

Bill Siverly

Night River

We walk the beach at Cottonwood Point
Where Lewis and Clark, homeward bound in eighteen-six,
Fearing late salmon runs and the upstream starvation
That drove whole families downriver in canoes,
Waited for their men to hunt and dry a supply of meat.

Nacreous light behind rain clouds over Washougal
Illuminates the smoking pulp mill at Camas.
A man is fishing, and seven children sit around a fire.
Under cottonwood trees Evergreen seniors drink beer.
Motorboats drone by, their modest wakes dissipating in silence.

Darkness spreads west out of Columbia's Gorge.
The trees on Reed Island grow shadowy and indistinct.
Lights come on along the freeway on the far shore.
Like returning wilderness, night reclaims the earth.
Landscape and clouds merge with river surging by.

As we enter the Gorge, we ask the spirit of this place
To lead us like a running light through darkness.
Dimly winking, it only seems as if it were there.
Receding further upstream, it seems to disappear
Like the dark of the moon, the ancestor of all things.

We rise and go down to the river road,
Setting out east after the morning star
Has lifted a veil of pearl-grey heliacal light.
And then a ruddy counterglow awakens the birds,
Filling the Gorge with answering layers of song.

We pause at Cape Horn near a town called Daylight.
The long reach of the river spreads silver-blue
Around the arrowhead of Skamania Island,
Ten miles upstream to Beacon Rock emerging from mist.
A freight train throbs and clanks eastward through forest.

Mist takes on a golden glow, the loud serenade
Subsides, the vast Columbia Gorge holds its breath.
The sun springs over the bluff in a torrent of gold.
We pull up to the gravel beach at St. Cloud,
Coming to rest like windfall under the apple trees.



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Night River II

(For Dale Edmonds, 1946-2003)

Koos-koos-kee was how the Nimipu knew you,
Meaning *clear water*, rushing down eastern mountains,
No longer transparent as under Lewis & Clark canoes,
But cloudy and flush with two hundred years' effluvia,
Out of Orofino, Kamiah, Kooskia.

No longer do people camp along your banks,
But often drive your highway side in daylight,
To swim or fish or raft your shadowy reaches,
River of night that still flows
Down the winding canyon of Miocene basalt.

On summer evenings my father leaving work
Stopped home long enough to load his fishing gear and me
Into the Buick so we could spend twilight spin-casting
Over eddies and riffles and into deep holes,
Where trout lay low and rarely took the lure.

Koos-koos-kee, that glassy stretch below Ahsahka
Mirrors the sky, dark masses of pines and dun slopes,
An apparition so still and clear there's nothing left to know,
But how to return to your place of perfection,
How to recover the home of the soul.

Saturdays in fall my father roused me at sunrise
For breakfast at Jack's Place, the whole day before us,
And even days when nothing came home in the creel
We savored each moment of red sumac light,
Down to early darkness rushing toward solstice.

No longer do people drink along your banks
The way they used to after darkness fell,
Drawn like moths to roadhouse neon like ZAN'S,
Later careening down Highway Twelve and crashing
Through guardrails to find cold death in Big Eddy.

Your old roadhouses have all gone up in flames,
But your water still runs clear as memory,
Whenever I enter your canyon of rocks and sparse pines,
My heart rushing, spinning like a makeshift raft
Borne over shadows in fading light.

