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.