

TIPS
for
DOMESTIC
TRAVEL

poems by
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CONTENTS

I

- 10 Tips for Domestic Travel
- 12 Renovation
- 13 Day Players in the Makeup Trailer
- 14 Cleaning Out the Attic, I Sing Long Overdue Praise to
Big Shirts
- 16 Table
- 17 Flip Doll: Red Riding Hood
- 18 Colloquy In The Heat
- 19 The Machinist's View
- 20 Self-Portrait With the Smithfield Ham We Had to Cut
on the Band Saw
- 21 Notes Toward an Ode to Bad Decisions

II

- 27 Waking
- 28 Beach
- 29 Your Suicide Script
- 30 Book of Years
- 31 Untangling Marionettes
- 32 Why I Practice Yoga
- 33 A Kind of Geometry
- 34 The Mystery of Houses
- 35 Clothesline
- 36 Crossing
- 37 Among My Father's Stories
- 39 Fact or Fiction

III

- 43 Night: Awaiting News
- 44 Sickroom
- 45 Nothing's Changed
- 46 Hospice Symptom Relief Kit
- 47 Not An Abacus
- 49 Self-Timer
- 50 The Ship of Grief Returns to Shore
- 51 Work in Progress
- 52 Rain-filled Rut
- 53 Pseudocris Crucifer
- 54 Small Memory
- 55 One Thing I Know For Sure

IV

- 59 21st Century Options
- 60 Outbuilding
- 61 Night Crawlers
- 62 I'm Sorry To Tell You
- 63 All Right, Fate Then
- 64 Watch in the Garden
- 65 At the Ophthalmologist
- 66 Something For Everyone in the Egyptian Wing
- 67 Midway
- 68 Pathway
- 69 Storm, and After
- 70 Groundhog Wars: Year Three
- 71 What It Comes Down To
- 72 Rx
- 73 Another Easter
- 74 Last Will

for
my mother and father
and
Abby, Sam, and Reb

I

TIPS FOR DOMESTIC TRAVEL

If you walk up, weeping, to an airline counter
one hour before flight and three days after

elevated warnings of terrorist attacks,
you should expect the body search

of a lifetime, even if you aren't wearing
an underwire bra. If you are, expect the sounds

that emanate from your breasts to summon
additional personnel and bomb-sniffing dogs

to the scene. Gloved women will work a wand
around your chest, ponder beeps and whines,

while men unpack your underwear, unzip
your tampon pouch. Impossible to think

someone could be dying during this. Bereft
of wristwatch, car keys, spare change, you walk

through portals, your shoes beside you, traveling
a scuffed black river in a plastic tub—

isn't this the way we keep death at bay?
By taking off our clothes? Of course, someone

is dying; someone is dying as you wait,
as you walk; someone is dying as you enter

the glassed-off security box, assume the requested
wide-legged stance. You lift your arms out wide,

as though for the embrace you're traveling
toward, the one that won't arrive,

but you don't know that, all you know is
you're the image sent in capsules

into outer space: Leonardo's Vitruvian Man,
alarms singing on both sides of your heart.

RENOVATION

I ripped the carpet off my stairs
so now I'm halfway up and halfway
down, extracting staples from scarred
slabs of pumpkin pine, thinking
how destruction beats creation
in a footrace every day—heave
most things out an upstairs window,
gravity will do the rest—but this work
has me on my knees and keeps me there
and what I bow before keeps changing:
hail to staple guns and staples,
hail the work of opposition, *hail*
determination of the soul
who put this carpet down that it
should be eternal, *hail* my kneepads,
needle-nosed pliers, teeth, *hail*
my flathead screwdriver shaft
that pries and lifts these staples up
like bodies out of earth, *hail*
to the ding they sing to the pail,
to sanding and to grit, to elbow grease,
to oil, to spreading polyurethane
across the treads like honey with a brush,
to watching as it sinks into the grain
four times before it lies atop the surface,
do not touch, until it's formed
the recommended hard, bright shine.

DAY PLAYERS IN THE MAKEUP TRAILER

I'm sitting in between a dead girl and a prostitute.
I play a nurse—no nonsense—powder, touch of lips,
“those test results you wanted just came in”
then they'll be done with me. I shake hands
with the prostitute. The dead girl pulls a curtain
back, says “what the hell, there's nudity, so what?”
She's eighteen, grey-blue, naked and they're gluing
latex lacerations on her neck and shoulders,
building up contusions, painting gorgeous bruises
down her arms. She's never done a film before.
She tells us that she's hoping for a line,
that maybe when they see her they'll decide
to let her speak, create a flashback or a dream scene,
shoot a memory of who she was, alive.
The prostitute and I say nothing.
We tilt our chins up for the final brush.
The dead girl's voice trails off. They blue her lips.
I look reliable, the prostitute looks hard-mouthed,
sad-eyed sexy and the dead girl's looking dead.
We're done now, all of us. We're going on.

CLEANING OUT THE ATTIC, I SING LONG OVERDUE PRAISE TO BIG SHIRTS

O Big Shirts,
let me proclaim your greatness
as I unpack you from this broken-zippered suitcase
I should have thrown away
but couldn't, owing as I did, my life
to you, a full year of my life,

Heroic Shirts!
You were protectors,
muumuus, blankets, friends,
clothes that swaddled
and unswaddled both,
shirts of my father,
shirts of my brothers,
shirts of the Big and Tall,

O, when I lifted you,
you tents, cloaks, awnings, sacks,
you burkas of the West,
above my head, and slid you
down onto my frame,
no one had a clue
of what was underneath you,
your great sleeves
so accommodating to bandages
and sling, to the healing
of defensive wounds

and later, with your front breast pocket
pendulous with wallet, keys, an orange,
anything, so long as it hung down,
swung low like an Amazonian tit

or hint of colostomy bag,
together we kept half the world away,
Magnanimous Shirts!

Wrapped in your voluminous magic,
I traveled through my days invisibly,
a head and ankles— I thought and moved,
unlooked at and un-lusted after—
a truck with mud flaps,
gigantic shirttails lapping at my heels.

O Shirts,
I bathe you, dry you, starch and iron you,
stroke your collars, smooth your plackets,
button up your cuffs in praise.
I sing your stripes and solids, puce
and umbers, lurid plaids and tropic prints,
Egyptian cotton, polyester blends
and drive you through these city streets
toward the thrift shop,
Mighty shirts!

May you be strong and righteous;
May your future be bright and clean;
May you be fitting decorations for the placid backs
of robust men and women;
May you take your place as shirts, not shields—
except against ordinary sun,
against the daily glancing knife blades of the cold.

TABLE

Here we heard the story of how we almost never were.
We were eating chicken, rice and butter beans.

Father was flying, both wings dead with ice
above the tidal marshes, no solid ground

inside the magic circle of his calculations,
for him, the center point, to land,

so we were falling too. We felt ourselves

begin to disappear, the plates to tremble, milk
to slosh inside our cups, we banked

hard left and watched the biscuit basket
sliding past the fruit bowl, watched our sticky

rice-flecked hands steam prints that vanished
from the tabletop, we stalled and spiraled

down into the center of his cautionary tale—

below us, turbulence; legs twisting, kicking,
brothers crying, my sister trying not to pee—

until at last he dove toward the smokestacks
of a rendering plant, where we are lifted

by the heat of horses' hooves and hides, ice
melting off, wings clear, we wing it home,

our lives intact, our lesson learned,

our landing smooth as the imperturbable surface
of a Mother's chocolate silk pie.

FLIP DOLL: RED RIDING HOOD

You won't find legs beneath
this dolly's blue flecked gingham skirt.
Or feet. No, there's a cast of characters
below, connected at the waist
and rather intimately, wouldn't you agree?
Good God! What kind of toy
is this to give a girl? Don't try to tell me
this is anatomically correct.

I flip Red on her head—
her skirt turns green and fifty years
fly by—it's grandma! with impressive
sagging breasts, grey curls like painted waves
across her brow. She wears a nightcap.
Pull it down to cover up her wrinkled face,
then turn her over—ho, ho, ho, it's wolf.

He wears the nightcap now,
dress buttoned high to hide the apple
in his throat, that tell-tale scrap of red cape
in his mouth's a tongue. Red's upside down,
below, her pig tails touching earth.
And here's the kicker, if you want to play—
no woodsman. Save yourself.