

Michael McDowell

The Hundred-Year House

At our beach house, my great-grandfather tells jokes
as my great-grandmother walks the property line
with pine seeds in her apron and a child in her arm,
planting carefully every ten feet in the sandy soil.

Over by the salal my grandmother pumps water into a pan
which her daughter has set on pine needles and moss
and talks of one day running a pipe to the kitchen.

Her son Tod, dead these seventy years, struggles with the push-mower
against the too-tall beach grass
beneath the towering pines.
After a pitchy climb, he can see twenty miles out to sea.

My mother sits on the summer porch in darkness
with her sister and cousin
talking of the evening's dance and the local boys
and those they'll return to in the city.

Burnt-sugar smells of the late-night taffy pull
still linger on the porch,
sticky-sweet laughter hardening into candy.

Silhouetted in the late afternoon sun
my teenage cousins Terry and Robbie leap in the surf,
the enthusiasm of adolescence and wealth combined.
Their older sister Carolyn rises golden from the waves.

My daughter giggles at the book she's reading,
the clock gongs the half-hour,
and the rain gurgles in the drain-pipes
above the dry August yard.

At night, she falls asleep watching North Head Light wink
through pines and over the dunes beyond the butte,
her eyes locked on the promise of stories
about that salal, those fishing rocks, that spruce, this beach.

