

books&authors  
SPECIAL ISSUE

# High Country News

For people who care about the West

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## STORIED LANDSCAPES

New works by Beth Piatote and George Takei  
Excerpts, interviews, reviews, new books



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## CONTENTS

### Editor's note

## *The West is the stories we tell*

I lived in Tucson, Arizona, for about six years, and one of the best things about that sometimes sweltering place was being surrounded by mountains. During my first week in town, new friends and I drove the steep, winding road to the top of Mount Lemmon, past cactus, then piñon and junipers, and finally into the pines. We threw down our packs in a hidden grassy patch just half a mile from a trail, a place most people hiked past. I snuggled into my sleeping bag that night, happy to be on the mountain, ignorant of its disturbing history.

Most Tucsonans know the road up Mount Lemmon for its stunning views of waterfalls, desert and blocky cliffs; its rock climbers, cyclists and backpackers; its log-cabin vacation homes. Fewer know the road's origins. During World War II, Native Americans and Asian Americans, among others incarcerated in a prison camp on the mountain, carved the road from ancient rock as forced laborers. They included Japanese Americans who were conscientious objectors; they had refused to fight overseas for a country that had detained their families. As the U.S. entered the war, it incarcerated thousands of Americans of Japanese descent in camps without due process or legal recourse, through a presidential executive order.

Today, some place names — Prison Camp Road, Gordon Hirabayashi Campground — hint at the mountain's history. But it's easy to hike, drive or bike on Mount Lemmon and never realize that you're traveling a highway dug by prisoners.

I did not learn about Mount Lemmon's World War II history in school; I came across it while researching the region's ecology for a writing project. Nor was I taught the peak's Indigenous history, spanning thousands of years before European colonization. Now, I wonder: What other stories of place and displacement, of community and landscape, are hidden in archives, personal diaries, family stories? Which stories about the West are ignored, while other stories are told and retold?

In this special issue of *High Country News*, we celebrate storytelling from many different corners of the West. Through his graphic novel, actor George Takei recalls his own childhood internment during World War II, an experience he finds painfully echoed in the lives of detained migrants today. Meanwhile, writer and scholar Beth Piatote, who is Nez Perce from Chief Joseph's Band and an enrolled member of the Colville Confederated Tribes, conjures a sister hoping for family connection in the long shadow of Indian school separations.

You'll also read about the history and future of the West's water woes; queer Indigenous life in the Four Corners; the challenge of teaching writing students to wield their art as a force for change; and more. I hope these pages encourage you to seek out many more stories of the West, including your own.

—Maya L. Kapoor, associate editor



# STORIED LANDSCAPES

Books & authors special issue

## FEATURES

- 10 **Internment's Long Shadow** George Takei remembers his childhood detainment by the U.S. government during World War II  
Written by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott; Art by Harmony Becker
- 14 **Beading Lesson**  
In Beth Piatote's first short-story collection, beads are easier to connect than family  
By Beth Piatote
- INSIDE**
- 4 **The case against migrant detention** César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández on why America puts so many immigrants behind bars By Sarah Tory
- 6 **The weathering of hope** Terry Tempest Williams on erosion as an emotional state By Ramin Skibba
- 7 **Summoning beauty through darkness** In his debut collection, poet Jake Skeets negotiates brutality and beauty By Bojan Louis
- 9 **Growth horizons** Is development a cancer on the West's landscape? The metaphor gets complicated when your mom is battling the illness.  
By Jack Hereford, winner of the Bell Prize
- 21 **This season's best reads** A roundup of the new and upcoming books that have caught our eyes By Elena Saavedra Buckley
- 38 **When we need more than stories** Essay by Susan Briante

## BOOK REVIEWS

- 27 *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers*, Elissa Washuta (editor), Theresa Warburton (editor). Reviewed by Amber Cortes
- 28 *This Land: How Cowboys, Capitalism, and Corruption are Ruining the American West* by Christopher Ketcham. Reviewed by Carl Segerstrom
- 30 *Stronghold: One Man's Quest to Save the World's Wild Salmon* by Tucker Malarkey. Reviewed by Ben Goldfarb
- 32 *The Lightest Object in the Universe* by Kimi Eisele and *Science Be Dammed: How Ignoring Inconvenient Science Drained the Colorado River* by Eric Kuhn and John Fleck. Reviewed by Laura Paskus
- 34 *A Prayer for Travelers* by Ruchika Tomar. Reviewed by Jenny Shank
- 36 *An American Sunrise* by Joy Harjo. Reviewed by Sheila Regan
- 37 *Deep River: A Novel* by Karl Marlantes. Reviewed by Mary Slosson

## DEPARTMENTS

- 3 FROM OUR WEBSITE: HCN.ORG
- 8 THE HCN COMMUNITY  
Research Fund
- 16 BOOKS AND AUTHORS MARKETPLACE
- 40 MARKETPLACE
- 44 HEARD AROUND THE WEST By Betsy Marston



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**Susan Briante's** book *Defacing the Monument, essays on immigration, archives, and documentary arts*, is forthcoming from Noemi Press in 2020.

**Elena Saavedra Buckley** is a writer and a contributing editor for *High Country News*. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

**Amber Cortes** is a writer and radio producer currently living in Seattle.

**Ben Goldfarb** is a frequent *High Country News* contributor and the author of *Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter*.

**Kalen Goodluck** is a reporter and editorial fellow for *High Country News* on the Indigenous Affairs desk.

**Jack Hereford**, winner of this year's Bell Prize, is soon to graduate from the University of Arizona; he is looking for post-grad work, including dishwashing.

**Laura Paskus** is a reporter in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her book *At the Precipice: New Mexico's Changing Climate* is forthcoming from UNM Press in 2020.

**Beth Piatote** is a Nez Perce writer and associate professor of Native American Studies at UC Berkeley.

## CONTRIBUTORS



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**Jenny Shank's** novel, *The Ringer*, won the High Plains Book Award. Her writing has appeared in *The Atlantic* and *The Washington Post*.



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**Mary Slosson** is a writer based in Portland, Oregon. She was formerly a Reuters correspondent covering the American West.



Author and activist **George Takei** is co-author, with Justin Eisinger and Steven Scott, of the *New York Times* bestselling graphic memoir *They Called Us Enemy*, illustrated by Harmony Becker.



**Sarah Tory** is a correspondent for *High Country News*. She lives in Carbondale, Colorado.

## FROM OUR WEBSITE: HCN.ORG

### PHOTOS

#### A canoe journey to Alcatraz on Indigenous Peoples' Day



**1.** On Indigenous Peoples' Day in San Francisco, California, the Northern Quest Canoe Family hoists their canoe into the water. **2.** Ruth Orta of the Ohlone Tribe welcomes the Northern Quest Canoe Family to the Aquatic Park Cove shore. **3.** Leila Perez and Sean Morrison take a photo of Alcatraz Island. **4.** A member of the Three Sisters Canoe Family sings at Aquatic Park Cove after the canoes have docked.

See more photos by Jolene Yazzie and read about Indigenous Peoples' Day, when an estimated 1,000 people from the U.S. and Canada participated in the Alcatraz Canoe Journey on Huichin territory in present-day San Francisco Bay. It was the first Indigenous event to take place at Alcatraz Island since Native American activists occupied it 50 years ago. [hcn.org/Alcatraz-Canoe-Journey](https://hcn.org/Alcatraz-Canoe-Journey)



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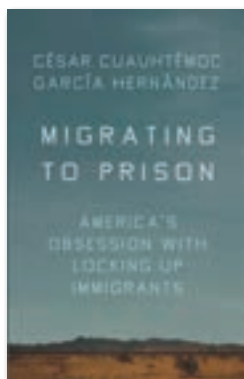
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# The case against migrant detention

César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández on  
why America puts so many immigrants behind bars

BY SARAH TORY



**Migrating to Prison:  
America's Obsession  
with Locking Up  
Immigrants**  
César Cuauhtémoc  
García Hernández  
208 pages, hardcover:  
\$24.99  
The New Press,  
Dec. 3, 2019.

Until the early 1980s, the United States rarely locked up people for the act of migration. Immigrants were not treated as security threats. Most undocumented people crossing the Southwest border were young men from Mexico looking for work in U.S. agriculture, and after their jobs ended, many returned home. That all changed when Congress criminalized the kind of migration that had occurred freely for much of the previous century, paving the way for the incarceration of people accused of breaking civil or criminal immigration laws.

Today, the U.S. incarcerates nearly 400,000 immigrants annually. They range from those caught crossing the border unlawfully and the growing numbers of people requesting asylum to legal immigrants who have lived and worked in the U.S. for decades. Despite the increasing number detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), few are convicted of serious crimes — and more than a third have never been convicted of even a minor violation.

Growing up in southern Texas in a housing project for farmworkers, César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández experienced the rise of immigrant detention during the Reagan era, not as a distant political debate, but as “life-and-death developments about people we knew.” Later, after leaving Texas for college and law school, García Hernández returned to the Rio Grande Valley as a newly minted immigration lawyer, confident in his knowledge of the U.S. immigration system — until he began representing immigrants detained at the Port Isabel Detention Center.

Port Isabel is a razor-wire-ringed complex a short drive beyond the bamboo thickets of the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. This is where García Hernández encountered America’s vast network of shadow prisons while representing people like Gerardo Armijo. A permanent resident who was born in Mexico but grew up in the Texas Borderlands, Armijo served in the Iraq war and returned from military service suffering from PTSD. He turned to drugs and was caught and convicted of possession. Armijo then ended up in detention, fighting a deportation order. (Not even military service can protect an immigrant who lacks U.S. citizenship from deportation.)

García Hernández also learned of

children held elsewhere in America’s migrant detention archipelago, such as 3-year-old Diego Rivera Osorio, whose mother fled threats of kidnapping and assault in Honduras. By the time he was granted a special visa for children, Rivera Osorio had spent most of his life in the Berks Family Residential Center, or “baby jail,” near Philadelphia.

Now a law professor at the University of Denver, García Hernández has spent more than a decade working inside America’s immigration prison system — a system that has grown so large, it is hard to imagine immigration enforcement without it. In *Migrating to Prison*, García Hernández dispels that myth, arguing that the U.S. can and should dismantle its immigration prisons.

Recently, *High Country News* spoke with García Hernández about the emergence of immigration prisons, the policies underpinning them, and the importance of telling the stories of the people behind bars. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

**HIGH COUNTRY NEWS:** What inspired you to write this book?

**CÉSAR CUAUHTÉMOC GARCÍA HERNÁNDEZ:** Because stories are powerful. For me, the story of the development of immigration prisons is one that is not talked about nearly enough. We think of them as being inevitable, right? That they’re this component of a functioning immigration law system. One of the goals that I have is to point out that that’s not true.

Entering the United States without authorization has been a federal misdemeanor since 1929. Same with illegal re-entry (re-entering after having previously been deported). The thing is, those two laws were on the books for about a century without being used very much. But during the Bush administration, we started seeing a renewed interest by prosecutors in tapping this power that they had to criminally prosecute people for immigration offenses.

My interest in prisons really goes back to the Obama administration, when my clients were almost all locked up for one reason or another. Then, once I started teaching, I was able to track the progression of immigration prisons. I was able to see that this system was growing, really, at an unprecedented rate. This was under President Obama — the most liberal

president in the recent history of the United States. Once the (Trump) election happened, it became obvious that this was going to be an even more important issue.

In writing this book, I wanted to force people to have that conversation about whether this is what we want to be doing as a country. Right now, I don’t think we’re asking that question. We’re just assuming that if you don’t have people locked up, then the whole immigration system is going to come crumbling down around us.

**HCN:** As a lawyer and academic, was it hard to dive into storytelling mode?

**CGH:** My comfort zone is in talking about laws and policies. That’s really dry. It removes the person from the focus of my attention, and I’m comfortable with that. I’ve developed a successful career doing that. But at the end of the day, the reason that I’m interested in law and policy is because of the way it impacts human beings.

In this book, it was important for me to make (people) the center of attention as I’m telling the story of the politics and the history of immigration prisons. I wanted to remind us that the cold bureaucracy of the federal government’s immigration law enforcement apparatus doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It exists in communities.

**HCN:** You grew up in the Rio Grande Valley, where migration and the border are very visible parts of the landscape and culture. Now you live in Colorado, where immigration issues are invisible for many people. How does that dynamic play into our understanding?

**CGH:** I think that’s huge. Most people in the U.S. think of (immigrant detention) as being a problem that exists someplace else. That reaction helps explain why a lot of these facilities are in the middle of nowhere. They’re in isolated places. You go to Arizona, the prisons are in the middle of the Sonoran Desert. South Texas is the same thing.

One of the things that I find fascinating about the Aurora Facility (an immigrant detention center near Denver) is it’s in the middle of a large metropolitan area. Nonetheless, most people don’t know about it. That’s a result of the way in which ICE treats the folks there. It’s very isolating. There are very few people



Law professor and author César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández outside the Aurora, Colorado, ICE detention facility. JOLENE YAZZIE/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

who ever go in there, and most immigrants in detention don't have lawyers, which means advocates aren't going in and out.

**HCN:** Even though the data show that immigration has the effect of reducing crime rates, one of the central myths driving incarceration is that immigrants bring crime to America. How has the growth of immigration detention contributed to this myth?

**CGH:** Part of the logic of prisons is that they suggest that there's a reason for them to be there. Why would we spend all this money locking people up if there wasn't a reason for it? When you're surrounded by barbed wire and you're in an orange jumpsuit, there must be some danger that you pose — even if we don't know what the danger is. When you isolate people from one another, then you make them afraid of each other. The prison does that extremely efficiently.

If (detained immigrants) were out in the community waiting for their immigration court date, and we got to know them and their stories, it would be much harder to justify keeping them

behind bars. It would be the guy building my house, the woman who cleans my office, the people who are working in the kitchen at the restaurant that I like to go to. They would just be ordinary people, as opposed to "criminal aliens."

**HCN:** And yet prisons are becoming a larger and larger part of the immigration enforcement system. Why does that matter?

**CGH:** I think it makes it normal to think of the prisons as a way of responding to social problems. The people who end up in immigration prisons are mostly people who came here to work or came here to reunite with their family, or they came here because they were afraid for their life someplace else. Even if they're violating immigration laws, they're not hurting anyone in any tangible sense.

So why are we throwing the second most severe power that the government has at its disposal at people accused of a fairly benign, harmless activity? The only thing that's heavier (than incarceration) is the government's power to kill people.

**HCN:** California lawmakers just passed a

bill banning private prisons from operating in the state, which would also apply to for-profit immigration detention facilities. Does that give you hope that the U.S. can dismantle this system?

**CGH:** I don't think California banning private prisons is going to dramatically reduce the number of people in immigration prisons. I can imagine that new facilities will pop up just across the border in Nevada or Oregon.

To me, what California did is powerful because it shows that advocates have the power to shift the conversation about migration so much that it actually results in a very drastic turnaround of law and policy. This shift in California suggests that it's possible to transform the narrative around migration and the way we think of migrants.

Immigrants are ordinary human beings: They're going to do things that are really great, and some of them are going to do things that are really bad, and most of them are going to do a combination of the two. That doesn't mean that they stop being human, and it doesn't mean that they should stop being part of our community. □

**"We're just assuming that if you don't have people locked up, then the whole immigration system is going to come crumbling down around us."**

— César Cuauhtémoc  
García Hernández



# The weathering of hope

Terry Tempest Williams  
on erosion as an emotional state

BY RAMIN SKIBBA



## Erosion: Essays of Undoing

Terry Tempest Williams

336 pages, hardcover: \$27

Sarah Crichton Books, 2019.

**H**ow do we survive our grief in the midst of so many losses in the living world, from white bark pines to grizzly bears to the decline of willow flycatchers along the Colorado River?” asks nature writer Terry Tempest Williams in her new book. “How do we find the strength to not look away from all that is breaking our hearts?”

Williams, the critically acclaimed author of *Refuge*, begins *Erosion: Essays of Undoing* with these challenging questions. Her lyric essays and poems chronicle her growing concern about the West’s changing landscapes — and changing politics.

Facing her own fears following the election of an anti-conservation president, Williams writes about coming to terms with a variety of losses, ranging from her brother’s suicide to the reduction of her beloved Bears Ears National Monument. At the same time, she’s determined to find a way to help people to move forward.

*High Country News* recently spoke with Williams by phone while she was at home in Utah’s Castle Valley, watching the sun rise over the nearby mountains. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**HIGH COUNTRY NEWS:** What first inspired you to write this book?

**TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS:** I think it’s where we are right now. This book, more than any I have written, is really grounded in the here and now. I live in an erosional landscape in Castle Valley, Utah. But I think it’s also the emotional, spiritual and political landscape where I’m dwelling. Erosion as a process of watching the landscape weather and be carried away through wind, water and time seems to run in parallel with the weathering and erosion of our own democracy.

Instead of the erosion of sandstone, I see the erosion of science, the erosion of truth and facts, the erosion of public comment regarding public policies, the erosion of decency and compassion, belief, integrity, and the weathering and overall breaking down of the political landscape in the United States of America, including the erosion of the rule of law.

When you see the (Bureau of Land Management) is moving their office to Grand Junction, I think they have a sharp eye on selling our public lands into private hands. When you see the rapidity and the numbers of oil and gas sales

occurring on our public lands, adjacent to our national monuments and national parks, it is urgent. It’s requiring us to come forward in dynamic and creative ways to stop this assault (on public lands).

**HCN:** Which climate change effects on the American West really keep you up at night?

**TTW:** Well, drought, for one. Last year, Castle Valley was so dry, the Colorado River was so low, it was terrifying.

The other thing that keeps me up at night is what we’re seeing around the world, with people searching for another place to live because of rising seas, drought or political instability, which I think follows climate change.

**HCN:** When you heard that President Trump planned to drastically reduce the size of Bears Ears, what was your first response?

**TTW:** My first response was outrage. My second response is: What can we do? Engagement is to me a way of taking that anger and turning it into action.

The photographer Fazal Sheikh and I put together a pamphlet we called “Exposure.” We knew there would be a protest in Salt Lake City, and that different organizations and thousands of citizens would convene at the state Capitol, and we wanted to have something we could pass out, almost in the tradition of Camus during the French Resistance. The pamphlet offers an explanation of Bears Ears, with the proclamation from President Obama about what this monument means.

**HCN:** In the book, you included an extended interview with Tim DeChristopher, a climate activist who served a prison term for thwarting a public-land auction in southern Utah. Do you think we need more civil disobedience like that today?

**TTW:** I think we need everything. I think each of us needs to really search our soul and ask, “What is my gift? What can I contribute to my community, wherever we live?” In this time where it’s easy to wonder, “How can we live with this kind of despair,” I think despair shows us the limits of our imagination.

**HCN:** Your book also includes a couple of poems interspersed between the essays. Do you feel you can communicate some things better with poetry?

**TTW:** I do, because I think it’s lean. And these are lean times. I think so often we don’t have the words. What I love about poetry is that the spaces between the lines say as much as the lines themselves, which is what I continue to learn in the desert. It’s the stillness that mentors me. It’s the silences that inspire me in a world where there’s so much noise and distraction. □



Terry Tempest Williams. KWAKU ALSTON/CONTOUR RA BY GETTY IMAGES

# Summoning beauty through darkness

*In his debut collection, poet Jake Skeets negotiates brutality and beauty*

BY BOJAN LOUIS

Gallup, New Mexico, is a border town, often called Drunktown and dismissed for its proximity to the Navajo Nation. For non-Native Westerners, this forgetting is a convenient cultural amnesia, given the stark and often brutal realities that have come with colonization and the reservation system: Indian removal, boarding schools, mining contamination, addiction and violence. Jake Skeets, Diné poet and winner of the 2018 National Poetry Series, examines and reflects on these truths with a Diné thought and poetics that seek beauty amid darkness and stereotypes.

Within this landscape, Skeets exhumes the diluted and misremembered lives that inhabit Drunktown with deftness and awe. Drawing inspiration from a photo of an uncle whose life ended violently — “stab my uncle forty seven times behind a liquor store” — and from his own queer experience — “I lick the railroad down your back— / admire black water down your hair” — Skeets has given us a book of poems that reverberate and summon the beauty of what has been overlooked or discarded. *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers* defines a Diné understanding of history, the Southwest and the border towns that people living on and off the reservation mistakenly mystify.

*High Country News* recently spoke with Skeets about writing the poetics of queer Indigenous sexuality and finding beauty amid border-town violence. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

**HIGH COUNTRY NEWS:** Your collection centers on a New Mexico border town. What inspired you?

**JAKE SKEETS:** Gallup is such a storied place, and I grew up just 10 minutes south of Gallup, so it wasn't really like I made the choice. I tried my best to separate, in the beginning, a collection about sexuality, and then maybe another collection on border-town violence and the story of my uncle. I tried to separate those two projects, but in the end, they ended up smashing together again, and I had no choice (but) to venture forward.

Once I moved back (to Gallup), everything kind of just clicked into place.

**HCN:** What was your process for mining the historical trauma and brutality that exist in Gallup, as well as in similar places, while also summoning beauty and balance?

**JS:** It was definitely a process, for sure, in terms of negotiating the brutality with the beauty, and it was a lot of emotional labor. For one, just the idea of returning home and just going through all these stories was a challenge for me, and then also, on top of it, getting ready to actually do hard research. I was looking at old *Gallup Independent* newspapers, and stories from *The New Yorker* or the *Los Angeles Times* about people who've lost their lives in Gallup, and then asking my parents about the story of my uncle and their experiences in Gallup. That itself was kind of harsh, having to relive it, and negotiating all that pain and all that grief.

**HCN:** How do you see sexuality and masculinity being intertwined with contemporary and traditional Diné values and the stereotypes associated with Native people living in border towns?

**JS:** It was an interesting turn that I took, because when I moved on to Phoenix, I met a lot of different Diné men who were living down there. Young men who were tradesmen, so they were working as welders or electricians or these very masculine jobs, and they were all living down there, away from their families in these urban settings and staying in motels for weeks on end.

I thought that was really interesting, and honestly, I was also navigating house parties, because you know Tempe, and that's a huge party scene.

I saw these scenes of guys experimenting with sexuality, experimenting with desire. And it was so interesting to see because the next day it was that, *this didn't exist or it didn't happen*. It was just something that happened on the night before, when they were drunk. And I thought it was so interesting, because the state of being drunk is one of danger, especially in a place like Gallup. It's a very dangerous thing to be blacked-out drunk. But when you're in a secure place, like a house party in Tempe, it can also be a place of freedom, where you're able to explore your body and be able to explore desire and explore what it means to be a young person living in society today.



Diné poet Jake Skeets. QUANAH YAZZIE

## DRUNKTOWN

*Indian Eden.* Open tooth. Bone Bruise. This town split in two.  
Clocks ring out as train horns, each hour hand drags into a screech—  
iron, steel, iron. The minute hand runs its fingers  
through the outcrops.

*Drunktown.* Drunk is the punch. Town a gasp.  
In between the letters are boots crushing tumbleweeds,  
a tractor tire backing over a man's skull.

**HCN:** What do you see as the future of Drunktown, your poetics and the Southwest?

**JS:** As far as Drunktown, I don't know the future of it. It's starting to become a little gentrified. There's a lot of cool little artsy scenes that are happening in downtown Gallup. It's cool to see all these young Navajo folks experiment with art, experiment with music and poetry in downtown Gallup.

I'm hoping that as we move forward, we can start talking about just specifically Southwest poetics and what that looks like. Because all these places — like Tucson, Phoenix, Flag(staff), Gallup, Albuquerque, Las Cruces — we all have a unique take on the world, because we're so close to a bunch of different borders, both national and tribal, and it's interesting to navigate through this field of Southwest writers.

I am hoping that in the future we can start talking about Southwest poetics, or even just Diné poetics and what it means to be a Diné poet, and how do we begin to borrow some of the depth of Diné — not necessarily the culture, or the story, or the language of the ceremony, but its depth of understanding, thought processes, and how we translate that into the American literary landscape. □



**Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers: Poems**  
Jake Skeets  
96 pages,  
softcover: \$16  
Milkweed Editions,  
2019.







# Growth horizons

## MY MOM MADE MAPS OF TIME.

Before retiring, she'd bushwhack over ranges and into basins, find traces of past epochs on hilltops and buried seabeds revealed by stream cuts. With a rock hammer she'd gouge out samples, shatter geodes to identify minerals under a hand lens pulled from a worn leather holster on her hip belt. From craggy promontories, she read time through the language of land crumpling and unfolding, punctuated by uplifts and fault lines. Sitting on dusty tailgates under wide desert skies she compiled notes, consulted previous surveys, built a block of land in her mind framed by superposition — what's oldest is underneath — and the knowledge that land moves slowly or cataclysmically.

A woman of medium build, burdened by a bulky field pack, sunhat and stout scrambling boots, she walked all over the deserts of Arizona, Nevada and Utah, and in the corners of California and New Mexico. Her then-brown hair was longer and straight, and her face fuller, already crossed by crow's feet and smile-lines but with rounder cheeks.

My mother's bones are making more lymphocytes than is usual. Lymphocytes are white blood cells that attack viruses in the body, but hers lack key proteins and are ineffective. These cells seep out of her marrow into her bloodstream, which is tilting towards an imbalance between red and white, thanks to faulty DNA.

Now that she's retired, she walks every morning; she seems unconcerned as she steps out the front door into the cold winter air in Flagstaff. I wonder how much of her thought is bound up with white blood cells — if while she walks through the forest, she thinks of how these lymphocytes flowing through her veins came from the marrow in her bones; if she is quietly amazed that the infantry of our immune system originate from within the very infrastructure of our bodies. I wonder what she thinks of hers faltering, as if her bones are failing her.

But after 64 years, she knows to keep some thoughts from intruding, to just look out and see how things have come to rest.

Last winter I ran almost daily, using the gray skies as an excuse to move, to remember that Tucson, where I live, has an elusive beauty. Moving reminds me to see that these buildings I pass by are tapped into an electric grid, that they were recently developed and require an



ILLUSTRATION BY LATASHA DUNSTON FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

allocation of water resources. That the people waiting at the bus stop have their own intrusive thoughts, and that they find it difficult to keep those thoughts out as well. That the mesquite trees and feather bush and palo verde by the path are all planted for my enjoyment, and that I do enjoy them. That the indoor world of air conditioning and plumbing and electricity isn't everything; that, outside, the weather's changing.

Running is my preferred way to cover distance through this paved geology. It holds my eyes to the light on the gravel and prods me to see that light as what's left after the atmosphere siphons off spectrums: how the gravel pops with texture in late afternoon, and how between clouds are crepuscular rays so present I imagine I could grasp one.

When I'm running, I see replication everywhere: the beige neighborhoods, the cloned shopping districts, all unchecked lymphocytes. I wonder where cancer is metastasizing in the West. Is it the constellation of freeways — blacktop tendrils carrying commodities, commuters, loners — or — the power cables and towers bristling over hills and dotting vast, empty stretches of desert? Is it the

dams clogging every river: Hoover and Glen Canyon, two especially malignant growths? Or the Owen's River Aqueduct and the canals of the Central Arizona Project bringing water intravenously to Los Angeles, Phoenix and Tucson?

I'm running under a winter desert sky as clouds of brilliant white with dark blue edges disentangle over the crest of the Santa Catalina Mountains, an unraveling of lenticulars. Sometimes I find myself talking in my head, conversing with figments of my conceptions of others. I'm asking my Mom: Is there too much space in the West? All this distance obscures the consequences of how I live, in a city with water, electricity, fresh food and entertainment constantly available. I have to leave to see what's underneath, what's oldest, the land I live on but not in. I ask not who, but what, are we. Am I the cells in the bloodstream or the damaged DNA?

My feet keep striking the pavement. I'm a flat-footed runner, and I'll get shin splints soon. The air is cool on my neck and arms. I think about my breath, lungs working while the words drift away, pushing against thoughts too large to move. □

I have to leave  
to see what's  
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the bloodstream  
or the damaged  
DNA?



# Internment's Long Shadow

*George Takei remembers his childhood detainment by the U.S. government during World War II*

The rights of American citizens and immigrants of Japanese ancestry collapsed just weeks after Japanese warplanes attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. West Coast politicians, including California Attorney General Earl Warren and Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Brown, urged President Franklin D. Roosevelt to lock up Japanese American civilians on the false assumption that they were saboteurs, spies and “fifth columnists” loyal to Japan and set on undermining U.S. war efforts. Roosevelt signed the now-infamous Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, authorizing the U.S. military to relocate people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast to some 10 detention camps located in remote areas mostly in the West. All told, more than 120,000 people were interned, two-thirds of them American citizens, leaving behind their jobs, schools and homes and selling or abandoning their possessions. Among the uprooted was then 5-year-old George Hosato Takei and his family.

Takei, the Los Angeles-born actor who played Hikaru Sulu in the original *Star Trek* series and movies, says he often meets people, even those he considers educated and well-read, who are shocked to learn of his imprisonment during another time of crisis, war hysteria and racism. He hopes that his new graphic novel, *They Called Us Enemy*, will help readers recognize the humanity of others and see the common thread between this historic act of racial injustice and the White House’s current vilification of migrants and its brutal detainment policies.

Written by Takei, Justin Eisinger and Steven Scott and illustrated by Harmony Becker, *They Called us Enemy* recounts Takei’s childhood internment at two different camps, following the months he initially spent living in horse stables at the Santa Anita Racetrack in California. At times, the relocation was thrilling: traveling by train as new landscapes flashed by his window, playing with other interned children. But Takei is clear on how dehumanizing his family’s internment was, even as his parents made the best of the situation, carving out a sense of normalcy to raise their three children while protecting them from the ugliness of camp life.

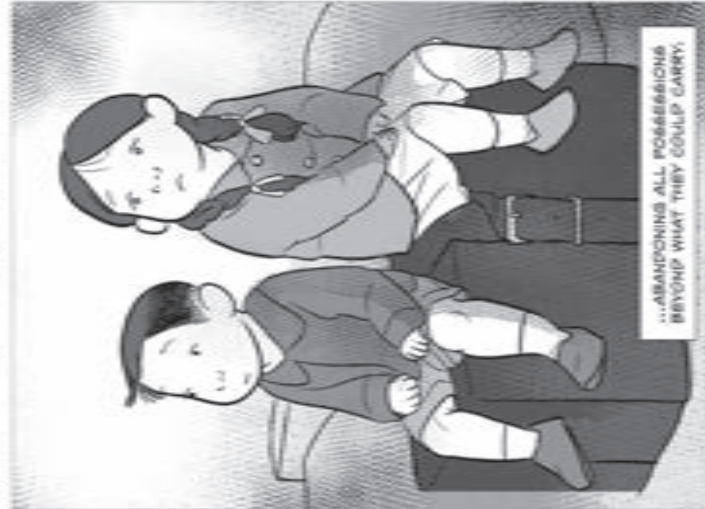
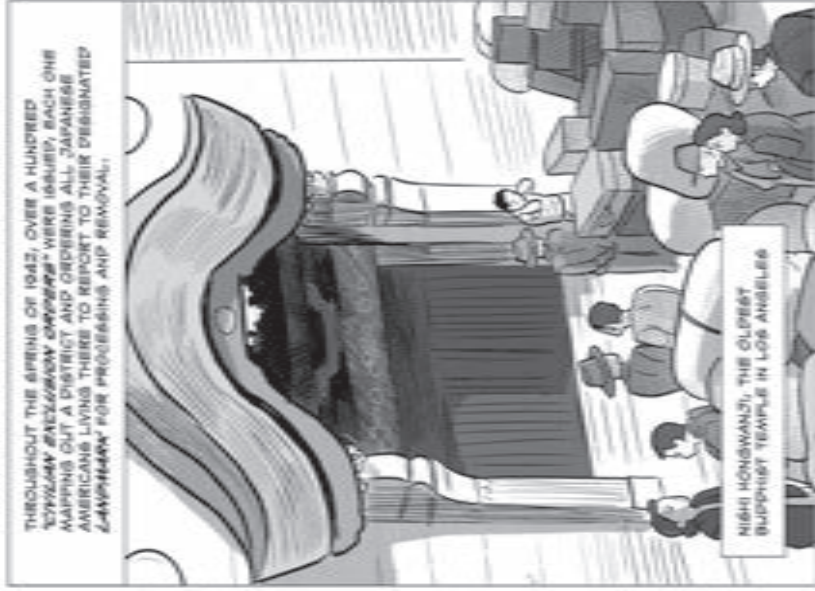
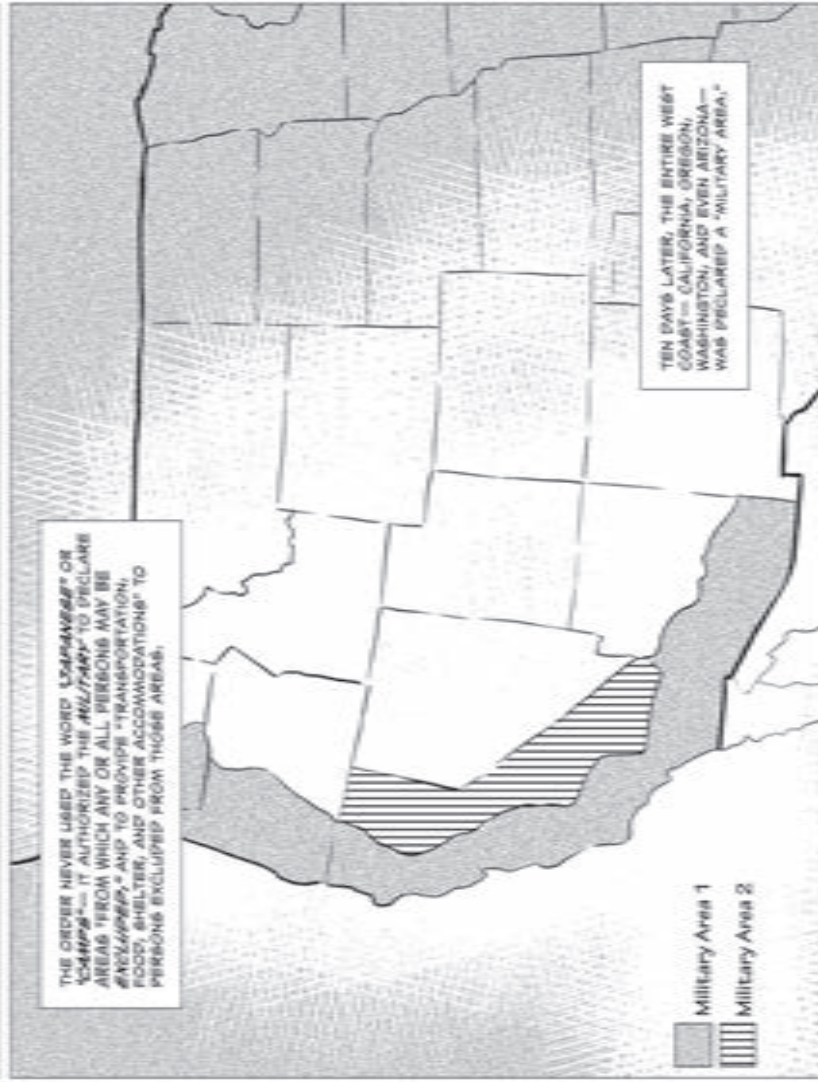
In *They Called us Enemy*, Takei describes current U.S. immigration policies, which indefinitely intern migrants and asylum seekers and separate children from their families, as a “cruel irony” that echoes America’s past racist policies. In 1944, in *Korematsu v. United States*, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066, calling the forced detention a “military necessity” that was not based on race. In 2018, in *Trump v. Hawaii*, three members of the Supreme Court spurned the *Korematsu* decision as racist, but the ruling likely still stands as a legal precedent. And in the same decision, the court also affirmed President Donald Trump’s “Muslim travel ban,” which bars people from majority-Muslim countries from entering the United States. America’s fears of minority citizens and immigrants seem as potent today as during Takei’s wartime internment. KALEN GOODLUCK

*This excerpt begins after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the U.S. declaration of war on Japan. Politicians, shopkeepers, neighbors and everyday citizens, most of them white, watched Japanese Americans with suspicious eyes, suddenly regarding them as enemy hostiles. As Takei recalls, the most popular — and most saddening — reaction was “Lock up the J\*ps.”*



*They Called Us Enemy*  
Written by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott  
Art by Harmony Becker  
208 pages, softcover with flaps: \$19.99 (US)  
Top Shelf Productions / IDW Publishing, July 2019.  
Excerpted with permission.

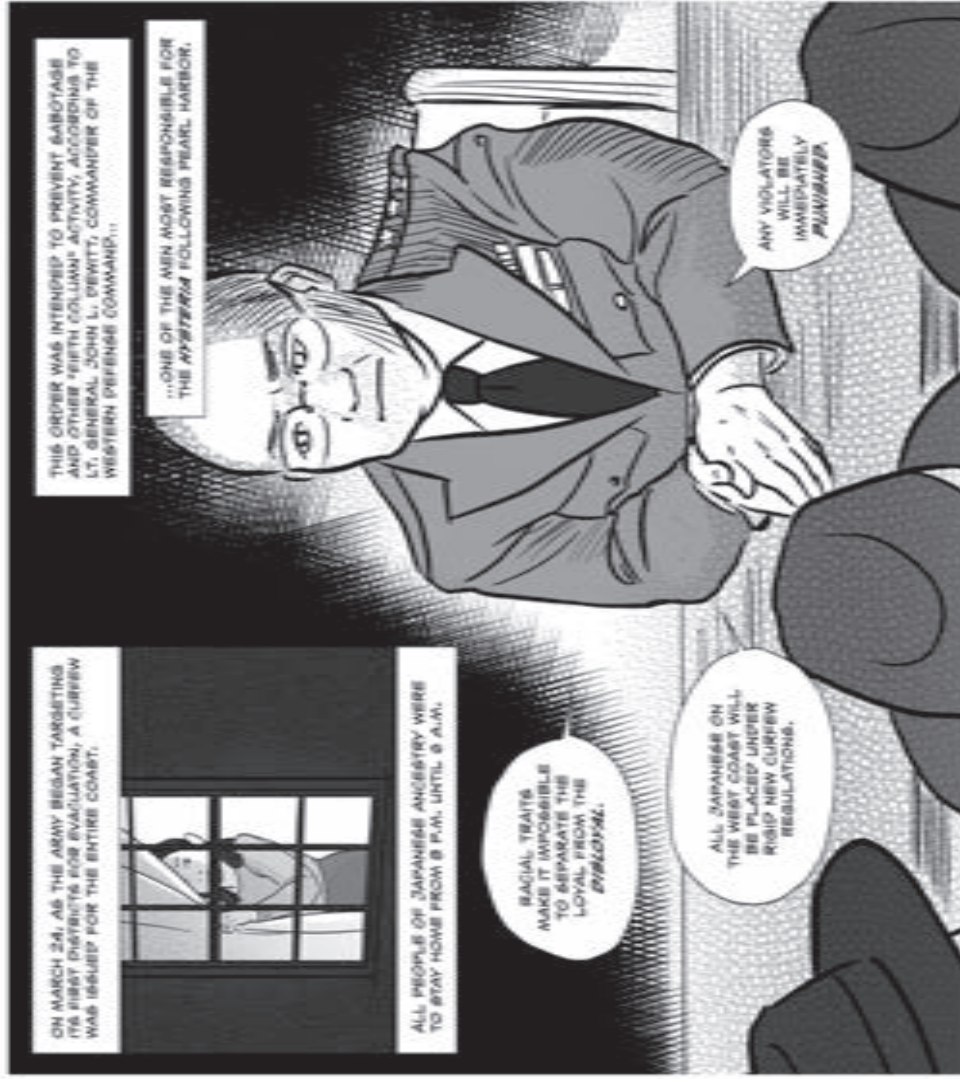












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27



# BEADING LESSON

*In Beth Piatote's first short-story collection, beads are easier to connect than family*



he first thing you do is, lay down all your hanks, like this, so the colors go from light to dark, like a rainbow. I'll start you out with something real easy, like I do with those kids over at the school, over at Cay-Uma-Wa.

How about — you want to make some earrings for your mama? Yeah, I think she would like that.

Hey niece, you remind me of those kids. That's good! That's good to be thinking of your mama.

You go ahead and pick some colors you think she would like. Maybe three or four is all, and you need to pick some of these bugle beads.

Yeah, that's good, except you got too many dark colors.

You like dark colors. Every time I see you you're wearin' something dark. Not me. I like to wear red and yellow, so people know I'm around and don't try talkin' about me behind my back, aay?

The thing is, you got to use some light colors, because you're makin' these for your mama, right, and she has dark hair, and you want 'em to

stand out, and if they're all dark colors, you can't see the pattern.

I got some thread for you, and this beeswax. You cut the thread about this long, a little longer than your arm, but you don't want it too long or it will tangle up or get real weak. You run it through the beeswax, like this, until it's just about straight. It makes it strong and that way it don't tangle so much.

You keep all this in your box now. I got this for you to take home with you, back to college, so you can keep doin' your beadwork.

How do you like it over there at the university? You know your cousin Rae is just about gettin' her degree. She just has her practicum, then she'll be done. I think her boyfriend don't like her being in school though, and that's slowing her down. It's probably a good thing you don't have a boyfriend right now. They can really make a lot of trouble for you, and slow you down on things you got to do.

Now you gotta watch this part. This is how you make the knot. You make a circle like this, then you wrap the thread around the needle three times, see? You see how my hands are? If you forget later, you just remember how my hands are, just like this, and remember you have to make a circle, OK? Then you pull the needle through all the way to the end — good — and clip off the little tail.

I'll show you these real easy earrings, the same thing I always start those men at the jail with. You know I go over there and give them beading lessons.

You should see how artistic some of them are. They work real hard, and some of them are good at beadwork.

I guess they got a lot of time to do it, but it's hard, it's hard to do real good beadwork.

You got to go slow and pay attention.

I know this one man, William, he would be an artist if he wasn't in jail. I'll show you, he gave me a drawing he did of an eagle. It could be a photograph, except you can tell it's

just pencil. But it's good, you would like it. There's a couple of other Indian prisoners — I guess we're supposed to call them inmates, but I always call them prisoners — and sometimes I make designs for them for their beadwork from what they draw. The thing is, they don't get many colors to work with.

They like the beadwork, though. They always got something to give their girlfriends when they come visit, or their mothers and aunties.

You have to hide the knot in the bead, see, like this, and that's why you got to be careful not to make the knot too big.

Maybe next time you come they will be having a powwow at the prison and you can meet my students over there and they can show you their beadwork. I think they always have a powwow around November, around Veterans Day. Your cousin Carlisle and his family come over from Montana last time, and the only thing is, you got to go real early because it takes a long time to get all your things through security. They have to check all your regalia and last time they almost wouldn't let Carlisle take his staff in because they said it was too dangerous or something.

What's that? Oh, that's all right. Just make it the same way on the other one and everyone will think you did it that way on purpose.

Your mama is really going to like those earrings. I think sometimes she wishes she learnt to bead, but she didn't want to when she was little. She was the youngest, so I think she was a little spoiled but don't tell her I said that. She didn't have to do things she didn't want to, she didn't even have to go to boarding school. I think she would have liked it. It wasn't bad for me at that school. Those nuns were good to me; they doted on me. I was their pet. I think your mama missed out on something, not going to St. Andrew's, because that's when you get real close with other Indians.

I like that blue. I think I'm goin' to make you a wing dress that color.

I think you'll look good when you're ready to dance. Once you get going on your beadwork I'll get you started on your moccasins, and you know your cousin Woody is making you a belt and I know this lady who can make you a cornhusk bag. You're goin' to look just like your mama did when she was young, except I think she was younger than you the last time she put on beadwork.

I used to wonder if you would look like your dad, but now that you're grown you sure took after her. I look at you and I think my sister, she must have some strong blood.

Hey, you're doin' real good there, niece. I think you got "the gift" — good eyesight! You know, you always got to be workin' on something, because people are always needing things for weddin's and memorials and going out the first time, got to get their outfits together. Most everything I make I give away, but people pay me to make special things. And they are always askin' for my work at the gift shop. My beadwork has got me through some hard times, some years of livin' skinny.

You got to watch out for some people, though. Most people aren't like this; most people are real bighearted. But some people, when they buy your beadwork, they think it should last forever. Somebody's car breaks down, he knows he got to take it to the shop, pay someone to get it goin' again. But not with beadwork — not with something an Indian made. No, they bring it back 10 years later and they want you to fix it for free! They think because an Indian makes it, it's got to last forever. Just think if the Indians did that with all the things the government made for us. Hey, you got to fix it for free!





NANI CHACON FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

*It's probably a good thing you don't have a boyfriend right now. They can really make a lot of trouble for you, and slow you down on things you got to do.*

You done with that already? Let me show you how you finish.

You pull the thread through this line, see, then clip it, then the bead covers it up. That's nice.

That's good. I'm proud of you, niece.

I think your mama is really goin' to like these earrings, and maybe she'll come and ask you to teach her how you do it. You think she'll ever want to do beadwork? Maybe she'll come and

ask me, aay?

What do you think of that? You think your mama would ever want to learn something from her big sister? I got a lot of students. There's a lady who just called me the other day, she works at the health clinic, and she's older than you and she wants to learn how. I said sure I'll teach her. I teach anyone who wants to learn. I just keep thinkin' if I stay around long enough, everyone's goin' to come back and ask me, even your mama. □

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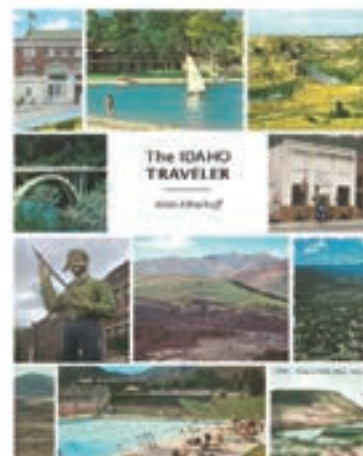
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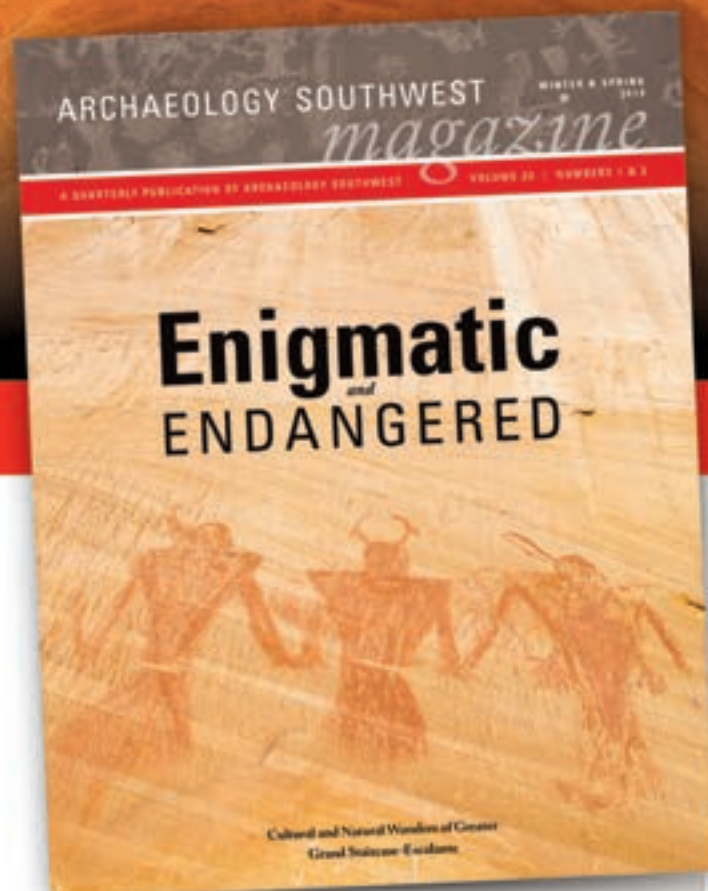
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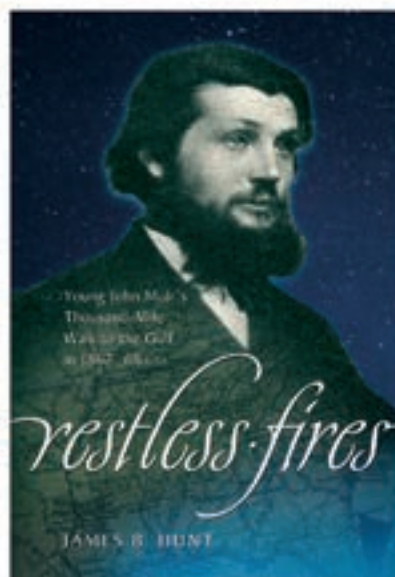
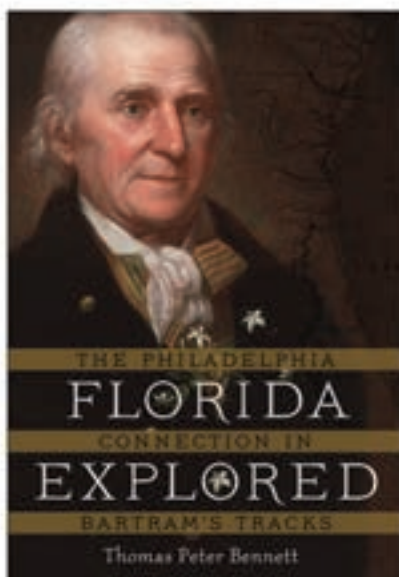
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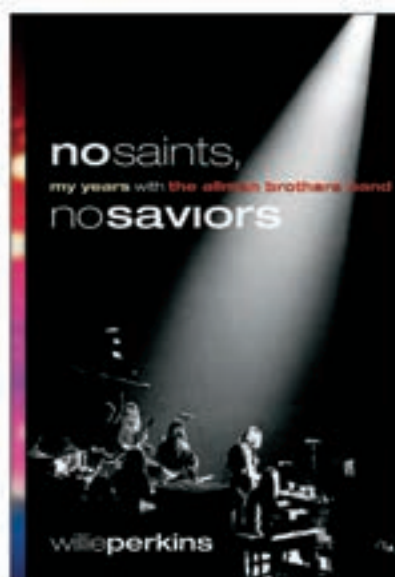
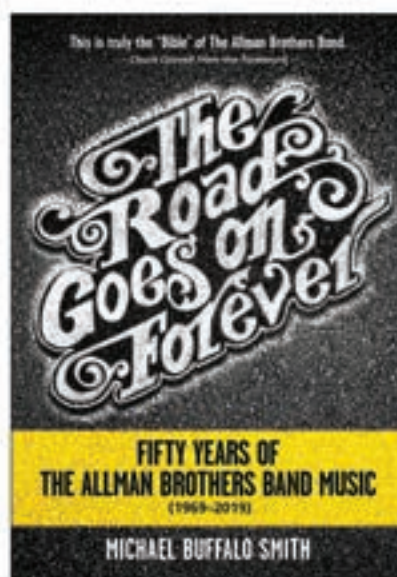
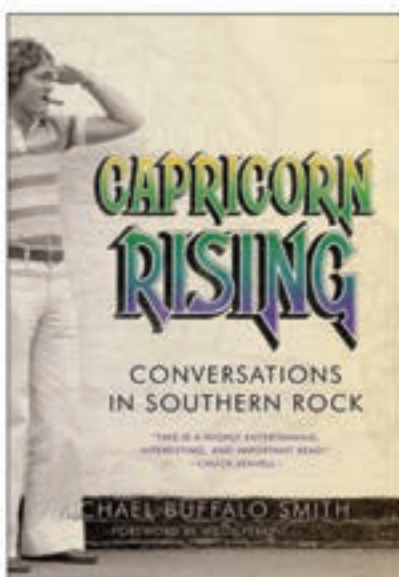
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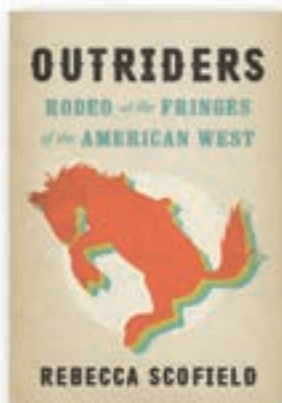
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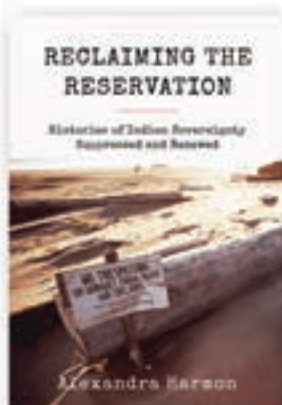
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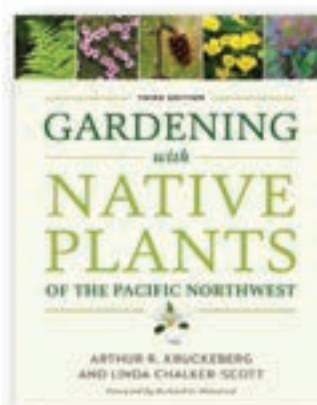
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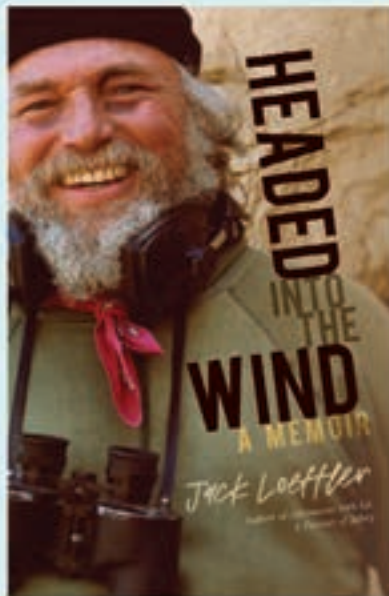
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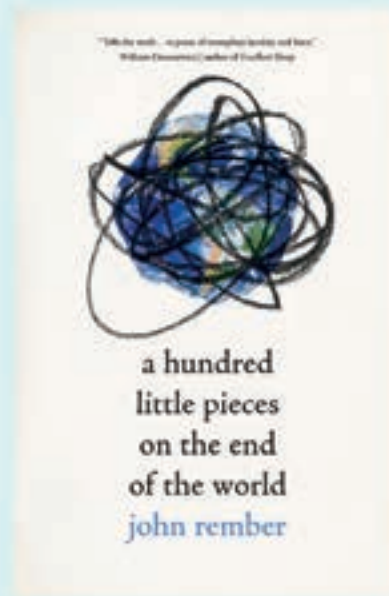


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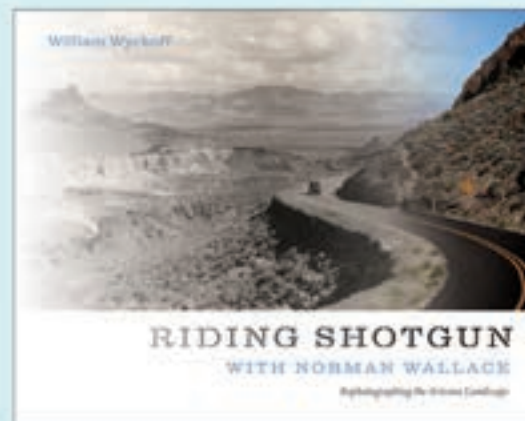
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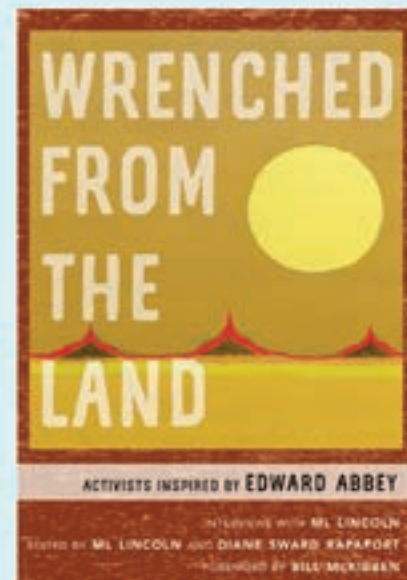
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# This season's best reads

*A roundup of the new and upcoming books that have caught our eye*

**High Country News** has compiled a list of some of our favorite books to read by the fireplace, including books that will publish early next year as well as those released in recent months. These titles, all relevant to the West in some way, are ordered alphabetically by the author's last name. If the book is already available, no publication month is given.

BY ELENA SAAVEDRA BUCKLEY

## FICTION

**The Penguin Book of Migration Literature**, Dohra Ahmad (ed.), Penguin Classics

**Ballad of a Slopsucker: Stories**, Juan Alvarado Valdivia, University of New Mexico Press

**Hollow Kingdom**, Kira Jane Buxton, Grand Central Publishing

**Your House Will Pay: A Novel**, Steph Cha, Ecco

**Kafka in a Skirt: Stories from the Wall**, Daniel Chacón, University of Arizona Press

**American Dirt: A Novel**, Jeanine Cummins, Flatiron Books (January 2020)

**Kingdomtide**, Rye Curtis, Little, Brown and Company (January 2020)

**The Butterfly Girl: A Novel**, Rene Denfeld, Harper

**Exquisite Mariposa**, Fiona Alison Duncan, Soft Skull Press

**If the Ice Had Held**, Wendy J. Fox, Santa Fe Writer's Project

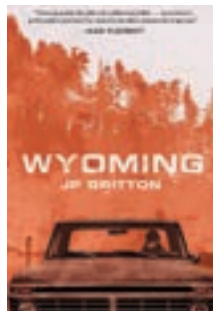
**Trinity Site: A Novel**, Jennifer Givhan, Blackstone Publishing

**Unforeseen: Stories**, Molly Gloss, Gallery/Saga Press

**Church of the Graveyard Saints**, C. Joseph Greaves, Torrey House Press

**Wyoming**, JP Gritton, Tin House Books

**gods with a little g: A Novel**, Tupelo Hassman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux



**Creatures: A Novel**, Crissy Van Meter, Algonquin (January 2020)

**Not a Thing to Comfort You**, Emily Wortman-Wunder, University of Iowa Press

## NONFICTION, MEMOIR, ESSAY

**Border Land, Border Water: A History of Construction on the U.S.-Mexico Divide**, C.J. Alvarez, University of Texas Press

**The Skinned Bird**, Chelsea Biondolillo, KERNPUNKT Press

**America's Most Alarming Writer: Essays on the Life and Work of Charles Bowden**, Bill Broyles and Bruce J. Dinges (eds.), University of Texas Press

**Prison Truth: The Story of the San Quentin News**, William Drummond, University of California Press (January)

**Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement**, Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon (eds.), University of Minnesota Press

**What is a Western?: Region, Genre, Imagination**, Josh Garrett Davis and Patricia Nelson Limerick, University of Oklahoma Press

**Becoming America's Playground: Las Vegas in the 1950s**, Larry Gragg, University of Oklahoma Press

**Wilderness of Hope: Fly Fishing and Public Lands in the American West**, Quinn Grover, University of Nebraska Press

*Please see New books, page 25*

**The Unpassing: A Novel**, Chia-Chia Lin, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

**After the Flood: A Novel**, Cassandra Monag, HarperLuxe

**Inland: A Novel**, Téa Obreht, Random House

**Prairie Fever**, Michael Parker, Algonquin Books

**Dead Blow: A Horseshoer Mystery**, Lisa Preston, Arcade Crimewise

**On Swift Horses: A Novel**, Shannon Pufahl, Riverhead Books

**Shine of the Ever: Short Stories**, Claire Rudy Foster, Interlude Press

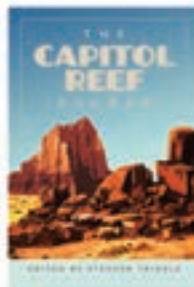


## New Books from the University of Utah Press

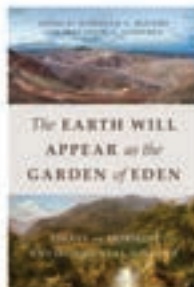
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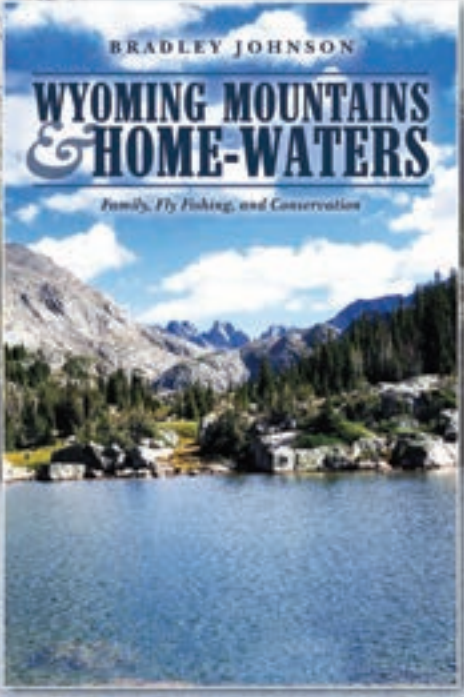
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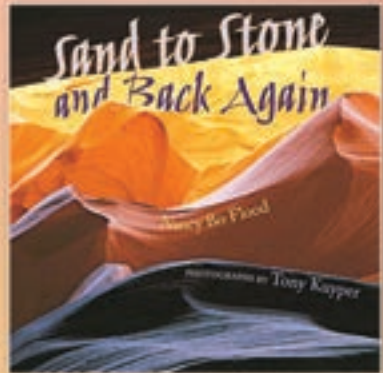
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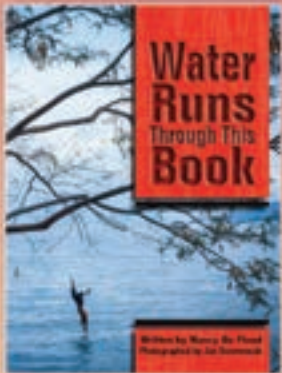
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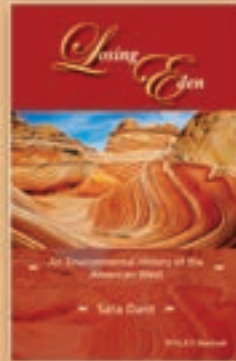
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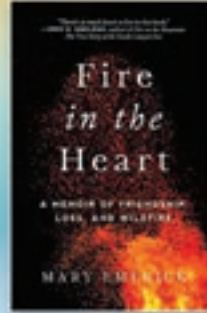
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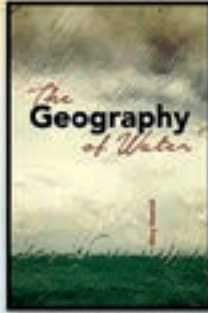
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New books, continued from page 21

**I Am a Stranger Here Myself**, Debra Gwartney, University of New Mexico Press

**Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration**, Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael Shear, Simon & Schuster

**Survival Math: Notes on an All-American Family**, Mitchell S. Jackson, Scribner

**A Diné History of Navajoland**, Klara Kelley and Harris Francis, University of Arizona Press

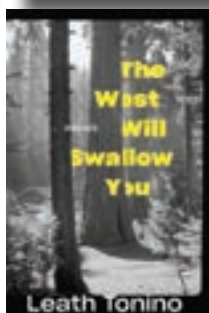
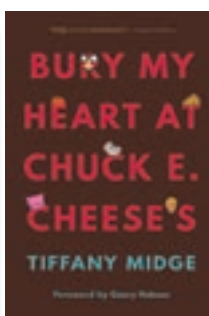
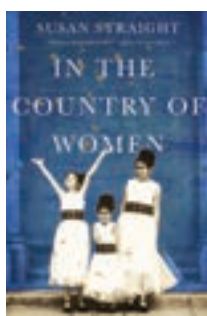
**All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon's Perspective on Climate Change**, Michael T. Klare, Metropolitan Books

**The Making of an Ecologist: My Career in Alaska Wildlife Management and Conservation**, David Klein, University of Alaska Press

**Shadowlands: Fear and Freedom at the Oregon Standoff**, Anthony McCann, Bloomsbury

**Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference, and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls**, Jessica McDiarmid, Atria Books (January 2020)

**The Rise of Wolf 8: Witnessing the Triumph of Yellowstone's Underdog**, Rick McIntyre, Greystone Books



**Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's**, Tiffany Midge, University of Nebraska Press

**Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States: Restoring Cultural Knowledge, Protecting Environments, and Regaining Health**, Devin Mihesuah, Elizabeth Hoozer, Winona LaDuke, OU Press

**The Way to Rainy Mountain: 50th Anniversary Edition**, N. Scott Momaday, University of New Mexico Press

**Alta California: From San Diego to San**

**Francisco, A Journey on Foot to Rediscover the Golden State**, Nick Neely, Counterpoint

**Confluence: Navigating the Personal & Political on Rivers of the New West**, Zak Podmore, Torrey House Press

**This Land is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth**, Jedidiah Purdy, Princeton University Press

**Re-Bisoning the West**, Kurt Repanshek, Torrey House Press

**Dreamers and Schemers: How an Improbable Bid for the 1932 Olympics Transformed Los Angeles from Dusty Outpost to Global Metropolis**, Barry Siegel, University of California Press

**In the Country of Women: A Memoir**, Susan Straight, Catapult

**Grinnell: America's Environmental Pioneer and His Restless Drive to Save the West**, John Taliaferro, Liveright

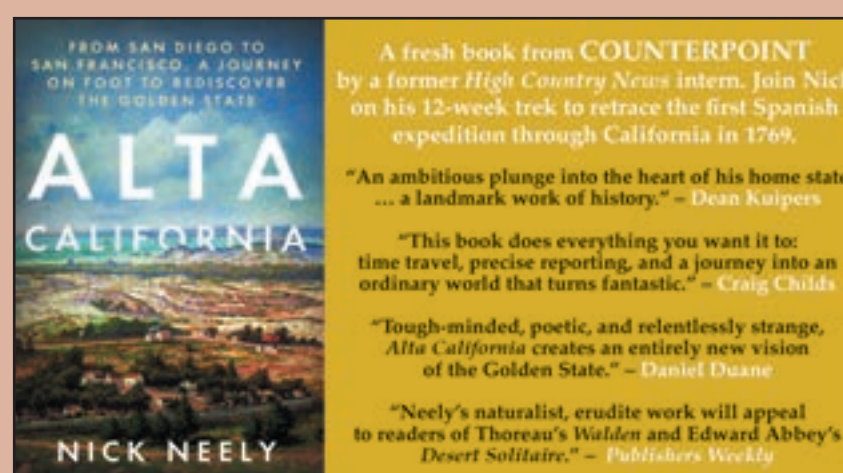
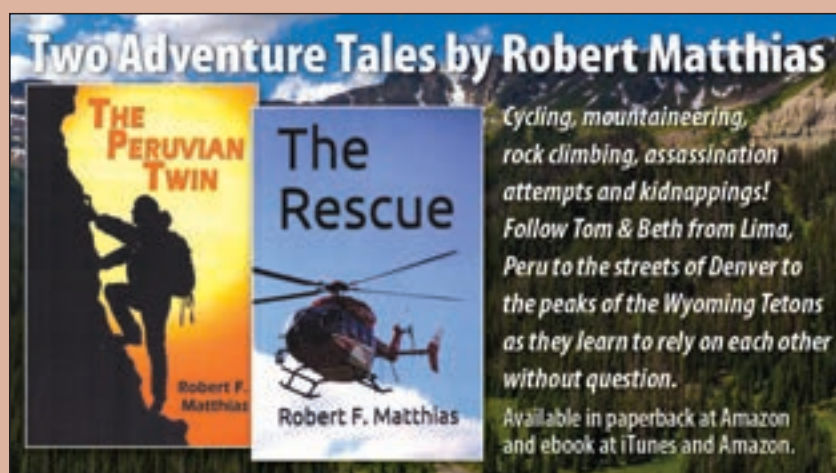
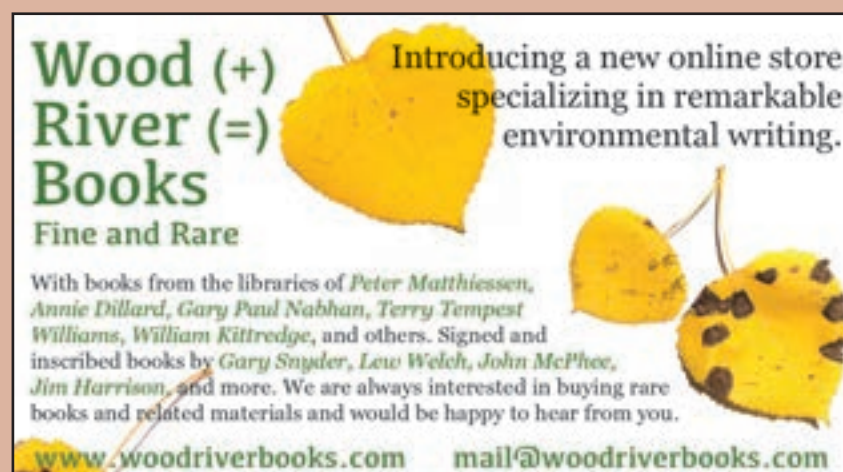
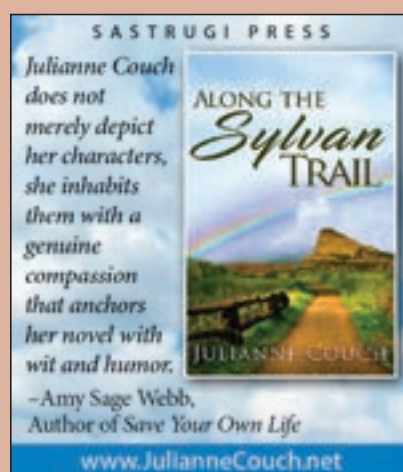
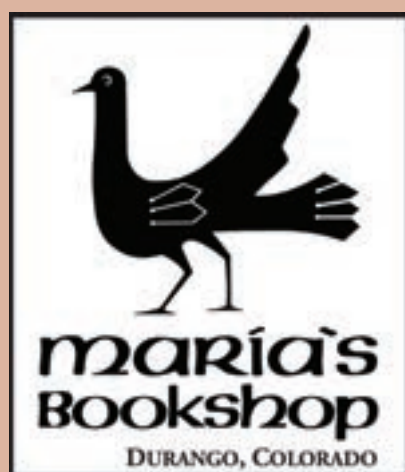
John Taliaferro, Liveright

**Invisible People: Stories of Lives at the Margins**, Alex Tizon, Temple University Press

**The West Will Swallow You: Essays**, Leath Tonino, Trinity University Press

**Uncanny Valley: A Memoir**, Anna Wiener, MCD (January 2020)

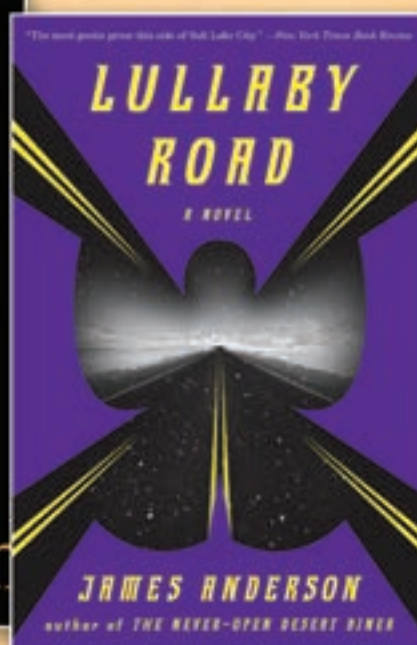
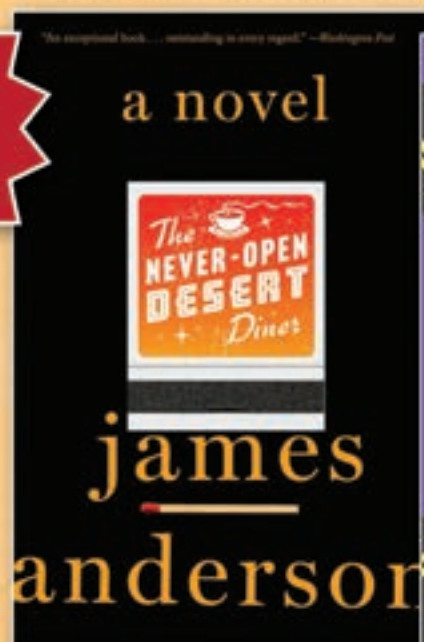
**In the Valleys of the Noble Beyond: In Search of the Sasquatch**, John Zada, Atlantic Monthly Press □





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"A glowing appreciation for the landscape's essential heartlessness radiates across Mr. Berger's A Desert Harvest...a sublime assortment of new and selected essays."

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY AMY BERENBEIM FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

## Breaking form, finding shape

It's a heart-racing thrill to meet writing that doesn't want to hold your hand. Take Billy-Ray Belcourt's experimental essay in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, which meshes poetry and memoir in an all-caps extravaganza, resulting in prose that practically tumbles over itself, shouting both urgently and intimately. Belcourt (Driftpile Cree Nation) has described his work to the CBC as a kind of literary mashup: "a manifesto, a prayer and an instruction manual for something like a queer Indigenous future."

This genre-bending piece is one of 27 "form-conscious" essays in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, a new anthology of Indigenous nonfiction, essay and autobiography that seeks to defy the conventions of writing as well as most readers' expectations of what Native nonfiction should be. *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* is unique — perhaps the only creative nonfiction anthology by Indigenous writers that uses experimentation with form as its organizing principle rather than focusing on theme or content.

"The basket. The body. The canoe. The page ... to speak only about the contents of these vessels would be to ignore how their significance is shaped by the vessels that hold them," write editors Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton. The anthology's essays are all ordered around the process of basket-weaving — with its sensuous coiling, plaiting and twining — thereby emphasizing the connection to craft while reminding readers that content cannot be separated from form. Washuta and Warburton's selections invite a deeper reading of Indigenous literature: essays by and for a Native audience that experiment

with form and innovative storytelling, moving away from presenting Indigeneity as merely content — "Native information," one might say — to focusing on form and creating a "dynamic process of 'Native information.'"

Through their chosen vessel — whether lyric essay, shape-shifting prose or avant-garde travelogue — the writers still grapple with the repercussions of colonization. But raw, emotional essays dealing with childhood traumas live alongside lively, witty takedowns of the English language — simply because a space has been made for them to.

Like form and content, in many of these essays, place cannot be separated from self. The prairies, forests and mesas in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* are themselves contours of deep emotional landscapes — landscapes that are tied to the inevitability of family, the past, of reckonings and homecomings. In "Tuolumne," Deborah Miranda's (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation) tribute to her troubled father, the river isn't just a place her ancestors once fished — it's a power that redeems.

Such places aren't always pure, either, or even places that exist in the "real world." Natanya Ann Pulley (Diné) describes a canyon — *her* canyon — with "slate gray" walls and a bottom "covered in bats, engines, spoiled batteries, and broken glass." She goes there when she "feels through with things — with the pressure or the nothingness I think of this canyon and wonder how close to the edge I am. Then I take a step back. Then another."

This anthology does a good job with this kind of interior world-building, showing how it is knitted into the world around us. One moment, you're peeking into someone's subterranean inner world; the next, you're reading something else entirely — excerpts from broken treaties, or reports of environmental disasters on Native land. But it's all related. When

you're done, the texture of that connective tissue stays with you.

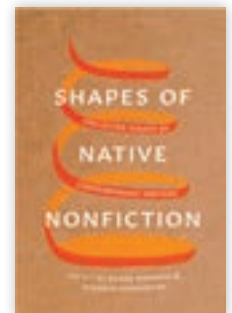
Something else that stays with you is the concept of land as body; when both have been subject to an oppressor's violence, decolonization becomes a process that is felt viscerally. As Bojan Louis (Diné) navigates his way through night terrors, addiction, and self-hatred in "Nizhoni dóó 'a'ani' dóó até'él'í dóó ayoo'o'oni (Beauty & Memory & Abuse & Love)," he concludes that "decolonization is violent, it is spiritual unrest, it is for me the other side of the river, the western lands."

Language, culture, family — the loss of all of these are felt, and felt deeply, in these essays. But woven into the shape of the stories are also pleasure and rejoicing in resilience — like Inuit/Taino writer Siku Alloodloo's rich description of her food-coma-induced bliss while feasting on tunktu (caribou) with her relatives in "Caribou People."

There's also outright humor. Eden Robinson (Haisla and Heiltsuk First Nations) imagines her profile on an imaginary Indigenous dating site called "Snag Beach" (in powwow culture, she explains, "snag" is slang for a hookup): "Eden Robinson, 49, matriarchal tendencies. ... Her smoked salmon will most likely not kill you. ... Swipe right to check attached genealogical records to see if she's your cousin."

Part of what's so satisfying about reading a mosaic of poetry, essay and memoir of such breadth is the experience of surrendering your expectations about what is coming next. *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* introduces the reader to a unique collection of voices, telling stories that shift from lost to living language, from history to lived experience. These shifts create new shapes for Indigenous writers to inhabit, explore and share. In this anthology, that shaping makes for a powerful read, and an absolutely necessary one. □

BY AMBER CORTES



**Shapes of Native Nonfiction:**  
Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers  
Edited by Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton  
302 pages, hardcover: \$95  
University of Washington Press, 2019.



# The West is more than heroes and villains

*In This Land, Christopher Ketcham roams the West in search of both, and misses a lot in between*

Adam, a Wyoming schoolteacher, helps the Mortensen family kill and butcher a Hereford cow. The Mortensens own the last remaining ranch within Afton town limits. Their neighbors sold and developed the surrounding property during the housing boom of the past decade. To pay the mortgage on his ranch, Gary Mortensen works as a truck driver for Halliburton in the oil fields of North Dakota. LUCAS FOGLIA





Cast a stone anywhere in the open spaces of the West, and there's a decent chance it'll hit something that offends your conscience. Love wildflowers? Bemoan the destruction cattle wreak on the range. Cherish wildlife? Weep at wolves gunned down on ranchers' behalf. Find fulfillment in lush forests? Suffer the stumps of industrial logging. Respect ancestral ties to land? Deplore the rigs and recreators despoiling it.

As Christopher Ketcham tromps around the region in his new book, *This Land: How Cowboys, Capitalism, and Corruption are Ruining the American West*, he throws predictable stones at environmental degradation. Through litanies of wrongdoing, Ketcham makes a pugnacious argument against despoilers of public lands, chronicles the many failures of federal oversight on the commons, and harangues the corporate softening of the environmental movement.

These screeds aren't without merit. For the most part, they are based on facts and include apt descriptions of environmental destruction and corruption. But the arguments and examples Ketcham provides are often reductive. Complex resource issues are reduced to destruction versus preservation. Federal employees are either the few brave whistleblowers Ketcham talks to or a legion of enablers paving the way for the industrialization of wilderness. Ketcham's West becomes a landscape for the preservation and enjoyment of those with the physical capacity and leisure time to seek it out, not a place to live on or make a living in.

*This Land* begins with Ketcham watching a bulldozer plow through stands of juniper and piñon pine in the Egan Range of northern Nevada. Seeing the gnarled trees subjugated to the machine sends him clutching his copy of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and contemplating eco-sabotage to halt the Bureau of Land Management project. The scene pulls on the reader's heartstrings, as do many in the book. Ketcham has a knack for impassioned scene-setting, indulging the senses in his descriptions of each landscape he bears witness to. But, much like the dozer, Ketcham plows right past any nuanced discussion of the Egan Range project, simply writing it off as a favor to cattlemen who will benefit from the removal of the trees.

In fact, a healthy debate exists over the merits of this project, one of many intended to reverse the growth of piñon and juniper stands as they overtake sagebrush habitats across the Great Basin. Obscured by Ketcham's vitriolic prose is the fact that range managers

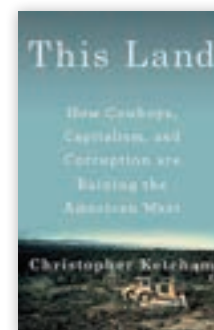
and wildlife scientists alike have hearty disagreements over the wisdom of such removal projects and whether this ecosystem is out of balance due to fire suppression and grazing. Those discussions, and many others in the book, are overwhelmed by Ketcham's desire to set clear battle lines, context and compromise be damned.

In overlooking the nitty-gritty details of public-land management and not even attempting to reconcile how and why communities exist in rural areas, Ketcham crafts an image of the West as a landscape of heroes and villains — and does this complicated region a great disservice. Ketcham has no time for mundane questions, such as how people make a living in places like Colville, Washington, or Kanab, Utah, or how they might cope with the collapse of extractive economies in places like Farmington, New Mexico, or Gillette, Wyoming. He also gives no voice to the dispossessed Indigenous peoples whose former lands now make up his unspoiled wild places. To Ketcham, who comes to the West to escape another villain — “*Homo urbanus iPhonicus* ... in my native habitat of New York City,” it appears that the people who actually live here are either on the take for industry, doing the bidding of the Mormon Church, or just too dumb to stand up for the natural world around them.

This simplistic view erases the experience of regular people, the kind of people who may not have time to worry over the wolf as housing prices climb — the kind of people who may love the range and care about its future, but are also trying to keep the family business running; the federal biologists who may love the habitats they work in, but can't afford to blow the whistle lest they lose their jobs and risk missing their college loan payments. These stories, the everyday stories of this land, are full of compromise, heartache and internal strife. But they just don't fit into the narrative Ketcham is selling.

Near the end of his book, Ketcham lays out a simplistic vision of a West where people and their machinations are removed from federal lands and the “wild,” whatever that is, is left to its own devices. “Sometimes I'm glad my job as an investigative reporter is mainly to lay demolitions under the corrupt structures, blow them up, walk away, and let you folks deal with the rubble,” he writes. Despite his bombast, Ketcham doesn't drop any new bombs in this book. Instead, he merely scratches away at well-worn craters. In doing so, he reduces the West to a battlefield, when it has always been so much more. □

BY CARL SEGERSTROM



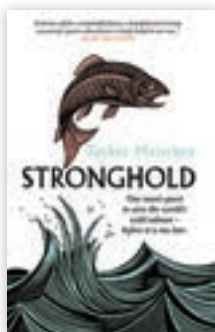
**This Land: How Cowboys, Capitalism, and Corruption are Ruining the American West**  
Christopher Ketcham  
432 pages,  
hardcover: \$29  
Viking, 2019.





## From Russia with love — and salmon

*A new book explores the borderlands of ‘Salmon Nation,’ from the American West to Russia’s Far East*



**Stronghold: One Man's Quest to Save the World's Wild Salmon**  
Tucker Malarkey  
368 pages,  
hardcover: \$28.00  
Spiegel & Grau, 2019.

The observation that Russia and the United States share a borderland sounds at first like the setup to a threadbare Sarah Palin joke. Yet for salmon — stateless migrants that flow from their natal rivers around the Pacific Rim to mingle in the storm-tossed Bering Sea — the 20th century’s two great rivals comprise a single habitat. The entire North Pacific, in fact, functions as “one big, fluid system” best understood as “Salmon Nation,” writes Tucker Malarkey in *Stronghold: One Man's Quest to Save the World's Wild Salmon*. When Japanese hatcheries pumped their rivers full of chum salmon, for instance, thousands of these factory-produced fish crossed the ocean and flowed into Alaska’s Norton Sound. Fisheries may be managed by nations, but salmon themselves are blissfully ignorant of borders.

That we are all citizens of Salmon Nation is the singular insight of the conservationist Guido Rahr, *Stronghold's* titular protagonist. Malarkey and Rahr are first cousins who passed their formative years together on Oregon’s Deschutes River, a relationship that gives the author rare insight into her subject’s character. Rahr, in Malarkey’s telling, was a taciturn angling savant who empathized more deeply with fish than with his family. He connected most intimately with the Deschutes’ famed steelhead, rainbow trout that spend their adulthood feeding at sea and return home transformed into massive silver torpedoes. Rahr “was instructed by (steelhead’s) majesty, strength, and singularity of purpose,” Malarkey recalls, “and by their ability to adapt, to change in their very cells.”

Rahr’s own evolution, from feckless fishing bum to charismatic leader, is nearly as complete. An indifferent student who spurned his coursework to host a fly-tying TV show, Rahr eventually finds his calling at the Wild Salmon Center — a scrappy group, founded by an ex-Navy Cold Warrior, that’s brokered an uneasy partnership between American fly anglers and Russian scientists on the remote Kamchatka Peninsula. When Rahr visits Kamchatka in 1993, he’s awed: Its rivers are undammed, its forests unlogged, its creeks free to run like wild horses across the floodplains. The region becomes the focus of the Salmon Center’s Stronghold Strategy, a campaign to protect a necklace of unadulterated salmon-bearing watersheds along the Pacific Rim. Let

other organizations muck about in the dammed Columbia Basin and the overdrawn Central Valley: Rahr’s mission is to ensure that Salmon Nation’s healthiest remaining runs never need resuscitation in the first place.

Kamchatka’s untouched appearance, however, turns out to be largely illusory — and not only because the Indigenous Nanai people have plied the region’s rivers since long before Russia existed. Law enforcement in eastern Russia, which was left destitute after the fall of the Soviet Union, is nonexistent, permitting caviar poachers to run wild. Officials feed their families with bribes; unsupervised fossil fuel companies plot new pipelines. Few locals are inclined to cooperate with the daft American toting the flimsy fly rod. People assume he’s a CIA operative: When he places a call from his hotel room, Rahr is spooked by the “telltale click of electronic eavesdropping equipment.” At its best, *Stronghold* possesses the tangled geopolitical intrigue of a John le Carré novel, its setting a place and era that have been little explored by environmental journalists.

Although *Stronghold's* subtitle suggests a “great man” theory of conservation, Rahr is shrewd about empowering his Russian collaborators. We meet Vladimir Burkanov, an incorruptible official besieged by death threats; Misha Skopets, a swashbuckling ichthyologist dubbed the “Indiana Jones of the Russian Far East”; and Maxim Ageev, a schoolteacher who stumbles upon an armed gang of illegal fishermen, cuts their nets and nonchalantly hands them anti-poaching pamphlets. Malarkey, who speaks Russian herself, deftly captures their devil-may-care bravery, a courageous fatalism born of life in a kleptocracy; Western conservationists driven to despair by the Trump administration can at least take solace in the fact that our rivers aren’t patrolled by the private militias of oligarchs.

The action is less scintillating on the American side of Salmon Nation, where Rahr becomes a prolific fundraiser whose Rolodex brims with millionaires. *Stronghold*, like some environmental groups, occasionally suffers from its proximity to famous philanthropists. We hear about Gordon Moore’s “prodigious intellect,” Tom Brokaw’s “inexhaustible energy,” and Yvon Chouinard’s “hardcore and determined” nature. Schmoozing with the wealthy is, for better or worse,

integral to conservation, but the mechanics of fundraising make for a less than enthralling narrative.

Like Rahr’s spirits, the tale revives when it returns to Kamchatka. In *Stronghold's* finale, Malarkey joins Rahr in pursuit of Siberian taimen, monstrous trout that feast on adult salmon. She vividly conjures the Tugur River, a watercourse so powerful that lifejackets are considered useless. “The line between life and death here was thin; one could easily slip away — all it would take was a misstep, a momentary loss of balance,” Malarkey warns. The book inevitably culminates in a riverside tête-à-tête between an American angler and a Russian fish, their negotiation mediated by a strand of monofilament. *Stronghold's* achievement, and Rahr’s, is the unification of Salmon Nation, a state whose borderlands encompass an ocean. □

BY BEN GOLDFARB







**Guido Rahr fishes the Wilson River in  
Tillamook State Forest, Oregon.**  
SAMUEL WILSON FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS



# What can we learn from catastrophe?

*Confronting the climate crisis means revisiting our mistakes*



## The Lightest Object in the Universe

Kimi Eisele  
321 pages, hardcover:  
\$26.95  
Algonquin Books,  
2019.

For someone like me who reports on the politics of water and the challenges of climate change in the arid Southwest, pilgrimages to places like Abiquiu Lake, with its reflection of Cerro Pedernal and backdrop of the Jemez Mountains, are a necessary rite of summer. If I want to keep ahead of despair, stave off cynicism — and remain present with the issues I write about — I need to submerge myself, often and diligently, in water that is cool and transformative.

This summer, I lugged two new books to my secret swimming spot and found that immersing myself in both fiction and nonfiction helped me make sense of the world we're facing today, as climate change demands that humans make better decisions — and as it's become entirely too easy to indulge fears of a dystopian future. Kimi Eisele's novel, *The Lightest Object in the Universe*, and *Science Be Dammed: How Ignoring Inconvenient Science Drained the Colorado River*, by Eric Kuhn and John Fleck, are both powerful books. Kuhn and Fleck examine how politics exacerbated today's problems with the over-allocated Colorado River, which supplies more than 44 million people. And Eisele carries us into a future in which we see what happens when we refuse to heed the warning signs and commit to a more resilient path.

Together, these writers show what happens when we give urgent problems the side-eye and slink off down the road, hoping someone else will devise a solution. They also urge us to reconsider what we think we know about the past, what we want to believe about the future, and what we need to decide — and accomplish — right now.

**IN THE LIGHTEST OBJECT**, her first novel, Eisele envisions a post-collapse United States. The economy has tanked, the electrical grid has failed, and people are left without governments and global food systems. The illusion that people can thrive independently of their neighbors — holed up and binging on Netflix and GrubHub — is gone.

She shows us how people survive this new world through her main characters, Beatrix and Carson, who long for one another — from opposite sides of the country — after everything falls apart. An organizer, Beatrix throws in with her neighbors, people she knew only casually before the collapse. They work together, try to protect and teach one another. And they aren't looking back; there's no reason to try to figure out what went

wrong or how things might have gone differently. Surviving today and figuring out ways to thrive tomorrow are all that matter. Carson, meanwhile, embarks on a trip across the landscape, hoping to reach Beatrix. His journey enables Eisele to show the reader a smattering of what's going on in the region the coastal media once dismissed as “flyover country.” He encounters bands of hungry kids, towns decimated by flu, and people willing to share what little food they have with a stranger, frightened by rumors and at the same time fueled by hope.

Whether in the city — where Eisele doesn't spend much time — in small communities or in rural places, people need one another, intimately. Only together can they eat, trade information, fix problems and start telling new stories. Not everyone's intentions are good, of course. There are crooks, creeps and charlatans in Eisele's world. And two characters leave the makeshift community Beatrix and her neighbors have cultivated to embark on a journey toward The Center, the promised land hocked by a charismatic radio personality who regales his listeners with tales of ice cream, utopia and redemption.

Eisele's writing shines most when she's exploring landscapes — no surprise, since she's a geographer as well as an artist — and the emotional pull between Beatrix and Carson.

Through Carson in particular, Eisele considers the natural world. “The morning brought dampness and more aches,” Eisele writes. “Carson didn't want to move. He opened his eyes as a large crow flew overhead. The birds were so fortunate. They could see the sprawl and order of cities. They could take in a long strand of coastline, the blur of white waves crashing. They could drift over the green-gold quilt of farmland. If only he could have that view of the landscape, a more coherent geography, to see clearly where he was going, where he had been.”

But even when that is the case — when we have at our fingertips everything from paleoclimatic reconstructions to snapshots of the planet from the International Space Station — we human beings still ignore the facts.

In *Science Be Dammed*, Kuhn and Fleck remind us of that, taking us back to the early 20th century, when seven Western states and the federal government divided the waters of the Colorado River between farmers and cities from Wyoming to California, in the grand bargain known as the Colorado River



Compact of 1922. (It took two decades more to negotiate with Mexico over the river's waters.) The common narrative has been that the compact's signatories over-allocated the river's waters because they'd tracked its flows during an unusually wet period almost a century ago. The poor schmucks, the story goes, just didn't know better.

That's the tale we've told ourselves, over and over again. It's not an accurate one.

Kuhn is the now-retired general manager of the Colorado River Water Conservation District, while co-author Fleck directs the Water Resources Program at the University of New Mexico. Both are keen and active observers of what's happening today, as the seven states that rely upon the Colorado work to provide all the river's users with water even as they grapple with a drought contingency plan meant to address its declining flows.

In their book, they point out that multiple studies in the 1920s showed flows that were significantly lower than the 17.5 million acre-feet parceled out at the time.

This means that the river's deficit isn't a baffling, unforeseen problem: The natural flows of the Colorado were even in the early 20th century less than the





From the air, the Colorado River is seen running north of Castle Valley, Utah.

DOC SEARLS/CC VIA FLICKR

amount of water promised to users. And men consciously decided to use up more water than the river actually carried, rather than heed studies based on U.S. Geological Survey stream gauges, drought data, and some limited paleohydrologic studies. One hydraulic engineer in particular, Eugene Clyde LaRue, repeatedly warned commissioners and politicians about over-allocation.

That commissioners chose to ignore the facts isn't necessarily surprising, given the pressure they felt from powerful interests, both agricultural and political. In the introduction, Kuhn cites Rolly Fischer, his predecessor and mentor at the Colorado River Water Conservation District: "One of Fischer's favorite sayings about the river was that the tried-and-true method to solve disputes on the Colorado River Basin was to promise the combatants more water than was available in the river, then hope a future generation would fix the mess."

We don't even have to look to Eisele's imagined future to know that doesn't work.

"Before the Compact Commission even began its meetings, the path had been chosen," write Kuhn and Fleck. And LaRue wasn't the only one who "put commissioners in a tight spot" by pointing out the facts.

Kuhn and Fleck note that three

different estimates prior to the compact's signing pegged the river at somewhere between 14.3 million acre-feet and 16.1 million acre-feet annually. (Annual flows have dropped even further, thanks to warming, and a 2017 study showed that between 2000 and 2014, they averaged 19 percent below the 1906-1999 average.)

But commissioners preferred to listen to those who told them what they wanted to hear, and, the two authors write, "they saw no advantage in asking too many questions about whether the numbers were right."

Kuhn and Fleck write:

*There was now credible science that the river's long-term flows might be much lower than they assumed. Yet in the short term, conditions on the Colorado River remained wet. Pushed by U.S. commerce secretary Herbert Hoover and Colorado lawyer Delph Carpenter, the commissioners chose to either ignore this information or challenge the credibility of the messenger. Ultimately, a review board of distinguished engineers and geologists would endorse LaRue's view that the water supply was insufficient, but by that time there simply was too much momentum for ratification of the 1922 compact and the authorization of the Boulder Canyon Project.*

The decisions men like Hoover made

in the 1920s killed off native species of fish; inundated canyons, sovereign lands and archaeological sites; favored the powerful over the vulnerable; and sucked the Colorado River dry. They also set the stage for how future "water resources" would be managed.

This isn't just another tale of the West's unenlightened past: We're still dealing with its fallout, and that shortsightedness threatens to repeat itself today. In New Mexico, for example, the future of an important tributary of the Colorado River, the Gila, is uncertain. The state's plans to build a diversion on the river, just downstream of where it flows out of the nation's first wilderness area, are outside the scope of *Science Be Dammed*. But it's hard not to connect the willful ignorance of science with what's happening in the Colorado River Basin today.

Yet there are always ways to pry ourselves loose from the narratives that bind us to our past mistakes. Kuhn and Fleck remind us we can excavate the past and hold decision-makers accountable, in part by making sure that science isn't ignored, diminished or squelched altogether. And Eisele shows us why it's worth deciding now to create a future that doesn't damn future generations with the consequences of our mistakes. □

BY LAURA PASKUS

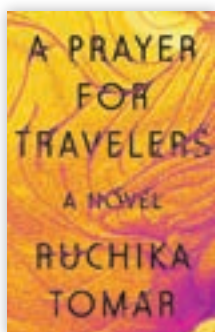


**Science Be Dammed:**  
How Ignoring Inconvenient Science Drained the Colorado River  
Eric Kuhn and John Fleck  
264 pages, hardcover: \$35  
The University of Arizona Press, 2019.



# FRIENDSHIP AND DISAPPEARANCE IN THE DESERT

Southwestern deserts are home to quiet, reclusive creatures whose venom enables them to survive.



**A Prayer for Travelers**  
Ruchika Tomar  
344 pages,  
hardcover: \$27  
Riverhead Books,  
2019.

They often issue warnings before they strike: The rattlesnake shakes its tail, the black widow spider displays her ruby hourglass, the scorpion raises its stinger. In Ruchika Tomar's taut debut novel, *A Prayer for Travelers*, many of the women in fictional Pomoc, Nevada, seem to channel the power of the animals in the landscape around them, somewhere near the California border where the Mojave and Great Basin deserts meet. Pity anyone who fails to recognize their hidden reserves of strength.

Tomar, who grew up in the Inland Empire of Southern California, conjures the feel of the desert setting with the precision of her spare prose. In their intense isolation, her characters have internalized the vastness of the landscape and the solitary tendencies of its inhabitants. They form attachments rarely, as though friendship costs too much. One character is still known as "the new guy" three years after landing in Pomoc," Tomar writes. "In a community as small as this one, there was a compound interest in minding one's business, in making peace with difficult neighbors, in living and letting live."

As the book opens, Lamb, the

grandfather of the 19-year-old protagonist, Cale Lambert, is dying of cancer. Lamb raised Cale after her mother abandoned her at birth, and now Cale cares for him and supports the two of them by working as a waitress at Jake's, Pomoc's lone diner. There, she makes her first real friend, Penny Reyes, the town beauty, who mostly ignored her when they were in school.

When Penny, who is a working-class Latina, turns up missing and no one seems concerned — including her friends, her family and the cops — Cale embarks on a desperate quest to find her. She starts in town, then ventures across the desert to its scattered outposts of civilization, with their dangerous lure of quick money and sex. In many Western stories about disappeared women, a man cracks the case while the victim's story goes untold. In *A Prayer for Travelers*, the men Cale asks for help prove unreliable, so she is forced to solve the mystery herself. In the process, she uncovers Penny's past as well as her dreams for the future. Tomar creates a vivid, nuanced human portrait instead of a generic, weak victim.

Pomoc is an elemental noir desert town, where drug abuse is common and resources are scant. The women face especially harsh conditions. No one, Tomar suggests, escapes this kind of vulnerable



situation unscathed. A Texaco serves as the meeting place for prostitutes who are not "careerists" but "mothers and girlfriends with day jobs whose checks came too late or too short; the extra baby formula, the surprise hospital bill." But Tomar also highlights the town's consolations, such as the warm familiarity of the diner's longest-serving waitress, and Cale's devotion to Lamb and Penny.

Tomar constructs *A Prayer for Travelers* with a fractured timeline: The chapters are numbered chronologically, but presented out of order. The traumatic incidents at the center of the





MIKAYLA WHITMORE

story shatter Cale's sense of chronology, and the book's elliptical structure evokes a survivor's fragmented recollections. Sometimes Tomar strings a few consecutive scenes together, and at other times she makes great leaps ahead or backward. It's a testament to the author's skill that this technique rarely confuses. On the contrary, it heightens the suspense when a tantalizing clue about the future appears early on — such as a facial injury Cale sustains, whose cause is not explained for another hundred pages.

While the main character's desert-rat reticence and her author's scene-shuffling

enhance the novel's mood and themes, there are a few crucial moments where her motivations and desires are unclear. This is significant, because she undergoes a radical personality shift during the course of the book, from meek to bold to vengeful. It's a puzzle of a book that you have to sit with for a while after finishing, reconstructing it in your mind in order to understand what happened and thereby appreciate the power of the story.

The West often serves as the backdrop for books, movies and television shows whose plots revolve around violence against women. In interviews, Tomar

has talked about growing up in rural Southern California, hearing stories of women's bodies found in the desert outside of Vegas. In the denouement, Tomar skillfully plays with the audience's expectations that young women in trouble are likely to end up powerless or dead. Several of Tomar's female characters face trauma, but possess a surprising capacity for retribution and resilience. In the end, they, not their abusers, the detectives, or even the men who want to save them, hold the cards and tell the story. □

BY JENNY SHANK





**An American Sunrise**  
Joy Harjo  
116 pages, hardcover:  
\$25.95  
W. W. Norton &  
Company, 2019.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY AMY BERENBEIM FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS



## Singing trees and trickster saxophones

**A**n *American Sunrise*, Joy Harjo's first book since she was named poet laureate of the United States, weaves together history, music and memory. The collection of poems wields nonlinear time as a form of resistance — a bold response to the manifest destiny narratives found in history books. Harjo's poems break free from time and find a different kind of truth through imagination.

The pages include a number of historical interludes, with snippets of archival texts as well as sections of prose that provide some factual context. Because the volume's layout doesn't always differentiate between Harjo's poetry and the historical moments she incorporates, the history begins to read much like the poetry. The book's lyrical, seamless structure allows the reader a deeper access to Harjo's visionary context.

In this way, Harjo's work harks back to the writings of Claudia Rankine, whose 2014 volume, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, mingled essays with poetry and striking photographs, creating a confluence of forms that grips the reader politically and emotionally. It also has echoes of N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, which she quotes in the book, in its poetic blend of history, storytelling and memoir.

For example, Harjo tells a story about her grandfather, Monahwee, who was briefly allowed to visit his home in Okfuskee, in modern-day Dadeville, Alabama, staying for just one night before he was forced into exile with his family.

"When I cross the great river, my desire is that I may never again see the face of a white man," Harjo quotes her grandfather as saying. Appearing after the first poem in the collection, "Break My Heart," the segment on Monahwee acts as both footnote and a poem in and of itself. Both pieces are about heart-break, but the specificity of Harjo's grandfather's story offers new insight into the broader understanding of loss. She writes in "Break My Heart":

*The end can only follow the beginning.*

*And it will zigzag through time, governments, and lovers.*

*Be who you are, even if it kills you.*

Likewise, Harjo follows the poem "Rabbit Invents the Saxophone," which imagines a saxophone player as a trickster entering a jazz club in New Orleans, with a short explanation placing the saxophone's invention in 1846 by Adolphe Sax in context with the Creek Nation's own history of turmoil.

It's another example of a device Harjo uses throughout the book, where a poem's subject matter is further explored and deepened through the prose on the following page. When Harjo informs us about the invention of the saxophone, she

is not explaining her previous poem, but rather riffing on it.

Harjo's temporal connections are loose and written in sweeping metaphor. She jumps from the Creek Nation's forced relocation west of the Mississippi River after the Creek Wars in 1814 to the saxophone's invention in 1846 to her grandmother learning to play it in the early 1900s, throwing in a passing mention of the instrument's growing popularity in brass bands throughout the South in the 1850s. In this way, she seems to draw a personalized thread between her own lineage and that of an instrument she loves. By jumping through decades to make these connections, Harjo resists the rhythm of time itself.

Sometimes Harjo employs striking visual design to strengthen the meaning of her poems. In "How to Write a Poem in a Time of War," lines appear on opposite sides of the page, giving the reader the sense that more than one voice is speaking. It reads much like a conversation between a writer and an editor, perhaps happening inside Harjo's own head. The two voices argue about where to begin a poem about war.

In "Becoming Seventy," written in honor of the 70th birthday of Marilyn Kallet, Harjo's colleague at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the first section of words appears on the page as a cascading waterfall, with each line growing incrementally — visually echoing the growth of age and wisdom that the poem explores.

"Becoming Seventy" touches on one of the book's major themes: memory and time, and how both are malleable through poetry, music and language. In "Exile of Memory," Harjo invokes the biblical story of Lot's wife, who was instructed not to look back at Sodom, but did so and was turned into a pillar of salt. Harjo describes how the story was used as a warning in Sunday school: "Don't look back." In her version, though, what lies behind is Eden itself and its trees and waters, land and sky. Looking back and remembering isn't just remembering the violence, it's also remembering hope:

*The final verse is always the trees.*

*They will remain.*

The trees circumvent time, and through this disruption comes a different kind of future — one that is freed from the grip of colonialist narratives.

Harjo challenges the rules that readers think they know. Think you know what a poem is supposed to look like? Harjo, through her hybrid style, counters with a whole new vision of what a poem can be. Think time is linear? Maybe not so much. Just ask the singers. Just ask the trees. □

BY SHEILA REGAN



## Wading into murky waters

*The blind spots, omissions and caricatures of Deep River fail to contend with the historical realities of the Northwest or the current political climate*

Reading is a political act. The viewpoints we choose to consider, the perspectives we expose ourselves to, help shape our worldview and sympathies. The importance of reading in a deliberate fashion is heightened in fractured political climates. Even when literature masks itself as neutral, every narrative makes a statement by calculating who is included, and who plays a subservient or silent role.

*Deep River*, Karl Marlantes' latest novel, is a lengthy tome that lionizes Scandinavian loggers — white immigrants who pull themselves out of poverty by sheer force of will. In the current political climate, the narrative seems particularly out of touch. The novel's singular focus on European immigration and industry in the Pacific Northwest mirrors the political divisions that persist in the region today, where a disproportionate number of white extremist and hate groups have found a home.

Marlantes' narrative vividly depicts the Pacific Northwest logging boom of the early 1900s and the strong-willed individuals who valiantly made lives for themselves. Read in a vacuum, the book has its pleasures. But contextualized in the unsettling sticking point between literature and politics in 2019, the novel valorizes extractive industries, erases people of color and tokenizes local Indigenous people.

Still, over the course of its 700 pages, it is easy to be swept up in the literary grandeur of *Deep River*. Crafted like fine, hand-carved furniture, Marlantes' prose is meticulous in every detail. He has breathed intoxicating life into a rugged world and created a vivid portrayal of life under the canopies of towering Douglas fir and Sitka spruce.

*Deep River* follows the Koski siblings, all born in Russian-occupied Finland, as they make their way to America. First to tackle the journey is Ilmari, a hard-working jack-of-many-trades who settles in southernmost Washington state. He is later joined by his younger brother, Matti, who was forced to flee Finland after violently confronting occupying Russian soldiers. Last to arrive is young Aino, a headstrong revolutionary socialist who flees after a direct action goes horribly wrong. They reconvene just north of the mouth of the Columbia River, where the Deep River flows into Willapa Bay.

The Koskis are literal bootstrappers, slogging through mud in caulk boots and felling trees for penance wages but

always dreaming of starting their own operation, just like their union-busting boss, John Reder, did. Loggers of that era were more likely to die in workplace accidents than become timber barons, but the American dream, then as now, is steeped in hope, hard work and false promises.

The false promises of the early 20th century echo contemporary political pandering to loggers and coal miners. Despite shrinking markets and the existential threat of climate change, the Trump administration has supported increasing logging on federal lands and courted loggers who opposed climate change legislation in Oregon. A glossy retrospective about logging, however entertaining, published in this political context begins to take on a different hue.

The novel also creates a problematic vision of race and American identity. Take Matti, the preternaturally talented logger who works impossibly long and hard hours without complaint, as an example. He's painted as the ideal immigrant, grim and determined, hardworking and family-oriented — rather like the type of immigrant Donald Trump must have had in mind when he said in 2018 that “we should have more people from places like Norway.”

Meanwhile, the local Chinese immigrant population warrants just a handful of fleeting references before one last offhand mention in the last third of the book: “Because the Chinese had been forced to California, the salmon-canning factories always had jobs for women on

a piecework basis.” For all of the book's exacting details, no ink is spilled over the racist policies that forced those Chinese immigrants out of Astoria.

Marlantes does not appear to be playing into this narrative knowingly. His novel is so laser-focused on the Finnish community that it seems he has excluded all others by omission rather than intention. Intentional or not, the erasure remains.

The author settles for antiquated stereotypes in describing the relationship between a wise, shamanistic Native Chinook woman named Vasutäti and Ilmari Koski. They meet when Vasutäti finds Ilmari alone in the woods, badly injured. She nurses him back to health, bonding the two for the rest of their lives. Throughout the novel Vasutäti makes periodic appearances, usually to exert her magic healing powers when a Koski family member is in urgent medical distress.

While *Deep River* is beautifully crafted, its blind spots and caricatures fail to contend with the region's historical realities. Marlantes' omissions amount to an uncomfortable silence that offers little insight into how the Northwest's history has brought us to where we are today, as white supremacist groups brawl in the Portland streets, legislators flee the state instead of considering climate legislation, immigrants of color are held in detention centers, and the president of the United States openly shows his support for white nationalism. □

BY MARY SLOSSON



**Deep River: A Novel**  
Karl Marlantes  
736 pages,  
hardcover: \$30  
Atlantic Monthly Press,  
2019.

**A 1906 stereograph shows two men felling a giant fir tree in the Cascade Mountains, Oregon.**  
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





## When we need more than stories

Sitting at a table in the Kino Border Initiative's Migrant Aid Center in Nogales, Mexico, before the afternoon meal, Joanna Williams, director of education and advocacy for the faith-based binational organization, explains the rules for volunteers working in the dining room or *comedor*. In addition to telling us how to distribute dinner plates, baskets of tortillas and fresh fruit drinks, Williams has four precepts for interacting with migrants: Don't promise anything you can't give. Don't answer questions if you don't know the answers. Don't offer money. (It's the responsibility of the KBI staff to assess individual needs.) And don't give personal information; it might be interpreted as a promise to stay in touch or get personally involved with an asylum case.

Sitting under a colorful banner that reads "Bienvenidos," Williams explains that she does not want to create more stress or disappointment for the men, women and children already caught in immigration limbo. Listening to Williams, we worry about our own presence on the border as writers documenting the consequences of racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric, as well as the decades of U.S. policies in Mexico and Central America that favored the wealthy and powerful over the majority. But how can we ever say all that needs to be said? What is the ethical way to tell the migrants' stories?

As images of children in cages and reports of the desperate conditions faced by migrants in Customs and Border Protection custody galvanize national attention, many of us have gone to the border as writers, volunteers or concerned citizens. I first visited the *comedor* in 2017 as co-coordinator of the University of Arizona's Southwest Field Studies in Writing program, which seeks to amplify and diversify stories from the border. We send three graduate creative writing students to Patagonia, Arizona, for two weeks each summer to engage in reciprocal research with community partners and write about issues unique to the region. But as Williams reminds us, even with the best intentions, we run the risk of harming the people we want to help.

Days after our visit to the *comedor*, I talk with my students over lunch in Patagonia, where work trucks from the controversial Hermosa mine cruise the streets. Against that backdrop, my students explain they don't want to extract stories from migrants as if they're mining natural resources; these travelers have lost so much already. They don't want to reduce migrants' struggles to mere human-interest stories. They fear telling stories is not enough.

These are the challenges all documentarians face. When James Agee went to rural Alabama in 1936 with photographer Walker Evans to write about sharecroppers, he staggered and stumbled through his representation of the tenant families. Early in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the resulting book, Agee declares:

*I realize that ... I am liable seriously, and perhaps irretrievably, to obscure what would at best be hard enough to give its appropriate clarity and intensity; and what seems to me most important of all: namely, that these I will write of are human beings ... and that they were dwelt among, investigated, spied on, revered and loved, by other quite monstrously alien human beings in the employment of still others, who have picked up their living as casually as if it were a book. ...*

Agee broke the barrier of objectivity, revealing his own perspective as partial and incomplete. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, he lays out his worries, imaginings and misgivings amid his meticulous depiction of the sharecroppers' existence. In doing so, he produces a wildly experimental — often lyrically stunning, tender, sometimes infuriating — map of his personal struggles. I hold Agee as a model today, as my students and I write about the border, learning to become cartographers of our relationship to the migrants and our government's immigration policies. Because the best writing not only tells a story, it helps us change the stories we sometimes tell about ourselves, our region and our nation.

Two years ago, when I first visited the migrant aid center, single men on their way to or recently deported from the United States filled the *comedor*'s tables. Before the afternoon meal, they watched a video about human rights and listened to a lecture on how to stay safe in Nogales. (*Don't borrow anyone's cellphone*, a nun warned them. *Don't stay anywhere but the shelter. Don't take taxis*.)

In May 2018, as the Trump administration's new policy left increasing numbers of asylum seekers stuck in Nogales for weeks or months before they could present themselves to U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents, the *comedor*'s tables began to fill with families. On the day we were there, Sister Cecilia Lopez Arias began the afternoon meal with a song instead of a video: "*En el arca de Noé, todos caben, todos caben. En el arca de Noé, todos caben y yo también.*" ("In Noah's Ark, there's room for everyone. In Noah's Ark, there's room for everyone — including me.")

The turning back of asylum seekers

and the administration's determination to build a wall mark a deviation from political precedent as well as an end to one of the stories we've long told ourselves about our nation, especially the West. In his book *The End of the Myth*, historian Greg Grandin writes: "All nations have borders, and many today even have walls. But only the United States has had a frontier, or at least a frontier that has served as a proxy for liberation, synonymous with the possibilities and promises of modern life itself. ..." Of course, the idea of the "West" as a liberating space has not been available to everyone. For Native Americans, the expansion of the frontier signified the contraction of freedom. This is true for the Japanese Americans who were held in internment camps, as well. For many others, the possibilities of the frontier may not have looked promising at all.

Learning to stay with the uncomfortable moments of witnessing one another and our full range of experiences helps us to debunk myths propagated by hegemonic views. In these moments, we not only document, we learn. My friend, the essayist and poet Metta Sáma, once told me: "I like to remember that writing is not just committing words to paper. It's committing the self to reflection, to percolation, to observing, to witnessing, to taking in, to dissecting, to organizing, to assessing, to synthesizing." At the border, writing offers a way to understand the community we share with these migrants as well as our complicity as U.S. citizens with the system that punishes them.

That's how reciprocal learning works for our students in the Field Studies in Writing Program. Just a few days before visiting the *comedor*, our students offer creative writing workshops to high school students participating in the Borderlands Earth Care Youth Institute. This yearly summer program, sponsored by the Borderlands Restoration Network, engages students who can trace their families' histories to both sides of the border — and to a time before it existed — in hands-on restoration work of the local ecosystem. In what was once an elementary school classroom in Patagonia, students scribble in their notebooks or on the backs of recycled office paper. Maps of Coronado National Forest and the Sonoita Creek watershed hang on the walls around them. Not a sound can be heard beyond the hum of an air conditioner and the birds outside.

University of Arizona graduate student Logan Phillips asks the students to reflect on a summer spent rerouting water flows, removing invasive species and building retention walls. "Only you can write this," Phillips says.

"I come from wide-open skies filled with bright and beautiful stars and a full moon," one student writes. "This work is: We must preserve and protect everything ... so others can be enlightened by it,"

"I come from wide-open skies filled with bright and beautiful stars and a full moon," one student writes. "This work is: We must preserve and protect everything ... so others can be enlightened by it," another adds.





ILLUSTRATION BY SIENNA GONZALES FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

another adds.

After the meal at the Kino Border Initiative *comedor*, I bring a group of migrant children outside to color on the sidewalk. As the kids draw houses, princesses and hearts floating on strings like balloons, they remind me of my 8-year-old daughter, who selected the crayons, pads and coloring books I brought to Nogales. But these children face circumstances more difficult than anything my child or most of us can imagine. Coming from Mexico, Honduras and Nicaragua, they left everything to travel to a place they'd never seen. They did so to escape

life-threatening danger. And while theirs might seem like a familiar thread in the myth of the American dream — the myth that anyone can make a better life here — quick comparisons mask the particular kinds of racism and anti-immigrant policies this population faces.

As writers and compassionate people, we need to acknowledge both our differences and connections, the dynamics of power and promise that run through all of our relations. U.S. immigration policies are not Noah's Ark; they don't make room for everyone: not the families waiting for their number to be called to request

asylum, not the children held in cages. But if we cannot guarantee a place for them now, perhaps we can at least guarantee that their voices will be heard.

Before I leave the *comedor*, some children give me their drawings. I walk back over the border, under the concertina-wire-encircled sign that reads "Welcome to the United States Mariposa Port of Entry." The drawings tucked in my canvas bag feel like messages to the future, the first in a series of images that will become part of these children's stories, images that will arrive in the United States before they do. □



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A close-up photograph of a pair of brown canvas work pants. The fabric has a coarse, woven texture. A small, dark, rectangular label with the Patagonia logo is visible on the right side of the pants. The lighting is warm and focused, highlighting the texture of the fabric and the details of the stitching and label.

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MONTANA

**Montana beekeepers are abuzz** about a new law that requires them to register their hives and pay a fee by April 1, reports NBC. Some have denounced it as “government overreach,” though the state says the law is intended to protect local beekeepers from the threat of disease from imported bee colonies. Chuck Lewis, the founder of “Plan Bee,” which promotes therapeutic beekeeping for veterans, says he plans to defy the new law: “I probably will not register my site, and if I have to go to court, I will.” Lewis, who notes that the sound of bees working in a hive helps veterans feel calm, thinks there’s a good argument for promoting bees as “support” animals. As much as we love bees (and honey) ourselves, we hope that doesn’t lead to a wave of people bringing “support beehives” onto planes, joining the cats, dogs and chickens already skulking supportively underneath their owners’ seats.

WASHINGTON

**Kirkland, a suburb east of Seattle, has declared war on dog poop**, reports the *Seattle Times*. Doggy dung has become a serious problem, what with an estimated 20,000 pooches depositing about 6,000 pounds of waste per day, according to Aaron Hussman, the city’s environmental and outreach specialist. Hussman notes that this is “a lot of excess nutrients we don’t need,” and not, as some dog owners believe, fertilizer. Since September, the city has enlisted volunteers to monitor the accumulation of canine crap at two popular parks, flagging every discovery and planting yellow signs that explain why people should prevent their pups from pooping on the parks’ land and water. The city has also installed poop bags near trashcans so owners can’t say they “forgot” their own. So far, the campaign is working, Hussman says, with hundreds of owners signing pledges to pick up after their dogs. This has been, Hussman says happily, an exercise in “glorious work.”

UTAH

**We don’t want you to think that “number two” is** our “number one” priority here, but the sad truth is that human visitors are pooping up Salt Lake



WASHINGTON I’d turn back if I were you. REGINA JOHNSON

County’s backcountry. In the Wasatch canyons, *E. coli* counts are rising and creek waters are becoming contaminated, says Evan Johnson of Save our Big Cottonwood Creek. The problem has become so dire, he told the Associated Press, that “a fecal time bomb” threatens the canyon. Unfortunately, as Johnson points out, “when visitors have to go, they’ll go, and there are no bathroom facilities.”

ARIZONA

**In 1882, in Bisbee, Arizona**, the Copper Queen Library opened inside the mine’s company store with a tiny collection of books sent from back East. That little library, the state’s oldest, is still going strong, though it no longer features spittoons and tables for card playing. Recently, *Library Journal* honored it as the “best small library in America.” In 1976, mine owner Phelps Dodge turned the library over to the town of Bisbee, and since then it’s expanded to offer a seed library for gardeners, literacy programs and “unconventional items available for checkout such as sports equipment.” Library manager Jason Macoviak told the *Arizona Daily Star* that “roughly 3,000” of Bisbee’s 5,500 residents are the proud possessors of library cards.

UTAH

**Kyler Bourgeois, 30, used to visit Utah’s Antelope** Island State Park, about an hour’s drive from Salt Lake City, several times a week to run or

bike its trails. He always kept his distance from the resident bison and other wildlife, says the *Washington Post*, but one day after hiking to the park’s highest point, he found two huge bison standing on the other side. That’s when he discovered, as he said later, that “you can’t outrun bison.” One bison rammed Bourgeois in the hip and armpit, tossed him into the air and then trampled him. It was waiting for him to move so it could finish him off, Hussman said, so he played possum while nearby hikers called a rescue helicopter. When Bourgeois finally returned a few months later, he brought a date, Kayleigh Davis, 22, who wanted to run the island’s trails. The date, to put it mildly, did not go well: A bison charged Davis, throwing her 15 feet into the air.

Fortunately, as she said later, she remembered Bourgeois’ advice: Don’t move, “so it doesn’t come after you again.” Davis suffered a broken ankle and gored thigh, but despite everything, the two plan to “hang out again.” Bourgeois, however, doubts he’ll ever go back to the island: “I generally am not superstitious, but I have this weird feeling that the bison there really don’t like me.”

CALIFORNIA

**Mono Lake is an “otherworldly strain of beautiful,”** reports *Atlas Obscura*, but that doesn’t mean you should drink its pearlescent water, which has a pH of 10, equivalent to detergent, and sky-high levels of arsenic, around six times what’s safe for humans. Yet one extremophile loves it: a super-tough species of roundworm that thrives on arsenic. “The newly discovered species of *Auanema* has a few other evolutionary tricks up its oral cavity,” scientists report. It has three sexes — female, male and hermaphrodite — enabling it to adapt to an unforgiving environment, and also tripling its chances for a date on Saturday night.

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write [betsym@hcn.org](mailto:betsym@hcn.org) or tag photos #heardaroundthewest on Instagram.



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