

# They Call It a Strip Job

Stretch of 219—old road out of West Virginia  
they still call the Mason-Dixon Highway—

widens and divides at the Meyersdale bypass,  
the right lane closed, drowned by a mound

of inside-out hillside, so I drift to the left, now  
running both ways, as the scent of mud floods

in through the vents. All my growing up among  
men who skinned hills to scrape their seams,

I've never seen a strip job this deep or trucks this big.  
No one works the job tonight, which stays light

long after moonrise, no one hears me cuss.  
Remember Strypeeze, the goop Mom painted onto

antiques, how it burned your skin and buckled varnish?  
Ever feel how hot wax, stroked on the bone beneath

your brow, stings with the flick of a stylist's wrist?  
Ms. Woitek, turquoise eyelids and coral lips, danced

on stage at the Silver Dollar out on Route 30,  
everyone said, but who had seen? Her specialty:

one semester of creative writing for eleventh graders.  
She's gone by now. O, let her rest on a green hill

somewhere. Let the light hold until I make it home  
from a job where I sat in a clean, quiet room

in a brick hall built during the century that built  
railroads to haul coal from these hills and logs

from those mountains to prop open deep mines  
or to make the ties that held the rails that became

ways to walk out of those towns. O, how did I come  
to get paid to sit in a clean, quiet room and listen

to lines written by coal miners' grandchildren, listen  
until we find the spots that smolder or sing.

# Sweetgum

Drag scrap lumber and pre-war dresser  
drawers from the sidewalk to the cellar  
then let them rest awhile in the dark.

Like the wren who doesn't mind repetition  
or euphony, keep pulling twigs and feathers  
from the bird box. Let go your desire to wrap

it up; closure's a hoax. Like grief, this labor  
requires long walks, bicycle rides, and talking  
out loud when no one else is around.

Use the same words the newspaper uses, yet not.  
Offer student work, botched. *Never mention  
poetry in a poem.* Try to render the redbud's

shaggy, plum branches and scraps of cloud stuck  
in the runs between ridges above town. *Each poem  
is about what it's about, and also about verse.*

*Pre-war* refers to the Second World War—so  
the gal can also whip up a pie crust in a jiffy! *Don't  
mention politics in a poem* Galway said sadly,

*I see only one beautiful phrase in this whole piece.*  
See how the sweetgum tree dangles balls  
studded with shrieking sparrow beaks:

cukoo-birs, bommy knockers, bir balls, gum balls.  
In 1615, herbalist Francisco Hernandez mixed  
sweetgum with tobacco to dissipate foul humors.

Yehuda said, *The poem is a vaccine you brew  
in your own body from myriad diseases*, meaning  
make use of whatever's at hand, my friend.

# Testing

Testing? What testing! I soak dried beans,  
revving up my sewing machine. We self-isolate,  
we wave at our neighbors, concoct *quarantinis*,  
listen to *quarantunes*, queue the *quaranTV*, sleep

more than we have in a long time. My labors  
deemed non-essential, I clean the freezer  
and cupboards as if dusting the last crumb  
from under the Angel of Death. I weed

my closet of business attire I no longer need.  
Passover, Holy Week, Week of the Pink Moon,  
worst week until the next week comes. We lose  
two thousand a day, not counting thousands

not counted. We lose thousands of jobs.  
*Let not your hearts be troubled.* Priests celebrate  
Easter in empty churches, reminding us hope arose  
in grief, under military occupation: *Woman behold*

*your son, son behold your mother.* In Boro Park,  
men bob in prayer on the sidewalk, Torah scrolls  
out in the sun as if they were still in the wilderness.  
*No harm will befall you. Nor will plague fall*

*upon your tent.* We trace contacts, crave beauty and touch, reading novels on screens. I see how invisibly some people die. I search for yeast and seeds grown as scarce as tissue and soap.

With an abundance of caution, I leave a vase of tulips and a handwritten note on a shelf by the door of the retirement home. Onion snow falls on our daffodils and coral quince blossoms.

Fourteen days on a ventilator, texts came, fifteen mornings I lit a ruby cup and let the flame draw oxygen from the living room until it was finished. *Hope is a thing with feathers.* Hope is a thing

that breathes. *One cannot truly know hope,* Merton wrote, *unless he has found how like despair hope can be.* At dinner, we fell silent watching a woman at the Little Free Library on our street.

She opened a book to read the flap, turned it to read the back, then slowly returned it to choose another, street light flickering on over her head. She looked and looked until she finally left, taking nothing.