

David Hedges

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."

