

# Ex Medio

The Journal of the Midwestern Region  
Sigma Tau Delta





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# Note from the Editor

Thank you for your interest in Ex Medio, the official journal of the Midwestern Region of Sigma Tau Delta. I had the pleasure of serving as the Associate Student Representative for the Midwestern Region during the 2013-2014 academic year, and it is with pleasure that I edited this publication. The following pages contain fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction by authors from the Midwest. Each piece is remarkably different. It is my hope that the following samples of writing highlight the variety of experiences people have in the Midwest, as well as how the feelings resulting from these experiences are not so different from those felt by others in this world.

Colin Loeffler  
Editor



# Prose





# In the End it Overcame Him

By David L. Modica  
Olivet Nazarene University

Contra Hollowbody traversed the labyrinth of sidewalks that cut across great lawns groomed to Edenic perfection, hoping to make it to the sixth floor of Lexington Tower, home of departments English through Religion, for a lecture he was not at all prepared for. Despite the best intentions, sunset found him helpless and alone on the porch of a seemingly vacant farmhouse several miles out of town, waiting for Karlos Ingeniaz, a wiz for landmarks, whose services could be bought by the taco at the local Taqueria, Los Brothers, to come and get him in that bright green El Camino.

“How did you know this time?”

They were approaching the borders of the small college town, some twenty minutes’ drive from their starting location. The car shook slightly. The music was more noise than anything else, masquerading under the title ambient post-rock, with a name so obscure it rendered it inaudible, fans settling on the acronym N.O.R.M.

“Amigo, I told you: Mexican Magic.”

Contra took the wallet from his pocket, surprised as always by the thickness of the billfold, as if its girth acted independent of the amount of currency it contained, and handed three singles to Karlos as he screamed into the battered speaker shaped like a taco that served as a double entendre for three carne asada tacos, hold the sour cream.

He found himself in a lecture hall dressed like a Methodist church.

“No, there’s no such medical condition.”

Professor Lyondardo Carnivale looked bored, eyes half glazed thanks to a number of anti-anxiety medications, leaning against the veneer of a pressed wood podium.

“It’s not narcolepsy, but it has similar characteristics. I’m fully awake, but I vanish and appear in weird locations.”

“Sounds like you need to lay off the LSD,” he says, hands juggling prescription bottles in the pockets of his lab coat.

“It’s not a hallucination, it’s a physical phenomenon. I don’t feel like I transport, I actually do.”

“Mr. Hollowbody, I have no time for philosophical quandary, I am a man of science.”

The next morning, tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, with the smell of piss oozing out of each and every pore, he woke to Resin Everclear sitting Indian style on his distended chest, bouncing slowly with each breath, eyes closed and fingers pressed together on his knees.

“Finally, I have found my pinecone chakra, right at the center; that all-seeing eye.”

“Do you mind?”

They shared a breakfast of all-natural granola bars and Bud Light before making their way into town in search of mind-altering substances. Unable to score anything a grade above

ditch-weed, Contra resigned to mass consumption of codeine, while Resin sucked away at a shark-shaped bowl that held a mossy mess that was more stem than anything else. He vanished only twice, the first landing him in the neighboring town's mall for no more than five minutes and the second resulting in a much-needed ride from Karlos, who found him dangling both feet from the edge of a quarry, still certain that the color scheme of the earth had changed since consuming the cough medicine. Two tacos later and two dollars lighter he buried himself deep under a down duvet, face sunk deep in memory foam, ass raised in a compromising position.

He began to plot the occurrences—for he knew not what else to call them—on a map that materialized on his desk following a night of heavy boozing, marking each point of departure with green and each arrival with red. He felt there was something missing as the scatterplot took shape, but there was life within the action of recording itself, so he continued to fill the thin paper with dissonance. He hung the project on the ceiling above his bed, searching for patterns while lying on his back waiting for sleep. Faces formed in the mess of polka dots, staring down at him with wide grins, taunting him for an answer.

Resin found him in the basement of a used bookstore, a copy of *Lolita* balancing haphazardly on the tip of his nose.

“They’re onto us you know.”

He smelled, vaguely. His clothes were the same as they had been a week ago.

“Onto us for what?”

“They want what you have. Me, I’m collateral.”

“You’re high aren’t you?”

“I am enlightened.”

“Go home, Resi.”

“Wanna go in on a ten?”

They found a man with a gallon sized sandwich bag of edibles in the poetry section, trading currency for dessert in the maze of bookshelves. Following a precautionary trip to Los Brothers, they returned to Contra’s dorm room with an enough greasy Mexican food to satisfy any and all urges. They sat before a television, opting for the floor over the university desk chairs, noses nearly touching the screen. A film was on depicting Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* set in New Orleans, the fairies replaced with witch doctors. Lysander was strikingly handsome in an androgynous sort of way. Contra dozed off somewhere near the lovers’ return from the forest, or in this straight-to-television adaptation, the bayou. He spent the night wading through the dense marsh, charming crocodiles with a heartfelt rendition of Elliott Smith’s *Either/Or* in its entirety, “Between the Bars” being an obvious favorite among the females.

He was standing under the flickering sign of a Motel Eight on the corner of Dilapidated and Disrepair. The El Camino appeared in a mess of headlights, one pointing far too high and the other far too low, and, maybe it was just the effects of the direct contact with his eyes, but he swore that for a second there was a shape following the vintage automobile, its own shape as

more than a vapor but not quite a solid. There was also the overwhelming sensation of being watched that left just as soon as it was perceived.

“This is gonna cost you big time, mi amigo.”

Contra weighed his wallet with his hand, still pregnant with singles.

“You are lucky to have a friend with this kinda gift, my uncle used to do like you, vanishing whenever he pleased. Ended up smoked outside of a gay bar in Los Angeles, plugged up so much you couldn’t light a match around him—four carne asada tacos, hold the sour cream—I’m just saying there are some strange hombres out there. I would be more careful if I were you.”

Contra awoke to a tongue depressor confusing uvula with tongue and an unpleasant retching sensation, finding himself in the nursing ward with little clue as to how he got there. Nothing was medically wrong with him other than a rash extending from the left leg toward the right buttock, and so he was let go with the setting sun, finding Resin strung out and shirtless in the quad.

“Wanna go in for a dime?”

He showed an obvious lack of sleep, his hygiene still leaving something to be desired.

“Go home, Resi.”

They dragged their toes on chalk-covered sidewalk until approached by a figure that was little more than a shadow and looked no more than thirteen, where money was traded with an awkward handshake. They ducked into a narrow alley between warring bistros, rolling a grape-flavored cigarillo by the light of an adjustable flame.

“Well, regardless, you need not worry for long.”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s quite clear isn’t it? The way things are going, there won’t be a way to disappear whether you want to or not. Soon we will all be tethered to this great machine, shackled via the invisible web of the internet. Grocery lists will be published, lives will be catalogued. Vanishing will be a skill above that of magicians.”

Dr. Laughgood chuckled softly into the folds of his beard, overgrown and unfathomable.

“And suppose what you say is true. . . .”

“The omniscience I speak of isn’t a thing of the future, it exists right now. Circling above you as we speak, collecting data within the confines of its own little Æther. It is everything if we exist in its fabric. We must recognize it the best we can and that starts from within. This harmony—an expanse of everything through nothing and beyond—they will use it. They know where you are, and they will find you.”

Beginning a meal in the dining hall and finishing in The Iron Sight, a bar two towns over, Contra settled the matter of nicotine addiction with the purchase of a pack of Marlboro Red Shorts from a gas station without a name. Smoking cigarette after cigarette and hiding in a telephone booth without a phone from the downpour, he watched the El Camino approach quickly, leaving the surrounding rain a tint of light green. And, was it just him, or did the rain fall behind the car at a strange pace? As if there was another vehicle of equal shape just behind?

“My brother, this is really becoming a habit.”

But the smile on his face let Contra know that he did not really mind.

There was something strange happening to his dorm phone, an extra click echoing each time it was removed from its receiver, a soft purr of white noise that continued even when disconnected. He wrapped it in his comforter, tying the bundle with a dress tie before burying the mess in the bottom of his hamper. But still, lying flat on his back, looking at the kaleidoscope still adhered to the ceiling, he felt he could make out the rattled hum within the pile of soiled laundry, soft, like heavy breath muffled by closed doors.

“I’m sorry about what I said earlier.”

Resin appeared outside of his dorm room. He looked showered, but thin. His eyes rolled constantly as he talked.

“What do you have to apologize for?”

“I just don’t want you to be caught off guard.”

“My god, look at your eyes, have you slept at all these last weeks?”

“Wanna do a ten sack?”

“Jesus, Resin.”

“You can just give me three for now, I’ll cover the difference.”

“...”

“Alright, I have it for now, but you owe me later.”

They sat in a living room that confused its heritage, South American drums fornicating with masks that screamed Africa, huffing at the bloated balloon just removed from a vaporizer of intimidating size. Shapes danced in the periphery of his eyes, and Contra moved to the upright piano, playing a mess of a melody in the key of C, alternating octaves like after-dinner mints, each note cutting the sharpness of the last before it ceased, the sustain pedal pressed deep into hardwood of the floor.

The map had vanished as it had appeared, only the corners left behind, held tight to the plaster with an unreasonable amount of duct tape. Still, when sleep began to make its way across the dense growth of his conscious, he could make it out. The map reconstructed from memory, the countless hours spent staring without answer providing a perfect projection.

The sky dipped convex, red and angry in the late afternoon. Strolling along the bank of a field of corn or beans, Contra walked slowly, braiding blades of grass he picked from irregular patches that lined the road. The El Camino appeared in the distance. He let out a low whistle which was returned somewhere across the ocean of crops.

Karlos leaned over to unlock the door a grin larger enough to show a gold bicuspid flashing in the shallow light.

“Amigo, this is the end.”

He climbed in, measuring the wallet in his grip, which seemed to have gained mass.

“Sufficient for the day is its own trouble,” he said.

“Brother, I am a practicing Catholic,” pointing to a small crucifix hanging from the rearview mirror, “We trade more than words.”



The neon lights of the Taqueria burned bright ahead. The windows were down. He played with a lighter painted to look like a football. The wind continually overcame the gentle flame, extinguishing it at its source.



# Chased by Loss

By Brandon L. Nizzio  
Western Illinois University

*Living.* A variation of the word alive. If I say it enough maybe it will make sense. Maybe its meaning will jump out at me like my father used to when I opened the front door, coming home from school. I remember the day my mother told me that he had cancer. She didn't sit me down like you see in some over-played soap opera or whisper it in a choked up, tearful voice. She said it as if it were something I should have already known. I was getting ready to go storm chasing and wearing nearly the exact outfit that I'm wearing now, only the jeans were different. I threw them out after riding through heavy mud on my prized Honda Xr 250. But the shirt was the same. It's black with Metallica emblazoned in ominously jagged white letters across the front. I like how the black color matches my hair and brings the darkness out of my brown eyes. If it weren't uncomfortable I'd grow a beard to match, but I guess my goatee is good enough. The beat up raggedy sound of Joe's ancient Camaro is nearing my driveway so I guess I'd better check the Doppler again.

The atmosphere is all kinds of fucked up and the air is the heaviest I've felt since I've started chasing three years ago. My mom is walking in just as I'm pulling my phone off the charger and says "You're chasing today, aren't you Kaleb?" in a scolding voice before frowning. "Yes, I am. Problem?" I say. I didn't say it as meanly as she took it, but she's giving me a nasty glare as if I did something wrong. She asks why I'm wearing my helmet so I tell her. "I'm taking the bike. Joe's leading with the car and I'm following. The bike's more maneuverable in the fields. C'mon, you don't expect Joe to drive his Camaro through Oklahoma cornfields do you? If you want to wipe someone's nose then have another baby." It pisses me off when she acts like I'm ten. Out the door I go. I hit the bike's ignition and it jumps to life with the same roar of my first tornado, only less violent. The bike was purchased by my sister, Stephany, after she won a two million dollar lotto and was the last thing she ever gave me before taking off to somewhere in Florida, never to return. At least, she never has yet. Two long country roads after leaving my house, Joe points to his left at a pothole filled road lined with heavy brush and tall trees. I smile in admiration of his ballsy decision. Taking a road with an obstructed view is asking for trouble when a tornado of violent, possibly EF3 strength or greater, is imminent. I'm drunk with excitement. I round the corner and see a rope funnel has already touched ground. As I trail off into the neighboring field Joe's wearing a face of complete confusion; he wasn't expecting this shit. But I don't give a damn. This one's mine and mine alone. He'll understand later. They'll all understand.

With all of the mud splashing up in my face I'm beginning to regret leaving the pavement. My bike's bogging down and it's becoming harder to see how close the damn thing is now. All I know is that it's in the vicinity of the field across from this one and I don't want to lose it. Shit, I just realized that's no longer a problem since the wind has changed direction. It's



coming straight at me. Fuck, my bike is bogged down in the mud and it won't budge. Now I understand. It's a shame that it might be too late.



# Leopard is Not a Color

By Amy Fogarty  
Western Illinois University

“Amy, please get this for me. I need this,” she moaned as she hugged her stomach in pain. “I’m dying.”

I got up off the couch and stopped watching TV. I was tired from my long day at work and frustrated with my grandma’s complaining about this damn medicine that would do her no good. I slipped on my worn brown flip-flops and walked into the next room to grab the key to the Jeep and my wallet.

“Take my credit card to pay for it. It would be in the same aisle as the feminine needs would be. Or at least that’s where Aunt Marcy said it would be.”

“I can get it for you,” I snapped back. I looked back at her before leaving. Her white hair was frizzing out beneath the leopard printed clips. She hadn’t gotten out of her satin teal nightgown for a few days; she really wasn’t doing well at all.

“Amy, please don’t be mad at me.”

“Just because you made peace with the fact you’re dying, doesn’t mean I’m ok with it,” my voice shook as I tried to fight back the tears. I slammed the door shut.

\*\*\*

I sat on my bed in front of the mirror staring blankly at my reflection. I took the next strand of hair and twisted it around and around the curling wand. The thought of that last fight stuck out in my mind; it just kept replaying itself over and over. I let the strand fall and it landed next to the other curled pieces of long, blond hair. *She always liked my hair curled and done nice*, I thought to myself, *it’s the least I could do for her today*. I continued this process for the next several minutes, taking strand by strand and making sure each piece was perfectly curled. There was a knock at the door.

“Just checking to make sure you’re up, but I can see you’re almost ready.” It was my dad. He just finished shaving his beard and the top of his head because he had shaving cream on the tip of his earlobe. “It’s only 12, Amy. We don’t have to be there for another couple of hours.”

I picked up the next strand of straight hair to be twirled around the wand. My dad stayed in the doorway for another moment, fixing on what to say. “You alright kiddo?” Is what he managed to utter. He knew my answer and knew the question did no justice. He wanted to be there for me any way possible, and I understood that.

“Yeah-huh.”

He left the room completely. When my hair was all curled I took a few pieces from the front and pinned them back with bobby pins. I looked at myself in the mirror, and took them out. I pulled out a black headband that had a plastic flower on one side of it that sparkled in the light. I pushed my hair back with the headband and contemplated a few seconds with how it looked



before I took that out also. *She hated when anyone had hair covering their eyes.* I decided to pin my bangs to the side.

I sat back on the bed. My eyes filled with tears. I took deep, even breaths in and out to calm down, to try and stop the tears from flowing. The pain was too deep to just shrug off. *Just get it out now so you can put on the makeup and fake smile.*

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“Amy wake up, they think it’s time,” Megan, my sister, said as she sprung up from the bed we shared. I got to my feet as fast as I could and ran down the hall. I knocked on my mom and dad’s bedroom door and turned on the light.

“Aunt Mel thinks it’s time.” My mom instantly jumped up. It was evident she hadn’t been asleep. We made our way down the stairs into the bedroom. My two cousins, sisters, uncle and aunt were all around the bed.

“Hey Mick, I don’t know, she just started to do gasping sounds. The sounds they warned us it would be like,” my Aunt Melody said, her voice quiet and shaking.

“I just left from being down here not even thirty minutes ago. This just happened?” My mom looked exhausted. Neither she nor her aunt got much sleep in the past ten days.

I leaned against the old, paint chipped door frame, with tears streaming down my face. The moment we all knew was coming had finally arrived. I watched as my mom made her way to the bedside. I hugged my arms around my frail body to try and stop the shaking, but couldn’t. The moment was too much to grasp, it was too overwhelming.

“I can barely make out her pulse.”

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I opened my eyes. *Everyone will be over soon. Get ready.* I got up and leaned over the dresser so my face was inches from the mirror that was attached to the back. My elbows were propped on the top of the dresser, and my head lay in my hands. The mirror fogged with every exhale I made. I looked at myself intently examining everything. My eyes were sea foam green from the crying. Usually they were deep green with a sparkle of blue to them, but they lighten when upset. I poked at the bags that formed underneath my eyes. The past three nights consisted of crying, which left them to be pink and puffy.

Red blotches had formed all around my face from the recent crying session. *I need a lot of make up to cover up this mess.* I pumped a big blob of Revlon Foam foundation into my palm and began applying the makeup as evenly as possible. I looked in the mirror, admiring the job, but shook with disappointment. There was no way I could get rid of the puffiness around my eyes.

I leaned back against the king bed and fell on the purple silk comforter. *There is no way you are going to get this day over with if you can’t even get ready for it. I just wish I could feel, see, hear her again.* The rush of tears began to develop again. I choked them back. A sharp pain occurred in the back of my throat.



I leaned over on my side and pulled open a drawer which held old birthday cards. “Granddaughter, over the years you’ve become an amazing young woman—confident, independent, and full of love for your family and friends. . . .” I took a deep breath and ran my finger over the front of the card. The corner of my thin lips began to curl up in a small smile. “Happy Birthday, Granddaughter, with Love,” read the inside of the card. “God Bless you and be with you always.” This time I couldn’t hold back the throbbing in my throat. The tears splashed down on the opened card. “You’ll never know how much I love you and miss you.” The tears rolled down my face and left traces in my makeup, slowly washing it away little by little. “All my prayers forever. Gram.”

I closed my eyes and drifted into sleep to the sounds Emile Pandolfi beautifully created on the piano. Megan woke me up when she came into the room to get ready. I got up and looked in the mirror again. Tear marks had stained my cheeks. I didn’t bother to wash my face; instead I just reapplied the makeup.

“Are you doing purple eye shadow?” I asked Megan.

“I only have dark purple. Why? Are you?” she answered.

“I think so,” I said as I dazed at myself. I turned to my makeup bag and ruffled through all the different useless amounts of makeup I had. I finally found a shade of purple to put on top of my puffy lids. My eyelids were then covered with purple and I swiped eyeliner against the bridge of my lashes.

“Can I borrow your mascara? I don’t have waterproof.”

I handed the orange tube of CoverGirl—water resistant—mascara to Megan. *I can get through this day.* I walked out of the bedroom to the bathroom down the hall where I slipped on the charcoal colored dress and zippered it along the side of my ribs. *I can get through this day.* I returned to the bedroom and picked up a necklace. It was one that displayed the birthstone in tiny little cubic zirconia diamonds. Mine was pink and it was of an angel. My grandma gave it to me.

“Do you think Erin is right? That it’s kind of morbid that we are getting too dressed up and nice looking?” I asked.

“Maybe, but it’s for Grandma. She deserves the best.”

I took the mascara back and began applying it. “This is as good as it’s going to get,” I said aloud. I wrapped a tiny, old, vintage purple belt around my waist. I slipped on the new, purple, suede heels, and pinned “Pray” on the right side of my chest. It was a pin that belonged to her.

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Moans came from my grandma. Megan laid next to her in the bed. She was holding on to my grandma’s wrinkled, shriveled hand. In-between sobs Megan tried to speak to her, to tell her we all loved her. I was constantly rubbing my red face from tears and watery snot that began to drip from my nose. It felt like my lungs started to close and one hundred pounds pressed down on my chest. I tried to inhale and exhale as quietly as I could, but failed. A vein appeared above my left eyebrow, and the more I cried the bigger it got. I had to breathe through my mouth



because my nose filled with liquid snot—there was no room for air to circulate in it. I just wanted it to be over. I wanted her to be free of the pain.

“It’s alright mom, you go be with dad. Go, be free. We love you,” my mom managed to say before it was too late. A moment or two passed, and then with one last gasp, she was gone.

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“Everyone, Amy wrote something to share today, so if you would all let her have the room.”

I stood up from my seat and took the folded paper from Megan’s purse. I took a deep breath as I looked around at my family and flashed them a fake smile and began.

“I’ll Be Seeing You. It is said that time is the greatest gift of all, but time isn’t so grand when it seems to stall. I can remember back to all our times spent together, like all the Saturdays we shopped, no matter what the weather.” I paused as the room laughed at the joke.

“I often complained about wasted time at the Dr.’s appointment, but time I missed without you is a bigger disappointment. I loved the days of listening to your music play, singing together the words of Billie Holiday. I’ll be seeing you, in all the old familiar places that this heart of mine embraces, all day through. You were the greatest mom and grandma one could ask for, through the crazy, all the drama and you never once swore. All the birthdays, graduations, celebrations and recitals too, we always could depend on one person there for us.” I looked up from the paper, tears filled my eyes, and saw my brother crying, “that person, you.”

“And it was you who gave me something special.” I had to pause again. “It is because of you I dance.” My hands shook and my eyelids were heavy. My eyelashes clumped together with mascara that ran down the corners of my eyes. “If I had the opportunity to jitterbug with you once more, I’d leap at that chance.” My breathing kept getting heavier and heavier. “You always listened and were understanding and gave great advice, and so full of love you put your family first, you never thought twice. I’ll be seeing you in every lovely summer’s day; in everything that’s light and gay. I’ll always think of you that way.

“You were so giving and generous, sensitive and selfless; there is not one person about who amounts to your kindness. God blessed us with your presence, an Angel of his own, teaching us about Him, from your preaching we’ve grown. So often moments pass us by so quickly yet so slow, it is now this time to say farewell, but I don’t want to let go. We must be grateful for the time we had and try not to feel blue, for this is not a goodbye, but instead an ‘I’ll be seeing you.’ I’ll find you in the morning sun and when the night is new, I’ll be looking at the moon, but I’ll be seeing you.”



# Emotionless Byrd

By Lorin Blackburn  
Missouri Valley College

Kathy takes a deep breath pulling herself from the dream, the pain, the sorrow, the run. She has had the same dream for the past four months, since the night she watched the ambulance take away her boyfriend's body. She was too late. She always is. She shakes her head, twists and turns, trying to push out the feeling of guilt. He shouldn't have been on the docks that night. That cold Baltimore night. She was the one who needed the hit, the speed, the rush, not Alec, not him, he was just a foolish boy in love with a screwed up girl. Kathy put her feet on the floor, shaking. Her feet could still feel the cool asphalt as she ran through the streets trying to get there in time. She was just trying to save him once she heard the plans that night. She could still see the blood dripping from the six holes in his back. Alec, she had loved him, she saw his last breath, felt the bullets go through, as if they were one. She wanted to cut again, cut or smoke, those seemed like the best solutions to everything. They weren't solutions though, it did not solve anything. All it did was stir questions, questions she couldn't handle. Kathy goes to the bathroom and looks at herself through a shard of glass. She punched the mirror a week ago, she did not like what she saw, the mated hair, red eyes, hard expressionless face, the bruise on her knuckles is still there. She brushes her teeth, pulls on jeans, a black shirt, and Alec's gray hoodie, takes a deep breath and starts another day as emotionless Kathy Byrd.

School, hallways, people, crowded mess. No place without a memory of a caress. Emotionless, she walked room to room, class to class, trying not to feel the gloom. That locker over yonder there, where Alec had kissed her long blond hair, she smiled then filled with guilt, straightening she looked ahead blocking the past and her thought of dread behind a tight mask. Jeanne Sanders walked by, once her best friend. Kathy thought nothing as she passed, once they had been so close they knew each other's thoughts, finished each other's sentences, and felt each other bleed. She knew everything until she first felt the rush, once she tasted it, it grabbed a hold of her and never gave up, she could blame Alec's brother Jackson, but there is no shed of guilt, it was all her, the blame resided on her shoulders. At that party she threw away everything, her love, her friends, and her life. With one drag her life dissipated away into a cold hue.



# *Hiraeth*

## or

# A Longing for an Imaginary Home

By Kristen Bird-Sheldon  
Purdue University North Central

Anthracite coal is so black that, like gasoline on a puddle, it reflects rainbows. Growing up along the Susquehanna River in Northeastern Pennsylvania, there was not much for a kid who saw rainbows in rocks to do. I picked up a piece of what looked like shiny black rainbow stone, not because it was useful, but because it was beautiful. Kids do things like that—they find pieces of useful and bring out beauty. Walking along the river, I created stories that the river and the valley it ran through, and the beautiful rocks that littered the riverbank were my imaginary home.

As a child I believed that coal—with enough pressure and heat—formed diamond. I believed it when I was told that it was coal that made Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania *The Diamond City*. I learned later that diamonds are not made from coal, and that *The Diamond City* was built on the backs of men and boys who descended into the earth in order to put food on their tables. In the end these men and boys wound up filling other people's pockets while they themselves went with empty wallets and empty bellies.

Coal mining is dirty and dangerous. For thousands of people in Northeastern Pennsylvania during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was honest work, and that was all that most of them wanted. The names of some of these men are on a handful of decaying mining certificates that I purchased at a thrift shop many years ago. The oldest of these certificates reads:

*Certificate of Registration of Sub-Board No. 1*

*To whom it may concern:*

*This is to certify that John J. Benson of Carbondale, Pa produced satisfactory proofs to the "Miners Examining Board," of the First Inspection District, in the Anthracite Coal Regions of Pennsylvania, that he was actually engaged as a miner in an Anthracite Mine in Pennsylvania at the time of the passage of the Act of Assembly of 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1889, entitled "An Act to provide for the Examination of Miners in the Anthracite Region of this Commonwealth, &c.," and is duly registered as such. Witness the hands of one of the Sub-Committees of said Board at Carbondale, Pa., this 4 day of April 1892.*

After one hundred and twenty-two years this certificate is yellow and faded. It has been folded, and refolded so many times that I am afraid that it will fall apart in my hands. On the page under the seal of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are the signatures of Thomas Jay, David M.



Nayare, and Henry Collins. Every one of these men is dead, and chances are, every one of their children, and their children's children are, too.

So why do I keep this paper safe? I do this because without this document John J. Benson was not a miner. I do this because without this document, yellow and crumbling in my hands, it did not matter that, day in and day out, John J. Benson stooped beneath the breasts of the earth and pulled coal from its veins. I do this because without this document it did not matter that he left the crusts of his sandwiches for the birds because the bread was covered in coal dust. I do this because without this certificate, John J. Benson no longer exists.

Did people call him Jack? Was he short? Did he make it out of the mines in one piece? Did he have a family? A home? I come from a family of anthracite miners. My forefathers mined and each morning these men descended into the earth's crust—slowly, cautiously—blackening their faces, and fingers, and lungs, and they tapped the veins of the earth. The boys, some as young as eight, worked on the breakers. Many of them never went to school because their meager income was necessary to their homes. From morning until night, these boys sat on wooden chairs removing impurities from coal their families could not afford to burn. The shards were sharp, and the rocks moved so quickly that many lost fingers, some lost limbs, and all lost their childhood. I wonder if John started as a breaker boy.

My great-grandfather started as a breaker boy. He came over from Ireland, his family longing for a place to call home as they fled far away from the home they knew. Eventually he grew up, had a family, and died beneath the ground. I know little more about my great-grandfather than I know about John J. Benson. What I do know, I can list with little trouble. I know his name: Thomas Burke. I know what he did for a living: Miner, acquainted with gas, skilled with dynamite. I know his future: Killed in a mine explosion. He left behind eight children, two girls and six boys, one of which would not be born until months after the empty casket was lowered into the ground. There was no body in the casket; Thomas Burke had been blown to pieces.

My great-grandmother was accustomed to picking up the pieces, I suppose. Her family was also searching for a home where they not only could survive, but where they could thrive in a new land full of opportunity. Hilda was born en-route to the United States from Ireland during *an Gorta Mór*—The Great Hunger—and by the time she was thirty she had given birth to twelve children. When influenza took four of them before their second birthdays, she buried them in Sacred Heart Cemetery on Scotch Hill.

My great-grandmother managed to go on after the deaths of her children and husband. She took in wash, and she cleaned houses for the mine bosses. Educating all of her children was vitally important to Hilda, but in this land of opportunity so far from a home that had never really been hers, there was not enough money or food for that luxury. Three of her older boys dropped out of school after the fifth grade. They all went to work in the mines. Her eldest daughter left school after the seventh grade and went to work in the lace mill. One son went to college, and became a superintendent of schools in New Jersey. My grandmother, my mother's mother,



finished high school and went on to nursing school—and at thirty-eight she was the only child to have children of her own.

I am a child of one of those children. I grew up in the same valley. I was enchanted by the beauty of the black rainbow rock. I walked along the same river that transported the coal that my forefathers died wrestling from the ground. I visited the graves of the people who had lost so much. When my parents died, I was twenty one. I did what my family has always done—I picked up the pieces and made myself whole. I left that valley, and the graves, and the coal that meant life and death to my ancestors because, in the end, the Diamond City became dull and dirty.

There are times when I think that place haunts me. Times when I take my memory of *The Diamond City* and I polish it to a near perfect shine. Times when I feel compelled to take my own children back to the valley: to walk the river, to harvest the beautiful black rock, to visit the graves, to connect with the ghosts of my past. But, it is not that place that haunts me; there is nothing left of it. What haunts me is the lingering sense of longing for my imaginary home.





# Poetry



# The Sneering Demons

By Ryan Arciero  
Lewis University

Their words and their voices shriek from the page.  
“Outcast!” they cry. “Failure! And exile!”  
The demons sneer, a cacophony of laughter, cruel and cold  
to the ears as they circle about my head.

They pick at me like a scab, with their long sharp nails  
taunting as my tears turn their words into blood,  
those voices spoken from the blackness of small hearts  
that only I can see and hear and feel.

The demons let their jeers fly, again and again,  
but I harden my soul so their burning arrows rebound  
back at them, though I do not deny their curses sometimes  
threaten my armor to the point of breaking in two.

At night their eyes haunt me in my sleep —  
the ink mixed with poison I blame on bad thoughts,  
but the truth of the matter is these demons  
are ones that I have created myself.

I cast them away, those doubts, as I would yesterday’s scraps.  
Still they return, laughing and jeering, picking and prying,  
in stout refusal of the day to come, of a hope to steal their sneers,  
when all they want from me is to bow down in fear.

Yet I shall not falter, I shall not fall. Words are only words —  
like a shadow in the mirror as you are walking away.  
The past is the past, and there it shall remain,  
for I believe that tomorrow will be a beautiful sunrise.



# Hill

By Jeannette Kirchner  
Olivet Nazarene University  
Alumni Epsilon Chapter

Hiking through wild bloom  
Going from girl to woman  
In a summer's day



# This Old House

By Amy Fogarty  
Western Illinois University

Fall of '77 months after the vows were exchanged  
the duo bought a little home to spend their lives.  
As the family grew, thoughts of a bigger place were brought up.  
Not wanting to leave her family the wife refused; as did his boy and two girls.

To settle in happiness expansion was the solution.  
Jerry encouraged his brother to make it a project for themselves.  
The expansion started October of 1990 to make the house  
bigger for the growing family, which would continue to grow.  
He found out later that year, to expect his forth.

Growing up in a house of hammers and drills,  
The days were interesting, with multiple men walking  
in and out, shooting the shit, singing the oldies and curse words  
flowing out of their mouths without thinking twice about the little ones.  
Jerry, Beaver, Tim, Tim Jr., Frank, Kevin, Brian, Gary, Mike, Glen, Sharron, Mike, Bill and  
the husband  
all worked hard. The main three being Jerry, Beaver and the husband.  
His boy watched and thrived to be a part of the men's work.

The enclosed porch was the first to go, tearing off the walls  
windows and floors. The roof supported only by wooden pillars.  
The men worked on building the new porch; open for many  
to sit around and talk on it, which many of them did on the job.  
Throwing back beers and leaving the cans underneath still to  
be found there to this day. Teddy stained it all.  
Simple at best, the challenge came with the addition.

The roof was tore off, and expanded the house with four  
joyces across the floor, and they boxed it in, built the outside  
walls and enclosed it for the coming winter. Then the roof  
was constructed and they sheeted the whole house with plywood,  
and constructed the addition for no water leakage. They worked  
afternoons, evenings and weekends off work. Sometimes they worked



through the night where the light given from the moon wasn't enough. They spent days to weeks to months up in this addition getting the rooms figured out. Where to build the walls, to get the ceilings lined up, and electricity for the new upstairs. Sheet rock was laid and taped all the joints in place, and the stairs were built in so the men no longer had to climb the ladder that was transportation of up and down for them. The kids got to paint their own rooms and Bill laid down the carpet.

But this house wasn't finished, it wasn't close to done. Between the years of 93-94 the enclosed back porch was torn down. All of it stripped and so these men extended it to make a bigger kitchen. More electric work was done by Glen and wind barriers put in, and siding around the house was continued to be put on. The roof was made over this extension.

'95 rolled around and Beaver the best friend who was close and dear to the husband passed. He didn't get to see the newly painted living room and stairs.

The house was well put together but not finished. The bathroom reconstruction didn't happen til years later, and changes to each of the rooms happened years past.

Many of the men who originally worked on it, didn't get to see the finish of the house. Little do they know, the house still isn't finished, for they may laugh down at him from above to see he still lives in the shithole he calls home, the home that he raised his family in of love.



# The Miners

By Ryan Arciero  
Lewis University

I was never the child who liked to dig  
in those deep places, afraid to be called  
a brain spelunker, with its entwined lobes  
brushing past cobwebs and grime,  
only to gaze into dark chasms of  
fear and peril and possibility.

Nor was I the one to venture onto paths  
that hadn't been explored fully before,  
for behind flowers of stalks, petals,  
sepals, pistils, and sweet-smelling stamens  
may be thorns, bound in pin-pricked ersatz  
just to sting you on your thumb.

No, I was the boy who gathered words,  
in lines and rows, bouquets and bunches,  
arrangements of this lovely language —  
not to tell you who I was,  
but to tell you who I wasn't.

Because to explain myself, the I, the me  
took a wisdom, an understanding even,  
I was far too young and far too scared  
to discover, whether it be in a distant field  
or a barrow-down a tad dim for delving.

Until they came, the ore miners  
of paper and ink and wrapping —  
with lights twinkling on foreheads  
and their eyes bright shining things  
like rare jewels, the books that taught  
the child how to braid coarse words  
into a life-bearing rope.



He followed in their footsteps, in their stories  
when at last he was ready to leap through the  
pastures and grottoes that had held him at bay.

And they taught this boy to say:

“I am the one who wields the bungee cord,  
the scaler of rock walls and green stems,  
no longer caught between the dangle  
but kicking off to land on solid ground,  
planted firmly on my own two feet.”



## Photo Credits

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