

## Inhospitable Hometowns

My youth was filled with small town talk;  
the brunt of it trials and tribulations  
of average countryfolk magnified  
into end-all, dynasty-like struggles  
by the ever running mouth of someone  
too volatile to settle into their life and  
too scared to change it.

If it rained, it was never enough.  
Whether it was too much for tomatoes  
or too little for lima beans, there was always  
something wrong with the weather,  
and never with the farmer.

Town gossip was served like syrup at breakfast;  
If a cousin had a cheating husband,  
or an auntie had a son who turned out queer,  
or, God forbid, there was a grandchild who left the church,  
it was the first thing I heard in the morning  
and the last thing I heard at night.

If I went anywhere with anyone  
who shared my blood, it was sheer certainty  
that I would hear the deepest, darkest, most deplorable  
secrets of every convenience clerk, cashier, and bank teller  
we encountered; it was simply  
*the* small town passtime.

But every now and then, on a cool day in late September,  
when the sun would hit the dewdrops on the hayfield just right  
and provide a view that seemed just for me, I would relish  
in the piece of smalltown heaven that, I'm certain, was the chief point  
of reason for those who defended living  
in the belt of Pine.

I grew up, grew out of the phase of life where  
running barefoot through fields is admirable  
and into the portion of my youth where it was admonished.  
I grew to despise the populace that detested me,  
and to only appreciate that which I could see through screens;  
what was far enough outside the reach of falling pine needles  
to be untouched, untainted, and opinionless.

It was then that I learned the lousiest lesson within county lines:  
The glamor of small towns is a thing that is burned away  
the higher the sun gets.

In the heat of the day, the angry swirls of reality spiraled up,  
the town's true colors bleeding through its very foundations,  
teeming and twirling off the asphalt in an undeniable exclamation;  
this place does not welcome you!

I later learned that message was more for me than most;  
Friday nights rolled around, and by then I was too old to join  
in the small scale side game of football next to the field and thus  
was relegated to walking the poorly paved track around it with  
fellow teenagers, none of which were sure of who we were;

We did, however, all rest firmly in one truth:  
For one reason or another, we were not meant to be here.

We saw it in the color of our skin; in the baleful glare  
of an old man with hatred tattooed on his heart and  
a clump of tobacco permanently tucked away in his  
judgemental lip.

We saw it in the desire of our love; in the offended,  
offensive leer of a woman with unnaturally blonde hair  
and an accusation of inhumanity on her tongue the second  
she saw us hold hands.

We saw it in the viewpoint of our parents; in the  
apathetic, antagonistic responses to our words, to our actions,  
to even our breathes, even and especially in the attempts  
to coax us out of our rooms that followed.

We saw it in the faces of our families; in the weathered,  
beaten down, beaten up faces of those who had clung,  
tenaciously, hospital banded wrists clinging  
to the smalltown even when it force fed them  
addicting distractions, one after another.

We were dead set on leaving this place; we'd made the plans,  
we'd done the work, securing asylum in any way we could—  
collegiate halls, military bunks, guest rooms of distant cousins.

But when we readied to leave,  
one foot outside the county line for the first real time  
in all our young yet immeasurable lives-  
We hesitated.

Looking back, we saw ourselves.  
Small, childish versions,  
youth running in colorless trails  
down our nose, through ever present dirt;  
a now outgrown response  
to the pine tree pollen most of us  
would never weather again.

They looked at us, these childhood renditions,  
and they smiled the knowing, mischievous,  
good-yet-bad-intended smile of southern youth  
as they extended skinny arms to wave us a goodbye,  
nothing but joy on their small, haggard faces,  
and it was okay.

We all knew, young and old,  
that we would leave today,  
but there was no need for sorrow;  
because, as certain  
as small towns stay small,  
those who leave them behind  
will always return  
when their child's goodbye  
has turned to nostalgia;

When they grow brave enough  
to make a home  
in an inhospitable hometown.