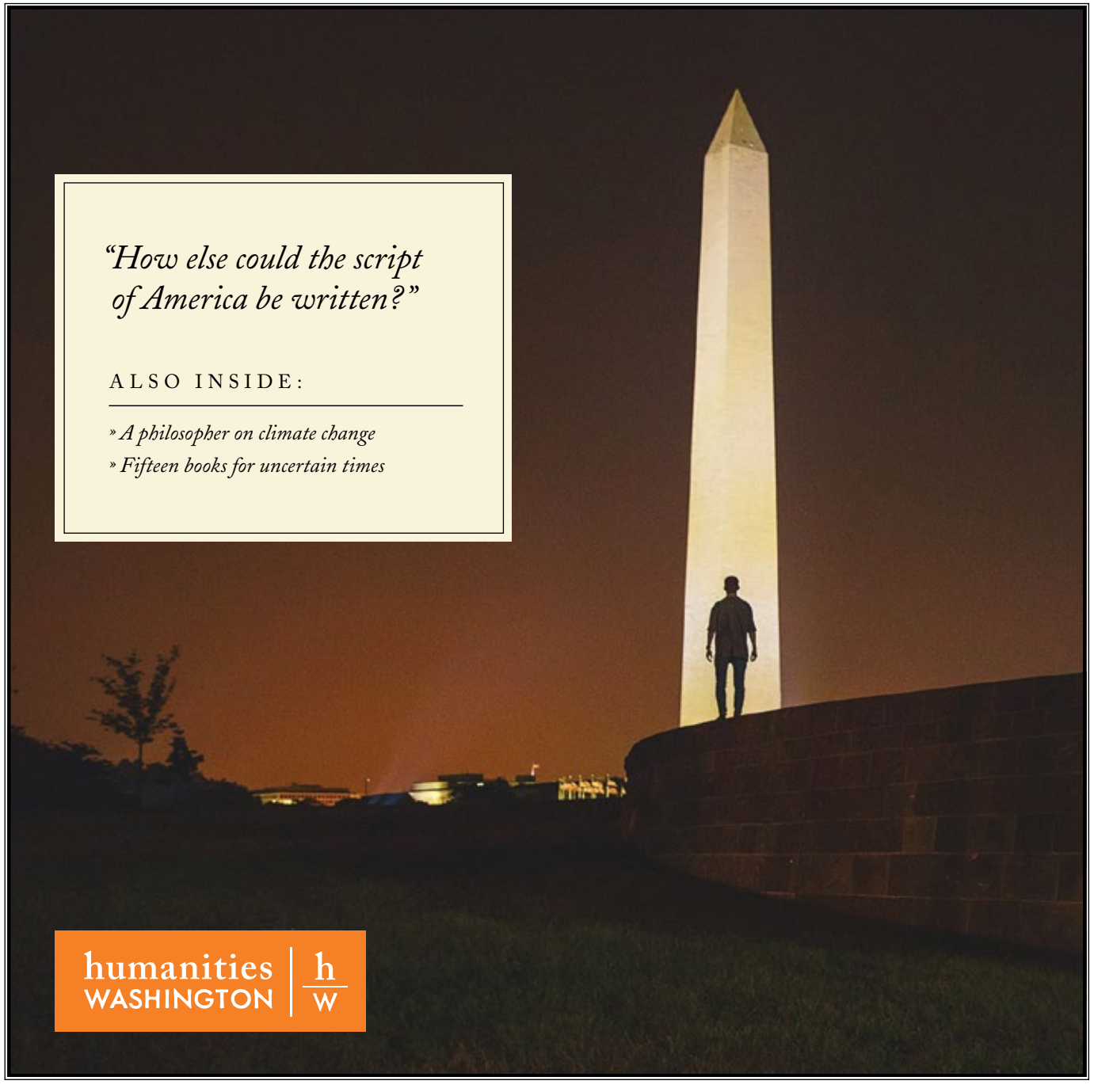
2021 Issue 1 | Free

SPARK

The magazine of Humanities Washington.



"How else could the script of America be written?"

ALSO INSIDE:

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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 twice per 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

Welcome

What a difference a year makes. The last ten months have been unlike anything Humanities Washington, or indeed any of us, have ever experienced. One thing that has remained the same, however, is our need to connect with others—in whatever way possible.

That's what we've been focused on at Humanities Washington: providing avenues for people to keep connecting with ideas and each other, despite the challenges of a pandemic.

Community is built through shared experiences, earnest discourse, deep listening, and storytelling—the building blocks of human connection. It's thrilling to be in spaces filled with passionate learning, sometimes awkward and funny engagement, and inevitably profound insight. Yet, this was in jeopardy when people were asked to shelter in place beginning in March.

Instead of shutting down, Humanities Washington stepped up.

- Cabin Fever Questions fueled conversations in a time of isolation, providing insight and escape.
- Cabin Fever Kids engaged children when schools across the state went online.
- Prime Time Family Reading went virtual, ensuring struggling readers still received support.
- Online events on the pandemic, the election, and more, served hundreds of Washingtonians as they grappled with the many hurdles of 2020.

And to all those who have helped Humanities Washington in this difficult year, thank you for helping us deliver much-needed programing these last several months.

Times are tough. But the humanities provide important opportunities for connection and growth that will help us heal and provide hope.

Warmest regards,

Julie

Julie Ziegler
Chief Executive Officer
Humanities Washington

▲ Photo by Clem Onojeghuo/Unsplash.

STRANGE PAGES: 15 BOOKS FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES

Looking for solace, context, strength, or hope in the face of a global pandemic? These authors can help.

By **Dustyn Addington**

What aspect of our lives has been untouched by COVID-19? There are over 60 million recorded cases at the time of writing. We grieve for more than a million of our neighbors, colleagues, friends, family, students, and community members. We think of the alternate path this year might have taken. What would we have done? Who would we have met? What life-long memories would we have made? The year has been one filled with mourning, precarity, and regret.

It is difficult to live in uncertain times, but we are not the first to do so. In fact living in uncertain times puts us in good company with writers and thinkers who, *because* of their unsettling circumstances, learned profoundly meaningful lessons. The philosopher Boethius wrote "The Consolation of Philosophy" while he was imprisoned in Italy in the 6th century. In his misery, Boethius imagined himself conversing with philosophy in human form, who advised him:

Nothing is miserable unless you think it so; and on the other hand, nothing brings happiness unless you are content with it.

Imprisonment also led Martin Luther King Jr. to create a masterpiece of moral and political philosophy, "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He wrote:

Never before have I written a letter this long—or should I say a book? I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?

Near the beginning of the pandemic, Xiaomi, the Chinese tech company, quoted the Roman philosopher Seneca when the corporation donated tens of thousands of masks to Italy:

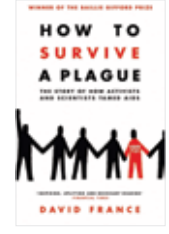
We are waves of the same sea

leaves of the same tree

flowers of the same garden.

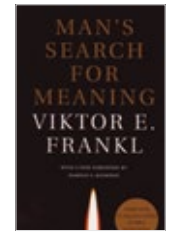
As we gain insight from those who have come before, who have suffered as we have, we can grieve together. We can also ask new questions. Who needs help? What kindness can I perform? Whose voice goes unheard? What strength may I offer my neighbors, colleagues, friends, family, students, and community members? These questions are hard to ask and harder to answer, but the humanities can help illuminate the road before us. by providing wisdom, practical guidance, comfort, and even catharsis. Here are fifteen readings from the humanities that speak to our uncertain times.

IF YOU'RE SEARCHING FOR HOPE:



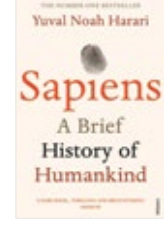
How to Survive a Plague: The Story of How Activists and Scientists Tamed AIDS by David France

The success story of activists (who go on to become scientists, journalists, and community leaders) combating the AIDS epidemic is inspiring, heart-wrenching, and deeply personal. You can also watch the documentary of the same name.



Man's Search for Meaning by Victor Frankl

The ur-text of getting through hard times. Frankl describes his experience of surviving the Holocaust. His ultimate message has resonated ever since: "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'."



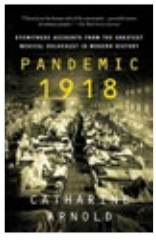
Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind by Yuval Noah Harari

Harari provides an illuminating glimpse into the deep history of humankind. It's lovely to see how far we've come and the means by which we've done it. If the future seems murky to you, you are not alone. Yahari writes, "For the average Roman in Constantine's time, the future was a fog. It is an iron rule of history that what looks inevitable in hindsight was far from obvious at the time. Today is no different."

IF YOU'RE SEEKING HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria, and Hubris by Mark Honigsbaum

A history of pathogens in the 20th century, this book covers everything from the Spanish flu to SARS. Honigsbaum is an excellent guide to pandemics in the modern age.



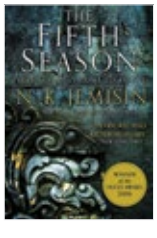
Pandemic 1918: Eyewitness Accounts from the Greatest Medical Holocaust in Modern History by Catharine Arnold

For a more personal route through medical history, Arnold's *Pandemic 1918* gives voice to the people who experienced the 1918 Spanish flu. Harrowing, fascinating, and global in perspective.

The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl by Timothy Egan

Egan's account is unbelievably vivid in its portrayal of a time usually depicted in black and white. A perfect fit if you're looking to see how humans dealt with a widespread natural and economic disaster.

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR SOLIDARITY:

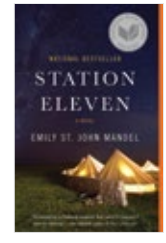


Broken Earth Trilogy by N. K. Jemisin

Set in another world, *The Broken Earth Trilogy* is a resolute but hopeful post-apocalyptic story about people surviving disaster together. They share resources, overcome hardships, and discover hidden talents. It's a story about finding solidarity among your tribe, even if you didn't know you had one.

The Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio

The Decameron is about a group of Florentines living through the plague of 1348 and their self-quarantine for ten days and ten nights, telling each other stories to keep their spirits up. The stories range from the funny, to the romantic, to the dramatic, but always beautiful and full of wit. Reach across time and toward the people nearby, as we are all together in this, even if we find ourselves distanced socially.



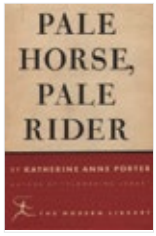
Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel

The New York Times review of this book is appropriately titled, "Shakespeare for Survivors." Centering on a member of a Shakespearean troupe traveling and performing in a post-plague world with flashbacks to the present day, this book is a lyrical and engrossing look at the humanities after the world goes to hell.

IF YOU WISH TO LOOK INTO THE VOID:

The Sacrificial Egg by Chinua Achebe

Achebe's short story about the impact of smallpox, in the contexts of colonialism and the protagonist's relationships, provides a glimpse into the gap between what one imagines one's life to be and the external forces that conspire to make it what it is. The best version of this story can be found in Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories*, but an earlier, free version is available from *The Atlantic*.



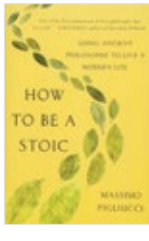
Pale Horse, Pale Rider
by Katherine Anne Porter

This novella looks at disease right in the eyes, unflinchingly. Set during the Spanish flu of 1918, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* focuses on a journalist in Denver who suffers from the flu and her relationship to a soldier. Porter herself caught the Spanish flu, and the historian Alfred W. Crosby's history of the Spanish flu is dedicated to her due to the story's unparalleled depiction of the disease.

Rosewater by Tade Thompson

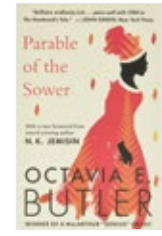
Author Adam Roberts aptly describes *Rosewater* as a "cyberpunk-biopunk-Afropunk thriller." As you might guess, there is a lot going on in this book. Even stating the premise (an alien biodome in Nigeria which heals the afflictions of those nearby once per year) does not give you a glimpse at its breadth and depth. At the intersection of disease and health, community and solitude, fear and hope, *Rosewater* is a beautiful case study of uncertain times.

IF YOU NEED TO BORROW STRENGTH:



How to be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live the Good Life by Massimo Pigliucci

Pigliucci provides an accessible, modern guide to Stoic philosophy, which originated in Athens in the 3rd century BCE. Stoicism teaches that happiness depends on recognizing what is under our control and what is not. (And it turns out that not much is under our control.) Check out this "Short Pitch" for the book from the Institute of Arts and Ideas, which includes an interview with Pigliucci.



The Parable of the Sower
by Octavia E. Butler

Butler's world is a miserable one: fraught with physical danger, malevolent political systems, and personal tragedy. Her protagonist, Lauren, perseveres through it all, envisioning and leading in the pursuit of a better world. In comparing the book to *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, reviewer Abby Aguirre claims that "for sheer peculiar prescience, Butler's novel and its sequel may be unmatched."

Hard Times Require Furious Dancing by Alice Walker

Walker's poems confront the hard stuff directly: grief, climate change, poverty. But Walker rises above those challenges and brings the reader along with her. Walker writes in the preface, "Sometimes it all feels a bit too much to bear. Once a person of periodic deep depressions, a sign of mental suffering in my family that affected each sibling differently, I have matured into someone I never dreamed I would become: an unbridled optimist who sees the glass as always full of something. It may be half full of water, precious in itself, but in the other half there's a rainbow that could exist only in the vacant space. I have learned to dance."

What would you add to the list? Share your recommendations with us on Twitter and Facebook.

Dustyn Addington is the director of programs at Humanities Washington. He wishes to thank Lane Eagles, Sam Sumpter, and Elizabeth Scarbrough for their excellent suggestions for this list.

PHILOSOPHER:

HOW HUMANS SEE OURSELVES IS LITERALLY KILLING THE PLANET

▲ Photo by Matt Howard/Unsplash.

Technology alone won't save us from climate change. We have to fundamentally shift how we view our role on earth, says professor Brian Henning.

By **Jeffrey Howard**

While many of us focus our attention on developing the technologies and policies necessary to solve climate change, perhaps we don't concentrate enough on the deeper problem—our relationship with nature. Each of us feels the sting of our possible global ecological collapse, but not enough of us allow that to transform how we relate to the environment. We ignore the signs or become fatalists.

Brian G. Henning, professor of philosophy and environmental studies at Gonzaga University, argues that the issue at hand is not whether we have technology sufficient to solve our greatest existential threat—it's how we view our place. It's how we view our place in the world that's the fundamental issue. We've internalized the wrong story about who we are. He believes that if we can become responsible *members* of the wider biotic community, and jettison the notion that we are its *rulers*, there's a good chance we'll have a thriving earth for many generations to come.

Admittedly, there are plenty of reasons to be grim, but Henning finds great hope in the way young people are shifting their

relationship with nature. Compared to other generations, they have done less to contribute to climate change, and yet they are likely to be the ones who will experience its worsening effects. Many are taking hold of the plethora of opportunities available to act—on both the local and larger systemic levels. To really galvanize our neighbors and communities, he believes we need to recalibrate our philosophical foundations.

Whether we realize it or not, these first principles animate the degree to which each of us acknowledges the precariousness of our situation.

In an effort to challenge the narratives we've been telling ourselves for millennia, Henning travels Washington presenting a talk titled, "Heating Up: The Ethics of Climate Change," which is based on his 2015 book *Riders in the Storm: Ethics in an Age of Climate Change*. He believes we have the ability to reverse course, but the key to actually achieving that will require a lot more humility and deeper reflection on the moral beliefs that anchor our worldviews.

This interview has been edited for brevity and style.

Jeffrey Howard: You focus on how shifting our relationship with nature is central to reversing climate change. The United States—as with many developed, Western, democratic countries—has a protracted history of people trying to control or tame the earth. For a long time, many of us have seen ourselves as masters of nature, or least have aspired toward having dominion over it. What are some of the historical and philosophical roots of this mentality?

Brian Henning: The historical and philosophical roots of the ecological crisis run deep. The historian Lynn White Jr. famously argued in 1967 that the destructive attitude of humans toward nature can be traced back thousands of years to the book of Genesis in the Bible. He contends that Western Christianity misinterpreted "dominion" to entail domination instead of stewardship, and that this created the intellectual conditions for the arrogant misuse of nature.

Others trace the philosophical roots of the ecological crisis back some four hundred years to the start of the modern era in Europe (circa 1600). According to early modern thinkers such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon, we humans are not a part or product of nature. Rather, they believed that humans are the sole thinking being in an otherwise clockwork universe. Nature, on such a view, is merely a vast machine and we are its masters and engineers who can bend it to our will without limit. What both of these accounts have in common is that, rather than seeing humans as an integral part of an interdependent and evolving planet, much of Western thought has depicted humans as fundamentally separate from nature and even contemptuous of it.

What are some philosophical or cultural traditions that you think exemplify the type of relationship with nature that more of us ought to strive for?

The cultural historian Thomas Berry contends that the old stories depicting what humans are and how they are related to nature are breaking down. Most people no longer see nature as a vacuous, valueless machine or believe that humans are the sole thinking, feeling being in the world. What is still lacking, Berry notes, is a robust alternative story or narrative depicting what humans are and how we ought to see our relationship to nature.

If we are not the lords, masters, or engineers of nature, then what are we?

The great American conservationist Aldo Leopold contends that the next stage in human ethical evolution is developing the ability to see that we are members of what he calls the "biotic community." We should, Leopold suggests, stop seeing ourselves as conquerors and instead seek to become citizens of the wider biotic community. This next stage of human ethical evolution is "an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity." This task is what Berry calls the "great work" of the current generation and the next: to transition the human-nature relationship from one of arrogance and blind devastation to one of mutual benefit. That is, the great work before us is to conceive and realize a form of genuine human flourishing within a flourishing world.

How would you describe your relationship with the natural world? Do you align more with a transcendentalist view, akin to that of Ralph Waldo Emerson—the outdoors as a "natural cathedral?" Or, do you more closely resonate with that of a concerned scientist well aware that humanity—alongside many other species—will no longer exist if we fail to change course?

I tend to identify with both Leopold and Berry. The task is to become a responsible member of the wider biotic community of which we are a part and on which we depend. This is not a

> *Rather than seeing humans as an integral part of an interdependent and evolving planet, much of Western thought has depicted humans as fundamentally separate from nature and even contemptuous of it.*

"back to nature" project that romanticizes or fetishizes nature. The question is: How do we live well in our place as an integral part of a larger whole?

Are there any other writers and thinkers that have significantly helped shape your view of nature?

My work is heavily influenced by that of the British mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead developed what he called the "philosophy of organism." One of its central insights is that, at its most basic level, reality is defined by interdependence. To exist is to be in interdependent relation. Nothing is truly unrelated or valueless. This organic view of reality heavily influences my work and thought.

Which type of messaging or storytelling about the global ecological crisis do you find to be the least effective at inspiring action? Which types of arguments do you think are counter-productive when it comes to convincing others of the urgency surrounding climate change?

Over the last two years, I've become involved with the Spokane Community Adaptation Project and Spokane City Council's Sustainability Action Subcommittee. One of the primary goals of these two groups is to help citizens in our region better imagine some of the consequences of climate change in this century. We have enjoyed going out into the community to speak with our neighbors about the importance of making clear plans to mitigate our contributions to climate change and prepare our community to adapt to the increasingly hostile climate we are creating.

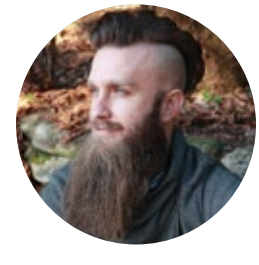
It can be quite powerful to shrink a global problem like climate change down to a size that connects to local concerns. These concerns might include how changes in snowpack might affect winter recreation and the health of our rivers, to how extreme heat might affect large annual events important to our community, such as the Bloomsday marathon or Hoopfest competition.

What are some technologies, community organizations, or projects currently underway that give you a lot of reasons to be optimistic regarding humanity's ability to address the ecological crisis?

Although we need rapidly to decarbonize our energy and transportation systems, the challenge of global climate change is not ultimately a technological problem, nor is it the sort of problem that can be solved solely through individual changes in habits. Ultimately, global climate change is not the problem; it is a symptom of a deeper one that concerns how humans see themselves and their relationship to the wider natural world.

Climate change is also what sociologists call a "collective action" problem. It has to be addressed at the systemic level. It is partly because of this realization that three years ago I helped to found a local branch of the international climate justice organization 350.org. Through 350 Spokane I work with my neighbors to bring about a just transition to a more sustainable future that works for all, both human and non-human alike. I find this community organizing work to be a great source of meaning and optimism in an otherwise dark time.

It is also a great source of inspiration to work with young people at Gonzaga University where I teach. Although young people today have had little hand in creating the global ecological crisis, they face it with admirable courage and dedication.



Jeffrey Howard is the founder and editor of *Erraticus*, an online publication focused on human flourishing. He is also the host of the Damn the Absolute! podcast.

The Night Walk

A short story by Beth Piatote

After his disappointingly chaste dream about Brad Pitt, Rowan realized that he had to up his sleep game.

During the pandemic, his friends had been extravagantly gifted with dreams, describing nocturnal hours filled with adventure, romance, and fabulous sex. In his dream, Rowan had been on a movie set with Brad Pitt, and when Brad embraced him off camera, Rowan had rebuffed his advances, saying: "No, Brad. I respect you as a person." In the dream, Rowan had earnestly desired Brad Pitt to feel loved for who he was—a whole person with insecurities and disappointments—and not just a gorgeous movie star ready to hook up.

But the next day, Rowan cursed his subconscious.

"Idiot!" he muttered, as the words "No, Brad," jolted around his head like bumper cars. *What were you thinking?! Who curves Brad Pitt?*

Rowan worried not only that his sexual appetite had malfunctioned, but that he was in the middle of an entire systemic breakdown.

▲ Illustration by Maria Abando.

Rowan turned to his friend, Ted, for advice.

"It was a one-off," Ted said. "I'm sure you have it in you to mack with Brad Pitt. And besides: Brad Pitt isn't for everyone."

In truth, Rowan wasn't sure that he had it in him. He was two years past the divorce, with only minor flirtations and occasional hueys to patch him through. And he wasn't as young as he used to be; the Brad Pitt dream was nearly age-appropriate. This was yet another disappointment.

During the pandemic, Rowan's primary companions had been houseplants and despair. He lived alone, and without the usual fodder of the gym, parties, and the office to support his social metabolism, he felt bereft. Now the weekly staff meeting appeared as a delightful mirage of human connection. He longed to make photocopies, or to stand in line for coffee. He was lonely. Some days he went to bed and woke up with the exact same thought: *I will sleep alone for eternity.*

Rowan had accepted the fact that there was little he could control in daily life. But he was not ready to admit that he could not control—or at least influence—his dreams. He needed to live the life he was missing, if not by day then by night. He'd grown up hearing stories of old-time Indian men, his great-uncle among them, who could change the weather. Dreams seemed a modest reach compared to a lightning storm.

Ted said Rowan needed to make friends with his subconscious, and that meant no more dream-shaming. With proper appreciation, perhaps Rowan could persuade his mind to re-assemble the pixels of the Brad Pitt dream and give him another go.

This seemed a bit high-level to start, so Rowan began with the mundane: sleeping on the other side of the bed. He moved the nightstand to the unused side, and placed a blooming orchid next to the lamp.

That night, he took a warm bath and slipped into his favorite boxers, then glided through some gentle stretches. His body felt alive and open, and ready for a fabulous date with his own imagination.

He lay down in a kingly pose, palms faced upward. "Come at me, Universe!" he said, and soon entered a deep, golden slumber.

Two hours later, he jolted upright. Too hot. Where was he? He kicked off the blanket. He turned to his side. He went to the bathroom. He paced. He ate a bowl of corn flakes. He did a crossword puzzle. He watched a rerun of *The Andy Griffith Show*. Would he dream of young Andy Griffith? Maybe. If he could sleep. He looked at the clock. It was 1:32. He folded himself into fetal position. He begged for sleep. All night he battled to reclaim the left side of the bed. The side that had been left.

The next morning, he swore at the mirror. Was there a sleep-deprivation equivalent of hangry? Slangry? Slurious?

"You can't fight your animal nature," Ted said, and urged Rowan to double-down. "Get outside. Pee on something. Go foraging."

Rowan struck out by foot that afternoon, heading northeast, away from his regular routes. Not exactly the wild, but the best he could do. As he walked, the street and yards became novel—each one a possible source of treasure. He stopped at a blue house with blackberry bushes sprawling over the fence. Rowan tested one, then plucked a handful.

"You making a pie?"

Rowan stepped back and looked for the voice. It came from the balcony. A handsome man, middle-aged, sat at a café table, with a book and a can of No-Li IPA beside him.

"Uh, no," Rowan said. "Just … snacking."

"Ah, curse the bad luck!" the man said.

"You've got a lot then?"

The man smiled. "You're familiar w ith the iceberg theory?"

Rowan smiled too, imagining a vast tangle of berry vines on the other side of the fence.

"The ones on the alley side are riper," the man said. "Help yourself."

"Thanks," Rowan replied.

"And come back when you want to make a pie," he said.

Rowan smiled and nodded, then made his way down the alley. Foraging had become unexpectedly pleasant. Soon he had filled the bag, and glanced back at the balcony. The man was reading the book. "Thanks!" Rowan called out, and the man looked up and waved.

Rowan cut across the park on his way home. The lawn was dotted with families and couples lounging on blankets, and college students playing badminton. How normal everything seemed, Rowan thought, and just then a doe darted out from a thicket and ran. Rowan froze. More alarming than the sudden eruption of movement was the fact that no one in the park seemed to see her. The couples continued to gaze at their phones and each other, the families ate their sandwiches, and the shuttlecock floated over the net.

"Did you see that?" he called out to a couple near the path. "That deer?"

The pair looked up at him, then around the park. They shook their heads.

Rowan followed the doe, crossing the park and turning down a side street. There he came upon a plum tree, with branches laden with fruit. The purple orbs released easily into his palm, and he picked five to carry home.

That night, Rowan dreamed of the blue house, and the tall fence around it. He was walking along the fence, and the man in the balcony was on the other side. He could feel the man's presence, a delicious tension between them. But the fence! The briar of thorns! He was certain that if he followed the fence he would come to a gate. A pink sky saturated the scene with a rosy glow, and Rowan's heart bloomed. Finally he came to an opening and crawled under the thorns, but when he arrived at the other side, the house was gone and so was the man. The pink sky remained, and a land of tawny hillsides opened before him. The land felt both magical and familiar, just as the man had felt known to him, while yet a stranger.

"Obviously something inside of you has died," Ted said the next day.

"Wait, what?"

"You're dreaming about a fence, a briar, and a desert," he said. "Try to be more open."

Rowan objected, but Ted's interpretation stuck.

Later that day, Rowan walked to the park and sat on a bench, hoping that the deer would re-appear. Instead a man approached him. The man's clothes were clean but rumpled, and he carried a dingy rucksack. His shoes curled upward. The man was in his fifties, with a trim beard under his mask, curly hair, and blue eyes. The man walked directly to Rowan, who had never felt so trapped in the wide open.

"Can you help me?" he asked.

Rowan reached for his wallet.

"No, no," the man said. "Can you help me write a letter?"

"Maybe," Rowan said. Ted's words flitted across his brain.

"It's for my girlfriend," he said. The man sat down and unzipped his bag, extracting a notebook and a card with metallic stars and planets on it. "Can you write on this?"

Rowan looked at the card.

"I can't write," the man said.

"But you have a notebook there," Rowan said. "And I'm sure your girlfriend would rather see your writing than mine."

The man began to repack. "No, I always do it this way," he said. "She knows it's my words."

The words *BE MORE OPEN* floated across the sky.

"Wait," he said. "I'll do it."

Rowan took the card. The man opened his notebook, which was filled with letters and symbols.

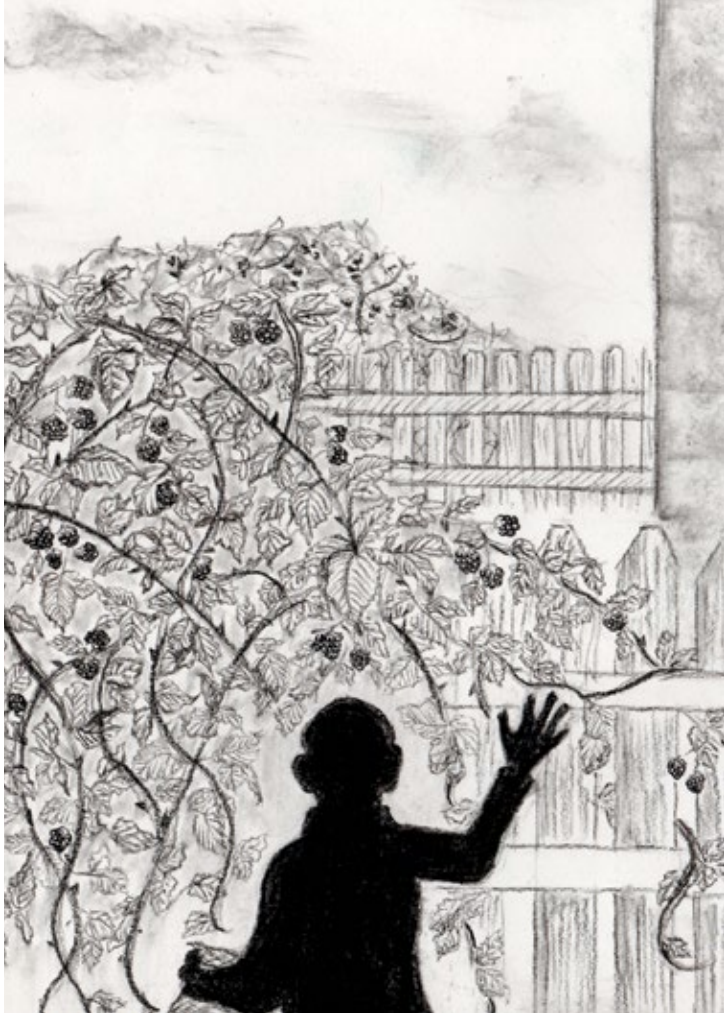
"Dear Maura," he said. "I have traveled through time and galaxies to be with you. I came to Earth to become a dinosaur, and then a human. I didn't want you to leave but once you decided I couldn't stop you. I ran after you but you were gone. I had to come to Earth to find you, and remind you of your power."

Rowan penned each word as elegantly as he could. The man smiled, satisfied.

"It's true, you know," the man said. "She was right beside me, then I turned and she was gone. The dinosaur time was rough. Thanks for your help."

Rowan was certain that the man was homeless. And he was certain that what the man said was true, though he didn't know how.

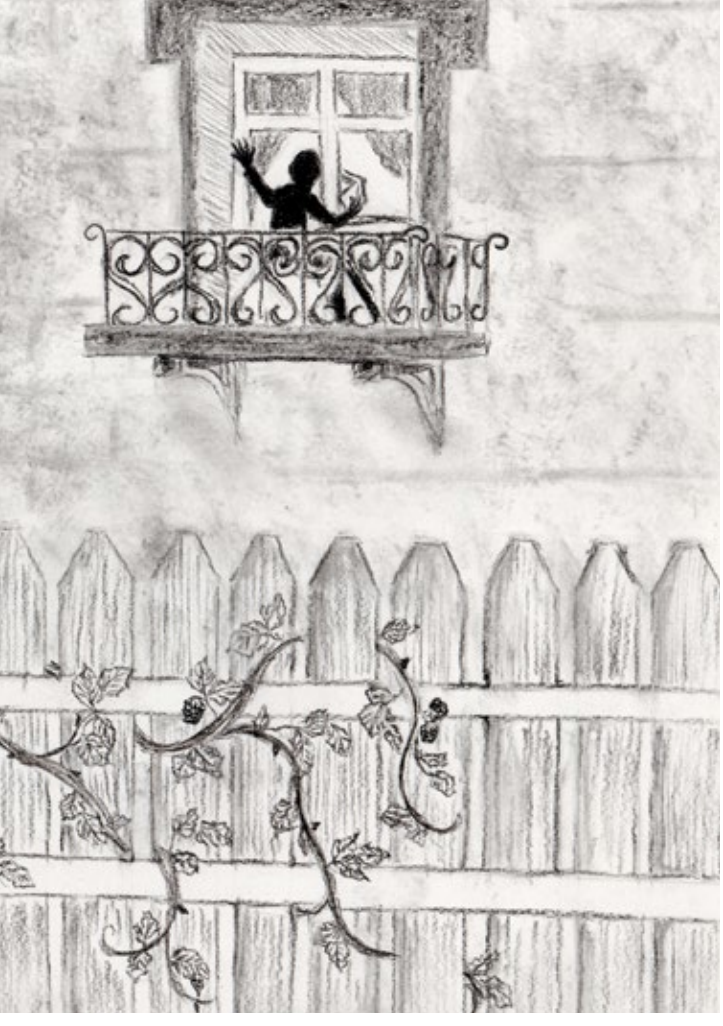
That night Rowan dreamed that he was on a tropical island. He was visiting friends who lived in a cluster of houses beside the ocean, and each house had a canoe. Around him, children were playing and women were cooking and gossiping. The air was thick and held a charge of anticipation; a rainstorm was on



its way. Rowan felt, in every way, his boy-self, with skinny legs and cut-off shorts and excitement to play with the other boys. Then he noticed that rather than running, the boys were flying, like little flying saucers. Rowan discovered that he too had this ability. He sat cross-legged and using his arms as levers, lifted off the ground and cruised smoothly around. He delighted in the discovery of his new power. And he felt pure happiness as he flew about with the other boys, chasing each other through groves of palm trees, dodging houses and dogs, and knowing they were free to play until they were called for dinner.

The dream seemed to restore something in him, perhaps some optimism that had been stripped away by the divorce, the pandemic, or belly flab.

He channeled this energy into a massive purge of housewares. By nature Rowan was tidy. But after having experienced the smooth



▲ Illustration by Maria Abando.

pleasure of self-propelled flight, he longed to be unburdened by things, especially things that reminded him of his previous life: the casserole dish, the wine glasses, the birthday watch, the half-set of bath towels. All day he went room to room, plucking items off shelves and emptying drawers. He made four trips to Goodwill and one to the dump.

On his final return, feeling sweaty and satisfied, he stopped half-way up the walk. A package was waiting on the porch. Cruel joke! Here was the Hydra's head.

But it wasn't. Turning the package over, Rowan recognized the handwriting. He opened it and read the card: *Hey Neph, Went to the mountains with Rosie and your cousin Eugene. Got nine buckets of hucks. Gathered some pisqu medicine for you. Love, "Unc" PS Rosie wants to know what's good on Netflix.*

Rowan unwrapped the package: two bags, one filled with dried Indian tea and the other with dried huckleberries, plus a vacuum-sealed package of smoked salmon. For a long moment, he held the open package in both hands, thinking about his family.

That night, Rowan brewed a cup of Indian tea. He held the cup to his chin, inhaling the forest smell. That night he dreamed of walking along the Columbia, the water shimmering in late afternoon sun. His skin warmed in the light, and he became aware of an older man walking beside him. On the other side of the river, bluffs rose up from water's edge. He could smell the bright scent of fish in the water, and hear the grasses shuffle and shoo in the wind. Before him, he saw the shadow of a great bird in flight, and looked up to see an eagle the size of a plane crossing over him. The path before him changed, and he found himself walking through sage-covered hills, pungent and alive after rain. The sky turned a fantastic color of pink. He felt a doe walking beside him. He turned to look, and she leapt into the sky and flew away. The sky faded to a deep blue, and as stars began to appear, he found himself walking among them. Not flying, but walking through the sky with Grizzly Bear and the wolves and the North Star, and here he felt most serene, as he walked along, greeting each one as an old friend.

Beth Piatote is a scholar of Native American/Indigenous literature and law; a writer of fiction, poetry, plays, and essays; and an Indigenous language revitalization activist/healer, specializing in Nez Perce language and literature. She is the author of two books: *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature*; and *The Beadworkers: Stories*. The story above was written and read by her for Humanities Washington's Bedtime Stories fundraiser event in 2020.

WHERE DID THIS QUOTE ACTUALLY COME FROM?

by **Tessa Hulls**

Tessa Hulls is a multidisciplinary artist, writer, and outdoorswoman who focuses on women's stories, and her writing has appeared in the *Washington Post* and *Atlas Obscura*'s Kickass Women series. She current presents her Humanities Washington talk, "She Traveled Solo: Strong Women in the Early 20th Century."

I AM PART OF THE AMERICAN STORY

"I felt as if I was asked to meld myself into America without being able to ask why America was shaped that way in the first place."

By **Michelle Liu**

The group who came to the library that particular rainy afternoon had much to say. In response to my talk on the ways fiction has shaped morals around our nation's imagining of slavery and its aftermath, they shared personal and impassioned stories of the place of race in their own lives. After our discussion, a smiling woman approached me: "I really enjoyed your talk," she said. I thanked her, and waited for her to finish wording what was on her mind. "If you don't mind me asking, I'm wondering how your ethnicity relates to this topic."

She said "ethnicity," but I knew she meant race. It felt right for her to ask—they had just shared so much with me. Her curious questioning vocalized what I'm sure other people have privately wondered, and is something I ask myself too: why is this person with an Asian face talking about the place of Blackness in the American imagination?

In the bit it took me to think of a reply, a compressed version of the journey that had brought me to apply to be part of the Humanities Washington Speakers Bureau surged through my head. I thought of visiting the graduate program I would eventually choose to attend some twenty-five years ago as a prospective student. The sole Asian American professor on the faculty at the time advised me not to come because of the lack of support for Asian American studies. I committed to the program anyway. Some part of me knew, even if I could not articulate it then, that the path I needed to take involved the kind of learning I could do precisely because I would not be surrounded by like-minded people. I knew I would have to work hard to discover, and then communicate, why it was important to pursue the research directions I wanted to take, which was a challenge that I needed. I could hardly articulate to myself why my interests were of significance to anybody but

> *I saw how easily a society envisioning the equality of "we the people" can blind itself with stories that perpetuate the idea that heterogeneity is to be feared rather than nurtured.*

myself. Historically, Asians have been a statistical minority in the United States. How was what I wanted to do different from mirror gazing?

My years of study showed me that what I first thought was a mirror was in fact a window looking out to the past. Asian Americans make up a small number of the U.S. population by legislative design, historically labeled as unassimilable aliens and a docile model minority, often (perplexingly) at the same time. Gatekeepers to America cast us as bit players, lucky to be invited, without apparent editing access to the entire complicated script that holds these American states united.

How does the weight of the past get felt by a single person? For me, I felt it in my formative years as a hard-to-articulate estrangement from the stories held up to me as ethical fables of how to be a good person and a good citizen. I felt as if I was asked to meld myself into America without being able to ask why America was shaped that way in the first place.

As I studied early American literature to prepare for graduate exams at one of the nation's oldest universities (seeded by riches from the slave, tea, indigo, spices, and opium trades), I felt in a new way how precarious the democratic mission that inspired this country's existence is. I saw how easily a society envisioning the equality of "we the people" can blind itself with stories that perpetuate the idea that heterogeneity is to be feared rather than nurtured. That the nation did continue to hold together was marvelous testament to the people who used the indomitable power of the imagination to narrate into existence new possibilities for connecting through our differences, when all signs otherwise pointed to it being easier and safer for everyone to bunker down in their own spaces and beliefs.

But as valuable as these fictions were for producing fresh ways of unifying, they invariably encased omissions and inconsistencies; I saw that the casting of Asian Americans as both aliens and models was no fluke. The contradiction itself was symptomatic of an American script as yet too reliant on the cliché of naming others as different and less-than-human in order to induce a fevered mirage of sameness and order. In my years of conversations with students, I've realized that others too, because of how the past has weighed on their present lives, have also felt variously burdened by this cliché, and are looking to do something about it.

What I've learned is this: all our private mirrors can become windows, which gives us a ledge from which to see the multiple ways we have not yet recognized in everyone the human capacity to feel, act, and change—and then to push for stories that can help us do better. I stand in awe of the many who, from the very beginning of this country, used their restlessness with being handed bit parts as a creative flint: how else could the script of America be written to make space for the majesty and potential of human differences? "All men are created equal" were the best words the Founding Fathers had at the time to describe protagonists for America's origin story as a nation built on possibility, rather than rank and ancestry. Since then, there have been multitudes of people, who through words, labor, action, and art, have thought about, cared about, and argued over what this nation can be so that it may strive to fulfill its promise. The result of this cacophony is our continually coming up with more generous and true words to imagine how we interconnect and see each other. And we will continue—we must—to imagine more.

"The Country that Fiction Built" is my small way of inviting people to do this imagining together. So this was my reply to the woman: my experiences as an Asian American have everything to do with this talk. I'm glad you asked.

Michelle Liu is a professor in the English department at the University of Washington. She is currently presenting a free Speakers Bureau talk, "The Country That Fiction Built."

COVID GARDENS

By **Claudia Castro Luna**

On our dining room table
a pitcher holding magenta peonies
and orange Gerber daisies
spills its June color and splendid scent
over coffee cups and Sunday paper

The flowers are a gift
cut for me yesterday evening
by neighbors grateful
for the strawberry jam
I walked over to their house

The strawberries plucked
earlier in the day from my garden
were no more and no less crimson,
no more and no less sweet,
than they needed to be

In my kitchen, the blood
of the earth mingled
with the snow of the sugar
until their heating alchemy
reached perfection, was jarred

Garden gifts making for rich
tables in slim times —
mine, plentiful with print and flowers
theirs, with jam, bread and butter,
or perhaps just with a good lick
to the back of a spoon

Claudia Castro Luna is the current Washington State Poet Laureate. The poet laureate program is presented by Humanities Washington and the Washington State Arts Commission/ArtsWA

WHAT MY UNCLE'S CENTURY-OLD IMMIGRATION STORY CAN STILL TEACH US

▲ Miguel employed at an ice plant in Bakersfield (courtesy of Carlos Gil).

Carlos Gil's uncle risked everything to cross the US–Mexico border without documents in 1922. Why? And what does his story reveal about the struggles of future immigrants?

By **Carlos Gil**

My uncle had finally arrived at the Mexican border town of Nogales, intent on crossing over to the United States. Like countless others, Miguel located the central plaza and "met a young man very much like me," he told me one afternoon when I interviewed him many years later. They discovered mutual interests in stepping over the line and agreed to do it together the next day. "They allowed people to cross," he explained to me with a touch of sheepiness, recognizing that he really knew he was not supposed to. "I don't know whether that was good or bad to cross illegally," he offered.

He talked it over with his mother (Carlota, my grandmother) who had also traveled with him to the border from central Mexico but was not crossing at that time. "Once on the other side I'm going to get a job and I'll send you money," he assured her. It was 1922, and he was twenty years old and her favorite son. They had shared a lot already, just in traveling to the border, so she agreed to let him go, reluctantly. She knew she could count on him and she also knew that she wouldn't be left alone; her daughter, my mother, Guadalupe, stood by her side, only seventeen years-old.

How can we fully appreciate why a young man like Miguel would want to cross a desert on foot with little or no food or water, not knowing where he would wind up? He never fully explained it to his children, and I did not ask him exactly.

I interviewed my tío (uncle) Miguel as part of an oral history assignment at UCLA in the late 1970s, and I also questioned other members of my family, recording their answers and finally writing a book about our family immigration experience. It's entitled, *We Became Mexican American: How Our Immigrant Family Survived to Pursue the American Dream*, and in it we share fragments of our collective lives beginning in the 1920s, when we were a small family, all the way to the 1970s when we, the children, had grown up.

As with other migrants over time, I believe the answer to why my uncle took such risks to cross the border lies in the larger context of their lives, as it does in my uncle's larger migration story.

First, the family had to stay together. His older brother, Pascual, had forged the route five years earlier. In a grammarless letter, he bid the rest of the family to follow him. He implored them to leave the hacienda (plantation) because the landowner will want to rape Guadalupe, sooner or later. Carlota knew fully well about such things and so she agreed, and cast aside

▲ Miguel Naranjo at 45 (courtesy of Carlos Gil).

enormous hurdles to pull her fourteen–year-old daughter away and, along with Miguel, join Pascual in the new land called California and thus keep the family together. This was the biggest pulling factor.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 also played a part in the decision to emigrate, though less directly in young Miguel's willingness to journey on foot to a strange new land. The great tumult arose when he was eight years old and it did not simmer down until he landed in California. His brother, however, was swept up in the uproar that induced armed horsemen to destroy anything in sight from government buildings to churches and farms, though in the end the great rebellion brought major changes to the country. In any case, Pascual was the kind who would join the fight and thus found himself on the Arizona border chasing after revolutionaries. One day he threw away his rifle and abandoned his horse and walked to Tucson. He too was conscripted to work on American railroad tracks.

Miguel and his friend crossed the border at night, staying away from the main road going north toward Tucson. There were few if any fences marking the boundary in those days, and the U.S. border guards tended to stay posted inside their office cubicles at the main official crossings. As I spoke with Miguel, he searched his memory and added,

We guided ourselves by watching for automobile traffic part of the time and watching for the trains too. We walked half the night and slept under a bridge. The next day we arose and continued following the railroad track. The ground was full of brush and trees in some areas, and bare in others.

Indeed, walking north on the desert floor, flanking the railroad track that partly parallels the old Nogales-Tucson road, and now the new Interstate 19, they stepped past groves of gnarly mesquite. They also walked around clumps of ocotillo and cylindrical cholla cactus, as many scaly and luminous reptiles slithered away from them in their trudge north. Unknowingly, they ambled past the crumbling Tumacacori missions built in the 1690's by the Pimas, under the direction of Father Kino, and paced not too far away from the ruins of the old Spanish fort known as the Presidio de Tubac, erected 170 years earlier, now decaying.

In the coolness of the morning, about thirty-five miles south of Tucson, near present day Green Valley, they landed a ride. A Mexican man in a truck stopped and said to them, "You're lucky. You've gone past the most dangerous part of the road, so I'll take you into Tucson." Miguel and his buddy thanked the man from the bottom of their hearts when he dropped them off right in the middle of Tucson. He would be the first of many Good Samaritans driving a vehicle along the immigrant trail and willing to help my pioneering ancestors.

Not having eaten a proper meal since Nogales, they were able to put a few Mexican and American coins together and bravely entered a small café. Like many eating establishments in Tucson today, the waitresses spoke Spanish—lucky for our young explorers—but the fare was American. This is how my uncle and his fellow adventurer gulped down their first meal in the United States, a plateful of pancakes, a new type of breakfast for them. "That's what we ate!" he said with giddy delight, subtly drawing a contrast with more substantial fare. "It was our first American meal! It was good too!" he noted cheerfully.

Like so much of northern Mexico, Tucson also looked and felt different to Miguel. Its dry, sunny climate and its diverse blend of desert-hardened people stimulated him in a way he didn't forget. He tried putting it into words when we spoke: "We noted a different atmosphere," he told me, "different even from Nogales. There were a lot of people on the street—Mexicans and Americans—the town just looked different in my eyes."

The opportunity to work did not wait long, however. This is what he said:

Afterward, we went to the placita [the Tucson town square] and a Mexican man came to us and said, "I need about thirty-five men to work on the railroad! I need to take them to the State of Oregon, so anyone wanting to go only has to give me their name." I talked with my friend and we decided to get on the list. The man didn't ask for documents, just our names. He told us to go to a certain hotel while he finished gathering the rest of the men he needed and from there we would leave that night.

Like his older brother, Pascual, who crossed the border five years earlier, Miguel and his fellow traveler joined the legions of men contracted on the spot at the border. These were the enganchados [the hooked ones], a word the men themselves must have made up because they would have felt hooked up, literally. To be sure, they stood for America's great thirst for workers in these years, especially in the West. The fact is that my uncle and his buddy helped fill that day's need for thirty-five more railroad workers—part of the thousands enlisted at the border this way.

> "They knew little about where they were going and even less about what they would find. But America needed them."

Miguel and his friend gathered at the appointed Tucson hotel at 6:00 p.m. where they met the contractor who had jotted down their names at the plaza. He directed them to the train where chow was waiting, and it wasn't very long before Miguel and his companion, and others, made a beeline for the food tables loaded with canned tuna, bread, and a variety of other rations. "They fed us," my tío observed in a satisfied way, and the enganchados were soon on their way, into the interior of the United States. They knew little about where they were going and even less about what they would find. But America needed them.

Miguel finally met up with his brother in Fresno, a happy occasion, without a doubt. He held many jobs afterwards; he

worked as a miner in the sierras above Fresno, at an ice plant in Bakersfield, in the orange groves of the San Fernando Valley, alongside my father, and in his later years landscaping green areas alongside California's busy highways. He settled in the City of San Fernando, my hometown, where he married. Together, with his wife, they had twelve children whom he steadfastly supported with singular self-respect and by the skin of his teeth. He never faltered. He was a steady and dignified uncle. He died there at the age of 92.

▲ Miguel, age 90 (courtesy Carlos Gil).

Miguel's story counts as part of the larger saga of my family's immigration from Mexico to the United States in the 1920's. It's the story of my ancestors, peasants all, pulling up stakes from their rustic adobe shack and literally trudging over jungle slopes, sleeping on beaches, crossing the arid U.S.-Mexican border, working at odd jobs and finally arriving in southern California years later, where my siblings and I would come to this world. Our story fits perfectly into America's mosaic of workers arriving, eager to lean hard into a job and add their energy on behalf of a thriving society. Our chronicle is part of the little known south-to-north version of immigrants coming to America, complementing the better known east–to–west, Europe–to–America.

Is Miguel's story unique to its time, with little or no application today? People crossing the U.S.–Mexican border without documents is still a reality today. They do it by the thousands each month because they too are responding to the pulling effects of U.S. jobs. They come because they are available to them, on farms, in non-union construction jobs, in meat packing plants, and so on. The Mexican economy has grown enormously since the days of my uncle, but the folks who cannot yet find a niche opt to travel to the U.S. to find employment. In the 1920's and 1930's job agents awaited them at the border, like Miguel informed me, as did the rest of my immigrant forefathers. My grandma and my mom also signed up with their own job agents who intercepted them after stepping on U.S. soil no more than a hundred yards and so did thousands of other Mexican job seekers at the time.

America's economy still functions as a titanic magnet attracting the loose filaments south of the border; it has been a decisive factor in Mexican immigration, and it will not stop tomorrow. A Trumpian wall will not deactivate the magnet.

Why did I write *We Became Mexican American*? I owed it to them, my viejos, my old folks, because they self-consciously shared their memories with me about coming to America. Not only did they want to help me complete my university training, since the interviews constituted a part of a class assignment, they also wanted me to know what they experienced, and they wanted others to learn through me. They wanted to leave a legacy of their struggle to become part of America.

Carlos Gil is an emeritus professor of history at the University of Washington, where he has taught the history of Latin America for over thirty years, and is the author of *We Became Mexican American: How Our Immigrant Family Survived to Pursue the American Dream*. He is delivering a talk, "From Mexican to Mexican-American: A Family Immigration Story," as part of Humanities Washington's Speakers Bureau.

NEWS

from Humanities Washington

Join us in (Re)Building Democracy

In the aftermath of one of the most tense elections in American history, explore the state of American democracy and civic life, and begin to explore "what's next." (Re)Building Democracy will feature online discussions focused on the history of voting and elections, election security, voter disengagement, voter suppression, trust, and polarization. The events will take place between March and May. Further, we're joining with KUOW Public Radio, Spokane Public Radio, and Northwest Public Broadcasting to produce radio content focused on these topics. More details to come—subscribe to our email list by signing up at humanities.org to get updates.

Humanities Washington wins national humanities award for its Cabin Fever Questions project

To help people process what was happening when COVID first struck, Humanities Washington created Cabin Fever Questions. Distributed several times per week on social media and email, Cabin Fever Questions provided humanities-based discussion topics and resources for our lives in quarantine. We asked such questions as "How do you define happiness?" and "How do we remain informed without feeling overwhelmed?", and paired each question with readings to expand the discussion. For parents struggling to keep kids engaged and occupied we created the aforementioned Cabin Fever Kids. In November, the project was awarded a Schwartz Prize from the Federation of State Humanities Councils. The award was given this year as part of a special category recognizing innovative and outstanding public humanities programming conducted by a council in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Give children the chance to explore deeper questions with Cabin Fever Kids

As a response to the pandemic and resulting school closures, Humanities Washington created Cabin Fever Kids, a digital project inspired by our Prime Time Family Reading program. One to two times per week, people across the state would receive a link to a reading of a beloved children's book in their inbox, along with open-ended questions about the story for children, parents, and teachers to discuss—questions rooted in philosophy, critical thinking, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines. With a future that remains uncertain, we decided to compile our Cabin Fever Kids project into a single digital book. Download the book free at humanities.org

The Center for Washington Cultural Traditions launches its new publication, Rites of Green

In January, the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions will launch *Rites of Green*, a digital publication that presents essays, photography, video and audio documentaries and other content related to our state's folklife. The magazine aims to be an equitable space for tradition bearers, documentarians, writers, and other culture workers to share the stories of their communities. *Rites of Green* will use an inclusive definition of folklife and tradition, a place where everything from tribal weaving traditions, Washington state's punk rock heritage and traditional Filipino foodways can be explored. At launch, *Rites of Green* will feature short documentaries and podcasts related to the Center's Cultural Traditions Survey work in Yakima and Twin Harbors.

Stay up to date at humanities.org

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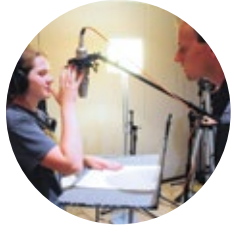
OUR MISSION

Humanities Washington opens minds and bridges divides by creating spaces to explore different perspectives.

OUR PROGRAMS

FAMILY READING uses storytelling and discussion to explore cultural and ethical themes in children's literature and emphasizes the importance of families reading together.

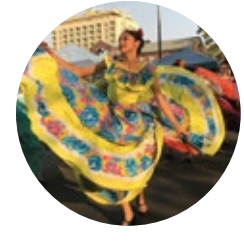


GRANTS assist local organizations in creating opportunities for their community to come together to discuss important issues using the humanities.

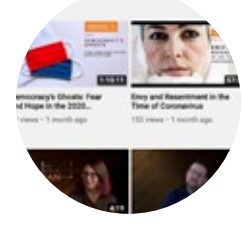
SPEAKERS BUREAU draws from a pool of leading cultural experts and scholars to provide free conversational lectures in communities throughout the state.

THINK & DRINK brings hosted conversations on provocative topics and new ideas to pubs and tasting rooms in Bellingham, Spokane, Seattle, Tacoma, and Yakima.

WASHINGTON STATE POET LAUREATE builds awareness and appreciation of poetry – including the state's legacy of poetry – through public readings, workshops, lectures, and presentations throughout the state. Managed in partnership with ArtsWA.



CENTER FOR WASHINGTON CULTURAL TRADITIONS is a new effort to amplify our state's rich, diverse living cultural treasures through research and special programming. Managed in partnership with ArtsWA.



Check us out on YouTube

In the absence of in-person events, Humanities Washington is producing more online discussions. Join us on YouTube for recorded conversations with scholars on everything from hip hop to the sociology of clutter.

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