

Mrs. Johnson

by J. D. Schraffenberger

Mrs. Johnson looked out the window
on the ride to Pikeville and saw women
in backyards rush to take sheets off
the lines so they wouldn't get covered
in train-soot. She came to Jenkins
on a hack driven by mules, with a baby
on her lap and a suitcase at her feet.
In the seat next to her was a keg of beer.
The driver turned around and offered
her a sugar cube for the baby to suck on.
She bit it in half, placed the smaller piece
on her son's lips. It was morning
and warm, and the driver told her
it would be dusk before they arrived.
And when they arrived in the half-light
of the mountains, the place looked rough
—no school, no church to speak of,
and the tipples were roaring like hell.
Most of the company buildings were nothing
but weather-bolted shacks. Mrs. Johnson
checked into the Old Jenkins Hotel,
where the Bradley Apartments are now,
and she got herself a job filing papers
in the hospital. She put her baby
in a maternity ward crib and spent
her breaks and her lunch hour nursing.
They hadn't started building the dam yet—
all the water came from deep wells
because the creeks were already stinking
with coal dust. You had to let the water
set up overnight in a bucket and then roll
the skim off in the morning, like cream.
But they did have a sawmill and a makeshift
ice plant and a bakery over in Ratliff Hollow.
You could get lumber or ice or bread
delivered on a dray, but for milk
you had to go to Shelby Gap and trade.
Where the boarded-up C&O depot is now,
they had lodge meetings and dances
and preaching services, and it was there
on a Fourth of July that Mrs. Johnson
says she met her future husband, handsome
standing in a corner and smoking a briar pipe
with Bad John Wright, both of them tall
and slender and dark, and when she approached

them with a baby on her hip, the men lowered their pipes and tipped their hats. Mr. Johnson tapped the tobacco from his pipe on the bottom of his boot and said *This here's John Wright*, and she asked if it was true what she'd heard, that he'd killed nineteen men. John Wright smiled and shook his head. He touched the bare head of her baby boy and said *I been meaning to make it an even twenty*. And though the baby wouldn't survive the winter, she sits now in her double-wide trailer in my own family's ancestral holler, telling me these stories with pleasure, refilling my coffee and looking at me with watery eyes as though I might have been her baby boy, the one whose head was touched by an outlaw.