

Alder Sounds

For Judith Anderson

Sean H. McDowell

Tallest of neighborhood trees, the alder hoists
its mainsail of leaves against a cloudless sky.
Of all the trees nearby it speaks
loudest the language of wave crests,
waterfalls, sluice rush, and applause.

I have come to see our fading garden,
a string of losses in my head, to catch
and hold late September sunshine.
But the alder keeps me sitting here to cleanse
my ears of dread with its deciduous song.

Miles away, my friend, you lay dying, your world
contracted to a room. Can you still feel
the pleasure of soft pages in your hands?
Or have the body's rages drowned the words
of poets you love but leave behind too soon?

Wildfires ravage mountainsides East of here,
a death as immense as a city bombed,
a green world gone, like the one you coaxed
so lovingly from Spenser with a voice
I will remember as long as I draw breath.

Tomorrow winds will flood my street with smoke.
So I have come outside to hear the alder,
a glass of whiskey in my hand, before
the air turns toxic, before the leaves
fall silent—to listen while I can.