

Mr. Johnson

by J. D. Shraffenberger

Mr. Johnson never worked the mines.
He hauled sand in shaky gin wagons
to build all the box frame houses here.
He made pocket-knives and repaired
the wheels of mine cars. He was good
with his hands. He made ends meet.
He tells me about the biggest man
in the world, Martin Van Buren Bates,
who traveled in the circus but settled here
in the isolation of the mountains. People
thought the man had healing powers
and called him Devil Van Buren.
They were afraid of him, they kept
their distance, there were whispers
of past murders, they loved him like God.
Mr. Johnson built the casket for him—
eight feet long, and the whole town
came out for the funeral, like a holiday.
All the ropes snapped as they lowered
Devil Van Buren into the ground,
and the casket clattered into the hole.
The lid cracked a little, and the box
lay at an angle. It was like something
inside of them all had snapped and clattered
at an awkward angle in a deep dark hole.
Mr. Johnson says he looked down
into that grave with fear and shame,
and they all did, and they wept together
because there would never be another giant
in Jenkins, and the tears came on and on
because the company was laying people
off and everyone knew it would only end
like this, and everyone knew the brand new
highway through Whitesburg and Pikeville,
it would never end, it would go on and on.
Mr. Johnson looks at his hands a lot, as though
trying to remember all the things they've done.
He thinks they'd like to try something new,
but he has trouble, he says, holding onto things.