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Reflecting on my small red town, after the wider world turned me blue

By Seth Sawyers

Feels sometimes like I grew up on a school bus rattling its way along the bottom of a snaking river valley outside of Cumberland, Maryland — long, low hills on each side, like parents' shoulders. A thousand times, that bus took me past the fibers plant once alive, they say, with smoke, now with the green of ivy working its way through the broken windows.

My family goes to all of my baseball games, but they don't have much money. No one does. I go to school, to Cub Scouts, to Mass if they make me. I don't think about red or blue. Instead, it's football and trucks, CDs and the mall, Boone's Farm and Hartley's pizza at some birthday party in South Cumberland.

Some kids hunt deer. Some kids join the Marines the minute they're able. Some can't wait for that first job, if they can find one in this forgotten corner of the world no one else thinks about unless it's the big-city paper parachuting in to do a feature about all the rust.

School always came easy for me, so I go off to college next to the big Beltway downstate, and at first it crushes me. These smart, fast, cool kids — Black, brown, gay, weird, brilliant, even the dull ones shinier than me. For two weeks, a month, a semester, I cling to that river valley, miss it terribly. Much of it is good, after all, and when I get older, I'll come to understand that it's full of ore to be mined. But that river valley never allowed for much past Fort Hill and Allegany, so I make mistakes and get embarrassed in my

new world. It is a trial by fire, but when I come through, singed, I am, as they say, the better for it.

My narrow world exploded and when the dust cleared, I saw that the walls I learned about growing up were never really there.

Now, when I head west for the mountains, I see that there are lots of people who never got their walls blown up. I see those blue flags with that man's name, in all caps, and each one's a dagger to the belly, which I suspect is half the point. My wife, who has family deeply in love with the man, gets it, this love affair of theirs with this empty soul who lies so sweetly in their ears. But most of my friends, now, don't get it. For them, it's as foreign and as gross as blackface.

I used to think it was about the rage of being left out. Of being held at arm's length from the good life. And I think there's something to that. And, of course, there are two different realities now, two different Facebooks, the TV in your Jiffy Lube tuned to a different channel than the TV in mine. Someone looks at an orange and calls it a banana. Or, worse, looks at the orange and says there's nothing there at all.

What's for sure is that it breaks my heart. It can feel like the friend I played baseball with has joined a cult. Or my friend's nice mother. I don't know if I can look at them the same way again, that's how awful it feels now, how personal, that they would love this man, still, who thinks so little of so many. I think: If they love him, awful as he is, they must hate me.

Some will call me soft. Sure. But when I'm out west and see those flags with that man's name, when I watch, again, the video of those sad people rushing up the steps to the Capitol, joyous in their certainty, I think I know what's really at the heart of it. Deep down, under the us-versus-them, under the blizzard of memes reposted without a second thought, I think I know what's really there, because I used to sit next to it, on the bus. I sat inside it.

It's just fear. And how common is that? Common enough that it's right up there with love. Right next to it. On top of it, under it, so mixed up together that they're just about the same thing.

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