The Archive

The plan was to tell the truth: tap the record
for stories gone missing, list up the arrivals,

track the pickups that carried us off, our voices
sewn into the linings of our winter coats.

Here's all I can say for certain: we squirmed
from the Ohio River onto the valley floor, cut
county lines through the feral honeysuckle.

There was a hotel on a hill and cold spring
water sold as a cheap miracle. Men died—

then and later, large numbers and small,
blood choked onto starched sheets and limbs
tangled at the foot of a fallen cooling tower.

We repeat the same droning half-truths,
learn to let the quiet settle in the gaps.

Nothing has ever happened.
Nothing is happening now.

The Map by Hand

You're not flying into Williamstown because no one flies into Williamstown. You're taking exit 179 and you're whipping onto West Virginia Route 2—there's a Dunkin' Donuts now, just past the River City Perk. The new one, not the one across the road, squatting in the husk of its past life as the adult bookstore where the boy who taught me to swear took me to buy my first bong, where I did my teenage best not to stare at the wire racks of impeccably sculpted vibrators.

Roadside casinos creep like knotweed: Stateline Big Time Coffee, the Original West Virginia Cafe, GoMarts lodged among them and not an espresso to be had—you're heading north past Deerwalk, past Waverly and the road to Pumpkin Knob. Maybe you'll find the marina; maybe you'll get to see the train.

Berry Pickers

We drive the borrowed Sable
to the farm, the kids in the backseat
un-sunburned. We'll zinc-white
their cheeks but it won't be enough.
We'll bathe them in oatmeal
but it won't be enough. He leaves
us for the water, pulls a bucket
from a tangle of barbed weeds.
Property of the marble factory
but it doesn't matter; it's as good
as shuttered. We're berry-bitten
at dusk and counting the lightning
bugs when they land on our knuckles.
He comes back with the river
on his hands.

Chalk Lines

Excavator a rough god climbs,
falters, and the rafters lose
their resolve. An erasure,
a fresh vault:

the nursery's ruined wallpaper,
its judgmental ponies cold
and snorting in the shell
of the cellar.

Childhood unlearns order:
unruly lick of stairs, fractured
cinder-block jaw. Childhood
slouching in the hall light.

Now I could swallow
the wreck, could lob
a smooth stone through
the shining kitchen window.

Now the jaundiced sign upriver:
best deals on Icehouse 30-packs
in town; now the excavator
tarnished on the lawn.

I remember the garden
hemmed in railroad ties,
the nail stomped into
my tender heel—

each year shakes the scar
loose; each year lightens
the bruise.

Our Daddy's Rat Gun

follows us to the store, broke
open over my brother's
bony shoulder

like a snapped robin's wing.
We found it in the quilt chest
and now the pellets

rattle in his pocket
and the rocks pinch up
to the tracks at the culvert

and we run and today
we don't meet a train.

Tinny bell clink when
we walk into the Farm Fresh
and again when we leave

and I'm head down peeling
my Zero bar from its slick
silver sleeve.

He's at my heels
then he's not

then the click comes quiet
and he's stopped feet wide
on a soggy rail tie.

I don't know what nougat is
but it gums shut the gaps
in my teeth.

The shot only hurts some.
It barely even bleeds.

I Promised Not to Talk About the Dead Dog

but the Dollar General
is Reno in the bottomlands,

half-dead neons buzzing
in the broom sedge;

it's a fresh crop of dropouts
in the back, soggy cigarette

hand-rolled into a hi-vis cuff
and it can hand you a shovel,

can send you downstream
to the river's ragged mouth.

You dream the dog bird bone
in soft towel buried

at the foot of the pin oak;
you dream yourself wilted,

a tire swing spinning emetic
on its fraying rope.

Good American Speech

It's cicadas or it's crickets
or it's something else entirely—

it's whatever a peeper is. I lost it
somewhere, mashed it to paste

between my teeth; no buggy,
no crawdad, nobody

redding up the table for supper,
but something Mid-Atlantic:

crooked on the tongue and never fit
enough for the stage.

We're all Shakespeare in the foothills
here, damp clover clinging to our ankles,

but the crick bleeds in. I can't explain
the night without it,

or the jellied mass of eggs
sprouting limbs

and crawling for the hemlock,
can't tell the truth

about the water's bite or our clothes
in wrinkled piles on the bank.

I can't spell the name
of the bone-white shells

raked by the handful
from the silt,

thin as fingernails,
quiet as parentheses.

When a Town

Population of. Historic
creekbed. Home of a
mud lane longer than
any river. East of the.

Inundated by. No
living room barren
enough. Chain up
City Hall. Count.

In Newport

It's four miles as the crow flies and the windows are thrown wide. They're the tip-open kind and I can see the sky—it's like peering up from the bottom of an envelope. Damp blue. The school a brick box and my bike's tucked behind a bush by the gym door; only four months since Christmas and somebody's already stolen it three times. My brother caught a boy riding it to the arcade on a Saturday morning, holiday ribbon still tied to its rubber grips, and he pulled him from the seat by the shoulders, shook him like so many bones rattling loose in burlap. Dangled him like a junk-store marionette. It's late April and too wet and it's not quite loud when it happens and we turn to the windows and we wonder but just for a second. Brief enough to keep track of the numbers on the board at the front of the room.

An Act of God

but God is an un-
answered citation,
a single egress,

a galvanized rib
impossibly bright
in the rubble.

Variance

A request for variance
shall describe

an alternative method
of compliance.

The alternative method
shall be judged

to provide equivalent
protection.

A competent person
shall identify

predictable hazards;

a competent person
shall determine

it is safe
to proceed.

Hurricane

I'm wading to the checkout
on the first day of my first job,
cigarette butts swimming

the store aisles, the final
shriveled drag of a Pall Mall
clinging to a box of Wheaties.

Downriver they're paddling
kayaks to McDonald's,

they're pitching suitcases
into the only trucks left
above water,

and I'm in the Exxon lot
watching the Ohio
climb the hill.