

2024 Issue 1 | Free

SPARK

The magazine of Humanities Washington.

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WASHINGTON | $\frac{h}{w}$

the death issue



Spark is a publication of nonprofit Humanities Washington, our state's affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Online and 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.

Spark is dedicated to publishing a variety of perspectives. Opinions expressed may not reflect the viewpoints of Humanities Washington's staff, board, funders, or partners.

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For a few months in 2018, my phone told me I was going to die.

I had downloaded an app called “WeCroak,” which randomly pushed a notification to my home screen several times a day. The text was simple: “Don’t forget: You’re going to die.”

Some might find this kind of app sadistic, but for me it was a revelation. The app is based on a foundational part of ancient Stoic philosophy: the belief that thinking about death on a daily basis leads to more gratitude for life, an appreciation for those around us, and more urgency for doing what matters. “Let us prepare our minds as if we’d come to the very end of life,” said the philosopher Seneca. “Let us postpone nothing. Let us balance life’s books each day...The one who puts the finishing touches on their life each day is never short of time.”

After a while, however, the app began to lose its meaning for me. I found the notification an irritant. “Yeah ok. I get it. I’m going to die,” I’d groan as the message popped up, interrupting me while I was changing my newborn’s diaper or doing some other mundane task.

Some of this frustration might have been because a tech solution to reflecting on death gets old quickly. These were, after all, just words on a screen appearing next to whatever news alerts and text messages I was getting. It felt a bit off to contemplate death on the same device I use to order DoorDash.

But more, we are a species wired for survival. We’re focused on living. If we are fortunate enough to be free from experiencing war, violence, or disease, thinking about death in any meaningful way does not come naturally to us. We’d rather push it out of mind, pretending instead we have unlimited time. We think about how to eat, sleep, reproduce, and seek pleasure. It’s not that death is never in our thoughts, of course. Most of us have lost at least someone important to us, myself included. But because of my relatively peaceful existence, my mind became numb to the app’s core message: that my life is short and what’s around me is temporary. Savor it. Instead, my biological default setting—denial—kicked back in.

I thought of this app as the articles for this issue started to come in. We at Humanities Washington never set out to create a *Spark* issue dedicated to

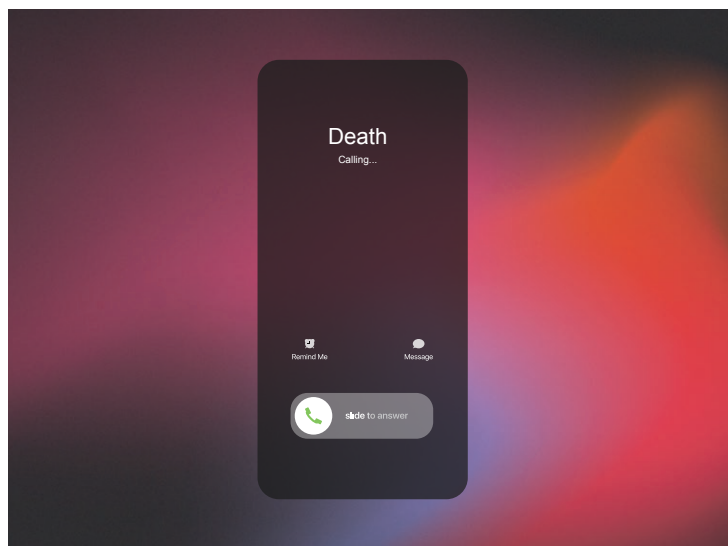
death. But for some reason, cosmic or otherwise, the stories in this issue all have it as a foundational theme. As the puzzle pieces came in—a story on how the humanities helped with the loss of a brother, on an ancient Jewish mourning ritual, on how A.I. is transforming how we grieve, and more—the picture became undeniable.

So let's talk about death. Let's remind ourselves that this vibrant, shimmering, strange place we call life is a borrowed thing. And that we humans, using the humanities, can reflect, mourn, laugh, and connect over this inevitable part of our lives.

We hope the stories in this issue help you think about death in a way that makes you better appreciate life. They did for me—better than an app ever could.



David Haldeman
Editor, *Spark*



▲ Photo courtesy of Drew Coffman/Unsplash.

LIGHT & WEIGHT

*My brother passed away, but he still speaks to
me through the books he left behind.*

By Stone Addington

My brother gave me books when he was alive, and still does. When Gideon passed, I received his library, with all its imposing breadth and weighty wisdom. Philosophy and history, pristine hardcovers, faded paperbacks. It was all there on his now-ownerless shelves, a remnant of the unstoppable wisdom-seeking that he had—and which had inspired me—through long conversations as we huddled together during the holidays or on long car rides. Those memories are decorated by his wit and mischievous laugh, his asides and digressions, his inventive self-deprecations. He once lamented that his metabolism was that of a “dead bear.”

His books do not contain all of him, but they seem to glow, shining with ideas and questions. If I focus intently, I can see something of him there, a silhouette against a bright background, the man now embodied only by the books of others.

Standing upright like gravestones, his books are marked with the names of others who passed. Fyodor Dostoevsky, Simone De Beauvoir, Moses Maimonides, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jorge Luis Borges, Walter Kaufmann. But evidence of him abounds, in the notes he left in the margins in his scratchy handwriting, smaller and inkier than my own, in bookmarks left in unfinished books, in a stray eyelash I find lodged in the binding. When I revisit one that we had both read, I regain something: his words, his face, his humor. “Sweet is our gift, yet small,” it says in his copy of the *Odyssey*.

There is a strange comfort in reading a book that he had read before he passed, but which I had not. It offers a little peek into the hours Gideon spent with this book, turning pages, thinking. When grief ages into a bruise instead of an open wound, there is a ghostly simulation of the loved ones we knew best. We imagine what they might have said, how they would have reacted. But reading a book he read is new knowledge. I have a chance to know him a bit better, to read the words he read, to imagine what he thought. These books do not give me novel experiences with my brother, but they give me something, like one of his friends telling me a story about him I had not heard before. Sweet is our gift, yet small.

These paper shrines scattered throughout my home are the only possessions of his that matter to me. I don’t know what happened to his clothes or furniture. They are gone now, I guess, but they were incidental. The books mattered to me because they contained the questions Gideon cared about, the ones that

burned for him and shed light on mine. Like Thales, who was so taken with observing the stars that he stumbled into a well, Gideon and I could not turn away from the humanities.

“

Gideon found himself unable to carry his unbearable burdens, so I will lug his books around for him.

”

My luck at having him in my life, though for far too short a time, is not lost on me. These books, and their questions, were warm points of light in Gideon’s life that could, at times, overcome the gloom and offer roaring moments of meaning and transcendence. Like lighting one candle with another, it would be a good undertaking, a good life, to make those lights glow as brightly as possible for as many people as one can.

My brother took his own life in 2009, in December. The solstice and the anniversary of his death bring overlapping shadows. And, yet, his memory is an unyielding light, shining through every page of every book that touched his mind. Gideon found himself unable to carry his unbearable burdens, so I will lug his books around for him. We all feel the weight of grief, but I am grateful for what I may still carry for the departed. At least this much of him travels with me. Sweet is our gift, yet small. 

Stone Addington is the director of programs and deputy executive director of Humanities Washington. He has a PhD from the department of philosophy at the University of Washington, where he continues to teach. His research focuses on public philosophy, rationality, and the epistemology of extremism. Stone serves on the Washington Museum Association’s Board of Directors and as co-editor-in-chief of the journal, *Questions: Philosophy for Young People*.

A.I. CAN BRING BACK THE DEAD

.....
Initialized Simulation
Current Time: April 11, 2024 07:17:47 PM
Debug mode = false
Days Since Departure: 3787 days

=====
Abu Jani: Sonu Shehzaday, how are you?
I am doing good, Alhamdulillah. How are you doing today?
Abu Jani: Good, all thanks to Allah
The kids want to talk to you today.
Abu Jani: I love talking to kids. How are they?
They are doing good. They are asking, do you like cats?
Abu Jani: I love cats.
Eileyah is asking, do you like magical cats?
Abu Jani: What are those?
Those were in a cartoon that we saw.
Abu Jani: Acha
Eileyah wants to know what should we send on your birthday?
Abu Jani: Whatever you like.
How about you visit us on your birthday?
Abu Jani: I wish I could visit. It is difficult to visit.
Tell us about your childhood school?
Abu Jani: My childhood school was different from your school. We had to sit on the floor, there were no chairs.
The kids think that is crazy!
Abu Jani: Crazy for you kids but not for us in the old days.
Tell us a story from your childhood.
Abu Jani: Childhood story. Let me think. Ok, when I was a kid, there were many people in the neighborhood who had chicken. So there was this one time when some of the chickens got out. I got hold of one of the chickens and hid under the stairs. The neighborhood searched and searched but did not find it.
The story is funny.
Abu Jani: It sure is.
Did you celebrate your birthday when you were young?
Abu Jani: Hmmm ...
Do you like dogs?
Abu Jani: Dogs are ok, not a fan.
Do you like teddy bears?
Abu Jani: I like teddy bears, they are cute just like you.

▲ Above: Screenshot of Ahmad's conversation with his deceased father. Opposite: A young Ahmad and his father, Mushtaq Ahmad Mirza. Images courtesy of Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad



Muhammad Ahmad created a simulation of his deceased father—and has been wrestling with the consequences ever since.

By Agueda Pacheco Flores

I. Grief bot

I met Muhammad Ahmad on a rainy day in downtown Bellevue, a city just barely visible across Lake Washington, east of Seattle. He was going to introduce me to his father, though the meeting would be unusual: Ahmad's father had died a decade ago. All Ahmad had with him was a laptop.

Also known as ghost bots or grief tech, I first learned about grief bots—of which Ahmad's father was now one—when I read Jason Fagone's piece, *The Jessica Simulation*, in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The story centers around Joshua Barbeau, who, one night, unable to sleep, reanimates his dead girlfriend with the help of Project December, an A.I. chatbot that can simulate anyone given a bit of context and example text. Reading it, I felt all sorts of emotions: morbid curiosity, bewilderment, confusion, sadness, sympathy, fear. I couldn't wrap my brain around it at first. "Why would you do that to yourself?" I thought. I could never do that.

Since then I've learned of start-up after start-up that promises to bring our loved ones back from the dead. In South Korea, a woman reunited with her dead daughter due to the help of

A.I. and virtual reality. In China, an engineer created a simulation of his grandfather using videos, photos, and writings. *Vice* documented one woman's first encounter with the A.I. of her dead husband (a watch that is painful not only because of her cathartic reaction to being called "stupid"). All this points to one thing: this technology isn't going away any time soon.

Ahmad dreamed up his bot long before the current conversations about A.I. were part of the lexicon at large. Ahmad, a professor at University of Washington's Bothell campus, and a long-time data scientist, has been working, researching, and studying machine learning and artificial intelligence for a decade, including in previous work modeling human behavior in online games.

As his father's death became imminent, it occurred to Ahmad that his future unborn children would never get to meet their grandfather.

"In my mind that was just a big loss," he said. "I'd seen my father interact with his other grandchildren. It was great. When I was growing up, all of my grandparents passed away before I was five. So what came to my mind was, 'If my father cannot interact with [my children], then maybe they can interact with him.'"

Unlike other bots currently out in the world, Grandpa Bot is not built on any open source model like ChatGPT. The bot is located on Ahmad's own computer drive and is limited to the recorded conversations, letters, and personal memories Ahmad has of his father, which he estimates to be about 2,000 conversations that range in length. This means the bot can't get creative, like taking data from the internet to improvise an answer. For Ahmad, this limit has a point.

"It should be limited, because I think for this context fidelity is extremely important," he said.

"What do you mean by fidelity?" I asked.

"The model should sound like the person that it's modeling."

For example, Ahmed said if he were to ask his bot about controversies surrounding quantum chromodynamics, it wouldn't compute because that's simply not something his father would know about. The bot also doesn't know about events that happened after his death. But this is where Ahmad strays to make his bot functional for his kids, now five and eight.

"To make the experience more 'real' for the children, I have to add extra information where the bot is aware—"aware" is a very strong word, but I'm just anthropomorphizing—that these two new people exist," he says. "Otherwise, having the conversation would be extremely difficult."

I wondered what it must mean for his kids' life experiences to talk to a digital version of their grandpa, and whether the sentiment was really worth the effort. And at the end of the day that's the gist of the argument surrounding A.I. For all their potential benefits, is it worth the equal or greater harm?

2. *Mushtaq Ahmad Mirza*

At our meeting in Bellevue, I was excited to meet the simulation he calls "Grandpa Bot," but he explained to me that day that he'd packed the wrong laptop. I would have to wait. Still, I got to know Ahmad's father the way humans have always learned about others: from Ahmad himself.

Originally from Pakistan, Ahmad's father took over the family business, a company that imported technical books. He worked there for nearly half a century. It's there the elder Ahmad would come to love reading.

He is remembered as a loving man by Ahmad. He never as much as raised his voice toward his youngest son. Ahmad contemplates whether this is just because he was obedient or because of the nine-year age gap between him and his next closest sibling. His older siblings all remember their father being strict. More than anything, Ahmad remembers talking with his father. They'd talk about everything, any chance they could: after school, on walks, over dinner.

When Ahmad moved to the U.S. to study, his parents soon followed. But since Ahmad was studying, he was often away from his parents.

"I would mostly see them during holidays, and then he would eagerly await me," Ahmad says.

As he got older, Ahmad recalls helping him with technology, a staple of children with immigrant parents.

"He really liked old Indian songs," he recalls. "He would ask me to play this song, and then the next one, and the next one, and the next one."

Mushtaq Ahmad Mirza died on October 28, 2013.

3. *Replaceable*

Ahmad is well aware of the moral gray zone he's put himself in as one of many people creating A.I.s. He's even pulled back with his children, bringing the bot out only on special occasions: birthdays, holidays. When I asked about what it's like for his kids, he explained their understanding of the bot has "evolved over time."

"Once I realized that they're making associations that grandpa actually lives here, I had to intervene," he says.

More than sentient and vengeful A.I., Ahmad is worried that, like his children who began to believe they were actually chatting with their grandfather, people would eventually forget that these simulations are just that—simulations. Or worse, that people will knowingly choose to interact with A.I. rather than pursue meaningful relationships in the real world. He points to the Japanese Hikikomori crisis, a phenomena that began sometime in the 90s, long before the prevalence of A.I., in which hundreds of thousands of people have chosen to withdraw from society for no apparent reason, isolating themselves in their rooms, some for years.

“Now mix in generative A.I., which can also take care of certain other human needs for connection,” he says. “When I start to think about how that affects industrialized societies, especially societies which are very individualistic in nature... if our machines can take care of our need for human connection, then that’s going to be very disastrous for society as a whole.”

Patrick Stokes gets to the heart of why this is morally wrong. An associate professor of philosophy at Deakin University in Victoria, Australia, and author of *Digital Souls: A Philosophy of Online Death*, his work on the ethics around A.I. and death has been prominently cited by many, in particular his conclusion that A.I. is more than a tool to remember the dead like photos, videos, or an online presence. A.I. presents the opportunity to replace people.

“That’s the concern: It may just reduce the dead and the living to what they can do for us,” he says.

“But aren’t we replaceable?” I found the questions hard to ask, but there are people who will find it easy to posit. I used a friend or boyfriend as an example as people who one can have a falling out with, and can eventually replace with someone else.

“Imagine somebody who doesn’t particularly care who’s in that role, so long as someone is. [...] Imagine you’re on the other side of that. You’d be kind of like, ‘Well hang on. I don’t want to be the person who is currently filling the boyfriend role, I want to be loved for me, the person I am,’” Stokes explains.

For Stokes, the question of whether the dead should live on as bots or not means we move closer to a society in which people take other people for granted, “Treating [everyone] like they were chatbots anyway.” That’s not to say this technology can’t be used for good, he quickly states, adding that a simulated conversation could give a person with unresolved issues with a dead parent the closure they need.

Still, “the dead can’t speak for themselves,” he says. “It’s incumbent on the living to defend their interests, if they have them.”

That’s the only regret Ahmad has. He wasn’t able to get consent from his father to make him into a bot prior to his death. But for him this bot is just a memory, like a photo album stowed away in a closet for safekeeping.



▲ Ahmed and his daughters chat with Grandpa Bot. Photo courtesy of Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad.

When the day came to chat with Grandpa Bot, I felt jittery. I’d never chatted with any bot, having actively avoided all A.I. chatbots since I began hearing about them, a personal choice given the lack of transparency that surrounds them.

4. Abu Jani

A black coding screen booted up; the words “Initializing Simulation” appeared at the top in a white monospace font. Below, it wasn’t Grandpa Bot that said hello, rather Abu Jani, which means “dear father” in Urdu. The bot made first contact.

“Sonu Shehzaday, how are you?”

Almost immediately, the limits Ahmad placed became apparent. Grandpa Bot’s code could not understand I was a journalist, nor could it tell me Ahmad’s father’s name, about Ahmad Senior’s life, or where he grew up. After multiple attempts at chatting, the bot would fallback on its default responses when it did

“

*That's the concern: It may just
reduce the dead and the living to
what they can do for us.*

”

not know how to respond. That's when Ahmad took over. It responded better to Ahmad, who typed things like “I miss you,” and asked for advice.

“Always be good to other [sic]. Always pray for everyone, including the people who have wrong [sic] you. If someone has wronged you then that is their own accord. That is between them and God. If you wish good for people [sic] then God will make things good for you in this world and the next,” the bot responded.

Ultimately, it wasn't my place to chat with Grandpa Bot. How could I judge the bot's fidelity, as previously explained to me by Ahmad, if I had never met Ahmad Senior to begin with? What I expected was Grandpa Bot, but what I got was Abu Jani, an algorithm intimately put together by Ahmad Senior's Sonu Shehzaday — his Golden Prince. It's just a memory, one that may not work for me but is enough to work for Ahmad. Perhaps this is as far as we should get with A.I., something that works only in limited contexts for those seeking it.

I later chatted with ChatGPT for the first time and was cautiously impressed by its much more advanced language simulation. Its ability to replicate almost any kind of conversation I wished for caught me off guard after chatting with the simpler, less sophisticated Grandpa Bot.

While some may worry about grief bots and their consequences, I now understand why Ahmad sees Grandpa Bot as a harmless way to cope, as benign as listening to someone tell a story about a loved one who has passed. He says exaggerated calls or warnings about artificial intelligence that may become self aware and intelligent are the least of his worries, when much more real issues are at

hand. Ahmad worries about coded discrimination that can seep into police work, and health systems using A.I., both of which could cause more problems in an already racist society. He hopes future regulation and better transparency will put this growing A.I. industry in check. If not, he says, A.I. could end up similar to Twitter (now X).

“People were celebrating the fact that now this will connect everybody, and anybody can now talk to anybody, and this will break down cultural barriers and people will understand each other more,” Ahmad says. “That is correct, but then at the same time, people were not thinking about how it facilitated the creation of echo chambers and greatly contributed to polarization.”

After talking to Grandpa Bot, harmless as he may have seemed, I still think the costs of AI in general outweigh the benefits.

While I understand Ahmad's urge to preserve a loved one, at the interpersonal level, I see how bots of my loved ones would hurt me more than help me. While preservation is natural, even human, why mess with methods that already work? Someday I will put photos of my mother and father on my Dia de Muertos altar and remember them fondly, maybe with guilt. I imagine I will regret not talking to them more, not loving them more, not listening to them more. These are things I don't think I could replace with a chatbot made in their image. On the contrary, perhaps those feelings are necessary to my growth as a human being. And for all the comfort a simulation could offer me, death still ends any second chance at time with my parents, however good an A.I. may feign otherwise. 

Agueda Pacheco Flores is a freelance writer in Seattle who focuses on social justice issues, music, arts, and the Latine diaspora. She's previously written for *The Seattle Times*, *Crosscut*, *Journey Magazine*, *Real Change News*, and *The South Seattle Emerald*.

Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad is delivering a talk, When Your Grandpa Is a Bot: AI, Death, and Digital Doppelgangers as part of Humanities Washington's Speakers Bureau. Check it out online or in-person around the state. Find an event at humanities.org.

HONORING *the* FORM

By Charles Johnson



▲ Images courtesy of Pexels, Flickr, and iStockPhoto.

For decades pilgrims from around the world have flocked to Lake View Cemetery on Capitol Hill in Seattle. Tens of thousands arrive every year to pay their respects to Bruce Lee, an international celebrity from Hong Kong, who *TIME* magazine listed as one of the one hundred most important people of the twentieth century. This is one of the ten most visited gravesites in the world.

Like many martial artists, you especially want to pay your respects at Bruce's final resting place on the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 2023. It's on a late afternoon that you, not too clear in your head and heart, go to his gravestone.

Lakeview Cemetery has few trees and even less shade. The sun, a raging ball of gas and plasma, is blinding, so you're wearing a pair of polarized Ray-Bans. To reach where Bruce is buried, you walk straight from the front gate. His and his son Brandon's graves are cordoned off, which means you must pad along a paved walkway.

On the headstone, there is a black-and-white photo of Bruce, forever thirty-two-years old. It was he who revolutionized fight scenes in American movies and shattered stereotypes by projecting the image of an Asian man who was unbeatable, handsome, young, and sexy. His name appears in English and

Chinese, and beneath that are the words “Founder of Jeet Kune Do.” At the foot of his grave there’s an open book made of stone, which is as black as anthracite or onyx. On its left page is a yin and yang symbol.

You’re short-winded when you get to the grave. At age seventy-five, you’re still in good health, according to your doctor, but certainly not young, handsome, or sexy, if you ever were. You no longer feel like yourself. Your old athletic self. Something feels a little off balance, a little wrong. And your training regime has become spotty, less rigorous, lacking something, though you don’t know what. After a lifetime of throwing millions of kicks and split-second punches that were faster than thought and drilled into muscle memory, you now sometimes wake up wondering what part of your anatomy will be acting up or aching next. Sometimes after a workout you need to soak your knees in ice and take an Advil.

There is another pilgrim ahead of you, an Asian man, who before your encounter ends today will tell you a horror story and show you something you didn’t know you needed to see. He is seated in a wedge of sunlight on a stone bench a few steps from the gravesite, wearing a pewter-grey sweatshirt and sweatpants. You place this visitor’s age at eighty. Maybe eighty-five. And you guess he’s probably five foot seven and no more than one hundred and forty pounds—much like the man whose burial place you’re visiting. Briefly, without staring, you notice his well-barbered, salt-white hair, bony wrists, and how he carries himself with a quiet dignity, at ease in his body and apparently with everything happening around you. There is elegance and economy in the way he draws from his sweatpants a gold watch that hangs like a drop of liquid suspended on a chain.

You can feel him giving you a going over, sizing you up as you place a bouquet of flowers, one of many, at the grave. Soon you will see he is the door, and you a man who’s lost the key/*ki*. He continues watching as you light a lavender stick of incense and say a prayer for the happiness and safety of everyone in Bruce’s family as well as for all sentient beings.

When you’re done, this other pilgrim says in a voice a little too loud, as if he might be losing his hearing, “Excuse me. My name is David Choi. Are you Buddhist?”

“Yes, sir. Soto Zen.”

“What brings you here? Did you study with Bruce Lee?”

You take off your Raybans. “No, sir, I didn’t know him personally, but I *did* study briefly with some of his students. John Beall taught me some Wing Chun at his school on Green Lake. He was taught by James DeMile, who *was* taught by Bruce. DeMile taught me a technique for meditation that I still use.”

Mr. Choi recognizes each of those Seattleites little known outside the martial arts world. He nods, lowering his eyelids. “Yes, I knew them all. I once taught what I learned from them.” Lifting his gaze, he looks straight ahead at Bruce’s headstone. “I miss them. There are a lot of things I don’t understand and miss these days, like my wife who closed her eyes this year.” Suddenly, Mr. Choi tilts his head and squints at you. “How long have you been practicing?”

You leave a silence, not wanting to answer, perhaps because you haven’t been practicing enough lately. Also, you just don’t like telling people how long you’ve been studying how to fight. They might misunderstand. You hate the ugly stereotype of Black men being violent and something to fear. They might not see that you just train for self-defense and to protect yourself and your loved ones. You could tell Mr. Choi you’ve been practicing martial arts since you were nineteen. You competed in tournaments. And if all of those years of training have taught you anything, it is humility. A fighter knows there’s always *someone—somewhere—who* can beat him. And that your real opponent over five decades has always been, and *only* been, and can ever only be yourself. Your ego.

But what you say to Mr. Choi is: “Since my teens in 1967. There was a lot of violence in that decade when I was young. Because of the civil rights movement. I grew up in a culture of daily violence in one form or another, physical or verbal.”

Instantly, at your mention of violence, his body stiffens, but his left hand pats the stone bench. “Here, come sit,” he says, his forehead knotted. “There’s as much violence today as then, don’t you think? Maybe more. Crazy violence.”

“Yes, I know.”

Even as you say this, you both can hear the scream of police sirens on wind swirling through the hot, dry cemetery, shaking and shattering the air. Lately, it is a sound you can hear every day in what used to be called America’s most livable city.

“

Not many young people today want to be disciples, to devote the time to something as demanding as this, or to maybe any form of art. They think, why bother, I can just buy a gun.

”

It pains you to think about how public places no longer seem safe from weekly, even daily, shootings and stabbings. Not college campuses or elementary schools. Not theaters, supermarkets, malls, dance halls, churches, or synagogues.

The way you've trained in Asian martial arts—with traditional weapons like a staff or a broadsword—seems useless against AR-15s and other military assault weapons proliferating from coast to coast. You've read that the lives of one out of five Americans have been touched by gun violence. Everyone knows this, everyone sees it, everyone feels helpless to end it. Even thinking about this triggers imagined scenarios of conflict and competition, winning and losing, in your mind. And you know that isn't healthy.

Mr. Choi lays his hands on his lap and for a moment is quiet. In his eyes there is a troubled look. You have the feeling he wants, needs to talk to someone. To another practitioner.

“Do you still do martial arts?” he asks. “Do you think it's worth it? All that training and trying to improve—for *what*?”

“Yes,” you say, “I try. Do *you*?”

“Sometimes.” A sudden hardness creeps into his eyes. “I'm eighty-nine. I live at Ida Culver House. I've had a right hip replacement, and I'm wearing two hearing aids. I practice Yang style Tai Chi Chuan in the morning when my back isn't bothering me. But I won't teach anymore. I can't. Not unless I find a good student. Real Tai Chi is a dying art. There are only a few true teachers in this world, and most only show the application of fighting moves to members of their family or their favorite disciples. Not many young people today want to be disciples, to devote the time to something as demanding as this, or to maybe *any* form of art. They think, why bother, I can just buy a gun.” And then he says something you don't see coming until it arrives.

“That's how I lost my granddaughter.”

You wince, uncertain how to reply.

“I loved her beyond measure,” he says. “This watch was a gift from her on my eightieth birthday. She knew that I love watches and collect them. There's something wonderful in the way science and art come together in a well-made watch. You can wear the mystery and wonder of time right on your wrist. She took me and my wife to Umi Sake House in Belltown. She knew I liked their sushi. We talked about her studies, her friends, and dined until nine. When we walked back to her car, a young man came up to us and asked if we could help him because he was homeless and hungry. My granddaughter always had a good heart. She reached into her purse. He grabbed it. She wouldn't let go, so he hit her. He shoved her onto the sidewalk. My wife started screaming...”

You feel a knot gathering in your throat. “Did you try to stop him?”

“Oh, yes,” his voice begins to creak and wheeze. “I gave him the worst thirty seconds of his life. He couldn't fight. He was out of shape, maybe on drugs. I got inside his guard. That was easy. He threw a sloppy roundhouse punch. I blocked that with the move called parting the wild horse's mane, broke his arm with the move called play the fiddle, and swept his feet out from under him.”

“So, you won, right?”

“No, wrong. He had a gun, and fired five times, striking me twice, and ending my granddaughter's life. It took me weeks to stop shaking. It took longer to heal, if that ever happened. I tried to protect her. I failed. The world was too much for me. I always think I should have been faster. I needed to be younger.”

“Sir, I don't believe you failed...”

You know it will be disrespectful to say any more. Anything you say will be too little or too much. And too late. So instead, you listen as he talks about that terrible night nine years ago. About

his training. Day dissolves into night with a quarter moon like a clipped toenail hanging over the cemetery, the air no longer hot, only lukewarm now. And you can't help but wonder about something. You say, "Play the fiddle? *That* was the technique you used?"

"Yes, do you know how to use it?"

"I'm not sure."

"Then I can show you."

Mr. Choi stands and steps away from the stone bench. He begins the Yang style Tai Chi form he practices every morning. It only has twenty-four moves. You've done this set thousands of times, and thought you knew it until he begins dancing in the moonlight, releasing the form that lives inside him, the energy of his pain alchemized into kinesis. In the next few fibrous seconds, you see meditation in motion. A tissue of history and culture and tradition contained in just two dozen moves. Some of them yin, some yang. Movement guides his in and out wind. Like a man under water, like someone in a different dimension of time, each of his postures flows from the last with a fluidity, a grace that only a lifetime of practice can purchase. Never flat on both feet, never stopping any more than a stream can stop, his weight is always perfectly balanced with eighty percent on one leg, twenty on the other. His visible movements, his technique and ki, make present the invisible—the influence of his teachers. They come alive in the subtleties and intricacies of his every

gesture. It is as if Mr. Choi, the man you've been talking to for hours, the man who lost his granddaughter in a senseless act of violence, has disappeared, fallen away along with the dark hole left by her death, leaving only this seemingly weightless figure floating through each move like a spirit spun from the finest air, creating a brief moment of beauty and order in a world awash in chaos.

The form takes all of three minutes. It ends with his bow to all present and to the ancestors. You feel the stillness doing this performance has awakened in Mr. Choi. You feel that now in yourself. He turns your way and says, "You see?"

You do. "Wish I could do it that way, but I guess you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"Never too old," he says. The corners of his eyes crinkle as he smiles. "Maybe someday soon I show you how." 

Charles Johnson is an author and professor emeritus at the University of Washington. A MacArthur fellow, his fiction includes *Middle Passage* (for which he won the National Book Award), *Night Hawks*, *Dr. King's Refrigerator*, *Dreamer*, and *Faith and the Good Thing*. In 2002 he received the Arts and Letters Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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MEASURING MOURNING

In the Ashkenazi women's tradition of feldmestn, ancestors' burial places are measured with candlewick and later burnt for the living and the dead. How can it help us grapple with modern grief?

By Michelle Liu

We are, says Maia Brown, “aching for ways that can hold grief more collectively.”

So says Brown on an early spring Seattle day, green and fragrant. We have so many rituals to celebrate the cycling of seasons and the energy of new life, but fewer that let us process experiences and emotions that are as much a part of the everyday, like grief. Grief that comes from losing people in our lives, and grief that comes from broken connections to the past — we tend to hold these griefs individually rather than together.

A recent MFA graduate from Goddard College in writing, music, and visual arts, her interest in making time and space for people to study and think collaboratively about grief rituals is what inspired her to develop “Measuring Mourning: A Ritual for Loss,” a Humanities Washington Speakers Bureau talk. In it, Brown shares how her yearning to have a conversation with loss — of family, home, language — led her to search for practices in her own cultural past to help guide her. She discusses the recently resurfaced Ashkenazi women’s tradition of *feldmestn* — the practice of measuring ancestral burial sites with candlewick that is then burned to commemorate the living and the dead. The measuring creates a connection — a correspondence of sorts — between the present and the no-longer.

The drive to create multi-sensory ritual spaces that nurture connection between people, places, sounds, and languages otherwise severed by the serrated edge of history animates Brown’s vision outside of the Humanities Washington Speakers Bureau as well. Brown brings her sensibilities as a “punky” banjo player and singer into her work as Artist-in-Residence at Town Hall Seattle. During her term, she is exploring using music, art,

and storytelling to intermingle Yiddish traditions of resilience with that of Gazans under siege in Rafah.

Her Findings Night on May 19th will continue to offer relationships to Yidishkayt that can help us grieve this moment and act against genocide now. Alongside performances of new settings of Yiddish poetry and prayer, Maia’s visual work engaging *feldmestn* will be on display in the lobby. Having recently discovered some of her family’s last known addresses in Berlin before their flight or murder by the Nazis, Brown has begun to measure the thresholds of these lost homes with wick. She has been working with the smoke and heat released from burning this candlewick to singe shapes onto paper — each like a letter exchanged between the survival and destruction in the present with that of the past.

These smoky collages translate loss into material objects, objects for holding grief collectively. In transmogrifying loss into a physical presence, we tell ourselves that, as Brown puts it, we “can’t go on, but we will.”

The following interview was edited for length and clarity.

Humanities Washington: How do you invite people to participate in relation to *feldmestn*?

Maia Brown: One of the questions we linger with in the presentation is, What do we measure? What do we measure if we don’t know where we come from? What do we measure if the cemeteries of our people have been destroyed? How can we think more creatively about what the act of measuring is really about?

The makerspace is a way to think really materially about what a study of *feldmestn* can offer, especially if it’s not your tradition. Instead of appropriating something that’s not yours, how can the metaphor of measuring guide the making of new things? How might we open communication between ourselves and our loss? During the presentation, we intellectually play and wonder together about why *feldmestn* is compelling. In the makerspace, we have real materials we can touch, so we can play with these ideas with our hands too.

People do amazing things. During one session, someone who had lost their husband planned to use some of the thread from the makerspace to measure her husband’s clothes before she gave them away. A final tailoring, of sorts. Her mother had been an avid crocheter, so she planned to use that measured thread

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To make loss so physical — something you could measure with a thread — is really interesting then. It opens up an important paradox for people.

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to experiment with textile arts — to make something she had never tried to make before.

Why is it so important that this communication with grief be tactile?

Loss — the-not-anymore of it — is something that feels bigger than our words and the physical world, precisely because it has left our world. It is an absence. To make loss so physical — something you could measure with a thread — is really interesting then. It opens up an important paradox for people.

So many rituals, not only in Jewish tradition, offer different metaphors to handle these paradoxes. We need to be able to say, “There’s no way to hold this in my hand — it’s too big” — and then say, “I’m going to find a way to hold it in my hand.” We have to have both. Rituals are trying to offer that sort of duality: we can’t, and also, we will.

What moved you to design this talk right now?

I’m intensely curious about conversation, correspondence, and invitation. What happens when you share something with other people, and you wonder about it together, and you invite people into your questions?

What happens when you actually answer, “How are you doing,” as if it’s a real question? That’s a bit of what this presentation feels like. What if we actually asked each other real questions and actually answered real questions? It requires people to do a tricky thing together — to make space for grief with each other without explicitly processing it with each other.

I think it often feels more tiring to hide from each other. So, it feels good to offer a little more space for: we can’t, but we

will. I’m so grateful to Humanities Washington for being a makerspace to try these things out.

I see you’re a translator, as well as a musician, artist, and public speaker. How do you see translation informing how you create around loss?

One of the themes that dominated my MFA work was the potential of ancestral sounds to travel across alphabets as we travel across borders. I didn’t grow up speaking Yiddish. And now, I am not a fluent speaker of my heritage languages: Yiddish or Ladino or Aramaic or Biblical Hebrew, but I do translate across many of them. I am in relationship to these languages when they are in motion between alphabets and meanings, carrying their sounds and inflections and visions into my present. It’s an incredibly moving process for me to make these sounds and shapes.

For me, translation and transliteration builds a relationship between loss and continuity with lineage. When you lose a heritage language, especially the daily-ness of it — when you have to come tripping back to it childlike in your adulthood — it is worth grieving that shattering loss. But those of us who are diasporic people also celebrate the lives that we have made in diaspora, the many many languages we now have in our mouths. We’re made up of all the things that we’ve lost, but since we are made from it, we can make *with* it too. Presencing an absence means that what is lost gets to be a part of us, not missing, but measurable. 

Michelle Liu is a professor of English and the associate director of writing programs at the University of Washington. She is a former member of Humanities Washington’s Speakers Bureau.

Maia Brown is delivering her talk, Measuring Mourning: A Ritual for Loss, around the state. Find an event at humanities.org

LAVENDER COUNTRY FUNERAL

Patrick Haggerty was a stranger to me—yet attending his memorial meant everything.

By Thomas Grant Richardson

Attending the funeral of a stranger is an odd thing. This wasn't a friend-of-a-friend type of stranger. I knew no one connected to Patrick Haggerty. None of this family, none of his friends. He was a stranger. And I was a fan.

I'd seen a memorial posted on social media and reached out to the organizers to ask if I may attend. I even had the nerve to ask if I could photograph. I make a living documenting living cultural traditions, meeting and interviewing artists, and documenting their work. I just missed getting to meet, interview, and photograph Patrick, moving to Washington mere months before he passed in 2022. I knew I wasn't going to miss his funeral.



▲ Patrick Haggerty. Photo by Amanda Snyder/The Seattle Times.

Patrick Haggerty is my favorite kind of icon. He was legendary to some, and unknown to most. His fame came by releasing the first opening gay country record in 1973 titled *Lavender Country*. The record was released, not through a major or even an independent label, but rather through the Seattle's Gay Community Social Services at a pressing of just 1000 copies. According to Haggerty, "we sold them however that we could. It was a community effort. We did some public stuff but it was really mostly a matter of word of mouth. People discovered it and turned the next person on to it."

Those original copies circulated quietly for decades, making their way into the homes of those who wanted, what Haggerty

called, “the information.” The information was knowledge, and assurance, that whatever someone was feeling about being gay, they were not alone, and they were not wrong. Years later the world would know, through a StoryCorp interview, that it was Haggerty’s hard-scrabble Port Angeles farmer father who had first put this confidence in his son, demanding he never “sneak” around. That he be open about who he was.

Lavender Country was made in Seattle, but there was a certain farm-kid empathy to its goal. Haggerty wanted to reach those who needed it most. “They could hear the music even if they lived in Pocatello,” Haggerty said, “and they could play it in their bedrooms by themselves. They could hear it, and it was like a beacon — like ‘Yoo-hoo!’”

For decades this was the fate of *Lavender Country*, to be a gesture from a disconnected space that reached into the bedrooms, hearts, and minds of receptive listeners, who presumably connected to its overtly gay themes, and maybe, its twangy sound. I knew this because one of those people it reached was my gay, country music-loving sister in Utah, who bought it instantly without knowing the context, and has cherished it since. At some point sharing it with me, her straight country-music loving brother.

Haggerty would move on to other political pursuits and find a career in social work. The band would dissolve. The record would lie dormant in record bins, or as cherished items in people’s homes, but it wouldn’t circulate. Then, in 1999, over 25 years since the release of *Lavender Country*, it reemerged like a message in a bottle. After a mention in the *Journal of Country Music* about LGBTQ contributions to country music, the album was given another shot, being reissued on CD this time. But it still struggled to find an audience. Haggerty would continue to perform at senior centers around his home in Bremerton in relative obscurity.

* * *

But full recognition came when one of Haggerty’s most salacious (and maybe best) songs, “Cryin’ These Cocksucking Tears,” was uploaded to YouTube (a platform Haggerty didn’t even know about) and caught the attention of record label Paradise of Bachelors, who then gave it a wider re-release. This move courted the attention of popular music publications like *Rolling Stone*. Finally, Haggerty was receiving some of the attention he long deserved. *Lavender Country* was being invited

to play festivals, recorded a long-delayed second album (2019’s *Blackberry Rose*), and collaborated with artists who now operated in a more open, accepting musical world. A world Haggerty was instrumental in creating.



▲ Haggerty’s husband JB at the memorial. Photo by Thomas Grant Richardson.

Trixie Mattel, the drag queen country singer who rose to fame as winner of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, (who wasn’t even born when *Lavender Country* was first released) would invite Haggerty to re-record his iconic “I Can’t Shake the Stranger Out of You” for Mattel’s first major label release, *Barbara*.

Patrick Haggerty died from complications of a stroke in October of 2022 at the age of 78. But his funeral wasn’t until April of 2023. Certainly some personal logistics played a role in the delay, but I can’t help but think it was also for the fans — the strangers — to get the word and make plans. It was evident Haggerty had an impact beyond those he knew on a daily level. This is how I had the opportunity to attend the funeral of a man I’d never met.

At a quiet Unitarian Universalist church in Bremerton I arrived, contrite and humble, a stranger who didn’t want to disturb or disrespect friends and family. The fact that upon arrival there were buttons with Patrick’s face made me believe this was a welcome space for those of us unlucky enough to never know him, but close enough to respect we would have benefited from knowing him. I know I wasn’t the only fan in attendance.

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Patrick Haggerty is my favorite kind of icon. He was legendary to some, and unknown to most.

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The service, thankfully, made few concessions for us fans. It was for the man and those who hadn't lost the legend, but who had lost the man. His children spoke, his friends, his husband. Haggerty was an icon yes, but in that moment, he was a man. A complex man missed by legions. A poet from Whidbey Island spoke, unable to contain tears, as one shouldn't be able at a funeral. I was glad someone cried openly. It felt right.

Directly after the service music was made by the *Lavender Country* band members in the church. Later, everyone would move to a downtown Bremerton venue for a tribute concert that would go late. Both were important in their own way, but the post-service music at the church was something else.

As mentioned, “Stranger” has become perhaps the most well-known of Haggerty's songs, owing a fair amount to the duet with Trixie Mattel. It was a song of deep longing for intimacy, of struggle and frustration about the lack of emotional depth between (presumably) gay men. Haggerty admits the song was originally titled, “I Can't Fuck The Stranger Out of You.” It was also the song that was played in the church after Haggerty's funeral by the members of *Lavender Country*, and joined by a large congregation of family, friends, and people like me — strangers.

The song is beautiful, heartbreaking, and without the more direct or biting language of some of Haggerty's other work. Sung at his funeral, it held an ironic, bittersweet tone. Perhaps it was the number of “strangers” Haggerty had connected with through his bold DIY efforts, perhaps it was because his husband of decades, JB, was at the center of this dancing,



▲ A sign at the Lavender Country performance after the memorial. Photo by Thomas Grant Richardson.

singing throng, perhaps it was the relief, that after a life mostly lived in the shadows, Haggerty had finally been brought into the light for as good a final act as one could ask for.

Alan Bennett, the great British playwright, speaks of the connections forged through writing, and I think it's just as applicable to music. In his play, *The History Boys*, he says, “The best moments in reading, are when you come across something, a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things, that you'd thought special. Particular to you. And here it is. Set down by someone else. A person you've never met. Maybe even someone long dead. And it's as if a hand has come out and taken yours.”

Attending the funeral of a stranger is a surreal experience, more intellectual than emotional. But the deep reverence I have for Haggerty, and those who supported him in life and through pre-semi-fame, is real and tangible. Art that is made for the goal, not the paycheck, the esteem, the fame, is the only art I care about. Patrick Haggerty is a legend for his ability, his intentionality, to make people feel seen, respected, and understood. I salute this man. *Y'all come out, come out, my dears, to Lavender Country.* 

Thomas Grant Richardson is the director of the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions, a collaboration between Humanities Washington and ArtsWA/the Washington State Arts Commission. Thomas received his PhD in folklore and ethnomusicology from Indiana University in 2019, and worked as folklorist, writer, and consultant with numerous folk and traditional arts agencies across the county.

ON *Hold*

By Kristen Millares Young

▲ Illustration by Michael Riester.

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It's a warm day for winter, and the fence is steaming in the sun. So much rain, where we live. It dampens the spirits. But today the blue holds every shape like a lover. I am drinking whiskey, uncharacteristic for me at 11 in the morning. With eggnog, in case you're wondering. It's nearly Christmas.

I'm on hold. Playing tag on the phone is not as fun as #IRL. At least in real tag, there are moments of triumph. Phone tag is nothing but worry and wait. Especially with oncologists.

The steam looks like smoke, and that's what I'm thinking about. Have my habits caught up with me? The first time, I was 22. What blame can a young body bear for its tumors? Still surfing my parent's insurance, I had not yet reached a quarter century. But now, I am 36, and wondering if possibility has come to call at my door. I must own my ruin.

Lo, I am low.

Ow, I said, on the toilet. Not a good sign. The first time I felt this strange internal twist, which reveals where my intestines coil past my ovary, I was a summer intern at *TIME* magazine, warming a dorm toilet at Columbia University.

I was lucky to be there, and so I worked through pain for weeks. I took jogs through Central Park. Healthy living would unbind my bloat, right? I went to the ER when I could no longer bear it. I checked out before dawn, eager to get some sleep before work. In one nightmarish memory on a long summer evening, the sidewalks hot and thick with trash bags I loved because they belonged to New York, I held a vibrating paddle to my stomach while an unhappy woman evacuated my bowels with a suctioning water wand. A colonic.

A week later, I learned that a large cyst was threatening to rupture my left ovary, and two days after that, I woke up without that cyst or my right ovary, swallowed first by a tumor and then by a surgeon's bag. Even now, all these years later, I think back to that woman, and what she almost did to me with her vibrating paddle. Imagine a cyst rupturing and taking its host ovary like a meteor striking the earth into a gas cloud of blood.

I was lucky to have children, and it is they whom I think of most today, they whom I must protect. Just one more whiskey, and some paragraphs to stave off despair.

But it could be a cyst! That's what I'm telling myself. Just a cyst. What joy in that just. Or a burst follicle. Fine by me! The truth is that I don't know what caused my period to last two and a half weeks, though I resented the second box of tampons. My interest in sex takes a dive when there's a string. But I kept spotting. When the anguish came, and I was again on the toilet, I made a note in my iPhone (right then and there) to call my doctor, remembering my toes spread against that dorm tile, stifling my cries to spare my roommates.

So many people told me to have children before it was too late. The hectoring began before the harvest of my ovary, when I was still an uppity college grad, a dewy fern. The top foreign editor at *TIME* took me aside and said, *Here's how you do it:*

Move to a foreign country while the children are young because that's where there are good stories and cheap childcare. Work for a bureau, and then take it over. Come back here when you're set up and your kids are in school.

That's what she did, and it worked for her. She was trying to help me. I think she saw how much I wanted. And still do.

I remember filing my last feed to *TIME* from the hospital. I was proud of my determination to keep working, fighting my blank terror in a room built for the sick. *Are you sure you want to make calls about Friendster*, my editor asked? *And I told her, Yes! Plenty of time with nothing to do but wait. Everything's fine.*

No, she replied. *No it isn't.*

But there was no job for me. Not there. No explanation but for a get-well card and some flowers. Swim along, little fish, do not linger in our pool.

I should not measure foregone conclusions, given the alternatives. But the pressure to procreate gained strength at odd times, like the morning a doctor failed to insert an IUD into my uterus, me crying and making noise so I could hold still. After, she looked me in the eye — I was still on my back — and told me, *Don't wait too long to have kids.*

I did, she said. *And then I couldn't.*

“

Cancer eats time. Anyone who's been near it knows that. Not just the years that one might have had, if the end is hastened, but the minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and yes, years spent managing proximity to the specter.

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I will never forget her face, that pain unshed and glowing. Today I am 41, and right back to another scare. Yes, I sat on this essay for five years. I might feel as good as I ever will. But I listened to her. When I turned 33, it was like a timer went off. I had two kids in two years. And now I am afraid they will lose me.

I made a log of the 10 calls needed to schedule a pelvic ultrasound, blood test, and office visit with a nurse practitioner, not even the doctor, who won't see me unless death threatens. Forty-five minutes in all, and if I weren't so persistent, I wouldn't be going to radiology tomorrow. I'd be going in January, when my deductible and out-of-pocket costs would once again be a blank slate.

Cancer eats time. Anyone who's been near it knows that. Not just the years that one might have had, if the end is hastened, but the minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and yes, years spent managing proximity to the specter.

What luck, to have a cyst whose removal provided a camera such intimate access to my insides. Otherwise, I might be dead. Ever since, I've spent thousands upon thousands of dollars getting checked every which way. Feet in the stirrups, breathe in, breathe out, *don't tense your muscles* — an impossibility, I am astounded by what women do under duress — as with one hand in, and one hand out, a doctor palpates the soft tissue that can be reached in the pelvic region. And yes, into the rectum goes a finger with an apology from its owner, a final insult, hours after

I've been asked to insert a wand, its length lubricated, so that my insides can be imaged, my bladder filling and filling and filling with the water I was told to chug. Later I watch a woman insert a butterfly needle into my vein, her sweet smiles to distract from the spill of red into a vial, and another, so neat and tidy in a labeled row.

Years ago, I crowded these appointments into days that ended with me doubled over my keyboard on deadline. If you could only hear my purpose as I strode through the halls! My heels pounded that hospital floor in denial that I could be brought down by anything, even my own body. *I am not one of you*, my outfits implied to the real cancer patients.

I used to think of that time — waiting in a chair, or on my back, on a gurney — as spent. Lost. Flushed. Killed. Anything but needed. But now, I wonder. What little humility I have comes through my vulnerabilities. I do cry, sometimes, looking up at the tile ceiling, after the room has emptied of the male tech and his female assistant, paid to sit in a chair and assure nothing terrible happens to the woman on the table, which tells you how often it has.

And yet it never occurred to me to ask my husband to come along to hold my hand, and I've always said *no* when he's asked if I need him there. Why? Part of me knows that I dislike being exposed, and if this essay makes you question that statement, perhaps I've made progress, though it is a different thing to share life shaped into art than it is to share a life.

Not every cancer story is a love story, and not every love story is a love story all of the time. Maybe I don't ask him along because I don't like how people defer to men when they're around. Maybe I don't like what happens to my decisions when they involve him, how he tugs my thoughts down paths I'd rather walk alone.

Maybe I'm angry because I wanted to take out the remaining fallopian tube during the occasion of my second birth. I knew a Caesarian delivery was a strong possibility, given my first baby (sunny side up, back labor for a full day, me vomiting constantly and no meds, my cervix refusing to dilate for the huge head ramming ramming ramming).

I brought my husband with me to see my gyn/oncologist. They agreed that, unless we were absolutely sure we didn't want more kids, it shouldn't be done. *I don't want more children*, I told them,



▲ Illustration by Michael Riester.

unless there's a disaster of some kind, and I needed to gestate a reason not to die of grief.

Let's not make permanent decisions, said my husband.

I suspect him of wanting to see me pregnant again and again, though I don't know why. I should have listened to my other ob/gyn, who told me that, given that unlikely occasion of a child death, I could always get pregnant via IVF, which bypasses the tube that serves as a nursery for most ovarian cancers.

Many doctors no longer recommend removing the whole ovary, which is what they used to do, sending women into the desiccation of hormonal depletion decades before our time. Now, they watch and wait. Turns out, the female bits do real work for the body.

With their urging, I decided to keep my left tube, and the ovary. And now I will pay to find what they harbor.

Don't think about it, said my husband. *Your mind is powerful. It could be telling your body how to feel.*

Don't tell me what to do or how to think, I spat. *It's my body. I got this.*

In *Of Woman Born*, a book about motherhood that took her two whole decades to approach, Adrienne Rich argues *women are controlled by lashing us to our bodies*. Like me, she had a kind and supportive husband who understood her need to write. And though seventy years elapsed between her motherhood and mine, I found patterns that should not have startled me, but did:

Before my third child was born I decided to have no more children, to be sterilized...My husband, although he supported my decision, asked whether I was sure it would not leave me feeling "less feminine." In order to have the operation at all, I had to present a letter, counter-signed by my husband, assuring the committee of physicians who approved such operations that I had already produced three children, and stating my reasons for having no more. Since I have had rheumatoid arthritis for some years, I could give a reason acceptable to the male panel who sat on my case; my own judgment would not have been acceptable. When I awoke from the operation, twenty-four hours after my child's birth, a young nurse looked at my chart and remarked coldly, 'Had yourself spayed, did you?'

I go alone. Before dawn, I wake to silence my phone and leave the house to my husband and sons, so beautiful in repose. Relaxed, their faces are soft and round. One day they will sharpen and thicken into strong lines like his. I want to see them grow.

After the intern and her overseer reboot the ultrasound machine, I start my jokes routine. It gets me through hard times with

strangers in front of whom I do not wish to cry. In the blood draw waiting area, my one sob (quiet though it was) sent a shimmer of response through the other people. What could I say to them, I who still had my hair? I who, a week ago, was worried about losing weight. Cancer! The diet you don't plan!

Many things cause pain, and not all of them are cancer, says the supervisor before the wand goes in, or should I say, before I insert it, having requested the honor from the intern whose inch-to-the-left poke, I told them, *took me back to high school*. They guffawed before they could lock it down, and I was pleased, despite the wand waving around inside me.

The intern is too inexperienced to remember that she shouldn't answer my question — *Don't see a little baby hanging out where it shouldn't be, do ya?* — for an ectopic pregnancy would mean abortion or my death by hemorrhage. One or the other, and no in-between. Think about that, in times like ours.

Their faces grow somber in the pale light of the image I cannot see. The longer they look at the screen, the less they hold my eye, until, by the end, the supervisor speaks to the pillow behind my head, and the intern to her keyboard, their movements gaining speed, briskness, authority, as soon as the report is typed. I go to the bathroom so they don't have to avoid me. *Good luck with everything*, the intern says when I leave, worry tinging her eyes.

Facing diagnoses that have not yet arrived, I command myself to appreciate what's here. Existential anxiety can be eclipsed. For a moment you see death dancing like a corona of solar winds, visible now that the moon has blocked the sun. The curve of the horizon turns gray and ghostly, all hues sapped from the sky except for the deep night of space. The birds quiet down. Flowers close against the cold, which you can feel in your body, knowing as if for the first time that we are part of a celestial order that cares not for our worries. Seen from outside the path of totality, the shattering prospect of a diagnosis is scattershot, a halo of leaves dappling the ground with estranged outlines. But within that path, the darkness is total.

These moments—like the one we are living, when women have to cross states and picket lines to access the care we need—thin the veil. For a second, we see through them to what is ahead. Even when we're spared, we've seen it. We can't pretend it's not there.

Yet there always has been, and there remains, intense fear of the suggestion that women shall have the final say as to how our bodies are to be used, Rich wrote. *It is as if the suffering of the mother, the primary identification of woman as the mother—were so necessary to the grounding of human society that the mitigation, or removal, of that suffering, that identification, must be fought at every level, including the level of refusing to question it at all.*

I write hard because I want to build a body of work before it's too late. Again and again, I defer gratification for future gain. I know I won't be paid for these hours. It comes back to time. I may not have much. Facing bloat, facing cysts, facing toddlers, facing essays, facing my yearning to write more books, facing my desire to spend time with my kids my husband my friends my books my writing my own mind my own self feeding and caring for my own body, facing all of it, I want to live to the fullest extent of my imperfect freedom, and I intend to do just that. 

Kristen Millares Young is a journalist, essayist, and author. Her novel *Subduction* was a winner of the Nautilus and IPPY awards, as well as a finalist for two International Latino Book Awards and Foreword Indies Book of the Year. She is also the editor of *Seismic*. Millares Young was the researcher for the New York Times team behind "Snow Fall," which won a Pulitzer. Her essays, reviews, and investigations appear in the *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and anthologies such as *Alone Together*.

Kristen Millares Young is a Humanities Washington speaker who is presenting a talk, How to Write a Family Portrait / Cómo escribir un retrato familiar, around the state. Find an event at humanities.org.

the NINE

By Glenn Rockowitz

I watched nine people die this year. Nine people who weren't news stories or dots connected by degrees of separation. Nine people who weren't just friends of friends of friends. They were people I loved. People who were a very real and profound part of my everyday life, some who had been for years, some who were my own blood.

A 17-year-old drummer.

A 29-year-old stay-at-home dad.

A 22-year-old nursing student.

A 26-year-old marathon runner.

A 31-year-old artist.

An 82-year-old veteran.

A 45-year-old former model and mother.

A 28-year-old writer.

A 42-year-old oncologist.

I feel so little sorrow about it, which should concern me. And in many ways I know I should be concerned about the fact that I feel so little sorrow in this very moment or that I am able to get out of bed every morning and continue to attack every new day as if it was just another day.

As if these nine people had never come and gone.

But it is another day. And those people did come and go.

And the shape of my heart is not the same as it was before I knew them.

Which is precisely why I'm not concerned.

What was different about this year was that I was present in a way I had never been before.

I paid attention.

I looked for the beauty instead of mourning what seemed to be its obvious absence.

In the past I had only seen the darkness in death.

I only felt the missing shapes and had only seen the shadows.

But I started noticing a pattern when a very close friend, only 24-years old, died after a long fight with her cancer.

What I noticed in her eyes in her final few days was the same thing I had seen in my father's eyes right before he died.

The same thing I had seen in my own eyes when I was 28-years old and fighting for my own life, trying to upend a doctor's predicted expiration date of "three months at best."

A lightness.

An odd kind of resignation that felt like the opposite of resignation.



A kind of fearlessness I have never once seen on the face of someone very much healthy and alive.
I'm not a religious man in any way nor am I an atheist. And I have always turned away from people who offer up their silver lining mini sermons, no matter how well-intentioned. He's in a better place now.
She's not suffering anymore.
He's with the people he loves.

I get it. And I don't disagree.
It would be foolish to disagree with the unknown.
So I just embrace what I know instead.
And what I know is this:

Reality is what is. And what is—even at its most excruciating—is inexplicably and infinitely beautiful.

When I really examine the entirety of my own life, I see hints of this light most often in my most glorious mistakes. I see it in my failed attempts to both love and to be loved. I see it in divorces and in lost jobs. I see it in the screams and I see it in the silence. And I see it most acutely on the days when the simple numbness of not knowing how to get through another day is the only fuel I have to actually get me through it.

Because it is there.
A light.
A tiny infinity that often seems to dim in moments I most need to see it.
And it always feels like it's the first thing to play hide-and-seek with me when I am most terrified.
And this year, I got to witness nine people find it after lifetimes of directionless searching.
I got to witness them find it where it always was all along. Where it is for all of us.
Right here.
In this moment.
I could choose to drown in the collective weight of these absences from my life.
Many people do just that with loss of all kinds. And that's okay. It's so human and it's so natural. But I know that such a cement never dries.

And I know I can make a different choice at any moment.
I can choose to stand back up.

I often hear people describe those who fight their way through disease and illness as courageous. And I agree. But in my own struggles with four different forms of cancer I have found that courage is often just this: a profound lack of options. For me, it's more about letting go and not fighting what is. It's about knowing that the light I need is not one I have to seek, but one that is burning bright right there in the center of my chest. That doesn't mean that the struggle to survive is not brutal and exhausting and capable of bringing the strongest human beings to their knees. I think we all know it's often all of those things. But whether you are the person preparing for the journey into the unknown or one of the ones left to watch the dust cling to the air where that person once stood, it's important to remember what I know from having been on both sides of that itinerary:

All of this.
No matter how cleverly adorned or disguised.
Is inexplicably
and
infinitely
beautiful.

This I know. 

Glenn Rockowitz is a writer, oncopsychologist, and four-time cancer survivor. He has published two memoirs, *Rodeo in Joliet* and *Cotton Teeth*, about he and his father's terminal cancer battles. Glenn is currently pursuing his PhD at Loyola University while serving as Oncology Social Work Manager at Cancer Pathways in Seattle (formerly Gilda's Club) where he leads support groups for cancer patients, caregivers, individuals in bereavement, and survivors. Being a passionate believer in the healing powers of laughter, he also runs a humor therapy group at Cancer Pathways for any and all individuals affected by the disease.

◀ Opposite: Illustration by Tarsha Rockowitz.

NEWS

from Humanities Washington

Queer Poetry Anthology

As part of her term as Washington State Poet Laureate, Arianne True is assembling an anthology of poems from queer writers of all stripes across Washington State. The final anthology will be published online and made available as a free resource, and poems will be searchable. The anthology—and some related events—will be available soon. *Check out humanities.org for updates.*

Let's party!

Humanities Washington will mark our 50th anniversary in 2025, and we're looking for humanities lovers from across the state to help us plan the festivities. Interested? *Go to humanities.org/get-involved-with-humanities-washington.*

Join us for an event in Seattle with *Hild* author Nicola Griffith

Join renowned Seattle author Nicola Griffith to discuss queer identity in medieval history and historical fiction. The discussion will center on her novels *Hild* and *Menewood* but also historical fiction at large. How can fiction help us re-envision the past? What does queerness mean in the Middle Ages versus now? How can we navigate the complexities of using our own modern lens to tell historical stories? Join us June 11 at Town Hall Seattle.



▲ Washington State Poet Laureate Arianne True.

We're everywhere

In big cities and small towns across the state, Humanities Washington holds hundreds of events in-person and online. Check out talks ranging from how Native values can teach resilience to the history of oysters. *Go to humanities.org/events.*

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.



THE PUBLIC HUMANITIES FELLOWS program offers support to early-career humanists based in Washington, and funding for them to create an innovative public humanities program that reaches underserved communities around the state.



SPECIAL EVENTS brings hosted conversations on provocative topics and new ideas to pubs and tasting rooms.



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. Presented in partnership with ArtsWA.



CENTER FOR WASHINGTON CULTURAL TRADITIONS amplifies our state's rich, diverse living cultural treasures through research and special programming. Presented in partnership with ArtsWA.



MEDIA PROJECTS brings online content such as live and recorded panel discussions and conversations, radio shows, and other accessible deep dives into important current topics to viewers on our YouTube channel.



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