

Spencer's Rock

“They don’t like Indians much
in Washington state,” says old Spencer,
raising his voice above the thunder
of Klickitat Falls, pursing his lips
as he strains, through narrowed eyes,
to gauge the white man’s reaction.
He points to the massive boulder wedged
like a black fist between twin chutes
of frothing water. “That’s Spencer’s Rock,
named after my grandfather.” He pauses,
his silence swallowed by the falls.
“My brother drowned here last year.
He was seventy. Fall in, that’s it.”
He leans from the rickety platform,
the taut rope girdling his waist
tied to an iron ring pounded
into rounded gray bedrock above.
“My brother, he fished here all his life.
My whole family, for generations.”
He thrusts his net down into the churn,
hand over hand, before the current catches.
“Now they want to take this place away from us.”
His forearms twist like bundled sticks
as he draws his net up, empty. “Same old story.”
His son grins as he pulls his net in,
hand over hand along the aluminum pole,
a silver salmon battling the nylon twine.
“I taught him too well,” says the old man.
“Now he catches all the fish.”
He grins back, motions for his son to hurry up.
“What fish there are these days.”
Young Spencer whacks the salmon’s head
with a knobbed stick and hauls it by its bloody gills
to a cooler waiting on the rocks. The old man
points to the concrete walls and wrought-iron grates
built into a channel blasted through basalt.
“This fish ladder was placed here by the state.
It filled with gravel and they left it.
They said Klickitat Falls was in tribal hands.
Their own law says, if they don’t maintain it,
in five years it’s part of the land.
For seventy years, no one gave it a thought.
Now it’s their excuse to blow the place apart.
Spencer’s Rock, the works.”
He thrusts his net into the black-walled cataract.
“To make it easy for the fish, they say.”

Three Days in the Desert Before a Bath

I should photograph you,
sitting in the cocoa-colored
shallows of the cow pond known
on the Metzger Map of Harney
County, Southern Half, as Guano
Slough—you, settled in silt,
your clothing strewn about
the cow-pocked slough bottom
where legions of buttercups
bivouac after the spring
runoff retreats—but I too
have waited days in the heat
of desert pursuits, grasses
and wildflowers and fossil bones,
water spilling, mirage upon
mirage, through dry channels
etched on my brain; and so
the camera stays in its case,
its eye unmindful of the play
of light on the porcelain cups
of your unbridled breasts
as I wade in, filling albums
with photos of you, splashing
between blinks of my eyes.

First published in *Calapooya Collage*.

Reprinted in *STEENS MOUNTAIN SUNRISE:*

POEMS OF THE NORTHERN GREAT BASIN (2003)

On Jefferson Street

Goose Hollow, 1980

Two trucks pass my window each morning at nine,
Bringing Budweiser in, taking Blitz Weinhard out.
It's nice to know taverns are still doing fine
In the face of inflation, depression and doubt.
Where else does free enterprise flourish replete
With the devil-may-care found on Jefferson Street?

The Goose Hollow Inn rings with laughter at five,
Stirring questions my conscience would rather avoid:
Is work my sole reason for being alive?—
And is life my excuse for remaining employed?
I flush my responses from bushes I beat
And they pop up like pigeons on Jefferson Street.

When Porsches break down they are cradled in slings,
Never hoisted with hooks like your commoner makes.
These bumperless babies are delicate things
Driven mostly by leadfooted nifties and rakes.
My window affords me a fine grandstand seat
For the Porsche parade along Jefferson Street.

From Suicide Bridge on a clear day you see
(With a ten-power telescope held to your eye)
The red-lettered words on the movie marquee:
Inside, JOY! they proclaim to the world from on high.
I drink to the failure of those who'd delete
All the X-rated scenes seen on Jefferson Street.

A block up the way a man hunkers and stares
At the sidewalk, oblivious even to cold,
Adjusting the cap and the muffler he wears
But unable to fathom the fact that he's old.
He's someone you recognize, someone you meet
When you walk in December on Jefferson Street.

My maple tree changes to gold in a blink,
Then it's bare, then with new leaves and full growth and old.
I see what I look at, I know what I think,
But I keep precious little of what's mine to hold.
I watch as the seasons slip past incomplete
Through my time-machine window on Jefferson Street.

First published in *Willamette Week*.

Reprinted in *THE WILD BUNCH* (1998)

On Stirring the Pot

The radiance! A brace of rich
Imaginations running wild
Through daisy fields without a stitch.

And what of you, quixotic child?
Are you a second Joan of Arc,
Or Dor-o-thy, the Meek and Mild?

When running naked, only stark
Will do. Divestiture requires
As much of tinder as of spark.

It's not the weak who fan the fires.
The souls pressed hard against the mold
Know nothing of their own desires.

They wind up winding down as cold
As old refrigerator coils,
Their aspirations pigeonholed.

Until the stuff you're stirring boils,
Nobody knows how hot you've turned,
How plagued with disarray your toils.

Look all about as books are burned.
See how the faces radiate
The sum of what mankind has learned:

We're put on Earth to procreate.
One scratch won't satisfy an itch.
God may be good but greed is great.

First published in *Poetry*