

# A Night in Duluth

Poems

Joe Weil

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## So Much Aluminum, So Many Flying Houses

*After Magritte*

I once believed in love at first sight.  
I also believed a turtle carried the soul of the world on its back.  
Stray voices from some distant planet upheld me.  
I was upheld and feverish in my truths.  
I wore the peacock's eye, the violent bronze  
of the peacock's eye. I was a gong  
sounding in all the flowers, a moment's reprieve  
between the tail dragged through the dust and the tail unfolding—  
a great fan unleashed in the barnyard where they slaughtered the  
cattle of the sun. I was the last thing the bull ever saw  
before death took away his horns.  
I touched what I could—horns, feathers.  
The days spoke on my behalf. The hours struck  
my chest with their little hammers, then surrendered  
to my embrace. Nothing remained of my ambition.  
Love grew difficult, if at all. Pianos came to my door  
and demanded payment for services rendered.  
Overall, it was a good thing I left the world when I did—  
so much aluminum, so many flying houses.

## How Do I Write to Duluth?

Duluth, you were always yellow on my maps  
and a town in vaudeville  
and no one had died yet, or fallen down  
in the dusk of their irredeemable sadness.

Duluth, I am irredeemably sad.

Duluth, I kept forgetting which state  
you were in and so you kept floating above  
baseball diamonds and parking lots and  
the gay farmer who went to dangerous bars late at night  
to be held in some other hayseed's arms.

And why is everyone queer, or straight in some  
awful way? And why do I wish I had dragged my body  
like a song, or a pen across the continent,  
scrawling your name?

Duluth, I don't want to be Richard Hugo.

I don't want to be Hart Crane.

Fred Astaire danced with his sister across your best stage—  
the A circuit of vaudeville. Duluth, if God lifted me  
in the grain elevator of his wrath and poured me forth,  
all the grain would have whispered praise.

Duluth, you know. I am no Allen Ginsberg.

Anaphora comes cheap. I have no money.

I am paying for you with my repetitions:

Duluth, which I often misspelled Deluth, you are  
no doubt nothing much to see. Neither am I.

You have to open me up and live under the dark trees  
of my homeliness, and then, oh my God! But I am  
a green pocketbook, a blessed event of nothing—  
the cricket chirping of a man who has walked beyond hope  
and the furthest city light—

but that's someone else's poem. Everything I love is borrowed,  
stolen, including you—this watch fob I carry and shine with  
the worn elbow of my shirt. Duluth, you wear the patina  
of my grief and wonder. You are the last cricket in November  
singing without a reason—loudly in the closet  
where a dead man's shoes have all been polished.

## Serenity Prayer

Dawn at Gary's confectionery,  
big fake thunder of the metal grate being raised.  
Paper truck belly flops its load  
of star ledgers at the entrance  
and then, recedes into diesel fumes.  
We collate sections, first customer, an old guy  
wearing a cream colored fedora,  
a tropical shirt, brown penny loafers.  
He scans the headlines,  
presses change gently into my palm.  
I admire the veins in his scrawny arms,  
his face so tan, all hide and cheek bones.  
He doesn't enter the store.  
The first six customers never do,  
but chat us up as we fold in the gentle light—  
Venus, morning star, and the  
half-moon above frame houses dissolving.  
We work at the stacks,  
carry them inside. I sit with a  
half-assed cup of coffee.  
No need for a good one.  
This is 1972, in a galaxy far away from  
baristas. I am 14, happy as Jesus among his elders.  
Kidding and being kidded,  
the scent of Aqua Velva and Old Spice,  
Dutch Masters and Bay Rum aftershave—  
among old men who have decided the world  
is going to hell—but not just yet.

## A Story

I was told by my crazy uncle Pete  
that there were men so lost to this world  
they became the evening's air.  
Shut up kid and listen.  
We'd sit on his porch, he with his Rheingold,  
me with my juice glass (mostly fully of suds).  
Listen hard. He promised  
they'll start singing.  
Singing what?  
"The gibberish of God."

He told me the stars spoke Yiddish.  
"The stars are the ghosts of Jewish cobblers.  
They sit on their stools  
and cobble the shoes of heaven."

"A good cobbler never talks.  
He's listening to his hammer.  
He's hearing the cry of God in the leather.  
He's doing his job."

And what about the men who become the air?

Uncle Pete took a sip of his beer.  
"They're doing their job, too.  
Why do you think you can breathe?  
All the real work of love is invisible and thankless."

I listened but couldn't hear.  
"Someday," he said. "The song will be silence."  
The crickets grew louder around us.  
Ball games could be heard  
from screen porches up the block.  
Koufax was always striking out the side.  
Brock was stealing third.  
The Mets were mostly losing.



One day a man gets so lost, he told me  
that his arms become a breeze  
that moves through the white flowers  
of spring orchards. His eyes become rain,  
beating against the macadam.  
His voice is the yellow light that lives  
in the windows of passing trains.  
Then he is ready to be the air.

“It’s an apprenticeship,” he told me.

I listened, knowing he was lying.

I kiss my son’s forehead.  
Kissing it again, and again kissing  
it, I say: “Shemah, Israel.”  
I am hearing the air all around us,  
and the ceaseless cobbling of stars.