

Classic Poetry Series

Thom Gunn
- 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

Baby Song

From the private ease of Mother's womb
I fall into the lighted room.

Why don't they simply put me back
Where it is warm and wet and black?

But one thing follows on another.
Things were different inside Mother.

Padded and jolly I would ride
The perfect comfort of her inside.

They tuck me in a rustling bed

—I lie there, raging, small, and red.

I may sleep soon, I may forget,
But I won't forget that I regret.

A rain of blood poured round her womb,
But all time roars outside this room.

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

Duncan

1

When in his twenties a poetry's full strength
Burst into voice as an unstopping flood,
He let the divine prompting (come at length)
Rushingly bear him any way it would
And went on writing while the Ferry turned
From San Francisco, back from Berkeley too,
And back again, and back again. He learned
You add to, you don't cancel what you do.

Between the notebook-margins his pen travelled,
His own lines carrying him in a new mode
To ports in which past purposes unravelled.
So that, as on the Ferry Line he rode,
Whatever his first plans that night had been,
The energy that rose from their confusion
Became the changing passage lived within
While the pen wrote, and looked beyond conclusion.

2

Forty years later, and both kidneys gone;
Every eight hours, home dialysis;
The habit of his restlessness stayed on
Exhausting him with his responsiveness.
After the circulations of one day
In which he taught a three-hour seminar
Then gave a reading clear across the Bay,
And while returning from it to the car

With plunging hovering tread tired and unsteady
Down Wheeler steps, he faltered and he fell
—Fell he said later, as if I stood ready,
'Into the strong arms of Thom Gunn.'

Well well,

The image comic, as I might have known,
And generous, but it turned things round to myth:

He fell across the white steps there alone,
Though it was me indeed that he was with.

I hadn't caught him, hadn't seen in time,
And picked him up where he had softly dropped,
A pillow full of feathers. Was it a rime
He later sought, in which he might adopt
The role of H.D., broken-hipped and old,
Who, as she moved off from the reading-stand,
Had stumbled on the platform but was held
And steadied by another poet's hand?

He was now a posthumous poet, I have said
(For since his illness he had not composed),
In sight of a conclusion, whose great dread
Was closure,

his life soon to be enclosed

Like the sparrow's flight above the feasting friends,
Briefly revealed where its breast caught their light,
Beneath the long roof, between open ends,
Themselves the margins of unchanging night.

Thom Gunn

For A Birthday

I have reached a time when words no longer
help:
Instead of guiding me across the moors
Strong landmarks in the uncertain out-of-doors,
Or like dependable friars on the Alp
Saving with wisdom and with brandy kegs,
They are gravel-stones, or tiny dogs which yelp
Biting my trousers, running round my legs.
Description and analysis degrade,
Limit, delay, slipped land from what has been;
And when we groan My Darling what we mean
Looked at more closely would too soon evade
The intellectual habit of our eyes;
And either the experience would fade
Or our approximations would be lies.
The snarling dogs are weight upon my haste,
Tons which I am detaching ounce by ounce.
All my agnostic irony I renounce
So I may climb to regions where I rest
In springs of speech, the dark before of truth:
The sweet moist wafer of your tongue I taste,
And find right meanings in your silent mouth.

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

In Trust

You go from me
In June for months on end
To study equanimity
Among high trees alone;
I go out with a new boyfriend
And stay all summer in the city where
Home mostly on my own
I watch the sunflowers flare.

You travel East
To help your relatives.
The rainy season's start, at least,
Brings you from banishment:
And from the hall a doorway gives
A glimpse of you, writing I don't know what,
Through winter, with head bent
In the lamp's yellow spot.

To some fresh task
Some improvising skill
Your face is turned, of which I ask
Nothing except the presence:
Beneath white hair your clear eyes still
Are candid as the cat's fixed narrowing gaze
—Its pale-blue incandescence
In your room nowadays.

Sociable cat:
Without much noise or fuss
We left the kitchen where he sat,
And suddenly we find
He happens still to be with us,
In this room now, though firmly faced away,
Not to be left behind,
Though all the night he'll stray.

As you began
You'll end the year with me.
We'll hug each other while we can,

Work or stray while we must.
Nothing is, or will ever be,
Mine, I suppose. No one can hold a heart,
But what we hold in trust
We do hold, even apart.

Thom Gunn

Lament

Your dying was a difficult enterprise.
First, petty things took up your energies,
The small but clustering duties of the sick,
Irritant as the cough's dry rhetoric.
Those hours of waiting for pills, shot, X-ray
Or test (while you read novels two a day)
Already with a kind of clumsy stealth
Distanced you from the habits of your health.
In hope still, courteous still, but tired and thin,
You tried to stay the man that you had been,
Treating each symptom as a mere mishap
Without import. But then the spinal tap.
It brought a hard headache, and when night came
I heard you wake up from the same bad dream
Every half-hour with the same short cry
Of mild outrage, before immediately
Slipping into the nightmare once again
Empty of content but the drip of pain.
No respite followed: though the nightmare ceased,
Your cough grew thick and rich, its strength increased.
Four nights, and on the fifth we drove you down
To the Emergency Room. That frown, that frown:
I'd never seen such rage in you before
As when they wheeled you through the swinging door.
For you knew, rightly, they conveyed you from
Those normal pleasures of the sun's kingdom
The hedonistic body basks within
And takes for granted—summer on the skin,
Sleep without break, the moderate taste of tea
In a dry mouth. You had gone on from me
As if your body sought out martyrdom
In the far Canada of a hospital room.
Once there, you entered fully the distress
And long pale rigours of the wilderness.
A gust of morphine hid you. Back in sight
You breathed through a segmented tube, fat, white,
Jammed down your throat so that you could not speak.
How thin the distance made you. In your cheek
One day, appeared the true shape of your bone

No longer padded. Still your mind, alone,
Explored this emptying intermediate
State for what holds and rests were hidden in it.

You wrote us messages on a pad, amused
At one time that you had your nurse confused
Who, seeing you reconciled after four years
With your grey father, both of you in tears,
Asked if this was at last your 'special friend'
(The one you waited for until the end).
'She sings,' you wrote, 'a Philippine folk song
To wake me in the morning ... It is long
And very pretty.' Grabbing at detail
To furnish this bare ledge toured by the gale,
On which you lay, bed restful as a knife,
You tried, tried hard, to make of it a life
Thick with the complicating circumstance
Your thoughts might fasten on. It had been chance
Always till now that had filled up the moment
With live specifics your hilarious comment
Discovered as it went along; and fed,
Laconic, quick, wherever it was led.
You improvised upon your own delight.
I think back to the scented summer night
We talked between our sleeping bags, below
A molten field of stars five years ago:
I was so tickled by your mind's light touch
I couldn't sleep, you made me laugh too much,
Though I was tired and begged you to leave off.

Now you were tired, and yet not tired enough
—Still hungry for the great world you were losing
Steadily in no season of your choosing—
And when at last the whole death was assured,
Drugs having failed, and when you had endured
Two weeks of an abominable constraint,
You faced it equably, without complaint,
Unwhimpering, but not at peace with it.
You'd lived as if your time was infinite:
You were not ready and not reconciled,
Feeling as uncompleted as a child
Till you had shown the world what you could do
In some ambitious role to be worked through,

Moly

Nightmare of beasthood, snorting, how to wake.
I woke. What beasthood skin she made me take?

Leathery toad that ruts for days on end,
Or cringing dribbling dog, man's servile friend,

Or cat that prettily pounces on its meat,
Tortures it hours, then does not care to eat:

Parrot, moth, shark, wolf, crocodile, ass, flea.
What germs, what jostling mobs there were in me.

These seem like bristles, and the hide is tough.
No claw or web here: each foot ends in hoof.

Into what bulk has method disappeared?
Like ham, streaked. I am gross—grey, gross, flap-eared.

The pale-lashed eyes my only human feature.
My teeth tear, tear. I am the snouted creature

That bites through anything, root, wire, or can.
If I was not afraid I'd eat a man.

Oh a man's flesh already is in mine.
Hand and foot poised for risk. Buried in swine.

I root and root, you think that it is greed,
It is, but I seek out a plant I need.

Direct me gods, whose changes are all holy,
To where it flickers deep in grass, the moly:

Cool flesh of magic in each leaf and shoot,
From milky flower to the black forked root.

From this fat dungeon I could rise to skin
And human title, putting pig within.

I push my big grey wet snout through the green,
Dreaming the flower I have never seen.

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

Tamer And Hawk

I thought I was so tough,
But gentled at your hands,
Cannot be quick enough
To fly for you and show
That when I go I go
At your commands.

Even in flight above
I am no longer free:
You seeled me with your love,
I am blind to other birds—
The habit of your words
Has hooded me.

As formerly, I wheel
I hover and I twist,
But only want the feel,
In my possessive thought,
Of catcher and of caught
Upon your wrist.

You but half civilize,
Taming me in this way.
Through having only eyes
For you I fear to lose,
I lose to keep, and choose
Tamer as prey.

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