Cleave

Close to the city, a deer leaves a hoofprint in our yard. I study it under the box elder. Speechless lips pressed into snow if man was not already the beast that walks on its mouth. I use your being on the phone to keep it to myself. As if too much knowing could drive it away. The law says we owned it while it stayed with us—what came from woods while under wool we twitched, pranced a circle where next solstice it will eat, then left us for the stream one block away. When a person says forgive me the please is implied. Folding and unfolding a slender, black-tipped leg it widened there a small hole in the ice.
Ornament

The Christmas tree comes down
but isn’t dead yet, doesn’t
drain the quart a day it did
the week I sawed it
from its future in the earth,
but still sips, last cells
stubborn in a local life.
Losing needles all the way,
I haul it bottom first
through the dining room,
leaving marks beside
marks I left last year
and years before,
yank yank yank it
out the kitchen door.
I don’t believe in Santa
but I can’t take it to the curb—
it brought us together
in honest wonder
on the couch.
To leave it upright
in a drift between
dangling suet
and the surveyed line
I tow it through
the yard by limbs
where varnished
feathers shined.
The Painted Hall, Lascaux

Mineral sweat beads patches of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of paleolithic cave art—calcium carbonate crystallized in hexagons flint tools couldn’t smooth. In what depends on art, absence must be chosen not imposed, so the painter put the pigment in his mouth—manganese, toxic in high doses, for black and brown, iron oxide for red ocher—mixed it, bitterer than March grass cropped through snow, with saliva, sent it to the stone in tonguey bursts, the roughness he covered with his own wet self chemically identical to the bones of what his color led him through.
The Convergence of the Animals

is a winter custom here:
a giant puppet wolf set in woods beside the path.
Its pine frame is padded,
will hold two humans soon.
They’ll don and walk it east
to the hard center of a lake,
dance with other totems there—elk, bear, and one we haven’t seen—come from sister compass points.
Scattering frozen leaves and snow the dog barks and charges, barks and flees a beast so intent on destruction it won’t turn its head.
We watch from the far side of papier-mâché haunches set to spring.
The wolf didn’t lunge at us when we passed but we slipped a little near the mouth the way couples holding hands and roped climbers do.
(My part is to stumble, yours to hold the line.)
When the leash man
can’t soothe the dog,
he lets himself be led
back the way he came,
to safety, but first
he shows us his and
we bare our canines.
Deciding where to put you, we speak of size
we won't live to see. It's the overhead
wires we're concerned about.
We make space by killing what was there
with poison painted on a welling stump,
amend the hole with peat when I reach clay.
That they'll be ready to connect,
she roughs your roots up,
the way doubt cultivates us,
while I hold you by the slow
persistence of your trunk.
Like a femur, we install you
in the dark hip of earth.
As I appraise your angle
to a beam and nimbus sky,
tricks of light afford
a stranger on the patio,
looking over here
when you're full grown.
I don't envy him but wonder
what he thinks of what
he sees—did we achieve
our woodland paradise?
Bending low to form
a raised soil circle for water
I'll pour each day around you
for weeks, my hands assume
that basic shape related to
but more perfect than applause.