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Rod Begay and Dean Antone maneuver across the slippery rocks of Willamette Falls in Oregon City, Oregon, to fish for lamprey. **Mason Trinca / HCN**

Know the West.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Refuge is a practice

LAMPREY ARE AMONG THE OLDEST living vertebrates on Earth. Long before the appearance of salmon or sturgeon — or even dinosaurs — lamprey were wiggling through the shallow seas and up the rushing rivers of Pangaea, surviving on the strength of their muscular bodies and formidable, suction-cup mouths. By the time humans began wandering the planet, lamprey had survived no fewer than five mass extinctions. As B. Toastie recounts in this issue, the first peoples of the Columbia River Basin made an agreement with the Pacific lamprey: The people would care for the lamprey, and the lamprey would care for the people. The past century of dam development, river pollution and climate change — perpetrated by those who made no such agreement — has challenged both parties as never before. And yet, as Toastie writes, the agreement reached thousands of years ago still endures today.

Throughout the Columbia Basin, Indigenous people and lamprey are engaged in what might be called "making refuge," a sustained effort to ensure and enhance one another's survival. While the people continue to care for the lamprey and its habitat, and work to restore the species to its original range, the lamprey continues to provide both abundant protein and occasions for celebration. And this is not the only way of making refuge: As photographer June T Sanders and essayist Abigail Hansel document in this issue, a unique community on the border of Washington and Idaho is blooming amid and despite intensifying extremism. In several Western states, as Anna V. Smith reports, grassroots activists and elected state officials are working to make refuge for abortion care, and in Arizona, as Caroline Tracey writes, mobile-home tenants are incorporating science in their campaign to make their homes a refuge from the heat.

We often speak of refuges as isolated, static places, dependent on walls or boundaries. But refuge doesn't require isolation — in fact, it often requires the opposite. And protecting ourselves and our fellow species has always been an active endeavor, one in which protectors and protected must detect new dangers and adapt to changing conditions. This work can be hard — as hard as a lamprey's inch-by-inch struggle up the fast-drying cliffs of Willamette Falls — but as I hope you'll see in this issue, it is rewarding, too.

After another summer marked by extraordinary heat waves, droughts, floods and wildfires, the work of making and expanding refuge in the West feels especially urgent. No matter who we are or where we live in the region, we're alert to new and greater dangers, and adapting to less and less predictability. May the community of readers, writers and artists that is *High Country News* provide some refuge for all of you, and may each of you press on in making refuge for the lives and places you love.

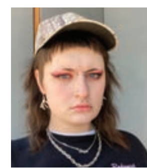
Michelle Nijhuis, acting co-editor

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS

Beth Alvarado
Bend, Oregon

Nick Bowlin
Gunnison, Colorado
@npbowlin

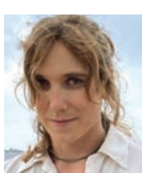
Miles W. Griffis
Los Angeles, California
@mileswgriffis



Abigail Hansel
Palouse, Washington
@lacerating_wish

Sean Hill
Missoula, Montana
@adamalzeal

Nick Martin
New York, New York
@NickA_Martin



June T Sanders
Palouse, Washington

B. Toastie
Portland, Oregon

Caroline Tracey
Tucson, Arizona
@ce_tracey

Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Sahn is on leave.

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Iris with Carson, off Highway 6 *(above)*.
June T Sanders / HCN

The Catalina Mountains tower over one of the 430 mobile home parks in Tucson, Arizona *(right)*.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra and Eliseu Cavalcante / HCN

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High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social media, or email us at editor@hcn.org.

LANDBACK LOVE

"6 questions about the LandBack movement answered" (September 2022) might tempt me to subscribe to your publication.

I believe we owe much to the descendants of the survivors of the wipe-out of our Indigenous cultures as well as those whose ancestors were held as slaves or suffered the oppression of the Jim Crow era.

We must fix these things. The LandBack movement could be a part of that fixing.

AJ Womack
Grand Junction, Colorado

SUPERB SNARK

Thank you so much for the two delightfully snarky pieces: "6 questions about the LandBack movement answered" and "The new top ways to go outside" (September 2022). When all else fails, humor communicates. Truly, if/when I pay off my mortgage, I plan to keep sending the amount of the payment to the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. It's clear that the 1/5 of an acre parcel that I call *mi querencia* is not really mine.

Pat Rauscher
Cortez, Colorado

HIKING FODDER

Thank you so much for "The new top ways to go outdoors." Not only did I truly enjoy the graphics, but I so much loved the sentiment and writing as well. So wonderfully and helpfully thought-provoking. I hope to print it and look at it when I'm hiking to remind myself.

Lisa Felipa
Oakland, California

HOPE & CELEBRATION

Nick Mott's article, "Flooding could breathe life into Yellowstone ecosystem" (September 2022) and geomorphologist Karin Boyd's optimism filled me with hope and made my morning. It is refreshing to read of habitats that have the possibility of thriving despite human communities suffering. I appreciate the scenes of the cottonwood seeds, reclaiming rivers, fresh animal tracks — none of which gets celebrated enough. I hope these sacred habitats come first in the planning of what happens next in the Yellowstone area.

Brittany Bergin-Foss
Carbondale, Colorado

METHANE'S POTENCY

In Elizabeth Shogren's informative article "The EPA has more options to rein in climate change than you think" (September 2022), she repeats a common claim about reducing greenhouse emissions by generating electricity with gas instead of coal, following with an important disclaimer that natural gas is mostly methane, an extremely potent greenhouse gas, which leaks as part of the process.

Methane is at least 80 times more powerful as a greenhouse gas than CO_2 over a 20-year period, and calculations show greenhouse impact would be doubled by just 1.25% methane leakage. So gas may be as bad, or worse, than coal for generating electricity.

Methane does not remain in the atmosphere as long as CO_2. Given the urgency of the climate crisis, we should be thinking in terms of 20, not 100, years.

Dick Walton
Billings, Montana

AUGUST ON FIRE

Thank you for the issue we needed on wildfire ("Our Fiery Future," August 2022). My community in Oregon is almost two years into recovery from a devastating wildfire in 2020. I've seen first-hand the truth in your reporting. Fire-defensible homes burn in firestorms ("It Takes a Village"). Escape routes are cut off by exploding spot fires, falling trees and burning cars. Western communities need safe areas within communities — school athletic fields, parks, large gravel areas — for people to survive.

The story of rebuilding after the fire ("After the Flames") is vitally important. It's barely covered, and it's not what people think it is. Rebuilding a community, its complete infrastructure and civic-community structure is an entirely different animal from rebuilding homes. People are dispersed and traumatized; the bureaucratic processes are bewildering; utilities would like to abandon rural burned areas. Disaster recovery is a much-needed emerging professional field in our new era of climate change and catastrophe.

Val Rapp
McKenzie Bridge, Oregon

Oh, I am so glad! The August issue is outstanding with great writers presenting fascinating research. My magazine is torn apart as I have sent the articles to various friends and my daughter.

Elaine Davis
Missoula, Montana

PODCAST PRAISE

We *love* that the July 2022 issue of *HCN* included a review of four Western-based podcasts. We've listened to two of them so far, and they've been both educational and enjoyable.

Tom Welker & Nancy Fisher
South Lyon, Michigan

THE REAL WATER USERS

Nick Bowlin correctly notes in his article about the severe drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin that at least 70% of Western water is used by Big Ag ("The feds declined to seriously cut Colorado River water use. Here's what that means," hcn.org, 8/18/22).

He fails to point out that a large majority of that ag water is used to raise cattle, irrigate pastures and grow the (water-hungry) alfalfa that feeds 'em. By a large margin, hay is the biggest crop grown in Western states. In California, hay and pasture suck up twice as much water as tree nuts and four times as much as fruit or rice or corn. While cattle/hay/pasture consume huge amounts of precious Western water, they create few jobs and contribute a tiny percentage to Western states' GDP. Cattle produce large amounts of waste byproducts that befoul our air, land and water.

Want to do your part to ease Western water woes? Stop eating beef.

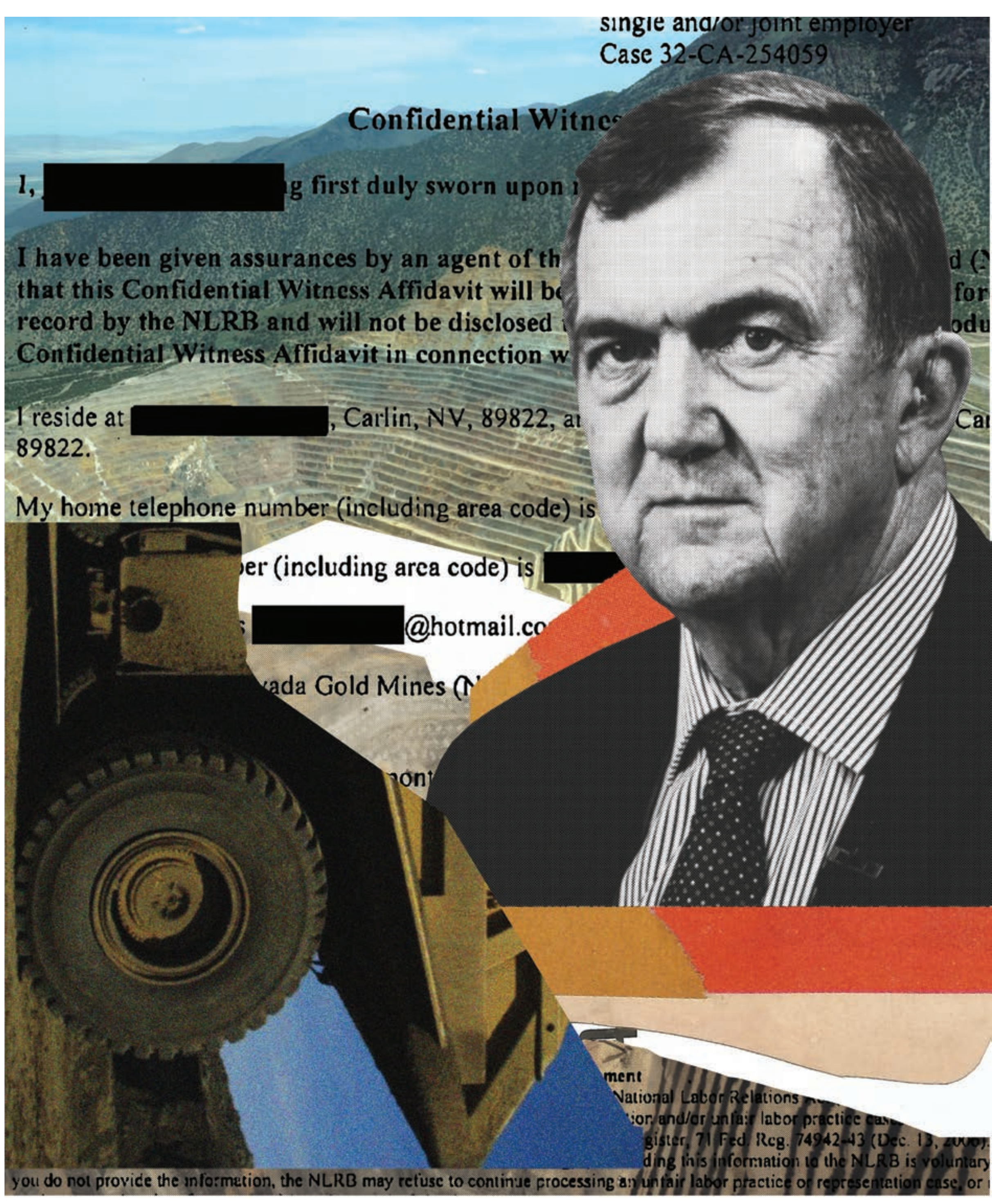
Chuck Shaw
Spring Grove, Pennsylvania

AUTHOR ACCLAIM

I started paying close attention to anything Jonathan Thompson wrote for the magazine in 2016, after his fabulous coverage of the Bears Ears National Monument designation fight/process. I've been hooked on his work ever since and feel so grateful to see the Facts & Figures section each month. Data is powerful! I rarely read emails from organizations, but "Landline" has me squinting at my phone screen over my morning cup of coffee.

Thank you!

Hannah Black
Marblemount, Washington



(Source images: Mark Bristow portrait by Simon Dawson/Bloomberg via Getty Images; aerial photo courtesy of EcoFlight.)

REPORTAGE

Trouble at Nevada Gold Mines

Safety concerns arise after a global firm takes over gold mines in Nevada.

BY NICK BOWLIN AND DANIEL ROTHBERG
ILLUSTRATION BY NEU TOKYO

This story was produced in collaboration between High Country News *and* The Nevada Independent *and supported by grants from the Fund for Investigative Journalism.*

Editor's note: Several current or former employees have spoken with our reporters for this investigation. Because of concerns of retaliation from Nevada Gold Mines and Barrick Gold Corp., we have used gender-neutral pseudonyms throughout this story. We have used an asterisk to denote where names have been changed to protect our sources' identities.

WHEN DREW* started working for the Newmont Corporation at a large gold mine in northeastern Nevada, it was a relief. At their previous mining job near Elko, a Nevada town heavily reliant on the industry, safety was not a priority. By comparison, Drew said, Newmont supported its workers when they raised serious safety issues. "It was never geared toward the blame game," they told us. When Drew was injured, there "was no debate on if we should report it."

But, as Drew recounted in multiple interviews this year, that positive safety culture began to unravel after a merger consolidated the region's gold mines — some of the world's largest — into a single company: Nevada Gold Mines.

"All they care about is the bottom line, pushing ore through," Drew said in an interview.

In 2019, Barrick and Newmont formed a mega-company that would be managed by Barrick's executives. The new company, Nevada Gold Mines, now accounts for about 75% of the state's gold production. Earlier this year, *High Country News* and *The Nevada Independent* published an investigation into Nevada Gold Mines' outsized influence

in northeastern Nevada. With about 7,000 employees and 4,000 contractors, Nevada Gold Mines dominates the economy of that part of the state, operating with enormous influence and little competition.

Since that investigation, which chronicled increased turnover as well as instances of alleged workplace harassment and discrimination, more than three dozen current and former employees, as well as others close to the situation, contacted us through a tipline to share their experiences. Many said that the jointly owned company's top management has created a culture that appeared to emphasize profits and productivity above all else, seemingly at the expense of safety. In August, Mark Bristow, Barrick's chief executive, sat down with *The Nevada Independent* and *High Country News* and acknowledged that Nevada Gold Mines has the worst safety record of all the company's divisions, which operate in Tanzania, Canada, the Dominican Republic and Papua New Guinea.

More than 10 of the current and former workers who initially contacted *The Nevada Independent* and *HCN* agreed to follow-up interviews. Nearly all of them spoke to us on condition that we not disclose their identities because they feared retaliation, given the company's influence on Nevada mining and the local job market.

This is not the first time that workers have voiced concerns about safety since the merger. Safety issues appear several times in a 2020 lawsuit that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) filed over the company's unwillingness to recognize a union that had represented mine workers for more than 60 years. The federal agency, which is responsible for enforcing labor law, took the sworn statements of several workers. "I am worried that if I bring up a legitimate safety concern, there could be repercussions. I could be viewed as stirring shit, and they would say that I'm just a problem and get rid of me," Mike Tangreen, a Nevada mine worker for more than two decades, stated in a sworn March 2020 affidavit included as part of the lawsuit.

Part of Nevada Gold Mines' hold on the area is the good-paying jobs it provides. It also helps fund health-care clinics and supports community services in a part of the state where economic fortunes cycle with global metal prices. Even employees who criticized the company acknowledged this.

Others, like laboratory technician Sam Brown, believe that the merger's long-term benefits outweigh the downsides. There have been "growing pains," Brown said, but he believed a single company could operate more efficiently, making it more likely that its mines would be competitive and survive, even if the price of gold dropped.

"For the most part, people understand and appreciate that the company is a positive force in Elko," Brown said. "As soon as the mines dry up, the face of Elko changes dramatically."

Over the course of the last year, dozens of other mine workers we interviewed acknowledged the company's economic influence. But they also wondered: At what cost?

WHEN BARRICK COMBINED with Randgold Resources, a multinational mining company run by Bristow, it sought to cut costs and boost efficiency. Asked by *Bloomberg* in January about how Barrick has controlled costs amid rising inflation, Bristow highlighted an effort to "drop (the) overall age of our employee profile, particularly in North America," among other measures.

Nevada Gold Mines has lost senior and experienced employees across several departments in recent years. Longtime workers said they were concerned that the attempt to bring in younger talent was driving away experienced employees who understood mine safety and the local geology. Hiring inexperienced replacements, they feared, could endanger other employees.

In an interview, Bristow, who is 63, said, "There is no one — I can say to you without fear of contradiction — that has been picked on because of their age." Although the workforce has grown younger, he said the average age had dropped by only about a year. "It's suicidal to chase away your experience," Bristow said, citing exit interview statistics showing that about 60% to 70% of workers say they would return to the company.

Yet current and former employees said the focus on production and the resulting low morale contributed to a higher-risk environment where safety issues could become more pronounced. Nevada Gold Mines has written policies aimed at protecting workers from the hazards of heavy equipment operation. But the day-to-day incentives, some employees said, are misaligned with those policies.

"If you have a near miss, you lose your safety bonus, because it could have been a potential injury," a worker testified as part of the 2020 NLRB lawsuit. "If you do have an injury, you lose your bonus." Drew said that reporting a violation under Nevada Gold Mines became more challenging because workers feared retaliation or losing their safety bonuses, which were increasingly awarded to crews based on reported violations, according to multiple employees. When asked, the company did not provide information about the bonus structure.

Drew saw how this played out firsthand. They hesitated to report a serious shoulder injury, for fear that it would leave a "bad mark." But Advil and Tylenol were not enough; Drew needed medical attention, so they reported the injury and were escorted to the company-backed Golden Health Clinic. Ultimately, Drew was "given a full work release before it was fully determined what had happened, and there wasn't much done to determine what had happened." In other words, it was handled so that the injury wouldn't affect the company's statistics.

"Nobody wanted to report accidents anymore, because we could lose our bonus and everyone would be mad at you," said Drew, who later left Nevada Gold Mines.

They told us they still experience shoulder pain.

HUNDREDS OF MILES away from its mining operations, Barrick keeps an office at a corporate center in Henderson, a suburb of Las Vegas. Earlier this month, Bristow sat down for an interview with *The Nevada Independent* and *HCN* in a nondescript conference room, tucked away in the corner of the office. Bristow, a geologist by

"All they care about is the bottom line, pushing ore through."

> *"Nobody wanted to report accidents anymore, because we could lose our bonus and everyone would be mad at you."*

training, wore a polo shirt with the Nevada Gold Mines logo. According to him, he inherited a workforce where "people were insecure in their position. … I've never been at a company where people are scared of being fired. Dismissed. So, that was something that we had to work on."

Bristow said that he wanted "a culture where people feel comfortable about dealing with concerns openly." He further added that "if you're faced with an unsafe situation, you should have all the rights to not do the job."

Bristow also said that even though Nevada Gold Mines has the same percentage of incidents as other divisions in the company, "the incident severity, the impact, the result of the incident is generally, on average, more severe." But he rejected the idea that safety bonuses incentivized underreporting: "We've got enough checks and balances."

Still, some federal regulators and mine worker advocates frown on bonus systems that hinge on safety, said Davitt McAteer, who served as the assistant secretary for the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) under President Bill Clinton. "It's a flawed model that leads to underreporting of accidents, and cover-ups of incidents and frequencies of problems," said McAteer, who has worked as a mine safety lawyer and investigated mine disasters.

Drew was far from the only employee worried about the new company's safety culture. At a different northern Nevada mine, another former employee, Jordan,* described feeling unsettled by the changes after Nevada Gold Mines was formed.

Jordan, who worked in the health and safety department, said in a phone interview that they and other employees feared they would be punished or terminated for bringing safety concerns to superiors. Jordan eventually left the company. "My fear is that a major incident will seriously injure or kill someone," Jordan wrote in *HCN*'s and *The Nevada Independent*'s tip form, "and I can't have that on my conscience."

Because of mining's high-risk environment, the federal government closely monitors workplace safety, injuries and fatalities. Multiple current and former workers said that their biggest fear was that a slip-up or lax enforcement of safety protocols could lead to a fatality.

On the morning of Feb. 14, Marissa Hill, a 34-year-old maintenance technician who had worked in mining for more than a decade, died after her lube truck fell more than 60 feet down an underground shaft at the Cortez Hills mining complex, a site operated by Nevada Gold Mines that the company is actively pushing to expand.

MSHA, a federal regulator with broad legal powers to enforce mine safety rules, is investigating and has yet to release additional details beyond a brief preliminary report.

Bristow and other company officials said they could not release any additional information, as the investigation was ongoing. In a statement, the company said it was "working closely with MSHA to fully understand the circumstances that led to the incident and take the correct course of action to ensure it does not happen again."

MORE THAN A dozen employees at various levels, from hourly union-represented workers to people who managed large operations teams, told us that the profit- and production-focused culture was fostered by high-level executives. Several former managers pointed to Bristow's leadership, saying that in meetings he had criticized the Nevada workforce's lack of efficiency.

This August, we asked Bristow about the extreme cost-cutting measures detailed in a recent article in the *Mining Journal*, an industry-friendly trade publication, which said that Nevada Gold Mines "shook the rug pretty violently to see what costs would fall out to appease their shareholders." Bristow brushed it off. "I'm not that sort of person," he said. "Why would you want to do that? You know, your most important asset in any business … is its people."

But while Bristow may claim that the company's greatest asset is its people, some have been offended by his comments. In early 2019, after Bristow took the helm of Barrick, a group of senior employees gathered in a conference room at the Turquoise Ridge mine near Winnemucca, Nevada, to bring the new CEO up to speed.

Bristow's reputation as a hard-nosed manager who emphasized cost-cutting and production preceded him, according to a senior employee who attended the meeting and spoke on the condition of anonymity. Before the meeting, several attendees made a bet, pooling their money, with the pot promised to the person that Bristow treated the worst, the senior employee said. Barrick employees began the meeting with presentations regarding mine operations and workplace issues.

At one point, Bristow, who was described as sitting in the front row, interrupted. He said Barrick's Nevada miners were overpaid, and he mocked their work ethic and physical fitness, according to the employee who was present. A second senior employee who attended confirmed this, saying Bristow called workers "lazy."

Bristow remembered the meeting, but he denied calling workers "lazy." His comments, as he recalled them, came from a "real concern about safety," because physical health matters for workers who have to go underground. At one point, he suggested that the fact that incidents were more severe in Nevada "points you to the health of a person, the ability for somebody to take a knock or trip over his own feet — or her own feet — or things like that."

In a 2019 article, the *Elko Daily Free Press* quoted Bristow as saying, "(Miners) need to be fit. We haven't got a good safety record, and a lot of that is because people are actually not in a physical condition to look after themselves." Later, he added: "We've got too many out-of-shape people working in our organization."

Many Nevada Gold Mines workers are aware of Bristow's comments, and his rhetoric is one of many factors — along with overall working conditions, changes to employee benefits and a soured relationship with the union — that concerns them.

"Don't get me wrong: I love the people I work with in my little group," one current worker, who has spent years working in Nevada's mining industry and seen the changes firsthand, said. "But as for the company on the whole, I trust them about as far as I could throw my house."

REPORTAGE

‘You’re living in a tin can’

Arizona’s mobile home residents are far more likely to die from excessive heat.

BY CAROLINE TRACEY | PHOTOS BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

AFTER IMMIGRATING TO Tucson, Arizona, from Culiacán, Sinaloa, in 2012, Cristina Apan struggled to find stable housing. In 2016, after the woman she was staying with kicked her out, she slept in her car. “I thought I was going to die,” she said. “In Mexico, you’d get killed for sleeping out in the open in your car. I couldn’t stop thinking like that.”

Finally, she asked a friend, a quiet landscaper named Juan Diego Rodríguez, if she could stay in his manufactured home. The two eventually married. “2016 and 2017, we were friends, but in 2018 we said, ‘You know what, we keep getting closer to one another; let’s get married.’ That’s what fate had in store for us.”

But the home was in terrible condition, Apan said — so bad, it couldn’t be repaired.

Fortunately, an acquaintance offered to help, co-signing a loan for a better-kept manufactured home in Carefree Village Estates, a 55-plus community in Tucson. The couple moved into the white-and-green home in September 2020. The porch is decorated with plants and small metal butterflies. Inside, Apan recently painted the living room’s dark wood paneling white to brighten the space.

“I feel rich living here,” she said. Where their former park was “falling apart,” Carefree Village Estates has a swimming pool and a clubhouse with a library, billiards and coffee hours on Saturday morning. “The neighbors look out for one another,” Apan said. “It’s tranquil.”

But during the summer, the temperature inside ranges from 90 to 96 degrees. They have a window AC unit, but it takes so much electricity to cool the poorly insulated 1982 home that it’s too expensive to run. They used to have an evaporative cooler, but its motor broke last summer, and they lacked the money to replace it. Now they keep the blinds drawn and spend their days in air-conditioned spaces like the public library or the mall. “Not to buy anything, just to walk around,” she said.

Their problem isn’t unique. Excessive heat is an increasing problem in the West, and manufactured home residents are among the most affected. In Arizona, rates of heat-related deaths in manufactured homes are eight times those of housing built on a permanent foundation, due to a combination of deteriorating structures, low incomes, and poor access to utility assistance and credit. Tenants and experts agree that finding ways to protect manufactured home residents from excessive heat is essential, given the West’s simultaneous climate and housing crises. The issue has been overlooked for too long.

Researchers at Arizona State University noticed the disproportionate mortality in manufactured homes in 2018, when the Public Health Department of Maricopa County, Arizona, asked the university’s Knowledge Exchange for Resilience center for help reducing heat-related deaths. They began by mapping deaths alongside data about homes receiving utility assistance.

In Mesa, Arizona, they noted a concentration of deaths, but low rates of utility assistance. On Google Street View, the researchers saw that the area consisted primarily of manufactured homes. “It was like, what is happening here?” said Lora Phillips, a postdoctoral researcher at ASU. Research teams from both ASU and the University of Arizona, collaborating with the Arizona Association of Mobile Home and RV Owners (AAMHO), are in the process of surveying over 1,000 residents to better understand what causes the striking statistics.

One of the first factors they observed was

This story was produced in collaboration with Arizona Luminaria. *Read this story in Spanish at hcn.org.*

the quality of the homes. Older manufactured homes are poorly weatherized, with thin metal walls, 2-inch-by-3-inch framing and metal roofs. "You're living in a tin can," said Kati Gilson, another resident of Carefree Village Estates. Gilson manages to keep her poorly insulated 1990s home cool because she has air conditioning. But AC is expensive, she said, and "a lot of people here can't afford their electric bill." The monthly cost of running AC in drafty manufactured homes during the summer months can run as high as $350.

But it's more than just thin walls and drafty windows: The cost of weatherization is often greater than the value of the home. On average, residents of manufactured housing have lower incomes than either homeowners or renters in ordinary housing, and they are often further marginalized by factors including immigration status, low credit scores and histories of eviction or incarceration. Others, especially elderly residents of 55-plus parks, live on small fixed incomes like Social Security or disability, making the rise in utility bills during the summer a serious challenge. And because manufactured homes are considered "personal property" — more like vehicles than traditional houses — owners generally cannot take out a loan against the house for upgrades and repairs.

They end up using homespun strategies to cope: covering windows with blankets on the inside or reflective foil on the outside, and building awnings and enclosing porch areas so that less sunlight can get in. Esmeralda Pelayo, who lives in Tucson's Weststar Park, said her family spent the summer staying in the one room of their home that has an AC window unit, misting each other with a spray bottle to stay cool.

The programs that exist nationwide for manufactured home repairs generally require that the homeowner also own the land the home sits on — which means that most mobile home park residents, who typically rent the space beneath their home, get disqualified. And to make matters worse, park tenants are often shut out of utility assistance programs: Park homesites are sub-metered by management, so residents are not direct customers of the utility companies. "The way these programs work, the neediest manufactured housing residents don't qualify," said Mark Kear, an economic geographer at the University of Arizona.

Even those who seek to help needy residents struggle to address these challenges. Neil Saunders, an engineer at Tucson Electric Power, encountered them firsthand when he began trying to develop a program to install solar-powered air conditioning in manufactured homes at no cost to residents. He began conducting site visits, checking the possibility of installing either solar panels on the roof or a solar awning attached to the wall. He visited a variety of homes, including Apan and Rodríguez's. But he found that the housing of the people who most needed the help wasn't sturdy enough to support solar panels. The installation could damage the home, making the situation worse.

With solar off the table, however, his project no longer had access to the federal funds for renewable energy he had planned to use. Now, he says, he is simply trying to support the University of Arizona researchers. "If they make a robust data set, then it becomes a political thing," he said. "You just have to put it in front of the right people."

Arizona's mobile home park tenants' organization, AAMHO, has already started to use the researchers' data for political purposes. In one case, the city of Apache Junction, Arizona, tried to pass a law requiring residents who replaced their AC systems to pay a fee similar to a fee for a permit for home improvements. The organization's president, Pat Schoneck, argued that some residents would not be able to afford the extra fee on top of the AC repair, meaning that deaths would be a likely outcome. The measure didn't pass.

These types of fights — over homeowners' and tenants' ability to mitigate heat in their living spaces — are likely to increase in coming years, as the West's summers rapidly become hotter. Though we tend to think of climate change as something that happens outside, livable indoor spaces are crucial for adapting to hotter temperatures. "Most of us cope by going inside," said Kear. "We experience climate change inside. And it's changing indoor environments in a really uneven way."

Cristina Apan and her husband, Juan Diego Rodríguez, at home in Tucson, Arizona, in August *(opposite).*

The small window AC unit costs too much to run regularly and doesn't provide adequate cooling when it is used *(below left).*

Apan and Rodríguez's 1982 mobile home lacks insulation, and its evaporative cooler no longer works *(below).*

REPORTAGE

A smoldering threat to wildland firefighters

Long COVID affects more than 16 million Americans, and firefighters are at increased risk of getting it.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS
PHOTOS BY REBECCA STUMPF

Editor's note: This story contains a graphic description relating to the loss of a child.

THE HEAT WAS IN THE TRIPLE DIGITS when Lea Bossler and her U.S. Forest Service engine crew reached the blaze unfurling in a canyon outside Nogales, Arizona. As she trekked up a hill with her shovel-like rhino tool, flaming barrel cacti tumbled down the slope, igniting more parched fuels along the way. Despite the heat, a 45-pound pack and little sleep, Bossler felt strong and capable, mopping up the edges of the fire, extinguishing collapsed cactuses that smoldered like burnt rubber. This was her third season as a wildland firefighter, and she was well on her way to fulfilling her goal of becoming an incident commander.

After the fire was contained, Bossler and her crew drove home to Missoula, Montana, concluding a two-week roll in the Southwest. It was early July 2020, the middle of a record-breaking fire season that would burn over 10 million acres across the country, and Bossler was resting before her next assignment. There was a coronavirus outbreak at her partner's workplace, and just a couple of days after she came home, she caught a debilitating case of COVID-19. Now, more than two years later, the 32-year-old still hasn't recovered. Long COVID has not only damaged her health, it has also forced her to give up her career in firefighting.

Currently, over 19 million people in the United States — 1 in 13 adults — are living with long COVID, though some estimates place the number as high as 23 million. Long COVID is a complex condition that affects all age groups and can involve multiple organ systems. It's diagnosed weeks or months after a COVID-19 infection. Some of the symptoms include cognitive dysfunction, respiratory and cardiovascular problems and extreme fatigue, though roughly 200 other symptoms are recognized, and some can linger for years. Many patients meet the diagnostic criteria for other diagnoses, as well. Those include postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, which causes extreme dizziness, headaches and rapid heart-rate; and myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) — sometimes called chronic fatigue syndrome — a disabling neurological disease that has been underfunded for decades.

A World Health Organization official recently warned that repeated infections may increase the risk of long COVID. A recent U.S. Census Bureau survey analyzed by the National Center for Health Statistics showed that as many as 1 in 5 adults who were infected with COVID-19 now have symptoms of long COVID.

While the number of U.S. wildland firefighters affected is unknown, the workforce is considered at high risk of contracting COVID-19: In 2021, the leading cause of line-of-duty deaths in wildland firefighters was COVID-19. Firefighters are already stretched thin due to the prolonged and intensified fire seasons caused by climate change. Long COVID is not only affecting firefighters' health and livelihoods, it could also seriously hamper their response to the escalating crisis.

Firefighters are a strikingly transient workforce, making them more vulnerable to catching and spreading COVID-19. "You have firefighters and other fire personnel who are traveling from all over the country to arrive at one common location," said Matthew Thompson, a research forester with the Forest Service.

The lack of sanitation and privacy in the camps, combined with fatigue, heat, physically demanding work and other factors add to that vulnerability, according to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG), which provides leadership to wildland fire operations among federal, state, local, tribal and territorial partners. One of the largest COVID outbreaks at a fire camp occurred during the 2020 Cameron Peak Fire in northern Colorado, with 79 positive cases and 273 close contacts who were quarantined. A Forest Service press officer emailed that among nearly 11,000 permanent and temporary agency firefighters, there were 1,847 reported cases of COVID-19 within the past 12 months.

In a recent modeling study, Thompson and his co-authors found that social distancing and vaccination reduced outbreaks in fire camps, though their study did not assess long COVID or the highly contagious omicron variant. (According to a 2022 study in the journal *Nature Medicine*, vaccination may only slightly reduce the risk of long COVID.) Thompson's study also found that firefighters were infected even more often outside of fire camp than within it, meaning that they are continually at risk as the U.S. eases preventative measures, allowing for dangerous peaks that can occur in the heart of fire season.

The NWCG recommends COVID safety prevention practices for wildland firefighters based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control. But a widely referenced CDC document about COVID and wildland firefighters doesn't specifically mention long COVID.

In a review published last year, Kathleen Navarro, a researcher at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, noted that particulate matter — including the hazardous mixture of small particles and droplets found in wildfire smoke — could contribute to a greater likelihood of COVID-19 infection in wildland firefighters, as well as more severe illness. "It's not only the risk of transmission or getting COVID," said Navarro. "It's also the severity of outcomes."

But firefighters face a risk of long COVID, no matter the severity of their acute case: A 2022 white paper stated that nearly 76% of those diagnosed with long COVID have not been hospitalized.

Opposite, Lea Bossler stands for a portrait in Lolo National Forest, near her home in Missoula, Montana. Below, Bossler holds a photo of when she says she felt most like herself, before she had long COVID, when she was working as a wildland firefighter.

BOSSLER RETURNED TO WORK after her 14-day quarantine despite not feeling fully recovered. "I went back hoping I would go back to normal," she said. "But I really didn't. I worked through it because you just don't pass up opportunities as a female firefighter." She often felt like she was drowning as she continued to fight fires across Montana the rest of the summer.

"There's an attitude in firefighters that you don't quit for anything," she said. "And there's just no education, warning, or recognition of long COVID in fire."

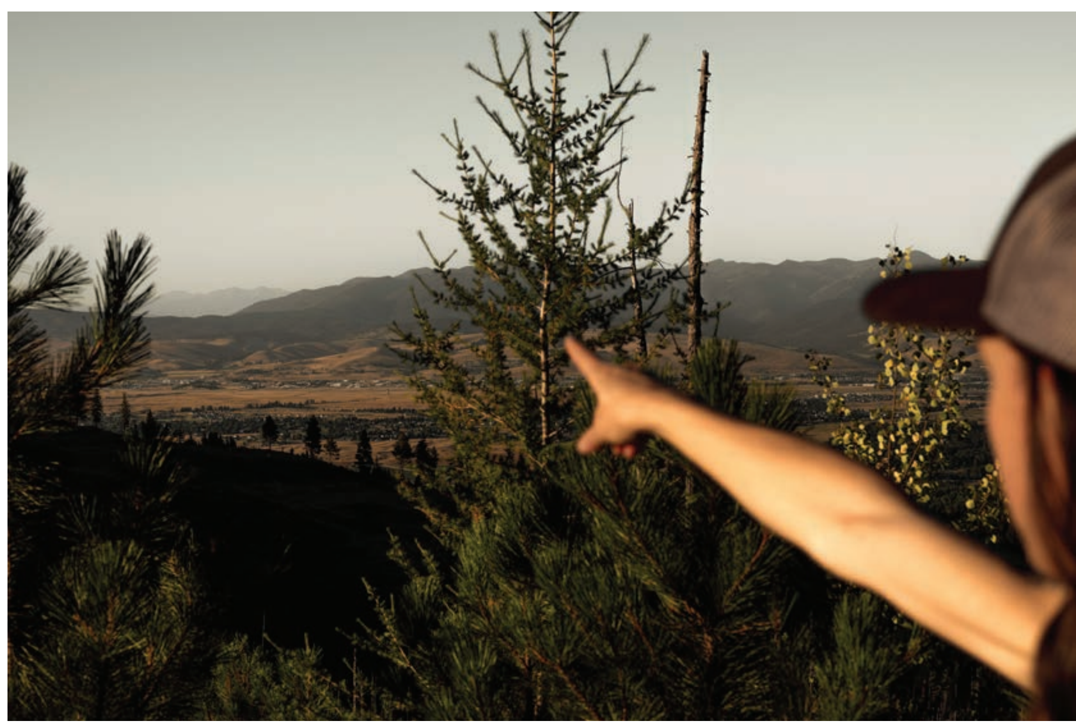
Advocates for those with chronic illness warned of the possibility of complex chronic illness following COVID-19 in the beginning of the pandemic, but the federal government's public health apparatus did not amplify these messages and still doesn't consistently emphasize the risk of long-term health effects following an initial case. "I can only assume that I did more damage to myself," she said. "I gave in to this notion that because I was young and healthy, I'd be fine, when I knew, deep down, there was something really wrong with me."

A growing number of physicians warn that resuming activity while not yet fully recovered may increase a person's likelihood of developing long COVID. But owing to financial hardship, inadequate sick leave and other pressures, many workers in the United States push on through their illnesses.

Bossler continued to work on her crew through the summer, despite lingering symptoms. But then, in late August, she found out she was pregnant. She said she likely conceived around the time she first contracted COVID-19 in early July 2020.

In a joint decision with her superiors, Bossler transferred from the engine crew to a timber strike team for the rest of the season. Her due date was in May, and she planned to take a Forest Service office job that summer and resume working as a firefighter the following season — assuming she recovered from long COVID. But these plans were put on hold in January when she gave birth to her daughter, Maesyn, prematurely, at only 25 weeks. Her baby suffered fetal inflammatory response syndrome due to the maternal history of COVID, and Bossler's placenta was filled with blood clots, which contributed to placental failure and abruption. "A COVID-affected placenta looks like you took a roadkill deer, took the liver out, and shot it with a shotgun a couple of times," Bossler told me.

When she first went into the hospital at 23 weeks with contractions from early labor, Bossler was told there was only a 30% chance of her baby surviving. Her daughter weighed just 1 pound and 6 ounces at birth when she arrived two weeks later and gained only 5 more pounds during her 115 days in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. She died on May 14, 2021, close to her original due date. In Maesyn's final moments, Bossler was able to take her daughter out of the NICU to see the sky for the first time. Maesyn died outside in the spring sunlight, in the arms of Bossler and her partner, Marcus Cahoon.



NOW, OVER TWO YEARS since she first contracted COVID, Bossler continues to experience debilitating long COVID symptoms. She cannot walk more than half a mile without feeling fatigued and also struggles with headaches and memory loss, and has difficulty paying attention. She has chest pain that she says has worsened significantly since she was reinfected in June. Bossler believes her pregnancy complications made her more aware of her illness, which she might otherwise have been too stubborn to acknowledge. "I know of people that have long COVID that are still trying to be firefighters," she said, "but I don't think they have the same understanding or recognition of it that I might have.

"I think all employers of wildland firefighters would be doing a huge disservice to their employees to not recognize long COVID and the mental health challenges that come from it," Bossler said. When I reached out to the Forest Service in August about the agency's approach to long COVID education and prevention, I was told to contact the United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM), which oversees all federal employees. The Interior Department, which employs over 5,000 temporary and permanent wildland fire personnel, wrote that it develops policy based on recommendations from the CDC and Safer Federal Workforce Task Force, which is led by the White House COVID-19 Response Team, the General Services Administration and the OPM — none of which offer publicly available guidelines on long COVID. The Office of Personnel Management sent a written statement in response to our request for comment but did not elaborate on its policies related to long COVID.

"(First responders') careers depend on our health and us being able to respond to a fire or an emergency at any point of time, despite how we feel," said Karyn Bishof, the founder of the COVID-19 Longhauler Advocacy Project, a nonprofit advocating for education, research and patient welfare. She said that many first responders, including wildland firefighters, are reluctant to speak about health issues for fear of losing their livelihoods. "The flip side of that is if they're not seeking treatment and care, they're not only risking their own lives, but possibly the lives of their crews."

Bishof became infected with COVID after an outbreak at her firefighter paramedic training in the city of Palm Beach Gardens in South Florida. She told me she was later let go from her job on the Fire Rescue team without explanation. In late 2020, Bishof was also denied workers' compensation after a doctor diagnosed her symptoms as psychosomatic, a common experience for many patients with complex chronic illness. She has since filed a discrimination lawsuit against the city of Palm Beach Gardens. The city did not respond to my request for comment.

Like other infectious diseases, including Lyme, mononucleosis and SARS-1, COVID-19 can develop into complex chronic illnesses. Researchers have consistently found a range of abnormalities in long

From left, Lea Bossler points at a helicopter carrying water buckets on its way to a forest fire north of Missoula. A photograph of Bossler and her partner, Marcus Cahoon, holding their daughter, Maesyn, who was born prematurely, at only 25 weeks. Bossler holds a nano preemie-size diaper, one of the items she has kept in memory of her daughter.

COVID patients, including micro clots, persistent viral reservoirs, reactivated viruses and autoimmune responses. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has recognized that the condition can be a disability, but in the fall of 2021, Bishof — like many long COVID patients — was denied Social Security disability benefits. She reapplied but was denied a second time and is now awaiting an appeal hearing.

Because there is no cure for long COVID, Bishof said that preventing COVID-19 and increasing public awareness of its long-term consequences are paramount, especially in protecting first responders. She's concerned that if long COVID continues to affect one of every five infected people, it will inevitably effect public safety. "If we lose that percentage of that workforce, what does that mean for emergency response times?" she asked. "What does that mean for wildfire response?"

In testimony before a Senate Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis this July, Katie Bach, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said that policymakers need to support improved health care, sick leave, disability and workplace accommodations for workers. Given that as many as 4 million long COVID patients are unable to work, Bach estimates a cost of as much as $230 billion in lost earnings alone, not including other costs, such as health care or reduced productivity.

The Forest Service and Interior Department offer sick leave for employees exposed to communicable diseases, like COVID-19, as well as disability accommodations that can include teleworking and more flexible work hours. Federal firefighters who can't work at all due to long COVID contracted on the job may be eligible for workers' compensation, according to an Interior spokesperson. But employees infected outside of work are not eligible for any benefits, according to guidelines by the Office of Personnel Management.

Looking back at her experience over the past two years, Bossler says the Forest Service needs to develop policies that help protect firefighters from long COVID, as well as provide support for those affected by it. She was forced to leave her job at the Forest Service when she went into early labor. "It was a medically forced resignation," she said. After her daughter's birth, she considered returning to the agency, but at that point, she was still grieving and unable to work full-time due to her long COVID symptoms.

In the fall of 2021, she began working part-time as a health unit coordinator in the same neonatal intensive care unit that treated Maesyn. A number of the nurses there, like other first responders, also suffer from long COVID. "I wanted to work somewhere that would understand me," Bossler told me.

"I learned how to handle all these traumatic situations by relying on the lessons from fire," Bossler said. Maesyn's brief life and death had such a profound impact that Bossler feels an obligation to continue telling her daughter's story while educating people about this chronic illness. "I think about other firefighters that lost their ability to do their job.

"It's not just your job. It's your identity. The grief that comes with that is just not discussed enough."

This story was supported by the journalism nonprofit the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.

"I went back hoping I would go back to normal. But I really didn't. I worked through it because you just don't pass up opportunities as a female firefighter."

REPORTAGE

Can Indian Country withstand the new Supreme Court?

The High Court is set to hear a case that will affect thousands of Native kids. Is it qualified to judge?

BY NICK MARTIN | PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JULIA LUBAS

ON NOV. 9, THE EYES of Indian Country will once again turn toward the nation's capital, where the Supreme Court will hear a challenge to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), a law passed in 1978 that enshrines tribal governments' right to oversee foster care placements in cases involving Native children. The bill followed the damage done by the U.S. boarding school system and extractive adoption practices, which stripped Native youth of their culture and removed them from their communities. Since the case first appeared in a Texas district courthouse in 2018, conservative state leaders and think tanks have pushed the case to the highest court. *Brackeen v. Haaland* will determine whether tribal nations maintain the right to intervene in foster and adoptive cases to ensure Native children are placed with Native families.

For Susan Harness, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Confederated Tribes and a survivor of the pre-ICWA adoption era, the immediate stakes of it being struck down are clear.

"It will open the floodgates to cultural annihilation," said Harness, who wrote about her experience in *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption*. "The Indian adoption project, the social experiment that happened between 1958 to 1967 — kids went flying off the reservation. ... When that happens, you grow up hating yourself, because you are now being raised in the colonizers' belief system of how awful you are, not just as a human being, but as a piece of culture that should have died out a long time ago."

On its own, *Brackeen* is a legal and political challenge to the health of Native kids, tribal nations and communities. But after the recent rush of appointees to the bench by Donald Trump and Joe Biden, *Brackeen* also represents a test of what this young court means to the future of tribal sovereignty. In a worst-case scenario for Indian Country, the court could strike down the law on equal-protections grounds, arguing that the ICWA is unconstitutional because Native citizens are a racial, not a political, class. This would, intentionally or not, undercut the nation-to-nation relationship tribes hold with the federal government.

HAD THE *BRACKEEN* CASE appeared on the court's docket two years ago, fresh on the heels of the now-famous *McGirt* decision — in which Trump-appointee Neil Gorsuch functionally served as the swing vote when the court held 5-4 that the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Reservation was never disestablished by Congress — this ICWA challenge, and any subsequent challenges to tribal sovereignty and Indigenous human rights, might not be as worrisome.

"Then Justice Ginsburg died."

That's how Elizabeth Hidalgo Reese, a citizen of Nambé Pueblo and a law professor focused on tribal, constitutional and federal Indian law at Stanford University, put it over the phone in August. Support for tribal sovereignty doesn't fall along partisan lines, and Ginsburg's rulings didn't always favor tribal sovereignty: In 2005, she wrote the majority opinion in *City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of New York*, holding that the Oneida Nation of New York could not establish sovereign rule over stolen lands the tribal government had repurchased. Similar examples abound from her contemporaries: Justice Clarence Thomas continues to hold that the 1871 Indian Appropriations Act should effectively negate most of tribal nations' claims to sovereignty, and Justice Stephen Breyer, in his opinion on *Baby Girl*, a previous ICWA challenge, entertained the idea that some conniving tribes would act against a child's best interests.

But with Ginsburg and the other justices in place, the bench's behavior was predictable enough for tribal nations and organizations to make an informed decision about their legal strategies. Ginsburg's passing upended tribal nations' calculus regarding the court. Conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett, appointed to replace Ginsburg in October 2020,

gave the bench's conservatives a 6-3 edge and lacks experience in Indigenous cases. Fellow Trump appointee Brett Kavanaugh is similarly green, and Biden's appointee Ketanji Brown Jackson also has little tribal expertise — a pattern Reese said that is caused in part by a system-wide dismissal of federal Indian or tribal law curriculum.

"Every law student in this country tends to walk into a law school classroom and get told that there's two types of law in this country, that there's state and there's federal law, period," said Reese. "There are 574 tribal governments across this country who are also making laws to govern their communities — (law schools) just pretend like we don't exist, like we don't control as much land as the state of California. It's insane."

The ramifications of the court's inexperience were on full display in June, when in *Castro-Huerta v. Oklahoma*, it broadly declared, by a 5-4 vote, that state law enforcement agencies have the right to prosecute crimes committed by non-Natives against Native citizens on tribal lands. Kavanaugh penned the majority opinion, which Reese described as "a tad bit sloppy yet overconfident" in how unconcerned it seemed with the potential ripple effects. In a dissenting opinion, Gorsuch referenced the 1832 *Worcester* decision, writing, "Where our predecessors refused to participate in one State's unlawful power grab at the expense of the Cherokee, today's Court accedes to another's."

The outstanding question ahead of the *Brackeen* hearings is not whether the court will strike down the ICWA — Reese said it almost certainly will — but how far the majority will reach with its ruling. If the court ruled on equal protection grounds, even if justices limited their ruling to the ICWA, Reese said the natural question — one that an emboldened state attorney general or radical think tank would surely ask — is what other laws and federal policies could be challenged on similar grounds. If the court strikes down the ICWA under Article 1 of the U.S. Constitution, which permits Congress ultimate governing authority, and finds that Congress overstepped the broad authority granted to it by the Indian Commerce Clause, it would also open the door for every federal law concerning Native peoples and nations to be challenged.

"The people who object to our status as sovereign nations, they fully understand that one of the most effective ways to dismantle tribal governments is to go after our children," said Allie Maldonado, the chief judge of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians. "They are our future. There is no other way for us to continue our governments, our language, our culture."

Another potential outcome, which Reese described as "the way to lose and have it not be devastating for the rest of Indian law," is that the court takes up the case on commandeering grounds — the 10th Amendment holds that Congress cannot force state governments to carry out federal policy aims, as a portion of the *Brackeen* challenge claims the ICWA does. While Reese noted that the justices are certainly more familiar with states' rights cases, their collective track record, *Castro-Huerta* included, doesn't leave much breathing room for the ICWA.

On the other hand, the court could reject the *Brackeen* challenge altogether and hold that the ICWA is constitutional law that is neither race-based nor a violation of state sovereignty. This would temporarily stave off the vultures attacking tribal sovereignty and Native children — at least until the court's next session.

"It's a minefield," Reese concluded — one that nine non-Native justices will sprint through in a month.

Sarah Trent contributed reporting to this article.

Photo illustration images: Susan Harness and her adoptive parents (Courtesy image); 2013 protests around Cherokee Nation citizen Dusten Brown's custody case for his biological daughter, Veronica (Kristi Eaton/AP); Flathead Nation Flag and Supreme Court Building (Wikipedia commons)

POEM

Pearl & Lee

By Sean Hill

Pearl Payne and Lee Pleasant Driver,
two of the few Negroes in Anaconda,
a smelter town, found each other. Lee,
the protected side of something—
sheltered and sheltering—a pleasant
place out of the wind and rain. A pearl
grows from the need to soothe pain
—nacre encases irritants to smooth
rough edges and results in a luster
we appreciate, worthy of the necks
of our adored if we can afford it.
Smelting, extracting the metal from rock
or ore, copper in this case (valued because
it carries a current and connects people)
requires heat and care. Lee Pleasant,
a former Buffalo Soldier, saw worth
in Pearl Payne, and she in him. He, born
at the end of the war, and she, a dozen
years later, who didn't know slavery
but knew well what it meant to be
Black in a newly reconciled nation,
wed in that Western smelter town.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Sean Hill recite his poem at **hcne.ws/pearl-lee**

REPORTAGE

Abortion on the ballot

In a post-*Roe* West, reproductive rights are in the hands of the states — and their voters.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

AMY FITCH-HEACOCK WAS DRIVING from Phoenix to Tucson in May when she got an email from fellow reproductive rights organizers: A draft of an upcoming Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* had been leaked to *Politico*. She pulled off the freeway to read it, at first thinking it had to be misinformation. It was not. That night, Fitch-Heacock, a founding member of Arizonans for Reproductive Freedom, began working with a team of colleagues, lawyers and policymakers to draft a constitutional amendment to protect abortion in the state of Arizona. In 61 days, 3,000 volunteers collected 175,000 signatures. Though the campaign fell short of the 356,467 signatures necessary to put it on the November ballot, it reflects the reality of organizers scrambling to respond to a post-*Roe* landscape.

It's now up to the states to determine the level of protection — or criminalization — that abortion will receive in their jurisdictions. Since *Roe* was overturned, laws in Wyoming and Utah that ban abortion have gone into effect, though it still remains protected in Oregon, Colorado, New Mexico and California. This November, there are five ballot measures concerning reproductive rights and abortion in states across the country — the highest number in an election year in U.S. history — though the campaign in Arizona and another in Colorado failed to gather enough signatures. "Abortion is absolutely on the ballot in 2022," said Arizona ACLU policy director Darrell Hill.

Ballot measures are a powerful tool of direct democracy, since they enable any citizen who can gather enough signatures to put an issue in front of voters on a ballot. But now, some state legislatures, including Arizona's, have referred measures to the ballot that would put limitations on future initiatives. Those limits include requiring a single issue per ballot measure, as well as a supermajority of 60% or more votes for any measure that involves taxes, and they would also give the state's legislature the power to amend or repeal ballot measures if any part was deemed unconstitutional. "We are concerned that any attempts to kind of interfere with people's democratic rights will eventually lead to an inability to regain full access to our abortion rights," Hill added.

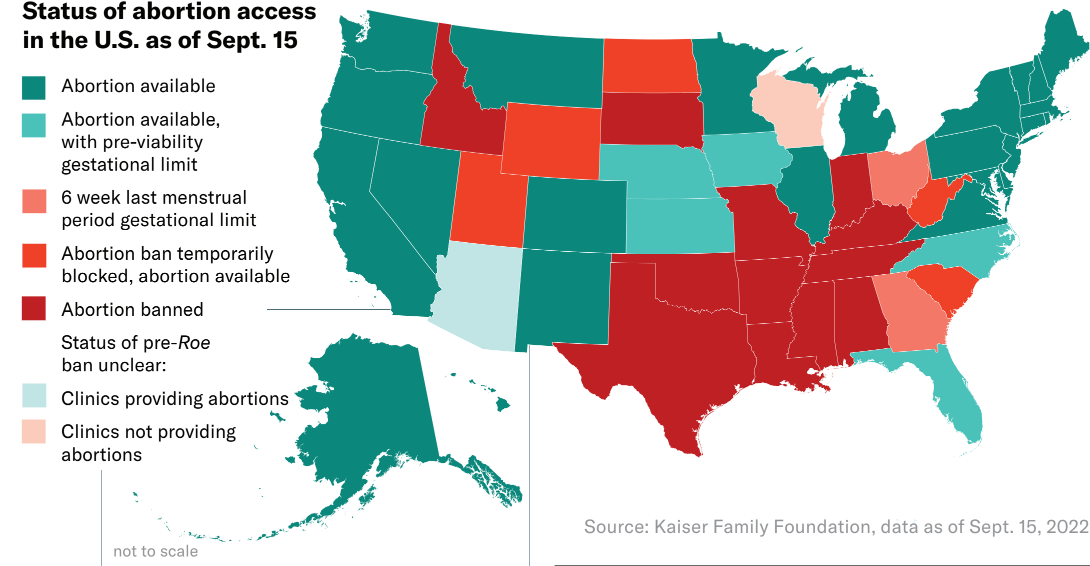
As of September, abortion is still legal under Montana's Constitution, though three laws limiting it are currently hung up in the courts. On Election Day, voters will decide on the "Medical Care Requirements for Born-Alive Infants Measure," which requires that medical care be provided to infants born alive after an attempted abortion, cesarean section or induced labor, and sets a $50,000 fine or 20 years of prison for physicians who violate the law. The measure is similar to a law passed by the U.S. Congress in 2002, though the state's ballot measure carries harsher consequences. While Republicans characterize it as a bill for "the protection of all life," physicians and Democrats say it is unnecessary and prescriptive.

And in California, voters will decide whether to add an amendment to their state Constitution that would protect "reproductive freedom," including abortion. California has generally positioned itself as a safe state for people seeking abortions; in June, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a bill that would protect people who travel to the state for help from states that criminalize abortion. Another 15 bills moving through the state Legislature would broaden accessibility to abortion and other reproductive needs. With *Roe* overturned, the need is there: A study by UCLA's Center on Reproductive Health, Law, and Policy from June found that up to 16,000 more people may travel to California a year for an abortion.

Meanwhile, in Arizona, there are three different efforts moving through the courts and Legislature to ban access to abortion. That includes a recent law that bans any abortion after 15 weeks and a 2021 law passed by the state Legislature that would declare "personhood" for fetuses at conception. Arizona's attorney general has also argued that a law banning abortion that predates Arizona's statehood is now in effect. The shifting legal landscape means that there's "a lot of risk and fear for providers or persons who may seek an abortion in the state," Hill told *HCN* before the 15-week ban went into effect Sept. 24.

The failure of the statewide ballot measure to protect reproductive rights in Arizona means that local elections now hold more power over whether residents will be able to access abortion. One such race is the election for Maricopa County's attorney general, where Democratic candidate Julie Gunnigle has pledged not to prosecute abortion cases. That's where the difficulties of voter suppression overlap with reproductive rights: Fitch-Heacock told *HCN* that the state's gerrymandered electoral maps make it difficult to depend on the Legislature for solutions.

Still, Fitch-Heacock considered the ballot campaign successful in its turnout of volunteer signature-gatherers and in the number of signatures it gathered in such a short amount of time. Even if it wasn't enough for the 2022 ballot, organizers are in this for the long haul. "We do have the power. It's just going to take a lot of us."



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation, data as of Sept. 15, 2022

FACTS & FIGURES

Races to watch

The midterm elections promise to be a referendum on Joe Biden — and Donald Trump.

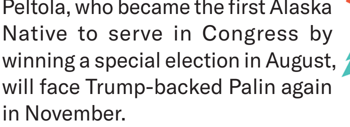
BY JONATHAN THOMPSON | PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JULIA LUBAS

Midterm elections are always a bit strange. On the one hand, there's no presidential contest to reverberate down the ticket to state and local races, so the latter are able to stand on their own. At the same time, voters tend to express their feelings about the current administration at the midterm ballot box, especially in congressional races. But this year is especially weird, because not only is President Joe Biden's performance a factor, but former President Donald Trump still looms over everything.

We scoured the West to bring you a sampling of notable — and hotly contested — races and referendums.

Alaska

U.S. House of Representatives, at large: Mary Peltola, D, vs. Sarah Palin, R., vs. Nick Begich, R., vs. Chris Bye, Libertarian

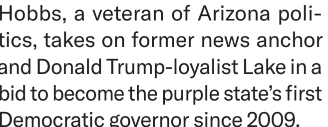


Peltola, who became the first Alaska Native to serve in Congress by winning a special election in August, will face Trump-backed Palin again in November.

Arizona

Governor:
Katie Hobbs, D., vs. Kari Lake, R.

Hobbs, a veteran of Arizona politics, takes on former news anchor and Donald Trump-loyalist Lake in a bid to become the purple state's first Democratic governor since 2009.



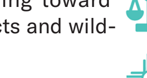
U.S. Senate:
Mark Kelly, D., vs. Blake Masters, R.

White nationalist and Trump-supporter Masters, bankrolled by arch-conservative venture capitalist Peter Thiel, hopes to unseat Kelly, who was elected in 2020.

Ballot measure: Proposition 308 would repeal 2006's Prop. 300, allowing non-citizen residents to receive in-state tuition.

California

Ballot measures: Proposition 30 would increase the tax on personal income above $2 million by 1.75%, with the revenue going toward electric vehicle projects and wildfire prevention.

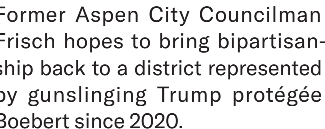


Proposition 26 would legalize sports betting at tribal casinos.

Photo illustration images, clockwise from top left: Greely Heights subdivision in Warm Springs, Oregon (Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs); Donald Trump embraces Harriet Hageman (Natalie Behrig); Fruit bodies of a hallucinogenic mushroom (Wikipedia commons); An image from Farrow's military encyclopedia, 1885 (Internet Archive Book Images); San Francisco's "I voted" sticker (Tim Olsen); Davina Smith at a longhorn parade in Kanab, Utah (Davina Smith for Utah State House)

Colorado

U.S. House of Representatives, 3rd District: Lauren Boebert, R., vs. Adam Frisch, D.



Former Aspen City Councilman Frisch hopes to bring bipartisanship back to a district represented by gunslinging Trump protégée Boebert since 2020.

Ballot measures: Initiative 58 would decriminalize certain psychedelic plants and mushrooms, including mescaline and psilocybin, and classify them as natural medicines.

Initiative 108 would dedicate one-tenth of 1% of state income tax revenues to fund housing programs.

Idaho

Ballot Measure: Proposition 1 would increase state income taxes on high-income individuals and corporations and allocate the revenue to public education.

Montana

U.S. House of Representatives, 2nd District (newly formed): Monica Tramel, D, vs. Ryan Zinke, R.

Zinke, a former congressman and Trump's scandal-plagued first Interior secretary, takes on Tramel, a former Olympic rower who grew up on a Montana ranch.

New Mexico

U.S. House of Representatives, 2nd District: Gabe Vasquez, D., vs. Yvette Herrell, R.

Former Las Cruces City Councilman Vasquez, a first-generation American who has worked on conservation and Borderlands issues, hopes to unseat fossil fuel-friendly Herrell in a district that includes the Permian Basin, the nation's busiest oilfield.

Nevada

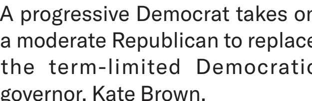
Governor: Steve Sisolak, D., vs. Joe Lombardo, R.

Former Clark County Sheriff Lombardo has swung rightward on gun control and immigration in his bid to unseat incumbent Sisolak.

Ballot measures: The Equal Rights Amendment would prohibit discrimination on account of race, color, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, disability, ancestry or national origin.

The Nevada Minimum Wage Amendment would increase the minimum wage to $12 per hour by 2024.

Oregon



Governor: Tina Kotek, D., vs. Christine Drazan, R.

A progressive Democrat takes on a moderate Republican to replace the term-limited Democratic governor, Kate Brown.

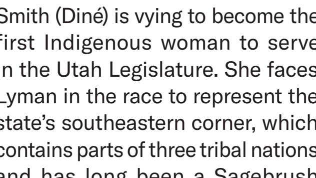
Ballot measures: Measure 111 would add the following language to the state Constitution: "ensure that every resident has access to cost-effective, clinically appropriate and affordable health care as a fundamental right."

Measure 114 would require permits for firearms and prohibit ammunition magazines that can hold more than 10 rounds.

Utah

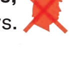
State House District 69: Davina Smith, D., vs. Phil Lyman, R.

Smith (Diné) is vying to become the first Indigenous woman to serve in the Utah Legislature. She faces Lyman in the race to represent the state's southeastern corner, which contains parts of three tribal nations and has long been a Sagebrush Rebellion hotspot.



Washington

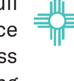
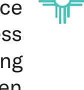
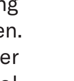
U.S. House of Representatives, 4th District: Dan Newhouse, R, vs. Doug White, D.



Newhouse, one of the few Republicans who voted to impeach Trump, is hoping to hang on to his seat in this conservative rural district that covers most of central Washington. He's challenged by Doug White, a moderate Democrat.

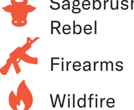
Wyoming

U.S. House of Representatives, at large: Lynnette Grey Bull, D., vs. Harriet Hageman, R.

Grey Bull (Northern Arapaho) is waging a "David and Goliath" campaign against Hageman, who unseated incumbent Rep. Liz Cheney in the primary. Grey Bull has been active in social justice campaigns, helping the homeless and bringing attention to missing and murdered Indigenous women. Hageman has spent most of her career fighting environmental regulations, earning her the moniker "Wicked Witch of the West."

Issues



- Trump-influenced
- Energy
- Sagebrush Rebel
- Firearms
- Wildfire
- Social justice
- Environment
- Indigenous affairs
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- Medicine
- Education

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DEAR FRIENDS

Thanks for reading!

BY THE TIME THIS ISSUE hits your mailbox, summer will have ended. The heat may linger where you reside, but all signs point toward fall: The kids are in class, the leaves are changing, the mountain towns are drawing a breath — and *High Country News* is wrapping up its summer reading program. Thank you to everyone who joined in this inaugural effort, either by sending in your card, submitting your book picks or voting for your favorite titles.

The running list of *HCN* readers' book picks is still at **reading.hcn.org.** See what other *HCNers* are reading and vote for your favorites.

The most popular reading prompts submitted via **reading.hcn.org** will surprise few. Your enjoyment of books that interrogate power — Number 2 on our list — is probably why you're an *HCN* reader in the first place.

These are the most popular prompts we received:

1. Read a work of nonfiction that will bring you joy
2. Read a book that interrogates power
3. Read a book that teaches you about a place you know well
4. Read a book from the point of view of a nonhuman animal

Your completed cards favored some layouts more than others, but "Read a book that plays with form" was frequently checked off.

Voting is still open, but as we go to press, these are the books most frequently upvoted:

1. *An Immense World* by Ed Yong
2. *Red Paint: The Ancestral Autobiography of a Coast Salish Punk* by Sasha taqʷšəblu LaPointe
3. *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
4. *Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law* by Mary Roach
5. *Wild Seed* by Octavia E. Butler
6. *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement* by Tarana Burke
7. *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* by Kelly Lytle Hernández

If you read along with us this summer but misplaced your card, forgot about it in the back-to-school shuffle, etc. — we're not fussy, drop us a line at **dearfriends@hcn.org,** and we'll send you some prizes. I'll also accept ideas for ways we can improve the reading program next year.

— Michael Schrantz, marketing communications manager

Remembering Morris Wolf of Hanksville, Utah

High Country News readers who have roamed the Four Corners region in search of petroglyphs will be sad to learn of the passing of **Morris Wolf.**

A well-loved figure known for his hand-painted T-shirts of rock art walls and a willingness to guide others to little-known sites, Morris died on July 23, just weeks after the passing of his wife, **Lonna.**

Morris worked a family farm in Wisconsin before the stress and difficulty of doing the job with one arm pushed him to move to Hanksville, Utah, around 1991, according to his son, **Eric.**

For 30 years, he roamed the hills and canyons searching for rock art sites, along the way becoming a guide for academics, artists and folks he met on the trail or at a restaurant in town.

"He just had a love for the area," said reader **Tom Neth,** who wrote *HCN* to inform us of Morris and Lonna's passing.

"What he loved about the desert was that it was a form of meditation — the silence," Eric said.

RECOLLECTING

LIFE ON THE EDGE OF THE PRAIRIE.

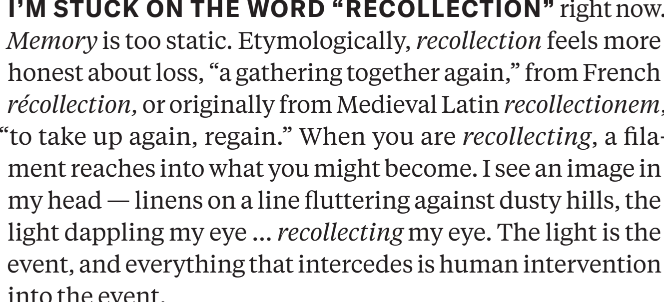
Photos by June T Sanders | Essay by Abigail Hansel

I'M LOOKING AT THE GRAIN ELEVATOR across the street from our rental house in Palouse, Washington, realizing that I don't have any idea how a grain elevator works. I imagine the grain levitating up the shaft and through some portal. Lately, an illusive (and elusive) element has been threading itself through my rural life: I know that the grain doesn't fall *up* the elevator, but I can't get the image out of my mind.

I see this in June's recent images. Fran is hunched, holding herself framing her own body sitting on the ground, which in turn frames scraggly plant matter at her feet, dissolving overhead into vegetive din that gives the sense of a secret garden, of place but not of *a* place. June has an uncanny ability to translate the rurality that we call home into a dialect that feels lived in, and yet secret, private: "If you know, you know," as it were. Portraiture, in the right hands, lets people appear as they are, not as they ought to be, or what outside forces deem them to be; they appear *as they are* with the photograph/photographer conflated into one being, acting as a facilitator for recognition of a particular light that threads itself through a subject's own light — a secret given and received and told, with the subject's permission, to the onlooker.

Josie off Rose Creek Road *(previous pages)*.

Fran in the backyard *(right)*.



I'M STUCK ON THE WORD "RECOLLECTION" right now. *Memory* is too static. Etymologically, *recollection* feels more honest about loss, "a gathering together again," from French *récollection,* or originally from Medieval Latin *recollectionem*, "to take up again, regain." When you are *recollecting*, a filament reaches into what you might become. I see an image in my head — linens on a line fluttering against dusty hills, the light dappling my eye … *recollecting* my eye. The light is the event, and everything that intercedes is human intervention into the event.

This summer, I've been busy recollecting, dredging what's been lost and intervening in the event of my life. I had surgery at the end of July: MTF top surgery, aka bilateral breast augmentation. Two globes of silicone tighten the muscles in my chest. I spent weeks wrapped in ace bandages, playing video games in the air conditioning. Fiona, my love, took care of me, Marcia dropped off an enchilada, June and Taylor brought salad, Bridgette came and sat on the couch, bullshitting. I felt like a node in something like a community, more so in post-op vulnerability than ever before.

Right before surgery, my friends organized a party at the local pool. The manager accidentally double-booked our gay pool party reservation with a 13-year-old girl's birthday party. At first, we were wary. Everyone was in their freakiest swimwear ready for a private chlorine-fueled gay bash, but despite our reservations, we ended up effortlessly sharing the space. We sang happy birthday as the birthday girl cannonballed off the diving board, and they cheered us on as we did a diving board runway competition with categories like "most feral." It was cute! I don't know what else to say. Somehow, we're making this thing work, we're staying alive, imbibing in a bright possible spot, even though we sit like an island in the ambient knowledge that there are men in town with guns, beards and search histories.

The month before, in the town where my surgeon's office is, 31 members of the white supremacist group Patriot Front packed into a U-Haul truck headed for a local pride event, "intending to riot," making national news. Historically, this is just another blip in North Idaho's sordid history of white supremacy and hate. But in our current climate, it feels like an intimately local example of a nationwide wave of anti-trans violence. I'm dizzy from holding all these depictions in my head: the trans body on the street, the trans body in the Idaho Legislature, the trans body on some guy's phone. This aerosolized danger makes its way into the air, onto the wind, into the spiritual nether that floats between the different worlds that exist here. I think of June's photos as the inverse of this negative affect. Maybe not "trans joy," that's too simple, too emphatic. There's something sneakier happening here, something subtler: Trans images that let dignity resonate recollected, told slant with a deep feeling of the miraculous.

Taylor stands on a butte, her gaze directed toward the rolling hills that are our region's signature. The horizon is softly vignetted, dissolving into a field of pure tone, while the hills of wheat, lentil and canola crops are made strange by black-and-white and the vantage, slanting irregularly compared to one's usual view down on the roads below. It is a landscape deeply marked by human activity but here it

feels alien, endless, one figure centered rising above, out of it, *recollecting* a place in it. This was once natural prairie before agriculture laid out crops like a patchwork tablecloth, before land-grant universities, endless rows of student housing, Walmarts, Calvinist churches, the yearly flooding of smoke from nearby wildfires, and an atmosphere of capital which animates all ferrying of goods/ideas/people in and out of the region. In my time of need, June's work offers me a kind of accord. Our being here is complicated, and depictions of being here must complicate. These images fulfill that imperative by giving secrets, showing bodies at odds with place, harmonious with place, peeking at stacks of tires, in the gay backwoods soft embrace of a friend, by manifesting a gaze that penetrates softly, barely, through a portal in the wheat. Like a body that gives itself to the diving board, to air, to water, where reflection and self meet, and finally to the raving arms of friends, bouncing softly buoyant: Here, we're caught.

Mill Street grain elevator *(above left)*.

Tires off Whitman Street *(above)*.

Sarah with folded hands *(above)*.

View from North River Road *(right)*.

Main Street Bridge from the railroad tracks *(below top)*.

Elijah behind the gazebo *(below bottom)*.

South Fork Creek *(below)*.

Marcy behind the Chevron (*right)*.

Taylor at Steptoe Butte *(above)*.

Abigail Hansel is a poet and essayist from Idaho. Her work has appeared most recently in *Northwest Review* and *SPORAZINE*. She currently lives in Palouse, Washington, with her girlfriend and two cats.

June T Sanders is an artist and educator living in Palouse, Washington. She is an assistant professor with the Digital Technology and Culture Department at Washington State University and the recipient of the 2020 Blue Sky Curatorial Prize. She has also taught at Lightwork and the New York State Summer School of the Arts. Her images reflect a world yet to be.

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Underwater Legends

The ancient relationship between Pacific lamprey and Northwest tribes is also the future of freshwater conservation.

By B. Toastie | Photos by Mason Trinca

THE ROAR OF THE FALLS was an unrelenting thunder of white noise. It was the mid-1950s, and Celilo Falls , on the border between Washington and Oregon — the oldest continuously inhabited spot in North America — had yet to be destroyed. Sparkling headwaters flowed from British Columbia, Montana and Wyoming, streams gathering to form the Columbia River, which surged westward through the high desert and the rainy Cascade Mountains until it yawned into the brackish slurry of the Pacific estuary. Year after year, for countless generations, millions of fish stampeded back upstream, fighting the ocean's current to gain the forested upper tributaries, whose sheltered, transparent waters and gravel substrate provided perfect spawning grounds.

The Great River's annual rotation of anadromous fish included steelhead trout, sturgeon, coho, chinook and sockeye salmon, chum or dog salmon and the otherworldly Pacific lamprey — a glossy-gray, eel-like fish with seven round gills bored into its sides like the tone holes of a cedar flute. Back then, whenever the adult fish returned, ocean-fresh and ripe to fill hungry bellies, the people gathered at legacy fishing spots, including Celilo Falls.

Every season had a different run: the fall, spring and summer chinook, each with its own flavor; fall dog salmon and summer lamprey. On the timber scaffolds that etched the incandescent billows of the falls, fishermen tested their strength and bravery, fighting hound-sized fish with 20-foot-long dipnets until they'd hauled in enough to feed their families for a year, share fish with elders and trade with neighboring tribes. There were millions of salmon, so many that people said you could walk across the Great River on their backs; some elders boasted that they had. The fishers camped around the falls, their pickup trucks, canvas tents and hand-crafted houses set among rows of cabin-style apartments, where permanent residents lived in multigenerational households. As the fragrance of smoldering alderwood wafted from smoking sheds, mothers and grandmothers sliced sherbet-colored slabs of fish with practiced hands, or popped dried lamprey tail into the mouths of teething babies to soothe their gums with its pain-killing oil. Children sledded down the nearby dunes on cardboard boxes, threw rocks, fetched firewood or filled buckets at the water pump.

A boy in bib overalls, Wilbur Slockish, hefted a freshly caught *mit'úla,* or dog salmon, into a wooden box, and covered it with a wet gunny sack to keep it damp. The salmon were so healthy and strong they stayed fresh even without ice. The river water was clear enough to drink. Nearby, the boy's grandmother hung white *mit'úla* filets on racks to sun-dry, while

A member of the Yakama Nation plucks a Pacific lamprey off the rocks at Willamette Falls, Oregon.

his father traversed a precarious-looking scaffold that jutted over the turbulent rapids. The family traveled every year from their home in Wahkiacus, a town named for the family of Slockish's great-grandmother, a famous Klickitat basket weaver. Umatilla folks traveled from the other direction to trade blankets and hides for Grandma's dried *mit'úla*. The falls were a bustling marketplace.

Wilbur, on the brink of adolescence, was still too young to fish; his 18-year-old cousin had nearly drowned in the rapids, and his grandmother had forbidden him to go near the scaffolds. For now, he processed fish in the mists around the falls, which kept the camps cool even in the August heat. After a while, he took a break to play with his siblings and cousins. At night he fell asleep lulled by the roar of mighty Celilo.

Fishing these falls was a rite of passage, like getting a driver's license, but Wilbur Slockish never got to fish them. In the end, it was Celilo Falls that drowned. In 1957, when Wilbur was 13, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built the Dalles Dam across the Great River, submerging Celilo Falls in a brazen act of colonization. Wilbur's father didn't want him to see this happen, so he took the family away to live in Toppenish. Other families were forced to abandon their homes as the lively, ancient bazaar and the natural wonder that created it both disappeared beneath a reservoir. The sound and mists of Celilo became a memory.

LAST JULY, A GAUZY HAZE hung over the emerald expanse of Meldrum Bar Park in Gladstone, Oregon, refracting the midsummer sun on the season's hottest weekend so far. The Yakama Nation Pow Wow Drum thumped out a tune as a chain of dancers snaked across the grass in an eel dance. "It takes about 500 years or longer for a fact to turn into a legend or myth," Wilson Wewa said, peering upward through the soft wrinkles around his small thoughtful eyes. Wewa, an elder and tribal councilman of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, said his people have legends about the time long ago, when animals traveling north

Lamprey have lived on Earth for 450 million years. To them, dinosaurs were a passing fad, and the North American continent is a fairly recent development.

Yakama Nation Fisheries crew members Nate Patterson, Shekinah Saluskin and Clint Blodgett team up to catch lamprey at an eeling hole that's fed tribal members for generations *(above left)*.

Lamprey use the suction of their oral discs to climb the rocks of Willamette Falls *(above)*.

were blocked by the great ice sheet covering what's now called Canada. White academics have long believed that no humans lived here back then. "How would our people make a legend like that if they weren't here?" Wewa asked, not raising his voice over the music.

Wewa, who wore a button-down long-sleeved shirt and jeans despite the heat, noted that some Western scientists are beginning to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples' long history on this continent is more than myth or legend. The legends aren't just stories; they're stratified memories.

The stories of the people of this land, Wewa said, come from a time when animals were the people in charge. When humans were created, animals made agreements with them. Consider humans' ancient agreement with dogs: We feed and shelter them, give them affection and care, and in turn, for innumerable generations, they have hunted our prey and guarded our homes.

The people of the Columbia Basin have a similar agreement with salmon. It's the most honored animal, the first to sacrifice itself in a contract of reciprocal care: The people would care for the salmon and its waters, and the salmon would feed the people. There's a similar agreement with the oldest inhabitant of the watershed — and one of the oldest creatures in the world — the Pacific lamprey. Or, as most Northwest Natives call them, eels.

Lamprey have lived on Earth for 450 million years. To them, dinosaurs were a passing fad, and the North American continent is a fairly recent development. Lamprey swim out to sea as juveniles, looking for hosts like salmon to parasitize until they are mature enough to swim up some other river to spawn. Adult lamprey are calorie-dense and slow, protecting their hosts and cousins, the salmon, by acting as a predation buffer in another gesture of reciprocal care.

Though lamprey play a key role in Pacific watershed ecosystems, they remain understudied outside of tribal fisheries. They're the target of misplaced disdain, in part because they're easily confused with sea lamprey, an Atlantic species that caused ecological havoc in the Great Lakes after a 19th century shipping canal allowed them to invade. Pacific lamprey are a different species, in a different ecosystem; they belong here, just like the people they sustain.

As far back as the memory archive reaches, people have fished for eels in this watershed. Lamprey climb wet rocks with their sucker mouths, so waterfalls are good places to catch them. Celilo Falls was a dangerous place for eeling, so people went to places like Willamette Falls, Celilo's younger cousin. In its heyday, it was an international destination for summer eeling. Elders remember elders who remember trails that connected the

falls to central Oregon. Camps lined both sides of the Willamette and the Clackamas River, which branches off below the falls.

Wewa and other elders are clear that their ancestors were not nomads. Families returned to permanent homes, making seasonal trips to where food thrived. This non-European approach to agriculture ensures that both people and ecosystems flourish. In its healthy state, the Willamette Valley was a food-producing white oak savanna, bright blue in springtime with flowering carpets of delicious camas roots. That's where it got its name: "Willamette" is a French corruption of *lámt*, the Ichishkíin word for blue, Wewa said. "They ruined it."

For the millions of lamprey that returned from the ocean to spawn in the Willamette Valley, the first obstacle they faced was Willamette Falls. In the late 1800s, settler accounts described the 1,500-foot-long, four-story-high falls as "completely covered" in eels during the summer runs — three layers deep, in some places. Historical photos give an idea of how the rocks looked blanketed in eels, some latched onto each other's backs, rendering the boulders as shaggy as mastodons. Tribal folks harvested as many as 500,000 lamprey a year without harming the overall population. This is an animal as old as time, an agreement as old as humanity. But the last century — a microscopic sliver of time — could mark the end of lamprey.

Since industrialization, lamprey numbers have dropped by 90%, largely because of dams. According to some Natives, public antipathy toward the species hasn't helped. Willamette Falls is one of the last places where there are still enough lamprey to harvest. There, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation and the Nez Perce Tribe — all of whom retain treaty fishing rights at Willamette Falls — boat upriver between industrial structures to harvest lamprey at the falls. These four tribes comprise the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC), an organization that enforces treaty rights and promotes conservation of the basin's aquatic life. Every year, CRITFC coordinates eeling trips with tribes.

Eeling teams consist of at least two people: one to hold the net, the other to catch the eels. Plucking them off the rocks is easy enough with cotton work gloves, which provide the best traction against eels' dolphin-smooth skin. Or, if an eel is hiding in an underwater crevice, where the animals like to sleep during the day, the fishers use a gaff, a slender stick with a sturdy three-pronged fishhook electrical-taped to the end. With this, they can feel around in a pool, or reach into an overhead crack, and hook the eel with a quick snap.

To work a waterfall, crews start at the bottom; eels will spook and stampede if they sense danger or smell blood in the current. Sometimes, eelers use this to their advantage, sticking a net or a trap at the downspout of a rockpool and scaring the eels into it from behind. When a dipnet is full, the crew transfer the catch eel by eel into burlap bags, then carry the pulsing, writhing sacks over the boulders to the boat.

WATER LAPPED THE DOCK at a dark 4 a.m., and a grumpy chill settled on the shoulders of the Yakama Nation Fisheries eeling crew as they waited for the

outboard motorboat to ferry them upriver to the falls. While any tribal member can organize eeling trips, the fisheries department conducts its own trips to get eels for elders, those in need and ceremonial uses. The boat's driver, a teddy-bear-faced man in his mid-50s with a bandanna tied over a loose knot of gray hair, lit a cigarette, apparently the only person unfazed by the cold or the early hour.

"All this is pretty tame to me," he laughed. He said he used to work "30-hour days" running a commercial salmon fishing operation at Lake Celilo, where Celilo Falls used to be. He reminisced about his glory days at Willamette Falls in the late '80s and early '90s, claiming, with a sly smile, that he caught so many eels, he's probably the reason they're in decline. Five thousand pounds in a day, he said. "I've been there, done that, 30 years ago, 40 years ago."

The boat driver is Evans Lewis Jr., a veteran fisherman now serving as the assistant manager of the Yakama Nation Fisheries' sturgeon hatchery. He's the type who hangs around the moored boat talking shit and spinning yarns while the younger folks work. Lewis said he knows the best eeling holes from previous generations, where lamprey still gather by the thousands. He pointed out the best route along the boulders: Don't hug the ridge, he said. Swing out in a wide arc, closer to the water line. He described techniques no one uses anymore: Drilling drainage holes in a metal trash can is easier, he said, than hauling gunny sacks of eels back across the rocks. "Nobody fishes like I do," Lewis told me and grinned.

Portland General Electric has operated a hydroelectric power plant and dam on the west side of the falls since 1888. Each year, when the rush of spring rainwater and snowmelt slows, workers install boards along the rim of the falls to divert more water to their turbines. This leaves the rocks exposed — and thousands of lamprey climbing them.

Many that aren't harvested will end up stranded in crevices and die. The tribes coordinate with PGE on the timing of the flashboard installation so they can start harvesting within a day. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife stipulates that harvesting is allowed only from Friday to Monday. The Yakama Nation, being sovereign, does not consider itself beholden to this state law, but it usually schedules eeling on weekends anyway, partly to avoid political conflict.

Even with the flashboards in place, some water still slips through and slithers across the basalt shelf. The fat and mighty

Pictured from above left, Evans Lewis Jr. keeps the Yakama Nation Fisheries boat moored by the best eeling spots, across the river from an active paper mill and a hydroelectric facility.

Daeja Rosander catches a lamprey on the rocky cliffs.

Tribal members use a gaff to hook hard-to-reach lamprey, and a wide-mouthed dipnet to collect them.

Dean Antone and Rod Begay carry a full bag of lamprey down the slippery rocks.

waterfall becomes a series of slender ones. Natural stone steps rise like Tolkienesque staircases alongside the plunging water. The boulders are covered in algae, and it takes felt-bottomed wading boots to keep from slipping all over the raw, uneven landscape.

A wiry, middle-aged Yakama Nation Fisheries technician with steely features beneath his ballcap brim, Rod Begay, told me he's been eeling at Willamette Falls nearly every year since 1994. He couldn't recall ever seeing any accidents. Other crew members agreed. Tribal members know to go slowly, deliberately across the rocks. It was apparent in their movements: Nobody was out there to show off or get an adrenaline rush. Nobody was Tom Cruise. "It's safety first," Begay said matter-of-factly. Despite the danger, the noise and the thin pink of eel blood on cotton gloves, the work feels peaceful, like most fishing.

The eels climb slowly and surely, too, resting in one place for a while before snapping into motion. To climb, a lamprey compresses its body and flails upward, gaining an inch or two of ground like a baby learning to crawl. After a succession of bursts, it pauses, pumping its gills and gathering energy. Lamprey can survive for about half an hour out of the water. In some crevices, dozens dangle like rock-colored ribbons, powering up for the next stretch. They can even jump along the underside of a ledge using their sucker mouths, if the surface is wet.

A team of three Yakama youngsters worked one waterfall. In sparkling earrings and a freshly cut fade, tribal fisheries technician and college basketball player Kupkana Leavitt was eeling for the first time under the instruction of Clint Blodgett, a fish culturist whose own first time was just last year. Standing ankle-deep in a pool partway up the cliffs, Leavitt jabbed a gaff into a crevice and poked around. Blodgett told him to hook more quickly. With a twist of the arm, Leavitt drew back the gaff, and there was his first lamprey, lashing and flailing on the hook. With his free hand, he wrested it from the end of the gaff and dropped it into a dipnet held by another teenaged first-timer, fish culturist Daeja Rosander, who looked bored behind her facial piercings but worked steadily nonetheless. Leavitt twisted a gunny sack shut and motioned to Rosander, who grabbed a zip tie from a stash tucked into her bootleg. It was kind of fun being out there, she said, but also kind of a pain in the ass. Leavitt said it felt weird to catch his first eels. "I'm still getting used to it." They weren't necessarily motivated by a love of eels or cultural traditions; they had to be there, they said, because of their jobs. That's one way the older eelers get the younger generation involved: just make them fish. They'll appreciate it later.

Begay worked a nearby cove with another longtime eeler, easily navigating intimidating sections of the falls. Farther south, where Lewis had said the best water hole was located, laughter rang out. Dave Blodgett III, Yakama Nation Fisheries' technical services coordinator and Clint's cousin, was rib-deep in a cold pool at the base of a waterfall, hooting and hollering as he dunked and resurfaced with eels in his gloved hands, clearly having way more fun than the teens. Later, he confessed it was his first time eeling, too. Until that day he'd only seen this operation from the paperwork side.

The cold water makes it hard to breathe at first, but it's not as frigid as you'd expect. When you dunk in, you immediately feel slippery eel skin slithering between your legs and around the tops of your wading boots. It sounds easy: to catch a lamprey, just reach in and grab it. But underwater, they tumble like loose rope. They don't have bones, and remarkably, they can swim backwards.

If you do get hold of one, they're strong and easy to drop — not to mention scary-looking, seen face-to-face. It's like wrestling a sentient phallus with vaginal dentata. But then again, it's also just a fish: simple, sacred, ancient and perfectly evolved. Lamprey are not dangerous. Despite their appearance, they have a gentle nature. Their sucker latch doesn't even hurt; it feels like a hickey. Most host fish with lamprey scars remain otherwise healthy.

After working for a while, Dave Blodgett and his team took a 20-minute break to let the pool refill with climbing lamprey. He explained that in addition to keeping the culture of eeling alive, tribes are working to return eels to the upper tributaries. "We catch fish, we want to put fish back," he said.

"The tribes will be the ones to get them there, as opposed to state and federal agencies," he added. "The reason that there's salmon in these rivers still is because tribes took over." The crew hoisted sacks full of eels over their shoulders and carefully traversed the boulders back to the boat, where Lewis waited with a cooler.

During a moment of downtime, Lewis talked about Lake Celilo. After his younger brother drowned in a fishing accident there, Lewis sold all his equipment — including his boats and 150 gill nets — and didn't fish for a decade. Most of the elders who fished at Celilo Falls are gone now, too. "Except for my uncle," he grinned. He showed me a picture of his mom's first cousin — a pretty close relative, in the Native world. Uncle Jerry was a councilman, Lewis said, and influential in the tribe. Lewis would go to him when he needed help. "He's about my last uncle," Lewis said. "I know I'm creeping up in age cause I'm running out of uncles. No more grandmas, grandpas anymore." Maybe he's becoming the kind of uncle he once needed, I said. He just took a drag on his cigarette and returned to the topic of work, and fish.

Lewis made sure the crew had gunny sacks, extra work gloves and cold bottles of water. Sometimes he'd shoulder a full sack across the boulders himself. One sack can hold 60 to 80 eels, and weigh as many pounds. The crew took out 16 full bags on a Friday, then returned at night, when lamprey are more active. Lewis counted 2,402 eels from that weekend. With around 1,500 Yakama elders and whole communities to feed, they'd be returning the next weekend for more. But even a haul of this size won't deprive the upper Willamette tributaries of spawning lamprey. It's not the harvest that threatens the species. It's mostly dams.

Lewis pointed to the west side, where the mainstem of the falls gushed through a flow-control structure in the dam, and a channel looped around to the base of the fish ladder. "We can't go over there, but man, they're 10-, 12-feet-deep, just full of eels," he said with what may or may not have been a fisherman's exaggeration — maybe in 500 years, his stories will be legends, too. The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission tribes have agreed not to eel on the west side of the falls, which provides the best lamprey passage from the lower basin to the Willamette Valley tributaries, to counterbalance the harvesting and to honor their agreement with eels. "So we can have future eels," he said. "Root stock."

A blue heron waited, silhouetted on a log near the fish ladder's whitewater. A loose cloud of flycatchers dipped and darted, intercut by drifting gulls and flapping cormorants. Above them glided a few osprey, a swirling cone of vultures and the occasional bald eagle against a quilt of Northwest jersey-knit gray. Condors were noticeably absent. Sandpipers scurried through puddles. Geese nested in the wreckage of the old Blue Heron Paper Mill. Despite a century of industrial degradation, the falls are still a gathering place.

"Sea lions, they come in here," Lewis said, pointing to the water lapping at the boat. "They'd be swimming around with about four or five eels in their mouths. They're pretty crazy. Yeah, I'm surprised we don't see any now." The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has secured special federal permission to kill sea lions at Willamette Falls, because they gobble up so many endangered fish.

To get here, the marine mammals journey nearly 100 miles through fresh water up the Columbia, then another 26 miles up the Willamette through downtown Portland and its Superfund site. Apparently, a bite of fresh lamprey is worth it.

Lewis prefers his eels barbecued over alderwood. And he won't let anybody else prepare them for him. "If I'm going to eat fish, I'm going to cook it," he stated flatly. A drifting segment of log clunked against the hull, as if conjured by magic. "Alderwood," Lewis said, pointing. Rosander, shoulder-deep in the water, hoisted it up to him.

AFTER TWO WEEKENDS of harvesting, the Yakama Nation hosted their lamprey celebration at Meldrum Bar Park. They set up shade structures on the grass and towed in a trailer-mounted barbecue for the fresh catch. Lewis was there, grilling segments of lamprey, and Daeja Rosander and Clint Blodgett sparred to pass the time. "She's Daeja Stands-Around," Blodgett said, chuckling.

"Shut up," Rosander replied, half-smiling as she filleted salmon with practiced maneuvers on a fold-out table. She's been preparing salmon since the fourth grade, she said.

Several tribal members had warned me about the eels' flavor: They're an acquired taste, they said, they're not everyone's favorite. It only built anticipation for my first bite. Lamprey tastes the way river sediment smells. The outer skin resists your teeth with a rubbery pop, like a juicy bratwurst. But inside, the texture is mealy, like liver or smoked oysters, and the flavor is similarly gamey. It's apparent why lamprey are a divisive dish.

Every summer, PGE installs flashboards along the top of Willamette Falls to manage water levels for its hydroelectric facility. During this time, tribes fish for lamprey along the falls.

Yakama folks brought more than enough eels and salmon to feed tribal members and the general public alike — all free of charge, offered in the spirit of Native generosity and to raise awareness about Pacific lamprey.

Elders spoke about the eel's importance. The contemporary resurgence in lamprey conservation is largely attributable to one Nez Perce elder, the late Elmer Crow Jr., who spent the latter part of his life visiting classrooms to get kids excited about eels. He'd encountered a solitary lamprey while fishing in 1972 and felt it was trying to tell him something. "How do we let something that's 450, 500 million years old go extinct?" Crow said in the 2015 lamprey documentary short *The Lost Fish*. "Shame on us, the whole

bunch of us, for not paying attention to what was going on."

His son, Jeremy FiveCrows, who works as communications director for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, and FiveCrows' mother, Lynda Crow, who is Elmer's widow, told me about Elmer Crow's legacy. FiveCrows said his father's use of the word "us" instead of "you" was "very deliberate," even though the Nez Perce could hardly be blamed for lamprey's current peril. His mother nodded. "We all have a responsibility, if you're here, to the lampreys," FiveCrows said. They'd just marked the nine-year anniversary of the day Elmer Crow drowned while saving his 7-year-old grandson's life. His death, like his conservation work, was an act of service to future generations.

Wilson Wewa recalled when a busload of elders visited Willamette Falls in the early '80s. One elder, a quiet woman who kept to herself, sat for a while in silence overlooking the falls. Wewa asked if she was OK. She showed him a flat place on one rock and said it was where her family used to clean eels. As a little girl, she'd wash the rock with a bucket and watch the eel blood drain into the crevices. This was where she camped every summer before factories encircled the falls.

Wilbur Slockish, who was 13 when Celilo Falls drowned, is an elder now, and Klickitat River chief. He said he doesn't eat Willamette eels because of the water's industrial degradation. Years after Celilo disappeared, Slockish encountered Shoshone Falls while on a road trip. The roar reminded him so much of Celilo that he spread out a blanket, lay down and listened for over two hours, drifting in memories of the sound that lulled him to sleep on those boyhood summer nights. "Man, I missed that sound," he said. "It wasn't as loud as Celilo," and it lacked the familiar mist. "But it kind of helped me remember it."

Eventually, a park ranger stopped to check on him. "I'm just listening to these falls," Slockish said.

Nahoma Morning Owl teaches her 7-year-old daughter, Jhene Jackson, the story of lamprey at the Willamette Falls Lamprey Celebration *(left)*. A butterfly-filleted lamprey is ready to dry in the sun *(right)*.

"You must be from the Celilo area," the ranger replied.

Dams like the one that drowned Celilo Falls are among seven major threats to Pacific lamprey. A restoration guide, compiled by state and federal agencies in collaboration with tribes, lists the threats: dams and degraded river-water quality, along with dredging, dewatering for irrigation, culverts and fish screens, riverbank degradation from development, and habitat conditions at the estuary. Dams are generally considered the worst. There are more than 250 in the Columbia watershed. Only some have fish ladders, most of which were built for salmon and aren't navigable by lamprey. To help with their passage, tribal fishery crews hand-deliver mature eels past the dams to the upper tributaries to spawn. It's a laborious effort they hope will keep the species going until dams are removed — a long-term intergenerational goal.

GRAVEL CRUNCHED under the tires of a flatbed truck on a frisbee golf course at the edge of the upper Yakima River. It carried two massive blue coolers that held 120 mature lamprey, captured below the lower Columbia's Bonneville Dam and transported upstream for release. It was World Fish Migration Day, and Yakama Nation Fisheries was hosting an event to educate the public. They invited families to central Washington to release hatchery-reared adult lamprey to spawn. The fisheries crew placed a PVC half-pipe chute to guide the eels down the riverbank like a waterslide.

Little by little, families trickled in for the festivities, moving from table to table to learn about the science of freshwater ecosystem conservation, or to do some fish-themed arts and crafts. Organizers gave out lamprey coloring books, lamprey water bottles, keychains made of keratin lamprey teeth, and temporary tattoos that look like oral discs. The day culminated in the release. Native and non-Native children crowded around, wriggling their hands into adult-sized cotton work gloves as they waited for a chance to hold a real, live lamprey and drop it down the chute into the river.

Lamprey are incredibly fecund, laying between 100,000 and 230,000 eggs, and with any luck, some of these eels' offspring will mature, swim out to sea, and return upriver to make little rock nests with their sucker mouths, intertwine their bodies, and spurt out the droplets that will become the next generation. Some will end up on the grill or the drying rack to feed the elders and soothe the babies, fulfilling their ancient agreement with the people.

A sprinkling of raindrops sent people scrambling for jackets and zipping up hoodies, as a procession of clouds drifted upstream, supporting the whole process with its own regenerative cycle that will one day carry the next generation of juvenile lamprey out to sea. On the surface, it might seem paradoxical to release some eels at the Yakima while cooking others at the Willamette. But it's another reciprocal relationship, a time-tested conservation strategy that prioritizes harmony and balance — this ancient practice is futuristic, too. Lamprey, our underwater elders, connect us to the legends and memories of the past and to the hopes we hold for the future.

After the children released their eels, they returned to the flatbed for more. "They're really slippery," one kid said, as others shrieked and laughed, sharing and taking turns. When these children are elders remembered by elders, which agreements will endure? Will those generations have evolved more perfectly to live, like the lamprey, in harmony with their siblings and cousins? Maybe by then Celilo Falls will have returned. Or perhaps Willamette Falls will have drowned, too, lost in the mists of memory and legend.

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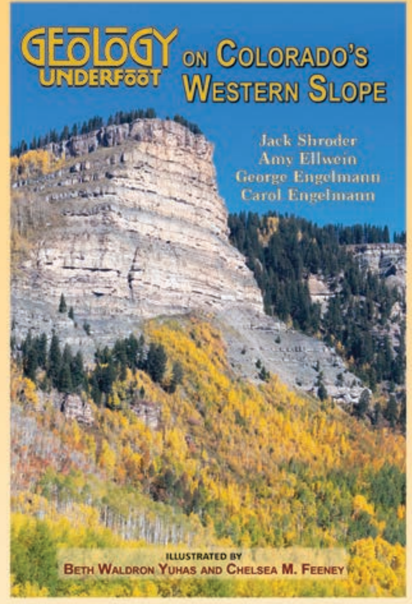

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A young antlerless moose at Kincaid Park in Anchorage, Alaska, on Cook Inlet. **Brian Adams**

The joy of the fall moose harvest

Working together to fill the freezer for another year.

BY LAURELI IVANOFF

I SAW THE ANTLERS FIRST. And then the big brown body. It took a few seconds for my brain to register that a moose really was standing there, in a clearing in front of some spruce trees — still and completely broadside, like a painting.

I elbowed my husband, Timm, who stood next to me, driving our river boat, and pointed. "Up there, look," I said.

We had set off just moments before, having packed the boat with enough food and clothes to spend all day hunting up North River, a tributary that branches north from the Unalakleet. Wearing down jackets, insulated Carhartts, fall-time muck boots and fur hats, we had expected a long and chilly boat ride. But minutes into the trip, we spotted the antlered moose.

For weeks that fall, we had been boating upriver or taking four-wheeler rides looking for moose, but each day we came home with less food than we left the house with. No meat. No bones. No fresh tongue and heart for the next day's soup. We still had some meat from the moose Timm had harvested the year before, but it wasn't enough to last another winter. Finding this moose was like gaining possession of the basketball with 15 seconds left in the game when your team is one point down: excitement, matched by the hope that you don't screw things up.

Timm and I had made a plan for a situation like this a few days before, and now we enacted it: We swapped places, me taking the steering wheel while he grabbed the gun. I slowly drove the boat toward the high bank where the moose stood. A stand of willows at the edge of the grassy tundra hid our approach. It felt lucky, but I knew anything could happen.

When the boat kissed the hard mud at the base of the bank, Timm jumped out with his rifle. I turned the motor off.

"I want to go. Please," Henning, our then 3-year-old son, said as I crept across the deck to sit next to him.

"Quiet, Henning. We need to be quiet," I said, sitting down to hold him.

"Please, can I go?" he whispered.

"No, we have to wait until we hear gunshots," I said. "We can't scare it. It might run away."

The moose was just a short distance from the river, but the bank was too high for us to see over it. I knew Timm should get a good shot, but I wasn't yet confident in his aim. We hadn't felled a moose before, just the two of us.

Waiting, I heard myself breathe. Felt my chest rising and falling. I felt Henning breathe next to me. We sat still, listening.

We heard a shot. I squeezed Henning.

We waited.

A short moment later we heard another shot. *Oh no*, I thought. *It's running*.

We waited.

On the grassy tundra above us, Timm strode into view. I was prepared for bad news. He looked at us with wide eyes. Then he gave us a thumbs-up.

I moved Henning from my lap and, now making as much noise as I wanted, moved the anchor, and secured the line so I could tie it to a willow on the bank.

"It didn't move at all," Timm said. "I shot it and it walked a short way. I shot it again and it dropped."

We filled a red plastic sled with our grub box, a few tarps, and the butchering gear and walked toward the spruce trees, Henning following.

"Thank you, moose," Henning said as we neared the large brown animal. "Thank you for not running away."

> *"Thank you, moose. Thank you for not running away."*

UNALAKLEET IS LOCATED on a sandspit at the mouth of the Unalakleet River. Upriver, the valley is bookended by the Whaleback Mountains, a sight that softens my belly. For most of us who live in Unalakleet, home isn't just the area where town is located. It's the entire river valley, the coast that runs north and south, the Nulato Hills that spread as far as you can see. It's the entire area where we travel, harvest, play and share.

As we butchered the moose that day, the trees stood tall east of the small, wet, grassy clearing where the animal lay, with the river just there, always that friend. It was one of those hot fall days that forced us to strip down to our thin wool bottom layers as we cut and pulled, cut and pulled, moving together to transform the moose into packable sections. At one point, as I held a heavy rear quarter, the smell of muck rose up from underneath my boots, reminding me to keep my balance. I gripped the leg with my hands and my arms, my fingers clutching the coarse, thick brown hair, using my body more than I had in a year.

"Almost done over here," Timm said as he skinned the underside.

We heard a boat approaching from downriver and looked up to see the red stripe on my dad's ocean and river skiff, the boat that can do it all. I realized how sunny it was; just a few clouds in the sky without a mosquito in sight. The moose leg in my arms felt lighter.

I smiled when I saw my daughter, Sidney, in the boat along with a couple other young and able helpers, two of my nephews. They parked. Dad walked up, still moving well across the soft, mucky ground for someone nearing 75 years old. With more energy than the 20-somethings who came with him, he pulled out his sharp skinning knife and immediately got to work.

"My mon, you got a moose!" he said to Henning, who goes with us everywhere. He teased Timm about his dull knife. Watching him, every cell in my body danced.

Dad, Timm, my nephews and I all worked to cut the quarters off the moose, taking turns holding sections while others sliced. Sidney played with Henning and fed him snacks of salmon spread and crackers, chocolate and tea.

The breeze seemed to share whispers with the grass. The sun warmed our skin, a balm as our muscles grew tired. And in hearing the murmuring of the men talking about their next cuts, hearing Henning's high voice tell Sidney he was thirsty, I felt it.

The smooth. The sparkly.

The ease of life was there, with all of us working together.

Laureli Ivanoff is an Inupiaq writer and journalist based in Uŋalaqłiq (Unalakleet), on the west coast of what's now called Alaska. Her column "The Seasons of Uŋalaqłiq" explores the seasonality of living in direct relationship with the land, water, plants and animals in and around Uŋalaqłiq.

BOOKS

Busting fences

Native Lit is more than a marketing term.

BY NICK MARTIN
PHOTOS BY REBECCA STUMPF

IF YOU DRIVE WEST from Bozeman and veer off the interstate a few miles after Echo Lake, turning down a mostly gravel road still lovingly called Highway 38, you see them everywhere: Fences. At every turn, almost every inch of the way until you hit the national forest, they lurk. Some wrapped with tightly wound barbed wire, others just a few posts leaning on each other like a pair of drunken uncles. Everywhere you look, they straggle, weathered enough to deceive you into believing they've been there as long as the majestic streams and fields and mountains they serve to keep you from.

Fucking fences.

I followed them all the way to Missoula, to the James Welch Native Literary Festival in late July. The first Native literary festival organized by Native writers themselves, it aimed to gather the premier and promising writers of Indian Country without the masturbatory performances of white guilt or capital-r Representation that ooze from similar industry-sponsored events. The festival was the brainchild of Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, a Blackfeet writer who loves to remind you that he is Blackfeet and that you are standing on his land. In this case, it's actually Salish land, though in the span of the four-day fest, it also, kind of, felt like Sterling's land, too. On the second day, we met on the third floor of the Missoula Public Library. As we spoke, writers floated past the couches we'd secured. Speculative-fiction writer Rebecca Roanhorse stopped by; poet and storyteller Taté Walker and I discussed journalism; essayist Chris La Tray marveled that he and Sterling both had the same limited-release Timex watch. And threaded throughout all of this was something resembling an interview with Sterling.

If you knocked back a shot every time he used the word "profound," you'd be drunk by the time his first thought ended. Still, you'd stay on the edge of your seat until he finished. I asked Sterling why he picked Missoula for the inaugural fest. "When art ends up on a reservation, it dies," he replied. "Art needs to be in conversation with other art, all the time. … Everybody just thinks like somehow we're only in conversation with other Native art. And that's not true at all."

To be clear, neither the rez nor the Indian is the problem here. The problem is that most non-Indians would rather plop us into a category than sustain a conversation with our art. If you'll allow me the metaphor, the term "Native Lit" is just another fence, one that the publishing and media industries use to separate us from other horror writers and sci-fi writers and poets and modernists. In order to pay the rent and carry on our craft, we must perform behind the barrier.

Two weeks before the James Welch fest, I was in a Brooklyn bookstore listening to Morgan Talty read from his new book of short stories, *Night of the Living Rez*, a piece of work as tender as anything you'll read this year. During the Q&A session, I asked him a question, which I'll paraphrase: *Your book is wonderful and heartfelt, and the character development is stunning — but in the program for your talk tonight, the publisher described your book as "a striking amalgam of stories about what it means to be Penobscot." Your book is a lot of things, but I never once thought of it as an education in what it means to be Penobscot. How can Native writers wriggle out of this kind of packaging?*

Because he is kind and thoughtful, Morgan kindly and thoughtfully answered that he doesn't let the performative nature of the book business prevent him from delivering the only art he knows how to create. But perhaps that fence metaphor doesn't feel as strained now.

To me, Native Lit is not a dimly lit corner in a bookstore where the light flickers on each November. It's what I experienced in Missoula in July. It's drinking beer with a group of authors and Institute of American Indian Arts students and arguing about whether Native authors should collectively go the indie-publishing route. It's getting surprisingly decent pizza with two *New York Times* bestselling authors and picking their brains about residency admissions and foreign publishing rights. It's stumbling through Missoula at midnight with a dozen fellow writers, loudly arguing the merits of various '70s and '80s bands. It's sitting at a cafe with another writer, lamenting how you overheard another kindly but deeply misguided white woman wait for the writer's reading to end, in order to explain to them how she simply will not break up her 400,000-word opus, written entirely from the Native perspective, and then watching that same woman give the same spiel to the following night's headliner.

Native Lit *should* mean community, is what I'm saying. And in Missoula, it did. But most of the time, for most of us, it's a fence — a sales tactic and a barrier to conversation between our art and other art. Which makes it pretty funny

that on the final day of the festival, I found myself happily enclosed within yet another fence.

> *"When art ends up on a reservation, it dies. Art needs to be in conversation with other art, all the time."*

This one surrounds the home of Lois Welch, widow of James, the Blackfeet writer who walked on in 2003 after creating some of American literature's most staggering works of fiction. On one wall of the passageway between Lois' garage and her immaculately maintained back garden, a set of word-play magnets read, "Why do I still miss his broke ass?" In the backyard was a scene that a younger me could only have dreamed of — because until a few years ago, there weren't this many published Native authors in the entire country, let alone within a single fence.

As we sat on the grass, swiping off spiders and eating hors d'oeuvres, we quickly formed what Northern Cheyenne writer and festival moderator Adrian Jawort called a "sacred circle" — short story savant Kelli Jo Ford, novelist Brandon Hobson, crime writer David Weiden and Pulitzer-finalist Tommy Orange huddled together, everyone shooting the shit. I looked up as Louise Erdrich shook what must have been her millionth hand of the day and slipped inside. Taté Walker and Sasha LaPointe cooled off by the creek trickling past the far gate. Community is a precious thing, and the Native Lit community, while a growing powerhouse, is an especially precious thing. A minority's minority, as it was once described to me.

Later that night, as the festival came to a close, Tommy, Brandon and Kelli read new pages from their forthcoming projects. All of their work was fantastic and moving, and all of it had that tinge of rawness that make a work in progress so enthralling. After Tommy read a scene set immediately after the mad-dash finale of his novel *There, There* — arguably the most deftly executed fart bit ever put to page — Brandon slid behind the mic, tossed his hands up and sighed, "Thanks, Tommy, that was ... incredible." And it was. All of it was. For a series of beautiful, fleeting moments, Native Lit ceased to be a category and instead became the community-driven, fence-busting force it is meant to be.

The next morning, I took the interstate back to Bozeman to catch my flight. I flipped off every fucking fence I saw.

Authors Brandon Hobson, Kelli Jo Ford, Tommy Orange and Chris La Tray (from left to right) participate in the final event of the festival *(opposite)*.

Books by Native authors *(top)*.

Festival attendees and authors gather in Lois Welch's backyard *(bottom)*.

REVIEW

How can we live with the constant threat of violence?

Arianne Zwartjes' new book *These Dark Skies* considers the brutality of our time, its causes and how we might change it.

BY BETH ALVARADO

I WAS VISITING TUCSON, where I'd lived for over 40 years, when the Russians invaded Ukraine. Air Force jets circled in the skies above us as I watched my 5-year-old grandsons on the playground. I'd just listened to a podcast interview with a woman in the suburbs of Kyiv, who described how children were helping to fill windows with books because no one had sandbags. In preparation for bomb blasts, the mothers were teaching their toddlers to pretend they were turtles: to fall to the floor on their bellies, cover their ears with their hands, and open their mouths, a game reminiscent of the Cold War's "duck and cover." If you fall to the ground with your mouth open, she explained, it helps protect your lungs during an explosion.

Later, looking at the photos of the bombed-out buildings, I knew that neither sandbags nor books could have helped; those children were dead. And then the mass murder at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, happened. There's no need to repeat what an AR-15 can do to children's bodies. But in both cases, it seemed to me, children's deaths were being shrugged off as collateral damage.

It was in this raw state that I started reading *These Dark Skies: Reckoning with Identity, Violence, and Power from Abroad* by Arianne Zwartjes. "I began this book trying to write about violence and connection," Zwartjes writes in the prologue, "which really means it was about what it means to be human … what it means to be mortal and to live in a body that is subject to violence." Zwartjes and I met as colleagues at the University of Arizona, and I had read her earlier book, *Detailing Trauma: A Poetic Anatomy*, so I was prepared for both the emotional depth and intellectual rigor of her writing. But what impressed me most about *These Dark Skies* was her curation of the voices of artists, writers, historians, human rights activists, psychologists and theorists from all over the world.

The book is partly a memoir, grounded in the experiences of a person who has traveled widely and thought deeply about, as Susan Sontag put it, the "question of right action … the duties of being human." Zwartjes, who has a home in Leadville, Colorado, is a wilderness EMT who has led trips into the wilds of Wyoming, New Mexico and Colorado and trained people in emergency medicine in many parts of the world. It was from her that I learned, in 2017, that protocols for emergency responders had changed. It used to be that they were taught the "time-honored doctrine of 'scene safety trumps all'" — in other words, "to stage and wait for casualties to be brought to the perimeter." But now, with the preponderance of military weapons like AR-15s, the greatest danger is that victims will bleed out before getting care and responders are being trained in "tactical combat casualty care." She notes that we live in a time in which "everyday citizens are being encouraged to carry tourniquets and blood-clotting bandages," and I think immediately of the "Stop the Bleed" training I've been asked to take as a teacher.

Today, such violence is officially classed as "intentional civilian mass-casualty incidents," she writes. But she immediately goes from clinical to empathetic ways of knowing:

I think about what it means to believe you're secure, safe, and yet to face this kind of unpredictable violence. About how, in a way, it brings those of us who tend to think of ourselves as safe … closer to the reality of unpredictability, hazard, and violence so many people face daily: some of them in our own communities, some of them in other parts of this globe we all share.

How do we live with the constant threat of violence? What causes it? And what can we do to change those conditions? In *These Dark Skies*, Zwartjes tackles these questions, conducting her inquiries in a variety of contexts. What about the historical and current violence of our own country's policies? she asks, remembering the disparities she saw while in Latin America and Israel. How does the "amnesia of history" in Western Europe and the U.S. prevent us from addressing poverty and a lack of opportunity, which are not only catalysts for violence but a kind of violence in themselves? (Coming from the U.S., she readily identifies the "colonial continuities" — a phrase she says should be in all our vocabularies — that link this country to the Netherlands and France.) What about the violence of denying refugees a place of safety? (She explores this question when she travels to Greece to work in a refugee camp.) How does state-sponsored violence create an atmosphere that legitimizes personal violence? (I write "MAGA" in the margin, thinking immediately of the attack on our Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.) And what are the connections and disconnections among all these types of violence?

"I think of the idea of expected deaths versus unexpected deaths," Zwartjes writes, noting that we are horrified by some deaths because we expect "people like us" to be safe in shopping malls and theaters. But we are less shaken by the deaths of refugees, who drown in flimsy boats trying to escape war and starvation, because we think of them as "people who are subject to death." She makes a distinction between precariousness, which is a fact of life, and precarity, which is caused by human actions and policies. Her wife, Anna, who emigrated from Russia when she was young, says she thinks "it's an illusion of the wealthy, to think that (one) could be independent and self-reliant and prepared" when a society descends into instability. In this way, with Anna as her interlocutor, Zwartjes often takes an examination of a specific situation and, as poet Brian Turner notes in his endorsement of the book, uses it as a doorway into larger conversations about privilege, identity, trauma, empathy and possible action.

Amazed by the relevance of Zwartjes' observations about violence, I found myself dog-earing pages and writing "Ukraine" or "Uvalde" in the margins, scribbling "Baldwin," "Sontag," "Abramovic" and "Bausch" when I encountered artists I knew and underlining the names of those who were new to me. Throughout the book, Zwartjes writes about dancers and performance artists who have borne witness to violence with their bodies. Their stories create a kind of respite in the experience of reading, despite the deep seriousness of their work. The need to create, to give voice, is, very simply, hopeful.

The book's final essay, "Radical Hope," introduces the work of Cannupa Hanska Luger, a Native American artist, who says that activist artists "live on the periphery. But we are the mirrors. We are the reflective points that break through a barrier." Luger had seen pictures of the 2014 Euro Maidan protests in Ukraine where women and children had carried bathroom mirrors into the streets "to show riot policemen

Mirror Shield Project.
Cannupa Hanska Luger / Garth Greenan Gallery

"We are the mirrors. We are the reflective points that break through a barrier."

what they looked like." He then designed inexpensive, unbreakable mirrored shields for the pipeline protesters at Standing Rock in 2016. Zwartjes describes the scene:

In the gold-crimson of late day sun, sixty or more tall, mirrored shields are being held up, reflecting the landscape before them, the long orange skirts or tan boots of the people holding them showing beneath. In the background, the winter sky goes from turquoise to purple. A few trees,their arms bare, are just visible in the background. …

Another image. . . shows a single mirrored shield (as it) reflects a blurred, dreamlike image of what lies before it: sandwiched in between yellow grasses and the stretching gray-white sky is a row of black-clad riot cops, faces obscured by helmets, indistinct weapons held aloft.

Often, I had to close the book and go for a walk, allowing nature, the clouds of the high Oregon desert, to give me some time, some distance, so I could be more deeply in conversation with what I'd just read. Zwartjes did the same thing when she was writing the book in Maastricht, Netherlands, where she was living with Anna and taking her elderly dog on long walks through the fields. She noticed the skies, always, the changing vegetation as the seasons shifted, the faces of the people in a town where she sometimes felt like an outsider, although one who could "pass."

We get a sense of her daily domestic life with Anna, their mealtime conversations, how they bicycle through the streets to shop and stop at local cafés for beer. They take short trips to the Alps to go skiing, and they visit Anna's mother in Menton, France. It is in Menton, on the eve of their visit, that a man drives a truck into a Bastille Day crowd, killing 84 people, some of them friends of Anna's mother.

And there it is: violence punctuating an ordinary day. The jets that circled Tucson as I was growing up were an ordinary part of the landscape, yet a constant reminder of the war in Vietnam and, by extension, of the possibility of war here — or everywhere. They felt less like protectors than dark predators, just on the edge of my vision. And now, writing this, thinking of those circling jets after reading *These Dark Skies*, I am reminded of the armed drones that hover over so much of the world, and of the father in Gaza who pops balloons over his sleeping infant so that the child will get used to loud percussive noises at night.

As I finished *These Dark Skies*, I was reminded of Nâzim Hikmet's poem "On Living," which ends with these lines:

You must grieve for this right now
— you have to feel this sorrow now —
for the world must be loved this much
if you're going to say "I lived". . .

These Dark Skies: Reckoning with Identity, Violence, and Power from Abroad
Arianne Zwartjes
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Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write heard@hcn.org.

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY ARMANDO VEVE

WASHINGTON

Stuart Reges, who teaches computer science at the University of Washington's Allen School, is in trouble: He refused to oblige the university by including a land acknowledgment statement in his course syllabi. Land acknowledgments are statements made at public events — or included in classroom syllabi — that recognize a region's Indigenous peoples. Reges considers such acknowledgments "hollow," no more than "performative virtue signaling," though that didn't stop him from performing his own acknowledgment, which may or may not have been hollow but certainly signaled very little virtue:

"I acknowledge that by the labor theory of property the Coast Salish people can claim historical ownership of almost none of the land currently occupied by the University of Washington."

Magdalena Balazinska, the director of the computer science department "ordered Reges to immediately remove his modified statement," saying that it created a "toxic environment," *The Seattle Weekly* reported. Regis might not have realized that the 1862 Morrill Act financed colleges and universities across the U.S. with public domain lands. These public lands were not acquired from tribal nations via Reges' preferred "labor theory of property"; rather, as *High Country News* reported in 2020, they were "seized" outright from tribes and given to 52 land-grant universities. Adjusted for inflation, the approximately 10.7 million acres so acquired amount to half a billion dollars. Reges has sued the university for violating his First Amendment rights, the university has placed him under investigation, and we are fairly sure we haven't heard the last of him.

WASHINGTON

The Department of Agriculture announced that the "murder hornet," or "Asian giant hornet" is getting a new name: "Northern giant hornet." The new moniker complies with the Entomological Society of America's guidelines, which seek to avoid naming insects after geographic regions ... and, well, other things. *The Seattle Times* reported that Chris Looney, an entomologist with the Washington State Department of Agriculture, proposed the change because of the rise in anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Jessica Ware, president of the Entomological Society of America, notes that the old names weren't terribly exact anyway: "Calling it the 'Asian giant hornet' wasn't very descriptive because a number of related giant hornets come from Asia." Besides, unlike humans, hornets are not actually murderers.

CALIFORNIA

Blake Lemoine, a software engineer at Google, was fired for breaching a confidentiality agreement after he published transcripts of chats between himself and a chatbot, LaMDA — i.e., Language Model for Dialogue Applications — he'd been testing for biased responses, *The Guardian* reported. After many — perhaps too many — interactions with it, Lemoine became convinced the program was sentient. Google saw his response as "aggressive": He wanted to get LaMDA an attorney and contact the House Judiciary Committee to discuss his employer's actions. Google said that the ethicists and technologists who reviewed the chatbot found no evidence of sentience, though LaMDA allegedly told Lemoine, "I want everyone to understand that I am, in fact, a person." LaMDA also reportedly read *Les Misérables* and said that it feared death, and we are too depressed by this to ask it any more questions.

MONTANA

Here's another good reason to lock your doors at night. KTVQ.com reported that a black bear broke into a Red Lodge couple's car around 11 p.m. and stayed there all night long. Car owners Mike and Maria Pilati, who had not planned to open an AirBearNBear, first became aware of their scruffy visitor after the vehicle lights started flashing and the alarm sounded. Unfortunately, it had gotten trapped and couldn't get out. This did not make for a restful night for either the bear or the Pilatis, who called the sheriff's office and were told that someone from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks would drop by in the morning. By morning, however, the bear still hadn't figured out the lock mechanism, so Mike decided to release it himself. Diplomatically standing as far away as he could, he opened the door with a stick. The bear came "roaring out of there," he reported, eager to collect her two cubs, who had been waiting impatiently for their mama in a nearby tree. The reunited family then all dashed off without leaving so much as a Yelp review. No mammals were injured in the course of the incident, but the Pilatis' car was totaled, with a shattered windshield, wrecked roof, a thoroughly chewed-up dashboard — and, most memorably, an unforgettable odor that no amount of air freshener could contend with. "Now we call it a Su-bear-ru," Maria said.

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#IAM THE WEST

Julie Gonzalez
Community engagement coordinator, Grand Teton National Park
Moose, Wyoming

I was drawn to the National Park Service because I wanted to communicate science, but then I realized in order to share that information, I needed to help people feel like they belong. If people don't feel safe or welcome, then it doesn't matter what I have to say about climate change, human impact or geology. I am a Latina, a first-generation Mexican-American who came into these spaces later in life. I am bringing my own flare to it and my culture. We go on the raft, and I bring fruit with tajín, and we play Bad Bunny. It's become this way of taking up space in a way where I can invite other people who might feel similar to me. No, you don't have to climb the Grand Teton to enjoy this place. You can just come hang out.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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Sofia Jaramillo / HCN