

Bill Siverly

## Umatilla Beat

From the front window desk of the *Herald* on Main Street,  
I watch shoppers and shopkeepers heading for morning break:  
Coffee and bear claws over gossip in Pheasant Cafe.  
It's nineteen sixty-seven in July, and I am typing a headline:  
Umatilla Man Clears Tunnels in Viet Nam.

The siren howls, and by reflex I grab the Rolleiflex,  
Rev up Rambler, race after fire trucks out on Punkin Road.  
Flames and smoke billow skyward from mobile home.  
Firemen with airpacks beckon coughing news kid  
To shoot heroic action for front page next edition.

Kids with nothing to do but wait for the county fair  
Ride bicycles in endless circles on residential streets.  
Older ones like Johnny get drunk and pretend to be saved,  
Raising arms and hallelujahs at tent revivals in Pasco,  
Race cars by night, fall in love, and register for war.

Umatilla, once a boomtown for McNary Dam,  
Once a northwest railhead with stores and bars galore,  
Once *imatilam*, rocky bottom village with a vintage salmon run,  
Now Umatilla watershed, a sink for runoff pesticide,  
The town a shuttered ruin when the army has moved on.

Senator Hatfield, lobbied on legislation by local cattlemen,  
Holds for my photography a slice of Hermiston watermelon.  
Out of cattleman earshot, I thank him for his stand against the war.  
He thanks me, says "Our view remains unpopular"  
(As long as young men rush to die, and old men urge them on).

Slow news day in town, I grab my Rolleiflex,  
Ramble out past Echo to check the facts of eternal return:  
Dry wind blowing sand across old Paiute sagebrush earth;  
Talkative August harvesters of mint and circles of corn;  
Army Depot nerve gas bunkers, basking in the sun.

Main Street drugstore window features images of Beatles  
Tricked out in Sergeant Pepper's splendid rainbow uniforms.  
The war against the future never ends.  
After my last assignment drinking beer with loud Jaycees,  
I pass the dark fairgrounds, quiet cemetery of dreams.



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## Ghost Bridge

Summer nights my father drove us in his pride,  
A fifty-three Buick Special heavy with chrome and steel,  
Clattering over the rickety Eighteenth Street Bridge  
That spanned the Clearwater River to North Lewiston,  
To see movies at the drive-in, like *Destination Moon*.

Built in nineteen-thirteen, the Eighteenth Street Bridge  
Put Silcott's downstream cable ferry out of business,  
After fifty years of service from the founding of the town.  
In the nineteen-twenties Clarence would ride his horse with no  
Saddle from the ranch at the foot of Lewiston Hill,

Across the Eighteenth Street Bridge up Normal Hill to school.  
North Lewiston forever the wrong side of the River—  
To come from there, by horse no less, shows lack of class.  
You surely must have shit on your shoes, Hayseed,  
Surely you will spend the rest of your life in this town.

Just before the south end of the Eighteenth Street Bridge  
Stood a small white cinderblock café called Jack's Place.  
Six A.M. my father and I on our way upriver would park the Buick,  
Meet Clarence among the mumbling mill-hands and fishermen,  
The air thick with bacon, coffee, tobacco, and damp flannel.

By nineteen fifty-eight the Eighteenth Street Bridge was gone,  
Replaced by Clearwater Memorial Bridge upstream.  
Today the Army Corps has reconfigured the levee, and Jack's Place  
Exists no more. Whenever I swing by, I want to turn,  
As if to cross again that bridge to destinations yet unknown.

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## The Mill

One rainy November night the saddest man I ever saw  
Appeared at our front door, mother's oldest brother,  
Uncle Cap from California answering the call  
For working men to build the pulp and paper mill.  
That was nineteen-forty-nine, the last I ever saw of him.

Such a mill requires plenty of fresh, clean H<sub>2</sub>O,  
So they built it in East Lewiston along the Clearwater River,  
Two miles or so above its confluence with the Snake.  
The river that entered east became the outflow on the west,  
Twice as warm, and creamy with liquor of paper.

Valley towns indentured to a single corporation,  
Trapped beneath a permanent inversion of the sky,  
Lewiston and Clarkston shed tears of H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>.  
Boosters called the stench of rotting eggs "the spice of money,"  
As "floaters" of dirty foam drifted into shore.

The second round of cancer killed my father at fifty-three.  
Ten years later, at Gertrude Bradshaw's graveside rites  
In Normal Hill Cemetery, I saw on nearby stones the names  
Of childhood gods, the men my father worked with,  
Diligent pushers of paper for the paper industry.

Clarence, cancer survivor whose first wife died of cancer,  
Spoke of catching bass under Clearwater Memorial Bridge,  
Not far below the mill. "Risky place to fish," I say.  
"Oh, I don't eat them," Clarence replies. "They're full of dioxin."  
Cancer came back and killed him anyway.