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*How We Spent Our Time*

Akron Series in Poetry

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*How We Spent Our Time*



*Poems by*  
Vern Rutsala



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*To Joan*



*Departing, Arriving . . .*

Both go on in the terminal's cathedral  
    hush—ceilings so high, voices trailing  
        off into wisps in the milky air.  
Families huddle on the vast carpet's dizzy  
        patterns, trussed hopes gathered  
    at their feet for the long journeys in air  
and darkness. See them cry as they leave

and come home, those wrenchings that may  
    end in disaster either way.

    This place is like a hospital.

We wait on and on while instruments  
    beyond our control make decisions  
    we live and die with. Our bags are X-rayed,  
our bodies scanned for evidence against us—

any odd shape gets closer looks from  
    cold-eyed pros. Something is born,  
        something else dies in this imitation air.

You overhear: “I called and tried to calm her  
    down” and “He’s at peace now”  
    and all your occasions for grief push  
gurneys down the concourse—how the first

time you flew first class was the winter  
    your father died. You remember that cold  
    flight over chalky plains, the land’s

frozen coma beneath you, the stewardess a kind  
of nurse giving you doses of bourbon  
that didn't work. You remember him  
wheeled from surgery like baggage, false teeth out,

chin trembling terribly. And how your mother  
cupped his chin to draw the trembling off,  
her own hand taking on the shaking,  
that shaking now contagious and your place on earth  
trembling under you the way it still trembles.

Now, waiting for a plane you relive all  
that waiting—in departure lounge and dim ward—

those grainy hours of dread and longing, mouth  
turned leather with cigarettes.

Our spirit, wispy as it is, dwells here,  
maneuvering this vacant air, this site of disembodied  
voices where hope and loss lurk in the white  
courtesy telephones that never ring and we  
wait for our lives to come back to us at Baggage Claim.

## *Looking for Work*

Today the line at the soup kitchen  
was longer than last week—winter  
is coming—and I remember that  
summer years ago I spent mornings  
on a bench at Third and Salmon  
reading the way a hungry man eats,  
caught in the gap between two fears—  
not finding a job and finding one.  
Those fears made the words glow  
with some extra meaning—I was reading  
*Lie Down in Darkness* and I sank  
lower each day into darkness,  
the summer slipping away with each  
click of the checkers the players  
near me moved with such care.  
But I couldn't move as if fastened  
there reading the same sentence over  
and over, lost in a kind of waking coma.  
I remember the dusty taste of those  
mornings among the old men sunning  
their drunk-tank stubble and how I  
couldn't walk the block and a half  
to the employment office. I knew  
nothing waited there but the clerk's  
dry lips saying "sorry" or, worse,  
offering something terrible, some  
blacking factory where I would disappear

forever, eaten alive by America's  
fierce indifference. And I was helpless,  
holding the book like a life preserver,  
knowing I was wholly useless with hands  
unable to do anything worth a single  
measly dime to anyone anywhere.

## *Getting and Spending*

Remember the day we saw three childhoods  
for sale, those other times whole families  
seemed smelted down to odds and ends?  
Abandoned wives and husbands loomed through  
the scattered jumble on picnic tables.  
Despite such sad hints we keep going  
because we love the useless—among the faded  
and the bent we may find a story  
about all our lives—of hot acquisition,  
of slow relinquishment. Some days, though,  
we wonder about how many more chipped  
vases we can stand to look at,  
how many commemorative mugs with crazed  
interiors swallowing the dregs  
of some forgotten glory. But we go on  
studying the battered golf bag with its  
three rusty clubs, the embroidered  
pillows for a lost fair  
on Atlantis. Once we found sheet music  
left so long in a piano bench  
every note was flat.  
And there are always those odd tools  
for machines that lost their patents  
ages ago along with nuts and bolts  
vainly searching for their mates.  
Behind the array, figures mill faintly  
with mumbled stories we never quite  
hear—words about fresh starts, something

about good riddance to flat tires  
and footballs, knobby fruit bowls,  
sunglasses blinded by one too many rose-  
colored views. We scan books so cheap  
they beg with their soft dog ears  
to be read just once more and always  
the postcards with illegible messages  
from the grave or scrawled arrows  
pointing to “ME!” We find gifts fit only  
for enemies—pens gone dry, paddles  
without canoes, canoes without paddles,  
electric cords so frayed their only purpose  
is to start fires. And all those toys  
so old they would turn children’s hands  
to rust. Bambi ashtrays, temperance coasters—  
“Cold Water Cold Water For Me!”—  
samplers saying Home Sweet Home  
from broken homes. We keep plowing through  
weekend after weekend, fondling  
whatnot and knickknack, trying  
to puzzle meanings for the completely obscure—  
pomander holder? Shoe tree for Sasquatch?  
Aztec sacrificial urn? Such uselessness  
keeps us going, looking for childhoods and love  
and ghosts swirling lost in myopic mirrors,  
locked in steamer trunks without keys.

## *Letting Things Slide*

Those stand-ins for the usual turmoil  
    inside our lives turn up without  
        invitation, taunting us—  
that leaking pipe, those cracked tiles,  
        each a comment on our deep  
        incompetence—the furnace smoking  
or coughing to a halt, a rain gutter

falling off while we sleep or the toilet  
    simply going on strike without  
        warning. This is the thing about  
owning they never tell you—it's called  
    keeping track, it's called  
    maintenance, careful people we hate  
call it “monitoring”. And we know we're

at fault—the stand-ins make that clear.  
    Stains splash down walls like stigmata  
        and a crack in plaster draws  
a cartoon lightning bolt that hits us deep  
    like an arthritic stab and we're  
    helpless, crawling through the yellow  
pages for the help we know will be too late.

We've let things slide, haven't monitored  
    our surroundings in the same way we've  
        let our lives get away from us—  
our balanced checkbook approach to history

is a mess. And that was  
another trick—we thought you were  
just supposed to live your life, not keep

track of every minute like some frantic  
scorekeeper. But we send out our  
dim SOSs anyway and the trucks  
rumble to a stop out front and the repair men  
come in with toolkits full of  
remedies—but their kits rattle, sounding  
like they're full of a deeper brokenness

and we're sure we'll get more problem  
than solution out of them.

And it's true—they never really  
fix what's wrong. Or, worse, each repair  
uncovers something new and bad  
and costly, broadly hinting at some  
homeowners' entropy sucking us down its

bankrupt junkyard abyss. And this gets all  
mixed-up with being wrong and fears  
of secret eyeless creatures gnawing  
the foundations and the luggage we must  
carry—our special toolkits of despair—  
toward the final dark appointment  
when the very last thing goes wrong for good.

## *Dreaming of Journeys*

*I dream of journeys repeatedly*

—Roethke

Our nights move across great distance  
and we travel hard  
through confusion—luggage lost,  
tickets turned to dust, the arrogance  
of border guards. And over each journey  
is the sense of escape  
from some unnamed crime, some  
deep deceit we can't remember  
though everyone we meet seems to know.  
At times we wander through  
an enormous jerrybuilt house  
as populous as Asia, room upon room,  
a house without end or back door,  
without any way out. And over all this  
lies an ominous fog,  
some insufficient knowledge of ourselves.  
We never let on of course  
as we move through rooms near hysteria,  
never questioning though we know something dark  
is following, some careless act we've forgotten  
writes its warrants and polishes its badges.  
But somehow we stay ahead  
and know that if we keep moving  
through these rooms like sampans  
we'll be safe. And so far we have been safe  
though each night we grow more exhausted

as travel among these people  
grows more difficult—so many call for help,  
so many need transfusions or money.  
We stop briefly and give  
whatever quick help we can—a cold  
compress, a dollar—knowing our compassion  
is a ruse, an effort to throw off  
those who follow, an effort to clear  
a place in the fog of our conscience and buy a little time  
from our pursuers, proving how decent  
and honorable we are,  
but we know deep in these swirling rooms  
that no proof will ever be enough  
and that the jerrybuilt rooms  
will go on and on forever.

## *Becoming American*

The Yankees needed ditch diggers,  
sandhogs, fodder for the wild  
hunger of their mills and sent out  
invitations with no RSVPs.  
My people came then, dimly knowing  
they had to cut away the baggage  
of the selves they brought with them.  
The cutting was strangely easy  
as they gaped at clerks smoothing  
harsh corners off their names,  
docking final vowels like tails.  
Distance helped the cutting, too—  
the ocean roiling behind them  
with all that danger and disease,  
the old country already swallowed  
by the horizon's bulging lead.  
At most it was only a village,  
a hut, the midden out back  
all frozen in the endless winter  
of the past. The new language  
squeezed more color from that past,  
making it shameful—starving winds  
and nothingness. They tugged  
the new words into their mouths  
like odd-shaped and exotic food,  
curiously spiced, hard to choke down.  
They rolled its oddness on their  
tongues, tried to suck the sense

from it and the new ran together  
with the old like milk in coffee,  
the color changing until the old  
was mostly gone, half their lives  
dropping off the edge of the world.  
Though some—my grandmother, maybe  
yours—spat out the venom of the new words  
and hung suspended between the two  
languages, citizens of neither until  
they lost both. Most learned the tricks  
of getting by—how to count their pay,  
the names of tools. Later they  
prayed their children would have  
no accents, knowing how their own  
stubborn tongues kept them alien  
and laughable, singsong and brogue  
impossible to scrape away.  
And then the generations forgot  
their way across the muddy wilderness—  
threshing wheat, scraping coal  
from the dark, laying ties, clearing  
homesteads with their bare hands.  
They clawed away all memories  
of the Atlantic and finally reached  
the third and fourth generations  
where the crops turned ironic.  
The old thought it was a kind  
of madness. Everything that was so  
expensively forgotten, the crumpled  
sheets of the past now started singing  
like a siren to the young and they

longed for all those lost places.  
They wanted the amnesia reversed.  
They wanted the erased words back  
in their mouths. The destroyed huts,  
every ditch and abandoned village  
crooned to them, bright and dear  
and hopelessly beyond their reach.