

**Diverse Voices in Appalachia: Urban, Industrial, and Ethnic.**

Diversity has always been the case in Appalachia. Typically, much of Appalachia is regarded as rural and homogeneous and only involved in extraction industry. In fact, our beautiful region carries varied voices reflecting the multiplicity of peoples and cultures as it has from the beginning, and it's even truer today. With reading selections and discussions from published memoirs and fiction, we will express urban, industrial, and ethnic voices in Appalachia.

**Presenters (Cat Pleska, convener/moderator; Marie Manilla, M. Lynne Squires)**

**Cat Pleska**

Cat Pleska is a seventh generation West Virginian from a working class family. Her memoir, *Riding on Comets*, was published by West Virginia University Press in May 2015. Her literary works are included in regional magazines. She reviews books for *The Charleston Gazette* and is a West Virginia Public Radio essayist.

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Presentation: *900 Degrees Celsius*

My presentation is culled from my memoir, *Riding on Comets*. In it, I write about my relationships with my family, who were a bit of a challenge. In writing about the men and women who were powerful forces in my life, who had a giant hand in helping to shape me, it was of great concern to me to honor them in my book as the fantastic storytellers they were. All of them told well-crafted stories of quotidian happenings, nothing fantastical and no tall tales. Just going to the store, to work, or losing someone, or finding the humor in the mundane. As an only child, I could have been the fly on the wall, the mouse along the baseboard, the little pitcher with big ears. I listened to both the men and women enchant me with their lives' detail, so naturally I picked up on what most little girls might not have thought to have been paying attention to: man talk. Beer bottle popping, whiskey swilling, man boasting stories of work, of

fixing cars, of wild nights roaring down from Cheat Mountain, challenging the kiss-your-ass curves.

But I didn't hear it all because: I didn't ask some important questions. No one did. At least, not the important ones, until, in this case, my father's life was nearly over, I finally asked, as you'll see, as a sop to boredom, but I'm so glad I did: I asked him about his work.

I wrote a chapter for my memoir titled "900 degrees Celsius," and what I learned about was what industrial life was like for my father, for many, mostly men, who walked into a plant when the whistle blew and walked out when it blew again. Inside, all day long, these men made magic. In looking at the diversity of work in Appalachian, it's important to continue noting work other than extraction, that Appalachia was at the heart of the 20<sup>th</sup> century work culture and not everyone was a coal miner, or even participated in industry related to it.

## 900 Degrees Celsius

### *Crucible*

My dad and I sat in plastic scoop chairs in the surgery center's waiting room. He was to have his carotid artery unclogged. I had traveled to South Carolina, where my parents had retired. Mom, as always, wanted to be near my aunt Norma, who had moved south a few years before. Now, Mom was undergoing chemotherapy and was in another hospital across town to have her port changed, through which she received medicine. I came to be with Dad during his surgery.

The waiting room was full, and a television mounted near the ceiling blared a *Jerry Springer* show. The show's guests were screaming at one another and occasionally baring gums where teeth should be. I tried not to glance up at the television too often. Dad stared straight ahead at a small child with a gauze patch over his eye, who stared back at Dad with his good eye.

Shifting in the uncomfortable plastic chair, I couldn't remember when I'd sat this close to Dad. Our thighs almost touched. When I was still at home, he always sat at one end of the table, with me at the other, and Mom in between.

Dad didn't appear nervous about his upcoming surgery and didn't seem inclined to talk. Silence, if you could call it that with the television blare, yawned between Dad and me. Given that we rarely had lengthy conversations, and I couldn't recall ever asking him questions, I had no idea what possessed me to suddenly ask: "Dad, what was it like working at Kaiser Aluminum? How's aluminum made?" He'd retired seven years earlier after working in the finishing mill for decades. In that part of the plant, he inspected thin sheets of aluminum that would be made into foil and beer cans. Still, I knew little about what he did and nothing about the aluminum making process.

“Well,” he launched as if he’d been anticipating the questions, “aluminum comes from bauxite. It’s mined in different places in the world—Africa is one place. They dig it up and then crush it to help remove other minerals. They wash the bauxite, sort it by size, then separate the liquids and solids to remove clay, mostly. It’s a slurry then, you see, sort of like a soup. They take that slurry and dissolve it in fluoride compounds, put an electric current through the bath, then you get alumina.”

“Alumina?” I interrupted. “Not aluminum?”

“Yeah, the ore at that point is called alumina. You don’t get aluminum until you mix it with carbon dioxide. They put that into a smelter and the carbon dioxide evaporates and you’re left with aluminum.”

Dad paused in his story when the gauzed-eye boy walked over to him, reached out and touched his knee. The boy’s mother called him back, explaining,

“He thinks you have gum in your pocket.”

Dad reached up to his shirt pocket and rummaged around, but I knew he never chewed gum.

“Well, there partner, I seem to be plum out of gum. But here,” he reached into his pants pocket, “here’s a dime.”

Without a word, the boy took the dime, glancing back at his mother, who nodded. Then he slipped back to his mother and took up staring at Dad again.

“Anyhow,” he turned to me, “they’d ship the aluminum to our plants then. You remember that piece of bauxite I gave you?”

“Yeah, I still have it in my cedar chest. It’s silver.”

“That’s right. And it never tarnished, did it?”

“No, it’s just as silver and shiny as the day you gave it to me.” I must have been eight years old or so, nearly 38 years ago.

“Aluminum forms from alumina at 900 degrees Celsius, but once the aluminum is formed, it melts at 660 degrees Celsius. At the plant, they smelt it with other metals in huge metal pots—they’re called crucibles—that can hold hundreds of pounds of smelted ore swinging from massive cranes overhead in the pot room. Cranes lift two huge, oblong molten ingots that I always thought looked like the Devil’s shoes passing over us.”

I interrupted again. “I thought you never worked in the pot rooms?”

“Well, I went in from time to time, needing to talk about the slabs of metal coming to us in the finishing end. We’d talk to the pot room guys and I tell you,” he shook his head and tsked, “I don’t know how they stood it. The temperatures in the pot rooms reach 180 degrees Fahrenheit at a man’s shoulder. You know your Uncle Jack worked in the pot rooms his whole time at the plant. I suspect that’s why he can’t breathe well now. The lines are wrapped in asbestos, like this . . .” His hand made a wrapping motion around the opposite arm as if he were swathing a wound.

“I’ve seen the men in those rooms look as if they’d been working underground in a coal mine, their faces were so black. They wear this heat protective garb that looks like big yellow rain coats. If they didn’t wear them they’d burn. You know those huge pots can never be turned off. Once they’re heated, it takes massive amounts of energy to reheat them if they ever get cool. It looks like the furnaces of hell. Sparks fly, men up on cat walks get covered in sparks, but they just keep moving, using these big cant hooks to tip the crucibles and out pours molten metal. It goes into molds to make the ingots.”

His hands gestured in grand arcs as he described the pot room. When he told of the crucibles tipping, his hands looked as if they held a large pot.

“It takes a special kind of person to be able to work in those pot rooms. In my end of the plant, the rolling mills were pretty tame. They pour the alloy into huge rectangular molds, making slabs of metal a couple feet thick. These slabs go through huge, heavy rollers and get pressed into metal for car bumpers or beer cans, or aluminum foil. We had it easy on that end. But not the pot room guys. They could do things I never could.”

### *Beneficiation*

“I forgot to tell you that they do a thing called beneficiation early on with the ore. They upgrade the ore this way, mix it with other metals. I guess you can’t just work with what you get out of the ground, and once you dig it up, it’s quite a process, you know, to get it to where it’s aluminum. And it takes so much gas to fire those pot rooms—it costs around three million dollars a month to keep those pot lines fired up.”

A nurse appeared at the door of the waiting room and called my father’s name, interrupting his story. It was then that I noticed about half the former *Jerry Springer* watchers were looking at Dad, obviously listening.

“Yeah!” Dad answered and stood up.

“Come with me, sir. You can come, too,” she pointed to me with her pen. We followed her to another room where Dad answered a series of questions about who was going to pay what insurance didn’t cover; whether he smoked; was he retired. I sat quietly, still thinking about the aluminum plant, seeing in my mind’s eye the smelting pots and the Devil’s shoes.

I'd always thought my facility and love of language came from my mom, who was an avid reader and ached to be a writer. Dad was also a voracious reader. I have a love of reading thanks to both of them. Yet, I conceded that Dad was a good storyteller, which is a skill most of my family members had honed all their lives. The high adventures Dad participated in as a young man, and even as a retired older man, seemed natural for storytelling. He told stories of his youth often. Work, now that I thought about it, he had rarely talked about. It seemed something he had to do and that was that. He did tell stories about the people he worked with, usually a funny story.

I remembered my mom's comments that in the early 80s he'd been trained on new equipment and handled it all so well the company had flown him from the Ohio Valley to California and Canada, to train others. His ease in understanding machinery, woodworking, tool use, and mechanics was astounding. Over the years, he'd disassembled cars and trucks down to the chassis and rebuilt them. My mom often found a weird-looking tool he had fashioned to do a particular job.

Another nurse came to fetch Dad after he'd told his personal business to the billing department woman. Again, I was told I could come along. I was beginning to wonder if I were going into surgery with him.

This nurse took Dad's blood pressure, temperature, and respiration. He was asked to put on a hospital gown, and when he came out of the bathroom, he was told to get in bed. Once again, he had to answer questions.

“Do you smoke?”

“No. I used to. Quit several years ago.”

“Do you drink, sir?”

“Oh, once in a while.” The nurse looked at me and winked.

“Well, that’s good. Too much drink harms your health.” Apparently she knew from his blood work that he’d been on a bender recently. I managed to not look directly at Dad.

*Rolling, rolling, rolling*

The nurse finished asking Dad questions and we were left alone. Silence again stretched between us. He fiddled with the bed covers, moved items on his tray—the water pitcher, a box of tissues, straws. I’d brought papers from my freshman composition class to grade, so I took them out of my satchel and began reading. I’d just begun teaching as an adjunct.

“Well,” he suddenly spoke, startling me, “the ingots we got into our rolling mills are a little over two feet thick, about 20 feet long.” He measured about two feet with his hands. “The slabs can weigh 20 tons.” He looked from his hands up to me. His eyebrows rose, which I remembered was his way of checking if his audience was listening. The brows lowered. “Those slabs are heated in a furnace and rolled between powered rollers until the ingot, then it was called a plate, is pressed to about an inch thick.” He measured the one inch between thumb and forefinger. “Then that’s when I got ‘em. They come to my finishing mill and we hot rolled them to about the thickness of a quarter of an inch.” The space between his thumb and forefinger narrowed. “I was one of the inspectors. If it didn’t suit me, then I rejected it.”

The door opened to his room and an orderly came in with a gurney, followed by two nurses. They helped Dad onto the gurney and with a nurse on each side, pushed him through the door and turned left down a long corridor. I followed along, chatting with the nurses, and noticed Dad began to look a bit anxious. The doctor who’d performed the catherization the week before was disturbed by how clogged the carotid artery appeared to be. He told Dad that he had a 50

percent chance of suffering a stroke after the surgery. He told Dad he would do his best to keep that from happening.

They rolled him the length of the corridor, and stopped short of double doors. One nurse turned to smile at me and told me where I could go to wait until after my Dad's surgery.

The doors swung open automatically and the surgery unit lay ahead. Dad didn't look back at me, but raised his left arm, index finger in the air. It was a wave so-long. Then he was through the doors and out of my sight.

Dad had completed his story about aluminum by the time they'd wheeled him down the corridor to surgery. The rest, I knew. Not the dispensing of aluminum to various industries, where other companies took the metal and made everything from car bumpers to toys, but I knew how he behaved on the job. Over the years, as his drinking had increased, the foremen of earlier times protected men like Dad. They may have been irritated that he missed work or showed up with a hang-over, but he was still one of their more talented workers. His work-related decisions and actions were considered smart and capable. Toward the end of his 33- year career at Kaiser, that protection waned, as it had for his father at United Fuel, welding pipe lines. My father's employers had not said anything to him about retiring, although he had enough company time for full retirement. When the company's employees went on an 18 month strike, and they had to endure the country's first employee lock-out, Dad decided to retire. Always a union man, he was not interested in carrying the banner any longer. It was time to go. He was 65.

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My father survived the surgery only to die in a vehicle accident 3 years later. By that time, my mother had passed away as well. I received "benefits" from Kaiser, or rather whatever

the name of the plant was by then. It has passed through other company hands, but as of today, March 2016, the plant is inactive. The pot rooms have gone cold. With the benefits I received, I took my husband and my daughter to the Czech Republic for a vacation. I don't know that was a fitting thing to do after all the hard work my father had done in the aluminum plant, but I like to think he wouldn't mind.

### *Crucible*

Not too long after my father's surgery, he was back in West Virginia for a visit. My mother was gone, but he came back to visit the mountains, to hunt and fish, and visit with me and my daughter a couple times a year. On that trip, my father had driven me to see his uncle Chester, a WWII navy veteran who'd been in Nagasaki one month after the bomb dropped. Dad talked when we drove to his uncle's and when we drove back to my house. We talked about his job, his life growing up, and I don't know how this part of the conversation came up, but he said to me, and I was stunned because I had no recollection of this. I am forever glad he told me:

*You wanted a lunch box just like mine when you started your first day of school. It was one of those aluminum hump-back types. You don't remember? Well, you did. You told your mother you wouldn't go to school unless you had a lunch box exactly like mine. Your mom hunted all over town, but she found one. You even wanted a sticker that said Kaiser Aluminum. So I got you one. Your mother told you she'd fixed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for both of us. You went off to school with that little aluminum lunch box. It was exactly like mine.*