

William Crombie

Empire

It was never a very peaceful neighborhood,
crows and gulls scrabbling for territory
like the gangs on Wasson and Wall, gray
hobos cast up on sidewalks like flotsam
on the mudflats. Always soaked with that razor
tang of garbage fire and low tide.

It was home.

Shattered plates in the back yard. “We’ll leave
them for the archaeologists,” Howard said.
Plenty of middens still around here, Coos,
Lower Umpqua, Siuslaw, broken shells
and arrowheads. Some more recent: street
of broken bottles, oil slick preserved in sediment.
Our soft detritus.

That house is still there— the one with grass growing
out the windows and an ever-growing menagerie
of children’s shoes on the stoop. The yellow mansion is gone,
though, finally caved into the bay, leaving behind
the clustered remains of a chimney and a field
of blackberries.

I’d stand here on top of the hill, gazing down and out,
rusted trestle against bright water, North Spit fading into fog.
Polyrhythmic rumble of waves and distant, crashing sawmill.

Who changed more, you or me?
Daina’s scattered off Cape Arago.
Her little cottages filled with yoga
bullshit and driftwood sculptures
are sold off. Nich’s working nights
at the Chevron on 101. Nando’s
still driving his crushed car
with his crushed body somewhere
beneath the bay.

Some of your dunes have been tamed
into subdevelopments, shore pines like
dragons exchanged for counterfeit palm.
But then, I’ve lost some things,
too. The boy who balanced on
the heap of corrugated sheeting
in the gap between the fence and
the back of the shed, footsteps careful,
so careful,
finally learned how much harder
he falls.