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.