Firing the soul

The articles in this month’s issue—about medical students writing musicals and learning piano, cancer survivors finding their voice in reflective writing and an occupational medicine doctor writing screenplays—should have provided more than enough creative spark for me to generate this editor’s note. Yet my fingers hovered impotently above the keyboard waiting for the muse to strike. I needed something to stoke the dying embers, to help me reclaim my writing roots. So I went to Asheville, North Carolina.

I had never been there but knew it was the birthplace of Thomas Wolfe, who was formative in my writing youth. During college as I discovered a love of language and the printed word, I found *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe’s classic coming-of-age novel set in the fictional town of Altamount, which was a thinly disguised model of Asheville, and featuring hero Eugene Gant, Wolfe’s doppelganger. Wolfe’s lush, poetic prose drew me in from the first page: “The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cutpurse went unhung. Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years.” Ever since reading that, I’ve tried to find the poetry in my prose.

So I tucked my copy of *Look Homeward, Angel* under my arm and headed for Asheville, a mecca not just for Thomas Wolfe fans but for artisans of all types. The first stop had to be Wolfe’s home, a picturesque yellow frame house where Eugene Gant (aka Thomas Wolfe) endured the drunken tirades of his tombstone-carving father.

Today Asheville claims Wolfe as its native son; but it didn’t always. So thinly did Wolfe cloak Altamount and its inhabitants and so brazenly did he paint their peculiarities and peccadillos that he was rejected by his fellow Ashevillians for years after the publication of *LHA*, prompting him to title his next novel, *You Can’t Go Home Again*.

The raw energy of Wolfe’s life and his writing seem to have fueled the creative explosion that Asheville has enjoyed during the 70 years since his death. In downtown shops and old warehouses along the river, artisans display colorful pottery crafted from local clays and hand-carved bowls hewn out of the panoply of woods available from the North Carolina forests. Bluegrass tunes waft from quaint eateries and raucous bars. Each block finds another Art Deco or arts and craft architectural gem. Like a potter’s kiln, Asheville fires the souls of its artists and its very air inspires.

Finding inspiration around you is what it takes to keep creativity in your life and what’s featured in this month’s *Minnesota Medicine*. Whether you’re pouring lattes at Starbucks or removing gallbladders in the OR, seeing the beauty and hearing the song around you will keep your fires stoked. It’s a force that you can find on travels, but you don’t really need to bring it back in your suitcase. It never really leaves you.

Now I can go home again. MM

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