

DULUTHIAN SANCTUARY OF DUST

We passed by it
without noticing.
Turned back
and saw an old church,
with a crooked arrow-sign
on the side, pointing back,
that read *entrance*
in lowercase letters.

Enigmatic, slightly eerie,
we wondered what
we were about to discover.

We opened the door
to a corridor crammed
with claustrophobic books
piled haphazardly on the floor.

“Have you been in before?”
the shopkeeper asked.

She ushered us
into the nave
and guided me
toward poetry,
gesturing along the way
to philosophy
and psychiatry.

This church—
once the solemn haven
of hushed devotion—
now the silent sanctuary
of towering tomes,
dust-laden authors,
devout and heretical alike.

My urges
got the better of me:
a battered volume, timeworn—
its pages
tinged with sepia,
its cover faded,

typeface dignified,
austere.

All literature
used to be printed
augustly—
neither commercially
nor opportunistically.
The words,
printed boldly,
sold themselves.

It compelled me
to imprudently purchase
books I already owned,
but the temperament
of an elder book
has an odd way
of reviving familiar words.

A printed page
is more like a painting
than we usually
care to acknowledge—
just think how many
versions there are
of *Madonna and Child*.

I brought my stack
to the antique register.

“You look happy,”
she said,
indulging my flawed impulse.

“There are worse things,”
she added gently,
noticing my bashful
look of shame.

“What did you think
of the poetry section?”

My fiancé complained
about struggling to breathe
through the layers of dust—

but I was still immersed
in a kind of spiritual drift,
that feeling one gets
when foolish enough
to embrace a book,
or slip it into one's bag
to carry out on errands,
knowing perfectly well
there will be no time to read—
yet still yearning
for the companionship
of a beloved book.

“The paperbacks
used to live in the basement—
I brought them all upstairs.
I want the poetry section
to be extraordinary.”

I was spellbound
by the sentiment.

There are
worse things,
I thought.
There really are
worse things.