

**MoNA Moments presents Rena Priest, Washington State Poet Laureate, on *MMIWG: Honoring Our Stolen Sisters***

Welcome to MoNA Moments, a podcast hosted by the Museum of Northwest Art located in La Conner, Washington. The Museum of Northwest Art resides on the land of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. With gratitude, we honor their stewardship of these lands since time immemorial to the present day. This land acknowledgment does not take the place of authentic relationships with Indigenous communities.

This episode of MoNA Moments is connected to the exhibition, *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, Honoring Our Stolen Sisters*, which is on view in the outside-in gallery at the Museum of Northwest Art from October 22nd, 2022 to February 5th, 2023. Curated by Pat Paul and Candice Wilson, this exhibition was created to remember, honor, and bring awareness to the thousands of Native women and girls who go missing or are murdered each year. This podcast and the artwork in the exhibition represent many tribes in Washington, Alaska, and British Columbia, Canada.

In this episode of MoNA Moments, you will hear Rena Priest, member of the Lummi Nation and the incumbent Washington State Poet Laureate, share a poem and story excerpt in connection with the topic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Thank you for listening to MoNA Moments.

Rena Priest: "Nations are made of homes. A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground," Cheyenne proverb. Is this why they kill our women? They know home is no good without them. Forty years ago, my step-sister's mother went missing, was murdered, her body found in a riverbed. The house I grew up in was filled with her absence.

My mother tried to make that home happy and bright, to restore its grand and beautiful life. But the walls were coated with grief like flaking, grim lead paint. Grief poured from the taps like mercury. Grief hung heavy in our chests like black mold spores. At first, I was too young to know what all that sorrow was for, but I felt it. My step-sister cried in the dark of our shared room. My step-father was restless and glum. My mother wept and moaned that she lived in the shade of a ghost.

For me, it went on for almost a decade, until I grew up and moved away, out into the fresh air and sunshine. But that feeling clung to me, the sense that something was missing, had been taken away, that at any moment the world would be torn and never mend. My mother

eventually abandoned hope of ever making that house her home. Now she lives alone, complains of ghosts.

My step-sister finally laid down in her grief and went to the other side to find her mother. And that house, that once grand and beautiful home is boarded up on all sides, the windows, closed eyes of the conquered.

The story I'll share here is a novel excerpt. It was written concurrent with my research and reporting on a story of an endangered southern resident orca, who was violently taken from her pod in 1970 and has been held captive at Seaquarium in Miami ever since. She has recently been in the news due to her failing health. My tribe, the Lummi Nation, has been calling for her release and removal to a marine sanctuary.

Her name is Skali Chakhtanat, or as the media knows her, Lolita. Her mother is the matriarch of her pod and still lives in the Salish Sea. At Lummi, we call killer whales *qwe 'lhow mechen*, the people under the waves. Our culture is a reflection of their culture and we are also matriarchal. The women are a light for our people. The children are a light for our people.

Many people are unaware because the media doesn't cover it, but there is a crisis in Indian country of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. This story explores the truth put forth by late writer and Indigenous scholar Lee Maracle, that there is a direct connection between violence against the Earth and violence against women. This story is called "The Ballad of Aunt Lottie."

Will and I are 16. Will drives. I don't.

Our dad gives Will the keys and sends us to the store for spray paint for his buoys. At the hardware store, a pimply-faced kid behind the paint counter slams his clipboard down. We look up in surprise and the boy says to the other boy, "you have to watch the Indians. They'll steal anything." We leave without buying what we need and now we'll catch hell and our father will have to spend more gas money going back and forth on the long ride from the reservation to town.

Later that night, I watch a TV news show about a white man who steals women from their families and keeps them in a bunker underground. I fall asleep and in my dream I am watching white men in boats rounding up killer whales in a cove, taking the babies from their keening mothers and putting them in fishbowls so people will pay to see them. The dream changes and Will and I are on the city bus when we run into Lottie.

This dream is a memory.

I am happy to see Aunt Lottie again. She disappeared and nobody could get the police to look for her. She used to come over as often as once a week. We called her “Rez Santa” because she would arrive bearing trash bags full of the latest fashions, everything that cost too much at the mall. She loved it when she saw that you liked something she'd picked for you. She'd even swipe things on order. Taking a trip? she'd swipe you some fancy luggage. Throwing a party? she'd steal you a prime rib roast with all the fixins. She'd committed to memory the shoe, pant, shirt, and dress sizes of all her family and friends.

She knew everyone's style and kept them in mind when she gathered. Gathering, that's what she called it, and that's how she approached it, just like an Indian in the time before the whites, strolling through the forest, gathering for the people. Malls have security guards to protect the goods, but the only thing watching over nature is a person's awareness of how an ecosystem works. Take too much and there won't be enough next time. Malls have a type of artificial ecosystem too. Aunt Lottie learned its ways in order to operate.

In the old days, a hunter fasted and bathed in mountain streams to smell like the landscape. She did something like the same by only wearing the classiest clothes and making it so everything encasing her seemed expensive, even the way she smelled. Knowing how to look like she belonged was how she kept the racket going.

One time, my brother and I saw Aunt Lottie on the bus all decked out in a beautiful white wool suit. “Why are you riding the bus?” Will asks.

“Gotta go see about a car,” she says, and winks. We suspect that she meant, “gotta go steal a car.”

“Hey, Lottie, how come you steal all the time? Don't you feel bad for stealing from the shops?” I ask. Will kicks my ankle, but Aunt Lottie smiles and says, “aw, Niecy. Someday you'll understand. It goes back to the treaty. They made a promise in that treaty that we would be allowed to harvest in our usual and accustomed fishing, hunting, and harvesting grounds. But look, they've paved it all over and made it private property, and now there's nothing there to harvest but clothes and jewelry and fine home furnishings, you see?” She gestured out the window of the bus. Then after enough concrete had passed to make her point, she goes on. “No more tomk, no more kale sip, no more Alila or Saski in the springtime. Have a pop tart, kid. Let me tell you something,” she continued. “Our UNA, that's what we call our usual and accustomed harvesting grounds. Our UNA ran in a trade network all the way from the Columbia River up into the Fraser Valley, Vancouver, Washington, to Vancouver, BC. I suppose I don't need to tell you that Columbia River and British Columbia are both named for that dirtbag Columbus, and both Vancouver's are named for that other scum Captain Vancouver. You learn about the explorers yet?” I shake my head yes.

"Explorers, my ass. Greedy men with ships is all they were. Don't believe everything those teachers say. I bet you think they know it all. Do you think they know it all?"

I shake my head no.

"Good. Anyway, the *x'nitims* paved the whole thing over, so now this is how I hunt and gather. If they ain't gonna give us an education like they promised in the treaty, and if we can't get decent, honest jobs because those are only for educated whites, then we got to make our own way. You understand? There's a difference, you know, between being smart and being educated."

She eyes me to make sure I'm following. "Do you know what the principal told the teachers at school? He said, don't bother with the Indian kids because they can't learn. And let me tell you, those teachers sure didn't bother. And you know what? To hell with them. Who says we can't learn? Those fools at Sears still haven't learned that chaining up the binoculars is just a show for the dummies when they sell wire snippers two aisles over. Who can't learn, babe?" We laugh together. And then she says sternly, "not to say that what I do is okay. And don't you ever do it. I know it's wrong, but I help people too."

She pulls the cord for the next stop. "How else is some broke-ass little Indian kids gonna be able to wear some fancy pants and feel good about themselves when the whites go around rubbing our faces in what we don't have? The haves and have-nots. Someday, you'll see."

She looked away and then continued. "Yeah, I'm a thief. But look at it another way. Who's the thief? They got the whole continent in exchange for some smallpox and black infected blankets." She pauses. "You think about what I'm telling you. They tried to wipe us out completely. But here we are, so we won. You're a smart kid," she says. "You can learn. I expect you to work hard and get an education so you can help your people." She pauses again. "Instead of being like me," she sighs. "I don't know. I'm not so bad, though." The bus driver taps the brake at her stop and the passengers shift forward and back as if to nod in agreement. The bus doors open and she blows us a kiss.

"Keep winning," she says, and hops off. I watch Aunt Lottie from the bus window as she walks down the sunlit sidewalk with her long black hair, wearing all white and glowing like an angel in the concrete terrain.

The dream changes again, and I'm out fishing with Will. He is picking the net when a killer whale swims to the boat. She speaks. "They'll steal anything," she says. There is an explosion and we look up to see boats chasing a pod of orcas through the pass, herding the young ones away from their pod.

The dream changes and we see white men coming for Indian children. The children cries. They're put onto a truck and taken from their parents away to the boarding school, many never to return.

The dream changes and we are staring at an orca from behind aquarium glass. When our eyes meet, we both see her endless days of aquarium life. The buckets of fish slop to her at intervals. "Have a pop tart," says a disembodied voice, and she opens her maw like a baby bird for 50 years. We see her loneliness in that stunted world, and then we see what seems to be another whale, but somehow it isn't.

"It can't sing because it's not real," comes the voice again. "None of this is real. It's just a concrete fishbowl." The orca swims away, and when she swims back, she is Lottie, but somehow she isn't. She presses her palm to the glass. "Keep winning," she says, and I wake.

My name is Rena Priest. I'm a member of the Lhaq'temish Nation, more commonly known as the Lummi Tribe. I'm the incumbent Washington State Poet Laureate and Maxine Cushing Gray Distinguished Writing Fellow. I'm also the recipient of an Allied Arts Foundation Professional Poets Award and fellowships from the Academy of American Poets, Indigenous Nations Poets, and the Vaden Foundation. My debut collection, *Patriarchy Blues*, received an American Book Award. My most recent book, *Northwest Know-How Beaches*, includes poems, retellings of legends, and fun descriptions of 29 of the most beloved beaches in Washington and Oregon.

You can learn more about me at [renapriest.com](http://renapriest.com).