

Seattle poet Luther Hughes on ‘A Shiver in the Leaves,’ his debut collection

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Luther Hughes, founder of Shade Literary Arts and author of “A Shiver in the Leaves.”
(Kenderick Richardson)

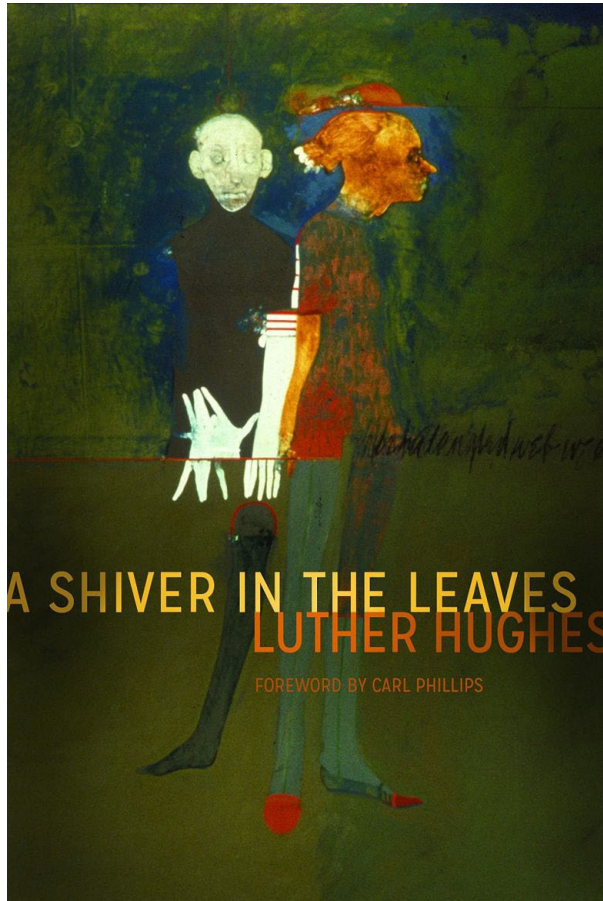
By [Sarah Neilson](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Local poet Luther Hughes was born and raised in Seattle, where currently lives and works. His chapbook “Touched” was released in 2018, and he has received multiple awards and fellowships including the Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. He founded the literary organization [Shade Literary Arts](#) for queer writers of color and co-hosts [The Poet Salon](#) podcast. Now, Hughes is publishing his first full-length poetry collection, “A Shiver in the Leaves.” The book is heavily influenced (and set in) the Seattle area,

with its lush landscape and harsh undercurrents. “A Shiver in the Leaves” explores police brutality, racial and sexual violence, depression and grief with the simultaneity of joy, healing, love and a relationship with place that is inherently complicated.

The Seattle Times spoke with Hughes over Zoom about crow imagery, power and the body, grief, and finding joy in the everyday. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



A Shiver in the Leaves

Luther Hughes, BOA Editions, Ltd., 80 pp., \$17, available Sept. 27

Can you talk about the importance of the imagery of flora and fauna in the poems, and how that relates to themes of selfhood?

Seattle is a city that is very unique in its cityscape as it is intertwined with nature. As I was thinking about writing these poems, I was thinking about Seattle and all its lushness. Seattle and the Pacific Northwest has a really nice population of birds, and that relates to selfhood, in that there is this underlying theme of the speakers in the book wanting to be free from life, from themselves, from the violence, from police brutality, even from Seattle.

This idea that birds can fly and kind of be free and be above it all is something that I was really taken by, specifically with crows given that crows have a sort of omen to them or a stereotype

to them. And being a black bird, being a Black person — I've seen some connection there that as a black person I too want to be able to fly above it all and distance myself from it.

As for the greenery, I think Seattle's a beautiful place, and I didn't know how else to talk about Seattle's beauty without talking about just the flora and just loving on the trees; and looking up specific trees in Seattle, looking at specific birds or specific bushes and flowers to be intentional about beauty. I got that from Ada Limón, who was very intentional about naming things in her book "The Carrying" and her other books as well. It's important for me to be genuine to the things around me.

Can you talk about the corporeal aspects of these poems, and how power interacts with corporeality?

When it comes to the body and power, I was wrestling with what does it mean sexually to have power in a situation? The book really does battle and challenge and reckon with sexual activity and who finds power within the body during the activity. I was even thinking about that in relation to say police brutality and who has the power in a situation where the person who is being seen as dangerous is seen as also less than, but also having the power to be perceived as dangerous. It's a weird tension I think that this book wrestles with.

Some of the poems also directly engage with murders, including of [Dwone Anderson-Young](#) and [Ahmed Said](#) here in Seattle in 2014. How do you explore death and sadness in the book, and how, if at all, poetry helps you process these events or use your voice to remember?

I want to talk about this violence because it was affecting me pretty heavily. In the book, there's a poem about Trayvon Martin. I think that was the first Black death [after which] I realized that the system is literally working against Black people. That was the beginning of how I started thinking about Black death and really wrestling with myself about how to feel about it. And I think that did trigger sadness or depression that I really didn't see until later on in my life.

A lot of the poems that speak directly to Black people dying are really about the speakers wrestling with the fact that they are dead and what to do with their bodies themselves. Which is also important, because I didn't want to retrigger anybody reading these poems, I didn't want them to have to go through the process of rehashing somebody's death. It's why in the poem "In Seattle," that's for Dwone Anderson-Young and Ahmed Said it's about the speaker just going through the city. Because one wouldn't think Seattle had these types of violence within it because we're so liberal and we're so open, but things do still happen in Seattle that may not get nationwide coverage. This poem was important particularly because I knew Dwone Anderson-Young. We grew up together. I need to also say they didn't pass away by police hand, they passed away from a hate crime. So again, I didn't want that to be a necessary propeller of the poem because it wasn't about how they died, it was more so about how the speaker felt within the context of their death, and to center my depression and my sadness and not center the acts of dying.

Where or when do you find inspiration for poetry in the mundane, in the details of the everyday?

I love the everyday. I really love the mundane. I love the poems that expand maybe a two-minute moment. The poem “Making the Bed,” there were maybe five minutes of that really actually happening, but it’s like 10-plus stanzas. I love poems that have the ability to kind of explode a moment. And I think it’s important for that to happen in this book in particular because life isn’t all about trauma. Trauma also isn’t always the biggest thing in one’s life. Sometimes tension is so tiny. There’s police violence in the book; there’s depression, which is a big topic; there’s abuse, which is a big topic; and so I needed to remind myself that sometimes the little things are more important than the bigger things. Without the little things, the big things wouldn’t matter as much to me.

The Rain is Clearing

7 p.m. Sept. 27; Open Books: A Poem Emporium, 108 Cherry St., Seattle; [st.news/hughes-openbooks](https://www.stnews.com/hughes-openbooks). Masks required.

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