

Selected Poems

Erin Murphy

ZipCodeMan

You tell him your five digits
and he tells you your town—
any state, any country,
even the moon, if the moon
had a post office, so the people
on this mid-western street corner
toss out numbers like horseshoes:

02859!

Pascoag, Rhode Island,

21911!

*Rising Sun, Maryland—
and by the way, Buck's diner serves
the best crabcakes in the state,
he says and I glance over at my brother
who came here for college
a decade or so ago and took
the scenic route to a degree
and to this girl at his side,
the one with scrapbooks
of Europe and a Rubbermaid tub
stocked with craft supplies,
the one who is so different
from my brother who put off
writing his 5th-grade autobiography
until the night before it was due,
watching as my mother and I
skimmed frantically through photo albums,
looking for pictures of him
and finding only a few, second-child
syndrome—all of my parents'
enthusiasm for first teeth and steps and bikes
used up on me, but not, for some reason,
on a wooden door I'd never seen
before, a photo of which was
preserved in a sleeve as if it mattered
to someone, so we glued it on*

the last page of his project,
with the line, *And this is the door
to my future*, which struck just
the right corniness nerve in his teacher,
who rewarded him with an *A*
and all he ever needed to know
about procrastination and letting
women do his work for him,
not that I am thinking about this
now, as my brother calls out
91659, the zip code for the remote
Alaskan village where he and my mother
lived when I chose boarding school
over 60-below temperatures and where
my 5'6" brother hunted bear
and caught salmon and was the tallest
player on his basketball team
and where I, brimming with hormones,
visited once and rode on the back
of a snowmobile driven by an Eskimo
boy named Ronnie who was
handsome enough to make me
want to forget my roommate
and my all-girl classes and the
production of *Hello Dolly* in which
I was to play the teary Ermengarde,
to forget all of that, until my mother
put me back on the plane,
an Eskimo shotgun wedding
not what she had in mind for her
only daughter, who is, at this moment,
thinking that maybe I haven't ever
committed myself to much of anything,
either, too eager to ride whatever
wave came along, not like ZipCodeMan,
so disciplined, so thorough,
even now as he pinches his temples
and squints at my brother, saying
*Not Bethel, not Platinum, not Goodnews
Bay*, unable to name the exact
Alaskan village, population 78,
and feeling like a failure, his life's work
unraveling right in front of
the Friday-night after-dinner crowd,
his bread and butter, while my brother
grins just a little, just enough to show
he's proud to stump up this man who
can tell us so much about where we've been

but knows even less than we do
about where we're going.

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**After Reading a Wealthy Woman's Confession
That She Has Never Changed a Bedsheet**

*I declare myself guilty of not having made,
with these hands they gave me, a broom.*

Pablo Neruda

I have not made a broom.
I have not made a poem

about not making a broom.
I have not made a poem

about the Haitian farmers
forced to eat the seeds

they should plant. Or a poem
about Dominican babies

warmed not by incubators
but reading lamps.

I have not made a poem
about the mother

of my daughter's classmate
who fixes her children

grilled-cheese dinners
with the iron in their room

at the Motel 6. I have made
many beds but fear I have not

made, with these hands
they gave me, a difference.

“After Reading a Wealthy Woman’s Confession That She Has Never Changed a Bedsheet” was first published in *Dislocation and Other Theories* by Erin Murphy (Word Press, 2008). It is reprinted with permission of the author.