

Follansbee

Nicholas Campbell

From the bank my uncle Emil
and I watch the men working,
the long boats pulling what steel they can downriver,
the water rusty, slow as the steel.

Ohio watches as we watch—
Follansbee, West Virginia, a gray street across a bridge:
Market Street, a link between two states.

Emil says the flaming steel drum
around which the men stand warming their hands,
cold and hard as brass, is called a salamander—
that the work is easier just knowing it is there.

Sometimes we walk to the store
and I listen as he tells me how it was,
how the air was cleaner, how there were fewer mills, more work,
how a friend named 88 is now a barber,
how he plays piano when he isn't cutting hair,
why my uncles Frank and Joe and Red Sperringer moved to Texas,
why my cousin Billy drives a school bus
and lives in a trailer in Wellsburg.

Sometimes we sit on the bank watching the boats
while Emil drinks whiskey,
his fingers standing around the bottle
warming their hands as he remembers how it was—
how the work was easier just knowing it was there.