Open Hearth, 1962

A two-headed kitten floats in formaldehyde

in a mason jar at the Old Mill Museum,

in Mill Creek Park,

in Youngstown, Ohio,

a city of hearths not yet rusty,

homegrown like the gowns of steel money

at the Mahoning Valley Historical Society,

all lace, high necks, and deep silken folds.

Skipping across the scuffed floors, enchanted

and frightened by the jar, its cloudy contents,

seeking comfort in the sibilance of air and water

that once turned the millstones,

scouting the cliffs we were forbidden to climb,

at Lanterman’s Mill,

we plotted our escape.

After peanut butter or baloney on Wonder Bread

or Schwebel’s, Happy the Clown’s favorite,

carrot and celery sticks, an apple or nectarine,

a Twinkie for dessert,

we played Red Rover and Who Stole the Cookie,

then gathered limbs, rotting stumps,

cracking the fingers off the branches into kindling.

One perfect stick, straight and green,

became the prized epée.

We’d strip the bark, gray on the outside,

vanilla closer to the muscle,

bits of sap sticking to our fingers,

and spear marshmallows,

white as an egg, gummy as its white,

gelatinous and airy, all at once,

awaiting the perfect flame.

We’d toast the treat,

watch the skin turn tan then brown,

bubble, crack, and weep,

burst into a torch,

fall to the dirt in strings.

Someone would toss in a plastic fork,

to watch it twist, a dying spirit.

We’d pick sticks from the fire,

ones with their ends burning,

inscribe our names across the sky

claiming it as our own

before collecting crayfish

to scare our mothers

when they opened our lunchboxes.

Did we imagine writing our names

alongside others’ on marriage licenses and divorce decrees,

insurance policies, mortgages, death certificates?

Did we understand how the heat of the open hearth,

working, working, working,

made livings, made steel, made us

beneath the Division Street Bridge

at Youngstown Sheet and Tube?