
guess what,
dust and heat
enough to turn
my lungs into
solid protoplasm--
what bronchial tubes?
When older, I got to stay
outside and throw
the bales onto
the Mayrath hay
elevator and breathe
the same good air that
our cows all breathed.

I was always dutiful.
I never gave Dad
a single hint that
I didn't like farming.
No hint, that is,
other than my stoic
attitude, my yes-boss
obedience, my lack
of any initiative,
and my slipshod work.
These failings didn't matter
because there was the farm
and there were we
and the earth was turning
and the weather was erratic
and new work grew up
as fast as the precious corn.

Dad never tried to teach
me anything technical
about how to farm.
He could see my soul.
One look at me
on any day of any week
told him that this boy
would never be a farmer.
No point in telling the boy
how best to rotate crops
or how to repair a combine
or how to choose fertilizer
or when to sell the grain.
Such breath would
have been as wasted
as a cold March wind
across the railroad field.

Dad was a good farmer
and a good man.
Farming is good, too.
We get to eat from it.
But farming gets glorified
pretty often, and I never
partook of that schmaltz.

I was a tractor driver
who would watch train
after train go by
on the Burlington
and wave at the engineers
and caboosemen,
all of us dutifully chained
to our turning wheels.

I was a manure pitcher
and a manure spreader
who knew the cows had
to produce this but didn't
see my future in it.

Farmer karma was
my inherited destiny
until college days
when I learned how
to be amply engrossed
in motions of the mind
and never later hankered
for any life on any farm.