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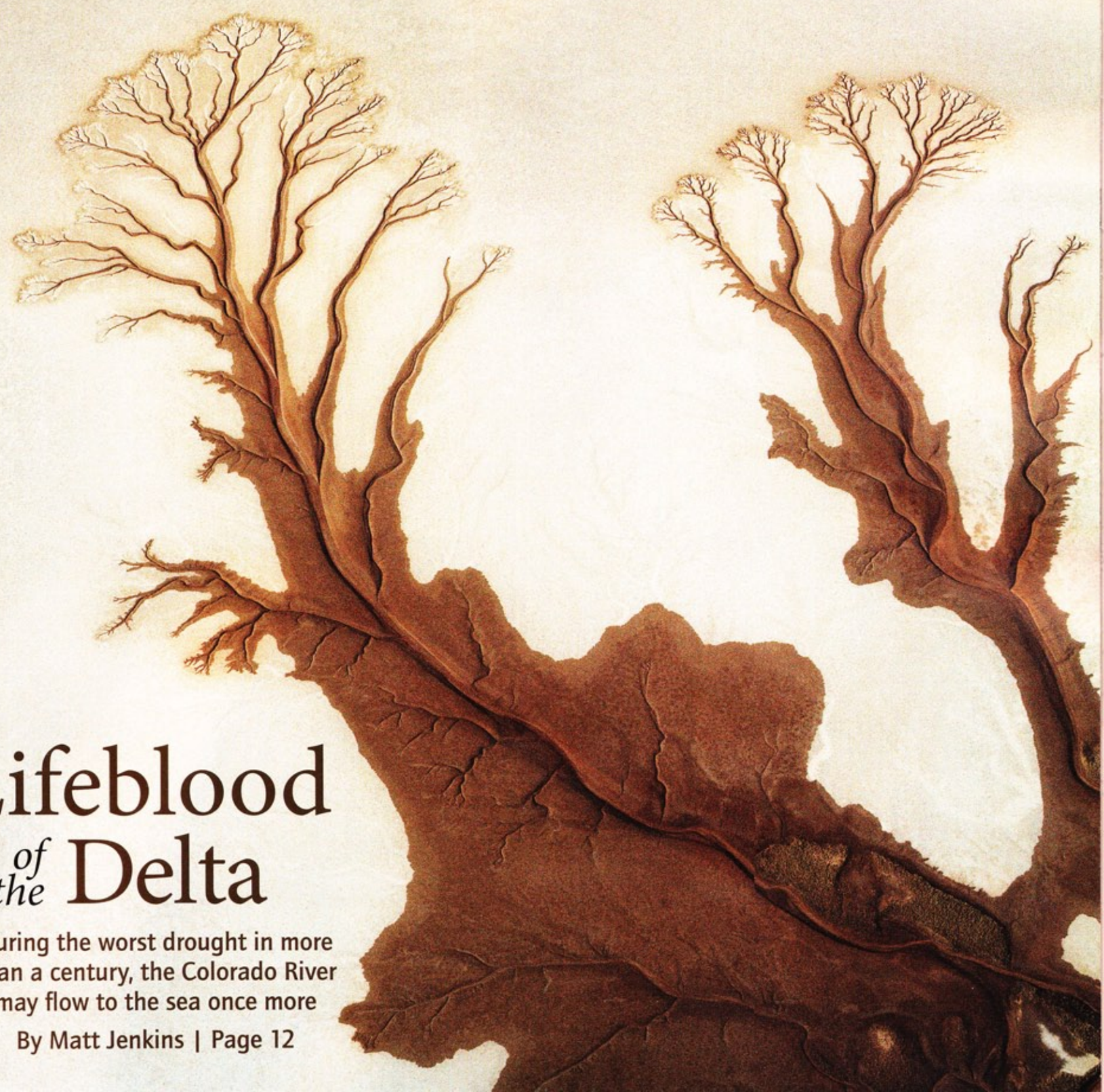

Lifeblood of the Delta

During the worst drought in more than a century, the Colorado River may flow to the sea once more

By Matt Jenkins | Page 12

UNCOMMON WESTERNER

O pioneer

A filmmaker explores how we find home in the West

"There's this mythology of the pioneering spirit that looms over any image of the West. It's a false kind of nostalgia."
—*Filmmaker Vera Brunner-Sung*

On a bitter morning in early April, on the south shore of Flathead Lake in northwestern Montana, Vera Brunner-Sung stood still behind a camera. At first, all was quiet. Then came the hollow knocking of an actress' boots on the dock, and seagulls crying, and water lapping at the trestles. Suddenly, everything seemed quite loud: A nail gun; a truck in reverse; a plane overhead. "Cut," Brunner-Sung called. She wore stiff jeans, leather boots with cowboy heels and an old blue coat. Thick dark hair topped her lanky frame. "I liked that," she said. "Let's move on."

The film, *Bella Vista*, is Brunner-Sung's first fictional work, built from trappings of her own life. It is less a story than a threading together of images and ideas that say something — "something small," she insists — about finding oneself at home in the West. Doris, played by Kathleen Wise, is in her early 30s. After years abroad, she comes to Missoula, Mont., to teach English to international students at the university. A fiercely quiet woman, her long hair often pulled back, she spends much of the film walking through the camera's wide, fixed frames. She seldom speaks, except with her students, who, at first, seem similarly out of place. "Doris is not someone we're supposed to get to know that well," says Brunner-Sung. She is a passerby, lost in her transient anonymity. It is never clear whether she intends to make Missoula her home. If there is a question that undergirds the film, it is, says Brunner-Sung, "Do I stay, or do I go?"

Brunner-Sung, 34, moved to Missoula from Los Angeles in December 2011. Her fiancé had been hired as an archivist at the University of Montana, and she took a teaching position in the film department. Missoula was the smallest city she had lived in. She found herself telling cashiers, unasked, that she was new: "I was really excited about being a stranger." She learned the city by walking through it: Down Catlin to Third, where she watched kids ride four-wheelers around a parking lot; up Mount Sentinel, from which the valley's sprawling lights reminded her of L.A. She loved these walks as she loves slow, avant-garde film — "I like to stop and take a breath and let my eyes wander" — and came to know Missoula at a studied distance: The apartments crammed into back alleys, the tracks bisecting town diagonally, the clapboard houses tilted on their foundations. She scribbled her observations onto note cards. Eventually, these moments became scenes, and the person who walked through them became Doris. By the following September, Brunner-Sung had written a script.

I met her in April, in Polson, Mont., on one of her last days shooting. We spent the morning with the crew at the Bayview Inn, all crammed into the bathroom of Room 17 while she filmed Wise shifting restlessly in bed. This, I thought — the stiff sheets, the carpet, the cigarette smoke drifting under the door — was the nadir of lonely transience. "Do you still see yourself in Doris?" I asked Brunner-Sung later, as we drove south for another scene. "I don't feel as lost as Doris does," she said. "I think she looks around Montana and doesn't see herself here."

The anonymity Brunner-Sung once relished had worn off; she now recognized people in the grocery store. "I think if you decide to open yourself up to a place and make it your home, the place becomes you." So would she stay in Montana a while? "I don't plan on growing old here," she said.

Brunner-Sung spent her first 18 years in a house on Longshore Drive in Ann Arbor, Mich. Her father had emigrated from Korea, her mother from Switzerland. Of mixed race, she understood what it meant to be "between things"; to her, borders — geographic, ethnic — seemed mutable. She saw her parents as converts to the American mythology that anything was possible, and that their coming to the States was a chance to redefine themselves.

When Brunner-Sung was in college, the house on Longshore, a 1940s single-family home with creaky floors and a single-car garage, burned down. The structure her parents built in its place was tall, blockish and set at a different angle in the yard. Eventually, Brunner-Sung returned to Ann Arbor, but felt like a stranger in the new house. She missed the staircase and the sound of the second-floor fan they used when summers got too hot. She thought about memories and the meanings that people attach to material things.

Around this time, she made her first

BY SIERRA CRANE-MURDOCH

Vera Brunner-Sung, left, talks with actors Kathleen Wise and Sam Sandoval while filming for *Bella Vista* at Montana's Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge. Brunner-Sung wrote and directed the film, based on her own experiences after moving to the state.
MICHAEL COLES

film. It was a portrait of her neighborhood and the people who lived in it, but she never showed peoples' faces — only their houses and leafy yards, and their voices overlaid on the images. "I wanted to understand what makes up a neighborhood," she said. "It's these structures, but it's also the lives that are lived within them." In 2004, she used the film to apply to the California Institute of the Arts outside of L.A., where she would study under the filmmaker James Benning. In the city, she says, she was struck by how quickly houses were torn down and rebuilt. "I had always thought that 'home' was defined by place — that structures were memory aids, that they provided meaning. But if a structure isn't valued, at least by the economic system, then suddenly architecture isn't permanent. So where does home really exist? In your mind? Is it just an idea? And if so, how do you settle into a place?"

Ten miles south of Polson, we turned west onto a dirt cul-de-sac in the Ninepipe Wildlife Refuge on the Salish-Kootenai Reservation. A father and son were dipping lures into a small murky pond. It was midday, but storm clouds capped the sky so tightly that it felt like evening. The crewmembers pulled stools, tripods, wires and booms from their cars and, within minutes, had trained the camera on a square of marshland. There Sam Sandoval, who plays a Salish man in the film, and whose day job is editing the reservation's *Char-Koosta News*, would emerge with his tackle box and fishing pole.

Brunner-Sung leaned against a car as she led Sandoval and Wise through their lines. "Now she's going to say, 'Kind of' — like, you're both kind of from here," she explained. The wind flattened the grass and lifted coffee cups off car roofs. Brunner-Sung waited until Sandoval had reached the end of the boardwalk, where the grasses thinned into open water, and then called, "Action on Sam!"

"You visiting from somewhere?" he yelled to Wise.

"Yeah. Kind of."

"Kind of?"

"Well, I mean, I'm living in Missoula right now. But I'm not from here. You?"

"Kind of." The wind carried off his words. A crewmember's knuckles were white from clutching an umbrella.

"Cut!" yelled Brunner-Sung. We ran for the cars.

If *Bella Vista* is a remark on self-enforced itinerancy, it is also a reminder that everyone, in one way or another, has been displaced. As Doris moves through the film, she encounters people whose definition of home is as complicated as her own: her students; a young boy who lives in a motel with his father; a Japanese man whose gravestone she discovers. The man died in 1945. Later in the film, we learn that thousands of Italian sailors, rounded up from American seas, and Japanese immigrants, removed from their homes, were imprisoned in Missoula at a World War II internment camp. After the war, only Italians, who called Missoula's valley "Bella Vista," chose to stay.

Most disquieting for Doris is her brush with the valley's indigenous history. Of the people she encounters, the Salish fisherman seems most rooted in his home. But even his people, he tells Doris, were forced in 1891 from the Bitterroot Valley south of Missoula onto the reservation where they now live. Since then, they have struggled to preserve their language and culture. "That's sad," she says. "Well," he replies, "when you lose your history, it's dangerous, actually."

It is sad for Doris, Brunner-Sung told me, not just because "she's realizing, 'Even you have been moved from where you're from,' " but also because "she can barely imagine what that would be like, to belong somewhere for so long."

It seems, suddenly, that Doris has no choice in the matter. She is a drifter in a nation of drifters, her presence even more ephemeral beside those who have been there longer and the landscape that predates them all. This is not a conflict of transience and permanence, but of different time scales — the wanderer and the West, the human and the geologic — passing each other by. "There's this mythology of the pioneering spirit that looms over any image of the West," Brunner-Sung told me. "Doris doesn't really have that. It's a false kind of nostalgia, anyway. I wanted to peel back those layers, to show the West as I see it."

But is it the same mythology, perhaps, that keeps Doris moving? "Sometimes I have this delusion when I move that I'll never move again," said Brunner-Sung. "Then, after a while, I start to wonder if I do my best work when I go somewhere else. Is that where inspiration comes from?

"We hold onto this idea that anybody can start over." □

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THE LATEST

Backstory

Idaho is one of the few Western states that doesn't mandate that some percentage of its electricity come from renewable sources. With little incentive to promote such projects, Idaho Power, the state's biggest utility, **lobbied regulators to effectively lock out new commercial wind farms in 2010**. It lowered the maximum size for renewable energy contracts from an average 10 megawatts to just 100 kilowatts – barely enough to power one house ("Power Play," *HCN*, 9/2/13).

Followup

On Oct. 1, Montana, which does have a renewable-sources mandate, followed Idaho's lead, and **limited the size of certain renewable energy contracts**. Its "standard" contract, which had allowed small-scale operations to win bids without competing against larger projects, drops from a maximum 10 megawatts to three. Proponents say this will let the state purchase wind power more cheaply, but small-project owners say the new maximum isn't financially feasible and they can't lower prices enough to compete with larger projects.

KATIE MAST