

2020 Issue 1 | Free

SPARK

The magazine of Humanities Washington.

*How the humanities
help us through crises*

ALSO INSIDE:

- » *The race gap in classroom discipline*
- » *When medical school teaches song lyrics*

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Spark is a publication of nonprofit Humanities Washington, our state's affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. At community venues across Washington, we hold hundreds of free events each year where scholars, authors, artists, and activists discuss everything from Washington State history to current social issues.

Published in the spring and fall each year, *Spark* is a free magazine based on those conversations. It's available at cultural organizations throughout the state, or you can have *Spark* delivered for free to your door by signing up at humanities.org.

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INSIDE

USING THE HUMANITIES TO HELP HEAL
by E.J. Iannelli 4-6

THE DISCIPLINE GAP
by Omari Amili and Daudi Abe 7-10

NEWS
from Humanities Washington 11

HOW THE HUMANITIES HELP US
THROUGH CRISES
by Various authors 12-19

GOOD STEAK
by Sharma Shields 20-24

WOODY GUTHRIE IN WASHINGTON
by Greg Vandy with Daniel Person 25-29

HUMANITIES WASHINGTON
Staff & Programs 30-31

Humanities Washington is an organization that loves words, but I am having a hard time finding mine at the moment.

In only a few months our reality has shifted dramatically. Well over 150,000 are dead from a virus no one had heard of nine months ago, and we now live with physical distancing measures that have fundamentally reshaped our daily lives and interactions with one another. The grief and anger over the senseless murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless other Black men and women at the hands of police are driving widespread protests, the likes of which our country has never seen before. These recent events would be exceedingly difficult if they were happening at different points in time, but they are happening concurrently—and exacerbating and illuminating inequities.

Though it can be hard to find the words to articulate the experience and feeling of the current moment, the words of others can help us feel less alone. There is great value in slowing down and taking time to listen to a variety of perspectives and experiences.

The humanities provide wonderful opportunities to create new connections and deepen existing ones. Context that includes a variety of perspectives and critical thinking skills can help us make sense of our current situation, and help us find equitable paths

forward. In these moments, I find that a variety of individual voices are often the most helpful.

In this issue, we asked a dozen writers from diverse communities around the state to tell us how the humanities can help us, as communities and individuals, navigate crises. We gave them carte blanche to respond in whatever way felt most authentic and appropriate to them. The result is a variety of responses that showcase the power of storytelling, artistic expression, history, and language to help each of us and our communities move through crises.

All too often our routines cause us to focus on what's right in front of us and ignore larger, systemic problems. One benefit of crises is that they can disrupt the status quo so we can make long-term gains. This is especially true when we can overcome our fear and explore our mutual vulnerability. The humanities give us reason for hope and can help us to heal.



With sincere appreciation,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Julie".

Julie Ziegler
Chief Executive Officer
Humanities Washington

USING THE HUMANITIES TO HELP HEAL

A hospital in Spokane is using literature, poetry, music, and art to build better doctors.

By E.J. Iannelli



▲ Darryl Potyk discusses literature with medical students and residents at a morning meeting. | Photo from 2016 taken by Young Kwak/The Inlander

There's a famous passage in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* that ruminates on the existence of monsters. Not just the grotesque physical monster that we might associate with horror films and ghost stories, but the "inner monster," the "malformed soul" who, like his fictional antagonist Cathy Ames, is entirely without conscience or principle.

The first time Travis Hughes encountered this passage was immediately before one of his daily patient rounds as a medical resident at Spokane's Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center. That might seem like an unusual moment to start thumbing through the classic novels of American literature. But this was actually a formal, albeit casual, session called A Daily Dose of the Humanities.

"Daily Dose" is an ongoing educational initiative that's part of the Providence Internal Medicine Residency program, and is designed to enrich the curriculum at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Spokane. During these regular ten- to fifteen-minute morning gatherings, medical students and residents like Hughes as well as their mentors are invited to share a work of visual art, music, or literature with the larger group. They then take the remaining time to briefly discuss and reflect on it.

The reading from *East of Eden* and the conversation that followed left a lasting impression on Hughes, now in his third year of the Internal Medicine Residency postgrad program. He thought about Cathy Ames and how she actively used her lack of humanity to, in the words of Steinbeck's narrator, "make a painful and bewildering stir in her world."

"She is just described as the truest form of evil, mostly because she has no emotional connection to other people. She feels no remorse and very little empathy," he says.

"That has always stayed with me—that I shouldn't lose touch with my emotions."

The risk of that happening among medical professionals is very real. The pressures of the job have always required a certain degree of clinical detachment, or else the outcomes—both good and bad—would result in a constant rollercoaster of emotional extremes. That wouldn't just be exhausting to the point of premature burnout. It could also compromise their ability to diagnose and treat patients effectively.

More recently, the adoption of electronic medical record (EMR) software has sterilized the emotional connection between medical professionals and their patients. Almost anyone who has visited a doctor's office in the past decade will be familiar with how computer-mediated checkups and consultations have become. Via their screens, assistants, nurses, and physicians are all able to access a common database of digital patient information, which can improve the efficiency and accuracy of their care.

At the same time, EMR software also has the potential to reduce living, breathing, hurting patients to cold, hard data. Or quantifiable units that have to be checked off like a to-do list.

A Daily Dose of the Humanities arose in 2014 as a way to counter these two dynamics. It was the brainchild of Dr. Darryl Potyk, now chief for medical education at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Spokane. He was quickly joined by Dr. Judy Swanson, the school's internal medicine clerkship director. Both sit on the faculty of the Providence Internal Medicine Residency.

"The main thing that sparked this was our interest in the humanities and medicine," Potyk says, "and for many people, the humanities and medicine is a big, overwhelming topic. How

do we integrate the arts into the sciences? And how do we do that in a formalized way? So we came up with this idea of just sharing the things we're interested in."

Poty's soft spot is for music. Swanson's is for visual art. And Dr. Judy Benson, who heads Providence's Internal Medicine Residency program, completes their collegial trinity with her love of the written word.

In one of the earliest trials of the Daily Dose program, Potyk played a pop song for the group, which typically consists of an attending physician, medical residents, and medical students. Beyond his own personal affinity for music, he thought it offered a "pretty low bar" in terms of its accessibility.

"Everybody just seemed to love it," he says. The response was so encouraging that Daily Dose quickly became a regular part of the curriculum. Potyk has since gone on to share songs by Neil Young, Neko Case, R.E.M., and many other bands. One track by the X Ambassadors, "Renegades," stands out to him because of the way it combined sight and sound.

"You listen to the song, and then you watch the video, which is all about disabled people being renegades and not letting their disabilities define them. It's super cool, super inspiring, and as we think about patients, it's a good reminder that nobody ever asked to be sick. They have to deal with whatever cards they're dealt in whatever way they can."

Not all of the shared art is meant to have such a direct message. For some Daily Dose sessions, simply taking the time to focus on something that straddles the personal and the professional worlds can be like a meditative act.

"It gives us a breath of fresh air before we have to dive into what we have to get done for the day," says Potyk. "It's like, let's just take ten minutes and cleanse our brains and think about this more holistically. In many ways, it helps center us and remind us why we went into medicine and why we're doing the things that we do."

In the era of COVID-19, reminders like that can be all the more vital. Swanson says that the pandemic has become an obvious point of concern for many of the residents, and that's carried over into what they choose to discuss during Daily Dose. Just recently, a student bought in a painting that depicted a medieval surgery in which a physician was lancing a plague bubo.

“ It puts my heart and mind in a more generous, empathetic position. And it makes me think about what life is like as a patient. I'm not just seeing a lab value, I'm seeing a person who's similar to me. ”

“You had the older physician advising the younger physician, totally intent on what he was doing,” she says. “And there were a lot of people in the background, hovering around, trying to see what was going on. It was interesting to see that there were a lot of the same reactions. And, of course, there was no personal protective equipment.”

In Swanson's opinion, the historical parallels and the awareness of modern medical advances “helped to relieve some anxiety” toward COVID-19 among the group.

One of her favorite shared paintings is one that has nothing to do with science, like Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768), or even medicine, like Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). It's Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (circa 1560). What makes Bruegel's rendition of this legend so memorable is that Icarus, famed for flying too close to the sun with wings made of feathers and wax, is reduced to two tiny legs poking out of the ocean.

To Swanson, this offered a dual lesson on the need for both humility and observation.

“The resident who brought it said, ‘Here we are, walking down the wards every day, and we have no idea what's going in that patient's room when we aren't there. There are tragedies that occur that we're not aware of.’ We can tell a lot about what's going on with a patient, but with the EMR in place, it's so much easier to go with the scientific data rather than to look at the person in the gown in front of you,” she says.

Along with creating common ground between physician and patient, A Daily Dose of Humanities has also fostered better relationships between the physicians-in-training and their more seasoned counterparts.

“It's what I call a leveler,” Potyk adds. “Medicine and medical training can be so hierarchical. But here there's no hierarchy in

sharing your feelings or your thoughts about a piece of art. And you're truly getting to know your fellow team members in a way that's personal and that may not come about in the course of our daily work.”

Those are exactly the wide-ranging benefits that residents like Hughes have taken from the program.

“I find that I learn not only about shared human experience but also about the people that I work with based on the choices of art that they bring in,” he says. “It puts my heart and mind in a more generous, empathetic position. And it makes me think about what life is like as a patient. I'm not just seeing a lab value, I'm seeing a person who's similar to me.”

Outside organizations have also taken note of the enthusiasm for A Daily Dose of Humanities and its clear anecdotal results. Medical professionals in other states have reached out to Potyk for advice on how to implement similar programs—all with the goal of cultivating nurses and physicians who can instinctively balance compassion and duty.

“It started off as a way for us to integrate the humanities into what we do in a bite-sized way that's also sustainable,” he says. “But it's just been amazing and gratifying to see the residents and students really enjoy what we do.” 

E.J. Iannelli is a freelance writer, editor, and translator based in Spokane. He's a regular contributor to regional newspapers and magazines as well as the “Times Literary Supplement.”

THE DISCIPLINE GAP

How and why teachers punish students can have life-long consequences, especially for Black children.

By **Daudi Abe** and **Omari Amili**



▲ Photo by Sam Bayle/Unsplash

Messenger is a series where two experts with complementary focus areas explore a topic through an online chat.

DAUDI ABE, a professor and author, studies the “discipline gap” in which Black students receive much higher rates of punishment in school than their white counterparts.

OMARI AMILI experienced this gap firsthand. After a difficult public school experience, he served prison time. But he turned his life around by taking college classes, and now speaks about his experience.

Together, they explore how schools get discipline wrong, where that failure can lead, and how college can provide a new start for those incarcerated. The conversation was moderated by Spark editor David Haldeman, and edited for length and clarity.

“

A teacher wouldn't have to explicitly tell Omari or myself that they don't think we are smart or we don't belong in college.

Those implicit messages are sent in classrooms every single day, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not.

”

David: So why don't we start with Daudi. I'm curious about how you came to the subject of the discipline gap. Was it your experience as a teacher? Did you experience examples firsthand?

Daudi: I majored in Econ as an undergrad and literally fell into teaching a third/fourth grade combo class at Zion Preparatory Academy in the early 1990s. Zion was a predominantly African-American preschool–eighth grade private Christian school, first in the Central District, then in the south end. There were great students at Zion, but the open enrollment also meant we would take on more nontraditional students who struggled in other schools and districts.

It was there that I first learned, at least intuitively, about different kinds of discipline, specifically *objective* versus *subjective* forms of discipline. It wasn't until I wrote my dissertation in 2003–2004 that I was able to attach this language to it. Objective includes things like fighting, or weapon or drug possession—things that do not leave much to interpretation. But subjective discipline includes things like “disruptive conduct,” “rule breaking,” and “defiance.” These forms accounted for over 50% of the reasons given by teachers in Seattle schools for the suspensions and expulsions of African-American middle school students.

David: What prompts a teacher to say, “that’s disruptive” and punish accordingly?

Daudi: At Zion I saw firsthand that what constitutes “disruptive conduct” in one classroom is actually considered excited, invested learning in another classroom, depending on the teacher. Teachers go to this in situations of cultural distance between teacher and student.

David: Is this predominately an issue with white teachers misinterpreting behavior? Would more teachers of color help close the gap, or is there something more?

Daudi: Yes and no. Another thing Zion taught me was that being a person of color is not an automatic qualification to be good with diverse classrooms, and vice versa. There are plenty of White teachers who are great with multiracial classrooms. In my view the issue lies in the training, which is why I'm involved in the Academy for Rising Educators, which is a partnership between Seattle Central College and Seattle Public Schools to develop homegrown teaching candidates who center culturally responsive teaching and relationship-based pedagogy in everything they do.

“

I saw firsthand that what constitutes “disruptive conduct” in one classroom is actually considered excited, invested learning in another classroom, depending on the teacher.

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David: Omari, I'd like to ask about your story shortly, but first I'm curious if any of this resonates with your experience in school. You've said that you struggled in school when you were younger. Would the way teachers approached discipline have made a difference?

Omari: It does resonate with my experiences in school. Especially the objective versus subjective discussion. I was always in trouble for “disruptive behavior.” Things like answering a question without raising my hand, getting up out of my seat, and various other behaviors that were rooted in my life experiences and circumstances both in and out of school. Unfortunately, once I got a target on my back and my teachers began to view me through what I believe is a negative lens, all of a sudden I'm constantly getting removed from class or even suspended for behaviors that I watch my peers display on the regular. Things like having someone ask me a question, and when I answer, I'm asked to leave.

I feel like if they recognized that discipline means to teach and not to punish then we all would have been better off. Unfortunately, the system they have to operate within is flawed and it was not built for kids like me. Not my skin color, not from my background, not with the issues that I came along with. They were not properly equipped.

Daudi: That is amazing Omari. I gave this talk up at the Monroe Correctional Complex a few years back, and afterward about a dozen cats from the Black Prisoners Caucus got at me,

talking about how their path to being locked down began exactly with those types of subjective disciplinary issues in school.

Omari: Yeah I don't feel like it's uncommon at all. We are taught from an early age that we are not like everyone else and don't belong with everyone else. "We" being kids who end up under far more scrutiny than their classmates.

Daudi: Indeed. I mean look, when I did my study it was on middle school kids. In the time since, we have research saying Black *preschoolers* are being disproportionately suspended and expelled. I was doing a parent night a year or two ago, and had a Black mother tell me her preschool daughter was suspended from preschool. For what? Wait for it: for not taking a nap. Swear to god. This leads to what a number of the Black Prisoners Caucus guys at Monroe identified with—the concept of "academic self-esteem." How students view themselves as learners. "Am I smart?" "Am I college material?" That kind of academic trauma—and that's what it is, trauma—combined with the messages sent by consistent subjective disciplinary events can eat away at academic self-esteem. A teacher wouldn't have to explicitly tell Omari or myself that they don't think we are smart or we don't belong in college. Those implicit messages are sent in classrooms every single day, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not.

David: Omari, could you give us the overview of your story? What led to your incarceration and how did you become passionate about education? And do you believe that a different educational approach in middle/high school might have helped you avoid prison, or was it just one of a number of factors?

Omari: I came from a background that included drug addiction on my parents' part, chronic instability, homelessness, poverty, foster care, all kinds of trauma, and a lack of positive influences. My family was in survival mode constantly. My values were shaped by all negative influences. I began skipping school around fourth grade, was first expelled from Seattle Public Schools in the sixth grade, dropped out of school permanently around the age of 16. I was incarcerated for a bank fraud scheme that I was involved with between the ages of like 17 and 20. I made hundreds of thousands of dollars and thought I had finally made it, but eventually it caught up to me and I ended up pleading guilty as charged to 30 felonies.

I became passionate about pursuing an education to climb out of my situation of being real young with a lot of felonies and

nothing that makes me attractive to an employer. When I got out of prison I put my GED to use, enrolled in college, and now I have four degrees despite not having that experience of walking across the stage and graduating from high school. It was my personal success in education and the resulting growth that sparked the desire to help other people see similar possibilities for themselves.

Based on my circumstances and the chronic instability, the fact that I attended over 15 schools and got expelled and forced into alternative schools means there was no different approach on my part. The different approach should have been on the part of the public school system, the teachers, the administrators. I should have never been expelled. When I dropped out in the sixth grade, someone should have come looking to re-engage me and not just with threats of the Becca Bill (Washington State's truancy law).

There is nothing a pre-schooler should be able to do to be suspended. That is so silly.

Yes, it was drilled into me that education was not for me at a young age by my experiences in the K-12 system.

David: Daudi, when you say messages of inadequacy are sent by teachers "sometimes intentionally, and sometimes not," it brings the question: What accounts for the gap? Is it racism, overt or subtle? Ignorance of cultural approaches? Something else?

Daudi: I think Omari speaks to a tough reality that exists within these gatekeeper professions like teaching and law enforcement. I do work with both teachers and police officers, and I think there are numerous similarities between the professions. But to both David's point and Omari's experience in professions like these, which have historically problematic outcomes for low income populations and students of color, that history must be taken into account when entering the field in my opinion. So, for example, having your first meaningful interactions with the populations you are serving *after* you have already started the job is being set up to fail. That shit needs to be built into the training from jump street. Sorry. For the curse, not the point...

Omari: Historically we have not been taken into account because this system was designed with our exclusion in mind. This system opened up to us with *Brown vs. Board of Education* and it was not re-modeled or adapted to meet our needs.

David: Omari, what happened in prison that made you pursue education? Was it a person convincing you? Was it a revelation? What made the change?

Omari: Nothing. Prison had nothing to do with me pursuing education and only delayed it.

David: You were out of prison when you pursued an education?

Omari: It was a personal decision based on needing to do something with my life. I didn't start my education until I was out and had trouble finding a job I actually would have wanted. Today there are a lot of programs and people in place to help but I had to be self-driven. There were no re-entry navigators on college campuses or anything when I got out.

David: Given your previous experience feeling rejected by the educational system, were you nervous about returning? What did the school do that helped you embrace education after feeling rejected by it?

Omari: I was released June 2008. I wasn't really nervous but I didn't feel like I belonged. I started out filling gaps from my childhood with math, learning things like the order of operations in math classes that were not for college credit. It took a long time to climb up to college-level math. I felt like an impostor. I felt like my felonies were a major barrier and my options were super limited. The school honestly didn't help, me at all, I never tapped into any resources or services. They provided an opportunity to grow and I took advantage of it. Being a student helped, being in school helped, but it was really self-driven.

To ask a question from Daudi related to this, what are strategies to get more incarcerated people, and those newly-released, to pursue education?

Daudi: I think what Omari said was so on point. "I felt like an impostor. I felt like my felonies were a major barrier and my options were super limited." Probably one of the keys is getting people to believe they can actually do it, which they can. They've just been led to believe otherwise over a lifetime of darts being thrown at their academic self-esteem. Then when the student begins to withdraw, now the kid/family don't care about their education. It's wicked yo. I should say the perception by the teacher/staff is that the kid and their family don't care about education.

Omari: I believe that the key is introducing the possibility. Once they know it's possible, and they know there is funding and there are people and organizations out there like the re-entry navigators, if it's something they want to do then they will. They need to have their lives in order so they can succeed, though, which is the hard part. You need housing, transportation, a lot of people need treatment for mental health or addictions. I feel like my job is to change the narrative and introduce new possibilities, and Humanities Washington has been an outlet for me to do just that inside of jails and prisons. You can send someone they can't relate to inside to share the same message, but the messenger really matters. If they can see parts of themselves in my story, and the stories of others similar to me, many of which have gotten out of prison and become attorneys, or scientists, or college professors, then they might recognize education as a path out of poverty and a life of crime. 



Daudi Abe is a professor at Seattle Central College and the author of the forthcoming book *Emerald Street: A History of Northwest Hip Hop*. For Humanities Washington, he presents the talk "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Principal's Office?"



Omari Amili is an author, speaker, and community leader who has been featured in *The Seattle Times* and *The News Tribune*. For Humanities Washington, he presents the talk "From Crime to the Classroom: How Education Changes Lives."

NEWS

from Humanities Washington

Join us online during the COVID crisis

For the foreseeable future, Humanities Washington will not be holding in-person events due to the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, we and our partners will host dozens of events with speakers online. While we'll miss the intimacy and conversations that can spring from in-person gatherings, moving our events online means anyone anywhere can be part of a conversation about a vital social topic. Go to humanities.org to view our calendar, or check out our social media, to find an event near—or now very far from—you. We are also posting video conversations with speakers on topics ranging from the sociology of clutter to hip hop and protest. Check out our blog and YouTube channel for more.

Humanities Washington awards state cultural organizations through the CARES Act

For the first time in history, all of Washington State's museums and cultural centers closed at the same time for a prolonged period, and the sector is suffering immensely. Thanks to the federal CARES Act and the National Endowment for the Humanities, we were honored to provide rapid-response funding to humanities organizations facing financial hardship as a result of the coronavirus. Over \$500,000 was given to 104 nonprofit and tribal organizations around the state, with an emphasis on organizations in rural areas or those serving under-resourced communities. Go to humanities.org/relief to view the list of grantees.

Poet Laureate launches Poetic Shelters project



Poet Laureate Claudia Castro Luna has created a new digital project that asks people to consider the poetics of their home. How has your home's physical and emotional character changed throughout quarantine? And what memories, frustrations, and daydreams does it hold? Any

poems, observations, or mini-essays about home are encouraged. View the poems or submit your own at wapoetlaureate.org.

Welcome Asia Lara

After her work as an intern for the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions, we're excited to welcome Asia Lara as Humanities Washington's new program manager. Asia just completed her undergraduate degree in international studies and pre-law at the University of Washington and has been doing international nonprofit work throughout her academic career. In her new role, she'll manage the Speakers Bureau and Grants programs. She is taking over from Hannah Schwendeman, who left to pursue a Masters degree in criminal justice. Thank you Hannah for your phenomenal work, and welcome Asia!

2020-2021 Heritage Arts Apprenticeship teams announced

From West African drumming to Nordic boat building, Hebrew calligraphy to Mexican folk music, The Center for Washington Cultural Traditions is excited to announce selections for the 2020-2021 Washington State Heritage Arts Apprenticeship program.

Created to encourage people to learn a traditional trade, craft, or skill, the Heritage Arts Apprenticeship program conserves and helps carry on cultural traditions important to Washington's communities. Program participants may teach or study occupational arts, storytelling and other verbal arts, dance, culinary traditions, music, and much more. These skilled and experienced master artists and tradition bearers will work with and mentor one apprentice each, teaching skills related to a tradition in their community. The Heritage Arts Apprenticeship program will culminate in a free event to introduce the public to these unique cultural traditions. View the full list of teams at waculture.org.

Stay up to date at humanities.org



HOW *the* HUMANITIES HELP US *through* CRISES

*We asked a wide range of Washington writers
how language, storytelling, literature, philosophy,
and poetry can help us during troubled times.*



For this series, we reached out to writers from across our state to understand how the humanities—from literature to philosophy to history and more—can help us, both as individuals and communities, during a crisis. What inspired this series is obvious to anyone alive in the year 2020, yet we gave little guidance beyond the central question.

Then something interesting happened as these essays began to roll in: They took on the feel of a conversation. Even though the speakers couldn't hear or see each other, a dialog formed. It had all the rhythms of a respectful back-and-forth: from the agreements and disagreements, to the concepts that built off each other, the personal anecdotes and the wide-angle social and political views, the points and counterpoints, the meanderings and the understandings—the result was something like a conversation in the dark. As you'll see, this is not merely humanities cheerleading: words of love for the humanities sit alongside sometimes tough criticism. It's likely your perspective will be challenged at least once. But it's hard to get any more humanities than that. —*David Haldeman, Spark editor*

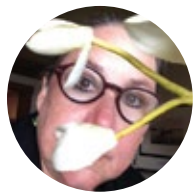


“He was called by the slaves a good overseer.” This sentence, from Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography, is the type of evidence my middle schooler's textbook takes as proof that not everyone thought slavery was bad.

When my child and I discuss how this can be, I remember a lecture about this sentence on what Douglass did *not* write. He did not write: “The slaves called him a good overseer.” Such a sentence would imply that whites listened to slaves as humans—unthinkable in both North and South. Instead, argued the professor, Douglass's sentence as written suggests slaves spoke what listeners desired to hear to create a shielded space for nurturing Black personhood. Slaves duly replied so Black people could declare, as Douglass did after his escape from bondage, that no good exists in a dehumanizing normal.

What did Douglass really mean? In discussing this question, my kid and I move towards another. Sentences with depth are always by design. Writers sweat to make sentences mean what they need to say and what we need to hear. What do I hear? I hear directions on acting in a crisis—forge sentences so we can hear voices we have been told to ignore, including our own. Insist on humanness that, though deemed unimaginable, is.

» *Michelle Lui is a professor in the English department at the University of Washington.*



Although, in our current diseased landscape, we dwell in tenebrous spaces marked by fear and dread, we embrace hope that this too shall pass. We have been here before. As Native People we recognize the rhythm and tone of survival, and so we gather in spirit around the bright fires of ancestral storytelling circles. We have heard this story many times, voiced through the natural world, and through the traditional stories that recount beginnings and continuances. In the creation stories of the Lenape and Iroquois Peoples, the earth floats in space on the back of a turtle, and as Native writer Thomas King reminds us, “...the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away.”

The humanities sustain. They were there in the drawings of the winter count, and there translating dreams into pictographs to inform the hunt. They were there in the form of baskets for gathering sacred, sustaining foods, and for ensuring that Chush, life-giving water, made it back to the village to quench the thirst of The People. The humanities continue to be an integral part of the much-uttered phrase *Since Time Immemorial*, carrying the message—We have lived. We live. We continue.

» *Winona Wynn (Assiniboine/Sioux Tribe) is a professor at Heritage University. Her areas of specialization are cultural identity and Native American education.*



We are quick to name a pandemic a crisis.
It's a spectrum of losses: grievous to trivial.

Quarantine is nevertheless a gift of time and memory. COVID-19 gave me space to mend rips and reunite buttons. It opened a window where music drifted back in. I rebuilt a music lifeline, from the lullaby my mother invented and sang in Spanish, to inventions of songs for a departed friend, to poems of conversation, and words I retake in a memoir.

We learned not to hug, so we are strong. We learned not to speak in small words, not touching, not drinking from another's cup. Immunity redirected our emotions.

I was a child worker, born useful, so this time is luxury for me: I'm able to sleep, rest, sit, and tell family stories, write for days, walk and drink when I'm thirsty. None of these luxuries are part of a workday for those whose class toils. Our time is sucked dry by germs injected into us by life circumstances, our families, culture, from birth.

I rediscovered my five senses to bathe in the beauty of flowers. A book opened a ritual of enjoyment, not obligation.

I have mended more than clothes.

» *Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs is a professor in the departments of Modern Languages and Women & Gender Studies at Seattle University, and the Patricia Wismer Center for Gender, Justice, & Diversity.*

In 1999, I spent a summer selling encyclopedias in Pulaski, Tennessee. I was an English major and bunked with Wil, who studied film. We'd work 14-hour days knocking and giving perfect pitches to escape the Southern heat.

Breakfasts were filled with a variety of moods that would dissipate with food and coffee. "Did you ever watch *The Thin Red Line*? It's like poetry," Wil said. I had. I hated it. Hated the protagonist. Hated its 2.75 hours length. Hated that maybe I wasn't smart enough to understand it.

Later, I decided maybe the film was like a fine wine—something that needed to be aged, and I was ready to fully appreciate it.

I tried five times and no luck. I gave the copy to Mom. Later on, when I visited her it was on, and I sat down. Five minutes in Mom asked, "Did you know that this part is connected to the Bible? . . . He's walking in the valley of death." My heart paused. Mom got it.

Years later, I'm still thinking about it. Thinking about the experiences that we need to have, the distances we need to travel, to be ready to understand.

Now. COVID. Isolation. Police. Relationships. Answers seem elusive. I'm not alone in the search for meaning, truth, or identity. But I have films waiting for me, poetry that has been searching for me; words have been put down on paper with the sole purpose of bringing forth clarity as I reach turning point after turning point in my life. I just have to give them a chance.

» *Jesus Sandoval is an educator born and raised in the Yakima Valley.*



Whether or not you've been actively protesting, it's likely that you've consumed an overwhelming amount of news on the pandemic, racial injustice, climate change, the economy, politics. We can't avoid these articles and news segments that conveniently place us in boxes.

We're Black, white, Latinx, Indigenous, conservative, liberal, progressive, protesters, patients, healthcare providers, unemployed, LGBTQ, feminists, and whatever else. Pick your category and the inevitable will happen. You'll start thinking in that box. Those who don't think in your special box you'll label "Other." This, of course, means you're "Other" to them.

As we get caught up in the habit of this programming, it is easy to forget who we really are. This is why we need the humanities. Poetry, fiction, and visual and performing arts work to answer who we are as multidimensional humans. The arts and humanities reach into the depths of who we really are to give us new perspectives on our daily challenges.

August Wilson expressed this radical power of the arts when he said: "I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition, its power to heal...its power to uncover the truths we wrestle from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities."

» *Sharyn Skeeter is the author of the novel Dancing with Langston and a writer, poet, editor, and educator. She was an editor at Essence and the editor in chief at Black Elegance magazine.*



The humanities operate on the premise that human beings are hardwired for storytelling and drama, which helps develop empathy, an assumed social good. But I'm wary of our culture's unquestioned faith in empathy as a theory of social change. Why do we believe so strongly that attempting to feel or imagine others' suffering is an ethical act? Might triggering empathy be counterproductive in the struggle to end racism?

The prioritization of an empathetic response to encountering injustice has led us to this specific moment: Minoritized people feel compelled to broadcast their private, sacred pain for consumption, in order to be allowed to enter dominant discourse. Videos of Black and Brown death at the hands of police continue to go viral. Allies exhaust themselves trying to squeeze out tears from their family and friends. White guilt abounds at annual diversity trainings, yet institutionalized racism remains robust. Even with well-intentioned applications, our faith in empathy from all sides has led to exploitation, racial essentialism, fatigue.

The issue is that feeling something is not the same as doing something; though, rather unfortunately, both can take up the same amounts of energy. We must be careful not to get lost in our experience of another's story, and miss what the story being told is for. Instead of being controlled by feelings of guilt and shame about injustice, we can instead be guided by our values in taking both personal and collective action towards ending injustice before it is too late.

» *Frances S. Lee is a trans, queer Chinese American writer based in Bremerton. They wrote "Excommunicate Me from The Church of Social Justice," and edited the anthology Toward an Ethics Of Activism: A Community Investigation of Humility. Frances's work has appeared in The Seventh Wave, Yes! magazine, and CBC Radio, among other places.*



The current crises facing the country—a global pandemic, a distressing lack of national leadership, pervasive racialized police brutality, and heightened precarity for the already marginalized among us – necessitate a reassessment of norms of practice and the values that underlie them, tasks for which philosophy is integral.

Practicing philosophy starts with identifying assumptions—in values, political systems, ways of knowing, logics of practice – and subjecting them to critical evaluation. For example, nationwide protests against racialized police brutality highlight a widely entrenched assumption of white supremacy, and philosophers like Charles Mills have articulated the myriad ways in which Black people have been excluded from the social contract.

Philosophy also has a creative side. Demands for defunding the police demonstrate an aspiration for a radical revisioning of our social systems. Finding viable alternatives calls for an imaginative creation and sharing of ideas across difference, to provide what Audre Lorde calls a “fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.” Philosophy thrives with a diversity of ideas.

Philosophizing is also, importantly, a vital practice for self-care. Rather than stewing in rage, despair, or helplessness in these tumultuous times, philosophical reflection helps us to interrogate our discontents, organize our thinking, and envision alternatives and active responses; it can be a pathway to hope. From young children questioning the meaning of freedom and despair to philosopher-activists exploring the role of anger in anti-racist struggle to philosophers guiding policy making in a nexus of critical crises, philosophy is a fundamental practice for understanding ourselves and creating the world we aspire to inhabit.

» *Sara Goering is associate professor of Philosophy and the Program on Ethics, and she currently leads the Ethics Thrust at the University of Washington Center for Neurotechnology. She is also the program director for the UW’s Center for Philosophy of Children.*



Some years ago, columnist David Brooks mused on what has long been evident to those of us working in the humanities. The humanities, he said, “are committing suicide because many humanists have lost faith in their own enterprise.” Their disciplines have become “less about the old notions of truth, beauty, and goodness and more about political and social categories like race, class, and gender.”

In “The Cultural Canon,” an essay in Julius Lester’s collection *Falling Pieces of the Broken Sky*, that fine writer recognized the crucial role played by a humanistic vision in education when he wrote that, “The function of education is not to confirm us in who we are; it is to introduce us to all that we are not.”

“My education,” Lester wrote, “did not confirm me as a Black man; it confirmed me as one who had the same questions as Plato and Aristotle. And my education told me that as a Black person, it was not only right to ask those questions, it was even okay to put forward my own answers and stand them next to Plato and Aristotle.”

Such a humanist education gave Lester an “intense and passionate curiosity” that lasted his entire life. It introduced him to “the terrifying unknown and provided not only the intellectual skills to make known the unknown but the emotional stability to withstand the terror when the unknown cannot be made known.” And such an experience, said Lester, gives us “the self-confidence to go forth and face that mystery that lies at the core of each of us: Who am I?”

» *Charles Johnson is professor at the University of Washington and the National Book Award-winning author of Middle Passage, as well as other works of fiction and nonfiction including Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories, and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice.*

“

We learned not to hug, so we are strong. We learned not to speak in small words, not touching, not drinking from another's cup. Immunity redirected our emotions.

”



The word ‘crisis’ is derived from the Greek word for ‘decision.’ In our 2020 social, cultural, medical, and economic crises, we have daily decisions to make about our own actions and how they might impact us and others. Most of us may recall earlier crises we have faced; some of us may remember how the humanities generously moved us in some way during that crisis. Maybe e.e. cummings said it best, “it takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

As a high school drama teacher/play director, I worked for 32 years with adolescents in the middle of that particular crisis—trying to decide who they were, what they wanted, where they’d fit, and what path they’d take. A core part of drama class/play practice required that student actors deeply analyze and take on the mantles of characters very different from themselves, using their minds, voices, and bodies to “be” those characters. This daily work created numerous opportunities for learning: when a studious 15-year-old fully embraced the role of messy, grumpy *Odd Couple* character Oscar Madison, or when a difficult 17-year-old became Elwood Dowd’s psychiatrist in *Harvey*, each learned more about themselves and the context of those unlike themselves, and were more prepared to make decisions moving forward to their futures.

In a recent interview, Henry Timms, executive director of New York’s Lincoln Center, spoke about the power of the arts and humanities: “They help us find ourselves. They help us find each other.”

» *Kathy Shoop is a former drama teacher in La Conner, and one of the founders of the Skagit River Poetry festival.*



“I had closed off large sections of my identity after getting out of the Marines. This was causing major issues including problems with alcohol and anxiety. It was really a tangled mess—one that I was great at hiding from others.”

Many veterans come into the Clemente Veterans Initiative with stories like this. The initiative offers free college humanities courses to veterans struggling with the transition to civilian life. All course materials, childcare, and transportation are provided at no cost to participants. Guided by seasoned professors, participants reflect on their military experience and create new models for community engagement.

Typically meeting for two hours, twice a week for three months, they explore some of our greatest thinkers, writers and artists, and ask the question, “What does it mean to live a good life?” Through Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, the tragic stories of Herakles and Ajax, and classical Greek and Roman sculpture, they explore notions of heroism and duty. They recognize themselves in stories of return and reconciliation in the Odyssey and Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale*. The most significant impacts reported by students are that they feel less isolated, and find a renewed sense of dignity and purpose.

“There were many eye-opening moments for me in this program, across all disciplines,” said the veteran quoted earlier. “Probably the one thing that connects all of them was that through discussion, I realized that I was not alone in my experience, whether that was during my deployments or coming home. I think the readings for the philosophy and history portions probably struck me the hardest ... I had never examined moral injury or philosophy through the lens of my wartime experiences. This program has changed my life.”

» *Lela Hilton is the executive director of the Clemente Course in the Humanities.*



I spend a lot of my time thinking about war. I cannot imagine a greater crisis than that. One takeaway from preeminent Civil War historian James McPherson is that soldiers almost never die for a nation or ideals. Instead, they die for the person next to them. The comrade-in-arms is more important than any abstract notion. He or she is willing to fight to help protect their buddies. From Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering*, I grasped the concept of the “Good Death” and how soldiers in their dying moments often cried out to their mothers. Men with broken bodies on the battlefield used their last breaths to appeal to maternal compassion. From Lord Moran’s observations on courage, I absorbed his straightforward assertion that, “If you know a man in peace, you know him in war.” A generous man will be a generous soldier and likewise a cruel person becomes a cruel soldier. The larger lesson is that society is much as it was. Technology has not sapped us of our humanity. In the end, we need friends, nurturing, and character.

» *Ryan W. Booth (Upper Skagit Tribe) is a history professor at WSU Vancouver.*



I entered a writing block in March after the stay-at-home order went into effect. Overwhelmed by reports of hate crimes towards Asians and scared of impacts of COVID-19 on my job, I fixated on getting from one day to the next. In the midst of this anxiety, I wrote haiku. For the past 13 years, a group of friends and I have written a daily haiku in April to mark National Poetry Month. This year, the pandemic crept into Amy reflections.

*six thousand miles away
from the motherland on tomb sweeping
day, I light sticks of incense*

*

*practicing her pruning
on dead limbs, the grower knows
spring will return again*

I was scheduled to debut my new book in April with a series of public events. Still under lockdown orders in June, I launched the book from my backyard cottage. As a way to engage with the racial grief of this historical moment, I asked griot-trained jeli Arsalan Ibrahim to be in creative conversation with me through his practice as a kora player and storyteller. I shared works centering racial injustice, miscarriage, and liberation, and Ibrahim responded with stories reflecting on slavery, loss, and warriorship. Liberation and understanding arise through intimate dialogue with our fellow humans. There is just this practice.

» *Shin Yu Pai is a poet, writer, photographer, and editor based in the Pacific Northwest. She is the author of eight books of poetry, including the upcoming book ENSO.*



“I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We’ve been taught that silence would save us, but it won’t.”

—Audre Lorde

In times of multiple crises, when the fires of racism and disease attempt to melt every chamber of my heart away, I allow myself to become an ember (for a time). I acknowledge the burning pain and let it set in like a tattoo and then, I scream, then I write.

History has shown me that the writers, poets, artists, and relentless creatives are what preserve and cultivate the vertebrae of the living. I write. Because the back boned before me, my writing ancestors wrote like their lives depended on it.

When our world is burning bright, orange and out of control, I sit up straight. I write. And writing becomes my candle and my altar, my ground and my sky—my oracle and my legacy. My weapon, my wand, and my peacemaker.

» *Anastacia-Reneé is a writer, educator, and artist who served as the Seattle Civic Poet from 2017–2019 and the 2015–2017 Poet-in-Residence at Hugo House. She is a two-time Pushcart nominee and the author of five books.* 

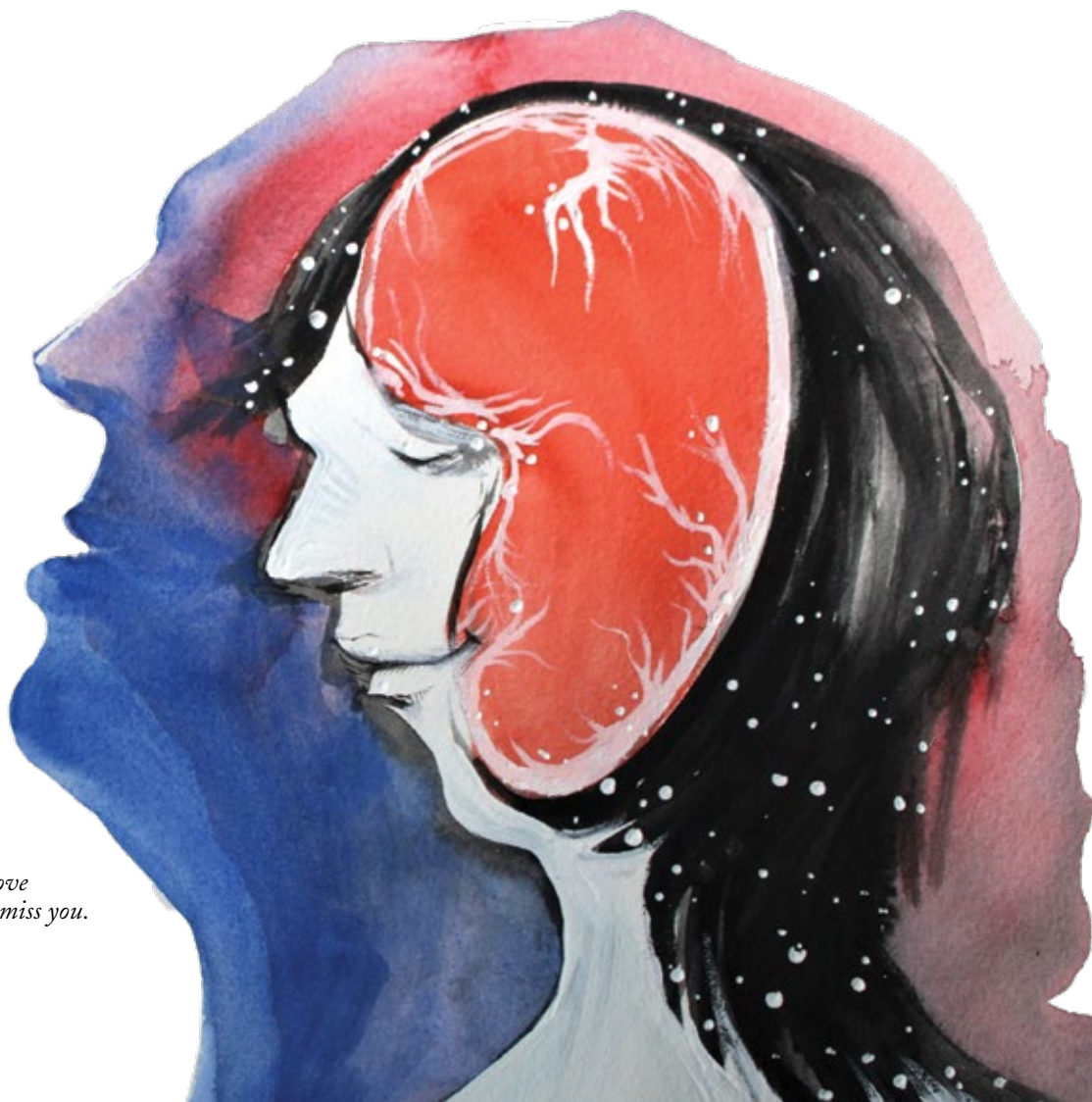
GOOD STEAK

A short story by Sharma Shields

» *For Ellen with gratitude
for our wacky texts
about parenthood and
the Anthropocene.*

» *For Kate V.
(September 23, 1960–
April 4th, 2020) with
gratitude for our
profound conversations—
especially our last—about love
and mortality and death. I miss you.*

► Illustrations by Jocelyn Skillman.



It was Carol who set up my blind date with the Man in the Moon.

I'm going to hook you up with someone if it kills me, Carol texted. And it really might kill me, you know, given how sick I am.

Ug, I wrote back. Life is going to super suck without you.

I was doing this more for Carol than I was for me. I'd already dated a couple of her other friends by this point, and I was getting a bit jaded. There was the narcoleptic if gentle Little Boy Blue, who kept leaving his horn behind wherever we went, always quadrupling our cab fare with all of the backtracking we had to do, and how boring those many cab-rides were, his head lolling from side to side, his mouth slightly ajar, snoring through some of my most important soliloquys about mortality and the Anthropocene. It was not the first time I'd put a man to sleep, but it was certainly the most frequent. Little Boy Blue was, despite his name, a full-grown male, and handsome, with a remarkably unlined face, as though he'd encountered very little stress in life, but he dressed like a rabbit in a Beatrix Potter book, blue seersucker rompers and a messily affixed matching cap. When he listened to me he did so with his thumb hanging crookedly from his mouth, and this became my cue to speak louder and to crack open a window in the cab; he was heading straight to Nappy Town. Maybe certain individuals enjoy pampering a partner through that midlife crisis sort-of-thing but I found his immaturity a complete turn off, and after a few sad outings I stopped texting him back and texted Carol instead, *LBB is a dud.*

I thought he'd be so sweet for you! She wrote back. He reminds me of a cat, and I know how much you love cats.

It's true, now that I think about it, how cat-like he was, always warm, always napping, always forgetting that goddamn horn everywhere, a horn he carried around with him for some unknown reason because I never heard him play it, not once, not that I wanted to hear it, but hey it's his thing not mine, it was probably a lovey for him, brought him comfort when he was falling asleep or whatever, the poor guy.

Cat or not, I texted Carol, he's not for me.

So she set me up with Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater, but he kept trying to take me home and force me into his pumpkin, and I got a very Jane Eyre vibe from all of it, that once I was in

that pumpkin I would never again see the light of day, and I'd be the mad pumpkin wife trapped in those orange stinking wet pumpkin walls with a husband whose moniker sounded like a dirty sex act.

No dice, I texted Carol.

So she set me up with the cat and the fiddle, which was great at first because I do really love cats, and I loved petting her behind her ears and listening to her purr, but this particular cat was, unlike Little Boy Blue, very devoted to her instrument, and I got really sick of listening to her fiddle day in and day out, however skilled she was.

Too talented, I texted Carol.

How about Simple Simon? she wrote.

You've got to be kidding me.

The butcher? The baker? The candlestick maker?

Too many knives, I wrote back. Too many sweets. Too many first-degree burns.

She suggested Georgie Porgie.

I dated him back in the nineties, I wrote. I was in love with him, but all of those tears! I'm no longer such a masochist.

By then we'd all heard about the dish and spoon running off maniacally together, happy as can be, and none of us were surprised, really, because they were very well suited and of course very passionate after all of those years waiting around in dark kitchen cabinets for some action, but I had to admit the whole affair made me feel very lonely, even if I wanted to be bigger than all of that somehow, a woman of my own making, an artist in my own right and a loving if inconsistent friend.

Don't worry, Carol texted. We'll keep looking.

Carol was always the best sort of friend, even when I was an asshat. By this point I knew I might lose her soon, and I was feeling so low about this prospect I wasn't quite sure if I should be around her. Maybe my being so pissed and sad would only hurt her further. And if I'm being honest, I was even insulted by her ministrations, that no matter my intellectualization and self-deprecation and misanthropy, she saw how desperately I

longed for companionship. It was irritating that she put more care and affection into my love life than I did.

I'm fine, I texted her. I'm perfectly fine with dying alone. I've been reading a lot about human composting and I think I'd like that done to my body when I'm gone, if you want to look into that for me, instead.

Carol texted back, cheerfully, *Oh, honey, I'm the only one who gets to make death plans right now. I'm very territorial about this. The hunt, she wrote, continues.*

Sometimes the thing with friends is: They don't know when to leave well enough alone. Although the truth was that I loved Carol for this very reason.

Only a few days passed before she wrote me, in all caps: *I'VE FOUND HIM.*

And then she set up my first date with the Man in the Moon.

My first impression of the Man in the Moon was that he was full of himself, looming down on me from his great height with an aloofness that signals either robust confidence or crippling insecurity. We met at a steak and potatoes restaurant called Meat Killers, where his first words to me were, poignantly, "I'm a vegan."

"Try the potatoes," I suggested.

I ordered the filet mignon, extra rare.

I took his quietness at first as some sort of ploy to get me to open up, and I was pissed at myself that it worked. I overshared that I was newly diagnosed with IBS, that I was a washed-up writer, that I'd been sober for eight years, that I hated eggs, even hated the word "egg" with its weird double g, that I'd made the front page of the paper as a teenager for driving drunk through a cowfield and man-slaughtering a newborn calf. I could tell he thought it was strange how voraciously I ate my steak through this last story.



"It's a coping mechanism," I said.

He gave a gentle nod of his big round ivory head. It annoyed me, how subtly his head glowed. He poked at his potato sadly. He'd forgotten to order it without the butter.

I washed the steak down with a lukewarm glass of water, horrified at myself for divulging so much so quickly.

"So, what's your story?" I asked.

"Oh," he said slowly. "You know. I work nights. I have what you might consider a primo view, but I see some ugly stuff. People," he said. "People can be terrible."

He pushed away from his plate just slightly, hanging his big head so that he stared glassily into the tablecloth, and the craggy gray features of his face settled into a look of such forlornness that I reached my hand across the table and touched him, gently, on the wrist. The Man in the Moon gave a little jump and then relaxed. He smiled sadly at me.

"Thank you," he said, nodding at my hand. "Sometimes I think people just want to stomp across me and stab flag poles into me, like that's all I'm good for."

I was a bit shocked, since I'd spent many years feeling the same way. "I don't want to stab you," I said. "And I hate walking. Sometimes I just roll around everywhere. Like I roll out of bed and roll over to the bathroom and roll into the shower and turn the shower spigot on with my toes and just let the spray hit me right in the face."

He laughed. "Same here. And usually I'm sobbing."

"Me, too!"

"It's fun to cry in the shower," he said.

We beamed out at one another, the Man in the Moon and I, and a few minutes later I excused myself and went to the restroom and texted Carol, *You're the best friend ever, you bonkers bitch. He's a misanthrope, he's miserable, he's kind, he's perfect.*

She wrote back, *Like you!*

He's nicer than me, I typed.

Naw, you're pretty great for how miserable you are. Maybe one day you'll see it.

I refuse, I wrote. *I prefer to wallow in the horrors of self-reflection. Anyway, thank you, C. Text you later.*

But when I went back to the table, the man in the moon had already left. There was a handwritten note, however, *Had to jet to work, but I'll be on the lookout for you*. I wandered out to the parking lot, feeling really smooth and hydrated after all of that lukewarm water, and there he was, scooting across the sky overhead, witness to the multifold ways we humans were busy destroying the world, and all of the ways in which we weren't. I waved and he shone.

I drove to Carol's house. She answered the door, arms thrown open to me, her wife and children already in their beds. We hugged, laughing, and then went to sit on her back deck, where we gossiped about my first good date in years as if he wasn't up there staring down at us.

"You won't be able to keep secrets from this one," she told me.

"Kind of creepy, huh?"

Carol agreed: Yes, it was creepy.

I asked her, "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

She grimaced. "Oh don't make me talk about it."

"You don't have to talk," I said, "but it sucks, and sometimes talking about things that suck is really fun."

"I'm so glad you're here," Carol laughed. "It really won't be so bad. The best part is all of those nice nurses poking and prodding me, all of that excitement and attention, and all of that awesome drugged-up sleep."

"Wow I'm jealous. I'd love to be poked and prodded and on good drugs."

Carol smiled. "But I can't sleep tonight," she said. "I've got all of this energy because I know I'm going to be deadsville the next few weeks. So I cleaned all of the toilets and hung up twelve family portraits in the den."

I teased her that no one needs twelve family portraits, one is more than enough. "Don't you just sit around staring at one another all of the time, anyway? Marveling at one another's beauty and goodness and all of that? Aren't you already immortalized in one another's minds?"

"I guess it's more for bozos like you who come to visit," she said. "Plus, we all know there's no such thing as immortality."

I grunted in agreement.

This, in a way, was why we were so close, Carol and I: We believed humanity was doomed, and that was okay, because even with all of the love and joy and beauty of the world humankind was hellbent on serving poverty and war and pain to it, too. Man's basic instinct for survival had crossed too many times into militarism and dominance, and so Carol and I believed in mortality over survival, we believed in apologies and insecurities and gray areas, we worshipped at the non-altar of the anti-dominant. We were proud of ourselves for our entropy.

The Man in the Moon had disappeared behind an inky cloud. He wanted to leave us to the privacy of our conversation.

"This moon guy is one passive mofo," I noted admiringly.

Then I turned to my friend. She sat in the porchlight gazing at the dark gathering clouds, still smiling despite it all, entropy

or no. Tomorrow she would come home beginning to glow just like the moon, veins filled with powerful drugs that she was told might help her but probably would not. *I will be there for her*, I told myself ferociously. I wouldn't back away from it in fear the way I wanted to, the fight-or-flight response that urged me to duck away lest I unravel alongside her. *I will be there*. Just like she'd keep texting me about dating to dispel whatever loneliness she imagined for me.

We'd be there until we couldn't be there. "You're a good egg," I told Carol.

"You hate that word," she said.

"You're a good steak," I told her.

Carol leaned back against the chair and closed her eyes.

"You need to stop eating red meat. Global warming, hon. And when I'm gone you need to explain the Anthropocene to the kids," she said. "Gabriela will be awful at that, she already thinks I tell them too much dark stuff."

"Consider the darkness covered, buddy," I assured her.

We held hands. The Man in the Moon slunk out from behind the clouds, saw we were finished, gleamed cleanly at us. He was perfect for me: omnipresent but distant, too, there and not there at all. Just like it was possible to feel so much sorrow and hope, despair and love all at once. Somewhere beneath the moon's gaze the dish and the spoon ran swiftly

together through the wilderness, somewhere the owl sang to the pussycat, somewhere a woman closed a Mother Goose book and leaned over to kiss her daughter's sleeping face. Sometimes it feels like the horrors of the world are dark and deep and ever expanding, and what a wonder it is that stories and friendship and love are here, too, those bright lights we keep swimming toward, those kind pendants suspended in the dark, signaling to us from the murk that we can be good, we can be better, we can keep going.

The End. 



Sharma Shields is the author of a short story collection, *Favorite Monster*, and two novels, *The Sasquatch Hunter's Almanac* and *The Cassandra*. Sharma's short stories and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Electric Lit*, *Catapult*, *The Iowa Review*, *Fugue*, and elsewhere and have garnered such prizes as the 2020 PNBA Award, 2016 Washington State Book Award. She lives in Spokane.



▲ Woody Guthrie, circa 1939. Photo from the Daily Worker/Daily World Photo Collection in box 36, folder 7113; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

WOODY GUTHRIE IN WASHINGTON STATE

How just one month in the Pacific Northwest changed the course of the folk singer's life – and the course of American music.

By **Greg Vandy with Daniel Person**

Woody Guthrie walked into the Bonneville Power Administration headquarters in Portland, Oregon, wearing the khaki work shirt and matching work pants that he seemed to wear every day. He was bearded, unkempt, and reporting for a job that wasn't exactly his yet.

It had been twelve days since the BPA had sent him a letter stating that it was interested in hiring him to write songs for the agency and asking him to fill out paperwork to facilitate the hiring process. Instead, there he was, unannounced, holding a guitar and eating an apple, with his wife and three kids waiting outside in the car. The blue Pontiac was now in even worse shape than when it was used to haul firewood in the Sierra Nevadas. Guthrie had busted a window when he'd locked the keys inside, the upholstery was ripped, and the vehicle looked generally lived-in. His hobo-beatnik style wasn't exactly what

employees at the government agency were used to seeing. The BPA, just four years old at that point, was made up of engineers and bureaucrats. The only people who could have any use for a dusty folksinger were in the public information office, the head of which soon fetched Woody and shepherded him to his desk.

Stephen Kahn had heard of Woody Guthrie but had never heard his music, let alone met the man. He'd gotten his name from Alan Lomax, who had recommended Guthrie for Kahn's documentary project with a flow of superlatives over the phone from Washington, DC.

The job Lomax recommended Guthrie for was a yearlong gig to be an actor, narrator, and singer in the documentary *The Columbia: America's Greatest Power Stream*. However, the job was far from certain. The film's budget was tenuous, and war was

looming. Then there was Woody's background. Even though Kahn was a liberal himself and an activist for public power, hiring another activist who wrote columns for a communist newspaper, a known agitator and sometimes radical, was a whole other deal.

Still, while Kahn hadn't officially offered Guthrie a job in the first place, now that he was standing in front of him, he didn't want to let an opportunity pass.

"He had his guitar, and I said, 'Play me something,'" Kahn recalled. "And I listened. And I said, 'Woody, I think you have the common touch.'"

The job description said that during his one-month employment, he would research the Columbia, study farmers' use of electricity, and determine the feasibility of creating a documentary and radio programs about it all. Only in the last sentence does it add "narrating and arrangement of musical accompaniment."

He said, 'What kinda songs you want, Steve?'" Kahn recounted. "I said, 'Well, the purpose of the development of this river is to raise the standards of living for the people around here by giving them water and power and navigation and flood control and the whole bit.' He said, 'Geez, that's a big order.' I said, 'Well, that's why we got you.'"

After an impromptu audition for Kahn's boss, Woody walked out with the job. Though he asked for one more thing: fifty cents to buy a hamburger. Kahn obliged.

Guthrie thrived in the framework laid out for him. He had an assignment, a purpose, doing what he did best—writing topical songs about things he cared about. He considered it a patriotic effort to promote something he deeply believed in: the government by the people, working for the people.

In a letter written twenty-seven days into his assignment, he wrote friends in New York: "This Pacific Northwest is a country of wild rivers and rocky canyons and is one of the prettiest places you ever looked at. Uncle Sam is putting big power dams all along the rivers to produce electricity for public ownership and distribution through the people's utility districts in every town and countryside and the main job is to force the private-owned concerns to sell out to the government by selling power at lower rates."

The monthlong job didn't make the Guthrie family flush, but it allowed them to rent a place with electricity and buy groceries—both improvements over their situation for the first part of the year so far. He was apparently so taken with having his money that he made an odd show of it. One BPA employee recalled seeing him take a pencil rubbing of a silver dollar, then writing beneath it: "This dollar once belonged to Woody Guthrie."

"He wrote at night," Mary Guthrie said. "When Woody would come home, he always had notebooks and songs with him. He would go over these songs many times and I'm sure add more to them before the day was over."

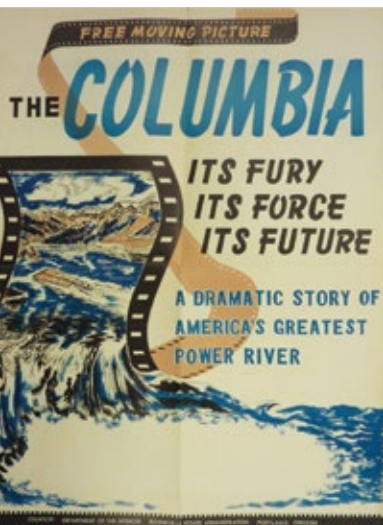
From the outset, Guthrie showed an uncanny ability to absorb the complex history of and plans for the Columbia Basin and to distill it all into simple, catchy stanzas of verse.

"I gave him a book on the Columbia River and he produced two songs like you'd snap your fingers," Kahn recalled. Among those was the song "Roll On, Columbia," which he started writing his first day on the job, using the melody from Lead Belly's "Good Night Irene."

Not long before Woody's trip, over the course of a weekend in June 1940, Native Americans from across the Pacific Northwest gathered in Kettle Falls, Washington, for a three-day "Ceremony of Tears."

For thousands of years, the tribes of the Pacific Northwest were sustained by the salmon runs of the Columbia River. They called the area "Roaring Waters" or "Keep Sounding Water," and as many as fourteen tribes traditionally congregated there during salmon runs in order to fish and trade. It was an ideal spot for fishing, as the eponymous waterfalls blocked the salmon's passage up the river, causing a mighty traffic jam of fish. There were so many, legend said a man could walk across the water on the backs of the writhing spawners.

But that June, tribal members knew that the falls, and the salmon, would soon be gone forever. The Grand Coulee Dam—the massive structure that Woody Guthrie would call the "mightiest thing man has ever done"—would soon be completed, backing up the river and creating a lake behind the dam, submerging the falls under ninety feet of water. Also submerged would be tracts of the Colville and Spokane Indian Reservations, requiring the



▲ Bonneville Power Administration



▲ The Bureau of Land Reclamation



▲ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

relocation of more than twelve hundred graves. The salmon, meanwhile, already greatly impeded by the Bonneville Dam downriver, would be entirely cut off from a huge swath of their natural spawning ground. Within a few short weeks, the land that had sustained these people for thousands of years would be utterly transformed by an audacious feat of engineering that still stands today as one of the most ambitious—and, some argue, arrogant—in human history.

By today's thinking, it can be difficult to understand why a folksinger like Woody Guthrie, who proved willing to walk away from good money based on principles before, so vociferously endorsed a project like the Grand Coulee Dam. It killed salmon, took away tribal land, and powered war industries—all factors well understood by the time Guthrie arrived.

While some people have castigated Guthrie for his support of the dams, others have tried to apologize for him by suggesting he was naive and didn't understand what he was being asked to endorse. Neither point of view gets to the more complicated truth.

Some lyrics don't stand up to modern scrutiny, specifically, the celebration of the Native American wars in "Roll On, Columbia" that today are recognized as a near-genocidal government policy. In addressing the controversial lyrics, Arlo Guthrie said his father later "scratched them out and didn't use them." Buehler's account of Woody's time in the Northwest suggests he didn't

hold any ill will toward Native Americans. Rather, one of his favorite parts of the trip was meeting tribal members at Celilo Falls, which was an even larger salmon-fishing area than Kettle Falls was. At the falls, fishermen would perch precariously over the raging waters on what looked like rickety wooden docks in order to snag salmon with dip nets. Celilo Falls was eventually drowned by the completion of The Dalles Dam in 1957, but at the time it was still an important gathering spot.

"He was very much interested in the Indians that were up there. He looked upon them as the common people too," said Buehler.

Guthrie was deeply affected by the collapse of the Oklahoma and Texas economies due to prolonged drought, and the limited options open to the dispossessed farmers who migrated to California. He was also impressed by the efforts of the federal government to help migrant workers in Southern California—via the farm labor camps where he performed and Weedpatch Camp, which Steinbeck featured in *The Grapes of Wrath*. To Woody Guthrie, the Dust Bowl balladeer, the Columbia River project was an ambitious solution to the Dust Bowl, and his songs were direct answers to his earlier Dust Bowl Ballads, published the year before in 1940.

He saw the dams as the answer to the ills of his time and the path forward for his people.

“ One BPA employee recalled seeing him take a pencil rubbing of a silver dollar, then writing beneath it: “This dollar once belonged to Woody Guthrie.” ”

But there’s undoubtedly a something-for-nothing quality to Guthrie’s Columbia River work, a suggestion that damming the Columbia wouldn’t diminish the wild character of the river he was clearly in love with, and an ignoring of the profound effects the dam would have on the area’s Native people.

Of course, Guthrie didn’t simply sit in Portland, read books, and write songs based on what the BPA told him. He struck out into the country to see what all the fuss was about.

He wasn’t trusted with a government car, Kahn said, considering the sorry state of his Pontiac upon his arrival. Instead he was assigned a driver—a man named Elmer Buehler.

For the rest of his life, Buehler remembered those days on the road with Woody Guthrie. They were in a “shiny 1940 black Hudson Hornet,” with Buehler at the wheel and Guthrie working on songs in the backseat.

“We didn’t talk much, because he was always strumming his guitar and jotting notes,” Buehler said. “He had a job to do.”

The Northwest was a wild country, like nothing Woody had ever seen, and the beauty had him awestruck. Buehler drove him east along the river and through the orchards of the Willamette Valley, then to visit the already-fading timber towns of Dee and Parkdale. But it was a side trip to Lost Lake, in the shadow of Mount Hood, that had perhaps the biggest impact. Surrounded on all sides by thick virgin forests, the lake was a revelation for Guthrie. “He just stood there in awe,” Buehler recalled, “and he said, ‘I’ve never seen anything like this. I am in paradise.’” Woody worked what he saw into his new songs—cherries, peaches, apples, wheat, and other crops. He also saw hops for the first time, which must have thrilled him, considering how often he consumed its by-product.

As they drove along, they kept the windows down—Buehler said Guthrie had body odor, noting several times in his various interviews that his stench was often overpowering. As they traveled along the Columbia River Gorge and into the wide desert plains of Eastern Washington, Guthrie picked away at his songs. “He would play his guitar, apparently composing things as we drove along,” Buehler said. No definitive itinerary of Guthrie and Buehler’s road trip exists, but they most likely followed the Columbia River into South-Central Washington, then crossed what was still an unirrigated expanse of desert to Spokane. From Spokane, it was a straight shot west to the Grand Coulee Dam site, where they could pick the river back up and follow it, more or less, all the way to Portland. With Buehler as guide, Guthrie saw the bucolic Willamette Valley; picturesque Hood River, in the gorge; Lake Chelan (Guthrie thought the Chelan River would be a great place for another dam); the apple orchards of Wenatchee; and, of course, Grand Coulee. Prior to the advent of the Interstate Highway System, it could be slow going on two-lane roads through the parched dun-colored country around the Columbia River, and they made many stops. Buehler took Woody to see factories and logging yards along the way. As planned, they also dropped in at Grange meetings and other gatherings, allowing Woody to meet the people and experience what they did.

Guthrie didn’t extend such courtesies to everyone he met, however. In Spokane, he was asked to play “background music” for the local chamber of commerce. “I wouldn’t play background music for any chamber of commerce, let alone foreground music,” he sniffed.

Woody never wavered in his contempt for money traders, but this new “planned promised land” appealed to him. The tangible benefits of jobs, farming opportunities, and better living conditions were inspiring to him, and sparked a creative

impulse. As the nation emerged from the worst depression in its history, Guthrie saw the Grand Coulee as irrefutable proof of the value and might of the American worker.

When he wasn't on the road, Guthrie was given a desk in the corner of the BPA's public information office. He was generally well liked in the office. According to witnesses, he was "free and easy in his conversation with everybody and was completely uninhibited—but he was diamond sharp." Still, the unusual nature of Guthrie's work led to unusual scenes there. He banged out rhythms on his metal desk, quite a distraction to other employees, and his body odor remained an issue; Buehler claimed several of the BPA secretaries complained about the stench that emanated from the new employee. Guthrie didn't hesitate to strike up conversations around the office. And he'd sometimes sit on the corner of Kahn's desk and hash out folk tunes, Kahn humming along as Guthrie strummed his guitar.

"I thought Woody's songs would be very effective in reaching the common man," Kahn said. "I didn't envision that they would become nationally popular, because I was not aware fully of what the people were listening to or what they were singing, but I recognized talent there, originality and personality." Guthrie, too, seemed happy with his work.

On June 10, Guthrie wrote friends in New York that he'd be heading their way soon. With his car still in the impound lot, his plan was to hitchhike.

Caring for their three kids, ages eighteen months to five years, Mary was staying put in Portland. Exhausted by the nomadic lifestyle and years of poverty, she and Woody never lived under the same roof again. By the fall they were officially separated. They divorced in March of 1943.

With the United States entering the war at the end of 1941, *The Columbia* documentary that Guthrie was originally enlisted for as actor, singer, and composer was put on hold. It wasn't until 1948 that a pared-down version was released to little public attention. The songs Guthrie wrote for it during his time in the Pacific Northwest, however, including "Roll On, Columbia, Roll On," "Pastures of Plenty," and "Grand Coulee Dam," would become vital parts of the 1960's folk revival and our greater American cultural fabric.

On June 11, Guthrie started walking down the highway that followed the course of the river that he now knew so well, a guitar over his back and a thumb in the air. Just outside Portland, a young lawyer named Gus Solomon pulled up alongside the folksinger. He was the BPA's lawyer at the time and had met Guthrie at the offices. "Woody, where are you going?" Solomon asked. "I'm going to New York," he said.

"How will you get there?"

"I'm going to hitchhike," Guthrie said without any note of irony. "Do you have any money?" Solomon asked. Guthrie said he did not.

Broke as the day he got there, Guthrie accepted twenty dollars and a ride to The Dalles. From there, he continued on east, where there were more songs to be sung. 

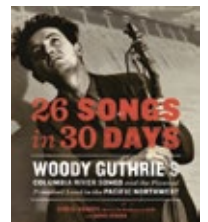


Greg Vandy is the host of The Roadhouse and a local tastemaker for independent roots music. Vandy co-publishes "American Standard Time," a blog dedicated to American music and vintage lifestyles, and curates the Pickathon music festival.



Daniel Person's work has appeared in *High Country News*, *Seattle Weekly*, *Montana Quarterly*, and *Outside Online*.

This article was adapted from the book *26 Songs in 30 Days: Woody Guthrie's Columbia River Songs and The Planned Promised Land in the Pacific Northwest*, excerpted by permission of Sasquatch Books.



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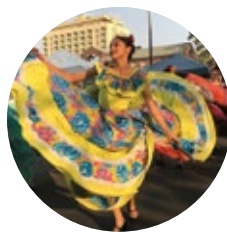
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