

Diesel Horse
Uttered Chaos
PO Box 50638
Eugene OR 97405
\$10 plus \$2 S&H

***Diesel Horse* by Joy McDowell**

A poetry review by Sharon Ramirez

I'm a long-time fan of Joy McDowell's poetry. If you haven't yet discovered her jeweled vignettes, you're in for a treat. Her voice is that of loggers and their families when lumber was king.

This chapbook with the nostalgic diesel horse cover bears witness to the demise of logging towns and their rugged way of life. The raw characters could have stepped out of Ken Kesey's acclaimed novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Or maybe McDowell's faceless characters simply carry on where Kesey left off. Whether Cottage Grove, Oregon, where McDowell grew up, or Kesey's fictional Wakonda, Oregon, it's the same harsh world, where children discover at an early age the significance of the mill whistle and the fire siren. They learn to fear the orange glow in the sky and the floods bringing brown water.

In "Ditch Water" McDowell offers this snapshot of a fatherless logging family with a sick child:

My sister misses two weeks of school. Our family has
trouble paying doctor bills. Mother takes in ironing
and cleans houses. Flooding gives way to summer.
Old Man Williams gets rid of his one-seater outhouse, that
flinty shack on the swampy eastern edge of the city park.

History abounds in *Diesel Horse*. In "The Oxbow Incineration" (McDowell witnessed that infamous 1966 holocaust of a fire), we see the conflagration through the eyes of a woman living in a motel while her firefighter boyfriend is on alert ". . . the fiery glow is backdrop/for city lights." And:

We could all become atomic elements like the blazing sun.
Then the morning breeze blows off the smoke and heat.
Cremated air drifts in another direction—reason for hope.

Some of the language is pure insider, and McDowell is adept with just the right "telling" detail or two. We read about wigwam burners, mill ponds, sawmills that "screech, clank and grind," and powder monkeys who "blow out boulders in a slide." In "Pink Stationery" McDowell sketches a black lunch box and a crushed felt hat, symbolizing a double shift. "The Monkey Man" poem offers up "The pond monkey/leaps into the fray, herding the logs with his long pole."

Death and danger are everywhere; a fireman cousin dies of burns. A gas plant explodes. A mill saw cuts someone in half. A relative loses her arm. Even city life is dangerous as in "The Wind Shifts":

. . . the city DDT fog machine drives down our

street pumping out
 white gobs of insecticide. Neighborhood kids
 run after the truck,
 dancing and twirling in the poisonous cloud.

There are union strikes, and in “Repo Man” a repairman talks about timber firms:

How they cut and run, taking old growth
 And even second growth, then closing their camps,
 Dismantling mills and scuttling logging towns.

Not all is grim and perilous on the home front of the logger world. Comic relief is offered in the form of Belle, the Avon lady, who “rents rooms to women with dyed hair/and failing reputations.”

Belle tells stories, naughty tales about women
 of the night, naked dancers atop bar tables and policemen caught with their pants down.

My favorite poem, “Hot in the Cot,” is an eulogy. If Molly Bloom in Joyce’s *Ulysses* had been married to a logger, her life-affirming speech at the novel’s end might have been spoken by McDowell’s widow:

She can
 still recall the rush in her breast when her lover came home.
 For risking love, she mourns in the same breath that she
 feels lucky. Her painful journey is over the highest
 mountain pass in the rugged range of being human.

Fittingly, the “Diesel Horse” poem itself is last, as it warns “Big timber doesn’t last forever.” And again, in retrospect: “No one saw the spotted owl coming.”

As a child of the dark ancient logging forests of Oregon, Joy McDowell gives us this gem about survival in the midst of heartbreak and danger. Her forest world serves as an unconscious metaphor for life’s perils caused mostly by humans. Redemption comes through love and work.

I urge poetry lovers to buy this book. Its poems delight, like pink lady-slipper orchids found deep in the forest.