

Old Humptulips

For my Grandfather, Francis Patsey

In the spirit of seawater,
you jump from one boulder to another,
and with the quick dip of the hand
you draw from under the next rock
a fifth sculpin, grab it by the gills,
a fish our people say sings to us,
a gift you will clean and roast on the beach fire
for your love and grandchildren.
Your new neighbors that came from the East
stare at you from outside the circle,
behind a blackberry bush, curious
yet guarded and unattached.
They have settled in the ruins of your family's
abandoned village of white fir and cedar.
They surround your crumbling longhouse
plagued with a disease no shaman understood
or could fight with rattle, smoke or song.
These settlers fear your sculpin dance
and refuse to join your family feast.
So you imagine they are grey willows
vanishing on the wind of mountain guardians,
step toward the beach, a whirling
sunspot on the sand print of strangers.

—Duane Niatum