

OUR GE(NE)OLOGICAL RECORD – Stratigraphy and Storytelling in Akron, Ohio

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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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English

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**Abstract**

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

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Creative Writing

Methodology: split into pieces. Go around the family gathering with cupped hands. What can you tell me about where I come from and why? The answers you receive will allow you to rebuild yourself, but not in a pattern anyone in attendance is familiar with. They'll move to corners when you enter a room. That's not what we told you about ourselves, they'll say. It was never about yourselves, but about your self, my self, the singular *III* ascending like a scared cardinal through the screen door of the sunroom. You can say: this *is* what you told me, and I am the truth coming through the cracking pavement of disparate accounts, and I am he on the wing, who sticks in the screen door and tatters the cloth, who does not run from the party when his cloak has been stolen, and I have patched together your remnants to cover my nakedness. Your story was never going to be something they'd recognize as their own. Each new outfit fits you different. They don't even have to tell you they like it.

*Absence* –

When I was a child, my father impressed upon me that I would grow up to write his first novel. Not quite a ghost writer, I would need to credit the idea to him, but claim ownership over the text through my name on the cover. He assumed it would get published, probably by Scribner. The book was to be called *Native Earth*. In it, the history of the world would play out on an alternate track. He explained it as being “like a b-side.” It begins with a white man arriving early to the New World. He loves the people there, and warns them others will come, too, intent on killing them, then he sails away on his leather boat. I like to imagine he dies on the way back, maybe in a sea storm, his immaculate craft instantly capsizing, a soggy mess like pruned thumbs. Then Christopher Columbus comes and is killed on the shores. From there, indigenous peoples thrive. They sail to Europe and multiply across the earth. “It will take a lot of research,” he told me. “Maybe I can do the research, and you can do the writing.” I am not, as it turns out, going to write that book. Instead, I am researching and writing my own.

My book is going to be about the act of being asked to live into these stories my folks have told me, that they’ve given me, an act of living that seems to me to include some inference of imminent redemption. I can make good the failures of the past, maybe. But I’m not sure they understand the complexity of what they ask. There’s difficulty in it. Even just the research.

Almost twenty years passed between the original gift and when I began what would become this book-length project in the summer of 2018. I went to my parents’ home and we watched a conspiracy mockumentary about the Cuyahoga Valley called *Helltown*, which started them talking about their own childhoods in the Valley.<sup>1</sup> My mother believed the mockumentary was a nonfictional account. Even when I’ve told her all the details were fabrication, she claims to still recall the names

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<sup>1</sup> Cheel, Jay, director. *Helltown*. Destination America, 2017. 1 hr., 25 mins.

and faces of the teenagers who were murdered in the forest by the supernatural Wendigo, itself a perversion of indigeneity. My father did not believe the mockumentary. He was silent through the viewing except to remark on certain places: he remembers the grassy berm where he and his bandmates with The Wad Squad used to park his father's El Camino to smoke at night. He remembers the silence of the roads in the years succeeding the government annexing the land, how rapid the transformation from Boston town to National Park seemed to him and most other locals. He remembers his buddy and bandmate who took a turn too hard climbing up a Valley wall and how the car was treed and his father, a volunteer firefighter, finally found a piece of elbow in the grass. Or did grandpa tell me that part on his own when I expressed interest in the engine-red helmet sitting on its pedestal in his basement? Most of all, my father remembers thinking it was probably a good idea to clear out the park land. The pollution was so bad at the time, he claims, that many of the people who lived there were falling sick with various cancers, a trend that persists today with the deaths of many of his local friends. Was it the water or the rubber in the water or something in the soil and rock? My father doesn't know.

The mockumentary leans hard into its prefix. Near the end, the conspiracy-driven lead actor takes the cameraman into a clearing in the woods off Everett Road (or somewhere close, I couldn't quite tell by landmarks alone) and lifts a rock carved from gray Styrofoam to reveal what looks like a submarine hatch in the grass. They open the hatch and crawl inside the darkness of a humidity-free government vault. They try to go back later, and it's gone. The government must've lifted the hatch like a sticker, like escape holes by the way of Looney Toons. Once again, the earth-beneath-the-earth resists being found.

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I'm telling you, it all goes back to Akron. My parents' lives, especially my father's, there's a shining thread that winds between trees to find that place always. My father's master's thesis was also about

Akron, specifically about its blimps, one of those innumerable signifiers of the bygone. My thesis is not about that. This is about stories, about meaning and saying what you mean—and I am trying to find something in my stacks of notes about Akron—a definition, a simple way to convey to you it’s *whatness*. All I have are crockpot comparisons. Akron lawyer Lucius Bierce once observed of his hometown’s proclivity for editorial journalism: “if the number of publications is evidence of the literature of Akron, she is the Athens of Ohio.”<sup>2</sup> Today, it is unclear whether Bierce meant Athens, Greece, the idealized center of western thought, or Athens, Ohio, established only forty-nine years before Bierce wrote *Historical Reminiscences of Summit County*. Nearly one hundred years later, Akron essayist David Giffels would inadvertently contradict or confirm Bierce, calling Akron “the Paris of hard times.”<sup>3</sup> It has also been called, at some point between those two means, by Devo’s frontman Mark Mothersbaugh, “a lot like Liverpool.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, when *The Akron Beacon Journal* opened a community-driven contest to select a slogan for the city, one entrant submitted: “Akron, City by the Sea.”<sup>5</sup> If Akron is the Athens of Ohio but the Paris of hard times, and possibly a lot or a little like Liverpool, and maybe or maybe not by the sea according to at least one person who lives there, a connective opinion must be sought—in the words of the Akron Recording Company, “*Where the Hell is Akron, Ohio?*”<sup>6</sup>

“Evidently,” says another self-proclaimed historian, nearly a century following Bierce’s death, “this was a town of lively opinions.”<sup>7</sup>

What we are dealing with is an absence of agreement, probably due to an absence of once-standing identifiers—the distance of history. Absence is the younger cousin of distance, though both

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<sup>2</sup> Bierce, Lucius. *Historical Reminiscences of Summit County* (T. & H.G. Canfield, 1854), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Giffels, David. *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 228.

<sup>4</sup> “Devo: Punk NEO Sound – Akron,” Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, accessed 1 Feb 2023, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/devo-punk-neo-sound-akron-rock-and-roll-hall-of-fame/OQVBjKFQaaIQ0w?hl=en>.

<sup>5</sup> McGovern, Frances. *Written on the Hills* (Akron: The Akron University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Akron Recording Company, accessed 1 Feb 2023, <https://www.akronrecordingcompany.com/home>.

<sup>7</sup> McGovern, Frances. *Written on the Hills* (Akron: The Akron University Press, 1996), 71.

have a long tooth and a large hunger, and both are critical to understanding the narrative structure of Ohioan history and to understanding my own engagement with linguistic scaffolding toward my story/stories.

To put it simply: Akron is understood most by what isn't there anymore. First, you have to learn what *was* there. This Rust Belt philosophy is what I write into, probably.

*Rust Belt*, as a term, was itself designed to fill a vacuum of identity when the rubber industries were lost, and first came into popularity when my father would've been eleven or twelve, in 1982, as a political word, but we took it and wore it like a meager pin over our nakedness. Giffels defines the Rust Belt philosophy aptly in his essay on LeBron James, "The Chosen Ones" directly to his Akron audience: "You come from a misunderstood place and you develop a habit of qualifying *everything*—and I realize "hope" is the only way to do so, to ultimately believe that *that* is the force that will conquer, and I curse myself for this, for the goddamned hope of it all."<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, I could claim he defines it in "Stones," where he opens his narrative sitting "under a tree one summer afternoon around the turn of the millennium, watching men dismantle a giant smokestack."<sup>9</sup> Equally true is that the Rust Belt philosophy is embodied in his parenthetical ritual for a lost basketball hero, that one may trace the deep red residue of Rust and Belt in "(humble beginnings; burden of expectation; killer biceps; purpose-driven departure; grand quest; home, home, home, home, home; daddy issues; failure of price; etc.)"<sup>10</sup> On all counts but the biceps, I know I resonate with his sentiments. In all cases, there is something or someone missing from the picture, something awry or amiss. Hope manifests in the case of a present-tense lacking, a past-tense experience that plenty exists, and a future-tense yearning to be reunited with it again. Let's watch the smokestack disassemble itself. Then desire against all possibilities for its course to reverse. Summer turns to spring turns to winter, and where are we now?

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<sup>8</sup> Giffels, David. *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Giffels, David. *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Giffels, David. *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 3.

In many ways, I am struggling to place it with a pen or a spade, I am struggling to dowse its place with meaning just as much as you are. What sets me apart from you is this gentle tug-tugging. I'm caught somewhere between "grand quest" and "home." So—*where* the hell *is* Akron, Ohio? In a physical sense, we are talking in this essay about Akron, Ohio, which is a rust belt town in the Northeast quarter of the state situated between along the Cuyahoga River and the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Akron is forty-five minutes from Cleveland and two hours from Columbus and if you mistake or aggregate it for either of those two cities, locals will be quite cross with you. If/when we speak of *my* Ohio in a larger sense, we are referring to the tract of land erroneously sold and surveyed and deforested by white settler-colonialists. This tract of land is in the northeast and its old American name is The Western Reserve, as seen here:<sup>11</sup>



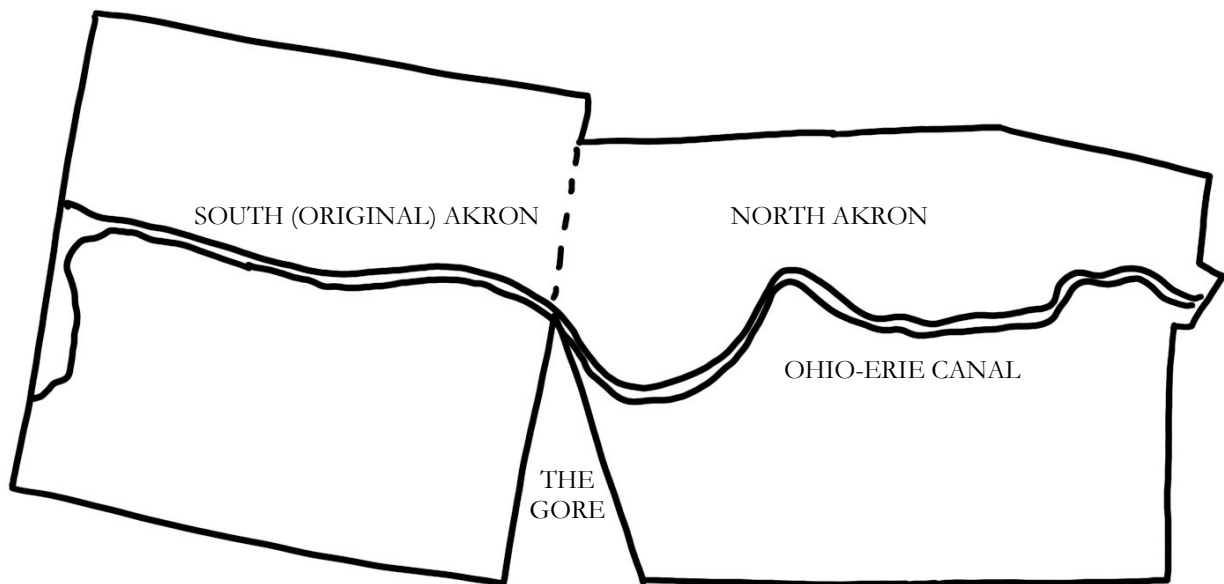
Ohio is a long, squarish state. Not nearly so long as others, but the flatness creates the illusion of spaciousness. There's a certain, golden light that comes down over everything like egg wash on

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<sup>11</sup> Figure adapted from a map of the Connecticut Western Reserve in Thomas Sherman's *A Place on the Glacial Till* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 94.

pastry dough, it lengthens the blades of wheat and each hair on each ear of corn stands out and suddenly seems a thousand years long. My parents live in Mid-Ohio now instead of in Akron with the rest of my family (where I used to live, too). Interestingly enough, if Ohio were the size of the entire United States, The Western Reserve would be located approximately where Ohio is, making it the Ohio of Ohio.

Capturing Akron's geographical (and related definitional) aboutness is difficult. My favorite example in recent memory uses history to conflate Akron with a different city entirely. *Cuyahoga*, by Pete Beatty, is written in the syntactical style of old Ohio newspapers, of which there were/are many. Beatty's book is about a conflict between two "Clevelands" situated along the Cuyahoga River, a premise based not on Cleveland's history, but Akron's. For two Akrons to make more sense, a map may be of some use:<sup>12</sup>



*Cuyahoga* is narrated by a character known only as Medium Son who sets out to tell the story of his brother, Big Son. As Medium Son's envy of his brother's Paul Bunyan mythicality grows, the

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<sup>12</sup> A simplified adaptation of "Map 2. Plats of the Two Original Akrons," as it appears in Frances McGovern's *Written on the Hills* (Akron: The University of Akron Press, 1996), 63.

story becomes more and more clearly about Medium through his brother, in the same way that the lesser Cleaveland, called Ohio City, only knows itself through its rivalry with the older and more grounded Cleaveland across the river. It is a story about storytelling. For much of the narrative, those being narrated about are absent, run off out of desire or shame or just to keep busy elsewhere in the world. Medium Son is the only one who stays, but that's written even into the naming of place, as "TO *CLEAVE* MEANS TWO WAYS."<sup>13</sup> Absence and reunion are at the heart of the naming conventions of his Ohioan city, of its history, and of the stories told within it. Though Medium strives for distinction, he is always cleaved to Big.

Similarly, "this inherit striving for distinction" marks Akron's layout—the original two Akrons were surveyed by two different individuals across two different landscapes, creating two cities "attached obliquely" through a neutral zone called the Gore, a word that can mean viscera as a noun, or the act of wounding as a verb.<sup>14</sup> The second Akron existed as an attachment to the first, though in ideological opposition to its southern counterpart. It is possible for multiple visions to exist and coexist. As anyone who has seen a barnyard fight break out in the dead of night will tell you: wrestling requires taking your brother into your arms.

In his essay on author Jim Tully, David D. Anderson asserts that "Midwestern fiction, almost from the beginning...has been a literature compounded of imagination and talent but above all of memory."<sup>15</sup> He later specifies that what he refers to is a memory prescribed by one's boyhood, by which he means romanticization and adventure and intrigue, or perhaps he means the brotherly boyhood exemplified by characters like Big Son or Paul Bunyan. The kinds of characters who aspire to Westward Expansion, Manifest Destiny, no doubt, the kinds who kill and maim and hunt down to the ends of the earth—the kinds of characters Akron, Ohio has no desire to shelter in its locks, no

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<sup>13</sup> Beatty, Pete. *Cuyahoga* (New York: Scribner, 2020), 58.

<sup>14</sup> McGovern, Frances. *Written on the Hills* (Akron: The Akron University Press, 1996), 65, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, David D, *Ohio in Myth, Memory, and Imagination* (The Midwestern Press, 2004), 107.

matter how abandoned those locks may be. Akron wants the trouble, and trouble only arises when we complicate the relationship between the brother who performs feats and exists to be watched, like Big Son, and the brother who performs all his feats silently, off the page, while proliferating the other's stories, like Medium Son. Akron exists as the boy remembered and the boy forgotten about: North and South and Gore at once.

The reader may ask at this point: what, what's the big deal? It isn't big, that's kind of the point. We've established where Akron and Ohio are and were, but we still don't have a definition of those things.

I keep returning to Ohio as subject matter. I am obsessed with Akron. I see something special in it. What I mean to say is what this essay and all other writing I do is supposed to be is a purpose statement of generational nature, that if I cannot speak in a voice that causes my folks to recognize where I've come from and where it is I'm going back to, that I'm telling the stories they're telling, that I'm taking what they've given and I'm running with it, running perhaps in a direction they consider to be "away," always, always, always, then there's a low likelihood of anyone else understanding me or my place in the world. This essay is my *Native Earth*, and it is built from the empirical past, because it is intelligible to you, and it's poked through with constellatory holes, because the flattening lack is even more intelligible to me.

I used to have this dream when I was very young and learning, still, in school about Christopher Columbus, dressing up as a cardboard turkey, a pilgrim, a native American. The dream usually started with me alone in boat suspiciously similar to a paper boat/hat and ended with me coasting off a precipice on a waterfall of silent, slow water as I hit the edge of the earth. Just as Columbus feared, it really was flat. Or is that apocryphal? It certainly isn't empirical. Despite the dream, my problem has never been my fear of the flat planet. Being a ready storyteller means being an explorer of your inherited stories, which eventually necessitates falling off a sharp edge. My problem

is when my cordage isn't strong enough to pull back up. When it's not truth at all, and I must braid it together into something stronger.

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To understand a place, one must understand its structure. Any mid-American dillweed can name or point to Akron, Ohio on a map. But what is Akron, Ohio made of?

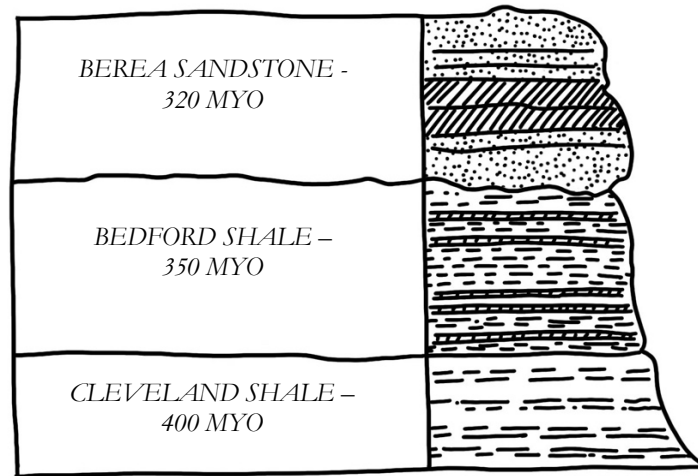
I have too many notes on this, locked in a black binder labeled *STRATIGRAPHICS* with brown duct tape. Luckily, the rocks present in Akron have been present for millennia and are mostly in agreement by now. I like hard sciences for this reason: they very rarely contradict themselves. They simply get clarified understandings.

Stratigraphy is a geological term for the study of layered rock in relation to its age. The closer a layer is to the surface, the younger it generally is, though all rules have their exceptions. The deepest layers are prehistoric. A stratigraphic layer sets the earth's clock. It says: you are here. It can tell which places are blood related. As an example, the Devonian shale in Ohio does not get its name from a cultish 80s rock band, but from the shale in Devon, England, because they are the same shale—exposed cliff faces of Devonian shale in England correspond to exposed faces in Ohio, even down to the immaculately small and calcified sea creatures stuck in the sandy rock. Which means, at some point in the earth's lifespan, Akron and Devon were the same place, fitted together by what is now a clear, traversable fracture.

The near clarity of these empirical observations is part of Ohio's charm. Ohio is stratigraphically simple, deceptively mysterious. To outsiders, it is a state known for its flatness. A state of sightlines, farmland, Amish country, soy and cornfields. To those who come from Ohio, especially the area of the Western Reserve, it is known instead for hills and valley bottoms, rivers, and till. The northeast corner is canal territory, full of "deep cuts" into the earth's crust that, alongside the

Cuyahoga River's deep cut through millions of years of topsoil and rock, are invaluable to placing the city and state in time.<sup>16</sup>

A small snapshot of our quarry might look similar to this:<sup>17 18</sup>



And imagine it continuing its plunge downward. Going by a bottom-up model of the lithosphere, one would begin with the Precambrian basement, which in Ohio contains “a series of interconnected fractures” discovered by farmers digging wells in search of pure water.<sup>19</sup> These ridges are called, collectively, the Grenville province, after going for some time by the name of their constituent igneous rocks: granite-rhyolite.<sup>20</sup> Grenville used to be mountains and Ohio used to be a small heart in the 1.1-billion-year-old supercontinent Rodinia, eventually breaking apart with the chunk of land called Laurentia, all of which predated the more-famous Pangea by millions of years.<sup>21</sup> The easiest way to date the Grenville province is to measure, microscopically, atomically, the amount of sun remaining on the covered surface of the rocks through optically stimulated luminescence, a similar practice to the dosimetry used to measure radiation absorbed in human tissue.

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<sup>16</sup> McGovern, Frances. *Written on the Hills* (Akron: The Akron University Press), 78.

<sup>17</sup> Stratigraphic figure adapted from a placard at the Brandywine Falls trailhead.

<sup>18</sup> MYO is shorthand for Million Years Old.

<sup>19</sup> Camp, Mark J. *Roadside Geology of Ohio* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2006), 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Camp, Mark J. *Roadside Geology of Ohio* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2006), 5,

<sup>21</sup> “Rodinia,” *ScienceDirect*, accessed 31 Jan 2023, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/rodinia>.

Underneath the earth, it has been dark for millions of years. The current version of the Cuyahoga Valley, upon and alongside which Akron is situated, is actually a 500-foot-deep façade. The original Cuyahoga Valley is a buried valley underneath that soil and limestone crust. Knowledge of the last light ties into knowledge of the last disaster—for instance, in the Precambrian layers, light lost out to volcanic eruptions. As lava coursed over the basement of the earth, pinpricks of sunlight were trapped beneath a hardening crust, where it remains if one knows how to tap into it. Perhaps I'm just easily fascinated.

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Getting young is difficult. Going up is difficult. In the *Helltown* movie, they don't want to leave the underground vault. It's the kind of breakthrough one can't afford to abandon, but they do have to go, to eventually lose track of what they've found in the ancient dirt.

In most places, time works its linear magic. Younger trace fossils and potsherds exist in abundance due to erosion having had less time to gnaw at them. The opposite is true for the northern half of Ohio, where stratigraphy results not only from volcanic, mountain-building events, but from multiple climactic events causing multiple glaciers to scrape away the bulk of history. As the placard the above figure was adapted from proclaims, "The rock layers of 60-foot Brandywine Falls can be read like a book...As these layers wear away, the story of the earth continues to be revealed."<sup>22</sup> The flatness and the hills are both owing to glacial trauma peeling back the epidermis: like magic, the face of the land is changed. In Akron, we are revealed most by what we have lost to our history.

The topic of Akron's losses, industrial and geological and cultural, is an extensive one, and if I am to truly write a narrative in an Akron, Ohioan setting, or be an Akron author, I must know something about how people hold them in their bodies. I must trust in the existence of a buried valley

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<sup>22</sup> The placard can be viewed at the Ohio Exploration Society website, if you don't happen to live in the immediate area: <https://www.ohioexploration.com/nature/brandywinefalls/#foobox-1/14/BrandywineFalls0022.jpg>.

underneath the Valley. The storyteller trusts and implements their loss—this underlying premise that things have changed parallel to never having changed.

The narrativization of missingness girds stories, like mine and like Giffels’ and like my father’s, in Northeast Ohio through what glaciologist M Jackson describes as “the social imaginary.” Jackson spent years interviewing and researching the social imaginary in natives of Höfn, Iceland, who dwell alongside four declining glaciers in Iceland’s growing climate-tourist industry. She concludes that, on a local scale, “a large part of the social imaginary relating to climate change and glaciers is underwritten with an assumption of a single story about glacier change—one of loss and melt,” ignorant of the realities of glaciers in limbo, glacial growth or, in the case of Ohio, societies sprung from post-glacial landscapes.<sup>23</sup> Narratives from outsiders get the nuances incorrect not because they’re unattuned or incapable of seeing what’s in front of their eyes, but because they’re incapable of investing deeply in the times that are no longer represented to their empirical senses. Deep time stripped away by climate disasters, glaciers, volcanic eruption. Lost cultures, shut-down bars, the murmurs that *used to be* there. Or, in smaller terms: a green clearing is simply a green clearing to a new observer. They do not know about the hidden vault beneath it—whether it once existed and what it meant when it did (or did not).

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A literary example of the social imaginary in operation can also be found in Akron’s poetry. Rita Dove, in an interview with Noor Hindi for *Medium*, claims the environment of Akron as an influence just as much, or in tandem with, her family’s intelligence and strokes of comedy: “As school children, we felt important—Akron was on the global map because we manufactured tires that rolled out into that wide world...There was irrefutable physical proof of our presence on the globe: the Quaker Oats silos...the smell of rubber on Akron’s east side and the very tires my father helped develop in his

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<sup>23</sup> Jackson, M. *The Secret Lives of Glaciers* (Chicago: Green Writers Press, 2019), 140.

laboratory at Goodyear.”<sup>24</sup> Like me, it seems that Dove clings to the what remains, in memory and in recorded history, of empirical evidencing of today’s absences: the once-was as “irrefutable physical proof” upon which we found our communal and artistic relationships. Because it is now an absence, and we must trust that others believe us when we say it existed, the site of loss becomes a promise we lock ourselves into. We are responsible for its story.

Like many famous Akron natives, Dove doesn’t live in Akron anymore.<sup>25</sup> She teaches in Virginia and has done since the 80s. Though her collection, *Thomas and Beulah*, the subject of Hindi’s interview, was written about her family’s memories in/of Akron. The oft-cited poem when referring to her Akron roots and philosophies is “Wingfoot Lake,” named for the actual Wingfoot Lake where today the blimp called Wingfoot One sleeps in its hangar.<sup>26</sup> The poem draws on absence to exemplify Akron’s natural surroundings: the absence of the speaker’s husband, “dead for the first time / on Fourth of July—ten years ago;” the absence of blackness in the signifiers of society, shown in “white arms” and “the white streets of government” and the segregation at a family picnic. The most glaring absence of all is retroactive, as Dove closes out the poem with an un-imagining, a reversal of a course: “Where she came from / was the past, 12 miles into town / where nobody had locked their back door, / and Goodyear hadn’t begun to dream of a park / under the company symbol, a white foot / sprouting two small wings.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hindi, Noor. “Rita Dove on Love, Race, Family and Akron History.” *Medium*, accessed 31 Jan 2023, <https://medium.com/the-devil-strip/rita-dove-on-love-race-family-and-akron-history-aa1d0ccc95f3>.

<sup>25</sup> Some other examples include LeBron James, Devo (though Mothersbaugh’s cousin Allen still lives there, playing trombone in a band named Massive Hotdog Recall), Jim Jarmusch, Chrissie Hynde, River Butcher, and myself.

<sup>26</sup> Yet another instance of absence, this time through nomenclature: Wingfoot Lake used to be called Fritch’s Pond or Fritch’s Lake for two early settlers, John and Mary Fritch. It was renamed Wingfoot during the time when Akron was gearing up for World War One, when we presumed blimps would be the newest in battle technology. Many of them were tested and flown there, in an early version of Wingfoot One’s hangar. The name stuck. These days, we suffer no illusions that blimps are useful to pretty much anyone. The Goodyear blimp is a good thing to look at if you’re wanting to know where you are in the world. My father was on the team that launched it in August 2014, one month after I graduated high school.

<sup>27</sup> Dove, Rita. “Wingfoot Lake.” *Thomas and Beulah* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon Press, 1986), 72.

What strikes me is the linkage between Goodyear, un-dreaming, and locked doors. How the imagination of one leads to the diminishing of another, the immense responsibility in that. How the arrival of the rubber industry heralds, also, the arrival of certain peoples feeling unsafe. Just as the arrival of settler-colonialists must've heralded similar feelings for the original inhabitants of the lake area: a Lenape tribe called the Delaware, according to an article published in the *New Ohio Review*.<sup>28</sup> Though the article seems to imply that the Delaware were the original inhabitants. They were not.

The author of the *NOR* essay, Marcus Jackson, concludes their close reading of Dove's poem by asserting that "Through the wisdom and grace of this poem, Ohio can shed its usual reputation as an unassuming, plain place in middle America and become a foundation for important complications and discoveries." But nowhere in the essay does Jackson clarify *whom* is being referred to when speaking of Ohio's usual reputation. As an Ohioan himself, does he mean that other Ohioans, including himself, find the state and its narrative history "unassuming" and "plain," or is he referring to those outside his context? I'd argue, even if only in the context of Dove's "Wingfoot One," that the level of detail with which authors render the state resists the notion of self-defining as flyover material. I'd argue that very few authors, notorious or no, consider Ohio "plain" to the exclusion of "complications and discoveries." What else is there to be interested in? Complications, like coyotes, are constantly at work cloaking themselves in the mundane.

And in the mundane, I suppose, was where our revelations spawned from. I forget myself: it wasn't that long ago that Akron didn't even recognize itself the way I recognize it, the way we recognize each other. Before 1982, and "Rust Belt," and empty buildings, it was 1979 and photographer Lee Friedlander was commissioned by the Akron Art Museum, itself only a little over fifty years old, to begin a project called *Factory Valleys*—a year during which he traveled the then-

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<sup>28</sup> Jackson, Marcus. "The Importance and Depth of "Ohio" in Two Poems by Rita Dove and Ai." *New Ohio Review* (2020), accessed 31 Jan 2023, <https://newohioreview.org/2019/01/06/the-importance-and-depth-of-ohio-in-two-poems-by-rita-dove-and-ai/>.

unnamed stretches of the Rust Belt in the Ohio River Valley to document it on film. Now, the resulting collection and book is described by the artist and his collectors as the best of his career.<sup>29</sup> David Giffels writes about the city of Akron's response to the photographs differently: "A pattern revealed itself into a story, and it was a story of ourselves and one we didn't yet quite know, and that is the worst kind of story: the one about yourself that you ought to know but somebody else has to tell you... This is not what we look like. This is not how we ought to be seen... who can ever put a reason to identity?"<sup>30</sup> The pictures showed a desolation we'd grown used to. Perhaps because there was yet no name for our discomfort.

I imagine my father, then only ten, standing in the vaulted white abscess of the Akron Art Museum's upstairs gallery, and I imagine his parents holding his hands, and they're in a crowd staring up at a crisscross section of train ties and houses on dark hills set into gelatin silver. A broken piece of scaffolding sinking into the Cuyahoga River, dark like a frightened man. A pile of dirt or ash. A single, sad road: the corner of Howard and Glenwood Avenues. I wonder how he rationalized seeing these familiar objects from the camera's mechanical and estranged point of view for the first time, if his responses moved molasses-slow as a child or if there was already a starter-spark inside his chest chartering and gear-shifting like a locomotive down the Valley tracks. Perhaps the naming of the thing demystifies our losses. Perhaps it renders them familiar, even loved. It is a hope I must cling to.

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When I began this essay, I began writing based on what I knew: the stories my parents told me, and the stories their parents told them. But to write a veritable account means double-checking oneself, and I very quickly discovered that almost none of the oral stories ring entirely true to how the stories

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, accessing Friedlander's photographs now proves nearly impossible, unless you'd like to buy a copy of the *Factory Valleys* book from his collection for \$3,000, here: <https://www.vincentborrelli.com/pages/books/112038/lee-friedlander-leslie-george-katz/lee-friedlander-factory-valleys-ohio-and-pennsylvania-special-limited-edition-with-one-vintage>.

<sup>30</sup> Giffels, David. *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 5.

have been recorded, and moreover it is nearly impossible to catalog this absence—the most striking and personal kind—in any structurally comprehensive way.

The glaciologist M Jackson tells us that oral history builds expectations about the planet, that it will ultimately protect human beings against losses we cannot believe, “just as you rely on your own local stories to understand what is changing, and how it is changing. Just like we all do.”<sup>31</sup> Oral histories and the beliefs they create and sustain are the basis for our relationship with the land and the experience of its stratigraphic, geological changes. They are the inherited, generational cornerstones we build our relationships upon, especially our relationships with our family homes, and so we must invest belief in these hand-me-down narratives. For Akron, Ohio, belief is especially vital—it is “pragmatism in isolation; it is what exists even if the world doesn’t know you’re there and never will.”<sup>32</sup> Our belief is our alienation: we self-fulfill our own absences from the grander American plot.

Returning to Rita Dove and Marcus Jackson’s essay, I want to make another misunderstanding clear: how easy it is to make such mistakes about who, really, is indigenous to Akron. While oral mythos has it that the mound-building peoples are the original and ancestral stewards, oral mythos also tends to conflate these peoples with modern tribes, which is untrue. There are no more mound-builders. The Lenape, or any tribe contained in that umbrella term, didn’t build mounds. The complexity of the challenge of inheritance, especially through my father’s *Native Earth*, was difficult to fathom at first.

When I started reading in Kindergarten, I learned passages from the native history coffee table books my father kept in his study for me (well, they used to be for him). The books described rituals with linguistic and imagistic detail. I spent long stretches of time with the illustration of The Sun Dance, a ceremony in some Plains tribes wherein young men are hooked to a pole by their pecs. In

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<sup>31</sup> Jackson, M. *The Secret Lives of Glaciers* (Chicago: Green Writers Press, 2019), 143, 227.

<sup>32</sup> Giffels, David. *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 53.

the illustration, the men are jubilant together with threads of blood thistling their sweaty chests and the prairie sun burning on the blades of grass surrounding their circle. I was fascinated by the pottery figures of dogs and children, by the myths of transformation, trickster spirits shaped like coyotes infiltrating the human flock. I felt empathy toward these characters and their fluidity. An inability to be one thing, speak in one voice. These books contained outdated information—my father bought them before my birth in 1996, probably in 1990 when he attended college for journalism and communications studies, due to a fascination with his own heritage. His parents had told him his great-grandfather was a member of the Blackfoot nation. In high school, I located a Pow Wow at Keyser Park and asked an indigenous woman at this tri-fold board in an otherwise empty barn about the Blackfeet. She laughed at me. “There are none here. That is just a word we use for intermarried Indians,” she told me. “When a black man lives in the tribe. That is what a Blackfoot is.” The actual Blackfeet live in Montana these days. They practice the Sun Dance, or they once did. Their real name for themselves is *Siksika*. The research, the research, it’s melting away. This was never a labor of equivalence, and I have been fighting my whole life against the tides of loss and knowledge, which are often the same. I do not know that my father’s research would’ve helped, even if he ever completed it for me to write out. Putting all the evidence so far in a line-up, I had/have no idea who to believe.

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Here is some of what actually happened in Akron: not until the Laurentide melted and made way from the north did the first evidenced Paleo-American peoples make their way to what would eventually be named Ohio. A narrow passageway opened up in the glacier as the Ice Age withdrew. Fluted arrowheads in bones and rock signal that the earliest encounters between indigenous peoples and megafauna occurred around 9000 BC, though there has been recent evidence, such as a 9,000-year-

old knife excavated by a Case Western University team in 1980, demonstrating that perhaps an earlier presence, the Clovis people, predated those fluted points.<sup>33 34</sup>

After the Paleo-American period, evidence is easier to read. The Early, Middle, and Late Archaic periods were characterized by more sedentary cultures and the diversification of tools.<sup>35</sup> Though pottery doesn't appear in the geological record until the Early, Middle, and Late Woodland periods, during which the Adena and Hopewell cultures developed farming techniques. Around 2000 BC, records indicate the domestication of native plants such as goosefoot, sunflower, marshflower, and squash.<sup>36</sup> Following the Woodland periods, the most well-researched Late Prehistoric Period (800 AD – 1600 AD) is divided into five distinct phases, characterized by continual development of horticultural practices and diversification of pottery types.<sup>37</sup>

Geologically speaking, the visibility of mound-building cultures has been important to the Ohio landscape. Mound-building peoples lived during the Woodland periods and into the Late Prehistoric, occupying a span of approximately 1700 years in the Ohioan historical record.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, many of these mounds (also known as earthworks) have been eradicated by erosion and the construction of the canal and railway and, eventually, roads. The mound sites are speculated to have been chosen originally for their geological significance—along the beds of drained glacial lakes and kames, sediment would have been plentiful and easily shifted.<sup>39</sup> One such mound, called the Botzum Mound, remains off Riverview Road in Akron, though it is barely visible anymore, and surrounded by the Boztum Station trail system. One easily mistakes it for an

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<sup>33</sup> Sherman, Thomas Fairchild. *A Place on the Glacial Till* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 60.

<sup>34</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015), 47.

<sup>35</sup> Zalesky, James M. *Archeological Investigation at the Vaughn Site (33CU65) Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area* (Lincoln: Midwest Archeological Center, 1986), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Sherman, Thomas Fairchild. *A Place on the Glacial Till* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 64.

<sup>37</sup> Zalesky, James M. *Archeological Investigation at the Vaughn Site (33CU65) Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area* (Lincoln: Midwest Archeological Center, 1986), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015), 47.

<sup>39</sup> Sherman, Thomas Fairchild. *A Place on the Glacial Till* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

element of the naturally worn topography, a mistake the early white settlers of the area made, too.<sup>40</sup> It is even possible that later indigenous cultures, such as the Lenape, did not know the exact purposes or makers of some of these mounds.

In the later 1600s, the first Europeans travelled through the Valley, though they did not write many or veritable accounts of the place then, as most of “what we know of this period derives from the archeological record and, less reliably, from derivative French resources.”<sup>41</sup> During this period, the Erie or, according to the Iroquois, *Eriechronons*, meaning “people of the long tail,” settled the Cuyahoga Valley and the surrounding areas, and had done for over 600 years before the French appeared.<sup>42 43</sup> Accounts of this people are left to oral reports from Seneca and Onondaga peoples, histories, and references. They may have been more than one culture, or the telling may have been skewed by the tellers, who were the proclaimed enemies of the Erie. There were purportedly around 12,000 Erie people at the time the French first encountered them in 1608, including one “large Erie settlement near the Big Falls on the Cuyahoga just north of Akron.”<sup>44</sup>

The Erie had been in steady decline since the late 1500s, prior to white settlement in the area, but still owing partly to it. Their enemies, the Five Nation Iroquois alliance, had recently come into possession of settler firearms and united against them. Those who remained were “slain” or “assimilated” by the Five Nations at the Battle of Fort Island, and possibly others fled north and west, though these accounts cannot be confirmed.

For nearly one hundred years, Akron wasn’t populated by any people. It wasn’t until the 1700s that other indigenous groups migrated from the east coast and became collectively known to white settlers as the Delaware tribe, after Lord de la Warr, though they were actually of the Woapanachke

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<sup>40</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Bloetscher, Virginia. *Indians of the Cuyahoga Valley and Vicinity* (North American Indian Cultural Center, 1981), 13.

<sup>44</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015, 52.

or Lenni Lenape, which translates most closely to “The Original People.”<sup>45</sup> Due to a series of defrauding trials, the Lenape were not allowed to reclaim the lands they’d come from in Pennsylvania. They settled in roughly the same places near the Big Falls as the Erie had done. Eyewitness accounts claim Akron then homed more indigenous peoples than anywhere else in the Midwest and Northeast, apart from Detroit.<sup>46</sup> This period of relative peace lasted about forty years.

Ignorance is a useful tool in accounts dependent on collective memory and recorded histories. The social imaginary leaves room for the dominating culture to dominate, also, the story that is told to future generations, owing to one of the implied necessities of that term’s “social” qualifier. In order to carve out space in the imaginary, one must have a social body, or a body at all. If the body is eradicated, so also is the imagination tethered to it. The imagination is made available, then, only through abstraction and artifacts—one might imagine the Adena possessed much imagination about the world they lived in based on the mounds they built. However, one accesses the Adena imagination through layers of time like cheesecloth; strained, it no longer holds power. It is severed from embodiment. Those who control the social imaginary now have limited imaginations concerning the true historical diversity of this plot of land called Akron. My father and I and every white Akronite think *indigenous* and see the coffee table Book of Plains Indians in our minds. It is not NOR’s fault they published an essay with misleading information about native tribes in Ohio. It is everyone’s fault for not talking about our true history. We created an absence in the narrative record.

Not many alive in Akron remember or choose to incorporate the Seven Years’ War and King George’s War into the narrative of the city, but it is dangerous, too, to withhold it. Many indigenous nations allied with the French during these wars, and in the wake of French defeat were pushed from their lands to make room for other European settlers.<sup>47</sup> They were left out of treaty agreements staking

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<sup>45</sup> “Our Tribal History...” accessed 31 Jan 2023, <https://nanticoke-lenape.info/history.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> Cherry, Peter Peterson. *The Portage Path* (1911), 72.

<sup>47</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015), 68.

claims on territories neither French nor British. During the waves of settlements afterward, the Lenape were crowded out of their remaining homes, starved of resources, made dependent on white vices and assistance programs, and further suffered population declines to white diseases like syphilis.

In 1782, a Lenape named Neolin preached the importance of returning to the old ways and turning from settler rule in the Cuyahoga Valley. Chief Pontiac and the Ottawas responded with an uprising in 1763, and Lenape led by Chieftain Konieschquanoheel allied themselves with Pontiac by raiding British settlements in the Akron area in order to secure promises of “guaranteed changes to British policies.”<sup>48</sup> King George III proclaimed settlers could no longer encroach on indigenous lands—but the proclamation came too late, and tension between settlers and Britain had escalated too high. The Revolutionary War broke out and the Lenape faced exceeding pressures to choose a side to a war that would enact violence on them regardless of the winner. After the murder of his entire family by settler soldiers, Chieftain Konieschquanoheel sided with the British.<sup>49</sup> When the settlers won and named themselves Americans, violence against natives, including Lenape, increased, with many settlers forming groups dedicated to scalping and murdering those who still lived in the Akron area.

At the dawn of the War of 1812, two Algonquin leaders named Tecumseh and his brother rallied their people in a new settlement called “Prophetstown” in what is now called Indiana. Lenape from Akron fled to join the cause and hear what Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa (whose name translates to “Open Door”) had to say. Most were slain in the battles that followed, and those who remained continued to be pushed out. The last Lenape and their chief are officially recorded as departing in 1829 from Cuyahoga Falls.<sup>50</sup> The last Seneca disappeared in 1890; Tully writes, “they must have felt marooned in an alien world...why they left and where they went does not seem to be recorded.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015), 74.

<sup>49</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015), 80.

<sup>50</sup> Bierce, Lucius. *Historical Reminiscences of Summit County* (T. & H.G. Canfield, 1854), 129.

<sup>51</sup> Tully, John. *Crooked Deals and Broken Treaties* (Monthly Review Press, 2015), 91.

The social imaginary does not record it, either. Neither does our literature. Akron writer Charles Whittlesey writes that the Lenape “were...removed to more central parts of the state for safety” and their being generally inefficient to white purposes.<sup>52</sup> In reality, “less than 1%” of the population of Cleveland today is indigenous, and less than .2% in Akron.<sup>53 54</sup> In her book on Akron’s history, Frances McGovern mostly leaves out the indigenous history of the area. “The Indians are gone, but the trees they knew remain,” she writes when describing the primeval forests of the Cuyahoga Valley.<sup>55</sup> She is right and wrong. Right, because, as indigenous Clevelander Marie Toledo says, “When a community is not seen or heard, then they’re not served.”<sup>56</sup> And, yes, the Cuyahoga Valley hosts some of the last primeval trees of the Western Reserve. They were left intact due to the area known now as Akron being classified as “unsuitable for commercial development.” The indigenous peoples are “gone” only because we’ve erased them. And, outside of the Valley, their trees are gone, too. As the land and the hands that hold it transform, so do its stories.

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In my memory and the social imaginary, there is plenty of room for the responsible boyhood that plays in ditches only to later discover they are the gravesites of lost leviathans. The narrow knocks in the earth surrounding Akron are occasionally glacial features from a forgotten past, occasionally indigenous earthworks altered by time and colonialism, and occasionally the big cuts of a canal that no longer holds water. A boy tends to make up stories about such places in his mind, blended from what he’s seen and heard—he finds a fluted arrowhead and wonders if he can still find the people who made it, hiding from him, just out of sight.

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<sup>52</sup> Whittlesey, Charles. *A Sketch of the Settlement and Progress of the Township of Tallmadge* (1886), 14.

<sup>53</sup> Patterson, Madison. “Neglected Native History: The Cuyahoga River’s Indigenous Legacy,” *EcoOhio*, accessed 1 Feb 2023, <https://ecoohio.blog/2019/11/18/neglected-native-history-the-cuyahoga-rivers-indigenous-legacy/>.

<sup>54</sup> From Akron’s July 2021 census: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/akroncityohio>.

<sup>55</sup> McGovern, Frances. *Written on the Hills* (Akron: The Akron University Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>56</sup> Patterson, Madison. “Neglected Native History: The Cuyahoga River’s Indigenous Legacy,” *EcoOhio*, accessed 1 Feb 2023, <https://ecoohio.blog/2019/11/18/neglected-native-history-the-cuyahoga-rivers-indigenous-legacy/>.

But all this work has to mean something, right? I'm no longer sure the old stories are responsible or if they make a mockumentary of us all—my father saw things in the Valley that weren't there, to reverse a timeline that was actually a crooked tree he couldn't understand. The stories my father believes about Akron are the ones he tells. The story Akron tells about itself are the ones it believes: once, we turned the tide of the industrial revolution by nearly burning down. Grains caught fire in gusts of wind. Our river caught fire thirteen times. And then we reversed it, and became the symbol for green movements everywhere. Sort of. In cases of fire, all that is not saved is lost. The stories Akron tells about itself leave some parts out. This is how narrative absences become narrative losses. These gaps translate onto our brains: patterning our misremembrances until there is nothing in the record to remember.

So it is not so simple as changing the story through manipulation. The evidence of the gone is everywhere, doubling up, telling and being told about. It is a feature of our narrative worldbuilding, the world we built for ourselves. An Akron essayist describes even living in the turn-of-the-century foursquare houses like this, that any citizens “who live in old houses in the city know that anytime we open up a wall or ceiling for repair or renovation, we can expect a fine layer of lampblack,” a result of the burning rubber that once silted Akron's skies.<sup>57</sup> I used to wipe the century-old ash from the window glass of my home on Dodge Ave, daily, weekly. Rituals and reminders like this ask their recipients a vital question about the place they deign to call home: do you believe in the story in which we are absent, or the story in which we return? Each story is mostly one of destruction. And, mostly, people do believe it, both of them. They must in order to remember how to survive.

To hell with boyhood. I would argue that absence is the Midwestern fiction I know best: the Rust Belt version of the creation story. You see an empty building and you fill in the gaps. The absence becomes charming, its own understated bass riff on presence, hinting that what's lost and what's to

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<sup>57</sup> Giffels, David. *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 21.

come are quite similar, really, or like two cities of the same name gripping hands. It's *not* that we've been abandoned by time and industry. We're just waiting for that chair at the table to host our honored guest. We're envisioning the lampblack spiraling back into fire. Something wonderful and unexpected can happen in the absence of everything else. But, first, you must be attentive to the broken pieces. Like all loss, ours is the kind of loss that erases. Loss revisions land and reorders families. When the story one tells takes place parallel in a body of land or of flesh, a body undergoes the obvious trauma of this revisioning, too—and then a clarity, painfully slow at first, manifests behind the eyes and is transposed on the world. It is the loss of our touchstones with the past that transforms us, makes us want to invent them and reinvent ourselves in the process. Suddenly, the observer is hiking to the top of a hill. From this vantage point one perceives the other, lower hills and how they slope into the Cuyahoga Valley's bottoms, and one imagines a future without oneself, and a map forms. Where might a city go? Everywhere, but just here. It is true that "one of the charms of Akron is that its streets go every which way and long ones seldom go far in one direction. New views keep opening up," because you make it true, you open up the views.<sup>58</sup> And when the terror that transforms you comes again there is an open door, a new one. And it is opening, yes, like a fervent fiery tongue or a river fervently on fire. It is opening: for you, for you, for you.

For  
me?

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<sup>58</sup> McGovern, Frances. *Written on the Hills* (Akron: The Akron University Press, 1996), 80.

*Reunion -*

One foot through the door. I cram anything I can into gaps. A geode: an author and a man. A glacier: an awareness of ice in melting flux. Another city: is it true that there used to be two? A buried landscape: below the Cuyahoga Valley there is another valley that has not seen the sun in 50,000 years.

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Where have I come from?

— who am I? — I love Ohio.

But where have I come from? —

What is round on both ends and tall in the middle?

Oh, I love my Valley. Oh. But which one?

—

I was born from wedded pressure and igneous fissions. This is the pleasure of being part of the earth. On the lithosphere, we're all at risk of spinning off, spinning out of control, or colliding. In stories: you know your way through based on how it ends. Like the marriage of a canal to the land, like the marriage of a people to a river. All my stories end in reunions.

Reunions are like Ohios to me. I write so much about what I think they must be like that I'm always missing the real thing. It occurs to me now that I may never have one of my own.

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At the time of writing this, I am not living in Akron. I am not living in Ohio at all. I had plans to conduct on-the-ground research, recordings of oral stories to transcribe and decode, a visit to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources for rare glances at hard geological data. Instead, I elected to pour all my savings into a gender-affirming surgery. This was my choice: to incur another absence on myself, this time physical, and in the process and as byproduct, I'd have to glare into the growing

absences accruing in my thesis. I lacked all the evidence I had come to count on. Possibly, such evidence never existed in the first place. Am I imagining things?

*It is sixty degrees and sunny and akron is doing great.* It was a Friday morning, the Friday before the new year, and I was doing shopping for no reason other than to fill myself with focus pointed outward. I received this text from my partner while flicking through hangars in the coat aisle. I hadn't realized how wound-up my insides were about this unasked and unqualified and unverbilized question until it received an answer. Is Akron different, is it okay when I'm not there to see it? Which Akron am I even talking about? What does *great* even mean? *Which is to say*, my partner explained, *pretty much the same*. I walked to my car, turned up the screamo on the CD player, and wept. I only wanted to be one place in the world. That place still exists, multiple tellings of it, even when I'm too far away to hear it singing.

There is an expectation that I will return. Someday, but mostly: soon.

I used to believe beyond belief that this was true.

Now that this essay is written, I no longer know.

I hold too much tension in my body, the new and the old both, I know. This translates to an emotional anxiety that pervades my narrative inventions: silent characters, fearful attention paid to all the wrong places. I grew up so afraid of a flat planet: meaning, eventually, it was possible to travel so far from Ohio that I'd fall off. When I presented my parents with *Helltown*, an alternate faked account of their home, I was really asking what made it so special, I was inquiring, maybe, about their particular variations on truth's strings—how far are you willing to take your altered accounts in order to support your version of the story? Which Akron do you believe in? Is there room enough for one more?

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You, my audience, my Akron, my family, my father, my home. I chose you when I saw you clearly for the first time, even if I only saw half your face or a sliver of crooked jaw. Sitting in the basement of

punk bars, sipping whiskeys with my neighbors, meeting up with my favorite bassist to eat dinner on the grocery store balcony, seeing familiar faces across West Market Street, smelling katabatic wind, watching the abandoned highways disappear under weeds beneath new, elevated highways. Walking the same trails my parents fell in love on, I begin falling in love. Akron, I tell stories about you, mostly, because my favorite stories to tell are ones about myself. Like Akron and its canal, my femininity was once my identifying feature to those family members who knew me, but lately the story has been different. I have my own absences. And in the same way that my parents' versions of Akron's history are not wrong, neither are their versions of me. I do not say *claimed to know me*. I say: they know me, they know me as well as the prodigal son's father knew the prodigal son. Then they offered me a place at the wedding table. Then I took off my cloak. Here I am, I say, and they are bent down and eating or they are open-mouthed at the dazzling fearful morph of my topography.

Though I may not ever come home. This is a story that exists in the in-between: have you lost me or am I with you? Through so many of my stories, I want to imagine myself as if I am there, in on the joke. It has to end with someone arriving, someone walking through a door. Here I am, I say to no one. Claim me like I've so often claimed you, piece and part, legitimately and illegitimately. And laugh on cue. Knock knock, I say.

Who's there?

—

Here is one final story for you. I have split it into pieces: Sitting in the attic of my old place in Akron sometimes, I'd look down onto the brick streets sloping toward the watershed like furs on the back of a dog and imagine what it used to be like, which is something my father did when he was a boy in Akron. I found a passage in McGovern's book describing the road I lived on as dense forests populated by wild people, which makes sense—the house my grandparents lived in, which my father's

brother currently lives in, occupies the land near the ledges where my father used to drag his bike and denim jacket and a jar of peanut butter into the woods to be alone.

Before my father married, he wrote for a music magazine called *Northeast Scene*. He wanted to make something of his writing, to publish books, to be a lauded critic, to cumulate a repertoire. To this day, he keeps the clippings of his writing in a binder he brings out whenever I come over. For a while, he worked at local radio stations and won golden casts of microphones for the quality of his voice. Within sight of my brick road and attic window, there is a punk bar called Annabell's where he used to play bass with a band called The Wad Squad. This was what he dreamed of doing the rest of his life. Then he had me, and he gave it up, because he wanted his family to have a better life than the one he imagined for himself. For most of my childhood and adolescence, he was gone. Travelling the world on business trips, he always told me looking out the height of plane windows and disembarking mostly reminded him of all the things he was missing at home.

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In 2016, about two years before my *Helltown* showing, I received a call from my mother on my walk home from work informing me my father had throat cancer and wasn't likely to live. It occurred to me all at once that history was not divided from me, nor was it divided from our bodies or the land we walked on. My fear in that moment forever impressed upon the sidewalks leading from the catering company to my apartment, just as my father's memory would only ever thrive in his hometown, where he played bass guitar and spoke over radio waves and pursued his dream of becoming the next Lester Bangs by writing for local publications. While I still could, my narratives turned from bitterness to attempts to understand his life. I chiseled for stories I hadn't heard before. I put together fractured pieces. I discovered artifacts that didn't quite match up—the house he claimed to have met my mother at in the late 1980s was used by the National Parks Service during those same years, though his stories needed it to be abandoned. In 2018 the house really was abandoned, and I trespassed and stole the

NPS housing ledger still standing open on the trashed kitchen countertops. I threw it in the Cuyahoga River. A few months later, I went back. Someone had burned the house down.

I moved home that summer after Mom delivered the news, in 2017, when we thought he was dying, though he did not die. During those months I spent with him, the months when this story came into being, it was impressed upon me how vital his dreams were to his character. Especially the ones he never reached, or eventually stopped reaching for. We walked around the parks surrounding their home. He wrapped his throat with a wool scarf even in the dead humidity of July and August. The frogs multiplied in the bogs and in the river bottoms.

At night, before the network of dreams wired my anxiety into images of shattered teeth and peeled-back nails, I pressed my hands hard against the cold cinderblock wall abutting my bed. I wanted to force mutation back. It wasn't just mutation—morphing, mutability, transformation. My interior terraformed as an unknown ice descended to take hold. My sense of the world suffered a painful inversion, abacus beads shook and slid back into a rightful place: there was no sword. There never was a sword, nor a thread, nor a threat looming over me. The threat was beneath. It was lying down long enough to turn to stone or becoming satisfied with answers you believe are clear wherever you find them transfixed in the rock. Nothing can be read that easily. And so nothing can be interpreted that easily, either. Stories are not symbols but the artificing of our inabilities to understand what is being or has been rendered absent. They are just that—abstract reunions, which can mean any number of things, including *imagistic*, *without physicality* and *summative* and *purpose statement*.

My mother asked me before she drove to gather my father up from the hospital, “Do you hate us?”

No, I do not hate you, any of you. Do you hate me for all the pasts and presents and futures I've stolen from you? Isn't this the danger of uncovering? Of discovery? Of my birth? And yet: here I am.

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Because I know this is about more than yearning for a new earth. I, too, live in fear of that flat planet. The story here is about a very real redemption, learning to see what used to be and could've been as an empirical reality, as affective a loss as what we have. The story here is about reunion. But mostly, it is about redemption. Dad, I want to do more than what you've asked me for. I want to get to the bottom of what you're really asking each time you tell me a story of your childhood, and your teenage years, and the friends who disappeared into the valley bottoms and never crawled out, and the nights you spent in bars identical to mine, and the writing you see me doing, wishing you could do the same. This is what *Native Earth* is really about: carving out a world where everything you've lost comes back to you.

But I don't think I'm capable of writing that story to make it real. When I search the earth for you, all I find is me.

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I made one trip to Ohio to visit my parents after I began transitioning but before I was out to them. It was a tense visitation, one I mostly spent in my sister's room, lent to me for the duration of my stay. "What are you doing?" Mom asked whenever I read. Doing research. "For what?" My thesis, for school. "What is it about?" It's about how the stories we tell are not arcs but layered like the land. "I don't get it." Maybe they'd never get it, or maybe it was my responsibility to articulate my message in ways they'd understand. I still don't know. I mince words. I eschew meaning for abstraction. It could all be plainer. I could've told him, even then, that this was about him, and it would've been truer. "You're fighting with mom," Dad observed while driving me back to the airport. You know how hateful she can be, how she jumps to hate like a stowaway. "Yeah, she's tough, but she has to be, it's the way she grew up, and she has her own ways, and I love her for that." I began to cry. She simply

doesn't understand, I don't know how to talk to you people anymore. "But we try to understand. For whatever it's worth. We do try to fill in the gaps."

My dreams begin to disrupt around this life I need to love, and the losses accrue as they burn downriver. The question I continue to return to: AM I ALIVE TO LIVE THE PAST IN WHATEVER WAYS THE PAST COULD NOT BE LIVED? Is there anything to be corrected? A year has passed and I have yet to hear my father say my name. Like a dog sitting up to see his pack crest the horizon when he knows they've perhaps perished in distance and deepfreeze, like strangers standing around a photograph of a city they live in, but do not have words yet to claim for their own—I will not stop waiting. Dad, I will keep the guard. It does not end until one of us walks through a door. It does not end until I see you again—and you see me. I mean it in an unabstracted, non-narrative sense. Really, see me.

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Cleave it all. Defy your inheritance, or you may never have one. Throw off the mountains like a cloak, turn them to stumps of mountains, assumed as you fly over the broil of the county highways. The photograph of mother's teeth smiling over the halo of her wedding veil shears into a plume of cardinal-colored ash. She sits up in bed, suddenly well again. My father's hair regrows. Scars vanish, voices return to their original posts in the spirit of the throat. He walks his bike behind his house, untethered, removes a jar of peanut butter from the pocket of his cut-off shorts, and sits down at Whipp's Ledges to eat. A screen door unsticks from its track. He turns because he knows the popping sound, anticipates an adult or someone with a belt and some authority taking the oak stairs slow, half a step at a time, but it is just this boy he's never seen before. He squints his eyes with his tongue pressed into the bulb of the spoon in his mouth, sapping the molecules of crushed peanut off of it—he's trying to determine if this new kid reminds him of someone, or maybe it's a twinness, a jointure or hinge, maybe the someone this kid reminds him of is a reflection, or a piece of a reflection. Hi, says the boy, can I

sit with you a while? And my dad doesn't know why not. So we sit together, watching the Valley where we grew up draw its breath, drawing us into being. Beneath our dangling feet, billions of years hang in reverse order to touch us even once.