

Peter Blair

Coke Man

For two weeks I draw lucky, coke man
on Number Four, a one-man job. Alone,
I work outside atop the trestle, halfway
up the furnace's round rusted body.
I can see the river, the sky. The other
side of the furnace, two stories below,
glows and rumbles, the cast house, none
of my business as long as I keep feeding
coke to the barrel-mounted hopper beneath
the tracks, and venture alone into the deep
high coal cars to shovel out the last
isolated coke piled in dents. I never see
the castmaster or any white hats,
just the brakeman from Union Railroad
when I call for a new four-car fix
of black rocks, hard as pumice, light
as whiffle balls. After I sledge hammer
the bottom doors open, the coke tumbles,
fills the hopper. The car drains
slowly. I get a half-hour break. Time
to watch the skip cars climb the furnace
and dump their coke. Nights are best,
as low summer moons cut through clouds
over the Monongahela. I imagine Indians
and French soldiers, paddling upriver
to give the British their first defeats
in the New World. One morning, Orion
melts into the dawn, and a white bird
flies from thick river mist, circles
high over Homestead. *Your cars set
for awhile?* Mr. Appleby, a supervisor,

asks. Surprised, I nod. He motions for me to sit with him on a rail, our steel-toed boots between the ties. He takes off his white hat, drops his safety glasses into it: *Where're you from?* Red rings circle his eyes. He talks ten minutes about how most men don't appreciate the equipment: *the incredible enterprise the mill really is*. He places his hand on my shoulder, grips and shakes me. *But you do. I can tell. You're not like most of these guys*. His round fleshy face smiles with fatherly eyes. *You like working coke man?* Maybe he just wants talk, someone who won't call him *asshole* behind his back, someone who'll be gone by fall, not beaten down by this incredible enterprise at war with the men who keep it going. Maybe he wants a warm body to listen among caverns of empty coke cars and hoppers ceaselessly rumbling beneath the trestle like hungry prisoners, so near and so far from the river. But fear, orange as my hardhat, that I'll spend each morning with him, and the deeper fear, seen talking alone with him, informant, suck up, boyfriend, fear overcomes me, *No, sir*, I lie. *It's boring. You see more on the furnace*. He takes his hand away doesn't believe me, gets up. The coke's gone from the car behind me. *What were you looking at when I came?* I say, *Fucking quitting time*, nothing to do but grab the hook and safety belt, climb the high wall of the coke car. Next week I'm in the cast house, shoveling hot iron from the runners.