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Traveling

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TRAVELING

Sherman Alexie

Upon arrival, I collect my baggage
And walk across the bridge

Into the parking structure
Where I discover, to my embarrassment,

That I've been gone too long
And have forgotten where I left my car.

From floor to floor, aisle to aisle,
I walk and walk, searching, searching,

Growing weary and angry. My bags
Are heavy. Too heavy. So I leave them

By an elevator and hope that I find
My car and return to them before

A thief steals them or airport security
Confiscates and destroys what they think

Could be an explosive device. Finally,
I think to look in my wallet

For my parking stub, and I find it,
And yes, I've written down the row

And number, so I rush to that location
And find an unfamiliar car, a small,

Black hatchback that disturbingly
Resembles an insect. This isn't

My car, but I insert my key into the lock,
And it works. So this must be my car.

I take the driver's seat and insert the key
Into the ignition, but the engine will not

Turn, will not turn, will not turn over.
The battery is dead. I have no power.

And then I smell something sweet
And sickening. I know that smell.

It's death. Suddenly terrified, I look
Into the backseat and see what must

Be a body wrapped in garbage bags.
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

I want to run, but I need to know who
Is dead in the backseat of this car

That must not be my car, so I pull back
The garbage bag over the corpse's head

And it's my father, O, God, it's my father.
What is his body doing here? We buried him

Six years ago on the reservation. I threw
A handful of dirt on his coffin, and yet,

Here he is. And his body is strangely
Preserved, as if he had just died yesterday.

And then I am rocked backward when
I notice that my father is breathing

Shallowly. I leap over the seat
And land on my father. I shake and shake

And shake him, but he will not wake.
He will not open his eyes. "Wake up!

Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"
I pound on his chest, on his heart,

And I slap his face, and I grab him by
The shoulders and shake, shake, shake him

Until he opens his eyes, barely conscious,
Barely aware, and I scream at him

To come back to me, but he falls
Into sleep, so I punch him in the face,

And bloody his nose, and I punch him
In the gut and hear the air escape his lungs,

And I punch him in the crotch
And that does the trick. My father sits up

Straight and his eyes snap open wide
And he looks at me—he sees me—and he asks,

"Where have you been? Where have you been?"
And I say, "I've been on a trip, a journey

Away from home, but I'm here now, and I am
Not leaving again, and I will stay with you."

And I ask, "But how are you here? How are you
Alive?" And he says, "I don't know, I don't know,"

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And then I'm awake. I sit up in bed. It's cold—
Our furnace is too small to properly heat

Our house during a serious freeze. But, wait,
It's not freezing outside. It's unseasonably warm,

And then I realize that somebody—something—
Is in the bedroom with me. I'm alone here

Because my wife is sleeping beside our sick son
In his bedroom. Perhaps our other son has found

His way into this room, but no—something
Large is standing in the corner. Oh, God,

It's a ghost—it's my father's ghost—no,
It's my grief and it opens its mouth

And it wails so loud that it hurts to hear—
My eardrums vibrate—and so I snap on the lamp

And realize that my grief is not standing
In the corner. It's not a ghost, either.

It's a bookshelf. I was frightened by
A bookshelf. This is funny, so I laugh,

And I lie back down, thinking that I might
Find a way back to sleep, but instead,

I weep for my father, I weep my father.
He's been dead for six year, for six years.

When he died, I cut my long hair.
By custom, I can grow back my hair

When my grief abates, but O, my grief
Floods my bedroom tonight. My bed becomes

A raft and I float up toward the ceiling.
I bump against the ceiling. I am crushed

Against the ceiling and I can't breathe,
I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't—

Perhaps I am dying. Perhaps my grief will
Murder me. Perhaps my grief will wrap

My corpse in garbage bags and leave it
In the backseat of a strange car

Parked at the airport. O, I can't breathe,
I can't breathe, as the grief-flood crushes

My lungs against the ceiling. I become
A part of the ceiling. I am the ceiling.

And then, suddenly, I am awake again.
Damn, it was a dream within a dream—

No, a nightmare inside a nightmare—
And I'm sitting on an airplane, weeping.

Beside me, a woman in a business suit
Is also weeping. "Are you okay?"

I ask her. and she smiles and says, "I am
Crying because you were crying in your sleep,

And I couldn't wake you. None of us could
Wake you, and so the pilot is now making

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An emergency landing in Pittsburgh.
There will be an ambulance waiting for you.”

But I'm awake now, I think, but don't say.
I know I must stop the pilot from landing

This plane, so I race to the cockpit door,
And pound and pound and pound and pound

On the thin metal frame, forgetting we live
In the Age of Terror, and so I have

Unwittingly become a threat to the safety
Of this plane and its passengers, and am

Knocked to the floor and buried beneath
A dozen men, who punch and kick me, who

Gouge my eyes and chew on my fingers and ears.
I don't fight back. I don't fight back.

And then I do fight back. I am suddenly
So strong that nothing can defeat me.

I toss the men aside and I smash through
The cockpit door and I am once again shocked

To see my father, who is now the pilot
Of this plane, and we are plummeting

Toward the ground. “We are going to crash,”
He says. “All of us are going to crash.”

And I say, “I know, I know, I know, I know.”
And I try to keep my eyes open—I want to see

What happens to us—and as the ground rises
To meet us, I see that it is beautiful—

The world is beautiful. My father is
Beautiful. I am beautiful. Death is

Beautiful. And, O, I lean against
The force of my grief, and I know

That I will wake again. I know this is
A dream—nightmare—but I want to stay

Here for a little while longer. I want
To keep plummeting with my father,

The pilot, so I stagger into the empty
Co-pilot's seat, and I take the controls,

And together, my father and I try
To pull us out of this spectacular dive.