

FIVE ENCOUNTERS

Sister traveler

Second leg back from Nashville
I took the aisle next to a thin blonde my age
With a bad haircut and the reedy bones
Of nicotine and diet soda
The ancient creature at the window
Her mother moving up from Phoenix
To live with her, she said,
And the hate that pursed the daughter's mouth
In resignation seemed as old as the Bible

And I wondered what their story was
What love withheld, what anger nurtured
In the decades between them
And I thought of my mom and all that never healed
And how I was spared the daily grate on nerve
And the need to wring out six more drops of patience
To weather the decline of a woman I'd loved too much
And tried hard to set aside

I rather liked the old bird at the window
Who helped herself to Cheetos from the daughter's tray
Who watched the clouds and showed us scraps
Of balled-up tissues that carried some deeper meaning
She seemed all there, and perhaps that was the problem
"All there" can still mean not enough or maybe
Just enough to keep alive those ancient hurts that cling to us
That wring out all our tenderness for those we would most like to love
But cannot bring ourselves to cherish even as they fade.

Garage picnic

Driving home from the beach on Monday
I find remains of a picnic in my garage
Two coke cups, an empty sushi tray
And a thin green box that housed
One pair of handcuffs \$4.99
The sushi was from Safeway
But I don't know if they carry handcuffs

If there's a display next to the pickles
Or down by the granola bars

It's rained a lot this winter and I'm
Not surprised when I find wrappers
Where someone's sheltered
From the rain, smoked, had a beer
Some Vietnam vet, some schizophrenic
Dumped on the streets by an indifferent system
Who trundles down my street seeking bottles and
Cans and a bit of dry now and then

But the handcuffs are a puzzle
Common enough in a police state like ours
But usually on the other side of the law
And there's no place for kinky sex in my Spartan
Garage, though now that I think of it
There are two hooks in the wall
Where the ancient ladder hangs
From the rough concrete but the ladder
Holds its tongue when I ask
And I'm left wondering what you'd handcuff
To a shopping cart

Coffee with Einstein

27 or 28 he was, impossibly young
Spiffed up in his dress whites
Or so I imagine from the photos
He left of that life.
On coffee breaks my dad would sit
At a big table with a genius 30 years his senior
And talk about life.
"Ordinary things really," he said
About coffee with Einstein
"A very nice man and kind to all of us
A regular guy, you know?"

My father didn't see combat
Didn't travel overseas, didn't kill anyone that I know of.
Basic training in the wake of Pearl Harbor
And a quick wedding

Then stationed at Cape May.

What my father did there he never said
Ordinary things I expect
Only the Einstein connection of any note
Oh, and the death of his second child,
Who went for a nap and never woke up
A sadly ordinary thing to happen to
A very nice man and kind to all of us
A regular guy, you know?

Staying out of It

“Don’t let me order a drink”
The woman says to the girl between us
“I’m on medication for panic
And I can’t have alcohol”
But when the cart reaches us
And we’ve learned more than we need to know about her fears
She orders double vodka with orange juice
Hands the girl between us a zipper bag
And asks for two Oxycontin
In a voice laced with Atlanta helplessness
What’s the girl to do
The woman has 30 years on her
And the girl has Asian obedience written in the
Bowing of her head and the neatness of her jeans

It’s a long flight and when the cart comes around again
The woman orders more vodka and hands the girl the bag
And asks for two of the little blue ones
Her makeup is impeccable for all this and her clothes expensive
The zipper bag holds a pharmacy of relief
And if it were mine, I wouldn’t be handing it over
To a stranger but it isn’t mine and neither is the vodka
And I am both relieved and envious

It’s a long flight and she starts in again
I want to ignore all this
I want the girl to say no but I know she can’t
So I get up and speak to the flight attendant

Who speaks to the girl
Who puts in earphones and buries herself
In her Kindle and the addict in the window seat
Finds the call button all by herself
But the attendant doesn't come
And she rummages in the zipper bag herself and
Whatever she takes then does the trick
And puts her out of our misery

And I think of flights years ago
When I needed a bourbon chaser for my own demons
And I don't envy whoever is meeting this woman in Portland

We all know where we were, that first one

Third period Latin II
Dorothy West, her suit as grey as her hair,
Her hand on the blackboard
Principal Curtis stopping her in mid-correction
He's been shot
He's dead

Until that moment, it had all been in play
The gunfire we knew
Bonanza, Gunsmoke, Dragnet
We loved that it was fake, harmless
We hadn't yet sent our boyfriends and brothers to die in the jungle

We were in love with the Once and Future King
And his model-perfect wife
Who had replaced Grandma and Grandpa in the White House

We didn't yet know that the grassy knoll and whispered conspiracy
Would change the world faster than we could imagine
That this was the first of too many
That the weight of them all would push us
Into protest and rebellion and open up
A gulf and a war between us and our parents
Between those who wanted the old world
And those impatient for the new

After that Latin class they came so fast

MLK, Malcolm X, Bobby, Ohio State
That we didn't register our surroundings anymore
When the news came or the body count rose
Or the atrocities deepened
I guess we each only get one first time
It's not the same after that