Classic Poetry Series

Thom Gunn

- 15 poems -

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Thom Gunn (29 August 1929 – 25 April 2004)

an Anglo-American poet who was praised both for his early verses in England, where he was associated with The Movement and his later poetry in America, even after moving toward a looser, free-verse style. After relocating from England to San Francisco, Gunn, who became openly gay, wrote about gay-related topics — particularly in his most famous work, The Man With Night Sweats in 1992 — as well as drug use, sex, and topics related to his bohemian lifestyle. He won numerous major literary awards.

A Map of the City

I stand upon a hill and see
A luminous country under me,
Through which at two the drunk sailor must weave;
The transient's pause, the sailor's leave.

I notice, looking down the hill,
Arms braced upon a window sill;
And on the web of fire escapes
Move the potential, the grey shapes.

I hold the city here, complete;
And every shape defined by light
Is mine, or corresponds to mine,
Some flickering or some steady shine.

This map is ground of my delight.
Between the limits, night by night,
I watch a malady's advance,
I recognize my love of chance.

By the recurrent lights I see
Endless potentiality,
The crowded, broken, and unfinished!
I would not have the risk diminished.

Thom Gunn

Black Jackets

In the silence that prolongs the span
Rawly of music when the record ends,
The red-haired boy who drove a van
In weekday overalls but, like his friends,

Wore cycle boots and jacket here
To suit the Sunday hangout he was in,
Heard, as he stretched back from his beer,
Leather creak softly round his neck and chin.

Before him, on a coal-black sleeve
Remote exertion had lined, scratched, and burned
Insignia that could not revive
The heroic fall or climb where they were earned.

On the other drinkers bent together,
Concocting selves for their impervious kit,
He saw it as no more than leather
Which, taught across the shoulders grown to it,

Sent through the dimness of a bar
As sudden and anonymous hints of light
As those that shipping give, that are
Now flickers in the Bay, now lost in sight.

He stretched out like a cat, and rolled
The bitterish taste of beer upon his tongue,
And listened to a joke being told:
The present was the things he stayed among.

If it was only loss he wore,
He wore it to assert, with fierce devotion,
Complicity and nothing more.
He recollected his initiation,

And one especially of the rites.
For on his shoulders they had put tattoos:
The group's name on the left, The Knights,
And on the right the slogan Born to Lose.

Thom Gunn

Cat island

Cats met us at
the landing-place
reclining in the sun
to check us in
with a momentary glance,
concierges
of a grassy island.
(Attila's Throne,
the Devil's Bridge,
and "the best Byzantine
church in the world",
long saints admonitory
on kiln-like inner walls.)
And lunch in a shady court
where cats now
systematically worked
the restaurant, table
by table, gazing into eyes
pleading "I'm hungry
and I'm cute", reaching
front paws up to knees
and always getting
before zeroing in
on the next table, same
routine, same result.

Sensible bourgeois
wild-cats working
with the furred impudence
of those who don't pretend
to be other than whores,
they give you not
the semblance of love
but simply
a look at their beauty
in return for food.
Models, not escorts.
They lack, too,
the prostitute's self-pity,
being beyond shame.
And we lack
what they have.

Thom Gunn

Considering the Snail

The snail pushes through a green
night, for the grass is heavy
with water and meets over
the bright path he makes, where rain
has darkened the earth's dark. He
moves in a wood of desire,

pale antlers barely stirring
as he hunts. I cannot tell
what power is at work, drenched there
with purpose, knowing nothing.
What is a snail's fury? All
I think is that if later

I parted the blades above
the tunnel and saw the thin
trail of broken white across
litter, I would never have
imagined the slow passion
to that deliberate progress.

Thom Gunn

From the Wave

It mounts at sea, a concave wall
Down-ribbed with shine,
And pushes forward, building tall
Its steep incline.

Then from their hiding rise to sight
Black shapes on boards
Bearing before the fringe of white
It mottles towards.

Their pale feet curled, they poise their weight
With a learn'd skill.
It is the wave they imitate
Keeps them so still.

The marbling bodies have become
Half wave, half men,
Grafted it seems by feet of foam
Some seconds, then,

Late as they can, they slice the face
In timed procession:
Balance is triumph in this place,
Triumph possession.

The mindless heave of which they rode
A fluid shelf
Breaks as they leave it, falls and, slowed,
Loses itself.

Clear, the sheathed bodies slick as seals
Loosen and tingle;
And by the board the bare foot feels
The suck of shingle.

They paddle in the shallows still;
Two splash each other;
They all swim out to wait until
The right waves gather.

Thom Gunn

My Sad Captains

One by one they appear in
the darkness: a few friends, and
a few with historical
names. How late they start to shine!
but before they fade they stand
perfectly embodied, all

the past lapping them like a
cloak of chaos. They were men
who, I thought, lived only to
renew the wasteful force they
spent with each hot convulsion.
They remind me, distant now.

True, they are not at rest yet,
but now they are indeed
apart, winnowed from failures,
they withdraw to an orbit
and turn with disinterested
hard energy, like the stars.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

Thom Gunn

On The Move 'Man, You Gotta Go.'

The blue jay scuffling in the bushes follows
Some hidden purpose, and the gush of birds
That spurts across the field, the wheeling swallows,
Have nested in the trees and undergrowth.
Seeking their instinct, or their pose, or both,
One moves with an uncertain violence
Under the dust thrown by a baffled sense
Or the dull thunder of approximate words.

On motorcycles, up the road, they come:
Small, black, as flies hanging in heat, the Boy,
Until the distance throws them forth, their hum
Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.
In goggles, donned impersonality,
In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
They strap in doubt--by hiding it, robust--
And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

Exact conclusion of their hardiness
Has no shape yet, but from known whereabouts
They ride, directions where the tires press.
They scare a flight of birds across the field:
Much that is natural, to the will must yield.
Men manufacture both machine and soul,
And use what they imperfectly control
To dare a future from the taken routes.

It is part solution, after all.
One is not necessarily discord
On Earth; or damned because, half animal,
One lacks direct instinct, because one wakes
Afloat on movement that divides and breaks.
One joins the movement in a valueless world,
Crossing it, till, both hurler and the hurled,
One moves as well, always toward, toward.

A minute holds them, who have come to go:
The self-denied, astride the created will.
They burst away; the towns they travel through
Are home for neither birds nor holiness,
For birds and saints complete their purposes.
At worse, one is in motion; and at best,
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
One is always nearer by not keeping still.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

Thom Gunn

Painting by Vuillard

Two dumpy women with buns were drinking coffee
In a narrow kitchen—at least I think a kitchen
And I think it was whitewashed, in spite of all the shade.
They were flat brown, they were as brown as coffee.
Wearing brown muslin? I really could not tell.
How I loved this painting, they had grown so old
That everything had got less complicated,
Brown clothes and shade in a sunken whitewashed kitchen.

But it’s not like that for me: age is not simpler
Or less enjoyable, not dark, not whitewashed.
The people sitting on the marble steps
Of the national gallery, people in the sunlight,
A party of handsome children eating lunch
And drinking chocolate milk, and a young woman
Whose t-shirt bears the defiant word WHATEVER,
And wrinkled folk with visored hats and cameras
Are vivid, they are not browned, not in the least,
But if they do not look like coffee they look
As pungent and startling as good strong coffee tastes,
Possibly mixed with chicory. And no cream

Thom Gunn

Still Life

I shall not soon forget
The greyish-yellow skin
To which the face had set:
Lids tights: nothing of his,
No tremor from within,
Played on the surfaces.
He still found breath, and yet
It was an obscure knack.
I shall not soon forget
The angle of his head,
Arrested and reared back
On the crisp field of bed,
Back from what he could neither
Accept, as one opposed,
Nor, as a life-long breather,
Consentingly let go,
The tube his mouth enclosed
In an astonished O.

Thom Gunn

Street Song

I am too young to grow a beard
But yes man it was me you heard
In dirty denim and dark glasses.
I look through everyone who passes
But ask him clear, I do not plead,
Keys Lids acid and speed.

My grass is not oregano.
Some of it grew in Mexico.
You cannot guess the weed I hold,
Clara Green, Acapulco Gold,
Panama Red, you name it man,
Best on the street since I began.

My methedrine, my double-sun,
Will give you too lives in your one,
Five days of power before you crash.
At which time use these lumps of hash
- They burn so sweet, they smoke so smooth,
They make you sharper while they soothe.

Now here, the best I've got to show,
Made by a righteous cat I know.
Pure acid - it will scrape your brain,
And make it something else again.
Call it heaven, call it hell,
Join me and see the world I sell.

Join me, and I will take you there,
Your head will cut out from your hair
Into whichever self you choose.
With Midday Mick man you can't lose,
I'll get you anything you need.
Keys lids acid and speed.

Thom Gunn

The Butcher's Son

Mr Pierce the butcher
Got news his son was missing
About a month before
The closing of the war.
A bald man, tall and careful,
He stood in his shop and found
No bottom to his sadness,
Nowhere for it to stop.
When my aunt came through the door
Delivering the milk,
He spoke, with his quiet air
Of a considerate teacher,
But words weren't up to it,
He turned back to the meat.
The message was in error.
Later that humid summer
At a local high school fete,
I saw, returned, the son
Still in his uniform.
Mr Pierce was not there
But was as if implied
In the son who looked like him
Except he had red hair.
For I recall him well
Encircled by his friends,
Beaming a life charged now
Doubly because restored,
And recall also how
Within his hearty smile
His lips contained his father's
Like a light within the light
That he turned everywhere.

Thom Gunn

The Dump

He died, and I admired
the crisp vehemence
of a lifetime reduced to
half a foot of shelf space.
But others came to me saying,
we too loved him, let us take you
to the place of our love.
So they showed me
everything, everything--
a cliff of notebooks
with every draft and erasure
of every poem he
published or rejected,
thatched already
with webs of annotation.
I went in further and saw
a hill of matchcovers
from every bar or restaurant
he'd ever entered. Trucks
backed up constantly,
piled with papers, and awaited
by archivists with shovels;
forklifts bumped through
trough and valley
to adjust the spillage.
Here odors of rubbery sweat
intruded on the pervasive
smell of stale paper,
no doubt from the mound
of his collected sneakers.
I clambered up the highest
pile and found myself
looking across not history
but the vistas of a steaming
range of garbage
reaching to the coast itself. Then
I lost my footing! and was
carried down on a soft
avalanche of letters, paid bills,
sexual polaroids, and notes
refusing invitations, thanking
fans, resisting scholars.
In nightmare I slid,
no ground to stop me,

until I woke at last
where I had napped beside
the precious half foot. Beyond that,
nothing, nothing at all.

Thom Gunn

The Hug

It was your birthday, we had drunk and dined
Half of the night with our old friend
Who'd showed us in the end
To a bed I reached in one drunk stride.
Already I lay snug,
And drowsy with the wine dozed on one side.

I dozed, I slept. My sleep broke on a hug,
Suddenly, from behind,
In which the full lengths of our bodies pressed:
Your instep to my heel,
My shoulder-blades against your chest.
It was not sex, but I could feel
The whole strength of your body set,
Or braced, to mine,
And locking me to you
As if we were still twenty-two
When our grand passion had not yet
Become familial.
My quick sleep had deleted all
Of intervening time and place.
I only knew
The stay of your secure firm dry embrace.

Thom Gunn

The Man with Night Sweats

I wake up cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.

My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed.

I grew as I explored
The body I could trust
Even while I adored
The risk that made robust,

A world of wonders in
Each challenge to the skin.

I cannot but be sorry
The given shield was cracked,
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.

I have to change the bed,
But catch myself instead

Stopped upright where I am
Hugging my body to me
As if to shield it from
The pains that will go through me,

As if hands were enough
To hold an avalanche off.

Thom Gunn

To Yvor Winters

Though night is always close, complete negation
Ready to drop on wisdom and emotion,
Night from the air or the carnivorous breath,
Still it is right to know the force of death,
And, as you do, persistent, tough in will,
Raise from the excellent the better still.

Thom Gunn