Gloria Bird (Spokane) is a member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians of Washington State and grew up on both the Spokane and Colville Indian Reservations. She is one of the founding members of the Northwest Native American Writers Association. She received her M.A. from the University of Arizona in Tucson and her B.A. from Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

Ms. Bird is the author of the poetry collections *Full Moon on the Reservation*, which won the Diane Decorah First Book Award for Poetry, and most recently, *The River of History: Prose Poems*. She is an associate editor for the *Wicazo Sa Review*, a Native literary magazine and has served as the contributing literature editor for *Indian Arts Magazine*. She has been included in many anthologies and has written introductions to *Dancing on the Rim of the World*, with Elizabeth Woody, and *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*.

With Joy Harjo she co-edited the anthology *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language: North American Native Women’s Writing* and has been active in encouraging Native women writers. In her introduction to that anthology she talks about the task of the writers to use the English language to “turn the images around to mirror an image of the colonized to the colonizers as a process of decolonization . . .”

After years of teaching in various schools including the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, she is back in Spokane, Washington, where she lives with her three children and works as a grants writer for the Spokane Indian Tribe. She is currently writing a collection of fiction and essays as well as completing a manuscript of poetry based on the testimony of women and children during the Nez Perce Retreat of 1877.
Images of Salmon and You

Your absence has left me only fragments of a summer's run
on a night like this, fanning in August heat a seaweeded song.
Sweat glistens on my skin, wears me translucent, sharp as scales.

The sun wallowing its giant roe beats my eyes back red and dry.
Have you seen it above the highway ruling you like planets?
Behind you, evening is Columbian, slips dark arms
around the knot of distance that means nothing

to salmon or slim desiring. Sweet man of rivers,
the blood of fishermen and women will drive you back again,

appointed places set in motion like seasons. We are like salmon
swimming against the mutation of current to find
our heartbroken way home again, weight of red eggs and need.
Kettle falls on the Columbia, Circa 1937

The river is a green crystalline ribbon flowing through the heart of the lands of the Inland Salish peoples. During the salmon run, the various bands flock to the river for sustenance, both water and salmon connected in the image of light dating back to ancient times when Coyote released Salmon from the first trap. The natural falls lie low and shimmer in the translucent green light that is the river. The falls form tables of water scallops in the fast running waters where the backs of salmon dapple the glistening surface. A thick forest surrounds the area. In the fall, just before the world turns a mottled green and the fog rolls in, the last of summer ignites across the hill backs.

We arrive in the fishing camp just before sunset. The colors along the river are subdued by the mist from the waterfall, barely three-hundred feet long, and on our side of the river, the rocks are pockmarked—or kettle-shaped—which gives us the name for this place, Kettle Falls. These gathering times bond us as kinsmen and fellow fishers among the people of the Inland. We are related by blood, by inter-tribal marriage and by the act of fishing for salmon. This year, there are many king salmon to be caught, and already the smell of smoked fish thickens the air and sets my stomach to growling. Only recently, we finished the last of the smoke-dried salmon that I made into a soup of salmon and dumplings, a staple meal through the long winter. The dried salmon can be stored in flour sacking and is packed easily because it weighs so little once dry. I look forward to tasting the fresh fish cooked outdoors again.

Our son, daughter-in-law and grandson are already at the fishing camp when we arrive, and the old campsite is alive with excitement. Men are at one end of the camp, gambling, women are talking and laughing in groups and children are playing. My son lives with his wife’s family on the Colville Reservation on the other side of the river. This year, they made their camp on our side, which gives me an opportunity to visit with my grandson, Sussep, already a young man. Fifteen years earlier, I was present at his birth in the spring of flooding, and rocked him in my arms as if he were as fragile as a baby blue jay. I know he is no longer a child, and I must remember to keep my memories of his infant years to myself.

In the evening, my husband attends to his fishing gear, in particular, his spears with points of sharpened deer horn. He sets the deer horn to the frame with pine pitch,
working his way around each with care, checks his line, tying it to the head of his long-handled spear. Every night before retiring he goes through this process in preparation for another day's fishing. I watch him work while I cook our evening meal. He is patient and works with a steady hand. The low roaring of the falls is heard over the domestic sounds coming from nearby camps, familiar and comforting.

The flap of our teepee is pushed aside and our grandson Sussep enters. He clears the opening with the full energy of his youth and greets his grandfather and me. But as his eyes adjust to the dim light and he notes his grandfather working on his gear, his smile fades. "Grandpa, when will you ever change?" he asks.

Then he turns to me. "Grandma," he begs, "don't let him take those pieces of wood and bone to the river, he will embarrass me in front of the others." Hotness erupts on my cheeks. It seems as though the young nowadays can always find something wrong with the old ways, but it would not be good to argue the night before fishing. I look to my husband as he keeps working—as if he hadn't heard the pain in our grandson's voice, though I know he has. By way of reprimand, I tell my grandson about the time the whites rode through the fishing camp.

"They threw the bones of animals into the water, and the salmon left, do you remember that story?" The story was a recent event and made an impact that talking about Coyote didn't. Sussep nodded his head.

Fishing for the younger men is so different from the way it is with the older men. These younger ones skip from boulder to boulder along the shore, hoping to spear the salmon with their whiteman-made iron spears. It is the same in every camp where the old men work. The young are learning from the convenience of the metal-worked spears purchased from the whites to devalue the self-sufficient methods that our people's survival depends upon. It is a contention of the younger generation
that the handmade implements are not sophisticated enough for them. Sussep is no different. I feel a heavy loss of another piece in the chain of survival and I worry for him. I worry for us all.

Although we women are not allowed to go near the river while the men fish, we know what goes on. I knew that his father, our son, tried to get him out on the scaffolds but that Sussep was not able to stay above the raging falls for too long a time. The scaffolds shook above the thundering water. I also know that Sussep is as skittish as a rabbit when he is teased. Teasing is a way to aid in the shaping of behavior that our old people used in the old days, but I knew that Sussep reacts in anger. This seems the only response of these young ones who were sent to the missionary school.

It is not my place to attempt to dissuade my husband from fishing the way our people have from the beginning. I refuse to come to the aid of my grandson. It was not good luck to have this youngster in the teepee complaining while his grandfather prepared his fishing gear. I ask why he has come. "The salmon leader will call the men out in the morning," he said. He left as he came with a whoosh of the teepee flap. He told us what we already knew, and I was struck by my grandson's lack. Later, when my husband was getting ready to sleep, I asked him why he would not use the metal spears. He
smiled and told me that the young men could not spear as many fish as he, even with their new spears. He comes from a family of fishers, and it is true. He is a good fisherman.

The next morning, after the men leave, we women move to our work site. We pick a spot in the shade in which to work at slicing and smoking the salmon. The fishing season means long hours of working hard and the shade suits us well. We work efficiently and quickly. Everything depends on how the salmon are treated during the fishing season. If we do not follow all of the rules regarding their treatment, our teachings tell us that the fish will not return. It means that we follow the directions as they were passed down to us. This includes staying away from the water and taking care in the disposal of salmon innards. Even the children must follow the rules during fishing season.

I was contemplating the implications of my grandson's behavior of the previous night when a young girl moved next to me. She was the daughter of one of a visiting tribe's fishing leader—she was Spokane. She had large dark eyes, a shy girl. She greeted me as grandmother properly and she asked if I might help her. I thought she meant with cutting salmon, but when I looked at her, I sensed her inner turmoil and stopped what I was doing. She was worried. She looked at the ground while she told me that on her way to catch up with the women that morning she had run out of her camp, trailing behind. She stopped to remove a pebble from the bottom of her moccasins, leaning against a tree to get her bearings. Too late, she realized that she had her hand on a fishing spear. I told her that since she did not do it intentionally it was not her fault. I could not ascribe blame to the girl who was very shaken by the accident. But I also knew that Indian taboo existed for a reason, and I was not as sure as I seemed. Was it an older or a newer spear? I should have, but dared not ask.

While we cut fish and lace the fillets onto stakes around the fire, conversations drift in and out of our hearing, carried on air from the river. I hear snatches of the young men making fun of the old ones' handmade spears and netting. In the old days, they would not have dared speak as disrespectfully to their old people as they do now, I thought, making fun. I knew Sussep loved his grandfather, but was confused by the belief that the white man's iron spears were superior. If it weren't for the ingenuity of our ancestors, we would not be here today. But I feel that the world is changing, too; I sense other disturbing changes coming in the near future. I
am not so sure that my husband and I will live to see those changes, and I fear them.

During the day, two girls, the daughters of one of our guests, are caught throwing scraps of fish gut at one another. It is a sure sign of the trouble to come, but I dismiss the thought. At noon time, the people are called for the distribution of the salmon. The salmon divider distributes the salmon equally among all of the people there, whether or not they were fishing. Everyone is given an equal portion. It could mean a period of starvation if we were stingy. I catch a glimpse of my husband briefly. He appears tired, yet he has the excited air of a younger man. He is a fisherman. The thought of the young girl tries to push into my consciousness, but I drive it back again. Was it his? After our noon meal, we go back to work.

There are times when, as an old woman, I have regretted very little. I have had a good life, and I have enjoyed traveling the way we Indians do, across the plains and over mountains in search of roots and berries, or with my husband to buy or trade for horses and other necessities. To fish. I regret that we did not take Sussep, our firstborn grandson, into our home, as is the old custom. When his parents settled in a square house on the reservation, they wanted him to attend the mission school. I was saddened to see him grow into a man who did not seem to know anything about our people or our life. But that is in the past. I regret so few things from my long life, but that, I regret most—even over my silence that day.

As the women work, I hear the story about a woman who had salmon powers and who, it was said, was able to call salmon into her weir. If this were possible, would it have changed the course of a young woman’s life more recently? Was it possible for an ordinary young woman to touch the salmon spear? Uneasy, remembering the young woman’s dilemma, I begin humming an old children’s feast song as I grasp the firm but slippery flesh of salmon after salmon. I slice from the backbone down following the outer edge of ribcage to the belly. The afternoon wears on and the women’s foreheads glisten in the simmering heat. Soon the leaves would turn, and the nights would grow long. We would have salmon enough to last us the winter with more left over.

In the stories of long ago, Coyote was the first divider. I have heard that he jumped into the mouth of the giant beaver and cut his heart loose. He sliced the beaver to pieces and distributed the body parts to the animal people who were locked inside. The distribution of those parts became the present day
and the salmon fillet I held down. I walk toward the men's voices muffled in the sounds of the waterfalls. Something has happened, but there is nothing to be done but wait. The women are all gathered together; none dare to close in any further. We are aware that the noise the men were making was sure to spook the salmon.

A younger man is running into the camp from the river, and we watch him come. As he searches our faces he must see expectant fear, then relief, as his eyes pass over one woman then the next without beckoning to any one. But when he turns his gaze on me, I feel my knees buckle. He motions for me to follow him down to the river. The men's trail veers from the larger trail that runs parallel to the banks. I'd never been on this trail during fishing season. Something out of the ordinary was happening, and because of it, fishing would be postponed, perhaps for days. I felt as if I was floating to the edge of the water.

I remember that particular day for many reasons. I remember that I thought it was my man and partner in this life who had an accident. The vision of living my life alone panned out before me. It would be many years before that would happen, but at that moment when I thought it was my man, I prepared for the worse. My heart raced like

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a wild turkey in my chest, and I clutched my chest as if I could suppress the fear gathering there. But it was not my life partner; it was Sussep.

I learned later that Sussep was asked by his father to take his place on the scaffold above the river. What happened next, no one was sure of, only that as he leapt from the tenuous perch closer in to the shore, he lost his footing on the slippery rocks. When his body slid into the water, he grabbed a hemp rope that slid with him into the river. Somehow in his struggle to reach the shore, the rope tangled around his legs and arms. Men along the shore dove into the water to bring him out, my husband among them. Sussep regained consciousness later, and was well again in a few days' time. Only in his sleep would there be an indication, in the form of fitful dreams, that he'd nearly passed from our world into the next.

That was twenty years ago. Now, I live with my son and daughter-in-law in their house on the reservation. Things move so fast, and after my husband passed on, I had to give up the buckboard and horses. My son believed I was too old to ride a horse. I've adjusted to my new life, and it has been a blessing to me in my old age to have many good memories on which I may draw. Of our life before, of being free.

On that day long ago, the salmon fishing ceased. We believe that when flesh or remains of anything living is thrown into the water, the salmon take leave. And they did. For two days, we waited for their return. The divider was sent to the river each morning, and every day he returned empty-handed. I knew that it wasn't just that the men dove into the water, but that a woman was at the river, too. That woman was I. There were other incidents to be blamed as well. Too many times when there is fault it is larger than the individual, and I knew that a woman had touched a fishing spear. I thought about the children who threw the fish innards, and that they were not stopped. The younger people needed the adults to teach them. This was the necessity of working as a community; everyone did their part. I could have spoken to them, but even I had not.

The men and women sweated separately for two days, praying for the return of the salmon. In the old days, our lives depended upon the salmon, the berries, the deer and the roots. The seasons guided us, and with each new fruit of the earth we celebrated with meals for the offerings given to us, the Creator's children. We shared our food with one another as a community. All of those things depended upon our passing.
the customs and teaching on to the children. For those two days we all suffered, some of us with guilt. I knew that my silence made me complicit, or at least partly responsible. To compensate, since that time I have taken the role of grandmother to heart, and will always intervene when it comes to teaching the children.

The year was 1937, and as I have said, we did not know what the future held in store for us Indians. Maybe that is for the best. We did not know, for instance, that the following year would be our last for fishing for king salmon in the homeland streams. One thing about us is that we believed things would remain the same forever. For us, the span of time means from the first beginnings, when the animals talked, through the present day. For us, it was easy to believe everything would always remain the way it was because we trusted our stories. We knew that the salmon, berries and roots that we ate kept us strong and healthy. Back then, our diet was a balanced one that protected us from sickness. Our lives centered on the game, the fish and the indigenous plant life. The intimate knowledge of the landscape was survival knowledge. But in a single generation, all of that knowledge was nearly lost.

In 1939 the backwaters of Grand Coulee Dam flooded our beloved falls, but it was the building of Chief Joseph Dam that prevented the salmon from reaching our homelands and ended our way of life for good. We were required by the government to take up farming. I believe it was intended to keep us on the reservations because before that time we wandered freely across the country. My husband was not able to adjust to reservation life and I believe it was making that transition to farming that killed his spirit. I don’t blame him for leaving. In a few more years’ time, all of the land surrounding our reservations was covered over by wheat. Camas and bitterroot became harder and harder to find. For the roots and berries that we gathered, we were forced to ask for permission to gather from the whites in our own territory. Everything happened too fast for old people like me. Yet I still have my memories of what it was like for us before to comfort me.

The story of Coyote releasing Salmon from the first trap shifts and in the story as it is now told, Coyote will return to tear apart the dams that block the passage of the salmon. This time, it is the dams that are the monsters he will slay. Coyote will come back and rescue us again as he did in the old days. I wish he would hurry up and come.

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