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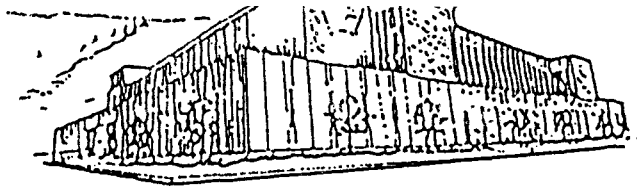
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THE MAN HIMSELF

by

Al Nyhart

B.A., Eastern Washington University, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

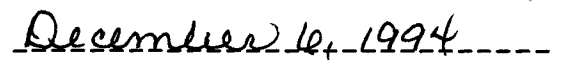
University of Montana

1994

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Near Da Nang"  
Puerto del Sol: "Breast-fed at the VA Hospital, San  
Francisco," "Donkey Show," "The Hunt"  
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Whiskey Island: "Blazing Away"  
Xanadu: "Out Of The Water"

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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,

(stanza break)



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 batallion 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 siver barn.

(stanza break)



Everone 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;  
 married, 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

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, endowed 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.

O how his gown ignited the body  
he'd worn. O 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,  
wearing 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 repletteness,  
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,

(stanza break)



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.