

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Dead Fish

East Palestine, Ohio

there is no available canary however the yellow
scream of a fox that has splintered its bones
trying to outrun its own end may suffice

*

one could almost believe the old dog simply ambled
into the light of the waxing gibbous

that daybreak would not unsecret his shell
rigid as glass in the violent dew

*

forty years my grandpa worked
Ohio railroads iron tree branching
from southern hollers shooting coal sap
hot as moonshine to sweeten glutton
tongues of the near north's factories

in his foothill town we can't
drink water from the tap
without sickening, we shower quick
before blighted with inexplicable rash

it has been this way so long
we don't ask questions

*

daddy just home from
the industrial glue factory peels
Calvert chemicals off his fingers,
clicks his tongue,
sighs *vinyl chloride?*—
that's some toxic shit

mama says she's just glad they'd had us
before he was ever made to touch it

*

not a hen in the county
whose eyes would catch the peony
smear of another mountain daybreak

a legion of spotted bass belly-up in Leslie Run

*

The fish yes
there was an impact to those. However—

*

schrodinger's cat of my mother's
maybe-cancer. practically
untestable, the ovaries that mapped
the half of me, child to uncage
at the foot of a floodwall mural proclaiming
Welcome to the Atomic City

fist of this tyrant kingdom: my city
of industry, my city of atom bomb,

my city of warheads, of plutonium kept
clandestine, of slow killings
accomplished to kill
more efficiently, of truths & metals
forced underground

I know where the river runs
& looking odds in the eye will break me

*

someone somewhere is always dying
& someone somewhere else pays a mortgage
with their finishing breath

now over a state line, now over a border

*

another business model another cost-cut
another behemoth on a flimsy track
another layoff another shift another shift
another layoff another consultant
another cost-cut another hedge fund
another business model another acronym
another euphemism another denial
of appropriate protections another cost-cut
another layoff another business model another
acronym another shift another shareholder another AI
without oversight another bottom line another
euphemism another axel bent to breaking another behemoth
on a flimsy track another accident another
accident another accident another accident
another poison found in the river that raised us

*

Opened in 1952 in an impoverished region

1,800 men and women who labored

trainloads of dusty uranium powder

material for bombs

Department of Energy contends

exposure was minimal

"I was told

this is Paducah—

it doesn't matter here"

radiation exposure

a problem

well into the 1990s

by then the plutonium

had permeated the land

fishing ponds

campgrounds

the community

has no idea

lawsuit filed under seal

“the truth

I can feel it in my body”

*

We all know how these stories go.

*

norfolk southern numbers games:

one-fifth—of jobs cut in the last
five—years, the slide to understaffing, precisely scheduled, to reap
fifty billion—dollar valuation, for company railroading on a brake system
one-hundred-fifty—years old, battling courts against upgrades that could
dent their
fifty billion—valuation, ensuring the environmental disaster of nearly
fifty—cars derailed or damaged,
eleven—of which contained highly hazardous substances, prompting the
company with a
fifty-billion—valuation, to offer as damages to the city
five—american dollars per chronically endangered inhabitant

*

[an impact][a conflagration][a migraine]
[an understanding within our nerves][a weeping
in the creeks][a sinking salamander][an evacuation zone]

[a rigor mortis][a gradual massacre][a dog
dead under moonlight][a patient
consequence][consequences][a seeping
into the earth][of us, our animal]
[bodies, our delicate cells][their chorus,
discordant][disquiet in our][queasy guts, our ground
water][if there is nothing][that could harm us][why
are our arms][newly blistered][why][are our throats]
[too torn][to speak] yes | there was an impact
However—¹

¹ *Material for this poem was sourced from articles about the February 2023 train derailment disaster in East Palestine, Ohio, and about the 1998 reveal of radioactive contaminants from a uranium enrichment plant in Paducah, Kentucky, published by the Washington Post, Willamette Week, Yahoo News, WFMJ, and other journals.*