

Could I Be Human?

By

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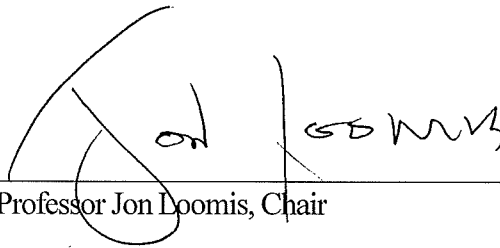
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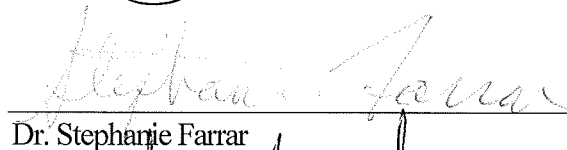
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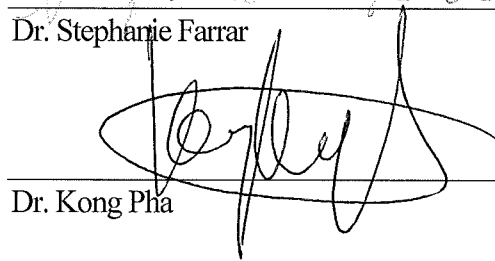
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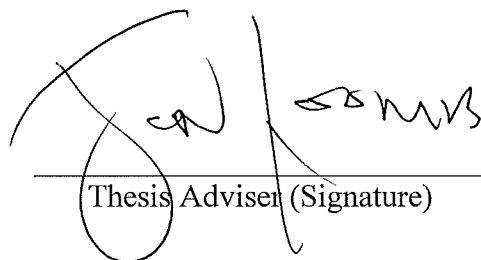
# Could I Be Human?

By

Samuel Hovda

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 2018  
Under the Supervision of Professor Jon Loomis

This creative thesis is a collection of thirty-three poems written primarily in the first-person, lyric mode. This collection displays a focus on craft, specifically precision of image and language, while both exploring the author's internal process of coming out and examining the author's relationships to ideas of queerness, to their family, and to society at large. Through this dual focus on craft and theme, these poems form a cohesive manuscript, which is conscious of its place in the literary and larger worlds.



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Thesis Adviser (Signature) Date

## Acknowledgements

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*Glass Poetry Journal*: “this man suit” and “Faggot Regrets Not Coming Out Sooner”  
*Nimrod International Journal*: “In a Dream, Faggot and His Father Drive Up the Side of a Dark Obelisk,” “Faggot Once Again Considers His Body,” and “Self-Portrait, with Faggot and Eyeliner”  
*Contrary Magazine*: “Planting,” “Hookup, at your house,” and “151 rum, malibu, pineapple juice”  
*Rust + Moth*: “bedroom fight, why can’t I *be a man*”  
*Sidekick LIT*: “after sex you said”  
*|tap| Lit Mag*: “Perennials”  
*Nashville Review*: “Crossdressed in Rochester, MN, I Consider my Reflection in a Bar Window”  
*Red Paint Hill*: “I climbed the Belfry”  
*Word Riot*: “Downward”  
*Tinderbox Poetry Journal*: “Aubade, with Minnesota Winter”

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a chapbook-length poetry collection, which primarily explores my experiences as a queer person, including romantic relationships, familial connections, and the early passing of my father, all in the lyric mode. This introduction provides context to these poems by first defining queerness generally and as it applies to me specifically, relating queerness to my poetry and the lyric generally, and discussing the context and influence of some canonical and contemporary poets.

### **What Is Queer: Sexuality and Positionality**

Before it's possible to discuss how queerness informs my creative work, it is important to first define what it means to be queer. One thing queerness can signify is variance in sex, gender, and/or sexuality. Queer peoples, in this sense, means gay, lesbian, transgender, intersex, nonbinary, genderfluid, and other gender and sexual non-normative groups that are not in a straight relationship between a cisman and a ciswoman. LGBT+ communities combine these together at least in part because of how those in power "use the state and its regulation of sexuality [...] to designate which individuals were truly 'fit' for full rights and privileges of citizenship" (Cohen 453). In my case, I am a transgender woman attracted to women, both a gender and sexuality-based deviant.

But this is only one, more limited definition of queerness. Explaining what queer means, more abstractly, can be done by relating it to whatever is considered normal in a culture or society. David Halperin writes that "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it*

*necessarily refers.*” (62, *emphases original*). Juana María Rodríguez further explicates this by writing, “This breaking down of categories, questioning definitions and giving them new meaning, moving through spaces of understanding and dissension, working through the critical practice of “refusing explication” is precisely what queerness entails” (24). She further states that queer is not a catch-all label for the multiple LGBT identities, but “a challenge to constructions of heteronormativity.” (24). Queerness, then, is whatever is abnormal, weird, or different, and whatever seeks to undermine normalcy.

To accommodate this understanding that sexuality is not the only identity category that’s a site of power and privilege or which people use to ostracize or punish others, queer theory has grown, intersecting with other fields to examine additional sites of categorical otherness as well as their intersections with non-normative sexualities. Race, class, and dis/ability, for concrete examples, also signify queerness(es) in this more general sense (Somerville 190; Samuels 233-43). Discussing queer language formations in *latinidad* communities, Rodríguez explains how, in all writings about queer *latinx* identities, “traditional disciplinary boundaries become inadequate containers for subjects whose lives and utterances traverse the categories meant to contain them” (30). This crossing of disciplinary fields, though, is not just a breaking down, but is also “the underlying premise through which the complexities of identity can begin to be understood” (31). Identities do not exist on a single axis; they always also include everything else.

Due to the complex nature of identity, people who fall under LGBT+ umbrella can have different amounts of privilege and varying relationships to heteronormativity, and some heterosexual people who are kept out of the center of heteronormative society



may be considered queer. Cathy Cohen explains that “heteronormativity interacts with institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation to define us in numerous ways as marginal and oppressed subjects” (448). Using examples such as how “marriage and heterosexuality [...] were reconfigured to justify the exploitation and regulation of black bodies, even those presumably engaged in heterosexual behavior,” Cohen shows how heterosexual people can be excluded from the heteronormative ideal (454). In addition, Cohen writes about the privilege some queers receive from being white, male, and upper class” (459). A white, middle-class, and monogamous lesbian couple, for example, might have more privilege than and exists closer to the heteronormative center than a straight, black, disabled man. A single-access framework is always somehow limiting: an individual’s identity cannot be explained by one category, and not everyone within a single identity category has the same relationship to power.

In my own writing and life, while I consider gender and sexuality to be at the forefront of my self-identification as a queer person, this single-access framework is complicated by other aspects of my identity. Most notably, the early passing of my father left me living in a single-parent household, with my mother working most of the time. At the same time, being white and growing up in a rural community, I’ve faced no conflicts due to race and have never been followed by store clerks or harassed by police. Despite my chronic health issues, I’ve been able to rely on my mother’s job-based healthcare and, more recently, state-run healthcare to cover most of the costs. I’m enmeshed in a middle-class lifestyle. Even within the context of being a transgender person, I still, during the writing of these poems, passed most of the time as a cis-gender male. I may be queer in a strictly sex/gender/sexuality-based sense, but I grew up in and still negotiate

heteronormative structures with ease. There are parts of my identity that steep me in privilege, others that leave me outside the center, and these must be accounted for when trying to understand how my lived experiences may be similar to or different from other queer and transgender people.

### **The Queer Lyric: Poetry of Confirmation**

To explore individual moments and to represent how I experience them, I work primarily in the lyric mode. While the idea of the lyric is nebulous at times, I think of Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" as a first, if obvious, example. Wordsworth describes poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [...] recollected in tranquility (para. 26). My poems do exactly this: they examine and reflect on past experiences until they reach a revelation or understanding. Poems such as "bedroom fight, why can't I be a man" and "151 rum, malibu, pineapple juice" are explicit in this; the moments are obvious. In a poem like "Faggot Regrets Not Coming Out Sooner," the moment is more implied, with hints such as the narrator looking out a window, but there is still a physical and temporal setting. Through this examination, the poem's revelation shows itself in an image charged with the powerful feelings. In the poems mentioned, these can be isolated, however inexactly, as the clothes on the floor representing a sense of failure, the final cuddling scene as a sense of safety, and the taste of plums transferred onto the darkness as remorse. While reducing the poems this way minimizes or even nullifies their emotional impact, this is how the poem transfers the lyric experience from the writer to the reader.

Another important component of the lyric it is the interaction between the poet and society in which they live, and it's here that the connection between queerness and

lyric poetry shows itself. The lyric expresses an individual perception and consideration, but the poet and the poem still emerge from a societal context. As Adorno writes, “the entirety of society, conceived as an internally contradictory unit, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society, and in what way it transcends it” (39). In some of these poems, such as “this man suit,” the conflict with social and cultural norms is explicit: the speaker is offended both by someone using the word ‘faggot’ and by how others view queer people. Even in a poem like “Self Portrait, with Faggot and Eyeliner,” social normativity is apparent in the fact that there’s an incongruity, even internalized by the speaker, in someone assigned male at birth putting on makeup. In these poems, lyric individualism and queerness overlap most obviously in how the speaker and poet exist in conflict with society.

The idea of the individual and the self is complicated one though, especially as queer theory understands it in the twenty-first century. Judith Butler makes this clear, writing that “there is no subject who is ‘free’ to stand outside [social] norms or to negotiate them at a distance; on the contrary, the subject is retroactively produced by these norms in their repetition, precisely as their effect” (22). More directly, “Freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power” (22). Not only is the individual always connected to society, but they are in fact always defined and redefined in accordance with it. There is neither a coherent self nor a self outside of the social order.

The idea of the lyric has evolved as well, in ways that reflect this understanding of the individual. I take some of my perspective on this from Brenda Hillman and her essay on the “broken lyric.” While the lyric aspect of poetry, for her, is still “rendering human

emotion in language; attention to subjective experience in a songlike fashion,” she writes of this sense of fractured identity (94). Discussing Emily Dickinson and Eminem, she writes, “their speakers present contradictory riddles as deflections for saying who they think they are” (95). Later, she notes how “the poet presses to an identity as a nonidentity, critiquing the culture as private artist” (97). There may be an attempt or attempts to solidify the subject within the lyric through the isolation of a moment in time, but, because of how identity is always fleeting and redescribing itself in its social context, the subject eludes solidification. This tension sits at the center of the contemporary lyric and in the center of my poetry. Even potential future readers of my poems, or of any work, will understand them through the context of the reader’s own temporal and cultural frames of reference, despite how they may or may not try to read them only through mine. In doing this, the speaker of my poems will continue to change, shifting for as long as people still read the poems and continually being redescribed against a social context. The idea that the speaker of “If I Die Before I Transition,” may eventually be “finally at rest, unchanging,” then, is an obvious, if hopeful, lie.

With this understanding of the individual and the self, it is worth noting also how I’ve used form to represent and convey some of this deconstruction. While I do not use fragmentation and multiple simultaneous perspectives in the way that Hillman elsewhere discusses in her essay, I have taken to heart Robert Creeley’s dictum that “form is never more than an extension of content” (Olson para. 8). In some poems, such as “hookup, at your house” and “Aubade, with Minnesota Winter,” lines contain considerable gaps that function as caesuras or, in the case of the latter especially, appear more like the words have been scattered across the page. The most extreme example of this is “151 rum,

malibu, pineapple juice,” in which some stanzas include displaced lines, others contain gaps within lines, and the final stanza takes on the appearance of a box. In addition, poems like “My Own Gender” eschew punctuation and capitalization to disrupt a traditional reading method and to force the reader to consider more directly how the words connect on the page. This also functions to allow multiple sentences and readings to show themselves at once. While this may appear similar to the writing of poets like W.S. Merwin or e.e. cummings, that I’m intentionally trying to queer the page and that the poems themselves are about queerness differentiates this technique from these writers and other precursors.

### **Literary Forebears: The Canon and Contemporaries**

The goal of this collection is not only to produce a manuscript of publishable poems focused on a specific subject, but also to help bring queer voices further into public poetic discourse. On the one hand, this helps highlight queer lives and both humanizes and individualizes what otherwise might be an abstract group of people for some readers. In addition, these poems, as a potential book or chapbook, may also provide, for younger queer people, a voice and conversation to hear and enter. While my first focus is on the use of language and creation of image, I’m also aware of potential audiences and receptions to such a collection. I came to understand that a person can write overtly about these themes and issues through reading mid-twentieth century and twenty-first century queer poets, and I hope to continue this cycle.

To speak more to the literary context and traditions of my writing, it’s worth noting first the wider literary canon. In my use of image and metaphor, James Wright and W.S. Merwin, as well as Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo, have informed my writing,

with their ability to make sudden leaps from real-world objects to other realms. As far as perspective, theme, and even tone, my writing comes closer to Adrienne Rich's examination of the social and the foregrounding of her identity in her mid-to-late poetry, especially *Diving into the Wreck*. One of my primary antecedents and influences though is John Ashbery, who wrote, albeit opaquely at times, about his gay and queer love interests. He was one of the first poets I found when I sought out queer writers. Regarding craft, his use of everyday occurrences to springboard into vast, imaginative worlds and his mixing of high and low art to give texture to poems such as "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" and "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" lead me to do the same in some of my writing. As T.S. Eliot wrote, "Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know." I constantly take from these and other literary forebears both to learn how they did the things I want to do and to continue trying new techniques once I've learned those older ones.

Having said this, I must note also how much queer poetry has already become more explicit and prominent. It's a far cry from Auden, Ashbery, and O'Hara closeting and hinting at their sexualities in their poetry. A couple older living poets I've looked to are Carl Philips and Eduardo C. Coral, who discuss their queerness more openly and explicitly in their work, though they both sometimes write abstractly and about other topics. Some younger writers I feel akin to are Ocean Vuong, Danez Smith, Aziza Barnes, and sam sax, who write similarly out of their queerness. Reading these poets, I've learned more about how to incorporate queerness and gender/sexuality into a poem without making it the only interesting thing about a piece, whether that be through

queerness being secondary, if not implied, within particular poems (as with Vuong especially), or through a focus on form and craft (as with Smith and Barnes in particular). As far as discussing queerness abstractly as the centerpiece of a poem and doing so without the poem becoming a flat, if warranted, affirmation of existence, I've learned from Cameron Awkward-Rich's *Sympathetic Little Monster* and H. Melt's *The Plural, The Blurring*, both of which mix critical ideas with poetry, especially Melt. While Awkward-Rich merges critical scholarship with their poetry, Melt surrounds the poems in their first book with essays about queerness generally, about the Chicago queer scene specifically, and about the history of queer literary magazines. Though it is relatively young, there is a definite context and conversation into which I'm writing and from which I've learned how to queer the poem and the page.

## **Conclusion**

These poems exist at the intersection of queerness and the lyric mode, where refusal of social norms gives way to reflection and this careful investigation leads to revelation. By discussing queerness, the lyric mode, and the context for my work, I've made a case for the academic and poetic underpinnings of these poems, as well as for their place in a culture that is just beginning to accept more and more explicit and various queernesses. All that's left, then, is the poetry.

## COULD I BE HUMAN?

*"All beauty, resonance, integrity  
Exist by depravity or logic  
Of strange position"*

*-John Ashbery, "Le Livre Est Sur La Table"*

*"If we die before we wake  
Who we are is no mistake"*

*-Kesha, "Hymn"*



**Faggot Reflects on Another Failed Relationship**

My skin is the rumpled flag of the country  
I haven't been welcome for years.

There, the birds bark, marbles  
head-banging in a tin can.  
There, every grave tastes like soap.

But this new, skinless night  
escapes its own bruises. I've escaped  
the museum of your hands.  
My shoulders, the artifacts.

I lick the sulfur from my palm. I lust  
for flesh, real flesh, not  
what I can see. I taste

like copper blueberries.  
Another love falls out of my wrist,  
a tumor, a plover

pulses from my bones.

## Seasonal Affective Disorder

The empty branches, x-rays of broken limbs.  
A couple Japanese beetles  
skitter-pause stinking across the kitchen sink.

They know nothing of what's to come.  
The snow, layer of skin  
uneven and pock-marked.

Even in our healthiest days, we're dying.  
No more birdsong,  
no more season of flesh. *Nothing*

*lasts forever* is meant to calm the child  
shaking after the gerbil  
rolls its plastic sphere down the stairs.

I'll be free. Escape this body's electric knives.  
The pain forks  
lightning through the chest, like flow charts.

Soon the old barn of this body will collapse.  
I'll be rot and the sawdust  
vibrating its slow dance back into the dirt.

### **In a Dream, Faggot and His Father Drive Up the Side of a Dark Obelisk**

The phallic structure, miles tall and just  
wide enough to fit one car. Perfectly

vertical. I'm passenger. We reach the top,  
drive over the peak, straight down the other side.

The old bastard lets go of the wheel, pulls off  
his hand, throws it out the window. It falls

faster than we do. *That's how you get over  
cancer, recover from a broken son.* So much

for reconcile. How does he show up  
in every dream? His whole body returned,

puppet hooked back onto the string.  
I would like, for once, for him to call me

Sara. Anyone, call me Sara. We won't reach  
the bottom of this giant dick. When he snaps

off his tongue, red ear of corn, he offers it, says  
to plant it when I wake up. *From there will grow*

*ten-thousand fingers. And the world they will keep.*

## Dysphoria

My lungs, each with its soft  
carapace. Those beasts  
slouch again against familiar homes.

This gender thing: the insides  
that won't inflate; upside-down  
delphinium, never blooms.

I sit in a grotto, with a favorite word,  
guilty thoughts. In here,  
with the white noise of the waterfall,

I can hear myself talk. And her voice  
shimmers stone. In here I visit  
my shriveled lungs, fill them

bulging, vast with seed, and almost growing.  
But like a garden beside fifty-five acres of corn.  
But like a child kneeling on top of an acre of bone.

**After sex      you said**

I fell back      into male,  
tiredness, no longer wanting  
to submit. Two years

you tried to love      this me. I'm  
gorgeous      when no one  
looks. Touch me      in silk

and care. Spider eats her mate. I devour  
me, corpse and grave. Bride  
and the father

giving her away. I echoes. I falls  
into mouth, skin chapped, so red  
I might      be morning.

**bedroom fight, why can't I *be a man***

we unstitch  
the skin over

her spine  
a white wing  
unfurls  
          she flies  
out the door

all our failures  
the lingerie  
blue pink  
          open mouth  
          across the floor

**Toil**

How far the night comes,  
its fragrant buzzing. Let's multiply,  
tall dandelions. Or not.

When doctors took my skin,  
rubbery paint swatch, I needed  
seven stitches to hold me in.

I'm going to burst at this  
rough patch of soil. Maybe  
this garden will bring me

something new: the scar  
where they excised my one  
wing, a word for self-love

without fear of drowning.  
All the water goes on and on  
and still the river remains.

I have enough  
muscle to house both  
my selves, queer

mixture. I've played this one song  
so many nights. All I hear, my pulse too  
tries to escape this body.

**this man suit**

itches. sags. nights    I hang it, it drips  
its blue-clear sticky liquids. each cut  
needs a kiss. I've cut out

so many tongues. men thought me  
one of them, spoke *fag* about something  
queer, slid up in panic. a scared man's tongue

lolls like a cow's. sunrise    out  
his mouth's horizon. small wonder: words shiver  
my arm, bite    like fire ants. the marks itch

forever. let me match-flame this body to dust,  
let me burn, let me grow    red-gold  
feathers    or armadillo skin. I don't want

hunched shoulders    too wide    for auditorium seats.  
I don't want alligator strength, every bite  
bursts skin, every glare    a hunger. let me

butterfly, mothwing. let me otter  
the river, hold my own    hand so I don't  
drift away    while I sleep. my closet

hooks:    all the tongues  
search the air, would form words    if they had  
anything    in this shelter

to clack against    to make noise.



# **Aubade, with Minnesota Winter**

You meteor                      through me still,  
          plastic bag      over my head.

I swore I'd love myself or die.

(Dog toy, no noise)  
 (Garden under snow)

Someday      I'll love this skin,  
          the landmarks,           surgical scars,

push              out,      out,  
          damn bruise.           I'm fine.

Just leave me              a blowtorch,  
                                  my marshmallow crown.

When I wore      your clothes  
          I looked  
                                  always  
                                          down.

Sometimes now              I see      snow  
          as it falls              sometimes clouds.

**Downward**

I want a yellow sundress, a pink cast,  
meds, empty hotel room.

You ever seen a deer,  
gun in lap, known  
you could never man?

It's gendered shirts,  
short hair, fists  
hide nails blue  
as veins seen through skin.

I want a healed arm.  
Break it again.

## Faggot Reconsiders How He Approaches Relationships

I can't believe I've ever dated anyone.  
Evening, the dear friend, steps into a clearing  
wearing a black dress spotted with bleach.  
I wake up from reverie  
at two in the afternoon.

Meanwhile, a coffee-date  
exhausts me for a day and a half.

Today again I'm a knot  
you can't unfuck even with a fork.

I can't even give  
'a good fucking' – I want to femme,  
to receive another's flesh  
or rubber excess. I can't  
exert, top, and this

is a failure? At least I'm broken  
in a way I can't puzzle together.

Unique, right? The body and mind  
together as riddle, the hint:

the potential to be loved.  
No one's gotten it yet.

I'm not sure there's an answer.  
Can I claim I'm anything  
other than the way nature's tendril  
slow-skims over concrete?

Well, yes. That's what night's  
good fucking explains, its consistent  
arrival, ritual, the lover  
I couldn't be. Who doesn't exist.

**Crossdressed in Rochester, MN, Faggot Considers His Reflection in a Bar Window**

To wear this black skirt, these heels,  
to look this good  
is to feel like no one  
will want to murder me tonight,  
which is not true.

**Faggot Goes Back in Time to Deliver His Father's Eulogy *En Femme***

The congregation slithers into pews.  
I'm already stiff-kneed in the pulpit.  
My father

stands at the nave entrance, greets everyone  
goodbye. His lips, blue already.  
Pale. Drunk, he brags

about his son's wide shoulders, *good for  
fucking*. Before I begin, I hear  
the sobs. Boy-me still

sits shaking on the narthex stairs, prays  
for girlhood's heliotropes to blossom  
from the soil of his hips.

He cries about skin  
rough like a lawnmower blade  
scraped from striking graves.

His sobs reach two directions.  
At least he won't grow to fill  
his dad's glass forms.

Around the casket, bluebell-filled vases  
quake. The dead man hobbles  
up the aisle, takes his seat

among the congregation—  
someone stands up, strums  
an old guitar, begins, *To everything...*

*(turn, turn, turn)*

*there is a season...*  
Am I invisible? No, I'm not  
even here. They always go on

without me.

## Seasonals

maybe closure is a pear        fallen off the tree  
gravel-bruised, swollen with ants. and goodness  
is just        collision        unlearned.

when the flesh was solid  
when skin glossed without rupture,  
taut as any stress.

my mouth is the rim of a well. each time  
you text, you dip your bucket in, retrieve  
a slosh of cold,        of empty,

the space        between stars. maybe  
the seasons, each year, are the same as before,  
not copies.        maybe the pear

is a tumor excised from the body,  
ant lines        blood vessels.  
then after the first rupture        there is

consistency. the cycle, viewed  
larger, is a stillness.

## Planting

I crawled, head down, beside my brother.  
 With deer-hide gloves, we tore up  
 every green thing  
 that grew        uncontrollably.

Prickly, bushy,  
 each fistful a biopsy.

Cleared an acre.

The next week, my brother hoed. My knees  
 churned. I poured ginseng, smoothed dirt.

Dad laid thirty lawns of clippings, covered  
 our sloppy,  
       spit on every swath.

The cancer spread, esophagus  
 to everywhere. Months of last-ditch chemo,  
 his skin sagged round the lip  
 of each wool sock,  
 compression-bound,  
       cradled in tan, leather.

Spit cup in hand, he'd drool  
 three inches, ask me to empty.  
 When he finally jaw-slacked  
 and crumbled inward,  
       his neck: a curtain.

Last day planting done, I stood  
 by the barbed fence, shook  
 dirt out        shaggy hair.

Dad took seeds, walked the rows,  
 tossed handfuls like feeding pigs.  
 He told me we could live for years  
 on the money we'd make.

He spit again on everything.  
 The ride home, I sat on old towels,

my body aching.



## I Climbed the Belfry

three days after your death. Rang  
the battered iron once            for each year.

The bell pulsed  
the countryside. Far off, the Gomers' cows  
looked. Starlings,  
              nests on the cornices,  
shot out  
              in spirals.

The plural of the heartbeat  
is one hundred  
starlings in flight. A new language

burns the throat. But words  
are how I forgive  
myself            my darkest

thoughts. So when I found  
you    waiting, at night,            hunched-over  
outside the church doors, I still couldn't  
say    I loved you.

The moon faked departure,  
pulled tooth hidden in gauze,  
and a single crow, fat,

drooped a winter-thin branch.  
You must've heard

my blood, dust            rattling. You couldn't  
mouth            a single word.

Face hollowed, your skin  
translucent, bat wings            held against light.

## Elegy for Stars

I'd rather be the night sky,  
wear her sundress

punctured with light.  
I can't speak

on others' behalves,  
even those who share

defenses, but there's no more  
knowing in words

than action anyway.  
The comet describes

its brilliant arc. The stars  
spun so long ago, still

spinning. So it appears.  
Like Christmas lights on my gown.

There's no happy ending, no luxury  
of perspective, or listening.

Night is a blue car. Out here  
in the junkyard,

most of the movement is just  
the metal, all rust

and starlight, settling in.

## Another Song

Please, enter my hallways. My veins:  
silent, dark, and moving. The dead  
grass on the dirt. The cracked gravestones.

How the body learns its rudiments—  
muscle retracts, tires or tears. The gait  
bends over time, as a willow. Then a strong wind

eddies the field with worry. Earth,  
its anger. In the woods, morels  
reach up, wrinkled dicks, shivering.

They will hook and pull us down  
like pulling a mass of zebra mussels  
up out of a river. Last year,

I gave you a rose, plated gold. You declined.  
Now your lips scour my thigh,  
as a thresher devours the harvest.

I don't trust you. There's no sound anymore  
that couldn't be music  
if you listened long enough.  
Most of what I do is an accident.

# **hookup, at your house**

*for Marisa*

I stepped out  
made up in your bathroom  
blue dress      hairband

crooked      eyes shadowed      you  
held me like a chrysalis  
a rabbit trap

my back is a river  
you won't swim again  
may you know      a grappler's

chin-large face      scars glare  
unshaved thighs      I'll sip

dessert wine    play Mario  
compressed in yoga pants

try to save the princess

**Visiting His Mom and Still in the Closet, Faggot Refuses to Present As Femme**

My faggot-self now shadow.  
Slouch to the kitchen, the Keurig  
hot-sputters its caramel dirt. Caffeine keeps me

from the slipup, the admit  
I'd rather wear a skirt. I skirt  
my mother's question on

is there a girlfriend. Home is where  
the refrain begins again.  
In basketball shorts, my leg hair long enough

blooms mannish. The patchy beard.  
But my nails: polish chipped, yet pink still  
slivers electric. And these natural lashes

thick like ferns. Sometimes I toe-walk,  
practice for heels. Sometimes I work  
falsetto, and my voice sticks. Grease the lever,

return the bass. Whatever hangs  
in the air between my body  
and shadow. That's who I really am.

## Annuals

I'm one wrong step from a herniated disc,  
the gelatinous nucleus pulposus pushing out, overripe  
tuber stem. The mole budding in one of my thigh's

stretch marks might be cancer. Google tells me  
it looks like squamous cell. My forearms  
already surgically tilled, strange flowerbeds.

So what makes me joyous? The squeak of plovers,  
coos of species I'll never name. The sidewalk  
children I'll forget except their shrill notes,  
their speakerphone mouths. If I could gather

every bird, every child of pain, I might start  
a family of saints. My death I hope  
will be quick, but no sudden flash. Give me  
a minute to speculate how dark looks

when it's overcome by something darker.  
Maybe, without light, I'll erupt  
stiff-green, a field of ginger shoots.

## **Faggot Once Again Considers His Body**

It's hard to think of myself  
as human anymore. Could I snap  
off a rib, drop it in a jar,  
let it grow into my new body?

Mornings I stretch for three hours  
or else my shoulders constrict

like a broken promise pinches  
the gut when I see again  
this body

that trusts me,  
though I want to squeeze it  
thin into a smaller corset.

I think of pills  
when I stretch, and a sundress. I learn

the conventions of types of songs:  
today, aria; tomorrow, dirge: how shape  
determine resonance, this male flesh

nearly orc with its slouch and lurch,  
how octave and timbre  
determines the gender of a voice.

If I capo  
my vocal cords with falsetto, then  
could I be human? As in please,

let me have this. I have this  
red stone under my breast,  
all these knots

tense in my neck. Even if I keep  
this body. Even if I don't.

**My Own Gender**

I don't know what  
it is so many men women  
tell me what they feel  
they know it is I don't  
know but I do know  
what it looks like  
ice flowers silver  
erupt between my ribs



**Faggot Makes Another Request**

Don't memorize my face. I hope  
it transforms before next winter.  
Jaw thinner, cheeks no longer

stuffed with snow. I might shrink  
some parts, but grow thighs, small tits,  
an ass tense as a water drop.

Or maybe my Adam's apple still  
will jut too far forward.  
Shoulders overflowing, hardened soufflé.

I don't know. This changing  
is like driving at night  
into fog. Behind me, only darkness.

What's ahead is clouded,  
my headlamps illuminate the air,  
reveal nothing.

# 151 rum, malibu, pineapple juice

*for Rayna*

You, first woman to say  
     *Yes*, of course  
 wear your sexiest lingerie, let's

get drinks. Stockings  
     beneath jeans. Black corset  
 a night around me. We talked  
     siblings, your forearm  
     tattoo of your sister's initials  
     and a semi-colon, mixed

drinks. You taught  
     the bartender how to make  
         a Caribou Lou, sang me  
 some Tech N9ne. You looked

like Taylor Swift, but a rounder  
     face, and smiley.

Later, I stepped from your closet,  
     bounced in my little  
         black  
     dress.

You said, *sexy*.

Before your dancer's legs  
     around me, your voice  
 shivered my lips purple.

And after. You told me stories:  
     Bubba Sparxxx sang you "Ms. New Booty,"  
         your birthday, rooftop drinking,  
         local reggae band.  
 You were flying  
     to France the next fall,  
         some small town  
         far away. You

let me stay  
 quiet. You  
 held me

like an egg.

## Trying to Talk with a Man

*after Adrienne Rich*

Yes, older brother, our hands are the same,  
but what is explosive  
in us is not. In my gut, a sloth

licks the back of her hand.  
Queen sloth. If she dies, I wilt,  
ribs falling off like stone petals.

Your mouth is a desert  
gold-vast as sunrise. They're always  
testing the bombs there, aren't they?  
And the lizard, it grips  
elbow-tense to stone?

Sorry. I fear anything  
that reminds me of what  
I was raised to become.  
But you put on a pot of coffee  
just for me. Thank you.

Your two older sons need you now  
at the kitchen table, to teach them  
cribbage, to lose  
chin-strong with dignity.

How you love them. The ways  
we learned together,  
they fell from my skin,  
tufts of fur.

The ways I'd fail my children  
if I had any of my own.

**Night**

But you told me your thirteen secrets.  
Forgive me, I must share one:  
each old skin you shed,

you must eat it, you must  
let it pass  
dry over your tongue.

If the throat is holy, and it is.

Not holy like a god.  
Holy like tenderness

dim-lit behind the waterfall  
where the echoes drown out  
meaning. Even starving,

pale as foam, at the point where  
waters of different speeds  
devour each other.

**the world is still***after Maggie Smith*

Because my dad died before they were born,  
my nephews have never hugged  
the air where he should stand.

Sunlight slits the blinds  
and the back of my skull. Morning raises  
its yellow fist. Today my mother

might find my duffel bag  
tumor-swollen with sundresses, makeup.  
My family might disown me.

Or a man's wires might spark  
in a coffee shop, and he'll want  
a bullet in every cappuccino.

My red waterslide might stall  
at the heart or calf. But the world is still  
beautiful. The language of scraped,

churning legs. Children named  
after flowers, stars named for lovers.  
The way people burn almost forever,  
neurons like comets, but not quite.

## Fear Is What Quickens Me

There's comfort in the story repeated.  
 My brother tells us every year  
 how he stole a traffic cone, got stopped  
 walking home, returned it, lit  
 by the headlights of the police car  
 illuminated like a jackpot. And how  
 he and a friend crashed our family Christmas  
 ten years back, 3am, returning  
 from a hockey game, to drink cheap beer  
 and watch *Bad Santa*  
 three times in a row. When my uncle  
 came downstairs at 8, unfazed  
 he let them be  
 to watch it again.

I prefer the story  
 I don't remember: I was three.  
 We had a plastic tent –  
 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles –  
 I was always Donatello, the nerd introvert.  
 I wanted to be Leo, confident, vocal,  
 but I knew. I ran around  
 wielded one of the poles like a staff.  
 My brother, seven, tripped me.  
 I don't know how I fell, but the pole  
 entered my mouth, pierced the back  
 of my throat. The doctor  
 sewed in a dozen stitches.

I don't blame my brother.  
 He's not a bad person, mostly.  
 We used to play video games,  
 or I would watch. The same story  
 repeated: save again the princess in pink,  
 give the little brother the controller  
 that's not plugged in. He knows,  
 but won't say anything.

So when now I repress around him  
 the femme with a pink bow,  
 the coming out I've shown  
 a hundred others  
 and more online, it's not the story

that scares me, but the reaction.  
The slow drink of *I always knew*  
mixed with the cyanide of every time  
he'd joke about the gays, call someone *faggot*.

The story is still comfort. I know  
the process. I want it  
to be otherwise, but I know. The ending:  
something ruptures, the princess  
is in another castle. Something difficult  
and hard to reach  
must be mended, given time to heal.  
Or maybe this time  
the pink femme can save herself.



## Self Portrait, with Faggot and Eyeliner

In the mirror, Tiresias                      mid-transformation.  
New rule: no mirrors at the table.

My jawline still                      twin scythes, be still  
my fingers.

Each morning. Liquid liner,  
unsteady pen, my wings  
                 become fists, grow  
                 with each fix. Each tremble  
transforms preparation                      into practice,  
but practice bends perfect  
                 into a hardness, soft-shaped, the end

of a spoon. Think how good  
I've gotten: the robin's egg  
at the end of each finger,  
lips the shade of blueberries  
                 plump in the dark.

The sunrise, soft explosion. The mirror  
sheathed in glare. What am I  
reflecting? Nothing                      that's here.

New rule: nothing that's here  
remains. Tomorrow, straighter

lines. It will work. Like any magic,  
practice. Enunciate.

## I Want Paris Again

even the mime who grabbed my ankle  
beside the Metro, even the Eiffel Tower's  
burnt-dough stench, the canal bridges,

their undersides, moss like neckbeards.  
the spray paint, new skin of Montmartre:  
*defund patriarchy, fuck America.*

and you. find me  
stiff-kneed near the same fountain.  
your black sweatpants, your green shirt.

as rats nose the weeds out front  
the Notre Dame, as brass basslines  
ribcage the chatter, lead me

back-alley to your apartment.  
let me undress, my blue  
lingerie, magician's cloth makes the man

femme. the trick is to strut  
until the stockings dip.  
the trick is almost confidence,

but needs a participant, her hand  
firm again squeezing my leg.

**If I Die Before I Transition**

In the obituary, write my female name.  
Or use them both. Say she lies  
finally at rest, unchanging, but still  
tense inside her armor made of stone.

**Faggot Regrets Not Coming Out Sooner**

The clock hands, two snakes  
dead, tied together. Hera cleaned

the ears of Tiresias once  
she'd blinded him, after

she'd already changed him  
into woman and then back. Even gods

repent what they can't repeal.  
Beyond the window, plums

fall, purple throat-lumps, into night's  
numb mumbling. Darkness

isn't absence. It lies  
so sweet on the tongue.

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