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Asphalt

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Paul Bone

Asphalt

We do not need a labyrinth or bay
where gods rise shining from the water
to toy with us. We have the asphalt plant
above the river, glittering black mounds
contained in stalls like mulch or excess grain,
or an obsidian vein crushed to dust.
We fear someday it might run down the banks
and turn the river into road, which was
the founders' wish at first. And when
that didn't happen they abandoned it.

In summer the commissioner of roads
stands by the asphalt and guides the county truck
back to the mounds, holds up his hand to stop them.
While it's still cool, the men inside drink coffee,
feeling the engine idle and the shocks
give when the front end loader pours a measure
into the bed, in which the asphalt smokes
as they drive, searching for potholes to fill.
It isn't always an unpleasant smell,
the soft, hot oil just this side of fire.
Someone outside this early watering
tomatoes or holding a bathrobe closed
while bending for the paper might remind
herself to be industrious or at
the very least not mock her husband
at breakfast and in front of the children.

The holes keep coming back. The only way
to stop them is to lay a new road down—
scrape off the old one, grind it up again

above the river at the plant, then pour
it back on the naked scar and roll it flat.
Not enough workers in the world for that,
and anyway the capitol up north
would never deign to help us out down here.
We do not play at fools, like Sisyphus.
Better to roll these small stones up a hill
than get behind one that will likely crush us.

It is a somewhat mournful time of summer.
The lone white pickup with the tailgate down
going so slowly through the neighborhoods
reminds us of the cut fields east of town,
the still-green bales of hay rolled up in sleep,
the mowing an act dividing light from dark
as the earth tilts us closer to the fall
and shadows spread from the bales to overtake
the fields, where in the coolness we smell summer
rising, drifting away from us like water.
Soon it will be the August grasshopper
exploding at our feet as we shuffle
across the stubble leaving clouds of dust.
But for now what was green still keeps its green,
even if tiger lilies in the ditches
signal the end in their own nodding way.
The workers in their lime vests tamp the patches
to level them, like a dentist at a tooth.
Come winter, we will swerve to miss the holes.