

Call Before You Dig

Day-glow orange, spray paint arrows,
bright blue X's drawn

across the sidewalk and the lawn, a code,
a cautionary tale of hidden

gas lines, cables—all things buried. So many
of us spend our life afraid

to dig, denying our taste
for dirt, our lust to root

in the valley's rich black clay, to let it ooze
between our ears,

and all the while, wallow-phobic,
praying to remain unsoiled—yet so many

end up interred, confined to solitary, speaking
only inside voices, cribbed

with indoor love—the winter kind,
forced air heating ducts and comforters

stuffed with smothered bodies, found dug up—
the wrist bone of a Bodhisattva

wearing Jimmy Hoffa's handcuffs. Call
before you dig.

What Comes Around

Long haul, treadmill highway eyes
fixated double yellow
behind a triple trailer hay-rig, loose straw
braiding tire spray, I can't help to notice

how juncos skirt the roadside hedges,
white tail-feathers splaying, seem to usher,
this way to my seat. The curtain rises, a chorus
line of clouds straddles ridgeline trees,

like skittish city girls who squat to pee
in tall grass. Mists lather clear cut
hillsides shaved like corpses' stubble
down to River Road, cold sheets

settling love in the low land. I know better
than to use high beams or fog will drown me
in its crystal krill soup. Skunk hangs
in the air. What would GPS do?

If not take the off-road to the water
urgent with early snow melt. I arrive late
without flowers, without wine. Moss-covered
steps up to a groaning porch,

an oak door opens,
my glasses steam, I hear only
a cross-tuned fiddle and the fire. In time,
I'll get what I deserve.

Apogee

(from the Greek *apo-gaia* 'above earth')

I never believed
hay causes fever, but once
in early August, the twine,

wound tight to dry bales
lifted and tossed
on the wagon, blistered

my hands raw, broken straw slicing
welts into my wrists. Kneeling
later beside the current,

the water stung me
as I watched
clouds of midges swarm

above teal shadows
of cottonwood cast
across the river pane, violet-green

swallows weaving
arcs through low light, pause
to feed their young mid-air.

Decoy

You wake up
strapped to a gurney, falling
snow under a streetlight cone, a siren

dopplers in the distance. You want
but can't—turn your head
to the summons of night

geese within
earshot, above and unseen
in the dark. No matter,

you've always ignored
the weathered clichés of autumn, hung,
you used to say,

like L.L Bean catalog bathrobes
matching slippers in the closet. Instead,
you chose to hunt for his telltales,

toward the sound
of his knife-blade whittling,
toward the scent

of sugar pine shavings
from freshly carved necks. You found
only a white

bearded man
with a drinker's nose
to the grindstone, and a jar

of glass eyes
on his work-bench. You turned
to harsh words, flung

buckshot-tongued,
down the Pacific flyway drinking
with men in red flannel

under Tiffany lamps. You can't recall
leaving or your truck
crunching gravel onto the highway.

Family Recipe

My cousin could tell
not only the name, but the sex
and age of an owl

by the sound, afternoons hidden
inside a winter stand
of fir. But I liked summers

in the tree house staring down
at her breasts, looking up
at me from her swimsuit. Only later

I figured out she liked girls
because she got more
A's than boys

in school. Still she showed me
how to clean gunk
from a carburetor jet, and set a broken

bone on a kestrel's wing,
and keep a banjo tuned to the crazy
weather of a woodstove

heated room. Freezing rain,
that year she brought her
girlfriend to our family

Thanksgiving, me stuffing
stale bread into the bird, they
suggest olives first before pinching

the foil tent for the heated
cover up. In the end, I wasn't
the only one to hear them

basting the salty gravy
just like—so I've come to
learn—grandma used to do.