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The Sorcerer

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The Sorcerer

The Sorcerer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

William Goehring
Knox College,
Bachelor of Science in Creative Writing, 2011

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Abstract

A collection of poems from 2011-2015.

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The Sorcerer



Poems by Willi Goehring

I. Alchemy of the Beloved

*These thoughts, along with all the sighs I spout,
grow fearful in my heart, and short of breath,
till Love, in suffering for them, faints half-slain;
because inside those multitudes of pain
the sweet name of my lady's written out,
and there's no dearth of words about her death.*

-Dante, La Vita Nova

Mudpuddle Boys

I can only hope that the world
has space for the breed in me,
that lonely streak of wild
 that grows with moss and
 thrush's song.

Sun-singers, moon-howlers, long-husked
mudpuddle boys, be late as horse-eyed night,
be soft and soggy as slagwater, but of your
morning, your torpid fingers, the cracking trees:

know there stalks a night of naysayers pitchforked
and policemanned against your coming
with polemic slogans and their tallgrass eyes
 even while another life beckons out of the drink
 wanting drop by oozing drop
 the unblossomed truth, the honest first spring.

Kids from Town in a Pickup Bed

Amid lovers' discontented looks
after starry couplings,
still some lights are lit: the fire is sputtering out nearby,
our bodies are warm and wet with blood inside,
a raccoon digs through trash for a meal,
our friends winnow away the night, sighing.

And because we're here, somewhere
a deer lost in a parking lot describes
that once-in-a-lifetime feeling
of terrible, obliterating loneliness
that comes back and back again

to us, wide-eyed, black. If I could place my mind in the stars
and burn so dim! Could I bear to think of you,
or love, or poems, or better days?
Or would time only repeat that same one
wide-eyed syllable of blood
before our bones split, murky and away,
into the rut of filth and ash?

Self-Portrait with Telecaster

Once I put her underwear in a faraway corner,
put on the antlered mask and took up the rattle, blackout sang and danced,
something like “make her love me” in a tongue I still don’t know.

But this time the dramatics, the hung-overness, seem foreign.
I must be over a certain age, under the legal limit, over
the performativity of loss, because I’ve gone and bought this guitar,
a butterscotch-stained Picasso-shape of alder ready
for my loving fingerings, all gained and reverbed, distorted up to 10.
Easy to see how sorrow shakes dark windows, pond scum, cave walls,
makes the dog whimper as if beaten, how it crawls up the neck into the song
like a drunken worm.

*Oh Telecaster,
learn to be my face now and gird my loins
and every sexed apportionment of me
for my beloved is elsewhere and again,
the spirit moves as if flying towards some brash and foreign city
far from the tongue that knows it. How we catch it changes us utterly.*

Absence and the Heart

The truth is I can't access finesse,
the finest gifts, or the deepest part
of anyone. I collect precious affection
by mining my faults and making hers mine, the ache of earth's
gaps and arches between us:

The Cardinal's love
always looks like rape, despite
lifelong mating... bombastic reds
attract a female's black mask,
hard, bright lips, with song,
and there is an ancient record
on which
a fiddler plays a tune called "absence
makes the heart grow fonder,"
a momentary squawk
grooved upon me, an unwanted yanked up
earworm.

Is it possible
love is only an analogue
for distance, for debts
between us, a song
whose twisty annals we retread each day
like a cave holler's echo, hardy, effervescent,
decaying in ringlets against the stone?

I'd pay dearly for a native guide through
such absences, those
mountains jagged as the needle
on a '78 record.

Afterbirth

The miracle of life is happening in my house—
two ducklings pushing out of their eggs in the incubator
(their mothers wouldn't hatch them, such things were bred out
eons ago), a thing called *pipping*, (so sayeth the book)
where their cheeps can be heard even from my soiled mattress,
even from their natal half-life in the egg. The amniotic chalaza,
the snot-like center, is so nutritious that when they hatch
they don't need to eat for days, like when we ordered thai
to this same mattress, gorging on the unpronounceable,
scared of pregnancy, or one minute apart, or possible diseases.

They fall, goopy, blind, out of their shells. They need nothing
but warmth for awhile, a mother's rump or the whirring machine,
but one is barely alive, premature by only hours. One degree warmer
and I wouldn't have to feed her water from a bottle cap. In ten minutes
she's scrambling away from me on her one good foot, terrified. *Pip, pip*,
I hear my phone in my bed. Not you, smiling, moving your hips
to staccato hums. Has the runt finally died? No. It is calling
for a mother who will not know it, or perhaps it is just cold.
I don't know how to care for anything, don't know how it will die,
but hope beyond my sense it will live, somehow, without me.

Sunday Aubade

My father never forgave my mother for dying
before he drank himself to a diabetic
maceration. Limbic tannins sprung
and leached his mind, then strained to fingertips
that colored every cloth.

The day was bloodsick:

*Just how do you think God felt when his boy
had tried to pin the blood on Him? Wordshit,*
to think I love you as he loved. Coy,
to pound the musts and skins and slug the spirit
that was his sweetie all along.

This morning

you meant it less than ever, left hung over,
your flowered panties sotted with the stink
of that sort of love. I saw the church mini-van
that picks old ladies up. I was happy then.

Shocks of Wheat

I don't know anything
about my own life
or where it will take me,
but I know hurt and the fields
from my truck window
are enormous, already indelible,
possibly pointless, and that you aren't
the gas station parking lot,
or the thought I had in the rain
while sitting there for twenty minutes
gloating over some private agony.

But your memory glistened like splintered timber soaked in the sprinkle.
In my mind it was the 30's. There was a Model-T that blinked headlights
twice to say *send the ferry across* or maybe *y'all alive?*
And in that town Jimmy Driftwood wrote a song called *Nobody Home*
and there were gifts for lonesome people placed in a cardboard box
every Sunday. The money curved impossibly in the humidity,
your hair stood on end, and presidents and pyramids bent and kissed,
bent and kissed, and in my truck I forgot

that memory isn't feeling, it's a brackish wad
of what you meant and where you've been,
that exchanging it for fantasy makes you feel,
fuels story, and keeps ballooning worlds
that shrink hour by hour, dying in heavier clouds,
up and away, and farther. This, finally, this
is what I'm seeing. The rain is the string
tied to the world and your memory
is the lightning strike in the wheatfield:
Innate, disconnected. Fiery, sodden.

Stupid Spirit

Holy orders of dung
wrapped in sunlight, left
in leaves, all sprouted, sprung
throughout my stupid spirit
where my gladness hung
and held my hand so deft
in love, a heaven among
the manures, which even death
stiffly breathed. I sung:

*I'll come to know you, taint,
so soft is my small heart,
so gay is my dumb lung.*

Duck Yoga

I wake in a far away place,
without you as usual.

I still think I hear the ducks
quacking away in their coop
and am naked in my boots outside
before I realize they're not here to let out to play,
to forage and stretch on the lawn,
to lift a foot and a wing in tandem.

Once, loose from the cage at night,
the drake was fleeing a visiting dog
and leapt over the whole bonfire,
stretched its clipped wings and caught fire.

We beat the flames out with open hands.

This addled morning in my boots I think
I should've coo'd into burning feathers:

no, it is not okay

to be Icarus at all

in the sun or the dark.

*The bright fires are not dreaming,
only kindling uncaged things,
arcs and flickers ornately winged.*

I should've said (instead):

you will give us what we need animal.

But the farm comes back
as everything I've tried and lost.

Thrift

The last time I wept openly,
really wept (and heaven broke open),

it happened suddenly: my then-girlfriend
commented that I'd worn my mother's old jeans

until my balls were falling out. When I understood
what I was at the hips, I quivered like a cloud

bleeding at the quick, had to sit in a shiver
by the oak tree we'd sexed under,

a small orchestra in my chest blaring
this theme of lightning and worthiness:

*Here at last I've proof I play
magnum mysteriums on the ancient bone flute,*

*and I could be, I must be a mountain, an orison, a galaxy,
a hand in the megalithic cave.*

The girl, who I loved and is gone, held me very close to her,
as close as two human beings can be, and I said

(because the sky was patterned like some dark quilted
flowers, crazed and cotton-batted— it was going to rain):

*Here I am being frugal
on a holy day in the sunshine.*

Self-Portrait as Figure with Meat

On the elevated train I sit alone, rejected
in a warm evening. The real city
dangles me above it. Hot streets take pity
on where (sodden-croched) I've hoofed.

I'm hooked. A flicking woman next
to me smiles, and my manhood hurts when I see
shadows of men on roofs. If I could sex
to you, rail-spark over earnestly,

I would. But I'm split. I judge the day
by my shadow, and see little else.
So when I arrive, hot, soggy helpless,
Let me off the hook. What can I say?
If I could just gristle my way into this.
Just gristle my way into this.

*On Wearing Your Underwear On My Head
While You Are Out of Town
and I Am Feeding Your Dog and Cat*

i.

The comforting animals leave
a sheer patina of their affection
among the rugs and couches,
and the newlyweds who visited
clasped hands like coiled-lace
flowers, so real
yet soft, familial. Did you
shed hair for me?

ii.

Generations
whorl in the patterns of those curtains
on the window where the dog has pressed his nose
and made slashes of moonlight opaque
against the hardwood floor.
The cat hair on your old dresses, in the air.
The slobbery doily. This is how
I long for your cheeky veil, your weave.

iii.

I don't know if or how it's worth saying
that life is often so beautiful
that it seems impossible
and more resembles death
but this is what I mean to say

when I say *the dog got sick*.

He barfed on your mother's afghan.

iv.

I have gone outside and seen the big dipper
pouring such doubtful, sickly beauties out
onto the earth, and it was not enough.

I want to palpate the sky's underbelly,
roll and press out an assembly line
of the diffident sheaves of light, save them
and let them gird, singing *ain't no sunshine
when she's gone*.

v.

I am a cosmic hairball, I guess, born
to wear the weave on my face.

Without you I have to make starlight into your hair
as wild as the loving animals.

Without you your delicates are made of hands
in the drawer, hands under the blankets.

Without you I will have to cover everything
with myself and these fuzzballs you left for me
and dirty laundry. So I brush, and feed, and tend all day and night.

The Heart Has Its Work Cut Out for It

A heavy indictment. The ancient greeks
did it one better: they had the *thumos*
in the pit of the stomach, and it was filled
with the will of a god like a great inhalation
or a bloating feast; an ocean, tumescing.
The modern lump of muscle, instead,
takes its proxies and ushers them away
from itself, displaced in its permanence,
always *from* the heart and *in* it,
always being *followed*, sought after (give me your heart),
waiting for the time when angels of medieval anatomies
might come down to interrogate it,
isolate it, cuff it away in bright lights
far from those lovers to whom it assigned
primeval, thudding laws.
They will amputate and spill
what they filled it with once, many years ago
when the soul was a novel thing,
and untutored in muscle and ancestry,
dependent on geometries and parallax,
desperate for drums beating regret and longing,
desperate for blood throbbing its impermanence
to all these new, uncertain ailments.

Portrait of My Father at 500 lbs.

I love another, thus I hate myself

-Thomas Wyatt

My weight is my love and I want
a woman to rise like the smoke
from a flame my father was in love
almost four-ninety-nine a pound
for every woman he has yet to meet
mine so I may be pound for pound before I find
one who is less wood-heft and more effluence
less last weeks' crumpled kindling more
marshmallows singing flesh cresting
sticking rippling

over the fire but we have privately hated
everything we've ever done so hard to be a soft man
waxing hot inwardly in songs degrees and lovely flavor
who can die in the sizzle when a woman makes a omelet
clot an artery in her steamy hot butterrolls on the tablesill

difficult or wrong to make love a cloudburst of carbon that roasts chickens
hot air above all things but we merely want to be treated
sweetly amply be mysterious and beautiful and prodigal too (what women are
not what men can do)
so we are fed

while she and her mother spatter bacon and salt tomatoes I am
bent over labor's sober conversation with her father

never yielding years or that a swollen belly is
a comfort a gift or a wish for culmination of
something too beautiful to hate: the baby girl who will sing

when we can't sleep airs of so needy a forgiveness
and a bellyfull of warm breakfast

I know to make a litany of hot curvy

white wants for a woman is zeitgeist incarnate
a car-window hoot at an empty wind but let me say briefly just how so

desperately so I am my father's edible certainty and I want babies

am eight ounces of good fire and curling rinds of meat

so wherever my love lies will be full of this curdled distention:

that I am what I love not (my father) who loves me

The City Where You Are Going

Worst of all of the brain's lispig visions is accurate remembrance of real events.

Let me tell you first that I do not know who said that
or even if I made it up. Is it good? You make things up,
say you love me, then say the opposite thing the next day.
I too have hollered *I don't care about the truth*
and been too drunk to believe it, but I do know
many unbelievable things. For example:

the phrase *geodesic dome*, but not what it is or if it appears in Emily Dickinson.
Also, the biotic similarity of the Ozarks to the farthest eastern shores of China
(and so I imagine the simultaneity of dogwood flowers to Li Po and some Ouachita

on whose mound I have stood while pining over a notion of you). And the melody
of the Schubert march you cannot play for shit— I hear it flublessly through the trio
when you put your hands to my mind's instrument. Do you not believe me?

There's a golden zither in the catalpas when the catbirds and rain sing on my roof,
and I imagine we climbed those trees as teenagers, and that I thought to myself:
she's wilder than Berryman, who I had not yet read. Finally, and not worst of all,

every time I think of *The Iliad* I see the same wild-eyed horse bleeding snot from its mouth,
and I am telling you this horse doesn't exist and I see it. What's worst is that I can't banish
to any remote corner of my brain or to any midnight-scrambled googling

(who was the saint who rolled in thorns to kill his lust? Kanye's 2009 hit?) how I love you
as you cannot possibly love me. When I looked into your brown eyes this morning
it was not some conjuring word, it was without pretense: you were leaving, tired, hung over.

What is real is that you didn't want me anymore and I wasn't imagining anymore. I was alone
in Chicago, many years before meeting you. Waiting at a red-line stop called *Chicago*.
Sitting there reading Sandburg's *Chicago*. Seeing a woman with broad shoulders.
A tattoo on her exposed belly that said, I think, *Chi-Town*.

Smoke Detector

O that O that

 blinks. The small
hours drip red water;

 O that O that
out get out

 this place is fire.

O that O that I

 might know if I
am burning;

 O that I that
waits that knows

 its workings.

Alchemy of the Beloved

Beautiful covenant, dirty knives caked, drying,
Bach on the radio in squall, you are in my mouth
as a dream on the tongue, one I don't know.

Convinced god exists, once father pointed
to the radio made of skin over the headfoam
of his lager-glass and cried a hoppy oblation:

the best thing I ever did was meet your mother;
and we agreed, more or less, we are our raison d'etre.
At twenty-four, I do not feel reasonable much anymore.

To live without your beloved is a knife in every direction.
Sometimes I cook things and listen to Bach,
who is a great comfort. His is a terraformed mind,

and I think of the lagers unsung, the women
shipwrecked on the shores of my mouth, and know
every song I've previously invented comes out as a recipe,

score, or record already written in generations of unsalvagable letters.

Genomes. Pheromones? Code? Who invented this taste?

The taste like ash and saltpeter? Cedar and onion? Black earth

and cherries jubilee? It must be piss and fire, good god,
the way I love someone I haven't met, how close they hold me
when somehow I'm singing while everything is happening.

Every loneliness I am aware of is being embalmed. Tonight

I have slashed out a phallus in clay, burnt it in the oven.

To feel this way is small beer, and yet a streak of tear marches,

presumably violin based, hard in its own brine, sharply cold. It dangles into another life inside my mouth.

II. The Sorcerer

*To step into the golden lute
& paint one's soul
on the body. Bird
goddess & slow snake
in the flowered tree. Circle,
lineage, womb, mouth, leaf-footed
godanimal on a man's chest
who leaps into the moon
on a woman's belly.*

-Yusef Komunyakaa

10. To part the waters and give a place to let them run. The word that parts the lips that makes the world make flesh. Not for you but for your family. Not because you want to.

11. As a face across a veil,
to be briefly coupled.

On Potty Training Anna, Age 3

You are loved by everyone, and you
do not know what that means,
and that makes you a god. We're scared
in equal parts that you'll succeed and fail:
on the one hand you'll grow cleaner,
more private and maybe more indoor-voiced,
on the on the other hand your myth will end,
and you will have less power over us;
We wont get to massage your bellyaches,
and we'll be all alone again in private places.
The more I think on it, it's always the same:
Love doesn't abandon you, but on the contrary,
is always waiting to disembowel you
with people who seem terrified
but also own you. I mean to say, Anna,
that you will have heartbreak, that we fall,
kerplunk, right into ourselves, and this
is the only way I know how to tell it:
Once I heard my love pissing from the hall
and sang from the Song of Songs, 5:4 :
*My beloved put her hands through the keyhole
and my bowels were moved at her touch.*

Cross-Town Rivalry

It's hard to remember everything you miss—
which good girls, what inside jokes, when driving dad's Buick,
growing up that song y'all would always sing, et-cetera. The fire
that held it all together has mostly burnt it up. Mostly at the gates of heaven
I think there will be people like my father and my first love, coach,
all-american cousin, people I called sir or went down on.

Pulled from bed in a wife beater and my holey drawers, they'll ask me
to go on ahead and judge myself for myself, and I know at that moment
I won't be able to conjure anything but that one tackle I missed senior year—

an around the end run just after my avowal that couldn't nothing get outside on me,
motherfucker, 'cause normally couldn't nothing,
how I clung to the tailback like a terrified shellfish cleaving to the nose
of Jesus Christ himself. Then I just let go, in front of God and Girls
and slapped the astroturf.

I could say to Peter that I'd finally figured out
the dreams other people had were not my own, that couldn't nobody
really know me anyways, that I had come to understand how small it all was.
But the truth is I've never been able to make my own decisions
beyond say, what I want on a sandwich.

So I say, *put me in, coach, or marry me,*
or remember when we laughed and laughed? I feel I am a loss that pits
two towns irreparably against each other; the local newspaper's third story down
once a year for decades; the sound of tossed cans and paintball guns
loaded with ball-bearings; bluegrass blaring from truckbed speakers,

and for that I'll just say to St. Peter and the crew:
golly, sir, ma'am, it sure has been a pleasure, take my drawers off,
lick my hand, run it through my hair, and say *I'll just see myself on down.*

What Lot's Wife Saw

...the golden baubles tipping from the windows
of the falling towers, the gold sheet of dawn draping
the river where the lockets and their inscriptions
ran with the blood, the unfettered embraces of the lovers
wailing in equal pain and pleasure, convulsed by brimstone
and stripped away, the sons-in-law, their faces contorted
in permanent laughter, most of all the house, the clay house,
that sturdy door that Lot built, where the kind, strong angels
feasted on the last morsels of stone-ground, unleavened bread,
and touched her face and made her feel hot, as if she might turn to wax.
Last, though, she saw the daughters who had not known men
were curling in fetid ecstasy in the tongues of fire and ruins
and she remembered Lot's unspecific, generous touch.
At that last moment she longed for love without consequence
above all things, and sex without sorrow, begetting
without the begotten. Then she began to cry
and the salt tears fell to the ground.

On Walking Home, Having Read 'Lolita' All Day

Humbert Humbert has me guess
a winding way down Scull Creek trail
dimly lit at dusk. I must confess I plan to look
for naked teenagers on the internet,
knowing I will find them flaxen,
their rousting tiddlies only regular
rotisseries of crude fantasy. Daydream becomes night
song. Damp, chlorophyllic. I must respect Humbert,
only words, after all, because I do describe myself
in part by taking the ferocity of feeling *othered*
and sequestering, sounding there, like, but not,
drums in this deepest night. I resonate too
that we might both only be an authorial creation
obsessed with transgression and underwear,
and Nabokov said:
reality is a mask,
and medieval peasants laughed
quite lightly at the dancing masked devils and demons
of their passion plays, who shoved fireworks up their asses
and set them alight. These are my analogues...so tonight, let fantasy
become the holy upskirt of pagan dresses, that wink
of something long and reasonably forbidden, that sunlight stored for night, song,
Scull Creek! A sick-sweet dankness on the whizzing air,
the splitting of the light, the trail down towards the twist
of darker hollers. Tonight, Humbert, I stick out my tongue
from my open head and listen to the night.
Whatever I am, may be, I hear country music- Hark!

Masaccio's Expulsion of Adam and Eve

Man is now a living well
of tears. He walks
fast beyond
the gate and angel
toppling the tower, fast
on his cry, his snot and spit: an ocean
of attribution bald and bright
before him, brighter
than the angel's halo,
and he hides in the cave of his hands
blubbing all the names of all
the things he named in nakedness.

And she, too, begets
the sorrow

of all the days
of her life.

A hurricane
come to the cusp
of her mouth, her body cup
and conduit of God
whose voice
is hard to paint,
whose weight is less,
darker and drier than
what's left behind: the still
shuddering gates.

Self-Portrait as Horse and Others

Evening star, I am the first vision
in this light, bathed in rippling mumbles
and ward the motions of the crocus weeds
wading in the Kishwaukee river
into word. When I sound this out:
Convention, I startle at the pith
and chomp the bit of night. You see
not much has happened here, and what
did was the will of God. Evening star,
I am the first image in your water
tonight. I cast my shadow to the edge
of your warbling weeds. A thirsty horse.
A heron standing
in wait. A fish dying.

The Hills of Zoar

In terror Lot hid inside the hill beside the city,
the mouth of the cave cooing like a great ghost
tickling his shoulder, saying, *what are you afraid of?*
He muttered: *Zoar* into his beard, scuffled the dust
of the escarpment where the angels had dropped him.
Wider than Sodom, but unresplendent, drab tenements
dredged out of earth with blunted tools and the ashen skin
of slaves. He recalled the well-watered plains
of Jordan that Abram was now tending. His daughters slept,
and the cave whispered and cajoled. It was anathema—
the earth coming over him in the manner of all earth,
his progeny woke sticky with the clay of the mountainside.
He lay on the hard ground and wondered
if he could bear to be anything but a drunk,
a drunk and a widower. There was little left to love
in the drear outside of Sodom. *Little but my daughters.*

Chimera

She will change the game at will.
After the Lost Bridge,
and Raccoon Hole Cave,
our provision of oranges ravaged
unpeeled in the Den of Garter Snakes,
the hedgeapple handgrenades
explode among 5-Foot-Death-Fall Canyon's
mossy rocks. Then we come across
some shanty temples of last Sunday's
little outlaws, hermits, fort-builders
and rockfighters, and she wants
to ride my shoulders; Childhood's faultless,
alchemical laws are mine again.
Two sister deer emerge from brush
to ogle how she antlers me,
mothered astride her hairless legs
and pink tights. Everyone we love
molds whole worlds for our delight.
Anna raised a fist ten feet in the air and howled
to terrify the sisters into far deeper woods.

I Am Afraid of Everything

Soon everyone we are scared
of disappointing will be dead.
Then we will be the standard bearer
of what we can't live up to. These days
are curling slivers in the hearth.
We are primitive and emotional. We have
seen movies we did not much care for:
too much violence, strong women with breasts
in the lights we never see. Unearthly splendor.
Everything explodes. Too much everything and fire.
When the movie is over, we escape into the cold,
slick as the protagonist, opaque as his role.
The frigid breast is unsheathed: A gun battle.
Everything explodes. I am still afraid.
Everyone dies and that night I think of her heart,
watching curling slivers in the hearth.
Unearthly splendor. Charred hero:
do you believe your eyes? Is it hard
to tell oneself with no sleep
and no one's hand to hold
that you are still God's instrument?

Lot's Daughters

kiss me, pa-pa
 and look at my eyes
the notion so clear
 animate, desiccated
animal
 stuck inside the white teeth
of your mouth
 a sinew a bone
could pick out
 of the rust colored air
an arrow the air
 could be rent by

the husk of a grape
 bubbling in the clay jar

(lift up your skirt and tread
 on the grape
step on the musts the reddening hem
 makes the wine)

pa-pa are you too far gone
 to look back
 can you stand
to see me thusly
 or can you look back
to the first thing
 like mother

The Sorcerer at Trois-Frères

i.

There is nothing indifferent in beginning, agog,
soaking with power in your apartment. Smear
in the shape of the thing. Festoon with flowers,

antlers, anoint and incense and ebb.

As Kingfisher? Snake? For the animal, nothing
is forbidden. Are you surprised at a man

grabbing neighborhood dogs by their tails?

There is no one to kiss me anymore.

Eventually you cultivate something your kind
of culture has not yet made extinct.

ii.

The sorcerer becomes the object of the hunt, the deer, in his mask...

just the way you want nothing but to be fed

and to be beautiful, flailing *in extremis* and

unction, unctuous horntip, speartip, bloody lip,

exhausted, aghast. Pre-bronze, pre-leather. Before latex.

Only stone, bone, hair, pigment. The animal

his kind kills each season, the one that gores his sons for millennia,

tramples them, saves them every hour of every day, is glaring, is giving thanks.

He becomes pure love
like the love of mothers:

the nods of acquaintances in the aisles of the stores,
those tonguing at the movie theatre, whoever was playing piano
topless when the plumber came back, the glances
of hundreds of thousands on public transit, sweet kisses

you never saw coming and make you shiver, the burst of a tomato
in a sandwich onto a clean, white shirt, words like *oak*
or *goldenrod* that mean next to nothing but a sort of dewiness,
that the world is covered in names after all and we can know them
and this can be a comforter when we must jump up and dance...

words like...*motherfucker*.

This is what the sorcerer becomes.

iii.

I dedicate, I dedicate this to beginnings as my entire intention,
the vow that I am *him* that was in love, truly,
and was hungry, really. That I did gorge, jive and whirl
about it, hoofed and frisked and that it was mine
to kill and drag away, that it didn't kill me but I only failed,
that it is everyone's right to fail and come home empty handed,
starve, and become a painting of you doing it
forever and ever until you begin again. The sorcerer holds his hands
to his chest like a scurrier, heart-livid, froth-skulled.
He has his balls between his legs like a eunuch or a bull,
a woman from some angles, and bellows forth like a birthing thing

so that when a god takes him he is as animate and impotent
as every beloved animal almost real in everything but realness,
always ready, and gilded, and anthropic inside it... every muscled schism
is to him the oblation of the first facts...

iv.

let this embody how we wrench ourselves
into the world and away those we first loved: Toolmakers struck the walls
of the caves they died in with blood and masks. They dreamed of hoof and claw and drooled.

A Manlike Me

Who told thee that thou wast naked?

-Genesis, 3:11

A manlike me wears skin like God a coat
of love. And I remember love undraping,
red and bleeding, coiled and fresh. Throated
like a baby boy. Soiled. Eyes watering,

moistening. A life of rubber months
opened up a metal mouth and jawed the day
wherein it proclaimed every hour by hour:

*where this face of love is
is the face of God.*

We are congregated here into one sad love.
As if we shared a birthday we open up
in a bloom of steel wool, loom
stretching skin and sky and dirt.

O straining weave, threadbare,
the wool gristled raw and rubbed
hard against you salt and ash and wound,
and song struck out your face
like tinfoil wrangling, a wind
like shitbreath freshened blood
in the tilt of reddened skies, and open, you
opened your mouth and yellow-teeth howled
and spool-gut unraveled
a song into the sun:

*is what clothes the earth filth? is love
and what clothes my face
the same face as the face of
God?*

Skin of love and the metal taste of my tongue,
unwind what bleeding drowns out. I'm singing:

*Father, our Father, dirt-and-skin-Father,
hide the shame of birth with my love's encasings.*

III. PRIPYAT

*For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful,
but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.*

-Matthew 23:27

Holy Manna

i.

Bar-twixt and sticky
to the counter
some mofo found his ilk
in tattered cockeyes;
a man's eye, a glitter
sharp as rims on our tucks.
He beat me on the back,
we drank and spat,
we laughed and cussed,
we shared a sudsy, bristled kiss
near the backroom box
of urinal pucks.
You're the boss, he said,
and when the exiles of Egypt got bread
from heaven they called it manna which meant
what is it, looked the blessing in the eye.

ii

My grandmother had the bible on her lap.
Sweet Anna sat on mine,
and grandma read of manna: *tomorrow is the rest...*
and bake that which ye will bake today,
and seethe what ye will seethe; and that
which remaineth over lay
for you to be kept
until morning...

Anna spilt her soda on a scrape's boiled skin,
wriggled and writhed and wept like a babe.
I heaved her off my lap, ashamed— all touch

is not the same to a grown man. What can I say
to keep myself from saying what is it, what is it,
this creature that I love whose earnest touch
rebukes the skin of me? It stayed unchanged
that sabbath night, unchanged

*..and it did not stink,
neither was there any worm therein.*

iii.

I overstayed, his hair was like a lamb's
blood in my teeth. I had never been
the booze before, or the black eye at the bottom
of the glass. I had become
the thing I longed to eat, the tree yielding fruit,
whose seed is in itself, the branch grown strong
where the worm awaits desire's end
in the end of desire, the addled brain
at the end of hunger or the desert,
something or another turning
to ashes in the mouth

Anna was still home the next morning, asleep, cradled in her
little pajamas, grandma with her bible dead asleep. What did I keep?

I can only tell you how much it burned
to piss among those marvelous
sap-honeyed branches
when I went out back
and the sun was rising like myrrh.
It ran clear and strong and sound
like a good man's body ought.
It was song and sense and seed
sputtering hoarfrost on the ground.

PRIPYAT

i.

I danced with
a girl who
took her heels off to
feel the floor.
I flailed at her
body in the dark,
was asked for
nothing else.

Streetlights glistened
sequins, her pinned flower
spun inward.

My letterman jacket draped
her shoulderbones,
the eject of a colicky infant,
blue and veiny-headed. The flat,
stone-veined Byzantines
from cathedral windows.

Gestures
towards this. We knew
no better.

ii.

The ugliest people I've ever seen
live here, or at least
picket their homeliness on these

corners.

I did not pay a shaking bum
but if I had I would've said

Wing-Away,
old prophet, no idea
what it meant.

His skyline is A-sexual, reproducing ever taller
offspring- a city
sprouted flowers around the lake,
proud wings pinned to his shoulderblades
turn, gesturing, shiny with the work of ages

of sitting and gesturing
I am hungry or *Chicago.*

I've found the church
she'd like the best:

a pane, a face missing from a window there,
unblue,
filled with smog.

iii.

I have lived my life through a lens
of collectivity.

Movies.
Innocent things die,
and I weep.

Tonight, a horse.
Its eyes are wide, dark, sucking,

edged with blue, a lump of tears.

A woman is being fingered behind me,
mangling my grief
with pleasure.

I rise
a lump in my throat,
the bathroom's
buzz of bulbs, irradant
bone-white tiles with blue.

I kneel into the bowl, gush lumps.

No escape in smut or rust.
No bruises but blue and swelling.

iv.

A frozen window of lakewater
chews the young, the glinting.

Lake Michigan's finest invoke
fur-lining, tightness, ease of moving, laugh
being full (how absurd to play with a lake).

Call: *Zoroaster!*

Spin, it is the highest elevation.
Flail in fuzz, bathe your wings.

I watch the go up and the go down.
The bums herald in the day.

I cringe to see the skidding asses.
The lake catches them where they flatten,

Byzantines on the

It wants to swallow them.

We spin till our bones are one

With yours, we melt.

Innocent girls: Swirling, feel
freedom, blue-boned ice, the city,
built of your monied veins
and a cool embrace of stone. Drool,
an erection, loll in white bulbs
that greet you in a selfless
snowy morning, icy, reeking of smog.

v.

Tonight a girl.
The eyes are wide, dark, sucking,
edged with blue, a thyroid lump.

Tonight! Pripyat.
The wings turn, flap, rock
the gesture *I am hungry*.
The dark
of the window:
lake, horse openings.
A pain, her throat,
and mine.

Run to the bathroom to melt,
gush in the mirror to find
another hole inside.

vi.

Milwaukee, where the wings of the Art Museum
up and down bide the day
mark the hours.

A blue streak of dark hair. An amorphous mass slashed
for the eyes with oils on the hair of dead horses.

The subject has a post-orgasm removal hole.
It is deep black with a yellow core
and blue edges.

At this depiction of homosexual sex
I am standing next to my brother, himself
a handsome man. I am

wondering about his innocence,
what hungers he must have
achieved

by our faces in the pane,
reflected squarely in the hole
of the other subject, the one removing himself.

I imagine, now, a horse's eye,
tranquil, the animal long dead.

I hear the wings rotating
up above us,
a mechanical, grinding sound.

x.

Now I can see from the colored windows
that great accident of human cathedrals.
Fragrant yellow, standing in the light

is each concrete sarcophagus
a thousand efforts spun.

This is what two decades of my living
has become to me:

the lyric eye, the scattered daffodils hanging
head-heavy with pursed lips in the city, always
the metaphor, the girl, the girl, the light
tattering black into the abscess ...

I see that someone has punctured
the grape jellies at my table
with a dull knife.

I see my face in them,
and this is the worst thing I have seen
in the history of my eyes.

IV. A Cult of Dogs

*My stupidity gave its blessing to succoring nature, on her knees before God.
What I am (my drunken laughter and happiness) is nonetheless at stake,
handed over to chance, thrown out into the night, chased away like a dog.*

-Georges Bataille

A Beautiful Sick Dog That Shits All Over the House

You go to
a place
knowing who
you are and all,
and everything
changes. You
try to keep
up but then
it makes you

so
you realize
you're dying,
your
mamma
dying,
big daddy
dying,
brothers,
sisters,
all dying
and all,

all those old dogs you loved so well
are dying,
are beshitten,
are unable
to stand on their own
clawing feet.

O lord
let my poem be a shotgun,
let me put these old dogs down.

Dining Amongst Men

In the crystalline glaze of sweet sherry glasses,
and the tinkling of hundred-year old china
you will note on the tines a tarnished patina
like the fatty, sweet film coaxed out of the carcass

that they plucked, and they scalded, laid bare on the table.

I have never been told it was bad sex, done poorly
understates the old father, skunk-drunk and lonely,
(though you guess from his weight he's just barely able)

and I never had lost a girl so ungrateful.

Then another chimes in that *no man could summer*
with a gun in the house of some bitch-made lover.
and you guess you agree, 'cause you reach for the ladle

for to drown the poor plate in more rendered fowl,
and then drink the old grapes, and belch bitter thunders.
Your loss is the feast at the party of drunkards,
and the wine into vomit was Christ's next avowal.

Anna Learns the Word "No"

We never learned sounds
but barked first
of night terrors and starvation
for mamma's gentle breast,

but then, learned this wretch,
a siren in circles, thrown cups,
scissoring legs. You keep flailing

and the word swirls like a sea uptossed
in storm, your mouth transmuted to foam,
your lips, a bright red yolk
spilt down the edges of this deep.

Baby, take this dismemberment with pride.
With tiny limbs, deny, and in the bubbling circle
stretch and wane the watery loom, desert
your vocal chord's brash assertion
of anything, anything at all.

The Teenage Poet's Diary Rewrites Itself in Trochees

No one ever asks me any questions, so I guess I talk just loud and often enough. O, I am a poet, and *they* have found that *they* do not have time to figure on the lovely metaphysics that I do. They're so boring, dead: they're my reason for not doing much at all. I think back on my day, a trip to the tobacconist, a poem/sandwich (both much larger than intended, needed, desired for), then a drink or two or three, then conversation that I listened to a little, probed about, and threw some pointed questions into: *Yes, but what is it that matters, really matters in all this that you are hiding from?* I saw the pretty girls that partied in that house did not like questions of this manner. I retreated to the kitchen, where there was a book of Monet paintings that reminded me of the first nudes I'd ever seen in art or life, the gentle curves and clamshells of the beings, even though the book did not have any naked people in it. So then I told someone all about that, and I was moved. Then I drove myself back home in the car my parents bought me, and here I lay in bed, wishing

I was dreaming of flowers or big
ponds or lilies. Anything but this.

Topeka, 1999

There was a time
at the budding of my life;
My father and I lay down
near a field of roses
red as our bonded blood.

Red was the color of his face,
his clear and thickish sweat was dew.
He basked, I shielded my eyes from the sun.

How many years does it take
for a field of roses
to bury a man and his son?

I was frightened
that if I stood to tie my shoe
I would find him dead,
bleeding rose red
liquid age,

or uncovering my eyes to a bright sun
to myself caged
in rose-thorns,
my father
replaced
by a red similitude,
growing gently back at me.

“me, wag”

I wander alone into the night of barking centers,
bar upon bar, upon a bicycles hoarse chains, upon the backs
of drunks upon click-click lighters and slings of drugs and moneys.
O wonder, where is the fringe of this, the ragged edge?

The big sky tears away my skin to dirt. I bloom
upon it, swell like one night
when I was being eaten alive
by a bonfire, swing dancing,
bones rattling near a girl.

This time, though, is different. I came
with ill-intention to wear nothing, to become
someone. This season tornadoes or the threat makes
the catalpa trees drop their pods. Babies everywhere
wear hats. Geese wail away and away.

The crows have begun to cry: *where is the dog
whose corpse we picked clean?*
Where is that rabid grin?

Terracotta Votive Womb, Italian, 4th Cent. BC

Stone cold piecemeal woman why
girl why you gotta be
so smooth so fine like so on
cupbearer to the catamite
link my histrionics to you moisturizer
for the better half of me place
of expiation confessional heartlimit badonk on the pedastal
do I hafta say it really
pandora as only her box
ouillisbos worn to doll-dress shreds umbral pudendaunfixed
curve of granite hills hysteria's place
my scrutiny my hallowed my wrung
rosewater lavender suave and glisten
tea-tree-cherry ripened strawberry optimum oil therapy
thanatopsis of the maidenhead wavy styx of stone named skin
and hurt museumed-catcall tell me who cast the first
who cast this and for whom
and did they love them or only the under of long-dressed helen of troy
sub-and-superhuman limestone white only love like
lauren bacall not whistling at bogart
and so like bigots cast puckers almost the size of a fist
whose mould spun on the wheel
of the maker's fortune who fired this and why
did this lure-goad and sweet lung's cord
press the pit of a chest
who wears the unhumaned objectified on the neck
what maternity cult of the wandering terrific
had this crown their ribs and why do I feel like their cohort
they must've ground out their own blood
on stone altars like this on my mother my god O
it must've been an unfruitful unhinged love

“The Cow of Nothingness”

with apologies to Galway Kinnell

Day broke over the mountain, and an extraordinary insight
burst within the poet as he watched a faraway ridge
with an old woman leading a cow across a field. *Sow-bossie*
she sang, and it lowed an echo. *If that ain't je ne sais quoi,*
he muttered, *I dunno what is*

(as he spoke, the snail of abstraction slimed by,
ducks of regret pattered their wings in the black pond,
and horseflies of besmittenness frolicked in his beard).

He meant a number of things that slowly became clear.
One of them was *the teeth of the morning gnaw the hills,*
another, *I guess I misunderstand my heart, but fully intend*
to tighten the strings of my lyre
all the way up from do re mi to light's pitch.
Last: *I insist on the tantrum of my original intent,*
which is that, fire and brimstone, my love is real.

Apropos, the beautiful island off the barbarous coast
of similitude, disappeared from his mind, and he sat on a hay-rick
of something or other, and sang as if by accident about how dust
is dust, and *ex-nihilo*. Then the clouds broke open,
and he tumbled down the wild and idiotic orders.

Eating Alone *for Kevin*

In my thirtieth year of life/I took my heart to be my wife.

-J.V. Cunningham

There will be nights where I am lonely:
a meal, a slim book of poetry.

Waiter, burn it. No pink center.

The Cheeto dust on the bus to Decatur,

with the Cherokee marine who'd fucked
some poor young girl right in the butt,

bragged to me all about it, wrung
on about his native tongue

saying *that ain't for yonegas to hear.*

That's where I most need you, dear:

the patisserie I grew to hate,
the falafel that a seagull ate.

So will you grab my bill past thirty?

Once I breached to an empty deli:

I am in love, and three beers in!

So up yours, chairs. No one listened.

The coroner's around the corner,
and knows the heart is meat, wants ore

of salt and egg, of grease, of fries,
the guts of fowls, and tripe of sighs,

so let poetry feed the mystery: break bread,
love heart attacks, eat the dead.

Binge

I wake crumb-covered from a dream
in which I became my father's ghost.
Now he's in bed with the mist of breath
heavy in him, like wind between lace
through his oxygen mask that grins
like a plastic Shinto demon.

In the bathroom where we weigh ourselves
I come to find that I am pounds fatter, closer
to him, and so when we sit the plumbing
might sing in a harmony of gurgles, as if
tonight we all began some diabetic round...

*The civil war letters are found
in the blue locker. Your aunt Ima
had those photos. They came as children
in covered wagons. They left us
this cup with their names on it. Our
artist friend made that, locked it
by mistake. We collected them
until we were grown. It's rusted out,
but will still play. Remember that easter?
There was never so much smoke.
See how you can make a wine glass sing
with just a little moisture?*

In the mirror that holds my face
a bottle swelled my face to pouring.
I've rubbed rogain on myself
to grow a beard. Ate the whole
of a roast chicken. Pulled its guts
from its end. His beard is long

and full of crumbs. I've learned
if you hold the shell up and listen,
the ocean breathes in your ear, but the mask
will drop its empty glass, like rotting

pimples burst, pressed grapes,
my armpits are dusty bottles here
and here, the mask of breath, of cool and fine
air blown in the night's ear...

*A happy little meadowlark,
isn't it? This dog has trouble
standing. That hatbox. I started
finding mothballs in recipes
for soup. She likes to hide
by the mailbox as if waiting. She
pruned petunias. A bagful
of popcorn lay on his lap. If you
leave anything out, the bugs
will get at it soon enough.*

it fails. I know wherever I stay in nighttimes
the zephyrs ghost like the neighbor's cat. I am
no organized force of nature but lost
in the patterns of a dying house,
an accumulated meaning.

O I know why. O come
you dead sick ghosts, bring
your laudable pus, your sucking gapes
and war wounds, your public musts
and private shames! You have not seen
what I have done in the mirror tonight.
Empty the glass of old man's breath.

I see through it because I wear it
on my face.

*Rub your eyes harder and you
can see the air. Go into the cedar
closet, turn around three times,
holler "Whifflebat." The next
clue is in the piano bench,
the treasure buried under the bedsprings.
See how riveted we are to great
greatlings? Their heft lingers
in every morsel, hair, and heave.*

*I'm Trying To Make Metaphors
For Your Skin Cancer
So You Are Less Afraid of Death*

Forget, maybe, the neglect that heaped the mold on all the bread
and you could feel yourself growing moldy and happy, ever larger
till you reach across the countertop of the spilled milk,
the glass of your ambitions shattered, your PBJ body soaked and left
for a million years in silence until futuristic explorers
rediscover you, black, crestfallen, yet preserved in high fructose,
sucrose, gluten, the oat-encrusted dust of an animate soul
calling for and made by and scared of mothers still. They'll clean
carefully around you and blow like a tomraider on your breast
and the lichen-infected part of you, every bit of lymph and cyst,
will fly, wind in its hair, to an end more than skin deep,
a journey into sunlight where you become sunlight itself.

I guess I'm trying to say, *you're growing into the sun and don't worry,*
because I have come to believe similitudes (my greatest comfort)
begin where the body of a man never dies then navigate
towards language in an awful ship, the worst-ever ship,
a slave-ship, and because I want to show clearly what I mean
and tie this poem to the post on the wharf and perhaps die myself,
I ask: *do you think the walnut can show the walnut-shaped brain
how life and death hang in the balance from a very hard, black tree
that also lives/dies by the vicissitudes of the sun?* I think,
pal of mine, that many things can teach us almost anything,
and that your inevitable death is now possibly not
entirely your fault. I, for one, am doing my best, doing it
for you, trying to be realistic. Someone has to be.
So come on, you in your bed. You are not dead yet,
and there is more of you than ever! Remember something
and be comforted. Let's play a game.
Can you spell *dearth*? How about *earth*?

We are Tired of Our Own Music

I have a pocketful of marbles
at the aquarium. Exhausted,
hung over, sad, I throw a marble
into a tank. It becomes a ball.
The fish play with the ball
with their snouts, bouncing
them far up into the air.
I keep tossing. The massive whale
breaches and squeals his
massive delight, and my pockets
are refilled. I heard
there is a tune no one can sing
except by climbing into the mouth
of a big fish and putting an ear
between its teeth. Like a sitar,
it is a high, decaying twinge.
When I get home, there is a cult
of dogs that want to worship me,
so I whistle long and low.

My Father, Living Alone at 56

Suddenly a bachelor, his wife and kids moved on
from that old house he stayed in, tried to sell.
He entered his own private hell: impotence and pizza boxes,
sleeping on the floor, keeping the door to the bathroom perpetually ajar,
and never far, the computer with it's mounds of breasts and twats,
the movie's slapping sounds, the hustle of the mouse...
that house was all but lost upon his children. And now I know

this childless way of living. Didn't see, but learned:
the reruns of the shows that never changed me,
how all the friends I'm proud and bleak to
never call in times of need. All we ask,
old man and I, is unconditional love
like the kind on the boob-tube
or in nightclubs twice a week.

Hold on. I know my life is not unique, that I'm not alone,
that history's the interest paid on what you've done and known,
that every home depreciates: your love, house, your bone,
but damn it. Death, it seems, is not in a gun or popping pills,
but the thing that waits for the cash box at the garage-sale to fill.

Buying Computer Paper

The lights are bright at 2am; these are our cathedral steps. Monks, madonnas,
blue-clad passion plays. I exchange a nervous wave with a woman I once met,
dated from the internet. Everywhere, in perpetuity, a couple is roving, looking
for what to look for. Two friends are catty corner in an aisle full of shoes.
I see two people kiss too many times, their lips are chapped from kissing.

One still has the lisp from her braces; her white-scarred teeth have left many black marks on him,
that congenital disease of new love between toothpastes, powders, stuffed bears, video games,
under the poster of the demi-god with his twin-pistols, leering over the shitstorm of the unique
and infinitely reproducible

is history, or memory, or time, a light that it is hard to see the point of,
more a spark that dazzles than illumination. At least it is bright all night, has not changed its cast
on sighs and sores. Let the checkout line be the narthex,

and how one becomes another

Pieta scene, the cars, the hands, the altar....

we'll drop the bags into our beds, we'll drive home, we'll lay
over the laps with a bagful of surrogates, drool on ourselves
for every black village, town and hamlet. Surely we have died
many times. Surely some god has come over us. And what drapery!
The way the stars and streetlights mix. The shadow folds of the lap
makes animal howls.

The Poet Troubleshoots the Gates of Hell

after Jack Spicer

Am I Orpheus- O man, am I?

A song without sound,

a cloud without sky?

Ain't gettin' in...

don't know why;

does wordy love live dead

with maggots in her eye?

1. Push playback to start.

2. Wiggle input to gates of lead,

3. shake that baby talk, coo larks

at the start of the life of the dead,

4. and sing not a song but a spit, palindrome

down upwards mouthways through bars to the pit:

am I mad, am I, Ma?

5.

Then lay you down and take your nap,
for happy dreams of loss, and lossy dreams of hap.

She is so far, so gone
when you're laying on hell's lawn
you'd waste all to linger there
for just a finger through her hair
some sliver of her lapse, her blonde.

Her head is dangling in such gaps,
hemorrhaging unhappiness.

6. Re-boot and kick the gate again

and singing, sing:

world all over, beautiful as the sky!

Word to all this, natural as piss,

*green as the grass with a finger up its ass,
curved as moony lovers spooning
over this dead world all of their
longing, their white dead love!*

How I'll Make an Elegy

First, forget the stories that everyone tells
of ordinary losses and longings, your problems
that don't have to do with language. Instead, draft

pacons to the phrase *if only*, or better yet, treatises
on the word *like*. Show us how it can dictate
the verb form of sentences,

how it quickens the metaphor's vehicle, leaving the tenor
(if you are clever) behind at the opera house.
Tell us how this complicates the way you think

about time and death. Then take a risk by describing the word *like*
as metaphor for an entire body, or, maybe a panegyric
to all the bodies you've known, being careful not to linger

too long on the bodies you've fucked or played with,
instead making a big chatroom for the invisible spirits of the world,
a continuum of glyphs. No averageness, no swoon, turning into things

you might've forgotten, like mellow grass,
crepes, bullhorns, rivers you swam in
in some anonymous June, telling us about that,

how small things are incredibly similar, how these images
are the body of the epiphany of your true feelings,
reassuring us that this is the life you are leading us to

when you write about death, a system as unreasonable as it is accurate.
Don't let on that all of this body decays someday by forgoing the word *like* in later passages.
This is merely queen-annes-lace invading the fennel bushes.

It is your black tie speaking. Be less common for us. Less honest, less true.

We will all, after all, lose everyone, especially ourselves, like it was nothing.
Give us the respect of ambiguity and uniqueness. You owe us that.

To demonstrate: Your grandfather had been around the whole world,
and twice, and even though he met hundreds of people
that he remembered fondly and spoke of often,

none of them remembered him. Nothing special all alone,
now he cannot walk, or take himself to the bathroom,
and his fingers have begun to fall off. Don't leave us there:

It's rude to leave no likeness to dictate forms,
to leave the tenor with no one to love him after all.
No, no, it wont do. Make him into a fucking house or something,

or at least a ghost inside one. No, put him into hiding,
into the basement, in every corner you are trying
not to write yourself into.

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