Man himself| [poems]

Al Nyhart

The University of Montana

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THE MAN HIMSELF

by

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II

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Oilfields

But let your speech be
Yes, yes; No, no; and
whatever is beyond these
comes from the evil one.
Matthew 5:37

The generator brings light
to graveyard shift
and nothing to do
but wait for the dull bit
to sink deeper into the hole
and speak to ourselves--
saying only yes or no;
anything else
will get you in trouble.

We'll soon make our connection,
something to bury
but the driller finds a snake
under the rig
and kicks it into the red mud,
blood of Ohio.
I know what to say
or not say
as he splashes gasoline
over its tired form.
It too has said little,
waiting
as the world waits
for this fire, so
quiet, so affirming.
Out Of The Water

Even in winter
the clear spring water
crept from the dark woods
and obese rocks looking like
beached whales in the snow.
Where it spilled over a concrete tank,
my father had built a miniature plantation,
carving small wooden slaves
and painting on their clothes:
a blue dress, white polka dots
on the red bandanna
of a stooped woman moving her arms
methodically up and down the tiny washboard
with the spinning of the waterwheel,
eyes fixed on her lazy man
who fished in January.

As they labored into the night,
I'd lie upstairs in the sunken bed
under three wool blankets
and listen to the hinges sing,
bringing their small tasks to life.
Downstairs in the kitchen,
my father found the whiskey
that kept him warm. Sometimes
I'd hear him swear at shapes
that appeared inside the house
and he'd load the twelve gauge,
chase them up the narrow staircase
where they ran and hid
to gossip about our lives--
"There they are, the bastards,
he'd say, weaving the wide barrel
across the room, and taking aim
at my mother's oak dresser
where an army of African violets
huddled and feigned sleep.
Donkey Show

You decide
which country to save.

From the bar mirror
he watches a woman
descend from the ceiling
in a wicker basket
made by her mother.
The mariachi band
spreads her legs
for the beast
at the end of the world
who has broken no laws
but makes new ones,
infallible
as her lovely body
spinning in the wilderness.
Near Da Nang

We've got five minutes while the driver buys his dope, enough time to share the small girl who squats in the corner washing her thighs. On the dirt floor a child tips a bowl of goat's milk with elbows notched perfectly then pushes himself from the room. The Sergeant and I argue to see who's first and try to reason, but in our desire we can't be sure of anything. Lying on top of her she turns her face away and denies my kiss. We move quickly like bodies must in war, selfish as the grave is shadowless. The Sergeant yells it's his fucking turn. Outside the child blows the jeep's sharp horn.
Breast-fed at the VA Hospital, San Francisco

Reagan wasn't elected yet
but I heard his voice rise (leap) from the Pacific,
calling me out
& I didn't know whether I'd pissed
or shit my pants. All morning I sat in my car,
Ft. Miley looming like a tomb behind me
& couldn't take my eyes off his photograph. Waving,
smiling
on the front page of the Chronicle.
I saw the world end.
I saw the three 6's under his shock
of steel hair
like Superman's hair; I knew he was making fun of me
so I had to do something.
I had to get out of my car
& kill him.

Inside the hospital,
I warned Judy it was Tuesday.
With the others I sat at her feet
& watched her breasts swell with Liebfraumilch.
Handing us perfumed paper,
she told us to write what we could not say,
name the enemy, confront him, back him into a corner
& cut off his balls.
I wrote The Next World.
I wrote The Female Spider With Undulating Wings.

(stanza break)
Then she filmed us.
Watching ourselves on TV
we saw the secret quirks appear,
exciting our mannerisms, our speech.
Maybe our faces were to blame.
Maybe our tongues.

& when she spoke.
No, before that.
Before she came into the room
we were already changed, languishing in chemical facades
& I thought of something soft, boneless, thin fillets
spread out into shapes
that did not resemble men,
ready to tell her how it felt being pussy-whipped;
how some of us thought we were fags, others
married to methadone
or a small war.
One--a welder from Palo Alto
said he'd had enough of this horseshit,
guys crying in their beers;
he wasn't going to hang around there anymore, but
he hadn't seen her come in. Judy,
the Brooklyn accent that cleaned up our mess. Jewess.
That was exactly the sound her dress made
as she sat down,
waited for us
to begin.
The Possession Of Duty

When I finished
drowning the emaciated rabbit,
pressing a stick against the throat
until it ceased thrashing
beneath the shallow stream,
we watched bluefish
eating gold flies.

Before I could tell her anything
about the open sores on its stomach,
she waded into the water,
warning me to stay there
as if only she could receive the thick light
dripping from the trees.
She warned me
& took off her blouse,
folding the soft dacron
& holding it in her small hands
like a new white Bible,
the kind her father dealt out
inside the church van
after I'd been saved--
the one that had my name in it,
the date,
the one that belonged to me.
The Hunt

Ten years in San Francisco
& you discover you're not
gay afterall. Afterall
the cedar closet was sold
years ago at the Estate Sale
of your hometown
before it moved away,
having forgot it ever saw you
slip two kind fingers up the ass
of a dead elk you'd found in the bloody woods.
Because it was a child's game,
because there was no excuse for it,
you imagined what it would be like
to lie there in the pink snow
& surrender all that flesh
to a world that had suddenly
exposed itself, turning
from a small invented thought
& racing back to a single dark beginning
like a prisoner retreating to his cell
after escaping once twice
because he could not change,
he could not pretend.

Now carrying everything that's deemed significant,
you board the bus for Tucson,
believing the closer one dies to Mexico
might appease whatever spirit,
good or least expensive
hungers in the desert.
The Indian woman from Gila Bend
clasps her silver moneyclip
engraved with dollar signs
& when you sit down next to her,
you've almost forgotten California,
the map of Africa
hanging like a giant jewel pendant
on a Tenderloin wall,
how you coughed into a blue handkerchief.
Blazing Away

for Marianne Faithfull

I'm pushed. Not by your current vehemence
but how irreverent you are, your piss

staining the persian rug, the one you purchased
in Madagascar where I first noticed

your ambivalent pretensions. You knew
what a bargain I was so you bought two

of me, one for each hand dealt here or there
when no one was looking. I know how fear

can behave when it's having a bad day
but you were so disconcerting, always

blaming me for what the other wouldn't do.
At first I thought I could recognize you,

sketch our love-making like some forgotten
premise I'd misplaced again and again;

but now this matter that's come between us
(much in my favor) is such an arduous

task that I'm concerned about our affair.
You should know by now we can't afford bizarre

(stanza break)
behavior, so why do you insist that I come at every ring, at each symposium of power administered on command. That is not my calling, my saraband executed on the polished parquet.

No, this is a different amourette where I'm the boss, the soldier on top of all wars. Do you want my nightgown to doff when our guests arrive? Or are you the guest tonight? That's all right; I love to serve just what you like--brandied chicken, leg of lamb, sorbet. Later, I'll ask the new madam to play the piano for you; not a bad note if you want my opinion, such a myriad of tricks I'm told, I couldn't pass her by. So darling we must try to simplify our lives--it's unavoidable. Of course our friendship will endure as we immerse ourselves in small talk, discussing pastille though I prefer not. Please, let's be genteel

(stanza break)
for always as suits our kind. I know you think me rude for being so recalcitrant

but I do want to help. I want to assure you that everything we do has some order

or what's the use. Next week I've got it all planned. First we'll sift through our emotional

debris and decide what to keep for future reference. That way we'll know when to infer

what it is we need. On the other hand we could just pretend to understand

each other. That might be the best routine considering your condition, how supine

you must lie now with all those plastic tubes stuck in you, full of your rare body fluids.
Hymn

The gilded grandmother lies blushing in her box,
a dry butterfly pinned to the purple room.

Three large women
sing "The Old Rugged Cross."
In Ohio you are born with one,
carrying it to school,
to marriage. You threaten
a husband with it,
nursing the children
from its black hallowed root.

This daughter,
wings around her own children,
looks one last time
& lets memory slide down a hill
on dirty knees--

    the rough hands dress the scrape
    with the same salve
    she rubs on the cows

bellowing outside the clapboard church
as the young preacher speaks her name--

    Paulvinia--
    & uses each letter of that name
    to perfect his eulogy.
Starting with perseverance.
At the end is allegiance

to her family sitting before her,
to the butterfat Jerseys already plodding
back across the frozen field,
to her husband
hiding his whiskey in the woods,
to Oral Roberts
needing more & more tithing
to build his gold cathedral.
Body Invisible

*for the enemy*

i.

When a man invites his innocence
to comfort an age
he discovers the remains
of a blind omnipotence.

When a man tempers his mind
to kill
& be killed
he makes a Buddha happy.

When a dead man returns
to consummate his affair
with another man
man has won his war.

ii.

At the bus station
he crosses his legs
& disappears. Jealous,
God has no choice
but to watch.
Memphis, St. Louis

no longer compete
with the dark pagoda
he has entered.

In the corner
are many bottles of green light
that never empty

like the swatch of brain
drying in the wet sand
or the desire

for another invisible body
crawling under
the concertina wire.
The Best Excuse

As if my father knew I needed an excuse to leave San Francisco, he fell down a flight of stairs at the Arcade Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri & died.

I gave my girlfriend everything. She could have California, the coast highway, Christo's fence running in Marin. I left her the gulls above San Quentin.

I wanted nothing. Only to return home & wait for my father's ashes, the hard clouds to break over Ohio.

Picking up the small package at the funeral parlor, I put him in the trunk of my uncle's Cadillac & closed it gently.

For two weeks we chauffeured him to his favorite bars & hideouts, raising glass after glass
for the man
who'd once fought us both
until the blood embellished the dust
& you could not tell
who had won.

If I said flutes,
there were flutes
when I poured the remains
beside his father's grave.

Saving a few pieces,
I threw them over a fence
that was coming down
from all the deer,
crossing
to run into the night.
Driving With The Dead

The man she loves
has two fingers up his ass
at the Ramada Inn in Cleveland, Ohio.

Before he comes home
and demands desire from a night
that dreams of other men,

she has left and is driving
across the United States.
Near Toledo, she hears the loud dead
calling her names, slurring
the years where bodies forget
how they entered new positions

for sleep, for love.
Tonight at the motel
she unfolds a roadmap on the bed.

As she sleeps, all the highways
bleed onto her face.
In the morning the car starts

like fire in dry grass.
Up ahead is a Great Lake.
Up ahead is The Heartland.
ADMIN MAN

I don't remember his name
but you can touch it
on black granite.

New in country
he should have been smarter
than the children calling him
out past the battalion gate
to sell him their dope,
maybe their sisters
he ran so blindly for their favors.
But they were teasing
and ran away from him,
alert for the trick,
the muffled punch from the earth
delivering one small
steel splinter.

At Graves Registration
I tried to see where
and the corpsman had to point--
"There, see there," he said
but the hole had closed
perfectly
over the heart.

Johnny Walker Red
and four hours on the condolence letter.
It had to be neat.
It had to explain.
It had to comfort and be proud of him. It had to be perfect and there could be no mistakes.
The Dispossessed

The burnt mountains
turn their backs on us,
confident we won't escape
sitting complaisant
with our wives
or by ourselves
we see finally
in the man reclining across
from us, the same man
who stares back.

Inside this hospital
we're expected to fall in love,
embrace our condition
in the only house standing.
A priest enters
& we can't help
but disrobe him, taste
the wet fur of animals
aghast at the savage shaking
of a body being taken.
The Veterans Of August

Whiskey Dick fondles his glass of bourbon.
Staring at the painting of Custer's Last Stand
he proposes a toast to the fallen calvary
& tells them that living in this town
is like screwing your own sister
or drinking poison when she tells on you.

There is a story about him
everyone has forgotten.

Perhaps it's the one of finding Doc Proger
lying in the quarry with a nest of copperheads,
a gold watch lodged in his mouth
as if the luminous numbers
were a delicacy to taste in the darkness.
Or maybe it's the one about his tongueless wife
riding the one-eyed Appaloosa around
& around their plywood cabin.

Only her hammer talks, nailing the anters
to the side of the silver barn.

(stanza break)
Everyone wants to forget these things because they cannot forget.

Even the river that named the town & ran away to work in the city

has left its stones behind. In August when the flies come to breed inside

a cow's ear, one tries not to hear the silence of the white sun.
In Between

Back in the world
I was something my father wanted to drag
from bar to bar, raising me up
in a toast to our common blood.

When he caught me fucking his wife,
I thought he'd be proud of the way I smiled,
sliding her down on the front seat
of his Eldorado. I thought it was what
he would have done, only better.
Lowering my head to taste her,
I remembered her age, in between,
as she coaxed No Please No
until we could not stop or see him
standing under a tree and a moon.

Squaring off in the warm light,
we marked each other like drowning swimmers
who have forgotten distance.
Even then we were trying

(stanza break)
to get away from something
all of us wanted.
Prayer

At first I was glad you'd died. 
I thought you'd done it for me 
like a school of migrating whales 
I watched from a yellow beach 
and I was showing them my body. 

I recalled not you, but a Mexican girl 
descending from the ceiling 
in a wicker basket made by her mother. 
The mariachi band spread her legs 
for the beast at the end of the world. 

And now when the dead speak in tongues 
I see you, a man pointing a pistol 
at a mountain in Wyoming. He is angry 
or is pretending to be angry. In his wallet 
is a business card with my name on it. 
Defamation

for Bill Sipple, who deflected the gun from Sara Jane Moore as she fired at President Ford

A ten year affair with San Francisco
& I'd had enough of Truth, Beauty,
the austere furniture sneering
inside the Mission St. Detox Center,
the whole goddamn mess accorded first love
& broke it off,
moving to the Northwest
where the Columbia escapes out of Canada
only to be caught, tamed,
& renamed by Bonneville Power--
lackadaisical Lake Roosevelt,
a lobotomy of water. Up here
I too embody compliance;
marrried, six children, all born
under the sign of Reagan
where twice a week I attend meetings,
hold hands, chant the Lord's Prayer
& wait for the spiritual orgasm
that keeps me sober. Here,
I resemble someone I once would have disdained--
businessman, well-fed, reasonably content
when I read your name again in the newspaper,
dead three days inside a Tenderloin room,
just around the corner from your famous mark on the sidewalk
where a madwoman took aim at America.
Though the article doesn't say,
I suspect it had something to do
with all the pink Chablis
you'd raised in a toast to the city
too beautiful to care;
or perhaps you too had had enough
& declined to wake up & heed
the incessant demands of your particular affection:
men loving men.
I don't know what that's like exactly,
only that you fled the Midwest
& came to the edge of a continent
to act out your private drama: the end
or the beginning of everything we imagine that's real.

At Ft. Miley,
the Veterans Hospital that was like a bad mother,
I watched you enter our ward,
smiling, eyes closed,
shuffling, a sleepwalker in lead shoes
who came alive at midnight
to phone every congressman who'd shook your hand,
praised your uncommon valor,
slipped you their card,
offered their assistance, anything they said, call me anytime.
And suddenly realizing the price of your good name
or foreseeing the peninsula
sinking into the Pacific,
uninsured & worthless as a rich man's
dying words,
you told them you'd settle for three or four million,
considerably less than what the lawyers surmised
reading those slanderous words in the *Chronicle*
who'd called you a hero,
three paragraphs later,
a queer
so you had them all by the balls.
And if that fell through,
you borrowed a drop of my sperm
when I told you I'd tested sterile:
Agent Orange would render our cure,
the monthly government checks
we'd invest on a Baja beach,
swallowing the gold worm
of our new beloved country.
It might have been that way
if we'd kept on with all that healing
like Sunday in Ohio
& the soul closed.
Montana

for C

and the land
as arbitrator
determining
the course
like death
devised

devised

from what we love
alone
after you've left
placing
a stone
inside the mountain
The Grand Bouffe

Was it open or were we too late?

i. The Man Himself

The man was defective but clairvoyant. We had no use for him nor his intent. He was slow to die and feigned affliction.

When he insisted everyone destroy him he was God. He was always God or a woman undressing in the dark, not speaking when spoken to, aware we were watching him practice his desire. He was in love and inventing the kiss.

It was the kiss we heard—Throw me out, he said. Piss on me; I got myself into this mess and I can live with it; rather, you can.

It's not the living we know or the dying to remember the death, but the appearance you must understand, the enamored style

I gave to the man himself. Here, my clothes are yours, endued with the art of protection. Wear them as I wore my father's. The gold suit

I found laborious and turned into money. The red vest was a shield, preempted to defend my interests, my bourgeois

(stanza break)
disability I could never repair.
Look in the pockets, a map of history.
Wipe your brow with it, wipe your feet

on a virgin country bearing the new color.
Here, my leather belt, cinch it until it fits
like a python in wrath. I promise you

fashion, all the shirts of the world,
all yours, every last finery. Wear them
and flatter the next Osiris

moving into your industrious cities
arrayed with the bullion of belief.
I never wore a hat.

0 how his gown ignited the body
he'd worn. 0 how his wingtips performed
before the alchemist's fire, dancing in

the blue ashes of his volcano, all appetites
sated, all in the cleansing, the pageant
of what he'd never known: clairvoyance,

an angry man who dressed himself. He begged us
to forget him, to throw him away.
When he died we married his accident.
ii. The Ballet

Not the demure and murderous works of man consuming whatever falls his placid way—long swallowed fears belching the frail beliefs until he's moved by what it was he ate. Perhaps it was his own distasteful death that ran among the silent predators. Writhing from his insipid watch he knew not the hour or day we'd left for Lake Champlain.

The excitement of someone's yellow coat hanging from the aspen tree—near the trunk was a burning basket of fruit. I knew the plums to be his sister's, but whose deft hand had placed the kumquat where I should go? The land was disconcerting; I'd not yet come out of the woods nor ventured far from my stale Ohio town. At last the wilderness!

Hot & cold, the temperature's wrong. We cannot simmer anymore. The basting done, the multitude feasts. Careful to wipe your shirt off, your sagging cheeks that pirouetted with Fonteyn in Paradise Lost when Cleveland was still a dirty city—the prodigious orange sun on the stage hauled in from Shaker Heights, waking up the Polack's wives. Time to pack their hubby's lunch,
wrap last night's chicken breast,
the poisoned fruit, Three Musketeers
& a fresh pack of Pall Malls
tamped on the table top.
I am a simple world made cunningly.
You cannot believe all my silly quirks
rooted in the spoiled machinery.
You'd think I was born for this godless work,
calling the Negroes up for a quick shine
& finding them jobs & an aperitif
in the heated poolroom next to Reubenstein's
where they grew their muscle. There were enough
girls to go round the block once or twice
& plenty of Jack to jack the police.
Tenderly would I sell my curling kiss
& ship the cotton back to Paradise.
When the town grew I bought a seraphim
& made a mascot out of Virginia Ham.

iii. The Marriage

He's reduced to thinking,
the resolution
in the washing of his body.

It's what they have allowed
now that the children speak,
now that she's the kind aggressor

(stanza break)
holding the reins for the first time
as they propagate their desire.
Is this the way wars end,

building coming down
in subtle agreement
after a long discourse?

He'd rather be underground
anyway, until the bombing's done,
wear a new uniform

cut from the old. Don't forget
the chevrons, the audacity
of obeying an order.

He tells her nothing
she doesn't pretend to know--
the machine cleaning itself,

believing he can talk
to the other side. On the wall
is a figure that prolongs

their work. When they finish
they will rise from the sea
and eat their children.
iv. In Praise Of Labyrinths

Between the Brownstones and canal
Peter Vilensky lived with his pet son.
Together they drew portraits, each
deformed face spare
and wanting as the mistress they once shared
in Soho every Thursday afternoon

and nothing mattered but the rent,
a moon, the inescapable East Side
when they made love to her, sanguine
as sashimi.
Intent upon restoring her ill face,
they worked late to fashion every line

as if that might hold her intact,
conjointly, lest she lose her perfect place
among the chosen benefactors
on Bleaker Street.
And they wanted her to be their own
invention, though she would supply a piece

of her—a nose, a breast, a leg,
whatever was needed for repleteness,
the model of a simple world
drawn perfectly.
And prudent in the thrust of primal acts,
they took turns tasting her magnificence.

When Peter Vilensky arrived
in South Dakota, he was well aware
he'd left his son and pet behind--
and she, she came
along under his seat in a pink box
with a red ribbon made from her red hair.

v. Self-Portrait

The whales were condescending,
gesturing as I stood on an empty beach,
a suspect deploring the scorch of reflection
and I showed them my body at their bequest.

The tunnel that led to the Pacific
was a scope at land's end. Inside, a seagull
faced the fall, perplexed by the sky's debacle.
Beyond the crowning house the sea allowed

a leveled stance. I could not rise above
the business at hand, the changing of guards,
eager cures, misused and washed ashore.
I kept them in a drawer in San Pedro

where they multiplied and assumed
the decor of my sparse room The new man
at the door had been a patron of mine
dressed for enlightenment or murder.

He entered an island of savages
breeding caustic plans. He spoke
of drowning, the defecation of ideas.
He'd finished his self-portrait,
a creation I'd eaten before,
picked clean from a thought I recognized
in the ocean's tenor, rendering
the answer of what it was not.

vi. Outside

for Ralph Ellison

He's belligerent to this tenure
of fire growing circular and obese.
What war did it march from,

ordering the sallow water
to crawl to another country?
Across the street, children

pretending not to pretend.
The tree they climb is nameless,
wants to come down

and warm the house.
What difference to the man
searing behind his door?

Each night, all the gods
come to dinner, serve him pabulum--
such exquisite taste, their auspicious eyes

(stanza break)
stare at the fire.
Once this street was carnivorous
when he walked to work,
surrendering to the dollars
changing hands. Once
it led to another house.

He's forgotten what hour
the voice cried—"Oh my,
Oh my, it's you again!"

He might have been
that woman, savoring the flesh
of all who entered. Stepping
outside of history, he invokes
the only possibility, invisible
as a fire that will not ignite.