

In These Times, Season 4 | Finding a Way With Words (Episode 5)

Alex Schein:

In Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man*, the protagonist, one of the few survivors of a plague searches for meaning in a world of loss, concluding that there is but one solution to the intricate riddle of life, to improve ourselves and contribute to the happiness of others. In 2022, as COVID-19 lingers on, the climate threat looms larger, and war returns to Europe, there seems to be no answer to when this era defined by loss will end. Many of us are finding that making sense of the intricate riddle of life and extracting meaning out of adversity is one of the things that art does best.

In this season of *In These Times*, we talk to scholars, musicians, and poets and other members of creative communities to explore the link between making art and making meaning and how creativity shines a light on that way out of adversity, past and present. In these times, knowledge is more important than ever. In this episode, we speak with an author and a poet on how writing can connect us and help us understand and get through times of trouble. Welcome to episode five, *Finding a Way With Words*.

For the first months of the pandemic, Lorene Cary felt fortunate.

Lorene Cary:

My husband and I kept saying that it was the most amazing gift and really a blessing to be together in a marriage with somebody you wanted to be with, that that was the best. Also, to be an introvert was a good thing. If you're an introvert, if you have enough money, hugely important. I live in the city so I could walk places. I could just go to my store. Philadelphia was very careful early on. So I was grateful for that. I had exercise. I had good WiFi. We had the best set up we possibly could have that.

My husband died in 2021. Sort of everything changed for me. Looking back, I still had overwhelming work to do. I think one of the things about the pandemic is loneliness is terrible and that was hard and is hard, but it's also terrible not to have enough work. I often think about it like a plate of gravy. Do you have enough biscuits to soak it up? So what do you have to take up your time? I think figuring out how to live again. Grief is a very stern task master for discipline.

Alex Schein:

A senior lecturer with the department of English, Cary is a prolific author and social activist.

Lorene Cary:

I think I began to write properly in second grade. I decided on a story, beginning, middle, and end. I talked to someone to be my collaborator. He loved to draw pictures. So I said I would write it and he could draw the pictures and I had a product in mind. So that was the first time I had a full book in mind, second grade.

The other thing was my first short story that I actually typed on a typewriter. I wrote it. I thought about it. I edited it and rewrote it. The first one was in middle school. I think I was 11. And our neighbor had given me his typewriter. He was the first black reporter, I think, or one of the first in the Philadelphia

Bulletin newspaper. I wrote things all the time and stories and he said to me, "You're going to be a writer, kid. So I'm going to give you a typewriter." Talk like that. He said that you need a typewriter to be a... So I typed it. I loved typing on that typewriter. And that was my real story.

Alex Schein:

She also had storytelling role models in her family.

Lorene Cary:

The first one is my great grandfather who was from Barbados. The women in my family would stay downstairs. I loved coming upstairs with him. He seemed ancient. He may have been in his 80s by then, but he told these stories from the Caribbean from the 19th century. Many of them were magical. They were stories where there were spirits. There were spirits in the keen field, things you could not see and they come out at night when you're walking.

He also loved form and he taught me all these 19th century poems that his British schools had made him memorize at the time, and we would do the memorization. He also had me memorize passages from the Bible, loved memorization and putting the form of a story in one's mind, finding the music in it. A lot of it was doggerel, but I loved it and I loved doing it with him. So it was performance. Sometimes at parties they would say, "Oh, Pat, tell us a poem." He'd say, "Lorene, come here. The night was dark. The end was hid beneath the mountain green and not a silver star appeared to shoot a silver [inaudible]."

Sometimes people ask about storytelling in the past. One of the reasons I love stories was that they allowed my mind to roam and intersect with other people in the way that prayer or meditation or song allowed the mind and emotions to intersect with spirit. I think storytelling is our, it is a technology we have come up with that connects mind, emotion, and bodies, and past and present and exploring the future. I know that Caesar wrote that and I was in his future, but I'm reading it now. And after I'm dead, someone will read something that I have either read, or if God is kind, something I've written. So the very act of writing is an assertion into the future. The language I'm using was created by ancient human beings desperate to communicate with one another, and over time and time and time.

Alex Schein:

Cary has written news articles, novels, non-fiction books and stories, scripts, and two memoirs, *Black Ice* and *Ladysitting: My Year with Nana at the End of Her Century*. Her play *My General Tubman*, staged at the Arden Theatre in 2020, tells the story of Harriet Tubman's life and lasting effect. Now she's starting to work on opera libretti. She chooses her form based on what she's writing.

Lorene Cary:

I learned more about form or the consideration of form from poets, I think, than from prose. I'm not very theoretical, and I don't write great theory. I like to do the work as opposed to talk about it. But Stanley Kunitz is a poet. He wrote this thing. He says that form contains energy. The form itself contains, holds in energy and that in a poorly made poem, the energy leaks out. I think about that with every form. When you ask me how you decide which form, it feels to me like some forms can contain the energy of a particular kind of story, and others are inadequate to containing that energy.

Now, the other thing is, if I write it poorly, it's going to leak out any damn way, even if you've made the right connection. So I love playing with all of these. I ask my students sometimes, like, "Take this. It's too talky," and say, "I don't want to hear any language. Make a list. Just make a list. Don't talk to me no damn words. It's too much, too many words. Make a list," or "let's try it this way. Or how would you... Oh, you just said that. Okay. Somebody, let's take out our cell phone. Say it again. And let's see if we can make that a TikTok. You got us a song to go," like just trying to catch the energy because so often we're so busy trying to be smart or answer the critics who said that this was wrong the last time, that we forget how we got into this business in the first place, which is being obsessed by a story that makes you crazy until you share it.

Alex Schein:

Long before the pandemic, Cary had been using art to help people connect and overcome. She founded Art Sanctuary, an African American arts organization in North Philadelphia, starting with \$5,000 and handwritten invitations to events. Art Sanctuary offers free or low cost programs like readings and performances of hip hop, classical, and other music. Philadanco and poet Nikki Giovanni have performed.

Lorene Cary:

It was Bill T. Jones dancing, unaccompanied on the high altar with people who had driven in from Bryn Mawr and people who had walked from around the corner at 18th and Diamond. I loved that. Then I started connecting it to Penn, because I thought, "Oh, I'm doing all this stuff. Why can't I connect my students?" So I started teaching a class called Reading in Concert where at Art Sanctuary, we would have a writer who would do a reading in the spring, and then my class would work on one work of that author. We started with John Edgar Wideman. We did Charles Fuller, June Jordan. One work, and they would figure out how to teach some part of that work to all of these satellite areas, project home, after school program in north Philly, a book group at a black church, Penn charter, a lunchtime book group. Berwyn Public School had an after school poetry group, like all over the Delaware Valley. Then all of those groups would come together for that author's reading.

I loved watching what it did to my students to do that, get out. Everybody says they want to get out of Penn and do something, but do it and be responsible for it. So after I left Art Sanctuary, I found that I was no longer satisfied without some community component.

Alex Schein:

Cary was impressed on how school kids rose to the occasion when they had to perform at Art Sanctuary and wanted to give her Penn students the same kind of opportunity. She created Safe Kids Stories, a website and social movement designed to promote Philadelphia programs that create safe havens for children and youth. Each week, a safekidsstories.org website focuses on a subject or theme that answers the question what makes children safe? The college students created material along with local K-12 students, community members, professional writers, and artists.

Lorene Cary:

So we do sports as a safe space for young people to learn to grow. We did poetry. We did just one thing after another. I loved that. Then when the Parkland shootings happened, that class at Penn was due to write. I had laid out the semester and they were going to write about poetry for us to publish in April.

But when the shootings happened, we were trying to talk about safety and we kept bumping up against all the things, all the ways that trauma and poverty and hurt and abuse and guns, we had to find a way.

So we wrote a feature for March to go with the March for Our Lives protest in Washington. And the idea was, "Okay, if we can't be on the buses with you, we're going to give you stuff to read, to send you on your way." At the end of that, those students said to me, because students always know better and they're very bossy once you tell them you're in charge. They said, "Your next course should be about voting," because that's what March for Our Lives said. We have to get into the political sphere. We have to make those of us who are 18, 17 looking at 18, we've got to talk about voting. Protest is not enough.

Alex Schein:

Cary created Vote that Jawn. Students work to register voters and create works that make voting seem cool.

Speaker 1:

Vote that Jawn. Okay. Okay, listen up. You're going to be 18 by voting time and you're an American citizen. So you got to vote, kapish? So head over to votethatjawn.com and click on the register to vote button. And heads up, if you live in Philly, your city and county are both Philadelphia. All you need to register to vote is a PA driver's license, a PennDOT ID or a social security number. And I know you got a lease one of those.

Lorene Cary:

And now they're doing portfolio features where they have an entire feature on the blog and they're doing TikToks, podcasts, Instagram, some blogs, all different kinds of short form storytelling about voting having to do with courts, gerrymandering, voting rights, women's votes. God, there's so many of them. Right now it's called Writing in Politics. And next fall it'll be called Voting Writes, W-R-I-T-E-S because if you start anywhere, you can write about anything, which is what the memoir teaches you.

Alex Schein:

Like Cary, Fatemeh Shams began writing early. The assistant professor of modern Persian literature has published three acclaimed and award-winning collections of poetry in Persian and English, including *88*, and *When They Broke Down the Door*. Born in Iran, she grew up surrounded by poetry.

Fatemeh Shams:

Really, growing up in Iran, in a way, means that poetry is part and parcel of your everyday life since very, very young age. That's how I was shaped personally as a poet and an avid reader of poetry. In Iran, poetry is the most visible, I would say, and also the most popular literary genre, in the households, on the billboards, in the streets, in the school textbooks, in radio and television; on important national holidays, such as the new year; and on moments of grief and celebrations, if someone dies or in a wedding; even during political insurgencies, such as the 1979 Revolution or 2009 Green Movement, poetry has always been present and active as an empowering and healing force.

So I wrote my first poem when I was in the middle school. Yeah, it was really just a natural urge inside to, in a way, dance with the music of the words and the harmony that I always heard and sensed in

Persian poetry around me. There was this idea of writing poetry in rhyme and meter that for me it was the natural way of working and reading poetry at that age.

I remember that I wrote a poem in a classical form and I recited it before my parents. It was a sonnet and I dedicated it to my father. At the beginning, they were quite shocked and surprised. My mother even thought that I stole the poem from somewhere. I remember that I was quite upset about that. And then a few days later, my father came home with a beautiful piece of framed Persian calligraphy, and he handed it into me and asked me to read it. I saw that it was my poem, which looked much more impressive than those scattered lines in my little notebook. I remember that I was staring at that piece every day and sort of caught myself with a big smile on the face. It was really empowering and encouraging to see my words in that beautiful frame. I don't know if my dad ever knew what a huge role he actually played in me becoming the poet that I am today. But he did.

Alex Schein:

When the pandemic shut down started, Professor Shams was already suffering the pain and loneliness of an exile. She had left Iran to pursue her education and political upheavals there made it impossible for her to return.

Fatemeh Shams:

I think the fear of losing human connections was the worst part for me. I'm a stateless exile, and although I have really gotten used to the worst forms of loss, such as the loss of homeland and the loss of seeing my aging parents and the gradual loss of my mother tongue, loss of memories of home and how it used to be like 12 years ago when I left it and saw it for the last time. All of this, I thought I'm very much used to this different layers of loss in life. And then the pandemic happened and suddenly it introduced a whole new form and level of loss for which I had to find new coping strategies in exile as a political exile or as someone who has been forcefully pushed out of their homeland. Those people still get to enjoy social freedom, mingling with friends, colleagues, interacting with students in my case, for example, as a teacher, being present in the society, being in the workspace, you still get to enjoy being alone in the middle of the crowd. But with the pandemic that social freedom was completely demolished for a while.

Alex Schein:

In the depths of isolation, she rethought how to create a sense of collective being.

Fatemeh Shams:

I remember it was deep into pandemic when I decided to reach out to some of our graduate students and faculty members to start a monthly virtual poetry circle with them. I wanted to give this fear inside me and this fear of loss, weight and credit, but I also didn't want to let it rule my life. I thought one thing that can help doing this is to basically rethink how to do this one healing way method that I know, which is reading poetry together, collectively, something that I used to do when I was a teenager.

I remember when I was full of rage and full of disappointment as a teenager with the society around me, sometimes even with the way that the world didn't make sense. I used to go to poetry sessions with other poets and we read there and we got angry; we laughed; we cried, and poetry suddenly allowed us to process our emotions in ways that nothing else allowed us to do. And I thought that power of poetry

to calm down the words and the thoughts in the middle of a dark chaos was probably something that could help.

Alex Schein:

Despite her Zoom fatigue, she reached out to colleagues and students and was motivated by their response.

Fatemeh Shams:

I chose the theme of fear. I said, "Let's think about fear and come up with one poem and read that poem and then discuss it for two hours." And then a small group of us came together. After the first session, which I remember very vividly, it was right in the middle of the Black Lives Matter movement, after the murder of George Floyd. It was that week and we read poems and then one of our graduate students proposed that, why don't we read about victory next time? The theme of the month would be victory. Then we came back with poems about victory, and after that about trees and rage and dream and love. Then we went on and on and everyone contemplated on those themes and some of us were poets, so it gave us a chance to creatively think and write about a theme, and many beautiful poems came out of those beautiful sessions.

Fatemeh Shams:

On top of that, we had the opportunity to check in with each other and see each other and basically to keep our sanity in place, I think, and have a sense of community that was taken away from us by the pandemic. It felt very violent and it felt that if we don't push back, it can take over our lives.

Alex Schein:

One of the most famous and popular poets in Iran is Saadi Shīrāzī, who lived in the 13th century. His work is inscribed at the entrance to the United Nations.

Fatemeh Shams:

[speaking Farsi]. This is a poem by one of the most famous Persian poets, Saadi Shīrāzī, which again is about imagining the whole humanity as one single organ that is one in creation. If one of them, one organ in the body suffers from a pain, other organs will also be restless, and that every human being who doesn't care about the pain of the others is not called a human, basically. In a way, I think this poem very much resonates also with the time that we live in, which is the time of a global pandemic as a collective trauma and pain, and also the time of war and a refugee crisis.

I feel like if we take that as a sort of a metaphor for the world and the way that this raging pandemic has been imposing death and loss and suffering on the whole world, still it doesn't feel as if we are treating it as a virus that is affecting us as a whole, as one body, that each of us as one of the organs of this body should care for the rest. I think that's one of the biggest lessons of this past two years for me, and to what extent this sense of collectivity matters to us, and to what extent are we willing to treat this collective crisis as a problem of us as a whole, rather than us as individuals,

Alex Schein:

Professor Shams' academic work also addresses the use of poetry in turbulent times. She was born during the Iran-Iraq War, four years after the 1979 Revolution in Iran. Her childhood was filled with

poetry and war songs on the TV and radio, and in the schools. Her first book, *A Revolution in Rhyme: Poetic Cooption under the Islamic Republic*, traced the evolution of the Islamic Republic through 10 key poets.

Fatemeh Shams:

For me, it was really interesting that even these poets who I didn't necessarily aesthetically was pleased by their work, had a very deep sense of what was happening in the past. They were very well read as far as the past Persian literary tradition was concerned. There were certain classical poetic forms that were revived after the revolution such as the rubai or the couplet or the sonnets that were written during the war. For me, it was interesting to look into why these particular forms have been revived again and in this way, for this particular purpose.

Then there was a moment where I was talking to people of my generation and I was inviting them to remember war songs and the songs of the revolution.

Speaker 2:

(singing)

Fatemeh Shams:

Even those who were completely entirely opposed to the ideology of the government were remembering the poems and the songs that were promoted by the government. It was very much part of our collective memory. At that point, I sort of thought that something needs to be done about how our memory has been shaped for four decades and the power of poetry, whether or not we aesthetically relate to it or not as the way that it has affected us and shaped us. So I wrote about that in the first book.

Alex Schein:

Professor Shams is now in Berlin, working on her second book, tentatively titled *Portraits of Exile*, focusing on Iranian poets who initially supported the revolution but later were persecuted and exiled.

Fatemeh Shams:

I'm hoping in the second book to draw parallels between the Persian literati of the '80s and '90s and the German literati who fled Nazi Germany, which is part of the reason me being in Berlin in the past few months as a Humboldt Fellow to work on the archival sites and material in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany on these existing parallels. They're fascinating, how being pushed out of your country sort of becomes a life completely starting from scratch, a new life, a new phase, a new birth.

Alex Schein:

She has been in Berlin during the fall of Afghanistan and the beginning of the war in Ukraine, both of which have led to waves of refugees in the city.

Fatemeh Shams:

I became deeply involved in the evacuation process of Afghan scholars and poets and writers back in August, which was for me a life-changing experience to feel responsible, to be part of a tragedy and exodus that was happening right at the heart of the Persianate world, and also to be involved in it as a

stateless refugee and as someone who was the educator of Persian literature. So this has been something that I've been working on.

It has been utterly exhausting and draining, I have to admit because this is not something that I came here to do. Really my responsibility and my sort of first goal was to be here to focus on my research, but this very much became part of my research because the research on exile could not be done without interacting with the people who came into exile. I'm hoping that the second book will reflect on all these sort of experiences over the past year because my hope is that for the second book, I will be able to write not only scholastically about literature of exile or poetry of exile, but also the experience of exile, what the body goes through, what the mind goes through. I think in a sense, living here in this city where once was divided by the wall and people were exiled in their own place, in their own hometown, is something that has been very integral in the life of the past year here in Berlin.

Alex Schein:

While in Berlin, professor Shams has also been writing poetry. One poem, *Hopscotch*, contemplates border crossing, memory and hope. Shams was inspired as she followed the path of the Berlin Wall.

Fatemeh Shams:

[speaking Farsi].

Fatemeh Shams:

Hopscotch shoulder to shoulder with your absence. I play hopscotch on the long streets of Berlin, the chalk lines half erased by rain. One hop to where you are far away. One hop to memories of faith kindergarten in Mashhad. Another hop, and I might reach him. I might see him. I might hug my father, still 29 and about to be a father for the first time. I hop one square forward over the artificial borders. I hop, hop, hop three squares back to the seven-year-old girl who darts from the tip of the white poplar, like the shadow of a frightened crow. And then on the landing, a brief pause, one foot dreaming of going back; one foot stuck in the present, repeating the paradox of living now in the roofless cube of memory. To play hopscotch on long streets in the atmosphere of being 38 is to walk with a pilgrim's gait in a childhood dream.

Alex Schein:

This concludes episode five of *In These Times*, the intricate riddle of life. Join us in two weeks for episode six, *Music and Meaning*, where we'll talk with a professor of music about the power of song and dance to unite and inspire people during the apartheid era in South Africa, and a college alum about his process, composing music for the screen, and our OMNIA podcast. The OMNIA podcast is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to Lorene Cary and Professor Fatemeh Shams. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening. Subscribe to the OMNIA podcast by Penn Arts and Sciences on Apple iTunes or wherever you find your podcasts to listen to every episode of *In These Times*, the intricate riddle of life.