

The Yakima River

By Joseph Powell

1.

At ten I splashed its flanks for fish,
saw its world of otters, beavers, minks,
those slinky divers, water's weavers;
garter snakes afloat or essing with ease;
herons doing Tai Chi, or still as stones,
poised to throw their one spear;
clouds drinking; black-masked ospreys dragging their tiny
reflections until their prey rises
and they dive to meet themselves, that empty handshake,
and emerge, dripping, shaking themselves
already looking toward the next graspable thing.

Turned over rocks for their teeming
underbellies, that squiggle of nymphs
crawling toward wings; underwater worms;
feisty crawdads shaking their fat fists;
ridged mussel shells, purple-streaked pearl,
flashing white under the riffles;
blotched and spiny sculpins moving their great fans,
their big heads almost half their bodies,
little philosophers under their chosen stones.
The glitter of skwalas, mayflies, midges,
gray-drakes, and olive duns,
mica of the air, this water's deft dreaming;
waxwings weaving their parabolas,
collecting these sunlit minutes.

Saw shoreline cottonwoods ringed by studious mouths,
standing like pencils on their fat pieces of lead,
chips scattered like shavings,
wondering which direction falling takes,
fifty years of innerness open as a newspaper.

Felt water's pushing onrushing weight
like a thousand invisible hands
in a crowd of oblivious hurry,



how its heavy surges swamp
inner sovereignty, ridicule dawdling,
on-and-on its mantra,
as it falls toward always.

2.

Young I swam full-strength against its on-rushing
side currents, going almost nowhere,
but loving the tensile pressure,
that wet equilibrium, that poise of power.
Now I drift with it, letting it take me,
swimming without swimming, earth-flying,
feeling each swale and hesitation, each swirl
and swift plunge, bobbing like an apple,
time's fruit, its lineage and language.
I'm of it, its object, its eye,
bobbing over and into eons,
that cyclic permanence inside each bead,
that droplet I am and am becoming.

Clarity is its milieu, moves how the mind moves
from burnished thing to thing, until something vital
rises out of it, a depth exposed, thus preyable.
It moves as it meditates, its eddies downward spirals,
motion's obsession, a gyre, released as undertow,
censuring the smooth sailing of its surface.
When I stare into this moving mirror,
it stares into me. Again looking up
the world changes, swivels on changing air—
trees sway away from their trunks,
snags reach for their missing leaves,
grasses ascend sagebrush hills
and return on rolling waves of light.

It's a way of being, a wandering force,
gathering in its minions—Taneum, Naneum, Manastash,
Ahtanum, Toppenish, Satus, . . .--,
its lesser rivers, Cle Elum, Teanaway, Naches—
tucking them in like a hen its chicks.
It swells or diminishes, stalls or plunges,

bends to assess and embrace, bathes what it destroys,
births what it beats, polishes edges, floats or sinks what's foreign,
mutters to itself, leans into farmers' Wilson Creek silt and poisons,
runoff, washes away foam and Styrofoam, cans and bottles,
rusts cars and carts, rods and rims, flashes its plastics
like the glitter of strippers, but always pushing forward,
its nine million year old speech.

