

Michael McDowell

Betsy

Betsy, the driftwood horse swing,
Hung by two ropes
From the leaning crabapple
In our Seaview beachhouse lot.

A generation of children climbed into Betsy's saddle
And rode to surf sounds through the Willapa Hills
Heading them off at the pass
Somewhere near Beard's Hollow, or Chinook.

Cisco Kid hat, pearl-handled cap guns,
Davy Crockett coonskin cap, cowboy chaps,
All the paraphernalia of violence and
Conquest rode beneath that crabapple.

One June when we arrived at the house
The tree had fallen. My uncle George
Had cut up the trunk where it lay. Like a hatcheted snake
It crawled in sections diagonally across the yard.

Betsy was nowhere to be found. Maybe burned in the
Woodstove, salt-soaked seawood snapping.
We have since learned to ride other, invisible horses
Beneath treeless skies.

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Palmer

When as a child I rode home
On what is now the TriMet 51 bus
But then was the Rose City Traction Company
Council Crest,
Just after 5 o'clock
Rain-coated men packed the bus.

The ones I knew were all lawyers.
They loomed large,
Rectangular blocks of sandstone and basalt.
They sat in all the back seats
Even across the back bench,
Where I usually sat.

They held square briefcases on their knees,
As if whenever they got on
The bus developed fold-down trays
Of leather-topped desks.

The gruff, remote talk
Intended to exclude.
The biggest, gruffest, most towering, was always Bill Palmer,
With wavy white hair,
And white eyebrows which like cumulus clouds
Billowed across his forehead.

He seemed never to smile.
But I would stand in front of his house and watch
As he tied the big yellow whitewater raft
To the family station wagon
And packed paddles and bundles of who knows what.

A hush would settle on our street
Of towering cedars and firs
As the old oversized rubber raft,
A muted splash of color
Patched and smudged,
Sat on the car.

Where did he head with his family and raft?
We never knew for sure,
But as I watched, I could smell sage and madrona and alpine soil,
And see Jeffery pines bending in a mountain breeze.



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Memaloose Lake

In the photo, Andrew stands by the car,
Backpack frame like a saintly aureole
rising above his nine-year-old head.

Beneath his visored hat,
He grins as wide as the mountain hemlocks are green
On this first day of the first backpack of his life.

Thermometer and compass on a green lanyard
Dangle data for the right decisions.
His "Cub World" t-shirt reminds of sanitized Scout campouts.
Now we're on steeper slopes, where the rules
Of common sense and nature prevail.

A clearcut mountain suns behind my son.
We're about to enter the woods on the left
Filled with shadows and a few spots of light
On our long trip to Memaloose Lake.