

# Scrawl # FOUR

## East of the Mountains by Scott C. Davis

The winter had been wet in the lowlands of Puget Sound and the mountains had carried heavy snow. At last the overcast lifted, warm air moved up the valleys, rivers ran high with melt . . . and we saw the sun. It was late March, and I thought of spring.

I left Seattle on Friday at noon for a quick business trip to Spokane.

I jumped on I-5 in the University District. I liked the U District. It was international. It was young. There was music and sports. I drove south until I was looking at the old industrial zone of South Seattle that now was giving way to stadiums and sports bars. Boeing field was just a bit farther down, but today I turned east on I-90. Forty minutes later I was in the mountains, then over the mountains into the flat, featureless land beyond. My mind drifted and, hours later, I arrived in Spokane where I was staying with friends.

The next day in late afternoon I headed home. Outside Spokane, the land was severe and empty and my mind drifted. I thought of the interesting life I led, the stories I could tell. Soon it was dark and farther along heavy rain and later rain with ice. The cars slowed and then stopped: a roadblock. The state troopers ushered all vehicles off the highway for our safety. Avalanche control on the pass.

Our detour took us into what I knew to be the first town east of the mountains. A century ago it had been a coal town. More recently it had served as a stage set for a network TV show. The coal had run out long ago and the show was in re-runs. People lived here. A few made money by selling worthless land with streams—I pictured mine waste and dead fish—to dupes from Seattle. The town was more or less without a meal ticket these days and sucked its living from the freeway. The streets were dark, no one was out, and I circled back toward I-90. In this town, on Saturday night, a fun time consisted of . . . I could not answer this question. Just one business was open, at the bottom of the freeway off ramp: a Perkins Cake & Steak.

Perkins was packed. I found a seat at a table with others, ordered a burger and fries. I found a Seattle paper and read as I ate. I couldn't eat the fries, but the burger was OK. I was curious about the people of this town. Between bites I did some people watching. There were a lot of young people, college students, East Africans. I suppose that they were on their way home from a church retreat or a basketball game near Spokane: the Zags; Wazzu. There were some Carhardt guys who, I figured out, were long haul truckers. I guessed that they were carrying freight to feed the businesses and industries of the coast . . . or to be loaded on ships for export. There were mom-and-dads, corporate managers with jobs and kids and SUVs parked in front and their wives heading home to Seattle. I liked this group. It was diverse. It was energetic. It was America.

I finished my burger and my paper. The road was still closed. I ordered cake and ice cream and scrounged a local paper with nothing in it. I read the classifieds and ate and watched. The cake was really awful.

I finished my ice cream. The road was still closed. Stevens was open, but it was a two hour drive to get there and, by that time—with my luck it would be closed too. There was nothing to read. I ordered mint tea . . . but they did not have mint tea or any other drinks I could stomach. So I sat and did nothing. I hate doing nothing. I had been at Perkins for a couple of hours. Two hours! I did not have two hours to do nothing. The good state troopers concerned for our well being now seemed more like incompetents. Explain to me, exactly why were we doing avalanche control at the end of March? And the crowd, if it was so wonderful, why was it the same? Yes, this was the same crowd I saw in Seattle every day, the same crowd I had seen in Spokane.

I was no longer in transit. I was in a place. But there was no place here. There was nothing I could see. Nothing to learn. No one to meet. There was no story here. No scent of history. No modern day leftover cowboys. No locals at all aside from waitresses too busy to talk. Perkins was clean and well-lighted. But it was not a place. It was, really, part of the interstate highway system. Who would I be if I had grown up in this town? I could not think of it. Time was passing. I was getting nothing done. My soul was in agony.

Twenty minutes later, the roadblock was lifted, and I was on the road heading west. There was slush on the road. I had to pay attention to the driving and then at the pass the roads were better, and I drove down the western slope, toward the newest suburbs built by Microsoft. Bill Gates was the richest man in the world, and he brought the smartest people from dozens of foreign countries to live here, and work, and to keep our economy humming. Farther down were the old suburbs that Boeing had built, my suburbs, where I had grown up without luxury yet without financial worry, thanks to a father who shucked off his individuality every morning at 6 AM and drove into the great gray airplane factory.

By now I was at Mt. Si, the last mountain before the green wet cow pastures and brimming streams of the lowlands. Over the years, I had used Mt. Si for physical conditioning. I had climbed in the Alps, in Chamonix and the Dolomites. Well, at least I had driven through the Dolomites.

Flat highway, thirty minutes from home. I was thinking of my life. I had come a long way, accomplished many things, and I had never boasted or taken undue credit. Still, my potential was more interesting to me. I liked my life very much.

Scott C. Davis is a freelance writer based in Seattle. His first book, *The World of Patience Gromes: Making and Unmaking a Black Community* won the Governor's Writers Award. His second book, *Lost Arrow and Other True Stories* won the King County Arts Commission Special Projects Award. His third book, *The Road from Damascus: A Journey Through Syria* was the first book of description and travel by an American on Syria in over a century. Scott C. Davis is also a founder of Cune Press, a Seattle-based non-profit publisher. [www.cunepress.net](http://www.cunepress.net)

SCRAWL #4 is a response to the exhibition HIGH LIVING by Buddy Bunting.