



Photograph by [Urish](#)

The Impossible Everything That Everybody Wants

by Seth Sawyers

In western Maryland, where the state's already skinny, being a stutterer who can't eat doesn't

help growing up. Paying tribute to 1980s Appalachia, home to American chariots.

On a map, the state of Maryland, on the East Coast of the most powerful country in the world, looks like a pistol pointing west.

The barrel points at the giant hulking hugeness of America, first toward West Virginia and then Ohio and then all that farmland, and beyond that California, the Pacific, and, eventually, China. The fat part of Maryland is low and rich. It's got money and restaurants and office buildings. But not the skinny part. That skinny part is where I'm from.

The skinny part is an outer province, an afterthought, a cartographic mistake. At one point, the skinny part is less than two miles wide. It's an add-on, a hangnail, a swollen pinkie finger. It's a place people see on maps but forget about unless they go deer hunting or have a second house there, where they go to get away. People from Baltimore or D.C. call it "out there" or "up there" or "the mountains."

The skinny part is all hills, ancient mountains long worn down, once as tall as the Himalayas but now smoothed out like old molars. On topographical maps, it looks like a tablecloth pushed together from the ends, a worried forehead, or corduroy. Those hills make a horizon that rises and falls like the humps of a sea monster. Those hills hold you like endless warm blankets. They're green in the summer but, when the leaves fall, they exhale a long breath and fade into their thousand browns and thousand grays. The hills wear clothes for half the year and wear nothing at all for the other half, but they're always there.

Nothing is flat in the skinny part, not front yards, not driveways, not roads, not even soccer fields. There are few straight lines, only valleys and ridges that dance and jut like a flag in the wind. The muddy Potomac River lazes along the bottom of one of those valleys, and so the first dirt road followed along beside it, and then the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and then the railroads, and then the smooth highways covered in asphalt. These days, convenience stores dot the sides of those roads, and they sell beef jerky and 10-can shrink-wrapped packages of Skoal and camouflage baseball caps and scratch-off lottery tickets, with handmade signs out front that, when I was growing up, said, "Absolutely Lowest Cigarette Prices Allowed By

Law.” It’s where the gas stations still let you pump before you pay. The bars are there, too, and so are the churches, the trailer courts, the tattoo places, the pickup trucks on blocks with the “For Sale by Owner” signs taped to windshields. At night, when you look down into those valleys, the roads and cars and parking-lot lights make for orange-and-yellow ribbons, or arteries.

Those valleys hold everything the people up there do or make. And those valleys hold a lot of what those people want. But not all of it. Definitely not all of it, because their wants are like the wants of people everywhere, in that they cannot be contained. The wants that live up there, it’s no surprise, go on forever. Some are knowable, like a job or a new car or a Super Bowl for the Steelers. But others, big others, are unknowable, and they’re bigger than the muddy Potomac, bigger than all of Maryland or Pennsylvania or West Virginia, bigger even than those old hills.

Some people live in Frostburg, the college town on the cold ridge that has a Main Street, an old movie theater, a coffee shop for professors and poets. Some live in the hard George’s Creek towns where the Scottish and German coal miners settled 150 years ago. They live in Eilerslie and Mount Savage and Midland and Lonaconing, where their last names are Sloan, Kitzmiller, Snyder, DeHaven. They live on the other side of Dan’s Mountain, in the big Potomac valley, in LaVale and Pinto and Bel Air, where we lived, in Cresaptown, where we lived for a little longer, and in Rawlings, where Mom and Dad built a house for us. A few live out east of Cumberland, on the edges of the great rolling forest there, in Flintstone and Little Orleans. Even fewer live in Oldtown, which used to have its own high school, the one that graduated a class of four the year I left for the big city. Some people live on the sides of those old hills, on Will’s Mountain, Irons Mountain, Dan’s Mountain, Polish Mountain, hillsides where the wind just goes and goes, where winter hangs on through Easter, through the start of baseball season, until you’re ready to scream, and where, when summer does come, it comes in easy and cool like a kiss on the cheek from your grandmother.

Life is lean for everything in those valleys, lean for the jumpy squirrels, for the nervous deer, for the people.

It's lean in the skinny part, scrawny, scrappy, tough like a chunk of meat that's been left in the oven for too long. Dad always said that the deer up there were skinny because the land itself was skinny. It's all hills that go on and on, deep, rocky folds in the earth where there's not much to eat. Life is lean for everything in those valleys, lean for the jumpy squirrels, for the nervous deer, for the people.

Most of the people live in Cumberland, which has always been either a very small city or a big town. The Shawnee lived there first, before white people came in 1728. During the French and Indian War, the English built a wooden fort where Wills Creek meets the Potomac. George Washington, as a young officer, lost a battle there. After the Revolution, the skinny part of Maryland stayed quiet. But then they dug the C&O Canal through, even blasted a thousand-yard-long tunnel underneath a hill. Then the railroads came and put the canal out of business. Cumberland grew, but only a little. Baltimore had a port, Washington had the government, and Pittsburgh had steel. Cumberland became a place you passed through.

For a while, there were factories. There was Kelly-Springfield for tires, the sprawling Celanese plant for textiles, the PPG plant for windshields. Husbands took their wives to the Elks, the Moose, the Ali Ghan Shrine Club. There was a Masons lodge, a few Knights of Columbus halls, a Rotary Club, a Kiwanis, even a B'nai B'rith. There were volunteer fire departments up every valley. The men got drunk at the American Legion and, for a while, my grandfather was one of them. They played softball and their sons played baseball. Their daughters were cheerleaders and then secretaries and wives and then mothers. But by the early 1980s, the factories were gone. In the summer, weeds shot up through the asphalt in the parking lots surrounding the Celanese plant. The only place that still makes anything is the paper mill in Westernport, but it seems as if it's only a matter of time. The good jobs, where you lifted something heavy and got paid well for it, were vanishing even back then. They're almost all gone now.

They said, when I was growing up, that, per capita, Cumberland had more churches and bars than any place in the country. I don't know if that's true, but when you drive Interstate 68, heading west, you can't miss all those steeples off to the right, in North Cumberland. From the highway, the city looks comfortable, and quiet, almost European. For Christmas, the churches string white lights along the

edges of the steeples. The hills frame it all. It's pretty, maybe, or cute, people say when I tell them where I'm from.

Not everyone was the same. Some grown-ups must have made good money. That's what people said, "good money."

There were always bars and they're like bars anywhere: low and flat and dark, and smoky, before they made everybody take their cigarettes outside. When I got older, I'd drink beer in Christie's, Goetz's, Appel's, Carmichael's, Bullwinkle's, When Pigs Fly, the E-Z Way Inn. Most had dartboards. One or two had a shuffleboard table. Cheap advertisements for the same American beers hung on the walls: Budweiser, Miller Lite, Natural Light, Busch, Michelob, Rolling Rock. One or two sold Guinness. There were bars I was too scared to go into, like the K Bar, in South Cumberland, and corner bars with glass-brick fronts through which you could make out a soft light that made me wonder why men and women would ever spend time there. Once, home from college, I went into Duncan's in Frostburg and ordered a Samuel Adams and I could tell by the way the bartender looked at me that I'd made the wrong choice.

Not everyone was the same. There were differences, if you looked closely. Some grown-ups must have made good money. That's what people said, "good money." Some fathers drove new cars, big ones, and resurfaced their driveways every summer. Some fathers dug holes, poured concrete, and put up basketball hoops in the driveways, and from the hoops hung new, white nets. I knew of a few houses with satellite dishes out back that you could rotate with a remote control. Some of the channels, secret ones, showed people having sex. At our house, we got some channels, but not all of them. We had no basketball hoop, but we didn't want one. We threw a scuffed baseball back and forth, to each other, until our forearms throbbed.

The people who made really good money came from the cities, what we called "down state." They came gliding through on I-68, in Hondas and Toyotas and Volvos. Sometimes we'd see a BMW or Mercedes Benz or, every once in a while, something unimaginable, like a Saab or a Jaguar. Sometimes it felt as if our small

world was running at quarter-speed, that the world motored at top speed only elsewhere.

There were tastes here and there, windows into another place where people had second houses and where they used chopsticks to eat their food. They took trips to Myrtle Beach or even to Disney World. Some families went skiing but the rest of us went camping at Rocky Gap State Park and slept in canvas tents so old that they smelled like time itself. Still, we loved camping because Dad would build a big fire and because, most of all, it was out of the ordinary, a change, something to look forward to. We fished for bluegill and pumpkinseeds with bobbers and worms on hooks. We drank generic-brand soda from County Market called Orange and Cola and Red Pop.

In the skinny part, people drove American cars: Pontiacs, Fords, a grandmother's hand-me-down burgundy Buick. In my memory, everyone drove a burgundy Buick. But the kids didn't, and when I got older, in high school, my friends drove tiny, indestructible Chevy Chevettes. People drove Ford Festivas until they wouldn't go anymore, cars so ugly they looked like they were made in Eastern Europe. There were a few Volkswagen Beetles and if somebody saw one, somebody else got punched in the thigh. Cars were essential, like food, and they were everywhere, like mailboxes, or cigarette butts, or oaks. Cars broke down, cost a lot to fix, and were an annoyance. Those were facts. Our red Ford Escort was an annoyance. It was the same with our big Oldsmobile station wagon and, after that, the Plymouth minivan. They broke and they stranded us on the way to Pittsburgh and were no good. But to live required at least one car. Two were better. In my head, the skinny part of Maryland in the 1980s is either burgundy sedans or guys in pickup trucks. The pickups always have West Virginia plates and behind the wheel is always a young man in a dirty baseball cap and a thin mustache, country music loud on the tinny radio. In the beds of those trucks were plastic buckets full of hammers, rusted nails, wrenches, tape measures, coils of old rope, empty Mountain Dew cans rattling around like seeds in a dried gourd. The pickups hauled old snow that had turned to hard snow, had melted and frozen again to form chunks of ice that coated the plastic-lined beds like clear polish coats fingernails. In November and early December, the pickups hauled four-point bucks, spike bucks, velvety does with holes in their necks oozing red.

Men like my dad got up early and sat in the cold woods until they got a shot at something.

Saturday nights, after last call at the Cozy Inn and the V.F.W., those American pickups, the chariots of the skinny part, weaved home slowly, cigarette butts shooting out of the rolled-down windows, exploding like fireworks when they hit the asphalt. There were pickups in the church parking lots on Sunday mornings, pickups in the teachers' lots during the week, pickups outside the fences at our baseball games, pickups without mufflers, pickups showing more primer than paint, Ford Rangers with stickers covering the tailgate, and, for some reason, huge, rusted pickups rumbling through your fears at night as you lay still in your bed, trying to fall asleep.

Pickups were of the inside. We knew about them. But there was an outside, and it looked like what we saw on TV. The inside and outside did not meet, except for weird overlappings, special occasions of strangeness. We had an Icelandic exchange student when I was in the 10th grade. Her name was Ilsa and she was tall and pale and had bright pink streaks in her hair and I couldn't stop looking at her. There were three Jewish girls, though two were identical twins who left for New York before the second grade. There was an adopted Korean kid named Matt Wilson who drew the best station wagon of any of us. One family may have been Pakistani, but no one knew for sure. Mom and Dad were Democrats, but Democrats were rare. I saw a hippie once, a long-haired man in round John Lennon glasses who was hanging around one of our baseball games, and one of the coaches told us to stay away from him. No one spoke Spanish. If anyone did drugs, it was maybe just some weed. There were no gay people, only a few men who people said were "funny." Kids on my bus said Cooper's on the west side in Cumberland was a gay bar, but I didn't believe them. They said Shooters on 220 was for lesbians, but as far as I could tell lesbians were imaginary or else so exotic as to be like mountain lions, or giraffes, or astronauts.

Once, on the way to Pittsburgh to see the Pirates, we stopped at a McDonald's in Garrett County, the tip of the skinny part, so high up in the hills that it's cold sometimes in June. I was about 10. At the next table was a couple, in their

twenties. The woman was pretty but didn't look like any other pretty woman I'd ever seen. The man had thick stubble on his face. I realized they weren't speaking English. I asked Dad about it and he said they might be French. That thrilled me. I wanted to run my fingers through the woman's hair. I wanted to touch the man's beard. The man was eating a McDonald's Big Breakfast. I'd never ordered the Big Breakfast, because I couldn't finish even a bacon-egg-and-cheese biscuit, which is what Jake and Ryan got, which meant that I got it, too. I watched the French man eat the scrambled eggs and the sausage patty. Then he picked up the first pancake. He rolled it into the shape of a log. I wondered when he would spread on the margarine and when he'd pour on the syrup. But he never did. He shoved half of the pancake into his mouth, chewed, and smiled. In the car, on the way to Pittsburgh, I told everyone about the French man and later that school year, I wrote a paper about it. In the margin, my teacher Mrs. Lease wrote, "Good detail! Strange!" For a while, I ate my pancakes that way.

Not all the meat came from the woods. Some came from County Market or the IGA.

We had a Burger King, an Arby's, a Long John Silver's, a Pizza Hut, and a Roy Rogers. We had a Chinese restaurant called Peking Palace. In Frostburg, for some reason, was a good French restaurant called Au Petit Paris, up Main Street from an Italian place called Giuseppe's. On TV, we saw commercials for Red Lobster, Applebee's, TGI Friday's, Domino's, Olive Garden. We bought our clothes at the Country Club Mall, which had a Bon-Ton, a J.C. Penney, a Kmart, and a Sears. Sometimes you heard of people driving an hour and a half to Altoona to buy shirts.

Men, where I grew up, didn't care much for clothes, or if they did they kept quiet about it. Men liked baseball and mowing the lawn and beer and a lot of them liked car races, but not my dad. He liked the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Bears and especially the West Virginia Mountaineers. He liked to laugh and he liked Susan Sarandon and he liked cut-off jean shorts in the summer. Men like my dad got up early and sat in the cold woods until they got a shot at something. Men killed squirrels and rabbits. We often came home to a skinned deer hanging, by its hind legs, from the back deck, its naked flesh milky white with

sinew and deeply pink everywhere else. We ate smoked trout and fried trout. We ate dove breasts and squirrel stew covered in a jar of spaghetti sauce and cooked all day. We ate deer. No one called it venison. We ate deer shoulders cooked in an iron baking dish with a packet of Lipton French onion soup mix sprinkled on top.

There were canned peas on our plates, or canned corn, or the kind of broccoli that comes in frozen bricks. There was Caporale's bread with margarine. I ate side dishes and came to love them but also hate them because they were all I ate. I drank lots of milk, because no one's ever hated milk, and I ate two or sometimes three slices of bread, and maybe a mouthful of potatoes, or some rice turned brown by too much Worcestershire sauce.

Not all the meat came from the woods. Some came from County Market or the IGA. Once a month, Mom made a meatloaf, smearing ketchup on top since she thought I might like that. She fried up big pans of store-bought sausage but I didn't like the way it felt in my mouth. She cooked plates and plates of chicken, the skin torn off some of the breasts because I asked for it that way.

It was the same, every night, and it went like this: me versus my dinner. I wanted to eat, but couldn't. I liked hamburgers, and hot dogs, and I ate most of the lunches Mom packed for me though I could never finish both halves of my sandwich. I'd come home from school, drink a glass of soda, watch TV, and then I wouldn't think about food unless it was to think about how I hated it. Maybe the food and the stuttering that came in waves were all tied up, and maybe I was all tied up on the inside. I got good grades and teachers liked me but the stutter was always there and I couldn't eat right and some of my friends' thighs were as big as my chest and all of it tied my tongue, and my stomach, which tied up my tongue even more. I had the ability to work myself into a 60-pound knot.

Back then, while trying to fall asleep, I'd pray that no one—not Mom, Dad, Jake, Ryan—got sick. I prayed that someone would find a cure for stuttering. I prayed that I'd wake up the next morning to a world in which food and candy had traded places. I wanted meals of Jawbreakers and strawberry Twizzlers and cherry Blow Pops. Trying to eat, I was blocked off, seized up, stuck. It was like sitting in the dentist's waiting room.

Mom would bring out the food. She'd scoop the food onto our plates. And then the scraping of forks, always the scraping of forks and knives on the pale-white plates with the flowers in the middle. Mom, on the far end of the dining-room table, ate slowly and passed food to Jake and Ryan, who ate very fast. Dad, on my right elbow, ate and watched. Sometimes I could feel his frustration. I knew he worked hard and I knew Mom worked hard and I knew they loved me because they loved me in a thousand ways but still I didn't know how to make myself eat. Not eating made my little muscles flex, from tendon to tendon. At the dinner table, I was a violin with the strings tied on all wrong, over and under each other, the strings tightened to within an inch of snapping, the whole thing barely still a violin at all. I don't know how it looked, but that's how it felt.

So, after two or three big mouthfuls of rice or potatoes, I cut off a sliver of meat, put it in my mouth, and chewed. I knew that the meat part was what everyone was waiting for. This was the end of the movie, the bottom of the ninth, the test. I chewed until the meat turned to mush. I knew I had to swallow and knowing that made it harder. I was trapped, in my head, in a place where I could not eat. My head was stronger than my stomach, stronger than my thousand swallowing muscles, stronger than anything except the sky, which brought snow and wind. I couldn't tell my head to stop, to just stand down for a minute. Always, my stomach felt small, the size of a rock, smaller than a baseball, smaller than a golf ball, so small that you could slip it into the little pocket in your jeans but not small enough so that you could forget about it forever.

That skinny kid is still there, the one who stuttered, whose elbows were so sharp sometimes other boys would get cut by them on the basketball court. And if I could, I'd go back and wrap up that sliver of a boy in my arms and whisper things to him so warm and true that he'd have to, for just a moment, stop worrying and just, simply, be. Because I love that kid. I think about him all the time.

Skinny kids try to be on the shirts when it's shirts versus skins. Skinny kids can't win fights.

That kid's ribs showed all the way up, from belly to collarbone. His heartbeat pounded through the skin on the left side of his chest, a small, hard flutter of flesh between two ribs. When adults saw his hands they said he should be a pianist, or a writer. That kid asked his dad why they said he should be a writer, and his dad did this little dance with his fingers that the kid knew meant typing on a typewriter. The skinniness was with him in the bathtub, on the bus, in class, at soccer practice. Skinny kids try to be on the shirts when it's shirts versus skins. Skinny kids can't win fights, so they avoid them. They try to be funny, to make the bigger kids laugh, and especially the mean ones. Skinny kids don't get girls, at least not for a while.

I hid a lot, with books, my fantasies, road maps as big as my pillow. I was all elbows, kneecaps, big front teeth. My ears stuck out and I couldn't help any of it. I had these big brown eyes that took up half my face, eyes that shone out, wide as chestnuts, taking in, absorbing, watching. So I did what I could, which was to keep quiet. People were forever calling me shy but really I wanted to break out of that, to talk, to shine. Instead, I read books, magazines, shampoo bottles, comic strips, the *Cumberland Times-News*, Dad's Sunday column, cereal boxes from which I did not eat. I watched, and listened. I was a set of eyes, a set of ears, a trembling heart racing so fast it was all I could do to command myself not to fly off into the sky. I wanted the impossible. I wanted everything. I wanted the thing that everybody has always wanted. I wanted to be told: you're special, and you stand out from all the rest, and I like you, and I want to be near you.

Seth Sawyers' work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Baltimore Sun*, *The Morning News*, *The Rumpus*, *The Millions*, *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Quarterly West*, and elsewhere. He is at work on a novel about a 10-foot-tall office worker. He teaches writing classes at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and is an editor at *Baltimore Review*. He has been awarded scholarships to attend the Sewanee Writers' Conference and Writers@Work. He is a former Emerging Writer-in-Residence at Penn State Altoona. [More by Seth Sawyers](#)