

Fortunate Traveler

Charles Douthat

At first, all that can be seen beyond circumstance
and the broken car beside the road
is the road itself, looking back with one eye from its rise,
the other turned beyond the next curve.
The pavement here is oyster gray—asphalt cut with granite dust
and sparkling stone. This far north
the violence of spring wreaks havoc with the roads.
Warming days will heave the earth and roads crack
and the cracks fill with a rainfall's runoff
that freezes at night and spreads. All summer
you'll see road gangs with steaming pots
and ribbons of molten tar blacking the cracks.

It's a state highway, centered by a double yellow line,
pristine but for a smoked skid a motorcycle left behind.
At the far road-edge is a second line—a wider one
of thick white paint which now a field mouse is half across—
and beyond the pavement lip, gravel bedded a yard or so
to keep the weeds down. Above this border
an uncut band of summer grasses rises
full of play and light, and overshadowed
only here and there by the blanched, upturned faces
of Queen Anne's Lace.

Some farmer's planted a rail fence
to separate the first green arm of his pasture from the road.
It's bounded on the left by a mature wood of birch
and tamarack, and on the right by aldered second growth.
But the trees go only so far. This field is cleared
like an upside-down letter "L," and the bottom of the letter
opens deeply past the right-hand woods.

Smoothly, the pasture flows in the distance,
it's chewed turf placid as waters in a lake.
The few caramel-colored cows seem to float
swollen from feed. In the grass, their hooves
are hidden as if in waded shallows.

But somewhere there is a real stream.
Now and then, a plash of hidden water carries on the wind.
Likely it flows in the mid-pasture dip
where earlier a blackbird back-winged down and disappeared.
Far beyond that place, beyond a last cow
and distant matchstick fence, forest foots the valley hills.
The ridges ride low to reveal other hills
and then others beyond those and then elevations
of creamy August sky. And isn't it the sky, finally,
that all eyes rise to? Though blue today
the sky's not quite blue enough somehow. A whiteness
burns the curtain. An almost winter threat of light.

From downhill an ancient flat-bed truck approaches
bearing a pyramid of split firewood.
Passing this roadside spot, it roars past the traveler
where fortune broke him down.
Then it's field crickets again, a disgruntled cow lowing
the tang of truck exhaust in New Hampshire air.