

North into fire:
our last road trip before you enter hospice

by Ellen L. LaFleche

We drive north,
into Maine's cyclical incineration.

The leaves make this sound:
bracelets of brass bells tingling a woman's wrist,
and this:
a psalm for mercy on a suppliant's lips.

Leaves twist through the pre-evening breeze.
In slow layers they drift,
calm as snow but vivid—
the good maroon of birth,
of throbbing cord blood.

You crave a splash of blue in the maples.
Not the sky slipping through foliage,
not that hue, not the shined blue
of a mussel glossed by sun and sea water.

We find a village too small to appear
on the map. A place where pumpkins loll in the fields
like corpulent pigs, where a lake sits serene as a mirror.
On the shore, a duck shivers silt from its feathers.
Its head is green as a horsefly's head
but the lake is almost the blue you crave.

The leaves make this sound:
a woman in a silk slip brushing static through her hair
and this:
ancient papyrus rustling in a curator's gloved hand.

We reminisce about the autumn we were newlyweds,
leaves so brittle with drought they sounded like rain
when they fell. We raked them into mounds
and rolled in them,
rolled until we were breaded,
and breathless.

Back home, fire hasn't reached us yet.
Our maple tree makes this sound:
soft applause after a Schumann symphony,
and this:
the long sad sigh of a blood pressure cuff.

A blue jay flits through the branches. *This*, you say.
This. This is the blue you crave.