

Tom Miller

STEEL TOWN

It is a gritty town still.
Houses tinged with gray on the sides that face the mills.
All look down to the river that winds through the valley
To the rusting decay of dozens of steel plants.
And miles of railroad tracks decorated by weeds.

The acrid smell of soot from the old furnaces still wafts on the breeze.
And window sills still turn black when the winds seep in.
Wheels still need to be turned to the curb when parked
Or cars or trucks may journey on their own down the steep hills
And congregate with all the other scrap below.

No longer do burly hard hatted men toting black lunch boxes,
With their sleeves rolled up, and jackets slung over their shoulders,
Hustle out of the gate when the whistle blows and cross the street
To Louie's Café to elbow each other aside to plop on a stool at the bar
And demand a beer.

The furnace at the Open Hearth still stands
Under the dirty roof which rests on peeling and rusting posts,
Once green. Never clean.
Waiting to be charged
With charcoal, pig iron, shreds of scrap layered in.

Waiting to be fired.
To burn for eight and a half hours.
For its heat to cleanse carbon out of the mix
And turn solid iron to molten steel.
To feel it melt and sink to its bottom.

The houses rise above each other in tiers along the streets
That climb steeply away from the river below.
Each claiming a clear view of the slope on the other side.
It too covered with houses that seem to crawl toward the top.
Back in the day they could not see so far through the thick air.

Porches still shelter an Adirondack chair here and there
Left from the times when darkness hid the ugliness
And the night time pour was a magical thing to watch.
When its beauty lent itself briefly to the night
And watchers gained some momentary satisfaction in some undefined way.

When the furnace belched its cinders and sparks like fire works into the night
And the red orange stream flowed from its gate at the bottom
And down the narrow bed in the sand spreading out like a delta at a rivers end
Into sculpted bar pits to cool from white hot to mellow gray
And be picked and stacked tomorrow.

The red orange river would flow like lava from a volcano
And light up the faces of the men on either side
Who would drag long poled scrapers again and again across the flow
Pulling slag of limestone and ash off the top
Dancing and sweating no matter the season in their rush.

When the gate was shut the orange flow would cease
And be followed down the chute by blackness
And the river would be no more.
Only the bars would remain and their orange would fade
Slowly, slowly. Never quite gone before the sun would rise.

And the light in the hearth would dim and the drama would be over.
Night and blackness would reclaim the scene.
The men would disappear from view.
Smells and sounds would lessen and carry on the wind.
And the watchers would drift to bed feeling somehow enriched.

But...no more. Never again. The quiet is loud.
Streets virtually empty.
Many houses abandoned like the plants below.
Shutters hanging and gutters drooping.
Lawns overgrown. Windows cracked and broken.

And try as it might,
the wind still cannot scrub the dirt away.

Tom Miller is a retired business man who has been able to devote more concentrated time on writing poetry and sharing it with others. His work has appeared in previous issues of *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, several *Bagel Bard Anthologies*, *Salem Writers Group Anthology*, *Merrimack Open Mic Anthology* and a variety of other publications. He is a frequent performer at various venues on the North Shore and has been the featured performer on numerous occasions. He also does voice over work and has appeared on several television and radio shows. Tom is a native of Ohio but he currently resides in Ipswich MA.