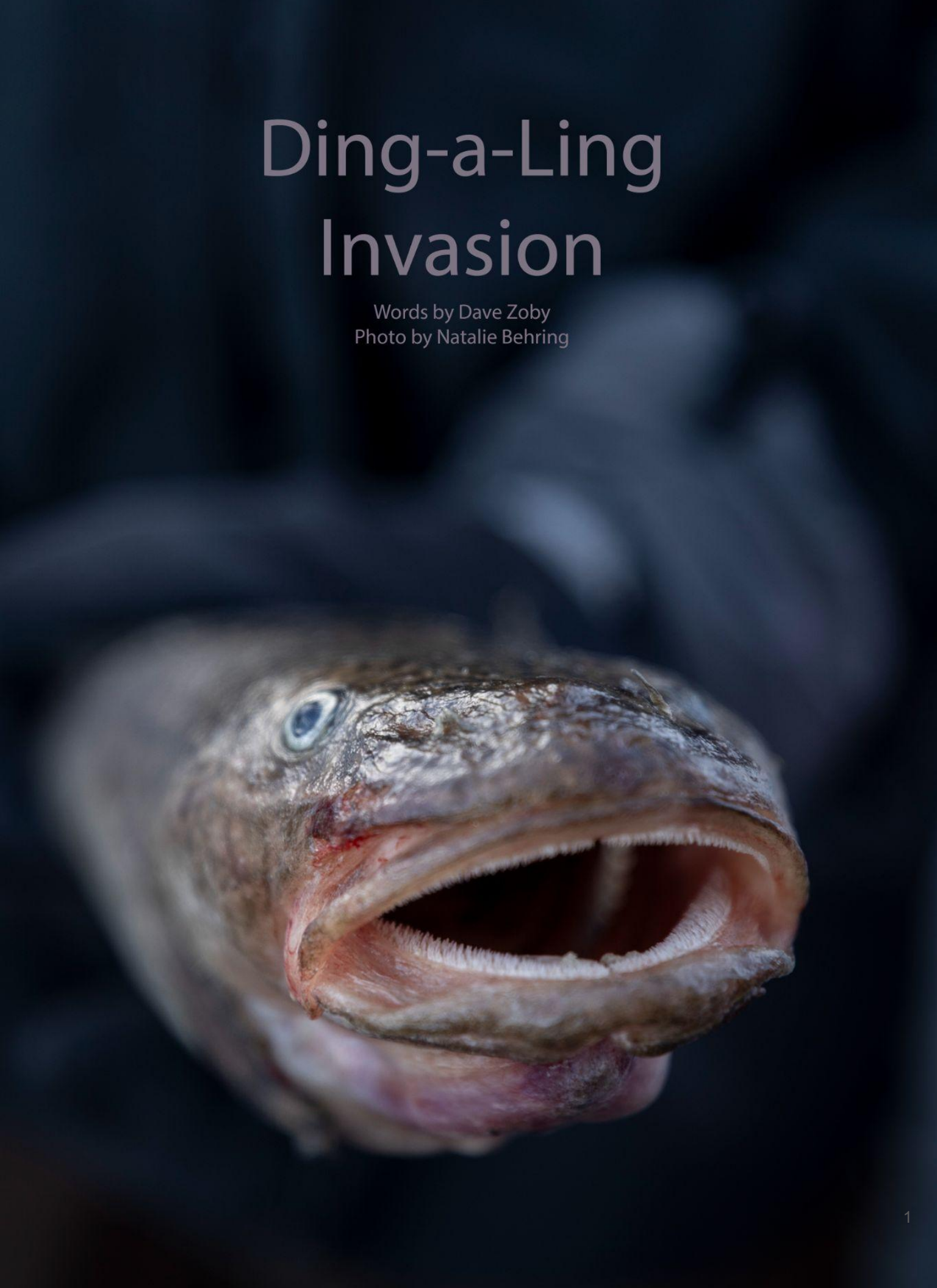
# Ding-a-Ling Invasion

Words by Dave Zoby
Photo by Natalie Behring

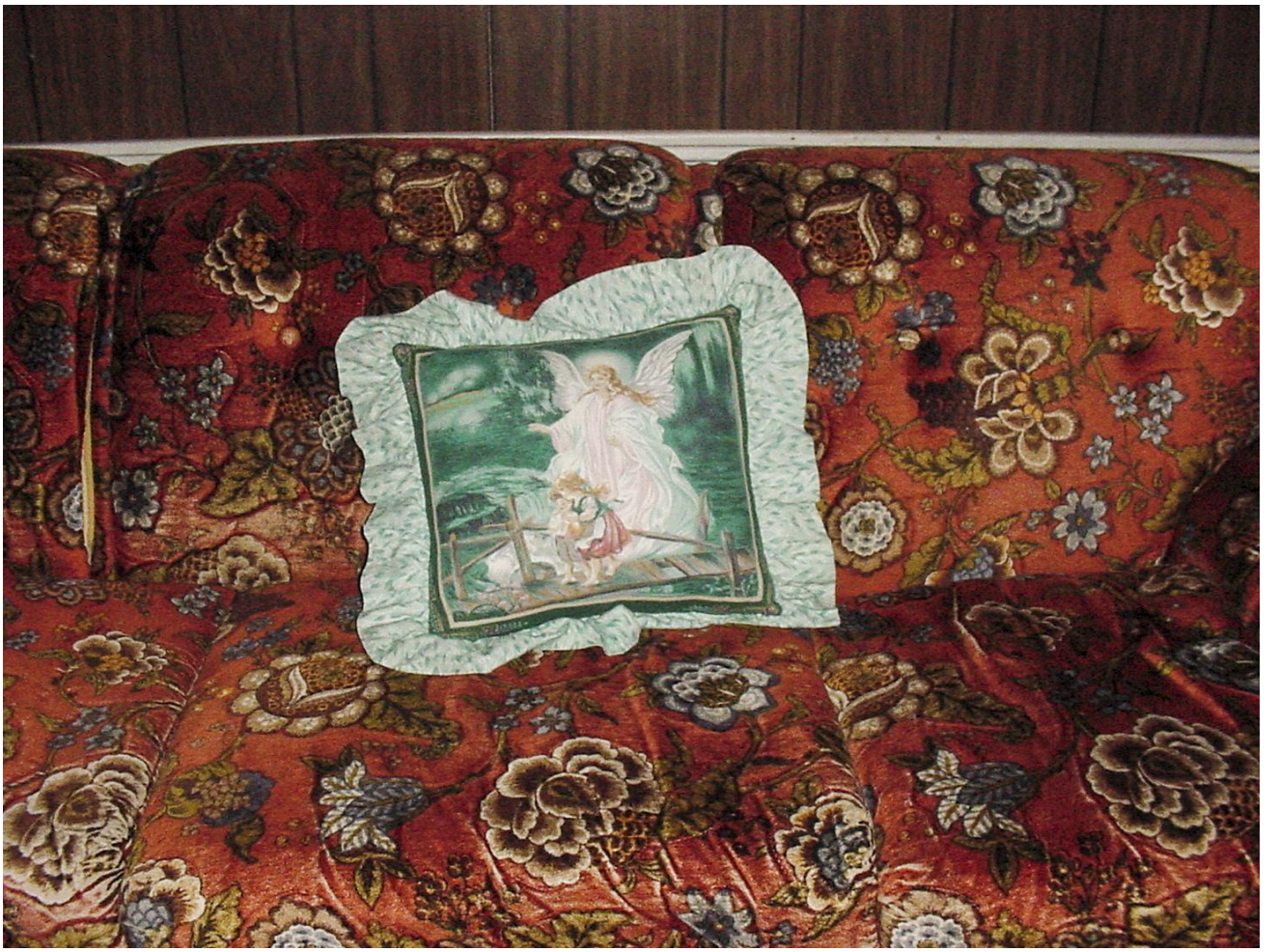


La Barge, Wyoming, tucked against the Utah border is a town of just 394 souls. Surrounded by sagebrush steppes, and foothills dotted with spruce, the town rests on the banks of the Green River near where Shoshone Indians once hunted and fished. A bottom-release dam makes possible Fontenelle Reservoir, a highly popular recreational area for boating and camping in the summer, ice fishing in the dark windy months. The landscape is rolling hills, wind-blasted buttes and eroded hoodoo rocks. Ninety-six degrees is the hottest temperature ever recorded in La Barge--negative 52 is the coldest. The closest clinic where one might receive medical attention is in Marbleton, some twenty miles distance. Tourism, in the way we think of tourism, never really took off here. At one time there were three restaurants, but these now lay defunct and unoccupied. There's no grocery store, no coffee stand. The majority of people here eke out a living by working for the mining companies, or in the oil and gas industry. Of course, there's ranching. When Fontenelle Reservoir was built in 1963, five ranching families, including the Stepps, one of the few African-American cowboy families to ever exist in the West, lost their land to eminent domain. Those ranches and memories are now buried beneath the 8,000 acres of frozen water that makes Fontenelle.

The Eagle Bar is perhaps the nucleus for the town. Or the de facto center is the Fast Stop Express where you can buy gas, all genres of junk food, select a burger, a wedge of pizza, or a breakfast burrito that has been basking under a warming light for an indeterminate period of time. At the Fast Stop there are some orange booths that recall the 1970s where you can take a load off. Though the hamlet is just 100 miles from the fetishized mountain town of Jackson Hole, the two places couldn't be farther apart. Just the mere mention of Jackson—I made the faux pas one night at the Eagle Bar—causes residents of La Barge to convulse and grimace with convincing consternation. They'll give you an earful about how this is the real Wyoming, right here in La Barge; whatever it is they are doing up in Jackson is some sort of aberration.


*Cassidy Brandt, attendant at the Fast Stop Express in Labarge.*

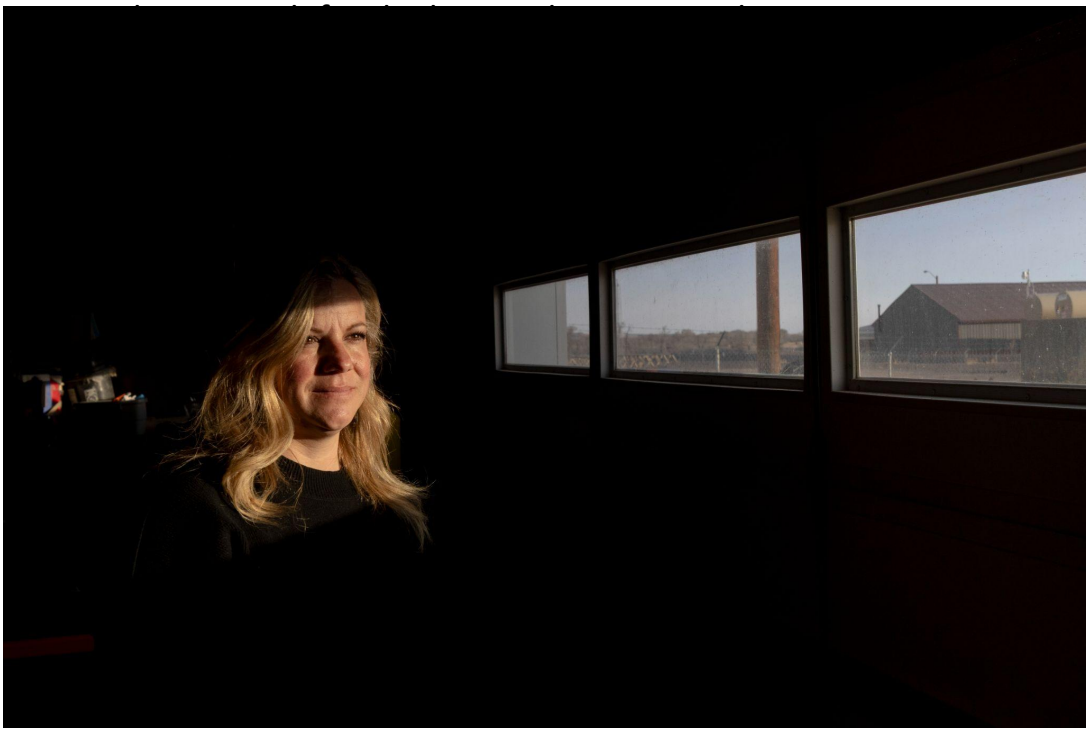

*Fontenelle Dam*



*Detail of the decor at the Eagle Bar in LaBarge*

I'm visiting this far-flung community to attend the annual "Ding-the Ling" ice-fishing derby put on by the La Barge Activities Committee. This group sponsors the annual Christmas Parade, and the other outdoor events such as the Turkey Shoot. Organizer Jenny Brandt says that their sole purpose is to promote family-friendly events that bring the community together. The tournament is now in its ninth year, and the number of ling being caught is increasing, not decreasing as they had hoped. Ask anyone in La Barge about ling, (also called burbot, lawyer fish, coney, freshwater cod, cusk, eelpout, and bubbot) and they'll tell you the fish must go; it's invasive and it doesn't belong here. In this they are unified.

"Ding-the-Ling" is not a catch-and-release tournament. This is a kill-only tournament, explicitly spelled out in the rules. Any fish caught must be snuffed out, no exemptions, no second chances. The whole purpose of the event, the reason my photographer friend Natalie Behring and I nabbed the very last room at the hotel, the reason the food truck--Street Meats--is rumored to be coming up from Rock Springs for the highly anticipated weigh-in ceremony, is solely for the extermination of lings. Death is a theme. Another theme is humor. The four-man teams painstakingly choose their names. This year we had "The Ice Holes", "Shanty Droppers", "The Brrr Butts", "Kingalings", and many others all competing for prizes that range from headlamps for Jetboils. And, of



*Jenny Brandt of the La Barge Activities Committee.*

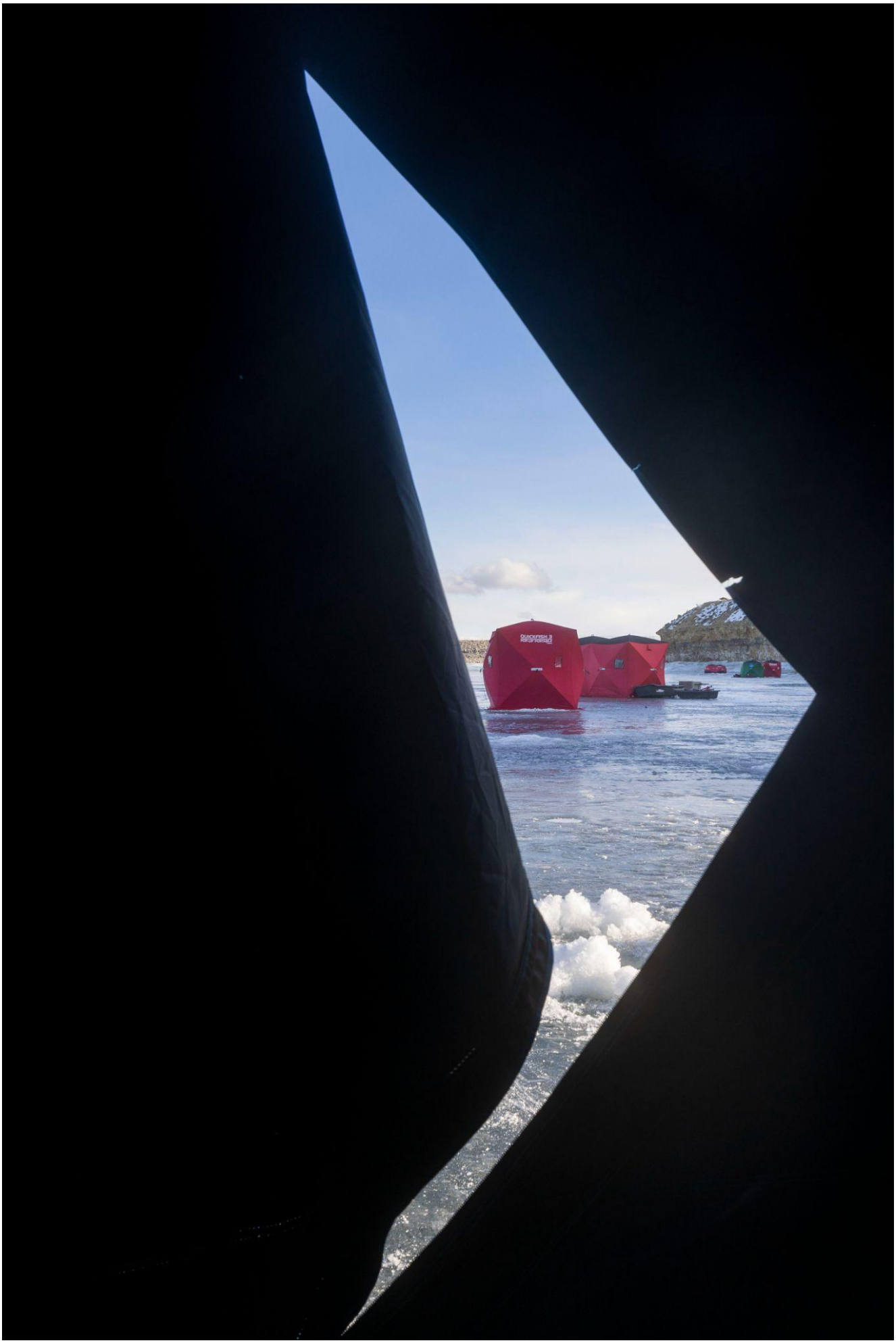
“Twenty-sixteen was our first year. There were 255 fish caught. The longest fish was 34 inches—the longest fish that’s ever been caught is 36 inches,” said Brandt. “Yesterday we had 687 fish.” She expected the total count this year to eclipse 1,000 fish

Brandt admits that she is not enthusiastic about ice fishing. These days she’s content to stay ashore and help organize the festivities rather than crouch all afternoon and into the evening in an ice hut.

“There was a snowmachine that went through the ice one year. And we went fishing in the spring and the snowmachine was still at the bottom,” she said. Being out on the ice causes her discomfort. This is something we could bond over.

Indeed, Natalie and I struggled on the ice that morning. The echoing pops, the mysterious rumbling sounds that punctuated the crisp Wyoming air, the barely perceptible shifts beneath your feet--none of it reassured us.  Natalie, zipped up in a Navy-blue onesie snowsuit that she claimed made her look like Kim Jong Il—ear muffs, heavy skiing gloves, dark shades, crampons, and a recently purchased balaclava—walked in little tiny strides and, more than once, asked me if I was hearing the same thing she was: the random chuckling noises coming from underneath.

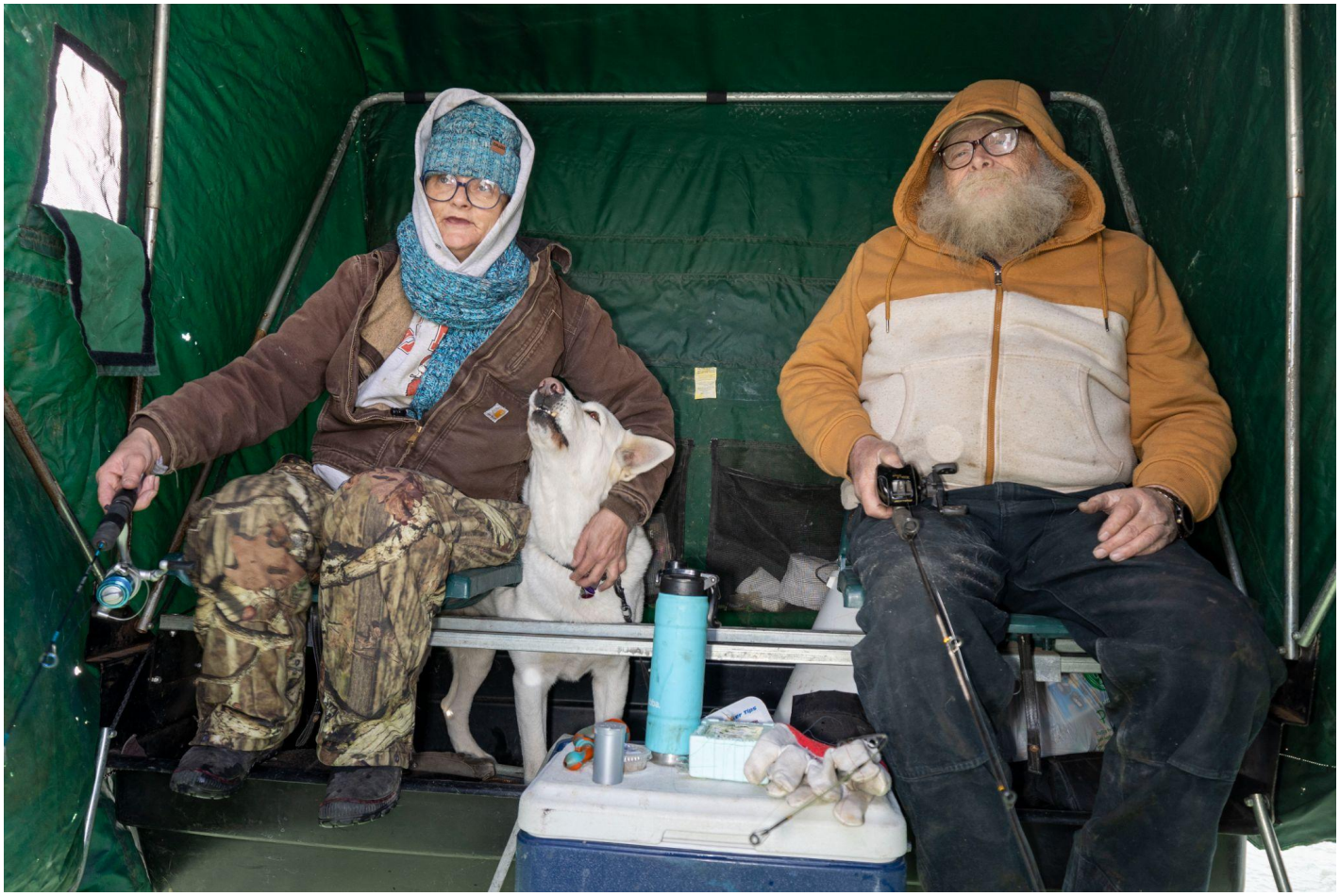
“It sounds like someone is bowling down there, throwing gutter balls,” I said, trying to be clever. Everyone else seemed oblivious to these sounds. They were busy with their augers, or checking their lines. But their insouciance didn’t ease our minds. In fact, two ATVs and a snowmachine had “gone through the ice” that afternoon at the boat ramp near where we hoped to conduct interviews. There were leads—openings in the ice—randomly curving along the shoreline. The Wyoming wind played over the open water, pushing it up onto the lid.





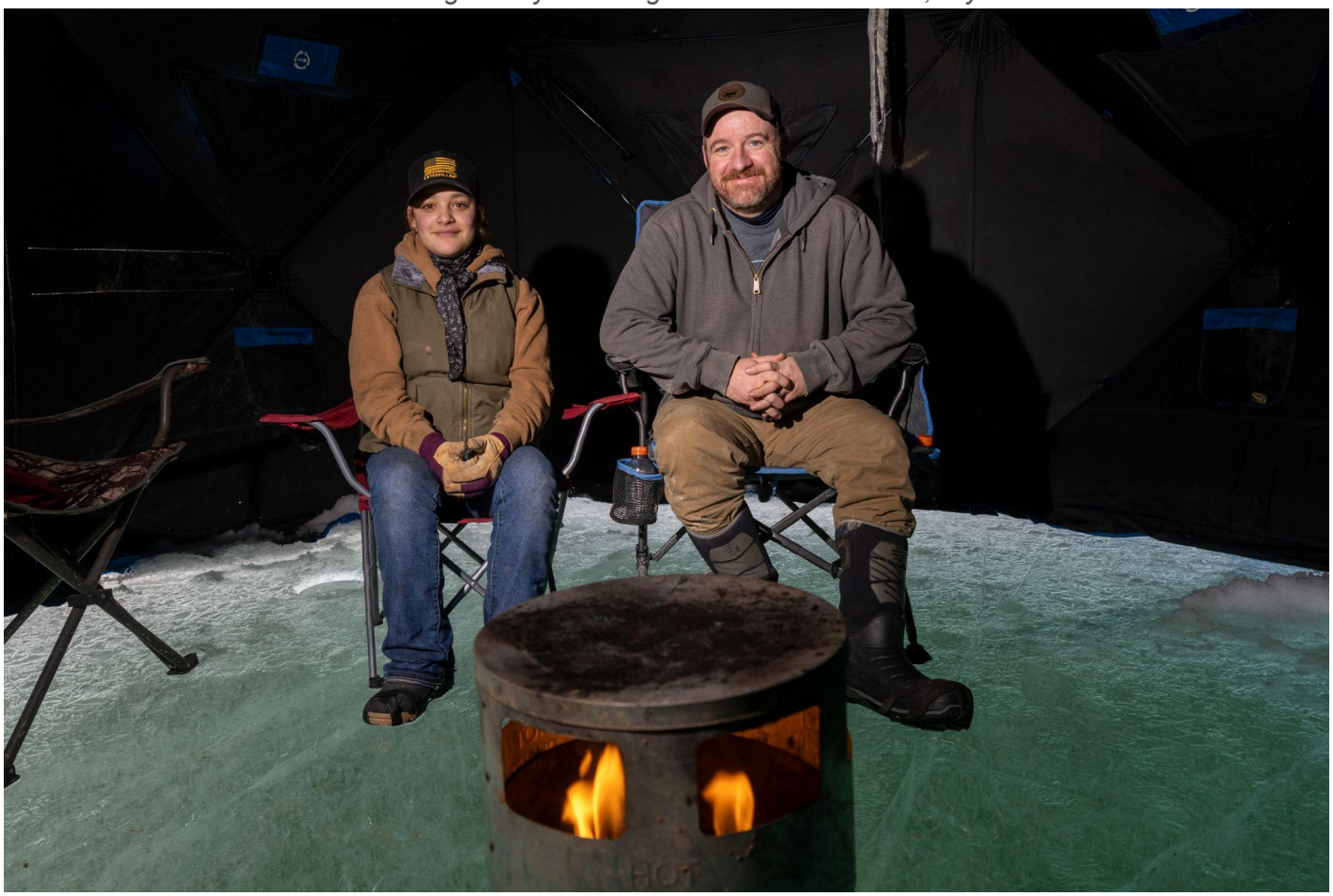
*A view from inside an ice-fishing tent.*

“Those were not there yesterday,” a passerby said to us. He was leading a troupe of children down to the ice for the evening bite. With ling fishing, there is a flurry of activity at sundown, then, in theory, another bite around midnight.  A few people, bundled up to the point where it was impossible to guess their gender, age, or economic class- walked up the lip of the leads and stopped there looking down into the abyss. What was it they saw down there? We decided to walk the shoreline and enter the ice where it appeared more solid.  But here, we realized, the ice was slanted at a terrible angle. We had no idea how to get down to the lake. The only option seemed to sit on our butts and slide.



*Tammy and Larry Abraham with their dog Koda Bear in a small ice-fishing tent.*

*Jeremiah Christiansen and his daughter Syndie Salgado from Green River, Wy*



Natalie speaks Chinese, has covered political upheaval and coups, has flown in helicopters over war-torn Afghanistan. One of the highlights of her career was photographing Afghan men playing Buzkashi, the sport where men ride ponies and try to haul a goat carcass from one end of the field to another. If she was afraid, it dawned on me, I should be terrified. With several staggeringly expensive cameras strung over her shoulder, she squatted down and sat on the steep incline. Legs first she slid out onto the surface of the lake, the snowsuit proving to be nearly free of friction. She spun and continued for twenty yards.  I followed, striking my hands on a fissure on the ice and bruising my thumb. We rose and began to work, visiting various ice huts, inquiring if the people therein would be willing to talk. We wanted to meet the dedicated ling fishermen. I steered them to the subject: the invasive species de jour, the much-ballyhooed burbot, how it has come into the watershed and upset the order of things. I wanted to register their complaints. I wanted them to say dirty, quotable things about burbot or anything else that was on their minds.

But check out the ice—it's not the uniform, monolithic character you might imagine. The ice is everything. In warmer years, like 2018, when the ice was suspect, or "rotten", events like these are cancelled for safety concerns. Tournament rules say you need to fish in pairs and carry a throw rope in case someone falls through. Though we were assured that the ice was safe—fifteen inches and building in most spots—neither of us could stop marveling at the idiosyncrasies of it. Under closer inspection, the ice was the color of topaz in some places, cola-colored in others. Gnarled by periods of warming and cooling, heaved in ridges here and there, the surface of Fontenelle Reservoir was a study in chaos. Yet people drove ATVs and snow machines over the surface as if it was no big deal. Or, matter-of-factly, they stood in plastic sleds, their gear stacked beside them, and cruised over the ice behind Snowdogs, lawnmower-sized machines that grip the ice with treads. Many set up on the far side of the reservoir, too far for us to reach. So, we focused on the shanties set up close to the boat launch. It was stuffy inside. Propane heaters whooshed within the huts melting the top layer and causing the floor to become slush and water. Children laughed. Beer and sodas were set outside upon the ice to cool.

There were icy-disks leftover in the lid where previous holes were drilled, used, then given back to the cold. The surface was scarred by snow machines, and here and there were spots of blood where lings and trout had met their end. Sawdust meant someone was using mealworms as bait. Looking down into a freshy-punched hole, the water appeared milky green. Beyond the green was a nothingness. It occurred to me that we were most likely standing over former ranches that were sacrificed for the dam. How far was I from Alonzo Stepp's underwater henhouse? We walked over the ice flinching at the ghostly faraway cracks and groans. There, below the surface, were pockets of air that appeared as white flags set against a dark sky.

"Look! -- I just saw a fish," cried Natalie. But it was only an air bubble flushing, escaping, seeking some sort of equilibrium in a root beer hued world. I told her that I was once a dedicated ice-fisher. You couldn't tell it now, but I once owned my own hut

and ice auger. I owned crampons and a little dipper to remove slush from the holes. I gave it up because I could never be comfortable. It gave me nightmares.

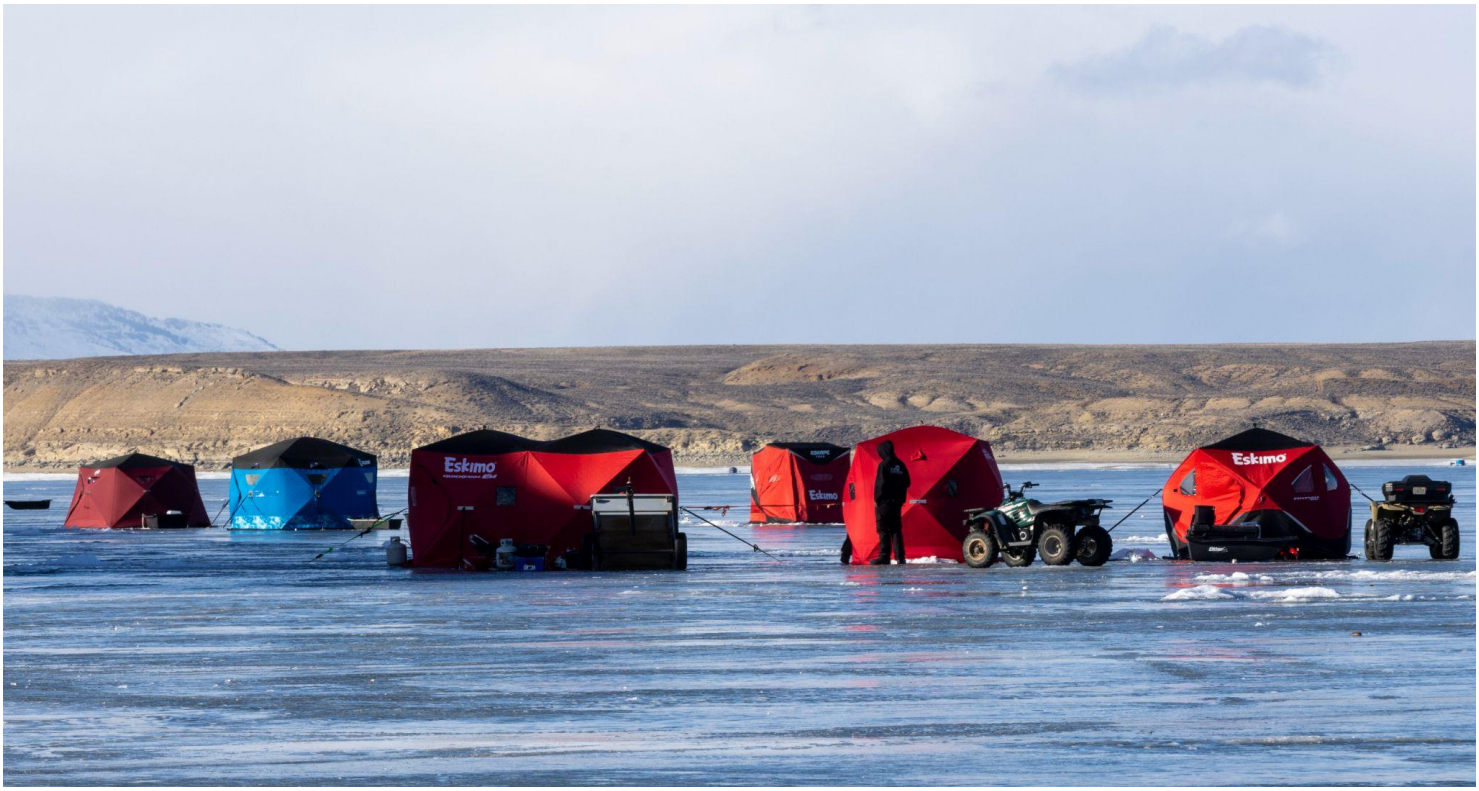
"And, also, there was too much drinking," I said.

But things were looking up in the little community of ice huts and ATVs. Contestants at the "Ding-the-Ling" proved to be friendly, optimistic, festive even. Natalie was invited into their shelters. One collection of ice huts contained the Goodsell family—three generations fishing for lings and whatever else. They did not trouble to reserve a hotel room; instead, they slept out on the ice, a concept that gave me the heebie-jeebies. The Goodsells were using glow-in-the-dark jigs tipped with sucker meat. (Sucker meat is the Holy Grail of ling bait.) Within their huts they had set up sleeping bags and tables where they could prepare their freeze-dried meals. They had augered holes in the ice in random areas, some twenty yards or more away from their huts, broadcasting their lines, giving themselves the best chance to catch a prize-winning ling. Using catfish bells on their rods, the fishermen listened at night for the ring of a fish hitting the line. This is an event they never miss. We stood on the lee side of their encampment, for the wind had picked up.

"We've never won the money or any of the prizes, but we try to come out more to just hang out with the family, and have the kids come out," said Chad Goodsell.

He described ling as a "sunflower seed," suggesting that it's more trouble to harvest the meat than worth the time. He pointed to a partially frozen ling on the ice and showed where the fillets come from, just a tenderloin piece along the back, and a section near the tail.

"I don't eat them. I give them away. A lot of people do eat them—they say they're the 'poor man's lobster', but there's too much imagination there. You have to think too much about lobster to have them taste like lobster," said Goodsell.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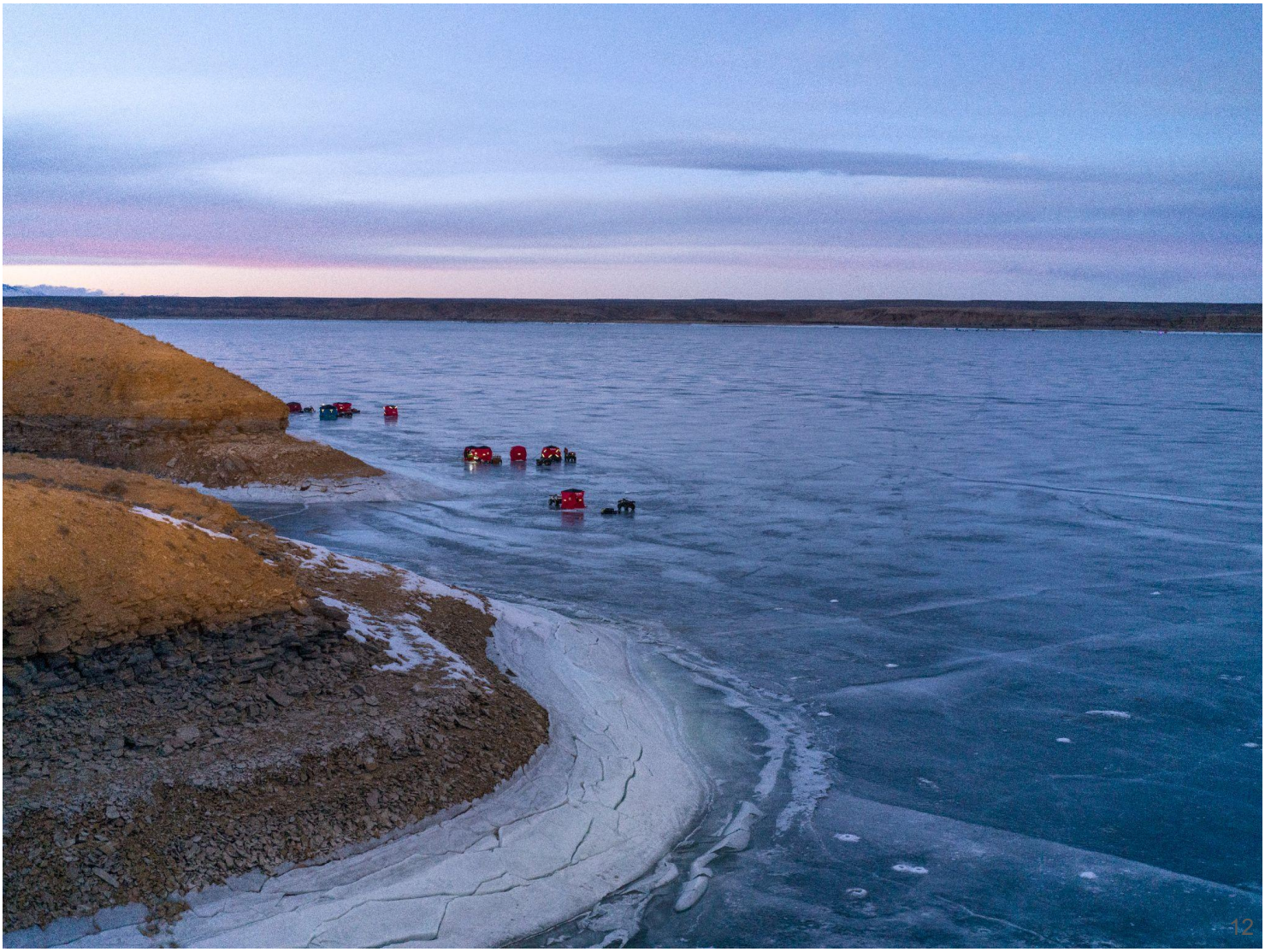
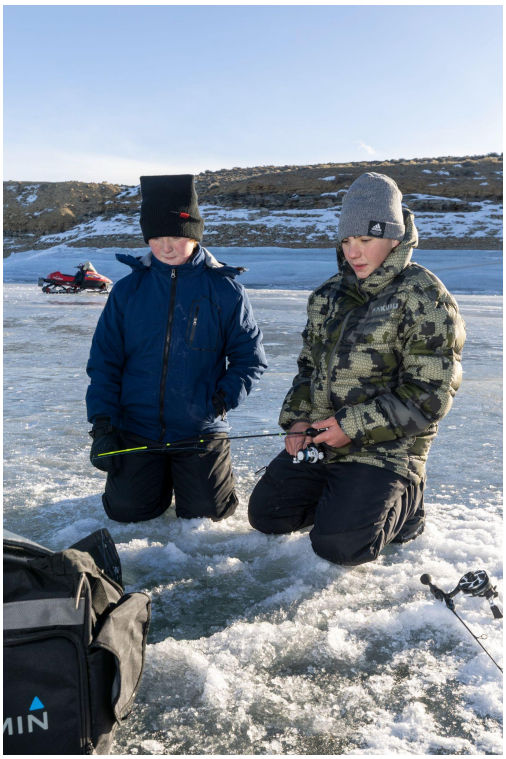
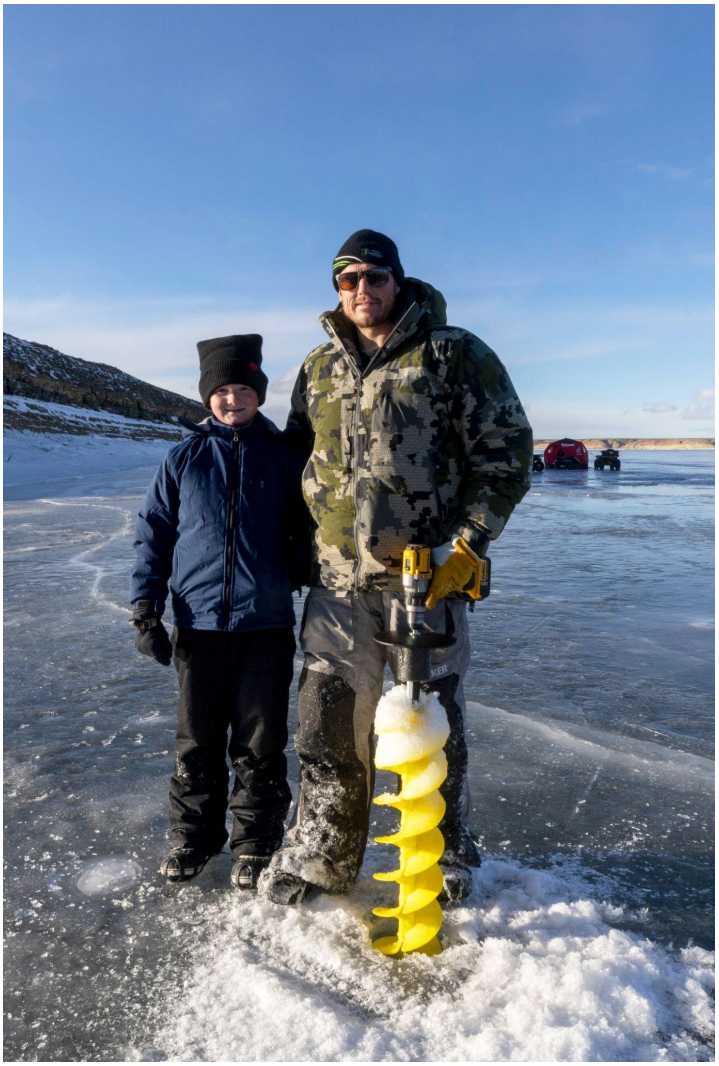


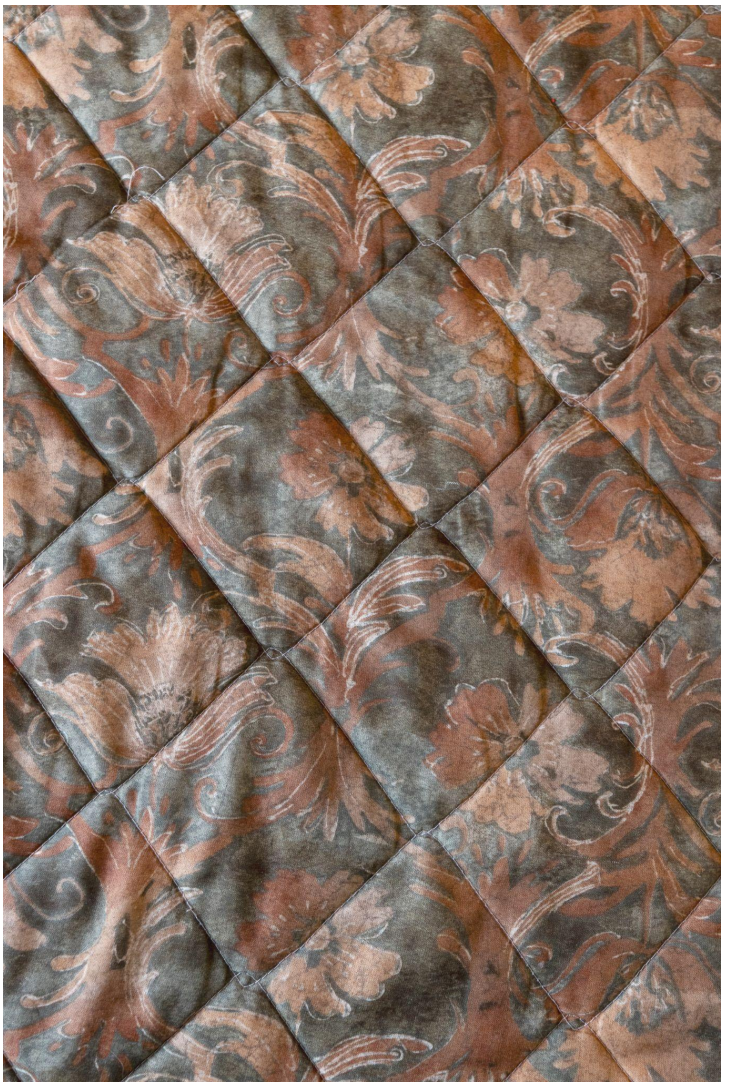




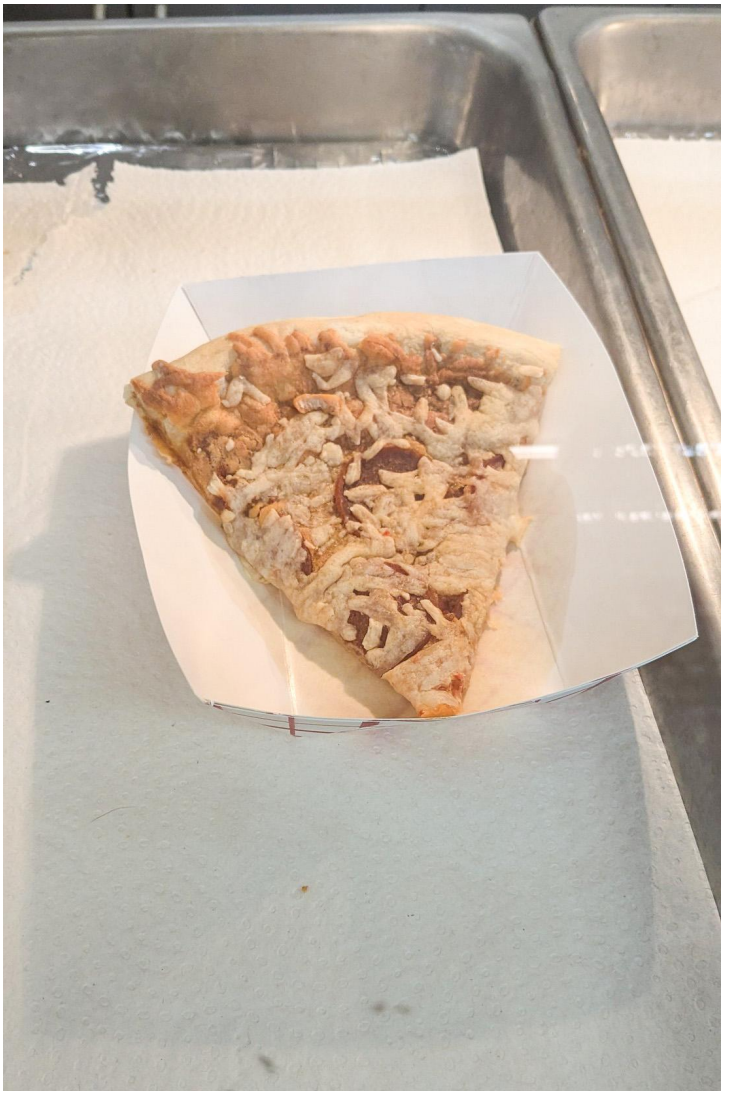
More teams were showing up. A man arrived on a snowmachine and quickly drilled a few holes for some boys to use. They were from Cheyenne. Their huts were set up on the other side of the reservoir. He said he was moving around a bit to find the fish. The sun was sinking into the barren hillocks, the ice illuminating and changing before our eyes. Burbot are a nocturnal species and it is well known that they primarily feed and spawn at night. The thought of staying out on the ice in darkness was unappealing. Though we had been at it for hours, Natalie admitted that she was still uncertain about being so far from shore.

“But I’m warm now—when I’m working I’m never cold,” she said.

We crawled up a ledge of ice by inserting our gloves into the fissures of rotten shelf ice. Our ascent up the slope was undignified and wavering. With solid ground beneath my feet, I finally felt okay again.



*Hotel bedspread at Wyoming Inn*



*Pizza at the gas station, the only place to buy food in LaBarge*

Back at the hotel, the Wyoming Inn, a sort of sponsor for the “Ding-the Ling”, Natalie changed cameras and futzed with lenses. There were only two trucks in the parking lot; the ice fishing teams were out taking advantage of the burbot’s tendency to gorge at night. We had the whole place to ourselves—in fact, the majority of the town’s population seemed to be out fishing the final night of the tournament. We headed to the Eagle Bar with hopes of finding something to eat and learning more about La Barge. The bar had the typical shrines to rightwing politics that one finds in Wyoming bars. There was a pistol framed in a shadow box that meant something to someone. There was an elk, and another elk taxidermied into perpetuity. The handful of patrons were joyful, talkative folks who picked us out immediately as out-of-towners.

“We are here for the ding-a-ling,” said Natalie.

Though she slipped up the name of the tournament, nothing was lost in translation. In fact, the patrons at the bar referred to the fish and the contestants with the same word: ding-a-lings. “It’s a ding-a-ling invasion,” said Teresa, a woman willing to talk all things La Barge.

There was no menu, but the bartender offered to cook us a frozen Digiorno pizza. We decided to just have a few beers. I was shown three brands of non alcoholic beers to choose from. Natalie settled on a Bud Lite.

Terresa, who had grown up in La Barge, said that it was tough sledding having to be bussed all the way to Big Piney for high school.

“They were mean to the La Barge kids,” she said.

Her feelings about ling being illegally introduced into the Green River watershed were conflicting. Most of the people we had met sort of shrugged when we asked about the origins of lings. Teresa felt like the sudden appearance of the species was a phenomenon among us, a sign that things are not quite right at the moment. She suggested, vaguely, that perhaps it was done on purpose. But by whom? And why? She wouldn’t elaborate. Teresa doubted the ice fishing tournament would put any serious dent in the population. She had serious doubts that the government could do anything to stop the encroachment of invasive species. One large man down the bar kept shouting, “They’re evasive. They aren’t supposed to be here. Evasive!”

He downed his drink and asked the bartender for a carton of eggs. The bartender went to the cooler and brough the man a dozen farm-fresh eggs. These were four dollars and added to the man’s tab. In an era where eggs cost at least twice that, I was perplexed. La Barge had proven to be a food desert, but if you knew the right people, it was doable. And, I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to get in on the deal of the century. I asked the bartender if I could buy a dozen as well, but I was out of luck. That was the last carton.

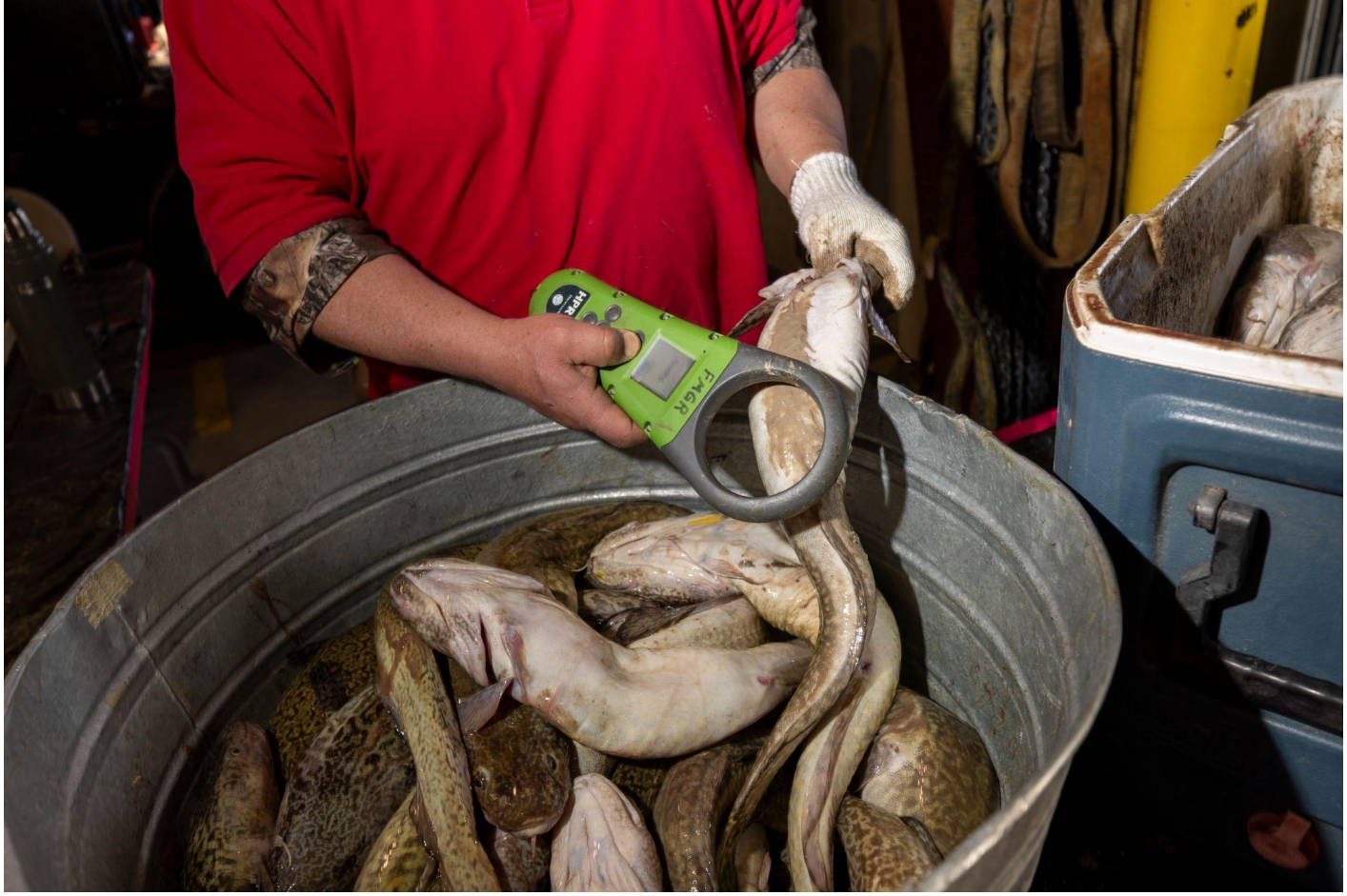
“You can have half of mine,” said the big guy. “I can only eat six or so.”

Out in the frigid air, Natalie and I marveled at the kindness you find in places like this. This, we decided, is the bedrock kindness, the thing that existed before polarization and social media brought us to each other’s throats. In a town like La Barge, you simply needed to pause on the sidewalk at night, lift your head, and drink in all the starlight you could stand. On one of the streetlights was a banner announcing the “Ding-the-ling” tournament. The cartoon fish looked nonplussed, perplexed, a wry smile on his face. I wondered out loud if I could ever live in a place so genuine, a place with no single-origin coffee, spotty WIFI, but friendly people nonetheless.

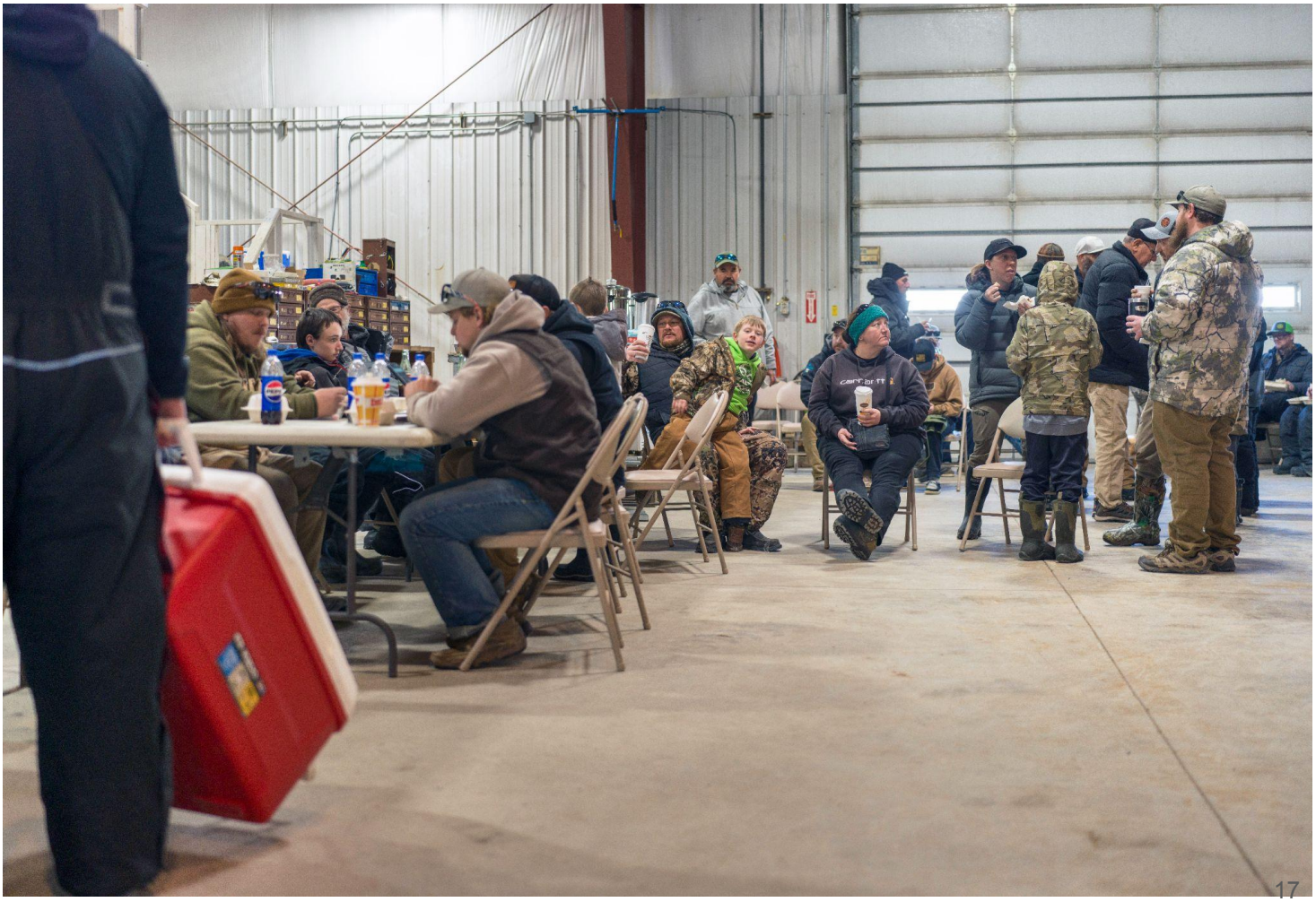
“You wouldn’t last five minutes,” Natalie said.

The freshwater ling, or burbot, is an often-misunderstood fish with mythical qualities that seem more folkloric than actual description. Robert Keith, the Regional Fisheries Supervisor for the Green River Region, says that burbot were illegally introduced in several locations in the area, probably at Big Sandy Reservoir in the 1980s. A particularly voracious species, they feed on sport fish, fry, and fish eggs, and for this, they are loathed, so much so, that throughout the winter months, there are several derbies organized for the purpose of eradication.

Keith, working the weigh-in tubs and waving a wand over the dead lings to see if any were tagged fish, had complex notions about burbot. Wyoming Game and Fish doesn’t sponsor these events, but they show up to gather data. The weigh-in celebration was being held within the enormous cement bays of SOS Well Service, a local oil and gas service company that donated the space for the tournament. Keith, gloved and partially slimed, admitted that burbot are remarkable in their ability to expand their range. He said they were related to saltwater cod, that somewhere back in time they must have been cut off from the sea. But he also acknowledged the damage a predator can wreak when it moves into new territory.



Robert Keith, the Regional Fisheries Supervisor for the Green River Region, scans ling cod for winning tags.



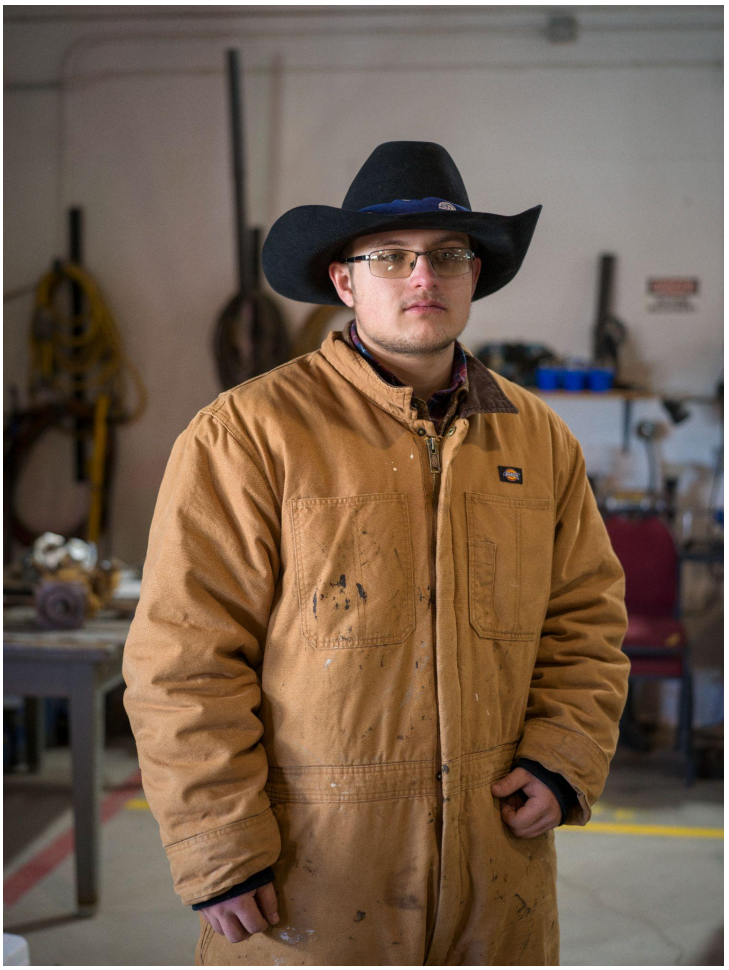
Fishermen and women at the ling-cod derby award ceremony at the SOS building in LaBarge

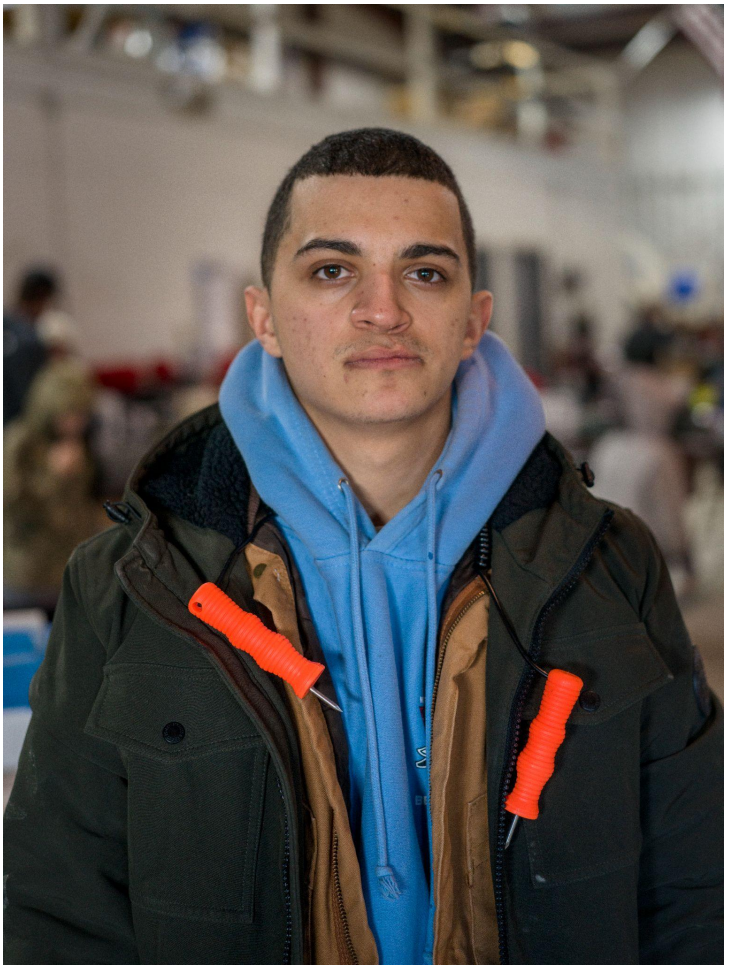
So, at least where we stood in the chilly truck bays of SOS, the burbot, though somewhat native, was a despised species capable of wreaking all kinds of havoc. At least that was what most fishermen said. But burbot are also in decline. They are not so much of an invasive species, as a familiar one that bumped over a drainage or two. The mottled patterns on their backs were beautiful in a certain light. Their single barbels, their elegant eel-like bodies, their crepuscular habits, their mysterious maws--maybe the guy at the Eagle Bar was right—they're evasive. I was told that they spawn in one incredible group event wherein hundreds of fish, males and females, form a ball and cut loose with sperm and egg. These orgies occur under the ice, out of our view. So, no, you can't watch. With burbot, there's a fine line between revulsion and admiration. And there was the frequent claim that they are delicious table fare. Oh, how I wanted to sample some fried ling dipped in tartar sauce, but there was no one setting up a fryer as I had imagined. Maybe they were on their way?

Street Meats arrived and the party got moving. Wyoming Game and Fish harvested the data, the coolers and tubs of dead burbot flowing into the metal building with no end in sight. Popular country music played. Technicians became slimed beyond belief. The burbot had to be counted, weighed and measured, scanned to see if any held the rice-sized transmitters that meant they were tagged, prize-winners of the Ling Cha-Ching. The fish seemed the least offensive players in the entire drama. Stacked in coolers, they seemed like just another fish to me. In the end, 1,277 were killed.

I have been to Alaska many times, and the smell of so many burbot recalled smell of fresh-caught cod—a bit of iodine, a bit of sulfur. Like Alaska cod, the dead fish release their bowels, and a grayish rue leaked out of them with seemingly no end. No question about it, cleaning fish is a messy, bothersome ordeal. But in Alaska, people will get irritated if you come too close to their fillets. Not here, though. No one seemed to want anything to do with them.

There were sixty of us, mostly men, a few town beauties in the mix. We stood around in our camo clothing, which you might call *ice-fishing-chic*, and talked about the quality of the ice, or upcoming tournaments, or whatever it is ding-a-lings talk about when they





Ice fishermen clockwise, Keith Puz, Gunnar Allen (8) , Avalon Green & Trevor Jones and Christian Kelly - he has some picks around his neck to be used as a safety device in case he fell through the ice.

gather in mass. A delightful man from Rock Springs regaled Natalie and me about a night out on the ice. He described the beauty of looking up at the dome of stars and listening as a whole den of coyotes serenaded the moon. He howled for us. And he yipped. Another man displayed an intimidating pistol strapped across his chest. No one gave him grief, or acted like this was unusual. For the life of me I couldn't imagine the application of a .357 while ice fishing. Perhaps, if he were in trouble, he might fire it three times into the air in the universal sign for distress? No one harangued him. Same for the gentleman in enormous white moonboots and a knit hat the simply read Tupac. Same for the kid with day-glow pink ice picks affixed to his chest with lanyards. I supposed he meant to save himself if anything odd happened out on the ice. No one teased anybody. This is what passes for diversity and tolerance in Western Wyoming. It's a sort of come one, come all ethos that you find in hostile environments. It's what I encountered in Laramie when I first arrived thirty years ago. In that Wyoming, kooks and weirdos were accepted without question. Here, in La Barge, being a ding-a-ling had finally come back into style.

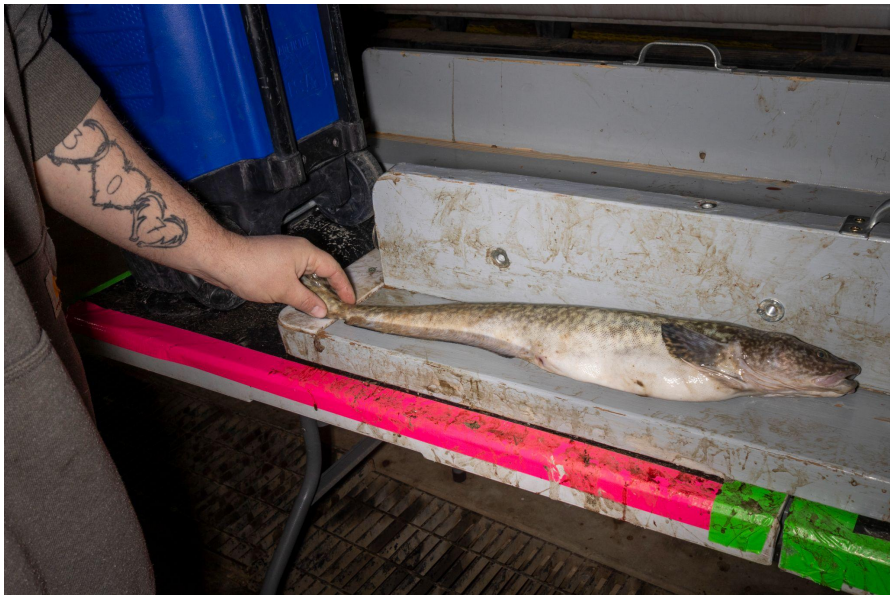
After the fish were measured and weighed, they were carried to a station where two cleaver-like blades were used to chop off the tails. This was so that none of these fish could be counted twice. Of course, given the mythic qualities of the burbot, some fishermen claimed that cutting off the tail doomed the fish even if they somehow found their way back into Fontenelle, or, God forbid, the Green River, a vetted Blue Ribbon trout stream. Several times, Natalie and I had been told that burbot had the unique ability to come back to life. Like Lazarus, these fish could be stone dead, but through some extraordinary means, they snap out of it, and live again. I had my doubts. Door prizes were being called. Next, the youth winners would be announced.

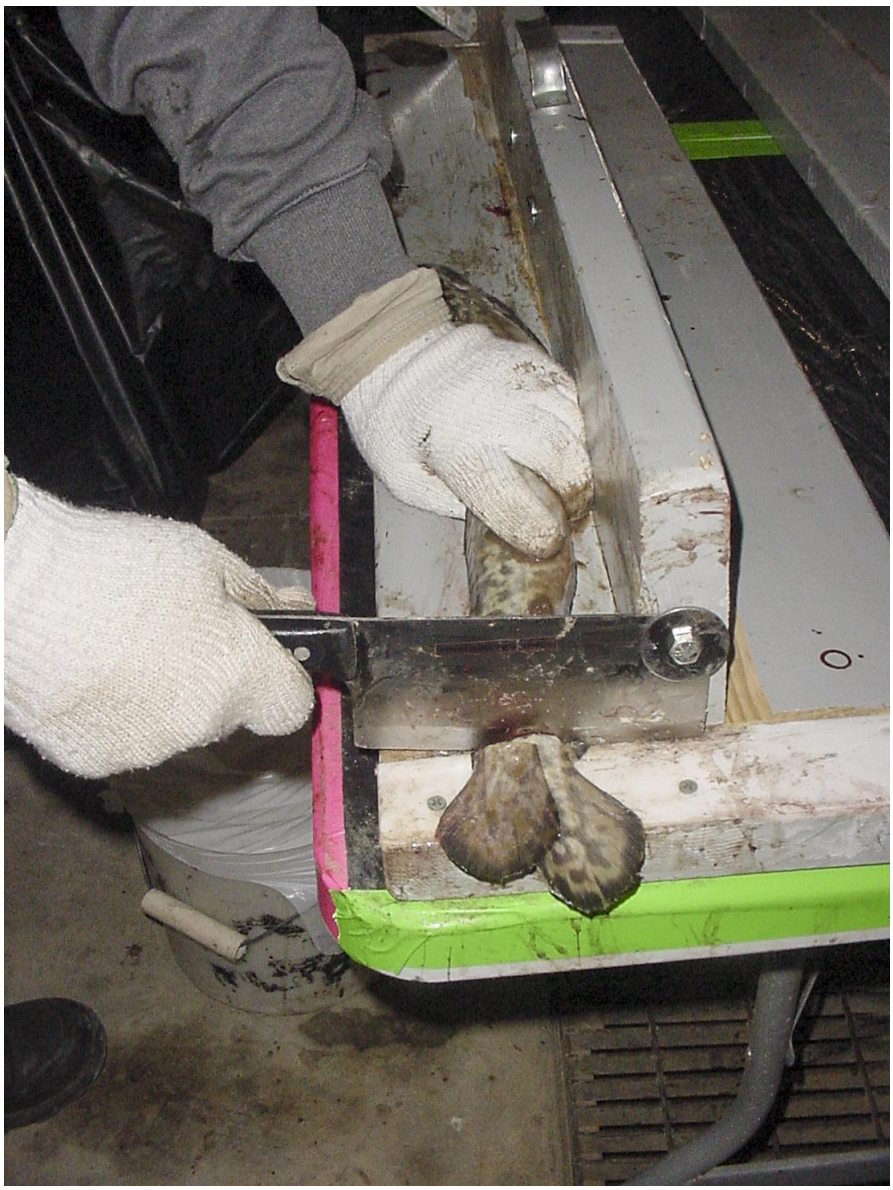
For all of the talk of freshwater ling being the poor man's lobster, not many were kept. I saw the great majority of them placed in black trash bags. I knew what that meant without having to ask. One guy kept twenty large lings which he said he was going to feed to his chickens. Smalltalk among ding-a-lings:

"Your chickens won't eat those fish."



"They might if I cut them up."





The last I saw of the burbot was as they were being hauled away. While the door prizes were being announced and the murmur grew over who had caught the most fish this year, the trash bags were being tied. It wasn't part of the official program, but this was obviously *The Moment We Toss the Lings Away*. One of the garage doors had been lifted. There was a truck waiting. The last I saw of the burbot was when they were swung over a shoulder and carried out into the parking lot over atop man's shoulder Santa Claus-style. The men hauling away the dead fish dipped under the lip of the bay doors, and stepped out into the wind.

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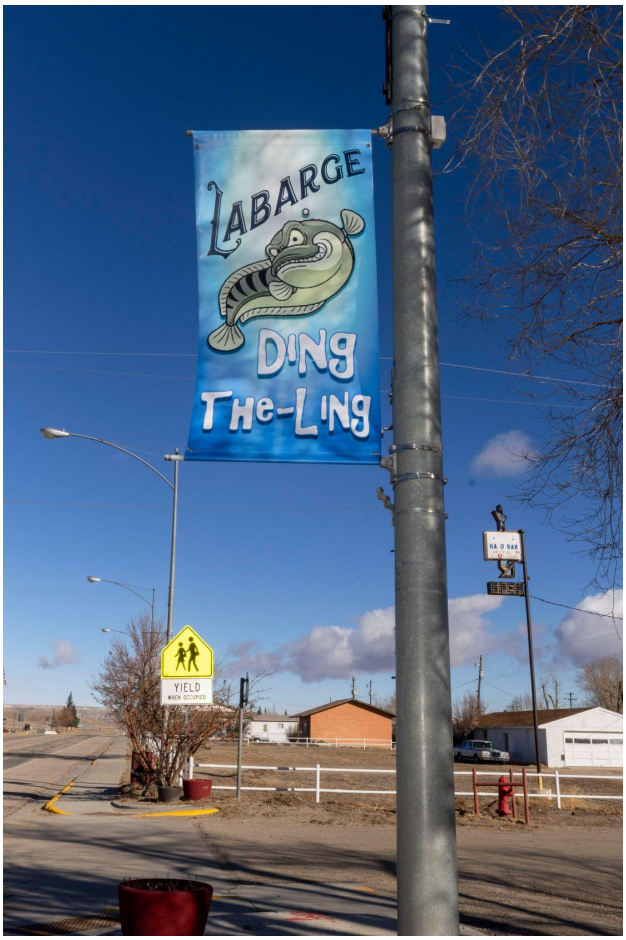


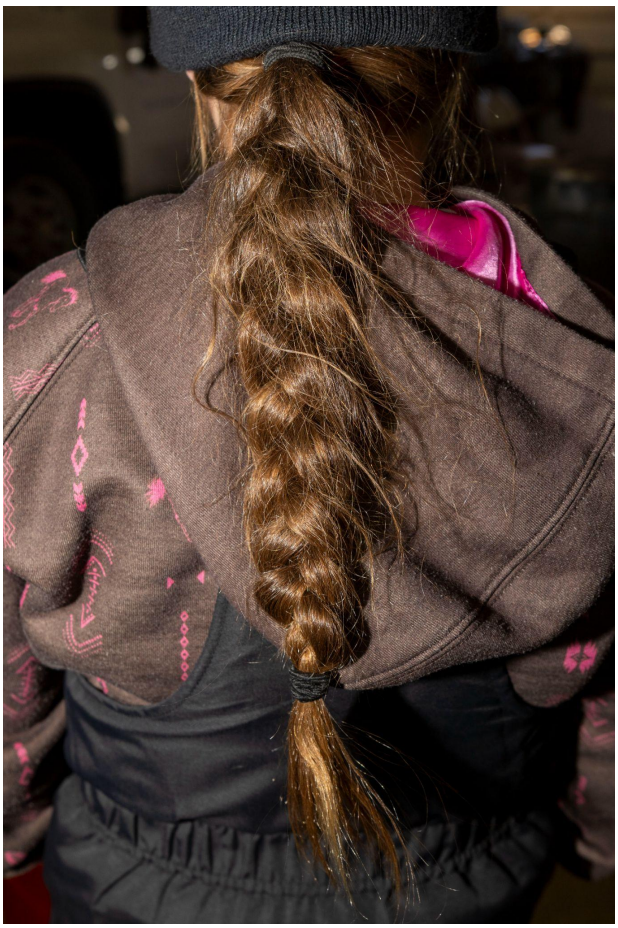

Camping hair