

Michael McDowell

Pine Cones

Seaview, Washington

After the hot oatmeal, our mother sends us forth into morning fog
to pick up fallen cones beneath the giant spruce and shore pines.
We earn five cents for every grocery sack of cones.

They last as well as Pres-to-logs in the kitchen wood stove:
After the fury of kindling and the steady flame of larger wood,
the cones pump out heat, each seed in turn throbbing a red glow.

My brothers and sisters spread out across the summertime yard,
hunched like gleaners to harvest our own lawn.
When I stand up, cool ocean mist falls full on my face.

Some cones hide in the woven mat of lawn, grass between the bracts.
Others have settled like saints in their own little pocket catacombs.
Their ghostly white mold glows in the overcast morning.

We fill the sacks like our mother did, and our aunts and uncles,
grateful that spruce, pine, and fir shake all winter
to provide us these cones for our cooking and heat.

We take our full sacks to the woodshed by the garbage pit
and set them beneath shelves of kerosene lamps and glass chimneys
where they'll dry and open to burn more readily.

A half-dozen new nickels send us pumping our bicycles
through the cool July streets for Popsicles and Creamsicles,
the cold indulgences of summer at Joe Sugarman's store.