

Thom Gunn:

Lives and Poetries

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List of Abbreviations

FT – Fighting Terms

SM – The Sense of Movement

MSC – My Sad Captains, and Other Poems

T – Touch

M – Moly

JSC – Jack Straws Castle

TR – Talbot Road

PJ – The Passages of Joy

MNS – The Man with Night Sweats

BC – Boss Cupid

OP – The Occasions of Poetry

SL – Shelf Life

CP – Collected Poems

Letters – The Letters of Thom Gunn

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How to Write a Poet's Lives

“I have written the foregoing because [...] if I don't do it, someone else will, sooner or later, and he is likely to get it wrong.” (Gunn, *OP* 187)

Reading this quote by Thom Gunn, I guess I must already apologize. For being rather late in writing this dissertation, for writing it despite knowing I would get it wrong, and for proving him right, in some parts. Gunn, who was humble enough to feel uncomfortable writing about himself, also used the explanation quoted above to justify his autobiographical text in *The Occasions of Poetry*. Somehow, I still cannot help but write about this man, whose poetry spoke to me some years ago, and who I've found interesting, in many ways, since. I am taking up the challenge of summarizing and interpreting the various aspects of Gunn's life as a poet, as a lover, as a friend, in all his facets, and his authenticity. I will keep this quote in the back of my mind, to push me to do my best, while at the same time having him remind myself of the fact that he already knew that a stranger was bound to miss or misinterpret one thing or another in a complex and dense life like his. In his way, he already made up my apology and I thank him for that.

To be more precise, this first quote is taken from the postscript of Gunn's autobiography, which was published as the last part of his prose collection *The Occasions of Poetry* in 1982 and begins a short explanatory text on this last part of his book. In the same two-page text, he states “My life insists on continuities – between America and England, between free verse and meter, between vision and everyday consciousness” (184) which names only a few parts of the fields of tension Gunn's life spans. I want to disclose and unfold a few more in the endeavor of writing this dissertation, grasping the course of the lives of Thom Gunn. Contrary to the closing of this annex to his autobiography, where Gunn states of his poetry that “[a] reader knowing nothing about the author has a much better chance of understanding it” (*OP* 188), I do believe that knowing more about Thom Gunn could open up new perspectives on his work. I do appreciate his point though: if you do not think that you know the author, you have no choice but to read his poetry, looking for the general truths in it and to make up your own mind, instead of falling for the illusion of believing you know what the poet supposedly meant, because you think you know him. Gunn explains his remark by the example of the heterosexuality behind the poem “Carnal Knowledge” which a reader who knows about

Gunn's homosexuality might misinterpret as chiffre or disguise. In fact, Gunn remains deeper and more mythical than that. To see how, I invite you now to join me on the journey through the lives of Thomson William Gunn.

Although Thom Gunn's oeuvre is at once both varied and timeless, there have been few publications on him since his passing in 2004, or indeed before. Apart from *Thom Gunn: Poems* (2007), edited by August Kleinzahler, and *Selected Poems* (2017), edited by Clive Wilmer, only his letters have been published as primary work. *The Letters of Thom Gunn*, long awaited and selected by Michael Nott, et al., were published in 2021, and rendered a very personal portrait of the writer besides his work as a poet. His intelligence, personality and artful use of words was brought to a wider public with these texts and in fact, besides the diaries, which are at the moment only available in the archives of Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley build a big part of what this book is based on. As secondary books, there are also only a few from a very specific circle of people. Leaving out the few scattered smaller articles, only those are to be named here: *The Poetry of Thom Gunn – A Critical Study* (2009) by Stefania Michelucci and *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn* (2009) by Joshua Weiner. Nott, Wilmer and Michelucci will also publish further books on Gunn, to appear soon. Michael Nott will be the author of Thom Gunn's commissioned biography, Wilmer is working on an edition of Gunn's essays and Michelucci is arranging and editing a kaleidoscopically varied book on Gunn, which will provide different insights from different angles and will surely serve as a prismatic display of the poet and literate, considering that we are now almost exactly lacking this information since at least Gunn's death about 20 years ago. Moreover, as this dissertation demonstrates, there is definitively room for more to be written about Thom Gunn, especially from a perspective that considers his vast personal archives. With the information found at Bancroft Library, I will attempt to tell the story of Thom Gunn, as a window to his poetry and his background as a person, in many facets. From the overview in this dissertation, it will hopefully be possible to find new angles from which to consider Gunn and I hope that interest in the poet grows, as in recent months publications about him have increased, slowly but certainly.

For me, the big question now arises: How to write a poet's lives – is there a blueprint? This is more about the framework of this work and how likely the effort will be to produce an ultimate biography of Thom Gunn. But how to actually accomplish that task? Collecting information has proven to be the most interesting part. As indicated, the market currently does not offer much on Gunn and merely reproducing the letters would

not suffice (alas, when I started research in 2017, they were not yet published). Hence, one of the biggest cornerstones of the information gathering for this book was diving into the archives of Berkeley, where at the Bancroft Library most of Gunn's personal notes and a collection of material from his belongings are stored. This collection includes newspaper articles, scrapbooks, family albums, love letters, correspondence with friends and publishers, notebooks for poetry, preparations for lectures, readings, speeches, address books, drafts for novels, and even the collection of a collage from his work room, meticulously archived. All these give an impression of the person hiding behind the poet, but, most importantly for a detailed look into Gunn's thoughts, they also include the diaries of Thom Gunn, a very personal view of the man who happened to be a talented and well-known poet.¹

During several visits to Berkeley, I brought my camera and, for the purpose of research, took pictures of every single snippet Gunn collected that seemed important to my project, with the diaries at the core of it all. This series alone comprises around 700 pictures, each one a page in scribbled, very tiny handwriting, and these are the key to Gunn's life as presented in the following book. As his entries were very short and sometimes very hard to read, the facts would be additionally supported by information from the letters, which have been published since my research began, just in time for me to use them properly, for which I am grateful. As information at some point combines to form a reasonable story, about a person with a life as rich as Gunn's, precise quotations seem impossible, especially when the information is gathered from so many different places and times, merging together in one way or another. For the reader, it is important to keep in mind that the accounts you read without quotations are most likely derived from Gunn himself, meaning his diaries and letters. At times, I will include direct quotes from those documents in the footnotes. Those word-for-word quotations, and those in the rest of the text, will of course be indicated, as is common in a work like this. One addition I would like to make here is that I have decided not to mark every incorrect word in the quotations with '[sic]', and the reason is simple. Gunn was an artist who used words to express himself. In his own personal writing, he developed a certain private language or shorthand, which is interesting to see. Correcting those would mean leaving out a lot of information about the writer. Generally, it is fairly simple to derive the meaning of this 'code'. For instance, the word "thot" in Gunn's diaries and notes stands for "thought" and

¹ The Thom Gunn Papers can be found at the Bancroft Archives under <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt7f59r9sr/dsc/>

is a phonetic abbreviation. In those cases, an explanation will be lacking. However, if what Gunn wrote seems too confusing to understand for a new reader, I will of course indicate what the shorthand stands for.

As for the structure, I chose the one most plausible, in my opinion. As we are dealing with a biographical work², it was easiest to give a semblance of a structure by adhering to chronological order, with some limited use of storytelling devices like foreshadowing or flashbacks. Gunn's lives should be made accessible, and so the broad approach does not always go into depth, but will strive to be connected to the historical circumstances as well as the character and personal circumstances of the person. As he was most known as a poet, his work will also be present in examples of how he would put his thoughts onto paper. However, if you are searching for close readings in great detail, you will most likely be disappointed. Gunn himself would have preferred that people not overintellectualize his poetry, which was one of the few emotional outlets he had and still controlled so perfectly. I do not see it as my task to deliver a perfect analysis of his work, if such a thing even exists. It is simply unfitting and impossible in my opinion. Yet, to tease interest to read more of Gunn, I will make use of his own words and give some interpretation when fitting – he was a poet after all.

Another important question I want to answer at this point is: Why am I writing this? What can you expect from this dissertation? To answer the first one, I need to explain how I found Thom Gunn. The story of this personal discovery will explain a good deal of what might be of interest to understand my motivation, and the reasons why I think this is important not only on a personal level but also for readers of poetry. I was trying to finish my studies a few years ago, and to be honest, I found it really hard. Learning was easy for me, but writing a thesis or making bold statements, open to challenge and refutation, was not my strongest suit. Additionally, coordinating exams, and finding people to read, correct and grade my papers, was just not for me. I never grew into the formalities of university well enough to navigate these things as lightly as other people seemed to. Yet, what do you do for the great opportunity of indulging in learning and discussing with other people who share your ideas? Thus, I took a leap, like so many others, and tried to play it as safely as possible, one step at a time. At that stage, I had one certificate left to obtain, but I doubted, after a break of two years in studying, due to my side job, that I would be able to pass the course on my first attempt. I had no idea what to expect, actually. So, having some time, and my curiosity, at hand, I signed up for two

² See Bradford or Eakin on Life Writing

possible courses that semester. Both *British Poetry from the 18th Century until today* and *American Short Stories from the 1950s until today* seemed interesting and promising, enough for me to choose them. I had special hopes for the latter of the seminars, as a friend of mine and fellow student, who teamed up with me to finish our studies, said he knew the professor offering the course, and liked his style.

I was rather nervous about going to those courses, it almost felt like starting from scratch. Being the lazy student that I was, I had no knowledge about classical British poetry, except for William Wordsworth, whom we read at school and whom I hated (probably because the rest of my class hated him, I joined in). I was actually scared of poetry, as, in school, rhyme schemes and form seemed more important than content and feeling, and I did not like analyzing them at all. So, when the first session of the poetry seminar started, I was awaiting what was ahead of me, thinking of the other seminar as a backup. The instructor explained what was going to happen: we all needed to give a presentation on a chosen poem and poet, to be graded, which would be our final grade. This sounded simple enough, even if I only knew a single name on the list of authors. Professor Erlebach, who taught the course, read names of poets and titles of poems I had never heard of, except, of course, for Wordsworth's "Daffodils", which because of reasons mentioned previously was not an option for me. He was moving through periods of literature at breath-taking speed, and the remainder of the options on the list grew smaller and smaller as he progressed. Quickly running out of available topics, I heard him say "On the Move" and "Elvis Presley", by Thom Gunn. Having an affinity for music, my arm rose almost automatically as my brain was thinking 'That might actually work'. As no one else was interested, I would be presenting on Thom Gunn.

The first thing I did upon leaving the classroom that day was some quick Google research, which was not very fruitful save for a few pictures and a very small entry on Wikipedia (apologies to everyone who still denies the quality of Wikipedia for a first browsing). The images that popped up, though, immediately gave the impression, that even if I would not like the poetry, I would still like the guy behind it. His vivid facial expression and the look in his eyes somehow caught my attention right away. When I finally found his poems at the library – I should add that they were nowhere to be found online back then (good old times) – the unexpected happened: I read poetry, and it spoke to me, despite the strict structure that was easily spotted looking at the page. The texts were almost alive, and denied me the chance to analyze the structure for quite a while. Rather, the form helped me to dive into the poetry in a way that felt natural to me, rather

than theoretical. Instead of analyzing rhyme and meter and trying to do what I had learned at school, I decided to focus on something else, which was more present to me: the bold, modern language, the subject matter and the energy within the lines. Their combination was a perfect match for a yet unknown hunger inside of me, and it did not fail to kindle a flame. It seemed this course was already a safe bet. And it was, as I succeeded with my presentation later that semester.

To be really safe and due to the uncertainty of whether I would pass the course at the beginning, I did not cancel the other course; also because I really was curious about the short stories, I would not be disappointed. Professor Scheiding, the instructor of that seminar, gave us an option for obtaining the certificate. For me, it was a simple choice, as it was between writing a paper of twelve pages or doing a fifteen-minute oral exam. I prefer to talk, so that was my decision. Still not having any idea about the next steps toward graduation, let alone knowing what to write my final thesis about, I went to the office to hold the examination at the end of the semester. I had chosen David Foster Wallace as a topic; I just loved his commencement speech “This is Water”.³ After exactly fifteen minutes of a conversation that did not feel like a test at all, I was harshly interrupted by Professor Scheiding, in mid-sentence. ‘Time is up’ he said, followed by ‘Mr. Schuppert, your English is not half bad, how come you did not graduate yet?’ Taken by surprise, I explained my struggles getting along with the system, combining university with work, finding a topic that I could write on and finally finding a person to correct my writing. He interrupted me again and asked a question I never heard before at university (or, if I had, I never realized it): ‘What are you interested in?’ Taken by surprise, I said what came to my mind, ‘There is this poet I find interesting.’

I told him the name Thom Gunn and I found that Scheiding knew as much about Thom Gunn as I had just a few weeks before. ‘Who is that? I never heard of him’, he said. I summed up what I knew about Gunn and within the next few minutes it became clear that my final thesis would be about Thom Gunn. What followed was a journey that at times I still do not understand, even today. I dove into a person’s life and work, a poet who fascinated me and who inspired my curiosity. It was a total flood, and I soon had to limit my research, for I had quickly collected an overwhelming amount of material in the course of my intense curiosity. In only a few weeks, after I finally managed to develop a structure, I finished writing, handed in my printed thesis and heard Professor Scheiding say the following: ‘Is there a biography on Thom Gunn?’ I replied, ‘If there was one, it

³ See “This is Water” by Foster Wallace.

would have made my life a lot easier these last weeks.’ This statement was followed quickly by the impactful question, ‘Why don’t you write one, then?’

This is, bringing a long story to an end, what I have tried to do since then. It was the first step on a journey which has, since it began, made me think, strive for formulations, reconsider my point of view and look further into the various stages of the lives of Thom Gunn which I had developed in my mind. The archival work (at the Bancroft Library archives at University of California, Berkeley) was amazing, but also very dense, and I quickly ran into the same problem as I had encountered with my thesis: Where to start? How to approach Gunn? Reading a dead person’s diary is weird and fascinating at the same time, very personal and deep. Interviewing friends, shaking hands that had once shook his, made it a very intimate endeavor, and shed light on so many aspects of Gunn’s life that it quickly grew out of hand. I realized that limits had to be set and cuts had to be made, which is hard for me, being the perfectionist I sometimes am.

Alas, some clarifications need to be made: I fully agree with Gunn when he says that someone trying to write his biography will most likely get it wrong. Knowing how he struggled to write a short part of his autobiography made it easier for me to accept.⁴ The density and variety of his life, the perfectionism, the struggles, the doubts, the talent, the sexuality, and everything that made him who he was, make it impossible to see it in black and white. Some conclusions may be hard to draw as the information is scarce, while others might seem obvious but still have the potential to be misunderstood, as the information is often so vast, it can seem contradictory. Anyone who lives a moved life will surely agree that life itself sometimes *is* contradictory, or at least may seem so. In that respect, it is important for me to clarify that I by no means consider this a complete rendition of Gunn’s life, nor do I presume to get it right. Rather, I would be happy if some things seem interesting, maybe controversial, and most of all true to the spirit in which Gunn saw being human and living a good life.

This dissertation is a summary, a story reassembled from pieces of information I found on Thom Gunn during my research. Collecting those pieces, interpreting their meaning and arranging them in a specific order is and will always remain personal, in a way. It is a matter of several perspectives. Mine, of course, as I consider the information I have, interpreting and seeing things in my own very specific way, the readers’ angle of

⁴“Even started writing a Stendhalian kind of autobiography, but decided that it's necessary to be more self-absorbed than I am to write that, so stopped around my eighteenth year (not so good when I admit it didn't start till my fourteenth).” Gunn (*Letters* 122).

interpretation, the points of view of those I interviewed and read concerning Thom Gunn, and last, but not least, his own stance on his life. It is also clear that even his own writings are written from an angle, even though I consider Gunn very much a self-reflective person. But as this dissertation is to a great degree based on his own letters, diaries and sometimes his poetry, it is undeniably in large part reflective of his view on himself, sorted and seen through my eyes. His truth will shine through and I by no means mean it as objective truth. The next point is that there is only a limited space in which to unfold Gunn's story. The orientation will be broad, spanning his whole life, rather than diving into all the details. It will cover his life from his birth (or even shortly before) until his death. The development of his character as well as that of his writing should find a place in there, so sometimes the tempo will be quite speedy. I will sometimes counterbalance this through more detailed reports, to give a closer insight into how Gunn led his life. Even though the diaries and letters provide amazing sources, some conclusions are drawn by assuming certain circumstances, whether personal, political, or historical. Based on these assumptions, a complete certainty cannot always be given, though I stay as close to the historical facts as possible.

There is, as of writing this, no biography of Thom Gunn yet, although one is planned to come out in the near future. The closest to a biographical book on Gunn at the moment is the collection of his letters published recently. He wrote the aforementioned autobiographical text at the end of the 1970s, as well as a few other essays about his mentors and friends where he also used a biographical approach. Another text by Gunn about his time in Cambridge was published in the book *My Cambridge* (1977). His writing on his time at the prestigious university seems very similar to the Cambridge part of his autobiography and was probably used as a basis for that. The following book will be adding a broader framework of his life from his childhood to his death. The focus will be particularly on some main aspects, rather than the details. Among those aspects will be Gunn's writings, his network of colleagues, friends and family, including hints and possible explanations of influences. To a larger extent his sexuality and the angle he had on life, partly due to his identity as a homosexual man, will find a prominent way into this book. I want to make very clear that I am aware of the fact that this is only one aspect among many, but it will be one of the angles from which I choose to look at his life, as in some parts it defined his range of free movement, in more restricted times and places, as well as in the niches and later more liberal surroundings. Thus, there will also be a visible and intended focus on queer topics.

The matter of sexuality was indeed a crucial one in the life of Thom Gunn on several levels, although he definitely took care to not be reduced to being just a gay poet,⁵ merely due to his despise of categorization. It would not describe his multifaced view of the world and was thus too shallow a definition for him. Still the matter, of course, left an imprint on his works, but not as the primary part. It was just that: a part of his world, which motivated him to write through the pleasure it brought rather than led him to write about it as a subject in general. Sexuality defines a part of his angle, as do the obstacles that came with it, which is exactly why this angle is important. It shows the limitation of experience and brings the human struggle and behavior to light, which was so central to Gunn. This simple and singular choice alone makes it clear why the following dissertation can only claim to deal with parts of the poet's life, and is only a suggested overview. It is a starting point, and its purpose is to open up the world of Thom Gunn a little more than it is now. Whoever will have more to say about him will be more than welcome. It seems about time that his timeless and valuable work and the life behind it became a little more present, a little more visible. Gunn's stance on drugs and their effects on him and his thinking will also play a guiding role during the course of the following story. Sometimes woven into the experience of his sexuality, but also separate from his sexual encounters with others. Gunn's deep refusal of categorization and the strong determination to rethink and reassess beliefs as well as his writings will also be evident. His view of the world as a unity, and the limitation of human perception and expression, as a part of his personal and professional development seem important enough here too, as they partly build the foundation for the variety of writing styles in his work which may have made him one of the most flexible and open poets of recent decades.

⁵ "The poem is about the attempt to understand a complex and intense relationship. And it is primarily the work of a poet, of a homosexual poet only secondarily." Gunn (*OP* 134).

Chapter One: The Beginnings of a Life Artist

William Guineach Gunn was born in Gravesend, Kent on August 29th, 1929 to Herbert Smith Gunn, called Bert, and Ann Charlotte Thomson Gunn, called Charlotte. He was their first child, after a miscarriage a few months earlier. The little boy was well taken care of and was quickly nicknamed Tom by the family. Charlotte was immediately the primary parent taking care of their offspring and without hesitation quit her job to be housewife and mother to their first-born child. As due to this arrangement, the child's attachment to his mother was quickly growing larger than to his father, the connection to his mother's sisters and her side of the family also grew deeper. Thus, there's less information on Herbert Gunn and his side of the family's history. Nonetheless, some background should be provided here, in order to put the child's (and later poet's) heritage in perspective. Herbert Smith Gunn was born on April 3rd in 1903 in Gravesend, Kent to the merchant seaman and marine engineer Herbert Gunn and his wife Alice Eliza Smith. The family name Guineach, which hints at their Scottish descent, was abbreviated into Gunn. Bert's side of the family had relocated to Kent from the north-east of Scotland in the 19th century. Although Tom was born in the same village and even on the same street as his father, it was the mother's impact on his upbringing and education on the young Tom that had most influence on the boy. His father's side of the family seems rather negligible in hindsight, hinting at the strong character of Charlotte.

Ann Charlotte Thomson was born on September 28th of the same year as her husband, in Snodland, Kent, the fourth of seven daughters to Alexander Thomson, a farmer at a place called Covey Hall, and his wife Daisy Collings. Charlotte's older sisters Barbara, Margaret and Helen, and the three younger sisters Christina, Mary and Catherine, were the core of her family bonds and would later play prominent roles in the course of their nephew's life. Being closer to his mother and spending a lot of time with her, the son would also learn more about her side of the family, as indicated. In fact, her stories were so influential, that they formed a kind of mythology for the child, which the grown-up Gunn still contemplated later in his life. His interest in family history as a teenager can be seen in his first diary, where amongst other notes, simplified sketches of the family tree on his mother's side have been scribbled down, stretching back to the year 1540. The Thomsons, like the Guineachs, had also come from Scotland, more precisely from Echt, near Aberdeen. At the end of the 19th century, the eldest son of the Baptist family moved to Kent to work on a farm. This went so successfully that he sent for the

rest of his family to follow his lead. According to our protagonist, the Bible-minded Thomsons surely saw parallels to the biblical story of Joseph.⁶ As the family began settling in the south, non-conformist attitudes were starting to develop. Changing from Baptist to a Methodist confession, pacifistic worldviews were becoming part of their mindsets, as well as socialist ideas and anti-royal attitudes. This can be seen as a root for young Gunn's mindset with its tendencies to rather revolutionary thoughts, at least in part. As time moved on, in Charlotte's role as a mother, religion finally lost importance in the worldview of the Thomson branch of the family. She raised her son without confession or religion, confiding in intellectual ideas rather than religious ones. Although Gunn later often stated that he proudly never practiced a religion, he still knew the Bible well. Partly because reading it was unavoidable at school, and partly as a collection of stories and basic humanitarian ideas.

Bert and Charlotte met in the early 1920s at the *Kent Messenger's* offices, where she began to work in journalism in 1921, while he was employed as a trainee reporter. They got along well together and complemented each other: While she was the intellectual ideologist, he was more pragmatic and career-driven in character. They fell in love and subsequently got married in London on September 12th, 1925. When she gave birth to Tom after her miscarriage, the Gunns followed the common family pattern in those days. While Herbert was further pursuing a career, Charlotte was expected to take care of the child and the household. Bert would provide the money for the young family, and had much better chances to securely do so, and have a career, just because he was a man. Charlotte certainly did not like that idea too much, but accepted the given realities at the time. She might have taken the uncomfortable turn as a gift, to spend more time raising her son and developing new ideas and strategies for a time to come. Maybe in a few years, it would become easier to achieve the goals she had in mind, but until then she had to limit her realm of influence to her firstborn and the little things she could do.

In a family picture album that Gunn kept until his death, and also had a great deal in creating as a child, there are a few photographs of him as a little boy amongst family and early friends. The album was left to the archives of the Bancroft Library by Gunn.

⁶“His luck was so good that he sent for his mother and all his brothers and sisters, like Joseph in Egypt sending home for the rest of his family –the parallel cannot have failed to strike the Bible-minded Thomsons-and by the start of this century each of the brothers was established as a tenant farmer in the villages between Maidstone and Rochester, my grandfather Alexander's farm being in Snodland.” Gunn (*OP* 169–70).

One of the photos depicts a happy boy with two loving parents, who was dressing up and playing with other kids, his curiosity nurtured by his surroundings. The pictures

themselves are arranged among snippets from magazines and are captioned with additional information about who or what is seen in the picture. One of those was especially dear to him and he even kept a copy of it on a wall of his study: It shows his mother holding him on her arm, when he was about one year old.

When Gunn turned three, he became a big brother. On April 5th in 1932, Charlotte gave birth to her and Bert's second son, Dougal Alexander Gunn, who was called Ander, as nicknaming by now seems to have become a family tradition. On this day, the big brother's longest lasting relationship began, and he quickly grew very fond of his younger sibling. According to the older brother's later memories, it quickly became clear in the time that followed what the brothers' dynamics would be. They were different in character, obviously, with Gunn mentioning quarrels usually seen among siblings, while both learned to appreciate how their differences could also be seen as strengths, complementing each other, not only in the matter of being cast in the roles introvert and extrovert, which Gunn found unfortunate, as their relationship, besides the mentioned quarrels, was friendly, accepting and individual in general.

As the family was now bigger, the total amount of family income also needed to adapt. Luckily, Bert was talented in networking and creating social bonds as he was able to climb the career ladder as a journalist. In 1933, he was appointed news editor for the *London Evening Standard*, which is why the whole family of four now moved from Gravesend to Kensington. One reason being to be closer to work, another one, because the promoted father could now afford the change of place. The new family home, close to Kensington Gardens, a stone's throw away from Kensington Palace, was the center of the four-year-old's first closer contact with urban life, but this only lasted for two years, before the family moved again to Shortlands in the southeast of London. He would not leave unimpressed by the bustling character of the big city. The intermezzo in London was also an indicator of the mobility of the Gunns, the moving action that Tom and Ander had to go through due to their parents' life and career choices. The difficulties in both Bert and Charlotte's character meanwhile made it harder for the parents to live together.

Charlotte, the intellectual stay at home mother, a strong-minded woman intrigued by literature and the ideas of socialism and feminism on the one side, and Bert, a pragmatic and hardworking leader, career oriented and practical, separated in 1936 for a short while. Although their reconciliation was already on the horizon, Charlotte went all

in, taking the sons to live with her side of the family in Goudhurst, providing the brothers with yet another contrasting change of scenery. It is here where Gunn would attend his first school, with many more to come. After the parents found their way back together, the next move was already in progress, when Herbert Gunn was promoted to a new position at the *Daily Express*, now in the function of northern editor of the paper. The family moved to Mayfair briefly, only to settle in Cheadle, a Manchester suburb, shortly after that. By the time the family lived there, both sons were already attending school. As day boys, they were taught at Ryleys School in Elderly Edge, close to their new home. Tom had learned to read before going to school, due to his mother's insistence, and thus had a head start where language was concerned. Charlotte's interest in literature, in fact, was part of the mythology which he later formed around her. From early on, she told him how she had read all of Gibbon's *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire*.⁷ She wanted to pass on her fascination for literature to her children, and her oldest son was up for the task. She not only taught him to read early on, but also recommended literature to him that would seem a bit advanced for his young age, which is why he read Austen fairly early. Gunn later says, "from her I got the complete implicit idea, from as far back as I can remember, of books as not just a commentary on life but a part of its continuing activity." (Gunn, *OP* 170) Charlotte Gunn got her son's attention for literature and reading by setting an impressive example, and with him she found an easy target, following her lead from an early age.

In contrast to his mother's vivid exploration of the highly intellectual world of literature, philosophy and politics, Bert was not a big reader, at least, not of fiction. Where this genre was concerned, he read mostly detective stories, focusing on pragmatism rather than fantasy.⁸ In Gunn's whole story, the lack of information on the father's side seems like emotional distance, but their relationship was not a bad one, though Bert's time with his son was confined by the fact that he worked much of the time and was thus absent quite often. Tom remembers many good times when his father was at home on his days off, especially on the weekends, when in addition to Bert's presence, his colleagues and friends brought their wives to the Gunn's home. Bert was indeed a social person and enjoyed company.

⁷ "An avid reader, he said she read all of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* while she carried him." Forester.

⁸ "No, he didn't read books very much. My mother used to say he never read any books except detective stories and books about journalism." Gunn and Campbell 16.

Also, it was Herbert Gunn⁹, who brought his older son a special gift from his work at the *Daily Express*. Tom was given a dummy newspaper: the almost fully blank piece of paper was divided into columns and empty spaces, providing the possibility to add news that were incoming late, and apart from the title *Daily Express* on the top of the page, nothing was written on it. It was up to the child to fill out the blanks, add pictures and fill the page with life, which was a task he seemed to enjoy. Looking back on later works he produced in his childhood and even as an adult, collage was part of his style, and in the case of the paper, a certain affinity for a given structure that needed to be filled with content is undeniable.¹⁰ Tom filled out the paper, drawing pictures and scribbling lines in what he later claimed to be the first creative act he could remember. Opposite Bert's approach to kindling his son's creativity, a postcard from Charlotte written to Tom in Cheadle in the year 1937, which can be found in the family picture album, suggests that Tom already was writing fiction in a less constrained way. In the text on the back of the card, Charlotte thanks her son for a Charlie story and compliments him on it. Little Tom was obviously already hooked on the idea of writing and both of his parents encouraged him in every way they could, each in their own style. (Gunn, *OP*; Gunn, *Scrapbook circa 1930*)

The stay in Cheadle, again, was rather short. This time, it was not only the father's promotion to assistant editor at the *Daily Express* in London. The change of place and the most recent relocation to London was rather surely also motivated by personal reasons. Charlotte had started an affair with Ronald Hyde, called Joe, who was, of all people, also a colleague and friend of Bert's at the paper in Cheadle. The Gunns moved to an upper end street in Hampstead, at 110 Frognal, in April of 1938. Hampstead was back then a suburb of London, situated around a park, which is still one of the biggest green areas in London today, called Hampstead Heath. A new place to live also meant a new school. This time, William Gunn attended the University College School of Hampstead, abbreviated UCS, only a few blocks away from home. He quickly found friends, among

⁹ Pictures can be found in Scrapbook 1967-1977, Thom Gunn Papers, BANC MSS 2006/235, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁰ Later in life Gunn notes "New Notebook, new determinations, new assessment of intentions. What I most want to (continue to) do: pass the romantic impulse through the classical scrutiny. The scrutiny is both the experience & the poem's form. It is destructive (or should be) of all that is not hard and genuine in the impulse. ... Examples of the impulse: fantasy; sexual fantasy; themes of liberation from authority; the decorum of naturalness; repossession of innocence." (*I 1968 1*).

them Ruth Pearce, a neighbor girl, who would remain in touch with Gunn in the following decades. In November that year, though, the inevitable happened and Bert and Charlotte split up, this time without reconciling. Too many things had happened, and they could not make up for them, or did not want to. Their divorce followed in the next year. Adding to this trauma, 1939 accumulated more chaos and sadness in Gunn's life. That summer, Alexander Thomson, his grandfather on his mother's side died in June, only a few weeks before a continental horror took hold of the country he lived in, right after the boy's 10th birthday. The United Kingdom declared war on Germany on September 3rd in 1939, since two days earlier Germany had attacked Poland under false pretense.

In order to provide more stability, and to give them a safer prospect of learning away from London, Tom and Ander were sent back to Ryleys School, close to Cheadle. This time, the boys boarded for a few weeks, before they returned to Hampstead and the UCS in December of that year. Upon their return to Froggnal, months after their father left them alone with their mother, the boys moved in with Charlotte and Joe Hyde, who now lived with Charlotte, and who would eventually marry her in the following spring. Gunn's schooling history was very diverse, first induced by his parents' life choices, then due to war. Despite the sometimes chaotic and rarely stable schooling, he fully indulged in the opportunity to learn. His head start in reading made it easier for him to follow the educational path that was so important to his mother. He liked school and did not get bored easily, and when he did, he started producing his own texts, satisfying his creative urge and curiosity, long before his fellow students. His curiosity did not leave him much down time, though, now that he had returned to UCS for about half a year. He was in an avid reader's heaven: Having the convenience of the school only a few blocks away, his mother's private library at home, and Bumpus' Bookshop a few streets over, he had the classical school structure, the availability of classic works of literature and a never-ending source of new books and stories at the bookshop. At Bumpus', he soon discovered Nesbit and Dumas, and dove into their worlds and their writing while continuing to work on his own creative endeavors at the same time.¹¹

Having chosen writing as his creative vehicle, his first published poem appeared in Gower, the UCS school magazine, in July 1940. The poem was titled "A Thousand Cheers for Authors" and was the young reader and poet's hymn to his heroes in literature

¹¹ "I think it was on Oxford Street. It was quite a famous bookshop, I have an edition of *Paradise Lost* that was published by Bumpus at, I think, the same address, in 1811, or thereabouts." Gunn and Campbell 16.

and writing.¹² Almost sixty years later, when interviewed by James Campbell, Gunn was still able to recite from this very early piece, of course with the humble attitude for which he was so famous, and the self-criticism that was the source for his drive and perfectionism in form and subject matter. In September of that year, the boys moved once again, this time to Farnham, accompanied by their mother, to live with their aunt Christina, before staying at a hotel in Alton, where the boys moved around several local schools for the rest of the term.

Despite the troublesome instability over the course of his education, having already visited three schools within one year, the young Gunn's interest in learning could not be broken. Besides his mother, his teachers were among his role models, and became a source of influence. During war time, as the young men of the UK had to fight for their country, Gunn recalls his teachers as mainly older men. Later, he specifically names his English and History teacher, Polameni, as a major influence on his interest for those subjects, as well as *The Poet's Tongue*, a poetry edition by WH Auden and John Garrett, and an unusually modern collection of literature for those days, which delighted the student at school. Tom's luck was such that, when evacuated to the countryside from London during the Blitz, he ended up boarding at Bedales School in Hampshire, a fairly progressive school, that supported his free mind with inspiring teachers and books. The progressive atmosphere was much to his liking, and he was soon diving deeper into different worldviews, breathing in revolutionary ideas, while depending on the foundation of the classics, thinking critically, guided rather than controlled and overruled. The energetic and persuasive teachers later became his benchmark, when he tried to kindle his

¹² In Mr. Bumpus' bookshop,
Oh there is my delight,
Of books he has a monster crop,
They are a lovely sight.
I hope that authors never stop
For reading gives the wisdom light.
A thousand cheers for authors!

I love to think of books of old
The great Greeks wrote so long ago,
Chaucer the first English stories told,
Sweet Shakespeare came, and stout Defoe,
With Jonathan Swift and Bunyan bold,
Till Dumas - he's the best I know -
A thousand cheers for Authors! - Gunn and Campbell 15.

own students' creativity and imagination, and to encourage them to thrive in the beauty that lies in literature.

Being away from his mother, only making day trips to London, Tom's center of life was now Bedales. To keep her son busy and to stay connected while helping him to concentrate on his favorite occupation at the time, Charlotte asked him for a very special birthday present: She wished for him to write a novel for her, a request the son was more than happy to follow. He started writing immediately, using all available free time to finish the task, even skipping his afternoon naps and using the time to write. For the purpose of writing, Charlotte provided her son with an exercise book, and in this very notebook he started working out his first novel, including a table of contents. Two very short stories were indicated on the top of the first page of the booklet, but the pages containing "Miss Wadham's Button-bag" and "The Children go out Boating" have been torn out, as they were not the centerpiece of the work. The young writer finally produced a 16-chapter long story he called *The Flirt*. The booklet was filled with a collage of written texts, drawings and sketches, as well as pictures cut out from magazines. The style is reminiscent of what one could imagine the blank newspaper looked like. In terms of content, the subject matter of the story was as dramatic as an eleven-year-old boy could produce. Very likely inspired by his own experiences observing what his parents were going through, and adding a little more spice for the reader, he wrote down a love story with obstacles, which culminates in adultery and finally the divorce of the protagonists. Concepts such as love at first sight, secrecy, family bonds, loyalty and surprisingly complex character schemes, the young writer studied and then converted into words. Gunn's qualities as an observer of deep human emotions and behavior patterns can already be seen at this early stage, although "A Thousand Cheers for Authors" or *The Flirt* hint at, but cannot really be interpreted as a forecast of his future career, yet. However, it showed the boy the possibilities that lay in the craft of writing, if he managed to combine his observational skills, his vivid imagination and huge knowledge and excitement for literature, with the capability to condense the subjects and their relevance, and his delicate understanding of his huge vocabulary for his age. In hindsight, his diligence and enjoyment of writing is at least worth mentioning as an entertaining side note. He enjoyed writing so much that in times of scarcity during the war, when paper was a limited commodity, he did not simply ask his mother for more notebooks directly, but wrapped it into a story. He finishes *The Flirt* on page 66 with an advert-like note, which reads: "Another book will shortly be published by Tom Gunn – (When his mother

gives him another exercise book)” (66). By that time, Gunn’s inspiration was already fed and nurtured by books that might be considered above his age range, but as already pointed out, his mother’s ambition fostered his interest. In addition to his school books, H. G. Wells’, and early issues of *Penguin New Writings*, he eagerly consumed whatever caught his interest in libraries and bookstores. In his teens he read Christopher Marlowe, John Keats, John Milton, Alfred Tennyson and George Meredith and added their craft to his list of influences. That early he concluded: “I wanted by then to be a writer: the role was all important, was in fact a good part of the writing's subject matter.” (Gunn, *OP* 172) The young aspiring writer had a very clear image of what this role would look like, and what kind of skills he might yet have to acquire to reach his goal.

In April 1942, when the air raids declined and it was safer in London, the teenager returned to UCS and to his home in Hampstead for his last term of junior school. In that time, as usual for boys, his body changed, and a yet unknown urge arose within him. The warmer days of spring supported young Gunn’s sexuality to develop, and he remembers masturbating for the first time then.¹³ In addition to all the confused feelings of any adolescent, the young man was confronted with one more thing to cope with, compared to other boys at his age. It was clear to him from early on that, rather than girls, like the other young men around him, he was attracted instead to boys and men around him.¹⁴ The young uniformed soldiers in particular made it easier for him to recognize this urge, but lacking proper role models, and living in a very restrictive time in the United Kingdom, it took him several more years to understand the implications of those feelings more clearly, and to finally put those feelings and their implications into thoughts, ideas and words.

Before Gunn could continue at UCS by attending senior school, starting late in 1942, his much-disliked stepfather Hyde left Charlotte and 110 Frognal in autumn. Again, Charlotte had not been very lucky with the choice of her new husband, either. Hyde turned out to be rather aggressive and was developing a problem with his regular intake of alcohol, the foundation of an increasingly unstable relationship. After he left, some peace

¹³ “started masturbating in spring or early summer” Gunn (*Chronology [1978]* 1).

¹⁴ “Well, it is a very difficult thing for anybody to know when they really discovered their 'sexual orientation', as we politely call it nowadays. I don't know when I discovered it. I was extraordinarily dishonest with myself in my late teens: all my sexual fantasies were about men. but assumed I was straight. I think it was partly because homosexuality was w such a forbidden subject in those days ... I didn't want to be effeminate either: I didn't think that was me I would love to have met some sporty young man who seduced me, but no, that wasn't to happen.” Gunn and Campbell 19.

moved in with Charlotte and her sons, which Gunn later recalls as a golden period of his youth, despite the war raging around them. To get a clearer image of what the area looked like, Frognal was and is a meandering street between Hampstead and Finchley Road in one of the more idyllic areas of greater London. The neighborhood was rather upper-middle class, reaching to the who's-who of Great Britain's bourgeois population. Around the time the Gunns moved there, Sigmund Freud, fleeing from Nazi Austria, moved to a house on Mansfield Gardens, an adjacent road to Frognal, where he would die a year afterwards. The Keats House was also nearby to Gunn's teenage home, regularly providing him with reminders of how poetry was perceived and where it was written. Towards the end of the war, a new neighbor moved to 99 Frognal, literally across the street; General Charles de Gaulle chose the road where Gunn spent his happier times as the place for his retirement.

The Gunns' house was originally built as two houses, but for size reasons numbers 108 and 110 were combined into one, the two buildings being among the oldest in Hampstead, and bearing some historical value. For a period of time, it housed a pub, and was one of the centers of urban life there. The location can provide us with a glimpse of the financial situation of the Gunn family, especially how Herbert Gunn's success as journalist and editor had turned out financially. For the older son, finances were secondary at best, but the effects surely left an impression on him. The place he lived was the perfect starting point for a young boy's adventures and endeavors. Of course, the proximity of UCS was one thing, the bookshops and Keats House another, and for the rest of his playful adolescence, Hampstead Heath as a large playground lay at his feet, adding to his golden period the possibility of escaping the city into the green.¹⁵

Now living with the mother, and some distance from their father, the difficulties in the relationship between Herbert and the boys became visible. The various reasons, starting from him being the financial provider of the family, at least the children, as opposed to Charlottes strong personality, made emotional connection between him and his sons more difficult. Especially after the divorce, the father had fewer chances to catch up and keep the bond with his sons. An early letter written by Tom to his father, thanking him for Christmas presents, indicates that Bert thought of his children, but the tone of the letter indicates a rather polite but distanced relationship. Although Bert was at a distance and emotionally rather disconnected, his presence at least supports the notion that Joe was not the children's favorite fatherly figure, and they at least had an option to go to in harder

¹⁵ See also Hampstead: Frognal and the Central Demesne | British History Online.

times. Gunn, who later in life strongly disliked being compared to his old man, still describes his father as a charming, hardworking man, who successfully worked his way up the career ladder, having a talent for bonding with people. In parts, the son admired those character traits and incorporated them in his life too. Bert's ability to focus and follow up, as well as reach his goals, also earned his grown-up son's respect, later, although Gunn was not in this case very motivated to follow the example closely.

In 1943, the main reason for the golden period was eliminated, when Joe Hyde reconciled his relationship with Charlotte and moved back in with Tom, Ander and Charlotte, while still not having fully resolved his drinking issues to a satisfying degree for the oldest boy. Only a short time after that, both of his parents would have partners again. While Charlotte took Joe back in, Bert married Olive Melville Brown on January 29th of 1944. He met his new wife as he had met Tom's mother, as Olive was a reporter at the *Daily Mail*. Tom, who now had a stepmother, in addition to his stepfather Joe, had started reading Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters, advanced literature for a 14-year-old, one could argue. Again, Tom's interest kept him ahead of his time, literature being a main source of stability and ideas for him, thus strengthening his connection to the written word, and a strong influence on his mind.

Despite the continuing troubles between the remaining Gunns and Hyde, whose drinking just made him more rageful than ever before, the experience yet awaiting the boys can only be described as the biggest seizure of their young lives. It would change everything. The day after Christmas 1944, Hyde left 110 Frognal again, as a result of a heavy quarrel between him and Charlotte. Although the boys did not like their stepfather much, it was surely hard for them to see their mother in this state of agony and rage when he left. This time, she seemed more desperate and hurt than the previous times she was left alone. After sending the boys to sleep, on Friday December 29th, 1944, the strong, proud, intelligent woman decided to no longer fight against the struggles life had in store for her. Planning to end her life, she put a note on the door, to prevent the boys from opening it without help, before barricading the room she was in. Still, the next morning the brothers, who found their way inside despite the locked door, ignoring the note that was intended to keep them safe from that sight, stumbled over the body of their mother, who ended her life by inhaling from a gas-poker, a device that was back then used to fire up the heaters.

In a notebook that Gunn received from his brother Ander as a Christmas gift just a few days earlier, Tom writes his first diary entry attempting to process the recent

experience. To give an impression about how the teenager dealt with the loss, it seems only right to quote the entry in full length:

Mother died
at 4.00 a.m., Friday,
December 29th
1944-

She committed suicide by holding a gas-poker to her head and covering it all with a tartan rug we had. She was lying on the sheep skin rug, dressed in her beautiful long red dressing-gown, and pillows were under her head. Her legs were apart, one shoe half off, and her legs were white and hard and cold, and the hairs seems out of place growing on them.

We had awoken at 9.45, and had dressed leisurely but were puzzled by a tender note against the parlour door, saying 'Don't try to get in. Ask Mrs. Stoney to help you, Darlings.'

The we realized that both the parlour and kitchen door were locked. So we did go over to Mrs. Stoney, who lives next door. But only her son was in, she having gone out shopping. Then Ander tried the back gate which was unlocked and we went in through the back door into the parlour. (*But I guessed – though I hardly dared to even when I saw the note. I think Ander did too. But we did not dare mention our conjectures.*) Both gate and door were unlocked, and they had certainly been looked the evening before. Mother had done this, we supposed to make it easier for us to get in. Ander began to scream. 'Mother's dead! She's killed herself' Before I could even realize that she was, and that her body stretched along the floor, with her hands up to her face under the loose rug. There was a smell. But not a very horrible great one, of gas. It haunted us for the whole day afterwards. I turned the gas off and Ander took the gas-poker out of her hands.

We didn't undo the blackout for we could see her perfectly well by the light from the French window, open behind us.

We uncovered her face. How horrible it was! Ander said afterwards to me that the eyes were open, but I thought they were closed; she was white almost, like the rest of her body that we could see. 'Cover it up. I don't want to see it. [...]' It's so horrible' Ander cried. Her hed [sic] was back, and the mouth was open, - not expressing anything, horror, sadness, happiness, - just open.

But oh! Mother, from the time when I left you at 11 on Thursday night until 4 in the morning, what did you do?

She died quickly and peacefully, they said, but what agonies of mind she must have passed through during the night. I hate to think of her sadness. My poor, poor mother; I hope you slept most of the time, but however sad then, you are happy now. Never will you be sad again! Dear, dear, sweet mother. It was Joe perhaps who caused your death. He had left the house (for the second time since their marriage) on the early morning of the 27th; I had heard his voice, through my sleep; at her command.

Oh mother, you could have called him back, but you knew we didn't like him! But we would rather you had 10.000 Joes in our house, rather than you had killed yourself.

How could we know how sad she was! I feel certain that it was after 11.20, when I came down to fetch my watch, and when I kissed her (I'm so glad I did!), that she decided to kill herself.

I kissed her legs. – then called the police... I kissed her forehead when the policeman wasn't looking; poor lovely statue! At first we ran screaming into the front garden – stiff with frost.

Later in the Morning I came into the parlour to get something out of the buro; the blackout on only one window was undone, the cat was nestling and purring with a pleased look and half-shut eyes, in the dressing gowns folds between her legs, in the dim light and disordered room...

I sent a telegram to Covey Hall directly we found mother saying "Mother has killed herself," among other things. Telegrams telephoned me about 20 minutes later suggesting I should alter this to 'urgent' or something similar but I refused. It now appears that Margot & her husband are to live with us. (Gunn, *Diary 1944-1945* 1-8)

After finding their mother dead, the shock bonded the boys together even more closely than before. But there was a problem now: Hyde was unloved and gone, Charlotte was dead, and Herbert Gunn was freshly married, living in a different place. The boys could not be left alone at their home. Luckily, more family was available to take care of Ander and Tom. Their cousin Margot and her husband John Corbett stayed with the boys after their loss, so that they could continue to live in their usual home at 110 Frognal, at least for the time being. This is where this dissertation, although acknowledging that both boys lost their mother, will focus on the older brother for obvious reasons. He was already highly functional, organizing things first, taking over responsibilities for himself and his little brother. Later in life, he would regularly refer to the discovery of his mother's corpse as the day his adolescence ended, him becoming an adult in an instant. The sights and the emotional shock from that day would resurface consciously and subconsciously for the rest of his life, underlining the importance of this traumatic experience, due to the important role his mother had played for him as an inspiration and a source of comfort.¹⁶

The loss was indeed a big shock, as becomes very clear from reading his diary entry. Sadness and loneliness were rapidly taking over after the golden period with Charlotte. The huge gap she left behind shows how much of a central figure she was to the boys and how close the three were to each other. Her influence on Thom Gunn cannot be underestimated; from her strong opinions on how life was supposed to be, her stance on reading, writing, religion, society and politics, to the love and security she provided,

¹⁶ Gunn often had dreams related to his mother. One example is the following entry from his diary: "Fri Dec 29: Yesterday the 34th anniversary of mother's death. I have dreamt twice about Hampstead - the house - in the last 3 days." (*Diary 1974-1986* 56).

she could definitely be seen as the center of the boy's world. She passed on her views by providing an example, be it as a socialist and her revolutionary approach to the world, her political activities as fighter for women's rights, her not caring much about other people opinions, at least to an extent that allowed her to let her mind flow freely, and accepting her need to act upon her own principles and truths. Tom's reaction to the sudden traumatic experience seems to be a very clear and reasonable one, and emotionally controlled, one might add. Looking at the massive impact of a mother's death on all aspects of a child's life sheds a more complex light on the emotional development of a 15-year-old, consciously and unconsciously.

After his extensive report on his mother's death and all the implied emotional chaos, grief and triggers of childhood trauma, he did not continue writing a diary right away. This one entry was rather a singular event, an outburst of writing against the carousel of emotional mayhem he went through. It seems his need for transforming his grief into words was satisfied after this one entry. How important it was for him becomes clearer when considering that he kept this book until the end of his life. Although he does not write down his thoughts and feelings on a regular basis, the content of the notebook from 1944 gives insights on Tom's thoughts and his focus on different interests in the period from 1945 onwards.

One of the notebook's aspects concerns Gunn's early interest in genealogy. As already pointed out, the Thomson side at least formed a mythology in his mind from an early age. It stuck with him, and it does not come as a big surprise that we find a basic form of family trees in the book. Tom wrote down names and the relationships of his family members, but dates, except for years of birth, simply do not exist. The recorded family history reaches back to 1540, but it is hard to reconstruct all the connections. Furthermore, his need to conserve memories with the help of this book is fulfilled by sketches of floorplans, most likely of 110 Frognal, where he and his brother had lived for almost five years by the time of the drawings. They work as visual support to remember the place which united the happiness of Gunn's golden period with the agony of suddenly becoming a half-orphan. Connecting his emotions and memories, and thus meaning, to a place was certainly something that played a pivotal role in his life philosophy in those days, especially when a few months later, the house was finally sold. Being suddenly grown-up, Tom's level of self-awareness, self-reliance, and self-reflection increased at an incredible speed. This is reflected in the notebook as well, as he writes down everything

from notes from school, to reminders, calculations and lists.¹⁷ Writing as a way to memorize, to outsource thoughts one does not want to forget, was a crucial function of the book, as well as building the foundations for creativity by freeing the mind from the obligation to remember, giving it the air to breathe and wander freely. Next to schedules and tasks to accomplish, sketches, like the double page drawing of a spider, and language most importantly, play a big role. Self-designed crossword puzzles, remnants of that fascination with words as well as poetry, copied and self-written, are also boldly present on those pages.

In the sections that clearly focus on language and its usage, he plays with words and their more relevant components as means of communication. Alphabets are written across pages, missing the vowels, showing categorized thinking in a way. Highly philosophical approaches become visible on a page he writes “My last words shall be – My last hopes shall be” (*Diary 1944-1945*), giving a pretty depressing glimpse of the experience of a teenager thinking about death already, crossing the lines out, as if he decided not to burden his young mind by those thoughts, before actually deciding how to finish those lines. It surely does not come as a surprise that the poetry entries find a special focus here. There is a wide range concerning poetry indeed. Browsing the notebook, one can find several remarks and quoted poems from Thomas Hardy, self-written, exercise-like lines, even experimental writings, with half made-up words like “Thski inblu ensu alweiriweltusa” (*Diary 1944-1945*) almost having a Gaelic sound when read aloud. The French language, which Gunn learned at school, also plays a role in the books various entries. His poetic exercises summit in an extraordinary piece within the book, a poem that is titled “Sweet Mother from the Pompous World”, an early but unrefined attempt to deal with his mother and her death. This would remain the last written piece on her for some decades; in fact, Gunn even rarely talked about his mother, and her suicide especially. Finally, as if to make a statement about his future occupation and devotion, the very last page of the notebook reveals a little gem, a special treat for those who know about Gunn’s occupation later in life. He finishes his entries into that book by writing down a list of terms that should form the basis for his future use of words and rhythms, including examples of what the terms describe. Those terms are well known to people acquainted with the theory behind poetry, and the list reads “iamb, Trochee, dactyl,

¹⁷ Kitay (“Thom Gunn as a Life Long Partner”) also refers to Gunn’s habit of having lists for everything. “He even wrote notes about taking showers.”

anapaest, spondee, pyrrhic” and ends the page with the note “elision: blank verse line; is usually 5 accents” (*Diary 1944-1945*).

Using the notebook to conserve thoughts, ideas and to-do's, and eventually keeping it until his death, shows not only how important it seemed to Gunn to memorize and cherish the written words, but also his general need to write ideas down, and his attitude towards ink as the better means compared to memory, as ink might fade a bit, but is still more reliable than the brain. Interestingly, this does not seem to have been obvious to him then, but rather implicit, as after finishing this last page, he would not write more diaries or notebooks in that period that survive until today. Of some texts he produced later, we know that he threw them away, a kind of good riddance to unliked and unappreciated next steps as a writer of prose or poetry. Several ripped out pages from the diary might also suggest the conclusion that the survival of this book is also partly a lucky coincidence.

The early part of 1945 was surely a hard time for the fifteen-year-old. Just having lost his mother, the UK still being at war, him moving around between family and school, all added to an inconvenient uncertainty about the future, traumatizing the teenager in one way or another. In the month of May, though, the mayhem and tumult would change for the young man. Victory in Europe was celebrated in London, after Germany admitted defeat. World War II was finally over, at least in Britain, and the relief was adequately celebrated. Tom describes his day in London to his aunts in a bright and vivid letter.

Before the official end of war celebrations were to start at Piccadilly, Gunn was attending a more private event, celebrating the birthday of his friend Holgate. From the birthday party, he went to the starting point for his tour through London and was swept along from there. Following the crowds from Piccadilly to Buckingham Palace, Gunn and his company tried to avoid Churchill's speech, as they found him less important than the experience itself, but failed in the attempt. It is remarkable for a fifteen-year-old boy, how young he was self-consciously political, and how strongly and clearly he was capable of opposing worldviews he could not rationalize or that he did not share. The strong pacifist beliefs inherited from his mother were probably at odds with the triumphal speech of Churchill and the glorification of the armed troops that brought peace. Another part where Gunn was following his family's traditional values and anti-royalist ideas would surely be fed on that day, when arriving at Buckingham Palace. After a quite disparaging remark about the Victoria Monument which opulently occupies the square in front of the Palace, the letter continues in describing the events, Gunn's observations and judgements on the

royals at the center of it. When the royal family finally appeared at the balcony, granting the shouting crowds their wish to get a glance at them, Gunn remarks “their graceless majesties appeared with their daughters dressed in khaki & blue, gave their regal cross between a wave & salute, & disappeared after a time. However stupid they are, it was fun seeing them” (*Letters* 7). Calm obedience, and acceptance of privilege by birthright, were just not in Gunn’s blood, or bloodline as family tradition. This was true for King George VI, and later for his daughter, dressed in khaki that day, wearing her uniform as she had earlier joined the military. Elizabeth Windsor, who was to become the queen of England a few years later, could not expect Gunn’s tribute as guaranteed.

As his tour through London continued, the teenager was convinced that his victory celebration was more personal, and pleasant, than the king and his wife’s version of it, and he was probably right. Here we take a glance at teenage Gunn’s fascination with real life, human qualities, and connection rather than distance. The masks and facades of royalty distort reality by force, and thus deliberately change their image and meaning of their roles in the world. But he not only disapproved of this disguise when it came to monarchy; he was generally supportive of the reality that lay beyond all layers of tradition, shame or deceit. He preferred true emotion, humanity and deconstructed worldviews, and roles or masks were obstacles in the way of unfolding those qualities. In a way, years later, Elizabeth II proved all of these despised qualities by how she chose to spend her reign, setting function, tradition and her role before her personal needs, guided by reason rather than emotion, and thus sometimes losing touch with her people. In this respect, she can indeed be used as a countermodel for what Gunn had already started to aspire to. His personal tour went on towards Trafalgar Square, where he enjoyed the view down to Whitehall, crowded with people. He was an observer and participant at the same time and tried to take notice of as many details as possible, to conserve the moment and keep it in his mind. It was a very emotional day, but even in the euphoria of the end of war, he noticed the bells of St-Martin-in-the-Field, from where he continued moving along, to only barely being able to avoid a service in church, which he surely would not have enjoyed being dragged into. Rounding up the journey through a celebrating London, he chose Leicester Square as an ending point of the eventful day. For the evening, though, he chose a much more familiar place to spend his time, bearing much more meaning, and closer to home.

At nightfall, his end-of-day celebration took place in his childhood playground of Hampstead Heath, which was finally safe from the risks and shadows of war. Tom was

joined by his brother Ander to see the bonfires, which symbolized the return of the light of hope, which Tom found a magnificent way to mark the end of those dark times. Burning all the flammable remnants of the conflict in an almost religiously ceremonial way, and seeing some bad memories going up in flames, must have been a very healing experience for so many people who made their way to those fires, but especially for the boys, who had lost their mother only a few months earlier. In the letter, his admiration for this kind of healing destruction, the good riddance to old baggage, clearly shines through. People were tearing down barricades and fences to burn those as well, in an act of retaining their freedom of expression. This humanitarian spirit and longing for expression was gratifying to the observing teenager, who was additionally delighted by the universality of this sentiment: UCS schoolboys, uniformed soldiers, the people of Hampstead were united in this act, and there was a sense of unity among them in lighting the fires and cheerfully letting off fireworks. After this night, Tom concludes his letter in a very honest, but also typically British way, summing it up by writing “It was very merry”. (*Letters 8*)

The end of the war was one big change in Gunn’s life that happened almost simultaneously with another. Until the end of wartime, the boys had been taken care of by their cousin at their childhood home. It was clear this was a temporary arrangement, and when the older brother finished his basic schooling at UCS in summer of 1945 by attaining his school certificate, the house where the boys spent a large part of their childhood was sold. Gunn’s time there was history, and the history of the house would take some interesting turns afterwards, and have some interesting owners. The family was succeeded by the ballet dancer Tamara Karsavina, the poet and *Punch* editor Eduard George Knox and, in the eighties, perhaps most famously, by the musician Sting.

After the house was gone, Tom spent the summer with his aunts Mary and Catherine in Snodland, as well as with his aunt Barbara in Allhallows. For the rest of his schooling, he was moving between Hampstead during the term, where he lived with and was taken care of by Thérèse Megaw, who earned for herself the boy’s gratitude by being there for him, and his family in Kent, when he was not at school and during holidays. Ander, as the younger brother, was not yet self-sufficient enough to be passed around like that. He spent his time with his father and his new stepmother Olive in Chelsea in the meantime. After two years of this arrangement, Tom finally received his Higher School Certificate as he graduated from the school in Hampstead.

After Charlotte's death and the split with his brother, the importance of family bonds became painfully clear to Tom. The suicide was traumatic, but on the other hand it strengthened the connection between the brothers even more so than before. The helpful support of their cousin and her husband, as well as their aunts' help, shows a deep trust and reliance on family and their presence. The deep connection to Thérèse Megaw added to that safety net on another level. Although she was not related by blood, the friend of his late mother treated him like her own child. The meaning of family to Tom is developed here, defined as a group of people you feel supported by. Family as genetic relation surely is one thing, but connection, care, having a reliable support system and being able to trust meant more to him. He was lucky enough to find all that in his youth, and would value those bonds dearly, perhaps more than most other things in life. He would invest in these relationships regularly, also to express his gratitude towards the people who had shown him so much love.¹⁸ The values of closeness and connection, loyalty, trust and humanity left an imprint on the young man and strongly shaped the orientation of his moral compass.

After finishing school, the life path for Gunn can be seen as predestined in parts. He had to join the armed forces as part of his National Service. Although he attended rowing clubs during his time as a student, he was not the most athletic person and thus failed his physical at the Royal Navy. He now lived with his aunts and the Crammer family in London, before starting his national service in 1948. This marks an end to a turbulent teenage life, following a happy childhood abruptly shortened by his mother's suicide. Suddenly facing more responsibility in becoming an adult, somewhat skipping adolescence, he remembers himself being a melancholic teenager.¹⁹ Later in life, he does not trace this melancholy back to the fatal event on December 29th, 1944, but interprets this emotional cocktail as a rather normal development of puberty. During this time of bodily change, coming at the same time as grief and concurrent with the need to go on with his education, Gunn isolated himself from people a lot, choosing to read instead of interacting with his peers. His choice of literature was wide and potentially hard to grasp

¹⁸ He would visit Thérèse Megaw, his aunts and his brother every time he returns to England, after his migration to the United States. In between visits, he would write letters and postcard as well as making occasional phone calls.

¹⁹ "I was an adolescent by then. Everybody has an unhappy adolescence, don't they? All those chemical changes going on inside your body are so distressing and unexpected." Gunn and Campbell 17.

for other boys at his age. He relied on the power of literature as a part of life, a notion he learned from his mother, and thus something he could carry on in her spirit. At the same time, he starts writing and producing his own literature more frequently. He tried writing prose, short stories and poetry. Although he experimented with different forms of literature, not yet having settled for a path, he recalls the feeling of not being very good at writing, except in the field of poetry. Despite having developed the idea of poetry as his calling, he threw away most of the poems from that period for not liking them. In the end, luckily for future readers, there was something about his fascination for the form that stuck with him.

Chapter Two: Apprenticeship in Poetry

The next, inevitable, phase of William Guineach Gunn's life would begin on April 1st in the year 1948, when he had to start his National Service, stationed at the Wessex Brigade Depot in Wiltshire as a member of the Army's Royal Hampshire Regiment. It was indeed a very different thing for him to do, and he chafed against the rigidity. For the first time, he had to live apart from all his family and friends from Hampstead, and he would later recall this part of his life as drudgery, but filled with learning opportunities, although mostly as an inconvenient example. After having spent most of the time before that in his state of melancholy, this new step would be another test for Gunn's patience and capacity to turn things he did not particularly like into something useful to his needs and personal development. Most of all, it was a time of change for the intelligent and already well-read soon to be poet, during which he had to endure taking and following orders that neither made sense to him, nor were put upon him by people who compared to him in intelligence, education, or self-reflection.

His free, strong and educated mind was not per se the obstacle he had to face, rather it was the direction his mind was pointing. Especially the idea of socialism was close to Gunn's heart from early on, of course having been influenced massively by his mother Charlotte and the example she set quite convincingly. He was socialized in a socialist-minded environment and since he could think these thoughts had of course been nurtured. From early on, he learned that being different was more a necessity than a weakness. Charlotte certainly had direct arguments for her attitude, but she also visibly stood behind her beliefs, from subtle moves like wearing a hammer and sickle brooch at social occasions, to active arguments for her side of the story, surely a courageous thing to do in the 1930s and 40s – and much more than a fashion statement. These ideas got into her son's head, consciously and unconsciously, and inspired by the strength of his mother's character, he followed in her footsteps. At his friend Holgate's birthday party, for example, the guests were invited to decorate the cake. Gunn's contribution were little red flags, indicating socialism in a rather conservative society. He already seemed to enjoy the different reactions of those in his surroundings. Sharing his ideas induced shocked looks on the faces of his friend's elderly family members, and he savored the fact that he stood up for his beliefs and had an impact on people's worldviews. As socialism was not a welcome concept in the military, he had to quickly adapt his behavior to the new circumstances. He learned to stay calm and reserved, when the consequences

of speaking his mind would bear the risk of turning rather unpleasant for him. Being the intelligent observer and highly socially capable person he was, it was one of the easier tasks for him to accomplish. Refraining from talking, if necessary, especially since he knew it was only for a limited time, was manageable for him intellectually.

While speaking about socialism or using the term itself in a positive context was unpopular, Gunn was learning another lesson besides just staying calm and avoiding certain topics. He realized there was a difference between position and motivation in an argument. To form a consensus, it was important to focus on the common goals of the arguing parties, not their different positions. In the case of socialism and the military, the ideas of camaraderie and equality, at least within one's own rank, and sharing common goods are the common ground in the otherwise mostly opposed philosophies. Finding common ground was an easy task for Gunn, who already developed a talent to see the bigger picture and at times needed intellectual validation for his actions. He needed also not to be torn between the things he did and the things he believed in. The core idea of the military, accepting violence as a way of solving conflicts, however, was not so easy for him to incorporate. Throughout his life he was convinced that words can be the sharper and more effective weapons, if used wisely. From this challenging perspective, military service was a unique learning opportunity to determine what he would and would not follow or support in his life.

With the hierarchical structure of the military came another unavoidable feature: the uniform. The main function of it, which already lies in the term itself, is to strip the wearers of their individuality, and thus personality, equalizing them with their comrades visually and functionally. Knowing Gunn so far, it is a striking thing to imagine him wearing a soldier's uniform. Now his task was to figure out ways to re-interpret who he was and to stay true to his inner beliefs, while being uniformly similar to the young men around him, with a focus on the notions that thoughts and ideas always have a freedom that nothing can take away. Of course, uniforms were not a new concept for a man who attended school in the UK. One might argue that Gunn had to change schools so often, and with them probably the uniforms, that it hardly mattered. What was more important for his individual personal development though was of course his family, and again especially his mother. Despite social norms in times of war, he was raised very individualistically and turned out to be a radical pacifist. He was deeply convinced that weapons and violence would not bring peace to the world. When facing duty, having to enlist in the army, Gunn obeyed, accepting it as a part of his life as a citizen of the UK,

always willing to turn his experience into learning and building his own opinion. It is understandable and conceivable that if he found convincing arguments that made sense and felt right to him, he would be open to adjusting his concepts and outlook on life. When finding something worth considering, he was able and willing to change his mind and rearrange his views. Thus, Gunn was setting a good example in his own opinion, as he often rejected people who he found to be opinionated. The time in the British Army definitely shaped and deepened Gunn's attitude towards the ideas of individualism and pacifism, planted in his head as a child, when his mother had clearly superceded the view of the father, whose work ethics and life philosophy had been more inspired by the values of duty and hierarchy. Finding a way through these contradictory sentiments was also part of the young soldier's drudgery, spending his time trying not to get bored too much.

In the few letters he sent from the military camps to his beloved aunts, trying to keep up the connection to his family, he describes his daily routines and lets us follow the path of his evolving opinions. The life of a soldier seemed strange to Private William Gunn at Royal Hampshire: Reg., Corunna I Platoon X Training Coy., W. B T B. Kiwi Barrack, Bulford Camp Wiltshire. With his days full of laziness and boredom, hardly having the adequate input to stimulate his vivid and active mind, he concentrated on consuming and observing rather than producing and composing, unless of course someone had a silly task in store for him. Sleeping, reading and speaking being his main occupation, listening to Verdi's *Otello* and other operas was a welcome change for the 19-year-old. His interest in opera and theatre, both incorporating poetry and literature in a way, made a mark on the listener and sharpened his senses and feeling for words and rhythms.

His attention to detail contributed to his observational skills, and in combination with his well-educated, well read and sharp mind, supported his analytical skills. Just two months into his national service, Gunn had already adapted to his surroundings so well that he was aware of noticeable changes in the structures around him. Upon the arrival of a new corporal, who would sleep in their room, he observed a less official character around the man and read this unpretentiousness as a positive. The former Sergeant had been reduced in rank for not having been severe enough during parades, Gunn learned, and he was impressed by this character trait. It reminded him of the individualism he learned from his mother, and he saw that with enough courage it was possible to remain an individual even in the military that rewards uniformity and obedience. Thom Gunn admired the former Sergeant's courage while others might have found it a disgrace. He

was fascinated by the personality and strength of the man, who seemed to choose personal belief and humanity over uniform and rules, and preferred making his opinion clear to keeping his rank. This reflects a personality trait Gunn would always treasure and measure himself by: being willing to pay tribute to one's personality and own truth.

Of course, he would also observe more unlikeable characters, at least in his own view. He tells a story about a felony committed by a fellow soldier, who was awaited by the police in the camp. He was accused of having stolen the store man's watch. Gunn describes the man as an "objectionable person" (*Letters* 9). It is not merely the act of stealing, that leads Gunn to this conclusion, though. He also argues that the guy's limited use of vulgar vocabulary, mainly obscenities, was a bad character trait and thus it did not come as a surprise that a person like this would also steal. This rare but clear example of prejudice based on the way somebody articulates shows how much Gunn valued the proper use of words.

While in daily life, he had to fulfill minor tasks with little meaning, like carrying a piano across the camp, shoveling coal or mowing grass. During those boring but necessary duties, for Gunn, changes of scenery were the only available stimulation for his mind, apart from consuming taped theatre and opera productions, and the books he could find in a rather decent camp library at Buchanan Castle, Drymen, near Glasgow. He was moved there during his first months in the army. Most of his free time he spent at the library, reading *Kangaroo* by Lawrence or *Antony & Cleopatra*, or occasionally watching movies for a change. His sharp intellect was already able to judge and criticize books and their literary quality, as well as movies, in a short but precise way.²⁰

His eye for detail was not only useful for the literature he read, but also for quickly revealing faults in organization. Even shortly after arriving at camp, the observation would detect the hidden aspects of military arrangements. The most visible thing to Gunn was that he had to sleep in a provisional dorm room, which was installed in the so-called Ballroom of the camp. In addition to that, he deemed the fact that this room was close to a passageway the Sergeant Majors frequently roamed, in order to get to their quarters, a

²⁰ "I am reading 'Kangaroo' still, but don't like it very much. Lawrence is so absurdly serious. I am getting some time to read French, and I am rereading *Antony & Cleopatra* in a very glorious edition out of the library. I went to the film of *Nicolas Nickleby* in hall in the camp on Tuesday. I thought it rather a bad film, but I am not very fond of the book, which is anyway very unsuitable for filming. It was not improved by the facts that the projection was a little blurry and the loudspeaker only allowed you to hear about a third of the dialogue." Gunn (*Letters* 11)

risky circumstance for himself and his comrades, as the comrades were constantly observable through the windows by their superiors. He obviously found this exposed situation displeasing, as the power vested in the higher ranked officials seemed arbitrarily and sometimes unjustly used on the lower ranked staff like himself. Also, other and less obvious facts were not missed by Gunn's eye. He remarks on the missing pickup upon the arrival of his platoon at the new camp as a sign of bad organization, as well as the lack of food, which he does not really mind, though. Among a number of mismanaged features, he lists "grotesque shortages – of electric light bulbs (only 5 among 30 of us), chairs (2), wash basins (2), lavatories (2), basin plugs (0), of door handles (every N.C.O.3 carries a spare door handle about with him as an essential part of his equipment)." (*Letters* 10), and by this also giving an account of his precision. He writes in a very differentiated way and pays attention to detail, which is important for his perception of characterization and of a situation. Accurate and well-analyzed studies of situations, without the risk of sounding whiny about lack of supplies, will later develop into a trait of his later writings, even when switching genre from letter writing to poetry.

Another very important and evident character trait of Gunn's has been touched upon several times now but has not yet been mentioned explicitly. His capability to accept things as given and the will to see positive aspects of change were well developed in the young man. While his comrades would have preferred to stay at Bulford camp rather than be transferred to Glasgow, Gunn accepts the transfer as an unavoidable fact and embraces the changes it will bring, focusing on the improvements that come along with it. The library was one reason, the scenery and landscape another. The close proximity to the famous Loch Lomond and its surrounding mountains offered him the opportunity to hike and climb. The availability of this resource outweighed the benefits of staying at the old camp for the nature-loving soldier. In addition to the beauty of the new surroundings, the sheer change of place also inspired the underchallenged mind of Gunn more than stability and boredom could. To him, the upside of that change generally even outweighed the fact that the new officers were different, and seemed fiercer, and thus more demanding, to him. What might have intimidated the others was merely another challenge to Gunn, who by this time was hoping to be promoted to Sergeant, not to climb ranks and raise his chances for a military career, obviously, but rather to balance out the difference in rank and be more at eye level with other officers, giving him a little more air to breathe.

As no one can endure a constant tension between personality and outside reality, the military had a lucky turn in store for its intellectual member. In October 1948, Gunn

was transferred to the Royal Education Corps and was appointed Education Sergeant at the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers depot in Arborfield, Berkshire. Here he was given his first opportunity to teach, and although he might not have taught the brightest minds of his career, something about it fascinated Gunn and stuck with him. The new task was more stimulating for his mind than carrying pianos and made his stay a little easier and more comfortable and.²¹ Little did he know at the time the role teaching would play in the course of his life. But had he not been open-minded and flexible, he might not have come to the task of teaching at all. In this, even military that strongly opposed his pacifistic worldview brought him something good, an experience he would use later on.

Personally, Gunn reveals something else about his character in his letters to his aunts. Although he later claims he was clear about his sexual preferences very early in life, especially when he was attracted to men in uniforms, he tells them about how easy it was to flirt with girls during his time in the military. Of course, flirting covers a wide range of meanings and could be detected almost anywhere, depending on the standards of interpretation, but the circumstances in which Gunn mentions it are interesting and rather typical for the time. His strong personality and high level of self-reflection may lead to several conclusions. In the case of his sexuality he either still had doubts at this moment, maybe thinking that his attraction to men might only be a phase, like so many young gay men sometimes hope, or perhaps even towards his family he was still cautious to hide this part of his personality, as society was not ready to accept homosexuality as normal. Pretending to be normal, or heterosexual, is not unusual for young gay men, especially before and around 1950 in England, as in the rest of world.

In 1952, a story happened that Gunn could not have missed. Alan Turing, the man who figured out how to decode the German Enigma machine and one of the pioneers of computer sciences, was not allowed to be a hero. He was massively talented in the field of logic, and like Gunn was from a middle-class family, but he had one stigma: Just like Gunn, Turing was a homosexual man. Unlike Gunn, in the case of the war hero Turing, the authorities found out, and he was sentenced by a court to be chemically castrated. For Turing this was too much, and he died only two years after the court ruling, presumed by his friends and biographers to be a suicide. This is just one of many examples of how

²¹ “We marched around a lot, and eventually I was part of the education corps, so I was teaching soldiers how to read and write so that was kind of interesting... some of it. What it taught me was how to deal with stupid or ignorant people being in power over me.” Potts.

queer people were treated, and under which circumstances Gunn had to make decisions on how to live his life with respect to openness. (Pinson; BBC News)

Apart from the flirting, Gunn must have been impressed by the presence of women in the army as well. The women's branch of the British Army, the Auxiliary Territorial Service, ATS for short, which in those years was absorbed by the Women's Royal Army Corps (their most famous member from a few years ago, Princess Elizabeth, served as a truck mechanic), was on the rise to becoming an acknowledged part of the military organizations in the country. Flirting with those girls, despite not really being interested in women sexually, was just another form of building a human connection for Gunn. Flirting most definitely connects people in one way or another, and after all, Gunn's first novel was titled *The Flirt* too. However nice and interesting the girls in uniform might have been as a novelty, Gunn still favored the men in uniform, and they would remain one of his poetic motifs for a long time to come, transforming in shape and meaning. The ambiguity of all this seems to have been one of the more exciting parts of Gunn's time in the military.

Besides those opportunities for building connections, it was the opposite that Gunn disapproved of most about the military: those moments when the tasks needed dehumanizing elements to be accomplished. He later called this a process of brutalization.²² By this he meant the way in which the military trained its members the belief that killing that the enemy was logical in combat situations, as well as the skills to do so. Instead of educating people intellectually, the goal of this brutalization was to train the more primitive reflexes. One had to gradually influence young human beings to believe the opponent was only an enemy force rather than another human being, trained in a similar way to oneself, an appalling degree of dehumanization for a pacifist like Gunn. It was highly contradictory to his values of humanitarianism and intellectual evaluation. At gunpoint, there is not much time to discuss the pros and cons of actions or to mediate between two parties; negotiation is outright impossible. On the battlefield, it is kill or be killed, eat or be eaten; in a way this is the dehumanization of people, reducing their actions to animal instincts. When desensitized like that, soldiers also have an easier time obeying their leaders' orders without asking questions. And asking questions about life and meaning was already burnt into Gunn's mind.

²² "Think back on the army - you were slightly brutalised there, even if only for a time - weren't you? And I think there is ultimately rather little difference, in war, between the attitude a soldier has toward killing ... and that he has toward atrocity." Gunn (*Letters* 131).

Of course, writing poetry was also one of the ways he spent his time during service. As with his early teenage poetry, the lack of creativity, freedom, and stimulation for Gunn's mind would have an impact on the writing he produced at this time. Later in life Gunn claims to have destroyed all of the works written afterwards, judging the pieces to have been no good, which was probably true, but impossible to know now. What can be said, though, is that writing was a way of channeling his creative energy, even in the military environment which did not provide him with an appreciable stimulus, despite the general confinement of thought and action he must have felt during that time. He simply could not get into the mood to write good poetry that was dense, and a mirror of life, while he was still in the company of people who ultimately followed a life-negating philosophy. Still, his experience remained, the widened perspective on the world that was so much more than black or white, filling his perception of the world with ideas and images which would sooner or later find their way into better poetry that actually meant something to him.²³

On January 23rd, 1950, Gunn's patience finally paid off, when he was officially demobilized from his military service and was able to leave this experience behind. Taking with him memories both good and bad, a various and vast amount of new impressions, Gunn was happy to leave, anticipating more pleasant experiences ahead of him. Contemplating the meaning of this phase of his life would certainly take a while, and later in life he reflected about the military as follows: "The army, surprisingly, had been of some help, by forcing me into what were for me extreme situations with which it was necessary to cope for the sake of survival." (*OP* 173)

Only a few months later, Gunn finally closed this chapter of his life for good. Already settled at university and enjoying the intellectualism of his surroundings, he wrote a letter to his father. The letter starts with an innocent account of what was going on around him. He talks then about socialism and the Cocteau movie *A Poet's Blood*, which depicted a character that the son was sure his father would not like too much, only to continue with the core topic of the letter. Writing in his dorm, the young man announces a decision he made concerning his status as a civilian in the United Kingdom. Feeling the urge to prepare his father for what was about to happen, the younger Gunn informed Herbert Gunn about wanting to become a conscientious objector. He involved his father at an age where he was legally old enough to make his own decision. But let us also be

²³ "He said he destroyed the poems written during his two years in the British Army as not good." Forester.

clear about one thing: the letter did not serve the purpose of asking the older Gunn for permission to do what he intended, making it an even more interesting object from which to learn about Thom Gunn's character. Did he want post-decision comfort and support from his father? Did he merely want to inform his parent about his plans in case there were legal consequences to his actions? Whatever his main reason was, the outlined arguments for his decision show a lot about the diligence of the man who wrote them. In the first argument, cowardice is the central topic. It was important for the young Gunn to make clear that the decision was not motivated by cowardice or dislike of discipline, but the moral compass of his feelings towards violence that told him that the army was the wrong place for him. He is pointing out that acting on one's beliefs is important, because according to him, they do not have value if you are not ready to stand up for them. Doing what is easiest, instead of what you believe is worth doing, is the real cowardice, he argues, and certainly not his cup of tea. Already, the ideas of existentialism that would become central to Gunn in the years to come were present here in a natural way.

The next part of the letter unfolds the full power of the other arguments Gunn collected. He wants to point how serious he is, putting his strongest argument at the end:

I would like to emphasize, then, that (1) it is for moral reasons that I take this step (though of course I would disagree – who wouldn't? – politically with a war with against Russia), (2) I think it is usually only by individual action that one man can bring about any good, (3) I do not believe a bad means can ever bring about anything but a bad end, (4) this is not just an impetuous action on the spur of the moment – I shall not change my mind, and I have been thinking about it for a long time, (5) it is inconsistent with my already having done national service, but I feel no obligation to stand by something done at the age of 18, when I had not thought on the subject with any thoroughness. (*Letters* 12–13)

As if the letter was not convincing enough already, and as if to further save his father from the struggle of trying to convince his son otherwise, the last part adds a psychological argument. He continues that he had prepared a longer letter and due to its pompousness decided not to send it, as he was aware that Bert was certainly reasonable enough to understand – and thus accept – this short version, which was probably a very smart move, showing the persuasiveness and cunning of the young man.

Finally, to show how deeply the decision was thought through on many levels, Gunn points out his awareness of possible legal consequences. In the early 1950s, such an act was considered a radical thing to do, with a clear expectation of discomfort facing the conscientious objector, including the possibility of imprisonment. The young Gunn is ready to present his case and arguments convincingly in court, making it very clear that he must object not for reasons of convenience, but for reasons of morality and being true

to himself. He is not trying to run away, but rather making a statement. His firm belief is so far progressed, that by the time of writing the letter to his father, he had already got in touch with the right people and organizations to support his wish, making it impossible for the father to have a chance of stopping his self-sustained son. Why would he want to, anyway? Herbert Gunn knew his ex-wife Charlotte and her stubborn mind, and the straightforwardness of his son surely reminded him of her, making it a better decision, if he would try to work against his sons will. To soothe and calm down his father for only letting him in on the process at such a late stage, he told Herbert Gunn that he is indeed the first person outside of the university to be informed, making it clear how important his father is to him, and simultaneously, that his new intellectual surroundings had a part in the decision-making process. Leaving his father with all the information, and a friendly remark on his work at *You* magazine, he closes the letter with the offer to ask any question that might refer to unclear points, but also underlines how useless it would be to try to convince his son otherwise. After his claim being officially approved, Gunn was finally completely free to move on with his career in the intellectual field, leaving the drudgery of the military behind.

After being freshly freed from the duty of military service, and released from its drudgery, Cambridge lay ahead of Gunn, and his vision of university came with many expectations. He was soon to attend Trinity College to read English at the prestigious university in the east of England. His acceptance to the school and his path there were not without complications, though, as he said, “I wasn’t bright enough to get a college scholarship and my father wasn’t poor enough for me to apply for a state scholarship.” (*OP* 157) This is how he describes his starting point, and he does it rather poetically and honestly. It is also true that his father was trying to save his money, and almost ended up being the financial obstacle in the way of his oldest son fulfilling his dream, by insisting he did not have that kind of money to pay for higher education.²⁴

Also because of the scarcity of money, the young man had developed an early talent of making the most of his time, even without much of financial support. Instead of waiting for the start of the semester at Cambridge, he filled the gap between his military

²⁴ As early as 1945, Thom Gunn contemplates “Father just came today. He said he might not be able to send me to a university because he wouldn’t be able to afford it. I think this is nonsense, but he seems weak on the subject, and liable to have his mind changed quite easily. If he needs any argument, I could tell him that Hilde once promised to pay for me, but I don’t think it will come to that.” (*Letters* 4).

service and university with a job as a translator at the *Paris Metro*, organized by a friend of his father, thus showing strength of will and his capability to be self-sustained. While earning some money, he freshened up his French skills along the way. After finishing the job, the now talented-in-language Gunn went on a road trip through France. It was his first journey in quite a while, and he did not travel alone. A friend and former comrade from the army joined him for the hitchhiking tour. As travels do, this trip brought a much-needed distance from everything he called home, and further opened his already very observant and sensitive mind, by exposing Gunn to new impressions and experiences.

Gunn possessed an immense strength of his own free will, and after his release from the military, he finally started to unfold it, bit by bit. Being immensely self-reflective at the age of twenty he already knew much about what he wanted from life and took actions to pursue those goals. Although, naturally, there was a strain of doubt here and there, he was willing to allow himself to think freely, retaining his mental freedom and being able to continue following his ideas. Even though he would go on doubting whether he was going to be any good as a poet, he knew he wanted to write, to use language to express himself, but at the same time he knew that he had to find his own tone in words and rhythm. He seemed to instinctively know that what Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet, was as true for him as well; the quote could have been the motto of Gunn's life in the years to follow, "This above all: to thine own self be true"²⁵ (Shakespeare 203).

Gunn's truth was partly defined by his freedom of thought, using his intellect and acting on what seemed morally and behaviorally right for him. Instead of allowing his time in the Army to contradict his goals, he incorporated his experiences in his concept of life, not ignoring it, even being able to focus on its benefits for his development. Being able to remain flexible in mind even when external circumstances were making it difficult was one of his great talents, and kept him resilient. By managing to carry out orders from superiors who he had better not question seemed to become an easy task, while focusing on the bigger goals in his life. In that sense, this experience of discipline might well have been one of the biggest contributions to the development of Gunn's self-esteem and his belief that he was capable of directing his life by making decisions and actually accomplishing his goals. Staying true to himself, while also protecting himself by adapting his behavior to a certain extent, was a lesson that made it easy for him to imagine that nothing could force him to give up who he actually was. It also taught him that in

²⁵ Although this quote is from Polonius, Gunn would most likely agree, there's still a truth to eat, although spoken by a fatuous person

society it is sometimes the wiser choice to play along with the rules and not disclose oneself to the full extent. As long as it does not break you, you will emerge stronger than before, like a phoenix from the ashes.

Recognizing this, and supported by his newly found strength, there was another decision to be made. To free himself from a specific burden from the past, to let go of certain understandings of loyalty, Gunn once again remembered his mother. She would in certain phases of her life adapt the versions of her first name. Ann Charlotte went by the short version Charlotte, and as a child, she was called Nancy.²⁶ Gunn was quickly called Tom, and his brother was abbreviated to Ander. The tradition of adapting names seemed to have something to do with their character.²⁷ Although he says he was not aware of the importance when doing it, out of a nostalgic notion towards his memory of Charlotte, Gunn changed his name by deed poll. At the age of 21, William Guinneach Gunn, called Tom since childhood, swapped his father's Gaelic name for his mother's maiden name and, stressing the importance of this part, putting it ahead of his own first name. From this time on, he was named Thomson William Gunn,²⁸ or in short, Thom Gunn. By eclipsing his given name William, he cut ties in a way. The act of the name change can in retrospect be seen as the birth of the poet Thom Gunn, who was yet to emerge. As an early act of taking conscious action and control over his own life, this was only one of many more examples to follow.

Upon his arrival at Cambridge, Gunn's life took a massive turn. Everything changed for him. It was the opposite of what he experienced during the past two years in the army. All his hopes and dreams about his future were manifested in the image he had of Cambridge, which in an early poem he expressed with the wistful words, addressed to the personified university, "Shall I ever rest on your learned lawns?" (*OP* 157). This line bears all his expectations towards the prestigious institution, and how highly he values education and intellectual exchange. Although the road to Cambridge for Gunn was

²⁶ *The Flirt* from 1978 in the archives of Gunn.

²⁷ "I don't like the self I was in England very much ... if I changed myself when I went to university, then I changed myself again when I came here ... And sometimes we change our names when we do it, I was very interested to learn that my mother, who was born Ann Charlotte Thomson, was known as Nancy all through her childhood." Gunn and Campbell 52.

²⁸ More than two decades later, he wrote in his diary "T Sep 18: to get new passport. DEED POLL application no longer necessary: woman said, we might as well simply accept that TWG is your name when the birth certificate is not called for." (*Diary 1974-1986* 63).

rocky, partly due to his father's financial restraints, in the end, the bright minded poet succeeded in getting his wish granted. He was a fighter, and he succeeded, also co-financing his own higher education, eager to reach his goal, which was Cambridge.

His image of Cambridge was as clear as his expectations were high. Gunn saw in Cambridge an almost redeeming entity, offering him a new kind of freedom, a place where he could unfold all of his intelligence. He expected Cambridge to be "an escape from the drudgery of the army into the bright and tranquil life of the mind," (*OP* 157) and this was what he was aiming at.²⁹ Right from the beginning, this almost mystical place seemed to fulfil its purpose for the freshman, as Gunn recapitulates "Suddenly everything started to feed my imagination. Writing poetry became the act of an existentialist conqueror, excited and aggressive" (*OP* 173).

To better grasp what he saw in Cambridge, especially at Trinity College, one needs only to look in the chapter "Autobiography" from his 1982 book *The Occasions of Poetry*. The mere length of the part about Cambridge, which is embedded in the autobiographical text covering everything from his childhood up to his life shortly before *The Occasions of Poetry* was published, takes up about a third of the space, while only covering a timespan of three years of his life. Gunn believed in the reputation and the classical image of the scholarly setting that was awaiting him, and he was eager to bring with him whatever was expected from him to succeed. He was also partly influenced by his father's work ethic, fully aware of society's view of Cambridge graduates and the opportunities they had; thus, in his first year, he wanted to use his advantage and aspired to climb ranks socially. He dove deep into the spirit of Trinity College and was willing to adapt his behavior and appearance. His explicit and rigid expectations were met from early on, right from the start. In his autobiographical text he talks about his introduction to the world of Cambridge. Having tea with fellow freshmen and the Master of the college, G. M. Trevelyan, who was focusing and emphasizing the tradition of the place by talking about architecture and the history of the buildings surrounding them. Although the Elizabethan Ceilings at Trinity did not leave the student unimpressed as well as being told stories about former headmasters, Gunn did fully realize that it was not necessarily the buildings that made up the core and heart of the campus, nor was it merely the thoughts emerging from the place. He had the almost poetic idea that Cambridge represented an

²⁹ "It was tremendously important to me. It was an escape into my life. It was then that I started to spell my first name with 'h'." Gunn and Campbell 20.

entity emerging from the thoughts and ideas of the students in attendance, conducted and led by their teachers, as well as the grandiosity of the buildings, being the constant reminder of the tradition and history of learning at this place. When all those factors merged together, something meaningful was created, that had the chance of adding up to something more than the sum of its parts. To achieve this unity, entity or oneness, every element had to play its part. And his part was to become the best version of himself. By the time of his first semester, to him that also meant blending in. His idea of adapting to the expectations about tradition also necessitated a change of style. He later recalls how he thought smoking a pipe and wearing tweed jackets was one way of accomplishing this adaptation. And writing poetry about old men and brown leaves in autumn, a very romanticist (but in the end rather powerless) path he chose and pursued.

As Gunn did what he interpreted to be his part, Cambridge provided its students with everything they needed. The accumulation of knowledge was the primary goal and for that, the students were granted certain privileges, which he was aware of and thankful for. Apart from the luxuries and services that came with staying in the dorms of Trinity College, including fresh water and amenities brought to you by staff, access to knowledge was granted to those who asked for it. Of course, Gunn and his fellow students did not always commit to the seriousness of their pursuit, when they studied. Sometimes, they also merely tested the range of their power, for example when they wanted to take a look at some very old books with very restricted access. Being granted access though, lowered boundaries and kindled the impression that nothing would be impossible for students in this place.

Gunn not only knew that he was strongly influenced by writers who came before him, he was also very clear about who his influences were, both in literature and education, as well as in life in general. Having a typical intellectual approach to life, he reflected on those things accurately. In addition to reflecting on his influences, he also reflected on his observational skills. Being incredibly accurate at observing, he preferred to stay in the background of situations, in order not to lose sight of the whole picture or blur his vision through participating. As a result, details did not easily pass him by, as he carefully observed the people around him and how they interacted with each other and the setting. The tension between taking part and observing as well as the contradiction between seeking a freedom of mind while dressing a certain way and writing adjusted poetry, were characteristic for his early time studying, a circumstance to which his approach would develop by the time he graduated. His talent to reassess his views and

behavior spoke to his advantage. Nothing is permanent, although the mind seems to long for this. Soon, Gunn would be ready to let go of hindering thoughts and ideas, and to replace them with more helpful and productive methods.

One of Gunn's earliest influences and teachers was of course his mother, who taught him to read, passed on her own views on the importance of literature, and recommended the first authors to him. It was she who gave him the idea to stay open to and interested in new influences along the way, encouraging him to explore rather than to blindly follow. After her direct advice on who to read, and required readings at school, he started following his own instincts. He picked up Keats' poetry, not only in school, but also due to the proximity of the Keats House to his own home at Frognal. His thirst for new angles from which to see the world was triggered and not easily satisfied.

Cambridge was now the perfect source to elaborate on new writings and perfect his learned skills. His preparation as a young man meant that he almost did not have to read any book from the given lists at university, because he was already familiar with them. He still used the opportunity to find new writers to read and discover. Alongside his newly made friends and university teachers, there were many who shaped and defined his time at Cambridge and had an impact on his thoughts and views. John Donne and William Shakespeare kindled and fired up his imagination, as well as his lust for writing, and deepened his understanding of his former literary heroes John Keats, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Lovell Beddoes and George Meredith. Geoffrey Chaucer and W. H. Auden then added even more to his knowledge of poetry, while Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus influenced his ways of thinking at university. For his growing interest in the philosophy of existentialism, the ideas Gunn learned from Stendhal would soon have a heavy impact on the student's life. His open mind was not yet fully in fruit in his first months of Cambridge, but Gunn's tendency towards the new, the non-conformist thoughts, and sometimes the shocking, was already predisposed in his mind. For the fruits to fully ripen, Gunn had yet to find the right angle at Cambridge, which was still the conservative place he imagined it to be. But for now, he followed the rules, learned the classics and went the predefined ways.

Apart from writing the conscientious objector's letter to his father and proceeding with his will in that regard, Gunn wrote lots of poems. He also published one of the more individual ones in *Cambridge Today*, the university paper. The effect of the publication of "Poem" was tremendous on Gunn, when he arrived back for his second year at Trinity College. He began the new term in the knowledge that his first published poem as an adult

had already had a positive impact, which in return further encouraged him on his path of writing and publishing. The piece was later renamed “The Soldier”, which inevitably hinted at the influence the military and uniforms had on Gunn’s early work.³⁰ The impact and reaction were in fact so inspiring for Gunn that he followed the impulses of the rather progressive language in the piece. He got rid of his earlier poems, written in the conservative spirit he saw in Cambridge, progressively leaving behind the subject matter of old men and autumn leaves, as well as the pipe and the tweed jacket.

Before resuming his second year, there were holidays to enjoy. Again, working and travelling were on Gunn’s to-do list. After the influence of the first year, freeing him from many restraints already, he was eagerly in the process of forming his identity. So, after one year of being Thom Gunn, the young poet went on another hitchhiking trip through France with his old friend Myers. The purpose was similar to the trip one year earlier, but the situation had changed massively, this time being even more able to enjoy the adventure and experience freedom, which added to its meaning. In a postcard to his great-aunt Alice Collings, the young traveler expresses how well life is treating him on this trip: “Getting very good lifts – today went 100km in an army lorry – some soldiers on their way to fetch a broken-down lorry. They insisted that I shared lunch with them & gave me piles of meat & wouldn’t let me pay!!” (*Letters* 14) The feeling of freedom and experiencing the generosity of strangers, let alone soldiers, must have left a positive impression on him. This security of not getting lost in the remoteness of a foreign country, so long as there were people who show their humanity, sounded like proof that fearing the unknown is only a concept of one’s mind, which is easily eradicated by getting to know the strangers. If you trust enough that life will take care of you, it is easier to see solutions instead of problems. Travelling in this spirit and with this mindset built from the things he saw, Gunn experienced something very impactful on his life, which he later describes as follows “I experienced a revelation of physical and spiritual freedom that I still refer to in my thoughts as the Revelation. It was like the elimination of some enormous but undefined problem that had been across my way and prevented me from moving forward.” (*OP* 159) On the same trip, he read the complete works of Shakespeare, according to the recommendation of his supervisor at Cambridge, as a lesson about life. Reading all of Shakespeare at once shows his determination and hunger for knowledge, which was hardly satisfied.

³⁰ In *The Occasions of Poetry*, he gives detailed information on how by now his poetry was inspired. Gunn (*OP* 159).

One can almost see how Gunn understood that fear is a bad teacher, and that acceptance and wisdom are the way to always find a way around obstacles, letting go being the answer to most of the blockades in life, which come ultimately from one's own mind. The ideological freedom he gained from his epiphany in France nurtured and directed his energies and helped him to suddenly feel enabled to write about anything he wanted. How immense this relieving idea was, became clear when he writes more about the direct effects the Revelation had on him "I suddenly found I had the energy for almost anything. And wherever I was, working in a farm camp, hitch-hiking through France, and later studying books at my aunt's in Kent, I pushed myself through an apprenticeship in poetry." (*OP* 159) It was a truly liberating experience, which along the way helped Gunn to find sources and subjects for poetry almost everywhere he looked and at the same time also activating the energy and the courage to write about the things he actually deems important and real. It gave him the motivation to practice his skills steadily, writing approximately one poem per week for the period of one and a half years after returning to Cambridge.³¹

Returning for his second year, many things had changed for Gunn, and his life got busier. For one, the effect of his published poem raised visibility among other Cambridge poets and increased interest in his work. This also paid into a skill Gunn gained from moving around a lot during his childhood, the talent to build up new relationships, one which he shared with his father, by opening up to new people. Although being rather controlled considering emotional outbreaks of any kind, Gunn connected quickly and well to people around him. It proved particularly useful in the army, and now at

³¹ To show how complex Gunn's self-reflection was, a longer excerpt from his letters on his influences "I read two books that separately and cumulatively made a tremendous effect on me. My reaction to them was of release! They were Stendhal's *Charterhouse*, and *King Lear*. I can't attempt to describe exactly their effect or why they meant so much to me, after 44 years, but I think it had something to do with the idea that one could contain romantic incident (dream, adventure, excitement of childhood game in adult life) in one's experience so long as it was sharp-edged, defined, and (in what I was to know later as FRL's term) "realized" – through language and tone. Think of the trumpets in *Lear*, think of Fabrice hiding out in caves from his wicked elder brother – the stuff of fairy-tale and of pirate story. But of course, there is also the hilarious account of Waterloo – I've just been reading it again – where Fabrice is almost like Chaplin, a lucky fool, constantly saved by his sheer unawareness of the dangers surrounding him. In any case, whether I describe it rightly or wrongly, these two works together gave me an extraordinary sense of possibilities." (*Letters* 553–54)

Cambridge, to be capable of being emotionally controlled and to have an instinct for people. The wide range of characters of the people who would become friendly with him laid the foundation for his range of register in his later poetry as well, as many of his pieces were about or written for people in Gunn's closer circle of friends.

At university, he of course valued the connection to the poets that surrounded him. Among these were Norman Buller, Harold Silver, John Coleman and John Mander. Building around their common ground of poetry, they joined each other to discuss ideas. Exchange was an experience that helped Gunn to further widen his views, making him believe more and more that many things were possible, so long as they could be conceived. The liberating effect of the Revelation also contributed greatly to Gunn's success in networking. From early on in his career, he seems to have kept his private and professional networks rather separate, with a few exceptions. As a private individual studying at Cambridge, he soon met a fellow reader of English, the Scot Karl Miller, whom Gunn quickly found abrasive and charming. They soon developed a close and trusting friendship, when they met during Miller's first year at Cambridge, where he visited Downing to study.

Gunn was intrigued by Miller's lack of preconceived ideas about Cambridge, which made him so different from Gunn himself, and helped the latter to adjust the angle of his approach, fired up by the freedom of mind gained since the Revelation. Miller, who would become an acknowledged and renowned critic later, was inspiration, sparring partner and good friend to Thom. Together, they visited FR Leavis' lectures³² and Miller was among those close friends of Gunn who were asked to help re-evaluate and discuss new poems before he would consider them finished. Miller would be handed drafts, hang them above his desk for some weeks and when they settled in his mind, he would return them with corrections which were useful for the poet. The two men also shared deeply personal information. It is very likely that Miller was among the first people Gunn trusted enough to open up to about his attraction towards men. This trust was one of the engines that drove their reciprocal influence on each other and thus their mutual education, even though Miller was not happy about his friend's sexuality and felt uncomfortable about it at times.³³ By commenting on Gunn's writings, Miller would not only help Gunn, but would also at the same time improve his own skills as a critic. Miller's strong mind was

³² *Critical Revolutionaries* by Eagleton.

³³ "P.P.S. You must not worry about what J. Coleman said of percentages of homosexuality in your character - no one who knew you could seriously think so." Gunn (*Letters* 18).

something Gunn also took lessons from, and he slowly changed from adhering to other people's enthusiasm for things, to increasingly arguing for his own point of view, challenging the world with his own ideas and new way of writing.

Gunn's professional influence was mostly personified in FR Leavis. He was a controversial character and teacher. One thing everyone can easily agree on was that his outstanding position on new criticism was unique in its time. For the young, curious Gunn, who chose FR Leavis for many of his lessons in his second year, the teacher was quite impressive. Despite their age gap, Leavis' view on literature not as something describing life but something that is alive, was similar to the approach to literature which Gunn had inherited from his mother. Leavis' level of passion for the written word was inspiring for his student. Poetry was enshrined as the highest mode of truth in writing for the teacher, who built his own views on literature "because of its bearing upon experience." (Gunn, *OP* 160) His holistic approach of completeness as a starting point for writing and critically reading poetry also impressed Gunn. It was also Leavis' idea, that literature was supposed to promote a set of values as a means to positively influence a humanistic culture. Generally pleased with these ideas, Gunn's fame as a poet was growing during his second year of studying. His individualism was inspired by Leavis' interpretation of criticism, which was not built on the general pre-existing opinion, and thus opposed the rather technical ideas predominantly present in doctrine. It surely resonated with the aspiring poet. Gunn wrote about Leavis that "his discriminations and enthusiasms helped teach me to write, better than any creative-writing class could have." (*OP* 160) Through Leavis, it became visible for Gunn that opposition to traditional worldviews was possible even at Cambridge, and it in fact opened up the world instead of closing it or bringing chaos into it. The idea was planted in Gunn's brain and the seed was soon to grow and bloom.

In his lectures, Gunn learned about approaches to interpreting poetry – at the same time he realized the risk that lay within the student-teacher relationship: By being invested in one particular worldview, he might risk becoming a disciple, and he definitely wanted to avoid being indoctrinated by the teachings of Leavis. Already having developed a strong personality, the powerful impact of his own values in his life as a poet began to show. Gunn's down-to-earth-ness partly derives from this example, and he supports this trait by maintaining contact with those in his inner circle. He never acted in a superior way, rather he always asked for help and counselling, which contributed to his personal growth. He did not reject the opinion of fellow students and teachers even though, or

maybe just because, they sometimes opposed the official views taught at Cambridge. This itself can already be interpreted as a revolutionary character trait.

Cambridge indeed changed Gunn in many ways. As an institution, it not only fulfilled its purpose in providing him with the means and tools to determine his own voice in writing poetry and criticism, but it also helped him to define and develop himself as a man, in accordance with what he supported, and in opposition to what he disliked. Gunn started off with his preconceived image of Cambridge, trying to blend in and adapt by changing his own appearance and self-image. His approach at the beginning of his studies was to reinvent himself in order to become a graduate in the great tradition of Cambridge. Reading Gunn today makes it clear; this approach did not stick, and abandoning the pipe and tweed jacket was a good decision, as he now adopted his own style and wove his own truth in his poetry. As he progressed in his learning about literature and writing, he also progressed in accepting himself as the person he really was. In the end, he did not want to be a social climber,³⁴ did not want to try and fit in by wearing clothes that only were a façade, did not want to mingle in conservative society. Cambridge was vitally important in his formation as a poet. The publication of “Poem”, and the positive feedback of its success, were part of his decision to pursue poetry as his profession. He had a strong opinion, but he was never caught so deeply in his own arguments that he was incapable of changing them if new arguments, feelings, or different ideas demanded it.

Towards the end of his second year at Cambridge, another Downing College student crossed Gunn’s path and would quickly become a constant source of inspiration and friendly love in the poet’s life for the next decades. Gunn and Tony White, a tall, attractive bourgeois man grew close instantly, partly due to their common philosophical views, and partly because the poet was sexually attracted to White and his looks. White was an actor at Cambridge’s own Amateur Drama Club, ADC for short, which was a good place for starting an acting career for those who had talent. Back then and later it was the birthplace for the careers of people like Tilda Swinton, Emma Thompson, Ian McKellen, Stephen Fry and many of the cast of Monty Python.³⁵ White was also talented and played a wide variety of roles there, e.g., Cyrano de Bergerac, as a “romantic-existentialist” (Gunn, *Letters* 696) as well as many others. The theatre enthusiast Gunn

³⁴ About his beginnings at Cambridge, Gunn writes “The truth was, I had the desire to be a social climber, but not the talent. I couldn't even find the bottom rung of the ladder, if there was one.” (“Thom Gunn” 137)

About his third year he wrote “I no longer wanted to be a social climber” (*OP* 161).

³⁵ See ADC Theatre.

was close to the ADC and due to his friend Tony White would even sometimes take over small parts. The ADC would become one of those venues that played a vital role for Gunn. The number of points of influence of White on Gunn is so large, they would be impossible to cover. A few central aspects will need to be mentioned here. From sexual allusiveness and openness to talk, despite the lack of mutual interest in the beginning³⁶, they progressed to a deep inimitable friendship that was built on mutual trust, which was probably only possible due to the honesty between the two men and their fascination for each other's intellect. As much as both men enjoyed the pleasures of the body, they also enjoyed philosophy and discussing literature together. Their similar views on existentialist ideas and their own inner values brought them close together. Like-minded people that they were, White also easily served as a vivid source for Gunn's poetry, as subject matter equally well as in criticism and inspiration. It was a friendship that almost did not need words to convey understanding. This was a perfect foundation for talking about poetry, where so much of the conveyed meaning happens in between the lines. White was one of the select few people whose opinion on his poetry Gunn valued and found useful. His interest in literature motivated the encouragement he provided to Gunn, giving him ideas and asking the right questions to help form the final versions of many poems.

White and Gunn shared an extraordinary number of ideas and worked with them, acting on their thoughts. They blended their readings and made up their own mixed philosophy, that borrowed ideas from Stendhal, Shakespeare, Rostand and Camus, which they called *panache*, a term they also borrowed from *Cyrano*. Bound by the same philosophy based on existential ideas, as well as their shared sense of being engaged in the search, and their common love for literature and its heroes, it only made sense they grew so close, even sharing their values.³⁷

Looking at Gunn's development in less private and more professional terms, Cambridge had been the foundation of more motivations for Gunn, too. His teachers, especially Leavis, were one aspect. But during the course of his studies, Gunn also got in touch with people within his own age range who were to remain close professional friends

³⁶ To Miller, he writes: "Somehow, without anticipating it, I have found myself thinking about him for days on end. Perhaps there wd be a chance to sleep with him in Paris. Perhaps, but one mustn't set too much store on such a thing coming to pass." (*Letters* 22).

³⁷ The values are noted in a message to Tony White, which reads: "All my best wishes for *panache*, *logique*, *espagnolisme*, *l'imprévu*, *singularité* and *MAGNANIMITY* in the New Year from one *Étranger* to another" (*OP* 163).

and mentors in the years to come. This is not to say that he kept a rigid emotional distance from them, only that they were seemingly a part of a different circle in which Gunn navigated. What will be emphasized here is the professional side of these relationships, which almost without exception had a friendly character; Gunn always made his connections as a sociable, honest person. With John Holmstrom and later Donald Hall in the early 50s, he also took a step forward in a part of society that was important for his progress as a poet, both technically and from the point of view of future publication. Being introduced to new circles of people at parties and talking about his work served as a publicity tool of a certain kind and Gunn was talented at interesting people in what he was doing. Also, his personal participation in the publication of the Cambridge paper would later serve to his advantage.

John Holmstrom, who started to study somewhat earlier than Gunn, was to become a key figure on several levels in Gunn's life. Upon the two men's meeting, Holmstrom was the president of the Marlowe Society at Cambridge. They were introduced to each other by Tony White. Holmstrom was influential in Gunn's publication career from early on, by offering him the possibilities of readings at the BBC and pushing him to go public with his work professionally. But also, in the capacity of a personal friend, he played an important role: He was gay, too, and Gunn trusted him enough to confide in him. As important as it was to be careful about talking openly about one's homosexual preferences in 1950s British society, it was also essential to one's mental health to have someone to talk to as a young gay man. Holmstrom covered those two needs for Gunn perfectly, and together they got the poet's career running, based also on their mutual confidence about their shared secrets.

Having set up his circle of friends, White and Miller were at the core of it, closest to Gunn. Miller, having had a little head start, was a robust pillar to lean on for the first two years at Trinity College. The two men had a lot in common and shared a deep interest in literature, and questioned how words can change life and the meaning of it, and maybe even change the world. However, there was one interest they did not share, much to the displeasure and maybe even disgust of Miller. Sexual interest was a big difference between the two men. Gunn was open to his peer about his own preference for men but still in a state of mind to try to be open about the issue, at least theoretically. Miller on the other hand had a clear vision of how the standard orientation should look, and so imposed a very typical homophobic idea on his friend, that maybe once he tried the sexual merits of women, he might like it. Of course, this is about as likely as a heterosexual man

being persuaded to be gay by sleeping with a man, but this parallel was out of the question according to conventional thinking. Twenty-two-year-old Gunn, who besides fooling around at boarding school and masturbating did not have physical experience either with girls or with boys, saw this suggestion as an opportunity rather than an attack on his identity. During his holiday job, picking fruits at Priority Farm Camp at West Walton, Wisbech for summer break, Gunn found himself surrounded by girls and thus in the perfect circumstances to follow through with his friend's idea. As discussed with Miller, Gunn did not hesitate to write to his friend about the way things went, immediately. The explorer describes how easy it seemed to flirt with the girls. After all, he was an attractive young man, by most standards, as well as intelligent and well read, and he knew how to be courteous, which is always appreciated. After just two nights at the farm camp, he already found himself in a situation with a girl called Ann. There was kissing involved, which was prolonged,³⁸ and which made the whole scene inescapable for the poet. Ann became his summer flirt and Gunn was still willing to follow through with the experiment, being sure to not miss opportunities after the lights were switched off regularly at 11 pm. Though Ann was playing hard to get, using her Catholic faith as an excuse to not go further than kissing, Gunn was convinced that he could persuade her to do more, if only he wanted to. However, he himself did not want to go further. His deep self-reflection and moral standards were developed further than many other twenty-two-year-old men. He knew that the mere fact of knowing that he could convince Ann to sleep with him gave him a sense of confirmation, satisfying his curiosity in a way, but also that he did not want more. He did not feel any passion, so he decided immediately not to pursue the experiment any further, letting the casualness with which he led the summer fling so far be his own justification for what happened between the two up to this point. Not playing a role to get what he wanted, to be real without disguise, was already important to Gunn at this age and it would settle as one of his main character traits. Carrying on with Ann would have meant distorting the image of who he wanted to be, by not listening to his inner voice. His judgement in the end was that he "would not have been adequate to deal with her afterwards. And it did not seem worth the interest of the experiment if it were to be so joyless." (*Letters* 17)

Seeing a conflicting young man in doubt on the one hand, on the other hand it already becomes clear how much Thom Gunn valued his moral compass, accepted it as

³⁸ He described his interaction with girls being "As clumsy as if I'd been straight." Gunn and Campbell 20.

his inner guidance and how much this made him capable of reflecting on his role in the world. His inner voice had the power to make him change his behavior, with him taking an active part in granting this power to his inner voice, by making the conscious decision to do so. Being a quick learner, in the same letter to Miller, Gunn continues writing about two of his travelling friends: “Guy & Ozzie (the Jamaican) are at present trying to persuade me to make love to a dear little girl from Leeds whom they assure me has indicated I would not be disagreeable ... but I have learnt by the affair with Ann that one must not enter on such things if one cannot be happy in them and make the girl happy. It is a pity to be perverted.” (*Letters* 17) Gunn had already decided that this was not what life had in store for him, even though society might call him a pervert for that. The experiment, which exposed Gunn’s way of thinking about the conditions of human dignity and the role he plays in enforcing its preservation, as well as his moral judgement of situations, was not a failure in the end and Gunn began translating it into his poetry. When Gunn claims that the “reader knowing nothing about the author has a much better chance of understanding it [the written poetry]” (*OP* 188) in his autobiographical text, he is referring to the previously described situation. The poem “Carnal Knowledge”, in his opinion, could easily be misread as spoken by a homosexual in disguise. The repetitive line “You know I know you know” can be interpreted as a gay man trying to stay in the closet while acknowledging that the other person somehow senses his being different. In this case, the poem was inspired by this very situation with Ann, and Gunn’s prime example for sexual morality. It also shows that he was not very precise with his criticism, only referring to the knowledge about the sexuality of the author. Knowing the right things about the author does not necessarily mean you misinterpret the circumstances. It is not all about the ‘gay poet’ and his disguise. But where he is right, is that without the knowledge, there are several emotional levels on which you can explore the poem, if you as a reader do not have to think about the circumstances. This is what Gunn was actually aiming at: true poetry, that works, even if read without a context, as it contains all the information in itself that is required to grasp its meaning. The detailed knowledge about the biographical facts of an author might be a reason for lack of enjoyment, when reading his poetry, like how knowing the right terms for clouds in the sky might strip the view of its romantic potential.

Having developed a feeling for his self-efficacy, an important evolution in Gunn’s thoughts took place. Also based on his realizations connected to the Revelation, he developed a “rather crude theory of what [he] called 'pose'” (Gunn, *OP* 161).

Philosophically it was based on his interpretation of the ideas and writings of Donne, Yeats, Stendhal, Shakespeare and Sartre. He defines his understanding of the term pose as follows:

Everyone plays a part, whether he knows it or not, so he might as well deliberately design a part, or a series of parts, for himself. Only a psychopath or a very good actor is in danger of becoming his part, however, so one who is neither is left in an interesting place somewhere in between the starting point—the bare undefined and undirected self, if he ever existed—and the chosen part. This is a place rich in tensions between the achieved and the unachieved. (Gunn, *OP* 162)

This idea of pose is what Gunn stated as being one of the providers of material for his poetry, the fact of seeing himself in the role of an actor or agent, which allowed him to work on a wide range of topics that he found useful. Stendhal's works were, according to the older Gunn, one of the most important influences on him and his thinking during his time at Cambridge. The philosophy of the writer captured Gunn's interest and built the foundation for a model upon which he tried to act and live to succeed in his life.

During his studies, Gunn chose several roles to fill besides being an English student. In 1952, he becomes president of the Cambridge English Club, of which Karl Miller was appointed secretary, doing all the hard work, as credited by his friend Gunn. Here he was practicing his ability to give short, sharp introductions to readers of poetry, which he found embarrassing, for one because Gunn did not believe he had great talent for it, and for another, because he did not like to speak in public. He was editing a student's poetry anthology as well as publishing one of the Cambridge papers, both of which propelled his fame as both a writer and a publisher. It strengthened his skills in networking as well as his sense for writing in general, and his sense of why this craft was so important for him. Helping his friends to publish the controversial paper *Granta* added to his creating content of varieties of literature.

In his humble nature, Gunn later tried to recall possible reasons for his early fame. He concludes that his fame partly came from his prominent position through the presidency of the English Club, and partly because John Mander was giving up writing, as a result of which Gunn could occupy his space in the niche of the Cambridge poet, which he did gladly. Although he knew that nobody became successful without wanting to be, he did not want to be a social climber anymore, as opposed to when he started at Cambridge, and he simultaneously knew he had something to say. He knew that to be read, he had to put himself out there. Already present in many printed issues of several university papers, his fame was rather limited to Cambridge. He later remembers the promotion of the Cambridge poets' society to be rather incestuous, when he and his

friends and colleagues found only nice words to introduce each other in readings or comment positively on their works in the critical sections of the common papers. The encouraging ways in which they talked about their fellows was “thus creating and perpetuating each other's celebrity” (Gunn, *OP* 165).

With his growing celebrity came the benefit of open doors. The poet Thom Gunn was invited to more official parties more often and could go to as many as he chose to. In his first years at university, partying was an excessive undertaking for him and his friends. This was depicted vividly in a story about his passing out so thoroughly, that he had to be carried out of the premises through a side door, which was much to the displeasure of the Don of Newnham, who was responsible for the location where the party took place. The Don, as the master of keys, was called after Gunn consumed half a gallon of sherry, and she had to open the gates. While she was standing by, he was carried out past her, and while drunk and unconscious, he greeted her with a displeasing fart.³⁹ Upon telling the story, he stresses the fact that this was Karl Miller's account of what happened, as he himself obviously was incapable of remembering any of it. Now, with the more serious character of the nearing graduation and his growing fame, Gunn's hunger for excessive partying declined. Parties were fewer and more selective, as exchange with his fellow poets and people who could be of help in publishing grew more important.

By the time he started his last year at Cambridge, Gunn was matured enough to realize that he by now had learned more from his fellow students than from his teachers, although he never neglected or negated the role the latter played for him. Leavis' stance on the subject of self-pity in poetry can surely be seen as a defining reason for Gunn's dislike towards confessional poetry. He would recall his teacher's particularly peculiar pronunciation of the term on several occasions even decades later, underlining the lifelong impact those lessons had on him. The notion of the tediousness which lies in being sorry for oneself and writing about it was one annoying side of it. Another angle on self-pity is the opinion that it can be seen “as limitation of moral fibre” (Gunn and Campbell 23), which struck several of Gunn's chords in resonance with his self-image. Underlying moral values in his mind and his life philosophy, he concluded about the idea of self-pity that he had developed a “disdain on confessional poetry” (23). It was only many years later, finding Ginsberg's writing, that Gunn would come close to liking a style like this. This is once again proof, how open and wide Gunn's range of interest was, with Ginsberg being the last poet you would expect to be liked by a Cambridge graduate in the 1950s.

³⁹ As told in *My Cambridge* Bradbrook and Hayman 145.

Gunn's final gratitude goes to Leavis, whose "lectures helped [him] to deal directly with my own (emotions), by reducing their diffusion, by concentrating them." (OP 160)

Before starting his third year, Gunn went on vacation again, with the standard road trip to France, this time extending to Italy. There he celebrated his 23rd birthday in Siena, enjoying the dolce vita, life at its finest, when it is not planned or scheduled. Little did he know how unplanned the course of the year would be for him. As Gunn was fascinated by theatre from early on in his life, he allowed it to play a vital role in his student life as well. Reading Shakespeare was one thing, experiencing his plays on stage, where they belonged, was the more truthful part for him. As an admirer of Shakespeare and other dramatists it was simply clear for Gunn that there was a different quality to the words when acted out, going deeper in their intended meaning, although he enjoyed reading them as well. With Tony White as a friend, who was a passionate actor, it was even easier for Gunn to get in touch with the genre. Opera, theatre, and later movies were one level on which he observed and experienced what literature was capable of. He generally preferred the role of observer in the theatre, being in the audience rather than participating in a production on the stage. In 1952, his friends, including Tony White, managed to convince him to play the small role of first servant in a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, which saw Gunn getting more in touch with the ADC and its crew.

In December 1952 at the afterparty for the production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, with White in the lead role, something unplannable, yet predictable happened. Gunn was introduced to another theater enthusiast and American exchange student from Kearney, New Jersey. The American, a twenty-one-year-old named Melvin Kitay, called Mike, later recalls this meeting for him as love at first sight, although he would admit, it was first sight in person. The exchange student read Gunn's poems before he met the writer, he got to know him through the words of "The Beach Head", which was a poem Gunn had written about Tony White.

Gunn on the other hand was similarly attracted to Mike, though maybe not with the same speed. He was gliding into love, rather than falling, taking one step at a time. But it would be so deep that decades later, the couple would still argue about the exact date of their first meeting. Thom was convinced it was December 5th, while Mike is sure

it was the 7th of December,⁴⁰ supporting his version by saying “It was Pearl Harbor Day, that’s why I remember” (“Thom Gunn as a Life Long Partner”) Typical for the two, they did not try to solve this unsolvable problem but made the best of it, occasionally celebrating both days instead of only one, however it fit best.

The first meeting at the staff party of the ADC was not only the beginning of a passionate, life long, ever changing relationship between the two men, but also a source of a different kind of subject matter for Gunn’s poetry. Kitay, who was quickly longing for signs of Gunn’s affection, was craving and sometimes needy, while his love interest did not express his emotions verbally very often. His Englishness and the associated understatement of emotion were typical for the young lover. Gunn was inviting Kitay for tea on the first dates, downplaying the intensity of the flame that was burning inside of him. But when the poet wrote about his affection in letters and of course in poetry, however, Kitay was more than satisfied, especially when the poems were so clearly related to him. Among the first poems there were “Lines for a Birthday” and “Tamer and Hawk” in which Gunn unfolded his talent for praising his lover, but still in the disclosure he needed to convey the fact that they were in a homosexual relationship. This time the line ‘I know you know I know’ would have been fitting in that way.

Both men were each other’s first love, and they were passionate about one another. The circumstances, though, did not allow them to be open about it. For Kitay it was different, as the distance from home made it easier for him to dive into the feelings of affection, ignoring all the implications, as they were literally thousands of miles away. For Gunn, it was more important to hide the deeper meanings of his poetry, of which the American lover now was his main muse. Kitay’s need for affection and Gunn’s good will to show his love partly triggered the flow of words from the poet, although wrapped in a genderless disguise. The love poems written for and because of Kitay then were a form of expression of the lovers’ effects on each other. Gunn, the free spirit, roamer of the world, experimenter and existentialist, now felt a power that was overwhelming enough to tame him, like a hawk is tamed by the falconer. When Gunn writes “Tamer and Hawk” in spring 1953, a few months after they met, it is meant as a loving dedication to Mike, looking at love from Gunn’s personal angle, where Kitay’s pure existence and their dynamics as a couple made it possible for the poet to direct his energies into something

⁴⁰ “Th Dec 2: ... AN3 makes M & me a beautiful anniversary cake (our 25th anniversary either being today or the 5th kesey or Mike believes the 7th). Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

he was not able to grasp before. The level of passion that was lacking in Gunn's poetry up to 1952 was now introduced to him by the love he felt for his partner, who was to become one of the most stable constants in Thom Gunn's life.

Kitay was an objectively attractive man: well-built, intelligent and gentle. Thom was very attracted to him and loved him very much, although his character did not easily allow him to express this verbally, or very overtly otherwise. This was to be one of the early problems for the couple, as Mike longed for more proof of the affection of his lover. In some ways, one might call him needy, as he later describes himself. What it says about the relationship and Mike's subjectivity, is that he was not used to the subtlety of Thom's low tone when expressing his emotions. Luckily, Gunn's talent in the use of written language exceeded his verbal skill in spoken conversation. His way of dealing with people in general, including Kitay, and the poems he crafted for him were not only expressions of general emotions, but Gunn's way of proving his affection and willingness to serve his lover's needs in the way possible for him. The early poems and some of the letters Gunn wrote to Kitay represent a corpus that exemplifies his deep admiration.

Generally, the relationship of the two energetic, young and attractive men was without boundaries, when they were among themselves in a safe environment. Sexual passion was present from the start, despite the understatement of Gunn inviting Kitay for tea, which the latter laughs about even more than six decades later. The British distance was to melt away quickly, as drinking tea was surely not the only thing the two men intended to do together. But the image fit the time: homosexuality, even more so than any sexuality at all, could not go without a disguise. There were secret languages that only people in the know could detect, a lot of energy being used to avoid and hide your intentions from a general audience, as secrecy was key. A different energy was flowing then, when one felt reassured of being among like-minded or at least well-minded people. The couple's passion went on for the first months and sparked the poetic creativity in Gunn as well as the general lust for life for both the couple. It is safe to assume that this encounter with his sexuality, unlike the summer camp with Ann, was for Thom like a taste of blood, and he surely wanted more.

In spring of 1953, a major leap for Gunn happened. He had his first solo appearance in print apart from Cambridge student papers and singular readings at BBC Radio, as a collection of his poetry was published by Fantasy Press. The little booklet contained his poems "The Wound", "The Beach Head", "The Right Possessor", "Wind

in the Streets” and “Incident on a Journey” as part of the publication *The Fantasy Poets Series*. His networking efforts were successful, and it was indeed an important step for the emerging poet. As another confirmation that he had something more interesting to say than in his early “series of poems about dejected old men walking through dead leaves” (Gunn, “Thom Gunn” 137), he was able to finally leave the leaves behind and progress to more important topics, to him and his generation. He realized it was worthwhile to tell his own truths, rebelliously leaving behind the conformist approach of his beginnings, step by step, or leap by leap. By then, his variety in writing was limited only by the examples he tried to imitate, given by his influences. The classical shapes of sonnets, odes and ballads were his new newspaper dummy, given the structure he filled in the gaps. And he filled the gaps with his experience and his imagination.

His writing about his view on the world was condensed in the ways he learned about in childhood, youth and university. The imagery was classical, and it was done purposefully. French language and allusions to Greek mythology found their way into his first works as well as the grand unavoidable topics of love, peace and friendship, as well as their counterparts. After putting leaving him the subject matter of autumn leaves, and breaking his personal barrier of what he could write about, his voice was freed, but not yet so refined. This did not hold Gunn back, though, in writing about his thoughts, ideas and emotions, as openly as possible. In this early pamphlet, one of his new images already presents itself clearly: the subjects of soldiers and uniforms, the questions about life as a remnant of a time he lived through in agony, the times of war and his own military service. Those images from *The Fantasy Poets Series, Issue 16* would stick with Gunn for some time, during which he transformed the meaning to his liking.⁴¹

In summer of 1953, Gunn would meet one of his predecessors in publication, the author of *The Fantasy Poets Series: Issue 4*. Although studying at Oxford, Donald Hall, who was a creative writing fellow at Stanford, met Gunn at one of the parties for aspiring poets and their fellow students. Exchange between universities, especially when so close to each other as Cambridge and Oxford, was encouraged. And the importance of Hall for Gunn would be immense. It was he, who introduced Gunn at further get togethers, which is how Gunn got to know fellow poets Elizabeth Jennings and Geoffrey Hill, as well as publishers that in the end stabilized his connection to the Fantasy Press for future cooperation. In addition to his association with the publishers of Fantasy Press, Hall

⁴¹ The uniform is a very varied theme for Gunn. Uniformity reaches from soldiers to leather jacket and to the notion of the Castro Clone (for the term, see Holleran.)

became poetry editor at the *Paris Review*, a position he held for the following eight years, in which he not only published himself and other poets, but also always had a space for Gunn and his yet unpublished poetry.

At the same time that he met Donald Hall, Thom Gunn graduated from Cambridge following his third year. He went on a trip to Mainland Europe with Kitay in the middle of 1953, to celebrate his achievements and their love. The density of sights and experience must have been overwhelming, only eight years after the area had been the center of a raging war. They visited Bruges in Belgium, before going to Cologne, which was already a gay epicenter by the 1950s, although of course not in the sense of liberal views, but rather due to the fact that there were many queer people trying to make their own life a little better in a large city. Heidelberg, still a must see for heaps of tourists nowadays, was also on the list, as well as German classics like Frankfurt am Main and Munich. Kitay remembers the trip as adventurous, sleeping in provisional accommodations like old bunkers and basic hostels, just made for travelers on a tight budget. To finish off the trip, they finally arrived in northern Italy, visiting Milan, Verona, and finally Rapallo.⁴² The trip left a massive impression on the lovers and deepened the foundations of their relationship.

Back in England, Gunn, who had the reputation of being as diligent as a student as he already was as a poet, was, unsurprisingly, rewarded for it. In 1953, he received the Harper Wood Studentship, a scholarship from St John's College, Cambridge. This award provided Gunn with some money, which he planned to spend on a stay in Rome to widen his horizon in the eternal city, the dying place of his teenage poetry hero Keats, and the place-to-be for artists of all kinds with interests in the classics during the middle of the 1950s. Going to Rome after graduation was something that would add to his experience, but which was not a necessity, as Kitay remembers. It gave Gunn a great set of benefits, the downside being that his lover was not going to join him, as he needed another year to finish his studies at Cambridge. They were just organizing their first split for several months, and they did not know what their relationship would look like after Kitay had graduated and his American exchange program had come to an end. It was the first critical test for their relationship. To make the most of their time together, they travelled again during the Christmas holidays. This time, they only had Italy as a goal, visiting Padua, Venice and Rome, where Kitay accompanied Gunn, and left him there after saying goodbye.

⁴² The city on the shore later being the subject of the poem "Rapallo" Gunn (*BC*).

As the importance of Rome was not due to the stay being a part of the official curriculum, it bore more importance for his personal development. In the end, he stayed there for three months, mingling with the local society, indulging in the culture and the dolce vita of Italy's capital city. It brought some distance from his life up to that moment and gave him space to rethink and breathe. What was about to happen when he returned? What about his relationship with Mike? How would he use his reputation as a Cambridge Poet, which surely offered some benefits? How would his publication history continue? For his stay in Rome, Gunn chose the Pensione Imhoff on Via Modena as a starting point. Situated between the Fontana di Trevi, Termini Station and the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, an area which is still famous for its gay culture today, which was starting to develop into this around the time of Gunn's arrival. More importantly it was located in the cultural center of the eternal city. Living amongst the Romans of 1954, he quickly grasped the character of his new surroundings, observing and making new acquaintances. As networking was no problem for Gunn, he did not take long to indulge in all the opportunities that lay in front of him. In a letter to Karl Miller, he freely expresses his love for the city and its inhabitants, saying "Rome is the best place I've ever been in. The right size, the right weather, the right proportions of good looking buildings to slums, the right complications." (Gunn, *Letters* 29) He added that, according to his belief, the northern attitude or the northern frustration might be a good and necessary background to be a writer, providing a person with material where humanity becomes visible, but Rome as the opposite had a profound influence on Gunn, by now giving him the release he needed to write new poetry.

Unleashing his creativity at a distance from England, which now seemed like a restraining force to him, the other part of his journey was his personal development. Having perfected the skill to create new connections with people as his talent, it was only a matter of time until he had collected enough contacts to fill his time comfortably with people he found interesting. From the beginning of his stay, he occasionally met with Meg Greenfield, an acquaintance of Karl Miller, whom Gunn did not much like. A rich American woman who invited him to social occasions left the young poet in doubt about her motives, and whose possible sexual advances towards him of course stayed unanswered. Instead of clarifying this tension, he chose to accept it as unclear and enjoy the meals and conversations he was invited to, ignoring the question of her possible sexual attraction. A person who left a more distinguished impression on Gunn, intellectually and professionally, was the Princesa Caetana, a focal figure of the writers in Rome, which she

quickly became for Gunn as well. Although the rest of her wealthy family were not part of the poet's interest, he continued to visit her and her palaces regularly, finding her "very old and distinguished and energetic and likeable." (Gunn, *Letters* 31). Her interest in being in the presence of writers and other artists, also in her function as editor of the *Botthege Oscure*, was more to his interest and liking anyway. The variety of her guest list was shown, when Gunn, upon arriving to visit her, once "met a funny tubby piggy man coming away" (31) who turned out to be Cyril Conolly, who was just leaving. Finding the information very entertaining, it was a great start for Gunn's stay at her palace in Anzio, just shy of Rome, indulging in the great landscapes of the surroundings. All of the grandeur motivated Gunn, who delightedly reported to Miller about this in a letter, pointing out that the Cyclopes lived in the area according to legend, showing once again how allusive those ancient myths and legends were to the poet.

His classical education at Cambridge surely made its mark, but Gunn was continuously moving on. His fascination was of a livelier kind, in the end. Another of his most important Roman acquaintances was a fellow artist, the German painter Carl Timmer,⁴³ who spent his time in Rome, too. Their range of mutual interests was vast, and they had a lot to talk about. Timmer's appreciation towards Gunn was realized in a painting of the poet, which unfortunately was lost⁴⁴, while the poet's expression of what he saw in the painter was the work "Before the Carnival", subtitled "A painting by Carl Timmer"⁴⁵. Thom was especially impressed by the naturalness with which his new friend Carl lived out the standards of existentialism. To his old friend Karl, he expressed his fascination for Timmer's style "and he does do things. I mean, not only fucking, or painting for that matter, but he acts rather than talks about [them]. And he's had an incredible life" (*Letters* 31). Timmer's directness and ambivalence really struck Gunn, who was intrigued by the painter's process of breaking free from his German past. His story fascinated the literate Gunn. Timmer had been a member of the Hitler Youth, like so many young men in Germany, and almost became a soldier at the age of ten, hitting some chords in the pacifist Gunn, and making him think about how soldiers can develop into what they are. The uneven story of Timmer's destiny was a treasure for Gunn, who was looking for the essence of life. These personal encounters made Gunn's stay in Rome fruitful, but there were other aspects as well. The rich and easily accessible cultural

⁴³ See *Biografie* by Timmer.

⁴⁴ A reproduction can be found in Gunn's scrapbooks (Bancroft Library)

⁴⁵ Early poems for *The Sense of Movement*

treasures of the city, dating more than two thousand years into the past, were a vast source of material for him.⁴⁶ But the distance to his alma mater gave him some freedom he used well in different aspects.

It was also during his time in Rome that Gunn followed the advice of his friend Donald Hall, who suggested he apply for the fellowship program in creative writing under Yvor Winters, who was teaching at Stanford. Hall also set up the contact between Winters and Gunn, believing in the benefits his friend would gain from this exchange. Gunn informed his friend about his application in a letter, adding that he also followed the instructions given by Hall on how to best approach his possible new future mentor. Going to the US to study would be a solution to many problems that Gunn was facing at this time: What was he supposed to do upon arriving back in England? Would he have a future with Mike? Having the option to at least be in the same country as his lover immediately made the future look brighter, on top of the opportunity to develop even further in his poetry. This was a part of Gunn's motivation that was not to be underestimated. His inner striving for a distinct voice, which he called "romantic Wanderlust" (*Letters* 32) was deeply rooted. He needed the input, the stimulation to write. Winters, an undisputed expert in his field, was a perfect source for this intellectual stimulation. His reputation preceded him, and he fell in the same category of man as FR Leavis, but with a different direction. Gunn's hunger for different angles, and different opinions and styles, was carved out exactly for this. Studying under Winters seemed a logical step, and he gladly accepted the challenge. When Gunn reports to Donald Hall about his submission of the application, the writer's insecurities clearly show. He writes about sending in "forms, poems, prospectuses, samples, facts, etc etc" (32) including a healthy doubt with regards to his possible success. If anything went wrong, he still had options, which was important to him throughout his life. On a personal level, Gunn acted on his talent for communicating with people. He reports to his friend Hall upon sending off his application "Thank you for all the advice about Winters [sic]: I was tactful in my wording – as tactful as I could be." (32), adding a self-ironic hint to the pursuit of a certain closeness to Kitay. In the end, when Gunn left Rome (because the funds of his scholarship ran out after three months), he of course succeeded in being accepted, giving him the hope he needed to continue his relationship with Kitay.

While in Rome, Gunn also finalized the manuscript for his first full book of poetry to be published. The title *Fighting Terms* would describe the inner conflict of opposites,

⁴⁶ For example "In Santa Maria del Popolo"

and it would contain most of the poems written during his time at Cambridge. The work reflects the energetic, revolutionary worldview of a man who accepts his influences as well as the challenges of processing everything through his own mind and capabilities. The young poet knew how to compose well enough to stun the critics, of course being helped by the reputation as a Cambridge graduate, which he never mistook for his own pure talent. His rigorous dealing with form and meter, and vigor in expression of thought and emotion, set the tone for his first book.

One of the subjects in his early work was, as the title suggests, fighting, war, humanity, love and the counter-connection between those, as well as the struggle to live according to one's values. One of his poetic devices was the image of the ever-present uniform, and the soldier wearing it. The uniform as such has several functions: disguising the individuality of the wearer, or his true self, being able to hide behind it like armor. It can also serve as a symbol and exaggeration of specific qualities that might seem valuable in a violent society, like bravery, discipline and strength. He plays with the image, in connection with his theory of pose, and how he describes the truth that lies beneath, unfiltered by the meanings attached to it. People rarely fully present themselves, but rather wear uniforms to present an image they want to convey. Gunn tried to let go of those kinds of images in his own life early on, considering his pipe and tweed jacket as a self-imposed variation of the concept, as well as, later, the uniformity of metered poetry or the fact that he graduated from Cambridge, and the image that came with it.⁴⁷

Fighting Terms was the first publication of a full book for Gunn as a poet. Later, he contemplated that writing was a kind of compensation for his lack of sexual activity, and thus the energy confined in the volume was also the pent-up sexual energies of a man in his mid-twenties.⁴⁸ The fact that it was gay lust made him inclined to hide it behind the words, and thus the energy comes across a pure force, supporting his drive to reach early fame within the niche of the young Cambridge poet, whose writing many readers were willing to read. Gunn obscures his sexuality with the uniformity that society expected,

⁴⁷ "The uniform itself is not an intrinsic part of whoever puts it on but is something extrinsic to the character [...]. The Uniform guaranties their bond with a group. [...] [The boys find] some security and even an assurance, however false, of identity." Michelucci 89.

⁴⁸ In an Interview with Tim Teeman (TT here), the following scene happened:

TT Thom, what were your first books about?

TG My feelings of lust, probably

TT Were you having lots of sex?

TG No I was writing *Instead* (laughs). You are probably the horniest in your twenties and you're having the most sex then. Teeman 2.

and thus writes about soldiers. He says in an interview “So, yes, isn't it interesting how many soldiers there are in my early poetry and how often I am the soldier and I'm not really sure what I'm doing?” (Potts) He is also referring to the missing action as a soldier in his life, still contemplating what he did, in an existentialist way. In his notes at the archives on one of his lectures, there's a passage saying “the figure of the soldier recurs in this book, as it does, I suppose throughout my work. First of all he is myself in late adolescence, the national serviceman, the 'clumsy brute in uniform,' the soldier who never goes to war.” (*An Apprenticeship* 13)

It is Gunn, disguised in several roles and poses. In “The Wound” (Gunn, *FT* 9), he comes to conscience, musing “The huge wound in my head began to heal” but is never sure whether the battle of Troy was real to him or just fantasies, if it was action or merely the thought of action. He speaks of classical heroes⁴⁹ and villains, longing for healing while the wound would “break open wide. Over again.” Gunn would also touch upon religious subjects with “Here Come the Saints” (10) and “Lazarus not Raised” (12-13), where he poses the question of how a miracle would be the same if “the scheduled miracle [was] not taking place” (12). Gunn retells classical stories and sometimes twists them, like his Lazarus who did not get raised, or “Helen's Rape” (17), and expands the use of words fashionably by also using French vocabulary, to breach the boundaries of language a bit. “La Prisonnière” (19) and “Lofty in the Palais de Danse” (14-15) stand as examples of that. The poet draws in all the imagery he needs and deems useful, be it well-known stories or foreign words that give his poems just the right tone he was looking for. As already indicated, “Carnal Knowledge” (20-21) is a very open poem with regards to sexuality. As Gunn said, it should not be mistaken as a poem which disguises homosexual love, but is rather a record of his experience at the fruit picking farm in that summer, that he corresponded with Karl Miller about. The poem “The Beach Head” (30-31), about his friend Tony White, depicts the energy he gets from the undefined and mystical aura that surrounds White, which attracts Gunn and makes him want to explore further. It is the poem Mike Kitay read, before he met Gunn, and which first attracted him, before having met the poet in person. What is indeed a poem which deals with disguise of his sexuality is a piece that is very much inspired by Mike Kitay: “Tamer and Hawk” (33) is a poem

⁴⁹ “Gunn's early heroes are in opposition to or in conflict with nature, and within themselves experience a similar conflict between consciousness and instinct.” Wilmer (“Definition and Flow (1978)” 54–55).

about their love and about how Gunn sees himself changed through love. In the second stanza of the poem Gunn is giving those feelings room to unfold:

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. (*FT* 33)

The free spirit of Gunn has been caught for the sake of love. Mike Kitay, as his lover, managed to capture the spirit and focus it from roaming around, at least for a while, and within a specific realm of Gunn's lives. The poem, in its gender-neutral language, also reflects perfectly well how the homosexual subject needed to be disguised. The tamer might be interpreted as a man, but it is never defined clearly – and certainly not clear enough to make a case of the poet's sexuality. Reading it now might make it seem obvious, but like in Polari,⁵⁰ for a general audience, this fact was hidden in plain sight. The same applies for the poem "For a Birthday" (36) which was, as the title suggests, written for Kitay's birthday. Also, in the undefined gender of the addressee, Gunn describes the passion of the relationship and the truth that lies in it, if acted out as the couple did. He culminates in saying "either the experience would fade / or our approximations would be lies," ever the existentialist. In the cover of gender-neutral language, he even dares to get very explicit, describing a kiss very visually: "the moist wafer of your tongue I taste, / and find right meanings in your silent mouth." Always going back to the conflict between finding and making meaning, doing and observing, which is the eternal fight in *Fighting Terms*.

During his stay in Rome, the publication was postponed several times, and Gunn had decided to go back to England due to the lack of money. To avoid going back empty-handed, he used his contact to the princess, earning a little money through the publication of his poems "Apocryphal" and "Excursion" in her *Botthege Oscure*, which then remained uncollected, later deeming the poems unrefined and bad, to Karl Miller. After finishing things up in Rome, Gunn returned to England, where *Fighting Terms* was finally published by Fantasy Press. As the result of networking, lecturing and of course writing his own poetry, this was a real breakthrough for the Cambridge graduate. Publishing his

⁵⁰ Polari describes a secret language spoken and understood by the queer community, when hiding was a means to survive (see Baker, *Fabulosa!* and Polari: *Rediscovering a queer language*; BritishSlang.co.uk.)

first book was, at least for the time being, a reason to leave his doubts behind. The book was an instant hit and brought him the reputation of a genius overnight.⁵¹

His return to Cambridge, however, felt strange to him. It had grown distant; he had already, early during his time in Rome, expressed his happiness about being gone. He writes to Miller, “I’m certainly pleased not to be in Cambridge. At present I think of it as the Valley of the Shadow of Death – everybody trying like crazy to be something or other that they’ll never succeed in being, and all the sex gossip – talking about without doing, and everything and everything.” (*Letters* 29) Cambridge, which during his time in the army was the place he longed for, became the place where Gunn finally took that turn, that led him from experimenting with many forms of literature, to the poetry he was known for. Here he put his attempts to write novels aside in 1950, and started producing. His time at Cambridge was an inspiration for his free-minded spirit. The influence of his travels and his Revelation unleashed an energy that made him write one poem per week for almost two years, and he felt more and more comfortable with what he wrote. Although he remained very self-critical, he accepted that eventually a poem would be finished, even if it was not perfect. His friends helped him to discuss and improve his work, which he never felt was good enough without extensive editing. His first publication “Poem”, in 1951, brought him fame that was restricted to the range of the campus paper *Cambridge Today*, where “The Secret Sharer” had already been broadcast on BBC radio, followed by his “Carnal Knowledge”, which was the outcome of his experiment of testing his sexuality, induced by Karl Miller. “The Beach Head” about Tony White, “Tamer & Hawk” about Mike Kitay and “Lofty in the Palais de Danse” are just a few examples of poetry written in that period. All of these pieces were discussed and rewritten during the process of perfecting them in Gunn’s meticulous way. He took each word seriously and paid them the attention they seemed to need.

By the time of Gunn’s early success in the summer of 1954, Mike Kitay had to return to the USA. Duty was calling, as he was about to spend his next few years in the service of the US Air Force in San Antonio, Texas, upon his return from his exchange studies at Cambridge. Though it is hard to guess what it meant for the passionate couple to be split apart again, at least they would have the comfort of Gunn following Kitay to

⁵¹ In later publications, Gunn would revise, and even later un-revise his work. He was always in doubt of hitting the right tone, always contemplating his words. In the end he accepts his earlier works as time pieces, leaving them be as they were, realizing they were right at the time of composing.

the States soon, though San José and Stanford were still hundreds of miles away from Kitay's military base. Having found something to look forward to, it was easy to leave things behind, his mother being dead, himself newly graduated and independent, with a new adventure awaiting him on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Chapter Three: On the Move - Go West

For the graduated Cambridge poet Thom Gunn, it was now time to leave England behind. He was not prone to nostalgic feeling or the notion of adding meaning to arbitrary dates, situations or places as a person. In general, he concentrated on creating meaningful poetry by diving deep into implications and connotations of words and language in full, which is also why he had his friends countercheck his writings, to make sure his messages would be understood. By doing so he tried to make his poetic truth as accessible as possible, to unfold his mind for the readers in a condensed form. It is all the more poetic then, that he left England, having packed his bags, setting off to a new shore. He took the RMS *Queen Elizabeth* in late August to cross the Atlantic Ocean, going west to Gunn's new promised land. He was in the middle of his journey to the United States of America, surrounded by water, when he had his twenty-fifth birthday. Turning a quarter-century old would indeed mark one of the biggest transitions of his life, although by then he could not dare to dream of what would lie ahead of him from this point onwards. The number and speed of changes was simply not expectable for a young gay man in this period or the success that he would have as a poet were simply not to be foreseen. Upon arriving in New York, he entered the United States through immigration on the legendary Ellis Island, holding a student's visa. After the days on the ship, his life's journey was just about to take off, even more than it already had.

He was lucky enough not to have to face his arrival and first days in the new country alone. Although Kitay was already stationed at the Airforce base in San Antonio, he organized a welcome committee. He instructed his parents, who lived in Kearney, New Jersey, to take care of Gunn, whom he introduced as a close friend, as the couple intended to keep up the disguise. For Kitay it was easier to be gay in England, thousands of miles away, then to bring this truth to his parents' home that soon. The two men were happy enough to be in the same country, at least for now. The Kitays in Kearney agreed to the proposal of their son, and for his friend, it was surely easier to know his arrival was taken care of. The downside of the situation was, of course, that he was announced as a friend and not a lover. The relatively long stay of three weeks still surely had times when this notion of being in-between truths, or not living one's full truth, led to moments of doubt. Shortly after the visit, Gunn recapitulated it in a form, he by now knew very well how to use to his benefit. He wrote a poem, which he called "First Meeting with a Possible Mother-in-Law" and it has everything in it.

This poem is allusively close to a real-life report, which makes it a very good example of how he deals with inspiration. It is his authenticity that drives him to craft his words. This specific poem he starts with empathy: “She thought, without the benefit of knowing, / you, who had been hers, were not any more.” (Gunn, *SM* 23) Again, he addresses Mike Kitay as the genderless you. Not being hers anymore could be meant in several ways. One would be that the son, now that he is back from his time abroad in Europe and in the Air Force, has been growing up and has finally become an adult, or that the mother senses that there is another person in her son’s life who is now his source of love, even though the gay couple “had locked” their “love in to leave nothing showing,” as it was risky to reveal anything. His being there as a very good friend, he calls suspicious, and uses a sewing metaphor. The possible mother-in-law is described sewing, and what the piece that is hanging out the door stands for, he finds obvious, just as he supposes her to know what the caretaking of Gunn by Kitay stood for. He realizes a “small likeness”, both being “two strangers left upon a bare top landing”, while he was lucky enough to only suffer from this “for a prudent while, she”, rather, suffers “totally.” In the end, there is the element of connection between two people who learn to accept their situations. They look in each others’ eyes and finally “shared too long a second’s understanding, / Learning each other’s terms of banishment.”

Although he left a conservative society behind when he left England, Gunn’s time of arrival in the United States was still not as free as he hoped it would be as a gay man.⁵² Of course, he was intellectually capable of obtaining a student’s visa in connection to his scholarship under Winters, but he also defined himself as a socialist and a homosexual man, the latter fact being the basis for his decision to come to the United States, to be close to his lover, in the first place. As for the timing, his arrival took place in the middle of what is now called the McCarthy era, surely an inconvenient time for a man like Gunn. His being different because he was English, and his reputation, already gave him the benefit of the doubt, distracting some of the officials, but he also tended to strongly argue his points, if he was convinced of his opinion. Unless he were lucky enough to discuss certain topics only with the right people, he would run the risk of being exposed, with the worst-case scenario being that his visa could be revoked, having to leave the country. In his role as a public person, as a poet, student and later teacher, he was also fully exposed to the effects of McCarthy’s policies⁵³ as a target of persecution: the Red Scare affected

⁵² On development of queer openness, see Hawley.

⁵³ See Schrecker.

him due to his socialist mindset, but the more crude and harder to avoid – yet less known – Lavender Scare, was really a major issue for Thom Gunn. Here the theory was that homosexuals, as a marginal group of society, could be easily influenced by enemy forces through blackmail, as they had a lot to lose if their secrets were found out and their sexuality was exposed. McCarthy’s logic in the 50s was of course not to try and give homosexuals the comfort of being accepted for their sexual orientation. Rather, by saying that gays were vulnerable to blackmailing, he argued they had to be isolated and punished by being fired from certain jobs, in order to neutralize the potential threat.⁵⁴

After this acclimatization to the USA at Kitay’s parents’ place in Kearney, Gunn moved onwards, further west. This time he chose the train as his mode of travel, for a 3000-mile journey via Chicago to San José, which would take a couple of days. The vast number of impressions on that journey left their marks on Gunn. Passing through large cities as well as vast landscapes added to the palette of colors the writer would observe and later choose to write poetry about. After five days, the train arrived at Oakland, where Gunn took the ferry to San Francisco, and from which he could not help but notice the spectacular entry to that city that was to become his home, despite the fact, at that time, he only planned to stay in the area for a year or so.⁵⁵ The last few miles to Stanford University in San José were now merely a formality, compared to what lay behind him at this point.

Arriving at his destination, his new teacher Yvor Winters had taken care of the necessary preparations for Gunn to arrive in a set place. Winters, who knew nothing about Gunn other than from his application and the recommendation by his student Donald Hall, had organized a place for him to stay at 334 Lincoln Ave in Palo Alto. On the one hand the basic formal preparations at Stanford University were also taken care of, to ensure a smooth start for the English poet, and to make the best use of his sponsored year on his creative writing fellowship. On the other hand, Gunn had received his information on Winters from Hall too, and was carefully approaching his new mentor, in the skillful and intelligent ways he had acquired in his young life.

Already, shortly upon his arrival, the USA provided impressions of a whole new world to Gunn, who gladly accepted all of them. The different culture in the United States,

⁵⁴ For more on gay life in the 1950s and following years, see Fritscher (*Gay San Francisco*) And Peoples “A Glimpse of Gay Pride in the 1950s” BBC Culture.

⁵⁵ “I eventually crossed the country by train, getting off in Oakland, and arriving in San Francisco by ferry, which is a wonderful way of entering the city, a spectacular way of entering it.” Gunn and Campbell 28.

especially in California, with a more liberal and individualistic angle, immediately seemed so much more prosperous for a curious, gay man writing poetry, wanting to improve his skills and define his own voice, as opposed to the stiff and dusty environment in the United Kingdom. Having passed through the whole North and West of the new country inspired so many ideas in Gunn, he could hardly grasp them all at once. He had collected new thoughts, ideas and conceptions that would quickly seep into his writings. Bringing with him the consciousness of the differences between those observations, he always appreciated the upsides of what he saw, even if only to offer him a subject to write on. Under the constant guidance of Winters, he was starting to get productive on new soil. His profound capability of differentiation made him the perfect canvas for poetry to occupy. His intelligence, his energy and his vigor, as well as his curiosity and acceptance for everything that was new to him, fell on optimal ground to grow.

Personal preferences and personal growth were among the determinants, the new country had a lot to offer to Gunn, helping him to further widen his perspective. He held on to his affinity for gentlemanly behavior and politeness (mainly in others, of course) and transferred this seemingly British trait of character to men like Cary Grant, while at the same time admiring the toughness of the cinematic rebels Marlon Brando⁵⁶ and James Dean. The sense of living, improvising, and the chance of making it as an outsider or misfit appealed to him and fascinated him more than the conformity he learned at Cambridge. He felt more like a ‘hobo’ who had something to say to people who wanted to listen, than a gentleman who put his words together in a way that was quotable for those who did not care for the meaning, but rather their intellectual reputation.

Gunn’s unique mix of experience, classical education, the will to find his own voice, inspiration and of course talent, led to building a good foundation and source of inspiration for writing poetry, but he still struggled to write anything he himself found good. He was uncertain about what would make a good poet and whether he would fulfill those criteria himself. To his former Cambridge supervisor Helena Shire, he writes a letter from the West Coast in 1954: “By ‘being a poet’ you are resoundingly different from other people, and tho that has its attractions as I’d be the first to admit, you train yourself into a state of mind which you think superior to that of other people” (*Letters* 40). His clear view on the opposition of observing and taking part in life, and the differences between poets and other people, in fact helped him to stay on the ground. He realized that although some might say the poet is in a superior position as an observer, he knew that

⁵⁶ Gunn also shows his admiration for Brando in interviews, see de Jongh.

this also had its downsides, which he was motivated to include, if he could find a way. Taking actions himself, instead of being a bystander, is too important for the existentialist.⁵⁷ The seemingly unbridgeable gap between observing and taking part and the fact that observing always changes the observed, points to a dilemma for the young man. It was a challenge and, at the same time by accepting it as unresolvable, much in the spirit of the Revelation, it was the foundation of his strength and uniqueness as a poet. In the end, it is the ambivalence of life, the need to unify seemingly opposing poles of the observed, realizing that it is in fact no contradiction of the given, that the opposition is merely created in the head, which kept him at work. It was this kind of continuity his life seemed to insist on, which he now slowly discovered. He realized the challenge early on and was on the constant search for a way to deal with it, while knowing there was no perfect way to do it with language alone. Only doing, acting on those issues as well as writing would be a way out of this dilemma, but always leaving certain options behind, it created realities in the sense of the existentialist philosophy he admired so much as a Cambridge student. His awareness thus made it easier for him to accept certain flaws that if corrected, would just create other flaws somewhere else, which helped him to eventually finalize his poems. Still, Gunn would always meticulously rewrite and revise his work, with the help of friends and mentors, as he learned at Cambridge. By now, this had become part of his writing process.

For Gunn's further progress in developing his skills, Winters was a wonderful source of information and inspiration for the increasingly mature Gunn. Shortly after starting his studies at Stanford under Winters, Gunn was invited to an event where he met W.H. Auden, one of his early literary influences and heroes. Surprisingly, Gunn was disappointed by his meeting with the writer. He says he "could hardly believe this was the Wild One of the Thirties, who whatever his faults then at least had the virtue of a strident tone of denunciation. But now you'd never know: a flabby dilettante, gracious living, complacent and trite." (*Letters* 43). Was it only Auden's loss of vigor and energy? Or had Gunn already inhaled the spirit of the new so much that he left his nostalgia for Auden's literature behind, in the process of his own letting go of the old and embracing the new? His high intake of new impressions had surely widened Gunn's horizon enough already to speak of a beginning of an Americanization in thoughts, style and expectancy, while not letting go of the ideas he had brought with him. It is the start of a style he would

⁵⁷ A good example of this conflict is the poem "The Nature of an Action" which will be dealt with later

later refer to as Anglo-American, defining himself in a way of merged nationality. Quickly, he seemed to accept that times change, and before mourning his loss of a hero, Gunn diverted his attention to the observation of the little things. One of these was the observation of the dynamics between Auden and Winters, where the latter as the host showed a fairly hospitable approach, while it became obvious that both writers were painfully aware of their differences. They avoided each other, and pointed out their differences with politeness. In the end, the main takeaway from this situation was Gunn's realization that he had outgrown Auden as an influence and inspiration, as his hunger for literature now brought him to choose Winters, his advice and ideas, over the fellow British literary scene. For Gunn, the time was right to move on. This personal development also came with the realization that he had to choose carefully where he would direct his energy and attention. He was aware that he admired Winters, but was mature enough not to want to become his disciple, as this would mean losing his own approach for the sake of adapting to his mentor's ideas. Blindly following other people's views and ideas might have been a part of Gunn's approach when he started at Cambridge, but now, after realizing his own qualities, he would meet his mentors more on eye level, accepting their ideas as what they are, and not as truth to be indoctrinated.

The differences between the views of Winters and his former teacher Leavis fascinated Gunn and kindled his intellect. In a way, they set a framework for what he saw as good poetry. Gunn was keen and curious, delighted by what he was told and taught. Winters' strong personality and widespread knowledge of his subject was, as mentioned, identified as a possible threat to Gunn's creative freedom. Compared to the time under Leavis, Gunn knew by now how to use this to his advantage. He was picking Winters' brain on every piece of information, while carefully making up his own mind, not merely adopting his mentor's opinion. The more he discussed with Winters, the more Gunn was impressed by the instructions, and later found that meeting his teacher during this period in his life was perfect timing, having developed a certain self-confidence about withstanding the strong mind of his mentor, but still was open enough for new ideas for Winters to be a positive influence in his writing. Their vivid discussions about what poetry was and ought to be, and what not to be, were a part of this apprenticeship Gunn would recall decades later. Gunn interpreted Winters' opinion like this:

It would have seemed to him an insult to the poem that it could be used as a gymnasium for the ego. Poetry was an instrument for exploring the truth of things, as far as human beings can explore it, and it can do so with a greater verbal exactitude than prose can manage. Large generalized feelings (as in Whitman) were out, and rhetoric was the beginning of falsification. (*OP* 176)

While he agreed with some of those aspects, while not accepting Winters' rigidity on the conception of poetry, it was in the end Winters, who preferred structure and the classical way of writing, who suggested that Gunn read William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. This recommendation opened a whole new range for Gunn, who was seeking out to progress his own writing. The idea of modernism and free verse was now planted in his mind, and he started looking for ways to realize the new style in his writings, hoping it would provide him with more freedom of expression.

In matters of providing a framework, Leavis and Winters also provide two pillars for Gunn, within whose ranges he will move poetically. While Leavis was famous among his students for the peculiar pronunciation of the term self-pity, and thus enshrined his opinion of it as a bad ground to base literature on, Winters, and his notion of poetry not being a gymnasium for the ego, further defined Gunn's poetic approach: not taking himself so seriously for one thing, and despising confessional poetry for another. Gunn would always move according to those ideas, although generally he was intellectually free to bend his rules, while also claiming that he never had his own poetics.⁵⁸ This might be true, as a general rule that would positively define his writings. It is also evident that he avoided becoming as confessional as Sylvia Plath, a few years later.

His need for socialization was bolstered by his curiosity in people as well as his status as the new, English guy. Supported by his youthful looks, intelligence and energy, his Englishness helped him to find his role in the Stanford social surroundings very quickly. His new network by no means reached the size of his former circle of Cambridge friends, but it was sufficient. Gunn did not consider the West Coast or Bay Area his home, after only being there for a few months, so his urge for sustainable friendships had yet to grow. Still, after a relatively short time, he already connected well, especially since personal contact was one of the sources of his energy.

Around Christmas, his highly stimulated brain was up for a long-awaited change. After having said goodbye in summer, half a year ago, one of his main reasons for coming to the United States was about to re-enter his life. Gunn finally had the time to visit Kitay, who now had spent around a quarter of his military time at San Antonio. They met for the first time after their break; Gunn brought with him lots of stories about his impressions and the experiences he had had so far, as well as a plan for avoiding long breaks like this

⁵⁸ "Poetics is such a big word nowadays, such a fashionable word.... I'm interested in writing poetry and I'm genuinely not interested in the theory of poetry." Gunn (*SL* 227).

in the future. From San José, he was already weighing the working options he would have in or around San Antonio. Having acquired some teaching experience as an education sergeant in the British Army, as well as an intelligent reader with a classical education at Cambridge, he reasoned it had to be easy to find a teaching position for himself. He found openings in several places and finally found a good opportunity at the fairly new San Antonio Trinity College. Apart from seeing his lover again, he followed the goal of setting the groundwork for an occupation there. It only lasted a short while until they had to part again, but not before Gunn had accepted the teaching position at Trinity College starting the following summer, and started planning how to leave Stanford, at least for a while. He could not possibly tell Winters that his love for Kitay was the reason for the break.

The Christmas holidays and the passionate reunion between the two lovers were over now, and Gunn returned to Stanford. The ardor between Kitay and himself was still there, but Gunn's curiosity for people and connection did not stop at intellectual talks. His sexuality was also a huge source of energy, and when he compensated for his lust by writing while he was at Cambridge⁵⁹, before he met Kitay, his urge for the sexual adventure now increased during his early residency in the United States. After all, he was so close to San Francisco, already a gay Mecca at that time. At Stanford he had his first United States crush, "a beautiful black-Irish janitor who cleaned the toilets at Stanford" (Gunn, *Letters* 596). There was an unknown ambiguity again: Gunn went to the USA to be closer to his lover, and yet his body yearned for something, and he seemed to have room for other men in his life. As for flirting in the open, the other side of that ambiguity was the unknown: how much could he say? How could he flirt and how far could he actually go? Even if nothing happened, being called out just for the attempt of a homosexual approach was a criminal offence, and that was especially risky for someone who stayed on the terms of a student visa. So he had two challenges: the monogamous relationship with Kitay was about to be renegotiated, and he had to find safe ways to find other gay men, who were looking for the same thing as he was.

The new surroundings in the United States had a profound impact on Gunn's writing and thus his poetry. He very much fancied the American way of life and freedom as he saw it, and the freedom of the misfits and revolutionaries. In the spirit of the 1953 Marlon Brando movie *The Wild One* (*Benedek*), Gunn wrote a poem about motorcycling and gangs. He worked on "On the Move – Man You Gotta Go" from March to May 1955, interweaving those sentiments of rebellion with his existentialist world views. It was an

⁵⁹ See interview with Teeman.

important piece to him, and it already shows his inclination for his sadomasochistic lifestyle in its undertones.

The writing carries a certain freedom in it, especially from his own ego; when Gunn states despite his general need for detachment, in the specific case of “On the Move”, he did not focus on detachment, but still managed to write truthfully and not confessionally. He later admits the poem reflects his unreligious upbringing in a “a particular and unprecedented kind of exuberant godlessness” (Gunn, *Letters* 104) as well as several years of Sartre’s influence. The motorcycle image comes from his being surrounded by friends riding them, perpetuating an image he was very fond of. He actually planned to write a whole set of motorcycle poems, but except for “On the Move” and “The Unsettled Motorcyclist’s vision of his Death”, *The Sense of Movement* does not contain any other poem with the subject of the motorbike, explicitly.

He summed up one of the properties or characteristics of riding a motorcycle as follows: “The mere riding of one is, in a strange way, a sort of controlled irresponsibility” (*Letters* 104). It defines his sense of freedom and looseness without the guarantee of safety, which in a way describes his approach to poetry, which was also about taking some risks. After all, magic always happens outside of your comfort zone, which is part of why Gunn appreciated and sometimes even actively looked for change. The important ingredient of this was balance, in life and poetry. In the case of motorbikes, it was risky enough to truly be a kind of freedom that had to be earned, and controlled enough to have a good chance of staying alive.

The image of the motorcycle gang from “On the Move” (Gunn, *SM* 11–12), “the boys” (11) was indeed a good vehicle to transport the feeling and Gunn’s going forward, “always toward, toward.” (12) It reflects his philosophy at the time so well that he would defend it against all sorts of criticism, and gives purpose and meaning to the chosen words and techniques for the following years (with a few exceptions) before accepting it as a time piece.⁶⁰ In publication, he also chooses to go new ways, putting in a special effort to open up to new groups of readers. So far, Gunn was regularly publishing poems in the *London Mag* as his main outlet. For this new piece he chose *Encounter*, for more – and different – people to see it. This change of publication and his choice to do so can be seen as a break of sorts. Although remaining true to his metered and very structured forms,

⁶⁰ Interestingly enough, the wild image still carries on in the myth of Harley Davidson, but it is mostly groups of veterans – former soldiers – who organize rides on motorbikes nowadays, which seems to be a striking contrast to Gunn’s poem. Podcast by Hesse.

which had been strengthened by Winters and his teachings, the subject matter was far from Cambridge now. As Gunn progressed, he obviously also transformed. In a way, the contents were Gunn's first steps to free himself from the chains and limits of structural restraints in the near future.

Although artistic freedom was now taking more and more space in Gunn's work "On the Move – Man You Gotta Go"⁶¹ was surely one of the most impactful and defining poems for Gunn as a writer and for his public image.⁶² Shortly after publishing, it would be taught as a subject at schools and universities, and there would be direct replies to the piece in poetry. It was one of Gunn's most central works, but in general his first months in the United States were so inspiring, that he wrote a good deal of poetry, dealing with the enormous input, visually, emotionally and intellectually. The pieces written in the US quickly adopted an American touch, maybe not in form and style, but unmistakably in subject matter and language. Seen through the eyes of a curious British immigrant, all those American things like motorcycles, vast landscapes, oceans, the idea of freedom, and revolutionary thought went through his head and as such slowly transformed his poetry as well, gradually turning him into an Anglo-American poet.

Under Winters in Stanford, Gunn was practicing hard to find a way to control these energies and also finding his voice in his poetry while doing so. Along the way, he dove deeper into the current of the West Coast's life, following his continuity of taking part in a life that his poet persona would observe and later describe. Being relatively new to the Bay Area, Gunn relied on locals and fellow students for places to go. His charm and restlessness were the perfect mix that allowed him to see new places and people. Among his new friends was a couple, Tony and Charlotte Herbold,⁶³ who coincidentally shared the same names as his best friend in the UK and his mother. The two took Gunn out one night to the 'Black Cat' in 1955; it was one of the early gay bars in San Francisco. Partly as a disguise, they also provided him with a girl as a date, for cover. The woman was called Mary, and according to Gunn's memory, she constantly pitied the men who

⁶¹ The subtitle is actually a misquoted line from the movie *The Wild One*

⁶² His friend Oliver Sacks would later use "On the Move" as the title for his Autobiography

⁶³ "Tony and Charlotte Herbold took TG to his first gay bar, the Black Cat, in San Francisco. They went in the company of a woman called Mary, TG's 'date'. The bar, TG told Robert Prager, 'was a great revelation to me. Gay bars were enjoyable! Though Mary kept on saying, 'Those poor men. I feel so sorry for them.' I wasn't feeling sorry for them. I could see that they were having fun. And I realized I could have fun there too, so I went back there the next night by myself." Gunn (*Letters* 47).

went there. He felt the opposite, as he could observe only happy people having fun, in contrast to his company. The happiness of the people there also triggered an urge in him, he wanted to join those happy and gay people. After that evening, Gunn was so intrigued that the next day, he went there again, this time on his own, starting a whole new chapter of his gay life.⁶⁴

Not seeing one's lover for a couple of months, especially being in one's prime, can be very unsatisfactory. Here, the dynamics between Gunn's sexual needs and Kitay's need for affection played a big part in the couple's personal development during this time. While Gunn was in San José, close to San Francisco's gay bar scene, the gayest place on Earth, which he was eager to discover, Kitay was far away in San Antonio, in the middle of the plains of the USA, with the military, forbidden to freely live out his own sexuality by the law of the state as well as the organization. Of course, Kitay was jealous, and he had good reason to be. Gunn, who stated that men are "probably horniest in their 20s" (Teeman 2), was full of sexual energy, curiosity and the will to learn more about his yearnings every day. While in his early years in Cambridge he compensated for his lust by turning the energies into poetry, now he was interested in experiencing the bodily effects it would have on him. Although the lovers' affection towards each other was strong enough to keep their connection going over so many miles, and even brought Gunn across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States, temptation for bodily satisfaction was there, and surely this was one of the next obstacles to be discussed. In the end it was Gunn who opened the relationship sexually, at least, as Kitay recalls.⁶⁵ He was now laying the foundations for a life of promiscuity and sexual adventures with gay men on the West Coast and, in fact, everywhere he went. His opening up to the possibilities outside of the structures of a classical relationship between two would later also be mirrored in his promiscuity towards writing and styles.

But first, after studying one year under Winters, contemplating whether to stay in the US or moving back to England eventually and visiting Mike only once during Christmas break, Thom had decided to move to Texas to teach and be close to his lover. He told Winters he had to leave for Texas to live with his female lover from the US, as a

⁶⁴ Gay bars were one of the few safe spaces in these days. For further background, see *Gay Bar* by Lin and "Structural Foundations of the Gay World" by Adam.

⁶⁵ Kitay describes himself as a serial monogamist, who did not gain too much satisfaction from promiscuity, although he remembers some adventures together with Gunn and without. From Interview with ("Thom Gunn as a Life Long Partner")

disguise. He accepted the offer from Trinity College in San Antonio, and so in the summer of 1955 he packed his belongings to go to Texas, but not without fitting in a meeting on a detour to his new home that would lead to some of the more important acquaintances in Gunn's life. On his way to San Antonio, he did what so many people dream of (albeit for different reasons). He went to Los Angeles, or more precisely Hollywood, to visit a screenwriter on a film set. The movie that was being shot was *Diane* with Lana Turner, Pedro Armendáriz and fellow Englishman Roger Moore. The movie is about a courtesan at the French court in the sixteenth century and one of the screenwriters was another British emigrant, the famous gay writer Christopher Isherwood. The author of the *Berlin Diaries* and close friend to W.H. Auden had settled in California a few years earlier and became quite successful writing for Hollywood. In his own diaries he notes on that day,

Yesterday Thom Gunn came to lunch with me, en route for Texas. Liked him so much I asked him to come on with us to Michael [Barrie]'s for supper. He has pockmarks and a vertically lined face like a convict, and his nose and chin are both too big -- yet he's quite attractive, with his bright brown eyes. He likes America, especially California. I warm to all Britishers who do that. And he's intelligent and warm. (Isherwood and Bucknell 506)

While Isherwood admired Gunn's looks and intelligence, Gunn was impressed by Isherwood's youthful charisma and curiosity, as well as his craftsmanship in forging novels. Both of them immediately got along very well right from the beginning despite their age gap of twenty-five years, and the following decades of friendship were always marked by honesty and mutual inspiration. The friendship might not have been characterized as a very close one, also because San Francisco and Los Angeles are significantly far apart, but they exchanged through letters and anytime one of them was close to the other's home, they took the opportunity to catch up. Their connection was mainly built on their mutual admiration of each other's craft, both learning from the other's knowledge and self-criticism, and while Gunn saw Isherwood as a mentor and role model in clarity, Isherwood was caught by Gunn's honesty and stride for truth in his poetry.⁶⁶ As a friend, Isherwood was also more than happy to give advice on how Gunn might deal with McCarthy, his minions and the likes, who might want to get hold of him. Isherwood himself had some experience to share, dealing with those people, being gay and inclined to socialism himself. After leaving Hollywood and Isherwood behind, Gunn was finally on the way to Kitay, following his original plan to live in San Antonio. The two men rented a shared apartment at 2638 West Craig, San Antonio, to keep their

⁶⁶ See "Christopher Isherwood: Getting Things Right" in Gunn (*SL* 173–96).

disguise alive as friends living together. Their long separation, which had only been broken for a few short weeks, was over for now.

Of course, two men living together still raised suspicion, and were they ever found out the situation was as risky for the soldier, who could have been dishonorably discharged from the military, as it was for the poet, who could have been forced to leave the country were they ever discovered the truth. Obstacles were appearing down the road for the two men once again.⁶⁷ Kitay was also teaching English, as a Cambridge graduate, but for the military of course. Most of his students were not there for their love of the beauty of language, but to collect credits needed for their military career.

One day, a military student of his, who was caught doing something that was considered gay at the time, was offered the chance to reduce his own terms of punishment, if he could give the military names of other gays. The young man accepted the offer and one of the names he mentioned was that of Mike Kitay. This was a harsh thing to do in the fifties; not only did this have the power to destroy Kitay's military career, but it was also possible he would have to go to jail, if the accusations were proven true. Kitay was struck by the process; although he knew the man was gay, but they never interacted sexually, or even at all apart from class, according to his statement. What the accusation meant for him was a process of trying to prove he was not gay, even apart from proving that he did not interact with the student and thus, also denying his identity, or at least part of it.

As much sympathy Kitay deserves for the stress, it is primarily because of the impact on Gunn that it is brought up in this dissertation. If Kitay's sexuality had been uncovered, the shadow of suspicion would have surely fallen on his flat mate as well. Gunn might not have had to go to jail, at least not for long, but his chances of losing his job and additionally being kicked out of the country were at 100% in the McCarthy Era. It is definitely understandable, why the poet was nervous about the situation and showed it, despite not being an overtly emotional person. Losing everything he built in the new country so far, and under the circumstances of having lied so much about his sexuality to get what he had, was a very high price to pay for being the collateral damage of such a witch hunt. And the inquisitions came uncomfortably close to him. In an interview, he had to reply to questions about Kitay, and Gunn was not known to be spontaneous in free speech. But when asked about Kitay being a homosexual and his own knowledge about

⁶⁷ Gunn referred to some pieces in *The Sense of Movement* as 'Obstacle Poetry' when inspired by Kitay, especially when they included hidden homosexuality.

it, Gunn replied “If Mike was a homosexual, I’d know.” (Kitay) This bold statement left the inquisitors satisfied for some reason and at least they did not ask Gunn further questions.

This story shows several things: the most obvious being the inconvenient situation of queer people during that time in so many areas of life, Gunn’s ability to adapt in tricky situations and use his language skills to get out of some through words alone, and how much the two men stuck together, especially under pressure. Maybe Gunn had already learned a bit from his new friend Isherwood, who taught him that attack and wit can help. It also makes very clear why Gunn did not come out of the closet earlier. As he said, he might have been a coward, although in this case, staying in the closet was not cowardice, but the reasonable thing to do.⁶⁸

Texas was, in many ways, very different to the Bay Area. Living next to the Pacific Ocean generally provides one with a more moderate and humid climate than a more inland place like San Antonio. Gunn describes Texas as tedious with frequent sandstorms, which is generally true but was even worse during his stay, as the 1950s were one of the driest periods in Texan climate history ever, having been dubbed the Texas Drought, which had its highest impact in 1956. Nonetheless, the vast settlements and landscapes offered novelty to Gunn, and he made the best of it. In the United States he developed a certain fascination and love for cities, and San Antonio would provide at least some satisfaction to him in that respect.

With only the experience of teaching as an Education Sergeant in the army, teaching English as a subject at Trinity College in San Antonio was new territory for him. The arrangement was surely good enough to fulfill the purpose of being closer to his lover, but as for teaching itself, Gunn’s confidence was not very high. He found it dull at first, including himself, partly because of the remoteness of the place, partly because he found the students uninspiring, and partly because he did not get the impression that he was particularly good at it, while the latter reason had the most impact on the self-critical man he was. Gunn was always considering the possibility that he might not be cut out for some things, and that was OK for him, although the process of finding out was the hard part. Of course, he was not trained as a teacher, which made it hard, even when he knew the theory behind the subject and the basics of the teaching matter. As a man who did not

⁶⁸ Asked on why he did not come out earlier, Gunn replies “it’s an obvious question, for people with no sense of history, anyway. Of course, you’re old enough to have lived through some of it, and knowledgeable enough to. But there are lots of people who aren’t old enough, or who don’t know enough.” Gunn and Campbell 27.

easily give up, he pursued the task. In fact, the path of a teacher gave him something he was craving, which was an intellectual exchange. This is also why the brightness of his students (or the lack thereof) was so important to him. The opportunity to change his views in arguments, the possibility of new inspiration and ⁶⁹ new subject matter for his poetry were what caught his attention and kept him going. Unfortunately, in San Antonio the possibility to fulfill his needs were small, as his mind during this period did not get as much intellectual sustenance as he wished for.

To fill the rest of his capacity and time with attractive options, in the summer of 1955 Gunn was “getting command of several different machines at once” as he lets his brother know before contemplating, “the right country to do it in, I guess” (*Letters* 55). One of those machines was his first typewriter; the other had more potential to become an asset to the glamorous image that Gunn wanted to pursue, following the ideas of freedom, rebellion and existentialism. On Monday, June 13th, he acquired a second-hand Harley Davidson, as if his life insisted on this counterbalance to the tranquility and intellectuality connected to a typewriter. He considered the bike’s price of \$250 a bargain. How much he wanted that new toy can be deduced from his brother’s anticipated surprise at the fact that he had obtained a driver’s license, which would have seemed odd to anyone who knew him. Thom Gunn had a reputation of not making the road a safer place, to put it mildly, which is one reason he had relied on public transport and other modes of transportation so far, and as he would in fact for the rest of his life. To Tony White he connects the news of having acquired a bike to his pride about “On the Move” as being one of his best pieces yet – and it surely fits the whole sentiment. There he was, the writer, who now controlled machines⁷⁰ that seemed now to define his world. Although he developed a deep connection to his “sexually beautiful” bike which he also describes as “like bringing up a child” due to the constant surprises, he is also convinced that “it is going to fall to pieces under” (Gunn, *Letters* 59) him. The hassles of technical issues made him abandon the bike a short time later. He ultimately sold his motorcycle on July 20th in 1956, shortly before leaving Texas to return to San José. The image that stuck with him was the one of the rebel on two wheels, and of course the leather jacket. The outfit

⁶⁹ “I have always believed that it should be possible to write poetry about any subject that was of importance to you” Gunn (*OP* 182).

⁷⁰ As a fun side note, he writes to Tony White “I’ve got a wonderful typewriter by the way – 30 years old, but with all the French & Spanish accents on, and even an umlaut. Hell, I must be like dreary old Walt Whitman & start introducing foreign words into my poems; then I’ll be able to use all the accents.” (*Letters* 52).

consisting of leather jacket and cowboy boots would remain as a visible reminder of what Gunn fancied; it became his own uniform of a sort, conveying the meaning of freedom and rebellion to him. It is what remains of the promise given by Harley-Davidson: “We sell you the dream, the product is for free.” (Nettebohm)

For Thom Gunn it was that dream of being free of mind, without attachment, that he bought with his Harley. He underlines his will to be himself in every possible way when he writes “motorcycles are considered disreputable over here – only hoodlums ride them – and it is considered ODD for a teacher to ride one.” (*Letters* 65) He expresses this meaning of motorcycles in two poems. One is his masterpiece “On the Move”, the other one is titled “The Unsettled Motorcyclist’s Vision of his Death” – both of which contain a sentiment of action, energy, and freedom as well as the juxtapositions of will versus nature and life versus death. The non-conformity and conformity present in the poem are inspired by the imagery of *The Wild One* and use parts of its language, found even years later in the song “Born to be Wild”.⁷¹

There was yet another level of experience to be unfolded. At the time Gunn settled in America, a musical phenomenon emerged, and of course, the ever-observant Gunn paid attention. One Mississippi boy with a difficult childhood, struggling to deal with the character of his mother and the imprisonment of his father, found his own salvation in an unexpected neighborhood. Although he was a white boy, he was mesmerized by the Gospel music he listened to, and reveled in what the music was to him: soothing, inspiring and energizing. The teenager hung out at the Flamingo Room and after graduating from school in 1953, he rented a music studio to record his first piece, as a birthday present for his mother, a striking parallel to Gunn and *The Flirt*, but on a different scale. After becoming a musician, the boy, whose name was Elvis Presley⁷², was discovered by Sam Philips. His young career skyrocketed after being auditioned in 1954, doing his duty gigs in the Bon Air Club and being a regular at the Louisiana Hayride. His fame was fueled by crossing the boundaries of what was accepted in society those days: mixing black and white subject matter, which was scandalous enough already in the 1950s, and peaking on July 17th in 1954, when he presented his dance move that came to be known as ‘the Wiggle’ on stage, combining it with his black and white music. Thus, creating an unignorable trademark, he was not only shaking his hips, but also the moral foundations

⁷¹ Title song of *Easy Rider*, Hopper.

⁷² For more on Rock and Roll, see Elledge.

of the society of the United States, going so far as to be threatened with prison if he continued to perform this vulgar act.

The extent and way of Gunn's knowledge about the early story of Elvis cannot be fully determined, but what becomes clear is the fascination he had for the singer. Almost directly after the publication of Elvis' first single "Heartbreak Hotel", Gunn heard his music on a jukebox, and was inspired to write a poem about the singer, which found its way to Gunn's book *The Sense of Movement*. His getting in touch with Elvis's Rock 'n' Roll is exactly what he describes in the poem titled "Elvis Presley" (Gunn, *SM* 31). He points out the tension between the real man behind the song and his listeners as "our idiosyncrasies and our likeness", and culminates his poetic argument in an allusion to his theory of pose, where the ambivalences become visible: it is not mere music, it is the idea (and the perceived idea) of the artist, as well as the consumers interpretation of it, that make up the message in the end. His pose could be real, or mere acting, but although "no cat bothers to say" that, the dancing style of Elvis can also be read as a "posture for combat" against whatever may come at the man on the stage.

What music was to Elvis, literature was to Gunn. Looking at their relationship with their mothers and how it affected their art, their willful rebellions against the classical, the conservative and lifeless are hard to miss. Both had something to say, and both were willing to take certain risks to have their voices heard. Although facing various challenges, their motivation was strong. Elvis was pushing the boundaries with regards to segregation and sexuality, while Gunn was progressively disregarding the standards for classical poetry, ignoring how a poem should look or what it should be about, including the sexual energies in his words, which had to be disguised but were slowly working their way to the surface. Later, as life progressed, more similarities between the two artists would come into play, like drugs to alter the perception of reality, though in different ways. In the end, Elvis would exhaust himself in the process of giving his music to the world. Gunn purchased a reminder of the early days of Rock 'n' Roll which would later stand in the dining room of his home: a jukebox became a visible relic of his mid-fifties' poetry.

At the high time of finishing his "second work of apprenticeship." (Gunn, *OP* 176-77) during the mid-fifties, Gunn was confronted with a situation he clearly disliked. His first book *Fighting Terms* was successful enough to have people talk about him as a poet. And thus, critics wrote about him. One of them was J. D. Scott and in the attempt

to identify certain currents of emerging poets, he classified Thom Gunn as a member of a group of writers he called ‘The Movement’.⁷³ He categorized Gunn alongside some of his contemporaries like Philipp Larkin, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings and Robert Conquest. With Conquest, who seemed to have liked the idea, wanting to publish an anthology called *New Lines*, Gunn corresponded vividly, arguing about why he thought this approach would not do those poets, especially himself, justice. When the issue was directly addressed by Conquest, Gunn replied, very directly stating “I don’t think the Movement is a movement in the same sense that, say, the Imagists, the Thirties, the Apocalyptic, were movements.” (*Letters* 53) In Gunn’s opinion, ‘The Movement’ lacked intentionality, including his own intention to be a member of it. The writers assembled under the new terminology did not form an intentional group with a manifest of that sort, but rather were developing and emerging in parallel with one another and thus, maybe by coincidence, shared some approaches or some of their style. The only real similarity between them, as seen by Gunn, was “a desire to get rid of the phoniness that was preparing in the Thirties and that made the Forties an all-time low in Eng Lit” (53) – and which writer taking his craft seriously would not want to do that?

In his letter to Conquest, Gunn also makes it clear how he despises categorizations in literary criticism, as he merely sees it as a device to make it easier to write about a group of people instead of really dealing with each of them separately. His use of the term “a healthy destructive attitude” (53), or describing some of the artists including himself as “pretty eccentric” (53), may indicate how displeased he was about his new label. In the end, as polite as he was, he asks his letter’s recipient to use anything necessary from his work. He also suggests that he might rewrite some of his poems published in *Fighting Terms*, as they no longer matched his taste at that time. He had already intended to rewrite these poems anyway and saw an opportunity to do just that, making the poems a bit more modern. In fact, Gunn altered his *Fighting Terms* for its release in the United States in 1958 by modifying some of the pieces, only to abandon these alterations in future publications in anthologies, collected poems and other media upon realizing and accepting that poems were indeed time pieces and should rather be left alone than frequently updated. They have been written and conceived under certain circumstances and they cannot necessarily be mended and altered to fit another period in time, which they were not made for.

⁷³ See also Anderson, also Leader.

As for his future plans, Gunn did some thinking in Texas and in January 1956, and took action on a decision he made. He humbly writes to his Stanford teacher Yvor Winters. As a sort of bribe, he encloses one of his new poems in a fairly rigid style, titled “To Yvor Winters, 1955” (Gunn, *SM* 44–45) and elaborates on its flaws within his letter. He also offers to make changes in case Winters felt misinterpreted and misrepresented in the piece, which also shows how much respect Gunn had for his subjects, especially when they were existing people. This poetic homage seems to have had, in addition to poeticizing the teacher and his skills, the function of opening the recipient’s mind to a request of a different nature than poetry for a poet. After adding praise for other students of Winters, like Donald Hall, complimenting his syllabics (a technique and form that would play an important role to Gunn himself very soon), or Calvin Thomas Jr., and even a little self-praise (in discussing his readings during his absence and his intention of writing a libretto), Gunn finally gets to the point. He introduces it as the “practical purpose of this letter” (*Letters* 66), and suggests working as a PhD graduate student under Winters. Besides this being good for him, his main reason for the effort was that he needed the degree to teach at United States universities. Teaching by now was something Gunn could imagine doing for a living, complementing his art and providing a stable foundation for his financial resources. For this goal, he was willing to accept a kind of work he most certainly was not cut out for, but it seemed necessary in order to become a teacher at universities, “which is what I think I want to do” (67).

Gunn of course was well prepared, though he missed the deadline for application, and suggests writing on modern American poetry, focusing on the recently deceased Wallace Stevens. Gunn wondered why not much had been written about him and thought he could fill a gap there. Today we see the same issue with Gunn himself, unfortunately with a much larger gap between his passing and this dissertation.⁷⁴ The writer shortly discusses three topics that would interest him most in the oeuvre of Stevens:

(1) the influence of French poets on him (this would be very difficult, and possibly not fruitful); (2) Stevens as agnostic – showing how his failure (and the failure of much 19th and 20th century thought) can be related to the agnostic attitude; (3) the poem as an “object” – i.e., presented without judgment – e.g., *13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* and many worse poems – and why such an endeavor must fail. – The second of these ideas attracts me most: however, it may be too large, and the others may be too restricted. (*Letters* 67)

⁷⁴ or the biography by Michael Nott, which has still to be published

Besides Gunn's general ability to distinctly differentiate these ideas, shortly summing them up and estimating the amount of work that would have to go into it, it might strike the reader of that letter how his way of looking at the work of Stevens as a subject is presented with admiration as well as critical ideas. Choosing a thesis about poetry and a modernist poet under Winters was a daring task on its own, and Gunn considered himself to be capable enough to take it up. At the age of twenty-six, he proved here that he does not necessarily suffer from lack of self-confidence, but he was also without the arrogance that a person overestimating their own abilities might show, if too convinced in succeeding with the task.

As an interesting side note, Gunn makes his plea to return to Stanford, as he deems Winters to be the best person to work under for this topic, giving the reason for his coming back by saying that his "engagement to the Texane is now off" and he as a result would be "free to go" (Gunn, *Letters* 67). Again, the underlying difficulty is Gunn's sexuality, and his knowledge about homophobic tendencies in his mentor,⁷⁵ which is why he hid this part of his identity once more. He left Stanford under the pretense of being engaged to a Texan woman, instead of telling the truth about Mike Kitay, and now refers to this engagement by lying about its cancellation, when the truth was that Kitay was to be discharged from the Air Force and intended to move in with Gunn in the Bay Area, to study at Stanford himself. Gunn estimated higher chances to be accepted for his PhD, if he acted as a normal guy, and the goal was important enough for him to deny who he really was.

Meanwhile, the manuscript of *The Sense of Movement* was put together and mainly consisted of those new poems written during Gunn's first months in the US. It was accepted by Faber & Faber in 1956, to be published the following year. The title of the book itself is fitting to Gunn's energy and the book's contents, and a play on words. The double meaning of the word 'sense' was as intentional as Gunn's playing with the movement as a category, surely having his conversation with Robert Conquest in the back of his mind. The voice of the poet within his new book has clearly adopted an American tone. Along the subtitle of "On the Move" in which "Man you Gotta go" is as colloquially American as it gets in language style as well as in subject matter. His subject matter in

⁷⁵ "Homosexuality was held in peculiar horror even by liberals who would not have dreamt of attacking minorities. In the mid-fifties, when I asked my teacher and friend Yvor Winters why he did not like Whitman's poem about the twenty-eight young men bathing [...], he replied that the homosexual feeling of the poem was such that he could not get beyond it" Gunn (*OP* 119).

general started to shift from the classical imagery that reflected most of the Cambridge environment towards more American-influenced topics, especially those particularly concerning the writer's life. The poems written between the publication of *Fighting Terms* and his first influences and experiences in the United States certainly show more attachment to the classical poetry with a fresher voice. But as Gunn was a poet on the move, his life philosophy quickly estranged him from that language, when it was not needed for him to convey meaning. The American spirit that seeped into his works "Elvis Presley", "High Fidelity", "In Praise of the Cities"⁷⁶, "Thoughts on Unpacking", "Meeting a Possible Mother-in-Law", "To Yvor Winters" and of course his central existentialistic poem "On the Move – Man you Gotta Go" marks this shift to another realm of poetry and subject matter in the poems in his new book *The Sense of Movement*. In terms of style though, Gunn still relied on the knowledge, influences and techniques he acquired in England, with classical shapes and structure, as well as rhyme schemes. These, combined with new, revolutionary subject matter, with which he left his literary home England behind with, make up the new voice of the mid-1950s Thom Gunn, who was still not done searching for his style. His sense for language, precision and observation mixed with his ability to also experience and his fine observational skills provided him with the tools and groundwork for the poetry to come.

Rule and energy are defining features throughout most of the whole book, and these characteristics show very deliberately in the central poem "On the Move (Man, you Gotta Go)".⁷⁷ As Gunn was slowly progressing from the mystical scenery of the legends of ancient Greece, he very soon after his arrival adapted a style which today could be described as an all-American imagery. At least it is fairly certain that the vast landscapes and scenery as they are described in "On the Move" (as well as the motorcyclists) are not inspired by a typical English background. This in mind, it is fair to say that the opening poem of *The Sense of Movement* also opens a new chapter in Gunn's repertoire of scenery and subject matter. Being very aware of his homosexuality, Gunn, who had left his old life behind to follow another man, does not seem to be comfortable with proclaiming this openly in his writings. After all, times were different in the 1950s, and we get a glimpse of how he saw it in his essay about Robert Duncan in his 1982 book *The Occasions of Poetry*:

"Those of us who chose not to be part of such enclaves did however feel a certain sense of threat from the effusive stereotypes: they seemed to be parodying

⁷⁶ In which his newly found fascination for the city as an entity comes to show.

⁷⁷ The epigraph 'Man, you Gotta Go' was omitted in later versions.

femininity. Were we in fact really like that ourselves, we wondered, if we just let ourselves go? Nowadays the thought they could be a threat seems laughable; for the more a ghetto disperses itself into the surrounding society the more various are the patterns of behavior available to its members. But at the time the threat seemed real enough. And we hate what threatens us.” (125)

In his admiration for what Duncan did for the Queer Society, Gunn was ready to admit his fear of being publicly gay later in life. The fact that writing explicitly gay poetry⁷⁸ could mean losing the publisher led to a number of poets preferring to disguise their sexual preferences. Gunn puts this the following way: “Most homosexual writers until at least the 1960s dealt with autobiographical and personal material only indirectly. One method was for a poet to address his work to an unspecified 'you', giving an occasional ambiguous hint about what was really going on to those in the know only. (This is what Auden did, and what I was to do later.)” (*OP* 119) In light of this information, it is certainly possible to read “On the Move” from a gay angle, being aware of course that the poem should not be seen as a pamphlet for gay rights. It is rather the case that the poet himself cannot ever free himself from what he is, and he does not seem to develop in a direction to want that, either. “On the Move” can be seen as an early step towards a free style in writing poetry without a disguise, which is innocent as well as honest, and deviant as well as socially accepted.

The subtitle itself immediately introduces the idea of a race, and it is not grammatically correct either, as only the subject ‘Man’ and the verb ‘Go’ are capitalized; the ‘you Gotta’, which was a misquotation from a movie line, remains ignored in a way, even though it gestures towards the protagonists by using a rather colloquial style, a biker’s style of speech. This break with the grammatical convention may lead to the conclusion that within these words, there lies a certain importance. Indeed, reading the poem with a queer eye, ‘man’ could only refer to a male addressee, which defines the gender right from the beginning, excluding women. The reading as mankind is unlikely for several reasons: firstly, because ‘man’ is in singular, secondly, because Gunn relates to the motorcyclists as ‘Boys’. ‘Go’ has several possible meanings in this context: to go away, go as in the start of a race, go as in going somewhere, all of which have a different intensity to the addressee, but always suggesting a movement away from something or somewhere else. In combination with the main title “On the Move”, the opening of the poem immediately implies a faster pace. The colloquial word ‘gotta’ implies a break from the elaborate British English that Gunn had used thus far, indicating his shift to the

⁷⁸ See Woods.

American side of the Atlantic Ocean. The influence of Winters as a teacher and William Carlos Williams as a poet were already foreshadowed, at work as early as 1955, when Gunn wrote this poem. It is also a very bold break of style, where Gunn accepts the full range of force, which he could now play by writing poetry.

At first, reading the whole poem “On the Move” (Gunn, *SM* 11–12) could suggest it is a nature poem, one that would also fit the Romantic era, starting with the description of a blue jay in the bushes. Quickly, this feeling for nature is interrupted and it becomes clear that contrast and balance are among the poet’s techniques of expressing the meaning of the poem – a contrast that might also leave the opportunity to draw parallels between nature and man, animals and machines, and their options for coexistence. Although the birds’ purpose in the poem is not immediately clear (or rather, their purpose remains hidden), it is assumed that they have one; it is simply not understood by the observers. This is also true for the situation of gays and lesbians in the 1950s. They were hidden and had to hide their natural desires, their instinct, because being homosexual was seen as abnormal or as an illness.⁷⁹ Queer people had to hide, to be out of sight of those in society who regarded them as too different, or condemned them entirely. The birds have already nested in hiding, having chosen a concealed lair as their best means of survival, in relative safety. Yet, a lair is static; moving from the lairs hard or even impossible, leaving can be either temporary or final, but in both cases it is risky. The birds are seeking their instinct and poise; instinct again suggesting nature, contrasting poise, which is something that is acquired, a posture or pose. Here, seeking both at once is suggestive of trying to make ends meet. The last three lines of the first stanza seem like a prelude to the second stanza, as they give the impression that something is on its way. “Approximate words” (11) are already threatening, intruding, like the massive impact of a thunderstorm, making nature wild, nervous, and yet only in a dull way, downplaying its possible impact verbally. The allusions and anthropomorphic characterizations of the animals (hidden purpose, seeking their poise) are disturbed by the mention of the term ‘words’, referring to language, which is unique to humans.

Like a sharp cut in a movie, approaching from far away across wide landscapes, something menacing comes along. This something first appears as flies, evoking a chaotic, uncontrollable feeling, but the approaching menace is soon to be identified as boys, who yet remain impersonal. Covered by masks, or goggles, the individuality of the single members of the group is disguised. It is almost impossible to overlook the analogy

⁷⁹ Referring to the American Psychiatric Association (APA)

between the flies and homosexuals: flies being pests to people who want to remain undisturbed, but also hard to catch and impossible to eradicate. The uniformed collective also share a common meaning which they do not reveal to the outsider, enhancing their potential of force and energy by making a union between man and machine, the bikers being almost impossible to be seen without the motorbikes. The word choice almost seems to represent the inventory of a rough leather gay bar: bulges, calf and thigh, goggles, which biker outfits emphasize. This is also a way in which Gunn nurtures his admiration for uniforms, which are now the impersonal leather jackets and machines, and heroes or knights on their mechanical horses, welded together like the mythological centaurs. Adding to this, those 'Boys' seek their strength in the group by giving up their individuality, but gaining power through their grouping and together challenging the "natural" (Gunn, *SM* 11) world; much like the early gay movements, being accused of promoting an unnatural lifestyle, and realizing that unity makes them stronger. The contradiction between dust as the trophy on "gleaming jackets", with the expected shine of a typical award, gives an idea of how different this group of people is from the anticipated norm of society. This also suggests that nothing can be achieved by staying clean – it is sometimes necessary to break the norms or rules of society in order to gain from them, just as these motorcyclists gain from accepting the dust on their jacket as the trophy for their labors and their journey. The juxtaposition between the dust on their jackets and the traditional idea of a trophy emphasizes that these motorcyclists live parallel to society's norms. Motorcyclists, who generally relate to rock and roll – and in turn the infamous sex and drugs – are the personification of counterculture in this poem. Yet, from the gay perspective, the motorcyclists can be understood as someone masking their personal identity from the hostile outer world as this grants the safest way to get around, either unnoticed, or evoking fear.

The third Stanza makes it clear that the direction of their movement is not at all planned or known by the heroes on bikes. Just like in the song "Born to be Wild", where it says, "Get your motor running, head out on the highway" (Steppenwolf), the openness to experience the unexpected, to move away from "known whereabouts" (Gunn, *SM* 11) and the status quo is the group's motivation. They do not yet know what they want to reach, but they know, to fulfill their purpose in the way of "Sartrean existential humanism" (Fraser 20) they must follow their bikes "where the tires press." (Gunn, *SM* 11) Along the way, nature must yield to the boys' will, birds are scared out of their habitats and choose to fly away from the uncertain violence which starts in the first stanza.

On the one hand, there is no guarantee for the men's safety, because even though they shape their lives by manufacturing their machines as well as their souls into tools to make their fast movement possible, they do not have the full control over what will happen. On the other hand, they dare to go into the future without having to know where it will lead. The future does not just happen, it must be made or at least shaped. Again, this mirrors Sartre's existentialism, when Fraser comments that "His choices cannot be made in complete foreknowledge of their consequences" (Fraser 21).

"The fourth stanza justifies the choice of the motorcyclists as at least a partial solution of the human problem. Man is not necessarily at odds with the world because he is not purely an animal." (Fraser 21). The "direct instinct" (Gunn, *SM* 12) does not exist, yet there is some inner force that drives the motorcyclists, because they are indeed half-animal. The insecurity of not knowing where this movement that "divides and breaks" goes, can be seen as perfect description of the leap of faith that most people have to take when they reveal that they are gay. The gay movements were also dividing society, especially in the beginning, when it was just one group against the other. But the partial solution that is suggested is a movement that keeps itself alive. "Afloat" suggests a fluidity like a wild river, carrying "the hurler and the hurled" away, in the same set of movement, uncontrolled, until the rigid formation of society is overturned and changes repeatedly. The other world, as it is, is valueless, so joining together to overcome old habits is the only option to move forward, and this only works by getting into motion.

The fifth stanza itself is a break, a pause. Despite being the last stanza of this poem, the end of the last line suggests that the movement cannot be over. It is a contemplation, making aware that the movement which began by choice, has to be "self-defined" (12) by a consensual group of people. Being in motion is the worst that can happen in a movement like this, yet without moving, progression remains impossible, and people have no other option than to stagnate in life. However, the only thing that has been constant throughout history has been change. The unachievable goal is depicted in the last line "One is always nearer by not keeping still."⁸⁰ Note that "keeping still" is different to "standing still". Finding compromises is not the suggested solution, though always looking for compromise or consent could be. What is unacceptable would be standing

⁸⁰ Later, Gunn questions his choice of words, asking "Nearer what? Well, the motorcyclist is nearer the destination, but what's the destination of human beings? Aha! It's a question that seems to answer itself but doesn't." Gunn and Campbell 29.

back against a wall. In the end, the disturbance by the gang remains dull, no one is harmed, and the fear of the birds might have been unnecessary.

The pace at which he produced the poetry within *The Sense of Movement* should be stressed once more. It is a sign of the inspiration Gunn gets from experiencing his surroundings. All the change he lived through, leaving his home behind, all the new observations that triggered ideas and emotions, were an immense source of inspiration. His ability to see things from different angles was a side product of moving between these two worlds of old and new. Gunn now had even more story to tell, and by choosing his path, accepting change as a gift, the story unfolded in front of him almost automatically. He had only to pick up the pieces and express what he found in his own art, a challenge he gladly accepted. In general, *The Sense of Movement*, as Gunn's second piece of apprenticeship, was perceived by him as such, as its content had "a lot of Winters in it, a fair amount of Yeats, and a great deal of raw Sartre (strange bedfellows) ... The poems make much use of the word 'will.' ... What I meant by it was, ultimately, a more Yeatsian willfulness. I was at my usual game of stealing what could be of use to me." (Gunn, *OP* 176–77) Winters' introduced Gunn to a diverse selection of American poets and their work, while at the same time Gunn's experiences in the United States of America quickly changed his language and imagery, and not only towards the motorcyclists in "On the Move" or "The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death". The whole book is somehow autobiographical as Gunn's new start in the foreign country, speaking about new things and the things he brought with him from England. The disguise of his homosexuality towards the possible mother-in-law and "The Allegory of the Wolf Boy" can be read as the hiding in the closet of a homosexual man, but also other coming of age problems. "To Yvor Winters, 1955" is clearly a product of his new experiences but told in the strictly formal language for which he was granted a scholarship by his mentor, whom the poem is dedicated to. "Thoughts on Unpacking" also clearly refers to his new start abroad. Although Gunn still uses the imagery of classical stories like religion ("Jesus and his Mother", "Julian the Apostate" or "St Martin and the Beggar") or legendary heroes from his old home as in "Merlin in the Cave: He speculates without a Book", his view becomes wider. "Vox Humana" (Gunn, *SM* 61–62), as the final poem, sums up the tone of what interests Gunn, listening to his inner voice, trying to make sense of destiny with a humanistic approach. In this poem he again uses the classical heroes of history and legend, finishing the piece with "I was for Alexander, / the certain victory; I / was hemlock

for Socrates” (61) widening the horizon presented by the lyrical I before concluding “For you bring, / to what you define now, all / there is, ever, of future.” (62)

Gunn starts the book with an epitaph from Cinna, a quote from Auguste, “Je le suis, je veux l’etre” (Gunn, *SM* 5), an expression forcefully hinting again at the conflict between thinking and acting, being and wanting to be, creating your own character by acting with an existentialist approach. Just after “On the Move”, the opening poem of the volume, “The Nature of an Action” (Gunn, *SM* 13–14) holds the key to Gunn’s personal philosophy. After he realized in *Fighting Terms* that his action made him wise, here he contemplates again about action and the making of meaning. Using the image of a house with rooms and corridors, he insinuates that relativity is ever present. Purposely, he starts his journey through the corridor “directed by the compass of my heart” (13), to realize that after seeing the short corridor, “the journey took me twenty years”. It is a statement about the importance of inner values, his moral compass, which lies within his body’s fabric. Searching this house, for meaning or signs, he starts doubting “what final evidence / Lay in perception or in common sense” (14), deconstructing everything he held to be true, renewing his assumptions and implying that self-doubt might be healthy, as long as you are aware that common sense might also be doubted. Despite the differences between the many rooms in that house, he realizes that they mostly have one thing in common, which is his own being there. Much like in quantum theory, where the mere fact of measuring changes the outcome of an experiment, Gunn concludes this poem by saying “Only my being there is different”, questioning the truth behind perception and realizing how change affects him. By taking action, he changes his perspective as much as he changes his surroundings, which are in this poem represented as corridors and rooms.

Other subjects find their way crawling into Gunn’s poetry, among them one which relates to his personal fascination of the concept of large cities, which he works on in “Praise of the Cities” (Gunn, *SM* 33–34), in which the undefined city is personified as a female, reflecting the attempt of human beings to create material and at the same time meaningful structures, which then develop a life on their own, which the personified city accepts. “You welcome in her what remains of you” (33) is an expression of mutual influence. The city forms and is formed, yet it is hard to design, it remains unclear and unstructured, although at the same time it relies on certain organizational structure. This is another conflict that fascinates the poet, even though he leaves out the nature which was the counterpart to the machines in “On the Move”, which the cityscape has by now

taken over implicitly. In the fourth part of this poem, Gunn also makes it clear that the image of the city here is universal, in “Charing Cross Road, or Forty-Second Street” (34), juxtaposing London and New York are merely examples, it is not really important what the name of the city is, they trigger a desire for the stories they tell and the promises they make. The city cannot mean anything on its own, though. It is made, as making meaning is a human capability. And this is the central core of the book, active versus contemplative, choice versus given, man versus nature and how meaning is conceived.

As for Gunn and Kitay, who in the first year had spent so much time apart before suddenly living together through several obstacles, the nature of their relationship had gone through more change than most others in the short period of several months. Discussing the sexual despite the feeling of jealousy, while maintaining what was lasting and sustaining their bond under ever-changing circumstances, was hard work, but at least challenging. Having a closer look at the two men will help to determine more of the characteristics of their unique relationship. Starting off after meeting at the ADC at Cambridge, their connection was built on mutual interests as well as a mutual level of intelligence and intellectuality. Although Gunn is described by Kitay as one of the most well-read people he knew, the poet characterized his lover as a man of great practical intelligence, which made a very good balance for them as a couple. Psychologically, the two lovers saw eye to eye, adding to the sustainability of this balance. On the other hand, there was Gunn’s striving for his freedom to experience life to the fullest, which opposed Kitay’s needs for intimacy and affection, a dynamic which in the end was fruitful on other levels. Gunn wrote poetry about Kitay to show his affection in his way, poetry which bore the beauty of their love as well as the agony of hiding away their sexual preferences, unless there was enough trust within the circle of their friends.

They also had a great sense of humor when dealing with their issues, contributing to the strength of their bond. While both were artistically creating, Gunn would use poetry and words to praise Kitay. The latter, on the other hand, was more practical and graphical. One example of his creativity lies in the archives of Bancroft: it is a little comic strip (Kitay, *Ephemera - Gay Culture 1966-1998; undated*) which sexualizes some of the poems in *Fighting Terms* and *The Sense of Movement* in drawings by Kitay in a witty,

funny way. The comic was drawn on separate little note papers and was a present from the drawer to Gunn for the celebration of an Independence Day, most likely in the middle of the 1950s.⁸¹ The artwork deals with the concept of movement in three steps, indicated by roman numbers marking the ‘chapters’. The first one hints on troop movements, with a drawing of an army of uniformed soldiers marching towards a bed. The sexual tension of that image is introduced and complemented by the design of the roman number I, which shows a face of a man who is about to give a blowjob, resembling the style of initials in old books. The second part humorously indicates that bowel movements are a “HUMAN CONDITION”, (Kitay, *Ephemera - Gay Culture 1966-1998; undated*) hinting at a poem’s title. Other poems’ titles are the main feature on each of the comic cards. “On the Move” is written next to a man reading while sitting on a toilet, and “Wind in the Streets” is on a card depicting a farting figure underneath a streetlamp, laughing at himself, probably representing Gunn himself, indicating the huge capability of humor and self-irony. Another drawing is about the supposed effects of bowel movements, and relates the poems “Lofty in the Palais de Dance”, “Incident on a Journey”, “The Secret Sharer” and “The Wound” to the subject of cruising⁸² and the aftermath of having sex. Part III deals bluntly with sexual movements, and Mike draws his allusive comics illustrating and reinterpreting the titles “Here Come the Saints”, “Lazarus Raised”, Helen’s Rape”, “Ralph’s Dream” and “Carnal Knowledge” to finish off the whole story with an after-credits scene showing a nightstand titled “A Mirror for Poets”.

A second collection of comic cards is titled “The Golden Rule of Sex” (Kitay, *Ephemera - Gay Culture 1966-1998; undated*) and seems to have been one of Kitay’s responses to opening up the relationship sexually. By no means is it to say that the couple’s relationship was merely sexual. But it is clear it was very passionate, and sex was not a taboo, on the contrary, it helped them define themselves on emotional, intellectual and physical levels. These drawings can be read as Kitay’s means of showing his lover how obvious and present the role of sexuality is in his writing, and they were a way of materializing his love and affection for Gunn and his passions. Finding those comics in the Berkeley archives also means that they had been kept for fifty years, allowing one to interpret this as an act appreciation for this affection on Gunn’s side.

⁸¹ One dated card says 1955, which is two years before *The Sense of Movement* was published. Kitay of course knew the poems as he was one of those people Gunn trusted to give him feedback.

⁸² Gay cruising is still a thing, but in decline, for examples, see *Queer Europe*.

When friends talk about Thom Gunn, one feature they all agree on, despite the great variety of people he spent time with, was his inimitable and boisterous laugh. Humor and taking life positively were some of Gunn's main characteristics and defined him as a person. As such, it was also a vital part of his relationship with Kitay, and he gladly catered to that. The comics are one example, funny letters exist as well. Another relic from their time together, which especially points out how dark their shared humor was, is a self-made Valentine's Day card made by Kitay. Gunn, who no doubt rather ridiculed the institution of Valentine's Day, was apt to make something funny of it. So, Kitay rendered a well-known children's poem and altered it, to amuse his partner. On the hand-cut heart shaped card he wrote

Roses are red
Violets are blue
You are my Valentine
and I am your Jew (Kitay, *Ephemera - Gay Culture 1966-1998; undated*).

Gunn, who loved to shock and sometimes disgust prudish people with his dark sense of humor, must have burst into laughter upon reading it, and kept it until the end of his life.

When it was time for Kitay to be discharged from the Air Force and he was finally free to move around, his application at Stanford was accepted. This gave him the opportunity to finally move in together with Gunn. But before they returned from Texas, they followed one of their favorite activities from the beginning of their relationship in England. They resumed the habit of travelling together, and made a road trip out of their journey to San José. In Europe they took every available moment to be on the road together after they met in 1952; Kitay even accompanied Gunn on his way to Rome, when he was to stay there on his grant. Now, in the United States, they took time to discover the new country. On the eventful trip in Kitay's car, they went first to New York, via New Orleans. Gunn reported to Tony White how they got arrested twice, while on the road. Once for recklessly driving, after smashing the car in Opelousas, and once for loitering, which Gunn denied having done. Released from jail quickly each time, the second incident had potential for disaster. Gunn reports that Kitay managed to dispose incriminating documents of Gunn's while being arrested and brought to the station in a paddy wagon, which again shows the teamwork between the couple, playing hide and seek under the eye of the outside world. After bailing (or rather bribing) themselves out, they continued their adventure. Gunn's fascination for the darker side of life was satisfied in New Orleans, where he met many male prostitutes, who were his favorite conversation partners there, and who to his intrigued surprise "claimed that Elvis Presley had been one

of them in his poorer days” (Gunn, *Letters* 78). After this, and finally having the car fixed, the couple continued to New York, where they split for a while, Gunn enjoying the city and Kitay visiting his parents after his two-year absence. Gunn, freshly in love with the cities of the United States in general, enjoyed all of what was on offer, no matter how wide the range: being robbed, seeing celebrities like Jane Mansfield in the streets, and hanging out with wannabe celebrities. He also made use of his sexual freedom, describing having “made various interesting but inconclusive experiments with the more extreme evidences of perversion” (78) experimenting at his own will. For Gunn the conclusion of the trip had an officious ending, when attending a conference of “about 600 New England poets, all looking alike, all married, all sitting in their large flat gardens sucking their pipes, with their children & dogs, and complimenting each other on each other’s work” (78), which, unsurprisingly, he found dull. The only positive of the event was a good recording of him reading a few of his poems, before it was finally time for him to return to San José and the West Coast. The time in New York, alone for the first time in the Big Apple, also marked the start of a very different relationship in Gunn’s life. After his first encounter with the city upon his arrival in 1954, which had left an impression on him, this one was the beginning of a lifelong fascination with the dark corners of the city that never sleeps. Gunn later puts his relationship to cities and places into words, saying “If England is my parent and San Francisco is my lover, then New York is my own dear old whore, all flash and vitality and history” (*OP* 178) which condenses it all and can be read as a representation of his life in general.

In his early time in the US, Gunn did not only find visual inspiration for his writing. His curiosity and openness also sped up his sexual development extensively, which worked in sync with the writing.⁸³ The possibilities New York and San Francisco had to offer seemed endless, and he learned quickly about his sexual yearnings and what triggered him most. Owning a motorcycle and wearing a leather jacket and boots, including other parts of fitting gear, already hinted to a fascination with the leather scene. He liked his friends and acquaintances to be strong in character, presumably to balance out his own perceived weakness, trying to use them as role models for his own development and self-practice. What was clear by now is that during his first two years

⁸³ “Monday, June 22: The heatwave has lasted ten days or more. It is so unusual it has sent all my poetry writing faculties to bad, and they haven't been that active this year. I search through my imagination for images that give me that little jolt – almost sexual tho not coinciding with the sexual jolt – which I recognize as authentic.” Gunn (*No. 4 1981-1983*).

in the United States, Gunn had developed a fetish for leather, indicating a rough manliness, and he was willing to pursue this interest. He established in himself in the lust for rough and wild sex and for him, there was no way back.

Half a year after his letter to Winters, Gunn returned to Stanford to start working on his PhD, moving back into his old apartment on Lincoln Avenue. Around this time, he was not sure whether he would stay in the United States for a long time, regularly considering moving back to England, torn between his home country and everything the United States had to offer. He was still a foreigner living abroad, who had not yet grown roots that were deep enough to consider the new country a home. He had also never stayed anywhere for longer than a year until then, being constantly on the move. He was Americanized in his ideas, but still he felt English enough to consider a return. As a consequence of everything he had on his plate, 1957 was a generally ambivalent year for Gunn. He enjoyed being in the United States, close to Kitay, exploring the sexual wonders of the leather scene and the relatively liberal climate in California and New York, as compared to other places, but he was annoyed by everything that has to do with paperwork, renewing his visa and the attendant uncertainties leading to basically having to live from year to year. Under these conditions, his doubts about staying in the United States or moving back to England took up a great deal of his intellectual energy. However insecure he was about the decision, he left for England for the first time in three years and somehow it was a take-it-or-leave-it journey. After a short stay in New York, he left for England by ship, visiting his family and friends back home and fulfilling his duties as a published poet in a year of having a book on the market. While Gunn was on his trip to England, Kitay started studying at Stanford and worked for the Comedia Repertory Company as a director. He moved into an apartment at 143 Alma Street in Palo Alto, where he was hoping for Gunn to move in with him upon his return. The two men met on Gunn's arrival in Los Angeles in September, before they returned to Palo Alto together.

At one end of the spectrum of arguments about returning to England, the many new friends he had already made in the States were slowly outweighing his nostalgic sentiments for his old home. As he shared a wide interest in people, ranging from outcasts to scholars, from teachers to screenwriters, and all sorts of artists, he had quickly set up a new circle of friends and a network around himself. He did not have to be alone, if he did not want to be⁸⁴, and these new friends supported him by providing new ideas, and

⁸⁴ "I made a resolution several years ago never again to allow myself to get in a situation of being completely alone" Gunn (*Letters* 122).

opportunities to write about new topics, as well as a vast amount of private and professional conversations. In all those connections there was one invitation that had the potential to unfold even more opportunities. Thomas Parkinson invited the young poet and PhD candidate to give a reading at the University of California in Berkeley, at a time when lots of things were about to change at American universities.

As the experience of distance from his everyday life at Cambridge when he stayed in Rome had given Gunn clarity, going back to England in 1957 created a distance for Gunn again, from which he was able to see things more clearly. This time the decision concerned his academic career – and it was an easy choice for him to make. Graduate work under Winters was just not for him, having been way too dry, and so he decided to quit his PhD. The work involved in his doctorate was exhausting for Gunn, and it drained his creative flow so much that he was not capable of writing poetry for several months. Being underpaid, and not creative anymore, would have resulted in a lack of financial support, making it hard for him to make ends meet, so quitting was a plausible first step for Gunn. Another very important consideration made the decision even easier. Gunn found out that the possibility of teaching in the United States without the title was a given by now, so the reason to pursue a PhD in the first place was gone, so he started looking for alternatives, always keeping this goal in mind. About working under Winters, he says “it has become an endurance test in which I am not interested and for which I am underpaid” (*Letters* 103). A contract had been offered to him by the University of California, Berkeley, upon his reading a few months earlier, which afforded another opportunity for Gunn. Teaching did not seem as attractive to Gunn as working at a gay bar at that time,⁸⁵ but at least Berkeley paid double the wages that he got at Stanford, and he suddenly had a perspective of a career at university.

Gunn was lucky to have met the right people by the end of the 1950s. In this case it was Josefine “Jo” Miles, who had a massive influence on Gunn’s life. It was she who offered and organized his first one-year contract at Berkeley, in a time of change for the structure of the scientific world. The requirements for teaching were becoming more flexible, with universities loosening their standards, from requiring a PhD to teach, to also accepting the experience of acknowledged writers as a qualification to teach in their area of expertise. Now being able to lecture without the PhD degree, Gunn was released from the drudgery at Stanford, leaving the unloved work behind. Miles and Berkeley gave him

⁸⁵ “I got offered a job in a tough-queer bar in New York, which I would have taken, if I hadn't already signed this damn contract.” Gunn (*Letters* 103).

the opportunity for a fresh start with more freedom, more chances for personal development as teacher and as poet, at a closer distance to San Francisco and finally, higher pay.

When Gunn started teaching at Berkeley in 1958, living in Palo Alto was just not feasible or practical for him. Being on the move, he rented an apartment on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland, within walking distance to Berkeley,⁸⁶ his new place of work. Now he was living just across the bay from San Francisco, with a better connection to the city that would eventually become his home. While his restlessness was one factor making his relationship with Kitay more and more stressful, he seemed to be successful at his new job. He gradually worked his way up his ranks while teaching and getting better at it. Teaching by now became an important part of Gunn's life routine, and by teaching his students he was also teaching himself. It would not be true to him as a person, though, if he did not constantly strive for improvement. He was as self-critical about his teaching as he was about his poetry, not granting himself much benefit of the doubt. Especially in the beginning, but throughout his whole life as a teacher, he regularly talked or wrote about how bad his teaching was, judging his skills but also allowing space for improvement.

With all these positive changes in his background, in late 1958 Gunn made room for a different, though no less important, experience. He met Paul Bowles, whom he describes as a "a minor (and I think bad) American novelist" (Gunn, *Letters* 110), but it was not Bowles' literary talent Gunn was most interested in. The fellow writer was an early door-opener for Gunn on a very different level of inspiration. Paul Bowles provided Gunn with a mescaline pill, sharing the effects of the drug in a San Francisco hotel room. Gunn let Tony White know later, that mescaline was supposed to have a similar effect as hashish, describing his experience, and writing he went through the effects of

uplift, giggles, supernatural confidence plus the uplifted feeling, mighty perceptions, calm and adoration at the "rightness" of everything ("rightness" is the only word), then colors – rockets exploding in green, much green, much blue, then shapes – ugh – fat and with turbans on (must come from De Quincy, though I've never read him), then cramps in my legs, and the most appalling sense of isolation imaginable – the only person in the world – like being the first man on another planet. I'd take one again if I had the chance, though: it was fascinating. (*Letters* 110)

As much as he seemed to enjoy this new passageway into his own mind, he knew little about the impact drugs would have on his future life and as a writer, a few years later.

⁸⁶ Gunn liked to walk, even longer distances

Given these new impressions, Gunn had a vast number of new subjects to uncover in his writing. The ideas inside his head flourished, inspired by people around him and the adventures he had experienced. Within this multi-colored bouquet of images, an old one from his earlier poetry popped up again, connected to existential heroism and innocence as a concept. His interest in uniforms and people who made consequential decisions began around 1960 to revolve around one person. Claus von Stauffenberg, the soldier who tried to assassinate Hitler in the 1940s, was for Gunn the embodiment of heroism, reckless and courageous, opposing a system he was part of but which he deemed to have failed, one that did not show the qualities he wished for in a state for the people. Von Stauffenberg appears often and in different shapes in Gunn's correspondence. He was writing about religious views, remarking on the anniversary of von Stauffenberg's bomb in a letter to a friend, he was trying to get closer to the hero by researching people who were contemporaries of him and could tell about who he was when he was still alive.

In Gunn's curiosity, a certain lack of knowledge could not hold him back from writing a poem about the German revolutionary who planned an attack on Hitler. To Gunn, the hero was a very good subject. He "started a poem about him which may or may not turn out. – It is the perfect subject, too, for a modern tragedy – the great noble figure ... magnanimous, the courage, the plot, even perhaps hubris – having favored the unknown of Nazism in the first place as being preferable to the known evils of Communism & the W. Republic" (Gunn, *Letters* 94). Gunn's interest in detail, precision, story and density, in combination with von Stauffenberg's will to succeed, were the perfect combination for powerful poetry. As he was very keen on doing a good job here, Gunn thoroughly discussed this poem in several stages of writing as he had done since Cambridge with friends and other writers, always trying to improve the poem he wrote. At some point, his Cambridge friends Miller and White published the poem without clarifying this with the author. Gunn replied to an apology written by White with the reassurance that he is actually happy he did not have to make the decision himself, and his confidence in the judgement of his friends, which was the reason to discuss the poem with them in the first place, was not disappointed, as he most likely would never have found the piece good enough.

Even with the status of celebrity Gunn had achieved at this early stage of his life, being a poet was not a very well-paid job. To earn some more money apart from teaching, Gunn wrote criticism about other writers and their work. Writing this kind of prose also helped Gunn to keep in the practice of writing, even when poetry was not flowing. In

April 1959, he made progress in his job security by becoming a regular critic for the Yale Review, improving his income a bit. In the autumn of the same year, Gunn made the acquaintance of a young English graduate student who came to Berkeley on a Harkness Fellowship grant. Gunn quickly realized the brightness of the man and connected to him, as an intellect and on a personal level. Tony Tanner, later a respected scholar⁸⁷, was to become one of Gunn's best friends, most interesting colleagues and important guides in his work as a poet. As a trusted and fruitful source of criticism, Tanner was present at many important events in Gunn's life, private and professional, and vice versa, lasting a long and inspirational period.

Although still keen on spending time together, travelling and moving around, the prevailing societal pressure on a gay couple, as well as struggles to find employment on Kitay's side, had impact on the couple's relationship. As Kitay had quit studying at Stanford and Gunn had moved to Oakland to be closer to his place of work, it was the beginning of an on-and-off phase of their partnership. Kitay's continuing jealousy and search for himself, and Gunn's eagerness to realize his own fantasies, and their contrasting temperaments, now lead to a kind of struggle unseen in the relationship thus far. In letters and in person, they discussed their points of view, exchanging positions and elaborating on the options they saw for their future. For Kitay, this struggle resulted in his slow decline into a more and more depressive state, feeling helpless and misunderstood, while Gunn was trying his best to understand, though he could not give up who he was, even if that meant not satisfying his lover's needs. If not for the deep affection and love they had grown for each other, they could have easily avoided the struggle by finally separating, but neither planned to do so. Their bond was strong enough for them to stay together, dealing with or accepting the problems that were there, and gradually changing and adapting the spoken and unspoken rules of their relationship, preparing it for an unforeseeable future.

During one of Kitay's absences in May 1960, Gunn met a guy from Michigan named Clint Cline with whom he started an affair. Troubled with Kitay, who was on the other side of the country, there was room and opportunity for this. Cline represented everything Gunn seemed to need at that point in time. He characterizes him as a man with "a kind of generosity of the spirit that I've almost never come across before, an insistence that I should enjoy everything as much as he enjoys it, and having himself an unequalled

⁸⁷ Author of standards like *The Reign of Wonder*, *Scenes of Nature*, *Signs of Men* and *Venice Desired*, *City of Words*

capacity for enjoyment” (Gunn, *Letters* 123). As they shared their view on enjoyment, they also lived together in Oakland for six weeks. The time together and the quality of experiences was enough for Gunn to later say he was in love, but it was not the kind of love he had for Kitay, having grown together for years now. If the bond to Kitay had broken, Cline might have been a possible successor, but not so long as Mike Kitay was a part of Thom Gunn’s life. Despite having troubles, when they spent time together, they were deeply connected and passionate with each other, sometimes including others. Kitay says “I had a shitlist, Thom had a shitlist, we had a shitlist together” (“Thom Gunn as a Life Long Partner”), referring to lists they made about their sexual adventures. Their open relationship was wild enough that Kitay caught hepatitis and went to his parents’ place to recover in early 1961. This distance gave Gunn space again, which he was willing to fill with worthwhile activities. It was during this time, when he met Oliver Sacks as well as Don Doody and Chuck Arnett, who would become close friends, inspirations and sources for critical exchange for him.

In the early 1960s, Gunn attempted to write a Stendhalian autobiography, to develop his prose writing skills, which he tells his new friend Tony Tanner about. He only got as far as the age of eighteen, starting at fourteen, including his mother’s suicide in the beginning before he realized it was not his type of literature as a writer. He quit writing it and he “decided that it’s necessary to be more self-absorbed than I am to write that” (Gunn, *Letters* 122). It becomes very clear that Gunn is not self-absorbed, but instead humble, enough to not even call himself humble, granting himself the human weaknesses he brings along and with it all the possibilities of interpretation. Acceptance was one of his strongest suits and got him a long way in many areas of his life.

Despite this acceptance, he remembers having been unsatisfied at the time. In the early 1960s, Gunn spent time with Kitay in New York. Kitay was busy with his job, so Gunn did not see him much⁸⁸, which bored him, and he felt lonely. As a result, all the poetry he produced was confessional, on the verge between self-pity and boredom, not having interesting people around him to excessively talk to, despite going to the bars regularly. Writing, which becomes obvious here, was one of Gunn’s psychological lifelines, a way of processing what happened around him, although not every experiment he opted for turned out as he intended it to.

His stay in New York was the prelude to a much bigger enterprise. Gunn had received the Somerset Maugham Award the previous March and had decided to use it to

⁸⁸ Usually not more than one hour a day

fund a trip to Berlin. There, he would be able to follow in the footsteps of Isherwood and Auden, experiencing life in one of the most vibrant cities in post-war Europe. So, he planned a supporting program, which included the already mentioned two-month stopover at Kitay's in New York and going to visit England before continuing to Berlin via Hamburg, where he intended to stay for a week. Upon his arrival, he continued to London, where he intended to meet family and friends as well as to have some official meetings regarding his career as a poet. During a lunch at Faber & Faber, where he was published now (since the Fantasy Press had ceased to exist), he met a man, who for some reason had not crossed his path before, despite studying at the same time and place and having mutual interests. Although they had a shared fascination with poetry, the two men differed in style quite a bit. Ted Hughes was an emotional writer, while Gunn's emotional level in writing was found to be "point zero characteristically" (Gunn and Campbell 26). This contrast was one of the reasons why Charles Monteith, who worked for Faber & Faber, had the idea to combine both poets' work in a kind of joint publication to juxtapose their styles and increase their popularity to a public that mostly knew the two men as opposing each other in style. Hughes and Gunn agreed to commit to this publisher's device, which would also help to point out their differences and possibly soften the impact of the categorization. After this, both poets became professional friends and read poetry together, keeping in touch via letters or meeting when Gunn was in England. On one of those occasions, Gunn was also introduced to Hughes wife, Sylvia Plath, but he did not have much sympathy for her, as she was, for him, the embodiment of the confessional writer, a style he personally did not value. To him it was consumed with the ego, and thus provided less space for the general truths of human existence he was searching for.

Thanks to the funding of the Somerset Maugham Award, awarded by the Society of Authors, Gunn was provided with the financial means to go on his excursion. His deliberate choice of the German city, as a country which had just tried to leave the chaos of war behind it, was the perfect soil for him to observe the movements and developments there, during its fresh revival. As an admirer of Isherwood, it also seems almost inevitable the decision was Berlin; he had also been to the city before, briefly, on a trip with Kitay during their time at Cambridge. It was the perfect place to be for Gunn, searching for change, chaos, human behavior and at the time, especially more information about von Stauffenberg and similar heroes.

The contrast between Berlin and the American and British cities he had been to was even enhanced a bit by his stopover in Hamburg, which was already thriving again,

with its famous red-light district in St Pauli. It must have felt similar to San Francisco, with the harbor, bridges and a similar bustling bohemian society populating the streets. Little did he know that at the same time he was there, four young guys from his country, more precisely Liverpool, were in Hamburg as well, trying to kick off their career as musicians in the basement bars of that raucous city. When he read about the simultaneity of their presence in Hamburg years later, he fantasized about how it might have been, if he had just happened to stumble into the right bar, witnessing one of the first concerts of the Beatles, and seeing music history in the making. But it was Berlin that was his goal for this journey, and he was to stay there for two months. The time that lay ahead of Gunn would be dense with experiences. As a bon vivant, he sucked in all the bits and differences he could grasp along his way. The timing was perfect, as Berlin was split into sectors between the winning allies from the war that had ended fifteen years ago, and lay there as an experiment. On a lucky historical note, however, the Berlin Wall was not yet built, and thus moving around and commuting between east and west was still easily possible. In his natural curiosity, Thom Gunn used this opportunity a lot, showing his excellent observational skills in Berlin.

Being strongly influenced by literature, Gunn also could not help but compare the Berlin he was now experiencing to the literary Berlin he knew from his friend Isherwood's (and other writers') work and stories. Finally arriving in the former capital of Nazi Germany, the queer Berlin of Auden and Isherwood from the early 1930s still seemed to be present somehow, but he realized there were changes. The remnants such as the man who took Gunn to his apartment, where he showed his visitor "the most awful pictures of hangings, mutilations, etc." (Gunn, *Letters* 124) matched Gunn's expectations. Still, although he was drunk, he fled from the guy, his hobby having been a bit too much for Gunn. He categorized the man as fitting into Hirschfeld's⁸⁹ or Isherwood's versions of Berlin. Other than that remarkable meeting, Gunn of course had no issues connecting with people, especially having a basic German vocabulary from school, trying to freshen up his language skills while in Berlin⁹⁰, being open and intelligent as always. The gay bars he found were not to his taste though, compared to San Francisco and New York. In Berlin, to him, they were "very epicene, very girly" (Gunn, *Letters* 125), as opposed to his favorited fetish bars in the United States. Still, he saw the opportunities and of course

⁸⁹ Magnus Hirschfeld was a doctor and sexual scientist, further information, see *Magnus Hirschfeld und seine Zeit* Herzer.

⁹⁰ "At present I am learning the *Thousand Most Frequent German Words*." Gunn (*Letters* 131).

had an eye for the beautiful men that lived here, outside the bars – on the streets or in the squares.

As he already did in New Orleans, Gunn also got in touch with the male prostitutes of post-war Berlin. As with other acquaintances, the fact that he was living in the United States of America, a promised land for many at that time, was a door opener for conversations. According to Gunn, the young men were most interested in talking to him, sometimes for hours. Of course, this also made him feel attractive, but with those boys on the street, he could not go down the sexual path, explaining his relationship to them like this: “I need hardly say this is very platonic, almost fatherly on my part” (*Letters* 129), his overall integrity making it very plausible that he meant it. He was looking for something different in the men he found sexually attractive, while in these cases it was merely their stories and sympathy that made conversation and connecting to them worthwhile.

His character being the young energetic British poet living in America was opening doors in many ways and he used this opportunity intensively, meeting and having conversations with many people he found interesting. There was a huge variety that fascinated Gunn. He reports a truck driver for a sausage company who balanced his driving the truck during the day by riding a motorcycle at night, which of course was just fitting for the fetishist Gunn. He was drinking Cognac and Bärenfang in amounts he did not have the proper training for, indulging in Berlin night life, as well as tapping an eighty-year-old woman as a source of information about the historical Berlin. He even found a man who two decades earlier had worked for von Stauffenberg, but the man seemed too ashamed to talk freely about his past, feeling guilty and afraid of being exposed, much to Gunn’s regret.

Still, his observations, although generally revolving around people, their stance on life, and the decisions shown in their behavior, exceeded the human aspect of direct connection. His precise description of the differences between the East and West fascinated him and was nowhere as easy to observe as in Berlin, where the worlds of capitalism and communism collided in a very limited space. In the west of the city, he saw a vast amount of rebuilt and repaired cityscape, characterizing it as a model for the flourishing capitalist city, from new apartment houses in the Scandinavian style and shops, to clean streets and polite cops who tried to stay in the background as much as they could, like the British cops he knew. Fashion was also on the list of observed detail for Gunn, pointing out hairdos of the women and the neat shoes of the boys populating the

public space, trying to create a glamorous image of a West Berlin, which has made a break from its war history and re-emerged from its ruins. In Gunn's view, from the four stages that Berlin went through (meaning the empire, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime and the post-war jungle), this fifth stage he saw as most similar to the Weimar era. His sentimentality and preference for cities as a habitat had also come into conflict with the fact that he had difficulties disconnecting Berlin from its past. His eyes were constantly on the lookout for SA men in the streets or political rallies, which he half-expected from his prejudices towards the Germans in his imagination. He was also shown around the historical sites like Hitler's Bunker or other important landmarks, for a vivid image filled with physical leftovers reminiscent of the Berlin of von Stauffenberg, though in the west, he was too late, the reminders having been mostly torn down.

This was different in the east, though. Having seen the guilty silence of the west Berliners and their effort to rebuild the city and paint over the scars of the past, the neglected other half of the city was a more interesting place for Gunn to feed his curiosity. Here the ruins were still visible, and progress did not hurry towards capitalist values, so the marks of history were still on display.⁹¹ In its decay, East Berlin was very famous for its cultural scene, especially the theatre, which was the only viable reason for West Berliners to come visit that part of the city. Of course, Gunn enjoyed the scene as well, reporting "I saw Aida at the Opera – I hate the thing, but the scenery was fantastic. And Brecht's Mother Courage at the Berliner Ensembler [sic], which was without doubt the best production I have ever seen of anything." (*Letters* 130–31)

His candid interest in people and their stories was very satisfied when looking around in East Berlin. In contrast to the west, police were visible at every corner, showing their presence to evoke the impression of control, though Gunn describes the men in their uniforms looking very young altogether. He also observed blue collar workers everywhere, people in general trying less to express their status through clothing. Wearing blue jeans, like in the west, was despised here as a product of capitalism. Unlike most people living in West Berlin, who found the ruinous state of East Berlin depressing as it carried the reminders of a war that they sought to forget, Gunn found the character more and more interesting. He indulged in getting to know cultures. His desire to train his language skills was increasing day by day. About German he notes "To my surprise, I delight in the language. It has a lovely slopping casualness and flexibility when it's informal that I never guessed at. I have big resolutions of studying it so hard when I get

⁹¹ The ruins of Anhalter Bahnhof are still there

back to Berkeley that I will be able to read Brecht and to speak it as well as I can French.” (*Letters* 131) Having learned French and German at school, he had a foundation on which he could build his practices. It is rather typical for him to connect deeper with a culture by also adapting to the language. Kitay adds that Gunn also studied Italian, to read Dante in the original version, which fits the image, although Dante’s Italian is far from modern and is even hard to cope with for Italians today.

Berlin also had a great influence on Gunn’s creativity as a poet. Not only did it provide the canvas for more information on his hero von Stauffenberg, and the inspiration for “Berlin in Ruins”⁹², he found new sources for poetry again, describing the simple life, including a piece about the Kurfürstendamm and curried sausage. From here he also sent in the finished manuscripts for his next book *My Sad Captains* to Faber & Faber. This new book was a turning point in the poet’s style. It was mostly written in San Francisco, but also during his time in Berlin. The title itself was partly inspired by Kitay, showing his influence as an advisor. More importantly, the collection is divided into two parts. While the first part is written in his old, traditional style of form and meter, the second part was different: it not only had a more humanistic tone, but also contains his first published poems in syllabics. On his path to master free verse, something he had wanted to pursue since Yvor Winters introduced him to the modernist poetry of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, syllabics were a step he needed to master. Gunn’s motivation for a change in style was partly founded in the ongoing search for his own voice and partly in the fact that free verse poetry was new to him, and different from any poetry he had produced until then. His observation at that time was that around him many poets wrote in meter and rhyme first, before they moved on to free verse. While he was curious whether he could develop attractive rhythms in the free verse, he never fully abandoned the structured form of poetry, as in his opinion poetry needed different approaches in specific cases.⁹³

My Sad Captains is a remarkable point in Gunn’s writing, expanding his style rather than changing it. The two parts into which he divided his new book are stylistically different from each other, as an obvious characteristic. The first part presents Gunn’s high

⁹² Published in *Touch*

⁹³ “More important to understanding Gunn are his fusion of modern and traditional elements, his aggressive use of poetic forms, and his renegade’s fascination with unpopular topics. Gunn sought to discover truth from his experience through poetry, describing events and people he encountered, strangers and lovers alike, bringing qualities of compassion and curiosity to both.” Forester 20.

level of perfectionism in his metered style. It starts with a poem that was inspired by his time in Rome titled “In Santa Maria del Popolo” (Gunn, *MSC* 11–12), presented in a rigid form that even Yvor Winters called close to perfect. Gunn’s approach here is the description of the setting in that Roman church, and more precisely, the painting from Caravaggio depicting the moment of Saul’s conversion to Paul, falling from a horse. The grand gestures capture the poet, but he questions the meaning conveyed, asking the long dead painter “what is it you mean / In that wide gesture of the lifting arms?” (11) In the last stanza he concentrates on what is real to him; the small, almost invisible gestures. He mostly sees old women in that church, converting them into the secret heroes of humanism, who compared to the legendary Paul “in tiny fists holds comfort as it can” (12) and concludes “Their poor arms are too tired for more than this / -- for the large gesture of solitary men / Resting, by embracing, nothingness”.

Gunn not only masters his meter and structure after two works of apprenticeship. He also expands his definition of the existential hero from those invisible women to Claus von Stauffenberg in the first, classical part of the book, as well as his range of subjects and symbols. Trucks, tattoos, and black jackets are clearly his own experiences seeking into his language. “A Map of the City” (Gunn, *MSC* 22) can even be seen as a development from “In Praise of Cities”, zooming into the subject, now more aware of the meaning to him. Another experiment is “Modes of Pleasure” which is one title for two poems, indicating that words can have different meanings, depending on the angle from which you look at them. After “The Value of Gold”, Gunn elevates his true hero at the time to the culmination of this first part of *My Sad Captains*. “Claus von Stauffenberg” (Gunn, *MSC* 30) is the subject of a poem Gunn would work meticulously on to get it just right. This poem is the height of existentialism with all that it implies for Gunn. “They chose the unknown” he says of people around the man who planned to kill Hitler, acknowledging that “fear is a natural state”, remarkably denominating fear as a state, not an emotion. Gunn was so sunken into details he points out that to be a hero you neither have to be young or perfectly fit. Stauffenberg only needed “two remaining fingers and a will” elevating choice and will again to a status that is unquestionable. Succeeding with the plan is not important to Gunn, as “though he fails, honor personified / In a cold time where honor cannot grow” the hero of this poem actually did succeed, at least in trying to do the right thing, stopping the agony of war.

With the second part of the book, Gunn opens a new chapter in his writing style. Although it will remain the only set of poetry written in syllabics, he is following his new

literary heroes, like William Carlos Williams, by developing into a poet who is capable of writing free verse. The expansion into this new style even widens his horizon of subject more as well, allowing him to leave behind the notion that topics need to have certain qualities like heroism or a notion of relevance to a certain audience. He, as the author, now fully decides what is useful to him to express his own idea of relevance, be it snails, loot, or the experience during a flight above California. He uses all the energy leading to the title poem “My Sad Captains” (Gunn, *MSC* 47) to talk about a subject which is central to his values. At the position of the last piece in this volume, the Sad Captains are friends, and friendship is what counts to him, along with values like love, loyalty, understanding, but also energy and strength, which he admired so much in his closest friends. He starts off with the memory of his friends who “appear in / the darkness”, “a few with historical names” but bearing no other meaning than what they mean to Gunn, who is realizing their impact on him. He reconsiders their meaning, saying “They were men / who, I thought, lived only to renew the wasteful force they / spent with each hot convulsion.” He had underestimated them and thus, almost as an act of regret, now elevates them and the value of friendship itself to universal scale, when stating in the last lines “they withdraw to an orbit / and turn with disinterested / hard energy, like the stars.” Friendship is, for Gunn, a quality that actually shares one very important quality with the stars in the night sky: it leads him and helps him navigate. The last message of *My Sad Captains* is exactly this: the universe is unlimited, to navigate it you need stars and values, manifesting in friends.

Post-war Berlin also gave new energy to one of the most prevalent subjects in Gunn’s poetry, which affected the ideas around the term innocence. In the following specific case, he combined these ideas, together with his obsession about men in uniforms, on different levels, such as attraction, mindset, and the motivations behind their decisions or values and virtues. All of those ideas are present in a poem he composed in Berlin about an SS Soldier he appropriately titled “Innocence”. In a letter to Tony Tanner, Gunn gives insight on how much thought and precision he puts into his work. The thoughts range from simple explanations of meanings of things and his own background, to the difficult choices of which words might fit best to express what he wanted to convey in the poem, but without running the risk of confusion, striving for the clarity and simplicity he admired so much in his friend Isherwood’s writing. The version he discusses in his letter to Tanner is not the final published version, in fact it differs quite a bit in form and content, which only adds to the opportunity to understand how his mind worked when

composing poetry. The alterations in form, imagery and content symbolize how much effort is behind single words in Gunn's poetry.

The meaning of innocence to Gunn is very significant, both in the poem itself as well as the term. As for the poem, he argues that it has the potential to become one of his best works, if he succeeds in solving the problems that he sees in it. One of the difficulties ahead of him he presents to Tanner as "the problem of the consequences of energy ... without moral sanction" (Gunn, *Letters* 131). He seems to struggle with his ego, which he sees as being in the way of finalizing the poem. He resolves to need less of what he admires so much, in order to get the meaning across adequately. It is not his goal to glorify the soldier for his decision to fight, and ultimately kill, for what he believes in, nor is it the intention to make excuses for his position. The main idea behind the piece, for Gunn, is to show how nobody is immune enough to influence from the outside world to prevent himself from ending up in the same position.⁹⁴ As a background, Gunn puts in all the information he could gather, including his own experience from his much-disliked time in the military, turning these years into something fruitful in this moment. The drudgery and the brutalization he experienced there make it easier for him to develop an understanding of the main character of his poem. He understands that people can be convinced that there is no alternative to fighting against invasive external forces, although Thom Gunn himself still is a pacifist. To think he might attempt to glorify military decisions made by the soldier in his poem, especially in the cause of the Nazis, immediately appears absurd. Nonetheless, if taken out of the context of Gunn's mindset, there is always a risk for a poem to be misread, which he tries to avoid, without putting too much of his own context into it. For him, both the attitude of a soldier toward atrocity, or killing someone at war, do not make much of a difference. Gunn's attribution of innocence is not an exoneration of the SS or an individual soldier, it is criticism of innocence as a concept. To achieve his primary goal of characterizing the soldier in uniform as what he is (or rather what he ought to be seen as, in the poet's mind), a human being, Gunn deliberately tries to leave out any judgement against the boy, but not the organization he is part of, in order to create a contrast in the brutal and cruel formulation of the last two stanzas, and thus on the view of what a young man can be capable of. Gunn contemplates the differences between innocence as "mere vacancy, into which anything can be put, including horrors" (*Letters* 132) and juxtaposes it against the innocence of the boy and the virtues of the corps, being courage, endurance, innocence and skill.

⁹⁴ The idea is comparable to the content of Morton Rhue's *The Wave*

In the later omitted (or rather replaced) first stanza found in the letter, Gunn pictures the young man as a person from a “Culture of guilt” (*Letters* 132), which still describes parts of the German soul today, and which he mostly saw in the people of West Berlin, trying to ignore the past as well as they could. He uses Leavis’ phrase of self-pity, deliberately separating it from pity, which was a trait much more in Gunn’s favor.⁹⁵ He makes use of the concept to characterize the poem’s protagonist. As well as the concept of guilt, this makes up a central part of the omitted first stanza, which Gunn still transfers to the final poem, when in the second stanza he writes

Ran into manhood, ignorant of the past:
Culture of guilt and guilt’s vague heritage
the soul; what he possessed
Was rich, potential, like the bud’s tipped rage. (Gunn, *MSC* 20)

The virtues that Gunn mentions operate as a juxtaposition to a void; they are provided by the surrounding society in the poem, and the soldier, in fact the whole military organization, follows them. The virtues are so strong, that they fill the void to the extent that they achieve the army’s goal of “hardening him to an instrument”, dehumanizing the boy, for whom, at this point, there is hardly a way out. Accepting the offered virtues morally, he also adopts them “thankfully” by putting on his uniform, leaving his individual identity behind. The word “thankfully” here replaced the word “joyfully” from an earlier version, after Gunn judged that joyful was too much of an emotional outburst over the whole situation, evening out and smoothing that peak withing the content of the poem out a bit.

With the final stanzas, particularly the last two lines, Gunn finds himself determined to achieve his goal of describing “innocence in a way that is accurate and at the same time would be approved by the great romantics ... whose ideas at least partly led to Nazism” (Gunn, *Letters* 133),⁹⁶ although it is set in a context of immense cruelty and brutalism, saying “A total innocence, child-like and clear, / No doubt could penetrate, no act could harm.” (132), which he changed to be as precise as possible in the final version printed in his book, where he swapped the word “total” with “compact”. How

⁹⁵ “You say I’m throwing out pity with the self-pity. No, I’m not, but he is. I don’t like self-pity, but I do like pity, but I see no need to comment here, since surely the end of the poem makes the point at sufficient length, tho by implication. What I’m implying here is what strikes me as an unfortunate fact: that the despicable Christian tradition does help one feel humanity, and that one cannot feel pity without having felt self-pity. Or am I totally wrong?” Gunn (*Letters* 132).

⁹⁶ It is typical for Gunn to see the world as a place of dualism where nothing is good or bad, but is made into something good or bad by those who interpret it.

much humanity is left in a person that acts like this? And what part does society play in leading to the creation of a character like the boy? These are central questions in Gunn's endeavor to grasp the term innocence in the surrounding of war. The last stanza was also changed from the version discussed in the letter. It's a cruel ending to something that started with innocence, and its potential is judged in the final version. Where the draft reads

Could watch the fat burn with a violet flame,
And feel disgusted only at the smell,
And see how all pain finishes the same
As melting quietly by his boots it fell. (Gunn, *Letters* 133)

The final version is slightly different, but to great effect. It reads

Could watch the fat burn with a violet flame,
And feel disgusted only at the smell,
And judge that all pain finishes the same
As melting quietly by his boots it fell. (Gunn, *MSC* 20)

Again, it becomes clear how Gunn values the meaning of words, and in this case stresses the judgmental part even more. It was important to him to wrap up the piece in this tone, judging the cruelty of murder and war in such a fashion.

Gunn's overall satisfaction with the final result of "Innocence" and the energy it possessed can be deduced from the fact he dedicated the poem to his friend Tony White, while the poem "Loot" was actually written about White. Gunn was dissatisfied with the final result of "Loot" as he did not fully succeed in transforming the original version, which was in classical meter, into syllabics, which he seems to have preferred. He tells White: "I tried turning that poem about you into syllabics, but it obstinately remained in bumpy anapaests, whatever I did" (*Letters* 129). He is here alluding to a perceived inability of his to emotionally connect deeply to his inner self and others.

Apart from the written poetry, and the progress Gunn achieved during his time in Germany, the socialist also learned more about the concept of wealth. As the source of his finances in Berlin was the Somerset Maugham Award, Gunn reports to have felt rich for that period of time. He found it peculiar not to have to think too much about spending money, and contemplated about the meaning of money itself, starting to understand the different approach of rich people versus poor people towards money as a medium. He thought he had grasped the reason why rich people do not understand poverty, because being well off meant not having to worry about the small things in life, not lacking the funds, for example, to buy another beer or another snack. Being willing to share, he did his part to bridge that gap a bit. While he had the money in Berlin, if he met someone

who told him “they can’t afford another drink”, (Gunn, *Letters* 127) he would buy another one for that person, seeing money as nothing different than a piece of paper with added meaning. In his generosity, he also thought about what good he could do for Kitay and Cline back in the US, who would also need money as a support. Unfortunately, the nature of the award did not allow him to follow through with these intentions. His generosity and the lack of greed were among Gunn’s longest lasting character traits, being qualities that would remain with him throughout his life.

In December, it was time to leave Berlin and Germany, about which Gunn wrote his friend Tanner,

I was feeling a little melancholy at the thought of leaving Berlin tomorrow. I imagine I will find Denmark, by contrast, a little soft. Berlin is so finely resistant that what one gets from it one feels one has really won, really wrestled out of it. It’s still too near for me to speak about, but I would seriously like to be able to spend a couple of years here sometime – there is so much I don’t yet know about it. (Gunn, *Letters* 130)

After collecting many memories in Hamburg, Berlin and Copenhagen, Gunn spent a little more time in England, before returning to the United States in January, 1961. Although England was always a chance to catch up with family and friends, this time he did not find the time to meet with Herbert Gunn. Resenting his lack of connection during that stay, the son had the empathy to assume that, although his father would have liked to see his son, he felt hurt they could not meet. While Thom Gunn was becoming more and more rooted, having a secure income and slowly settling in the States, Hebert Gunn’s job was becoming more insecure as he got older.⁹⁷ He also got caught up in some decisions that did not turn out well for him, resulting in the folding of his paper under his editorship. Drinking during work was not the best idea, but shows the desperation and helplessness of a man who was used to success, but had started to feel like they had led an unfulfilled life. To somewhat soothe his father’s pain about not meeting, Thom Gunn sent him a telegram, knowing that he liked that form of communication, thus trying to keep up the bond with his father, who was still married to Olive, the woman the poet despised so much. While he did not meet his father, Thom Gunn visited Cambridge, which made his good-bye easier, supported by the cold and damp weather in the early year of 1961. Having been gone for more than six years now, and having earned his master’s degree from Cambridge⁹⁸ while living abroad, there was simply no sentimentality left to make

⁹⁷ Sometimes, Herbert Gunn overstepped legal boundaries, see article “Editor Fined £ 500 on Contempt Motion.” In *The Guardian*

⁹⁸ *Master of Arts Degree - University of Cambridge 1958.*

him want to go back permanently anytime soon. Every time Gunn went west, his urge to return to the United Kingdom grew smaller and his feelings of being at home in the United States, or rather on the West Coast of California, were reaffirmed.

Upon his return, he took another step that seemed unavoidable in retrospect. He left his apartment on Telegraph Avenue and rented a new flat in the city of San Francisco, on 975 Filbert Street, North Beach. After those couple of months of separation, he was joined again by Kitay, who found work as a director in Redwood City. They moved in together, despite still being a troubled couple. Yet, Gunn later describes the life at North Beach with his lover as very cozy and settled. The couple lived together in what was called a railroad apartment, a long-stretched condo. Here they gave each other, and Fletcher and Black, their two cats, a home. Having two cats was a new level of commitment for the two men, as it represented a step towards a more domestic life.

Shortly after his return to California, Gunn made the acquaintance of another young man from England. He was four years younger, hunky, and very determined to find and meet the poet in San Francisco. According to his own reports, he read Gunn's 1957 poem "On the Move" and immediately knew he wanted to meet the writer. He even claimed to have bought a motorcycle because of the impression this poem made on him. The young man was Oliver Wolf Sacks, who just moved to San Francisco to start working as an assistant at the Mount Zion Hospital and begin his medical career. Sacks was almost obsessed with Gunn, and his persistence led to sexual encounters. A story about one of the encounters goes that Sacks was just giving head to Gunn in a dark corner, when Gunn looked down and could not help but making a remark on the absent looking face of his partner. He said "Oliver, you look like you're trying to solve a very complicated mathematical equation, can I help you with that?" (Silberman) With that, he ended the sexual encounter, showing once more how much he enjoyed sex and wanted it to be a mutual experience.⁹⁹

Gunn's sexual relationship with Sacks was neither casual, nor something that he was proud of. At the very least, it was the end of their story as sexual friends. In a letter to Kitay, discussing their troubles while he was absent again, he confesses

Yes, I did make it with Wolf, & it was indefensible, since I find him extremely unatt. Well, not extremely, and some people go mad crazy about him, but I like something (a) more beautiful and (b) more subtle. But for the first time in my life, I did what I consider so wrong, i.e., slept with someone because he was so devoted,

⁹⁹ In an interview, Gunn talks about Sacks approach to him and says "Actually, I often found him a bit irritating in those days, and embarrassing because he was so enthusiastic about me, and I just didn't feel there was much to be enthusiastic about." Weschler.

which I find immoral, really, the one form of sexual immorality. But he literally came to California because of me, and bought a bike which he still rides all the time because of me. (*Letters* 138)

This extract again demonstrates that sex was not arbitrary to Gunn. His moral standards for the act of bodily unification were high, and he had a clear code of conduct to which he was true. In the case of Sacks, the mutual attraction he valued very much was just not present. Although the physical attraction was not mutual, a certain intellectual attraction would become mutual and fruitful. After their sexual start, the two men continued to have a friendship of great value to both of them as writers.

A while later, Sacks left a pile of his notebooks on Gunn's porch for him to read and comment on, which Gunn, who always tried to be helpful, gladly obliged. The books contained Sacks' observations of medical cases that he wanted to write books about. Gunn commented on the writings that he found the observational talent behind them extraordinary and the degree of detail stunning. However, in the poet's opinion, they were emotionally cold. "You write without heart" (Silberman), he told Sacks, remarking on the lack of empathy when writing about the conditions of neurological patients. This seemed to make sense to the medical professional and went straight to his heart. He changed his writing style, accepting emotion as a valuable device in books about neuroscience, and became known as one of the most empathetic neurologists in publication, with his anecdotal style reaching many readers outside the professional world. His early book *Awakenings* even made it to the big screen, with Robin Williams in the lead role of the semi-biographical movie.¹⁰⁰ To return the favor of helping him become a better writer, Sacks was to become one of the people that Gunn sent his poetry to for comments and remarks. This fruitful relationship carried through the men's friendship. Sacks' admiration for Gunn's poetry became very clear again when a few decades later he published his autobiography. For the posthumous book, Sacks chose the title *On the Move: A life*, a reference to his inspiration from the late 1950s. On the cover, we see Sacks in the 1960s, bulky with muscles, wearing a leather jacket, sitting on a BMW motorbike, looking cheekily into the distance ahead, awaiting the adventures of life to come, including his moving friendship with Gunn.

Thom Gunn's circle of friends in San Francisco was far from complete. In the spring of 1961, he met Don Doody. The young man from Chicago was visiting San

¹⁰⁰ Of course, the doctor played by Williams, depicting Sacks, was written straight. This was also reasoned by the fact, that Sacks remained in the closet for all his life and put a lot of effort into his secrecy.

Francisco, where he met Gunn in a North Beach neighborhood restaurant called Gordon's. Doody studied in Georgetown and Syracuse before majoring in anthropology at Tulane, adding a law degree as well as an MA in English there, the year after his first graduation. Gunn was fascinated by Doody on several levels, but it became clear immediately how similarly their minds worked when learning that Doody's thesis was written on Shakespeare and the Opera, topics that Gunn shared a passion for and found interesting to combine. Although their encounter started off sexually, it quickly developed into a deep platonic friendship after the first sexual enthusiasm wore off.¹⁰¹ During their early acquaintance, Doody, who had moved to San Francisco, was working at the Tool Box, an infamous and pioneering leather bar in San Francisco. Partly because of his fetish, and partly due to his affection for Doody, the Tool Box became Gunn's favorite bar at this time. Conveniently for him, who had a talent for drinking a lot at night, Doody driving Gunn home at the end of his shift became a habit, and trademark of the friendship of the two men who shared so much.

The Crossroads was another leather bar in San Francisco where Gunn went to cruise and flirt. Here he added another close friend to the list of people who had profound influence on Gunn's personal and professional development. Chuck Arnett was a ballet dancer and artist, about whom Gunn said in an interview "we had nothing in common, but you don't need to have anything in common for a friendship. I am attracted to people who take charge ... I think that's very attractive. I admire people who are stronger than me, ... I may appear like a strong person, I appear to myself as a weak person, so I'm always attracted by the strong." (Gunn, *Letters* xxxii) In a way, Arnett was Gunn's American version of Carl Timmer – a man who did things. His art was direct and easy to grasp. He designed the famous black and white mural of men at the Tool Box, which was part of the bar's later legend. Like Gunn, though, Arnett was not aiming for fame, he was enjoying life, living from day to day. Creating art and having sex, of course including Gunn in the beginning of their friendship, was his way of life.¹⁰²

As time went by, accompanied by ever-changing distances, geographically and personally, life left marks on Gunn's and Kitay's relationship. Their personal differences,

¹⁰¹ "With Don any sexual relationship totally out of the question." Gunn (*Diary 1962-1966*).

¹⁰² The moved life of Arnett made it into Gunn's poetry as well, with the poem "Pierce Street", which was where Arnett lived in the 1960s, "Transients and Residents", "Bravery" about a portrait Arnett did of his friend Thom Gunn and "Crystal".

what they wanted in life, and how both expected their future to be, did make it hard to re-evaluate the terms of their connection. It was during that time of uncertainty and searching, that Kitay found another Tom, with the last name Gee, with whom he started an affair. He even had a wedding ceremony with Gee, thinking that this was what he wanted. The effect this had on Thom Gunn was of course sadness, but also stoic acceptance. If that kind of label was what Kitay wanted, he was willing to let him go, as he knew he would not be willing to provide it. In a letter to Kitay, he assured his partner of how much he loved him, but also how sure he was about the fact that Gunn himself would not change. He would not marry Kitay, and thus left the decision of how their future would look like to him, figuring out what he wanted.

Adding to the uncertainty with Kitay, a certain loss was affecting Gunn. Herbert Gunn died in March 1962.¹⁰³ Although Thom Gunn and his father had always been on speaking terms, their relationship was always characterized by a certain distance. After all, traditional family life had ended when Charlotte and Herbert split, and despite the attempts to stay in touch with both parents, the boys stayed with their mother. Herbert Gunn wanted to meet with his son on a visit to the United States, which was aborted due to his declining health. The son felt sorry that it did not work out as planned and wrote to his father with his best wishes. While he was touched by his father's passing, his second wife Olive had always been a red flag for Gunn, at least since the death of Charlotte, when Ander and Thom had been split, and when Olive had treated him badly, in Gunn's opinion. Still, upon being notified of his father's death, the writer showed politeness by writing a note of condolence to his stepmother,¹⁰⁴ despite his dislike of her. His father's death was certainly not as dramatic, and the grief not as deep, as with the suicide of his mother, though.¹⁰⁵

On his way to finally arrive as a rock star of poetry, a rebel with a cause, Thom Gunn decided to get a tattoo in 1962, when it was not yet fashionable. He chose a tattoo studio which had opened eight years earlier, in the year he arrived in the United States.

¹⁰³ See obituary in *The Guardian* "Herbert Gunn Dies."

¹⁰⁴ When learning that she died, Gunn writes the following: "Mon Feb 25: I forgot to say I was pleased to hear that Olive died last December (Ander told me in a letter). One less bastard in the world - cynical, hard, & unloving. In fact I let out a whoop of delight." (*Diary 1986-2000* 38).

¹⁰⁵ When Gunn returned to England in 1963, he notes that he feels weird to return to England knowing his father is dead. The loss also triggered a kind of freedom in the poet.

As a motif, he chose a black panther,¹⁰⁶ which from then on populated his right forearm, being worn proudly by Gunn, showing it off on this visible part of his body. His being different from average, normal citizens, now had a visible representation on his body. The tattoo also partly symbolized his fetishes, his being a real man, and sympathies with the hoodlums and outcasts, who were the ones associated with tattoos these days, being aware of the messages that were conveyed by having – and showing – a tattoo. Although it may have been a coincidence, it is surely not unfitting that the tattoo artist Gunn chose was Lyle Tuttle,¹⁰⁷ who as soon as tattoos became mainstream a few years later, became a celebrity of the scene. He decorated the skin of Janis Joplin, Cher, Joan Baez and all the members of the Rolling Stones, while also inventing the Tattoo Shirt. (The Book Haven)

A while after Kitay had gone through it, the sexually active poet was hit by hepatitis in late 1962, which changed his life tremendously for a few months. Besides being forbidden to drink alcohol during his recovery, and the time it took, it showed him his own vulnerability. This vulnerability, in combination with the experience of his father's death at a fairly young age, and in combination with having much spare time at hand suddenly, culminated in Gunn starting to write a diary.

The first years in the United States meant so many different new experiences for Gunn, they are nearly uncountable. The attempt, however, shall not be missed. Besides the intellectual stimulation at Stanford with Yvor Winters as his mentor, everything that had to do with his surroundings there, the meeting with Isherwood in Hollywood, his teaching experiences at Trinity College in San Antonio, the trips with Kitay, the stay in New York, making friends, all the little bits in between, seeing gay life flourishing from its hidden existence, experiencing the benefits of his open sexuality, travelling withing and discovering the United States and in Europe, coping with the hurdles of paperwork applying for his visas and later green card, being on and off a PhD program and finally being able to teach at the well renowned university, describe a trip every late twenty-year-old gay guy would be jealous of, even today. For Thom Gunn, all these new experiences widened his mind immensely. He developed in character and as a poet alike, trying things out and not being afraid of missing out on anything while doing another thing. That is what characterized the young Thomson William Gunn and shaped the foundation on which he would build his future in the years to come.

¹⁰⁶ For meanings see also iTattooDesigns.com and Tattoodo.

¹⁰⁷ For Lyle Tuttle in Interview, see Reasoner.

Chapter Four: The Fullest Years of My Life

In December 1962, Thom Gunn added a brand-new level to the documentation of his own life. He started writing diaries and in his personal fashion, he did it fairly regularly right from the beginning. There were several possible reasons for him to start writing his diaries. He might have regretted not having taken notes when visiting Berlin, as he was asked to write a travel book for which he could not remember enough facts.¹⁰⁸ It is also likely he took his friend Isherwood as an example, who once replied to the question about the favorite book he ever wrote with “My Diaries”. Or, in the light of mortality, his father’s death could have motivated Gunn to document his days, especially when reminded of his own fragility when he contracted hepatitis. The reason, if there is just one, will never completely be determined, but the fact remains, he became accustomed to writing regular diary entries very quickly, after a short period of practicing the routine. In general, he wrote short summaries rather than long texts about his daily life, with a few exceptions. The entries could be as short as one word¹⁰⁹ or just a symbol or run for half a page in simple notebooks bought at the store for reasonable prices. The staccato feeling of his very limited writing per day is also reflected in many abbreviations, which at times can be hard to interpret. While the definite intention of starting to write the diaries remains unclear, the content is well described by the author himself by the titles and subtitles he chooses for his diaries. When he titled the first notebook with the funny and ironic “The Record or the Black Diary (Where is the Pink One?)” (*Diary 1962-1966*), he skillfully condenses the observation with the hidden, when alluding to pink as the color he was supposed to choose, because he was gay, instead of the black cover the notebook actually had. The title was most likely added after finishing it, or at least after a while of writing. The second diary has a more extensive set of titles and subtitles, as if Gunn himself could not really decide what he had produced here. He called it “A Record volume two or the Diary of a Man of Quality, the second volume of a continuing memoir or The Life and account of high society as seen from below stairs or, From Auschwitz to the Presidency” (*Diary 1966-1970*). This aptly conveys his sarcasm, dark humor and the ever-appearing

¹⁰⁸ “Your second question, about a book on Berlin, is more difficult to answer straight off. I’d like to think about it for a week or two. It strikes me that a straight travel-book is hardly called for: there’s plenty of that in books and newspapers already. ... should have kept thorough notes or a diary ... As it is, what I’d be able to write at this distance would be too vague and scrappy.” Gunn (*Letters* 140).

¹⁰⁹ “Sept 5, Thurs: Nichts“ Gunn (*Diary 1962-1966*)

theme of continuity between the extremes of life. How tasteful the chosen titles are is a question that may be left to the reader. What they show is a certain lightness with which Gunn saw life, giving him a sense of freedom to move between these opposites. In the third diary, then, he gives up his extensive titles, simply writing “People met & dates to remember” (*Diary 1970-1974*) in a free space above the first line of the book, which describes the content of all the diaries, and the times they report on, perfectly well. Gunn would keep his diaries until two days before his death, including little extra books for travelling, which he meticulously copied and sometimes edited into the main notebooks upon his return. He used space on the pages in a very thrifty way, usually using one marked line in the notebook for two lines of writing, or dividing one letter format page into two columns, to save space, when the notebooks got bigger. As a result, the handwriting turns out to be relatively tiny and scribbly in parts, which adds to the difficulty of deciphering it, already compounded by the abbreviations used. For names, Gunn’s idiosyncrasy complicates retracing of events as well as his use of several languages, mixed with seemingly no structure behind it. He uses German, French and at times Spanish or Italian terms and sentences in his notes. Always reflective and presumably as honest as possible while writing about one’s own life, the first entry in his first diary as a grown-up reads “1962 Dec 7 – entered hospital with hepatitis” (*Diary 1962-1966*)

Recovering from hepatitis must have been a harsh period in Gunn’s life. The illness did effectively hinder him from following through with his diaries right from the start, causing him to take a one month break already, after that first short remark from December 7th, when he continues with the second entry “Jan 7 – discharged from hospital, staying at Don Doody’s” followed by a simple “January – Don” (*Diary 1962-1966*). When the routine quickly started to increase after that and his pace of writing grew to once a day, it also became clear that his health was improving. While in early February he still writes about barely being able to stand up, at the end of the month he would proclaim to feel OK again. Still, for safety reasons, and not to be alone, he would stay at his friend Don Doody’s place at 1045 Fell Street until May of 1963. Gunn was lucky to have a friend like Doody, who grew close to Gunn in these months. When Kitay was in New York and could not look after the weak Gunn, it was a friend like this who was needed. While Gunn stayed to recover, Doody was not living alone but with Bryan Condon. Gunn, who had connected to Doody particularly when being driven home drunk after his shifts at the Tool Box, was now instructed by the doctors to fully stop drinking

alcohol. Being deprived of this kind of occupation left some space for productivity. While at Fell Street, Gunn read a vast amount, especially Thomas Mann, who had died a short time earlier. The author by this time was known to have been homosexual, which made him a perfect source for Gunn, looking for what was possible in literature at that time, in openly writing about the homoerotic. Mann, who had lived in his United States exile, before returning to Europe shortly before he died, was closeted but revealed his sexuality in some letters and most famously between the lines in his books *Death in Venice* and *Felix Krull*, being full of sexual innuendos towards the male main characters. Mann's acquaintances knew about his sexual orientation, but unlike the poet, the German writer never acted on it.

When he was feeling stronger, Gunn ventured head on into the San Francisco night life again, including concerts at the Hungry I, a venue for stars in their early fame. Here Gunn saw the yet to become famous Barbra Streisand.¹¹⁰ He also visited a Joan Sutherland concert, all without alcohol, as he was staying strong and listening to the doctor's advice. He also started to meet friends again, as a note mentioning a get together with Christopher Isherwood suggests. Abstaining from drinking was hard for Gunn, who was a heavy drinker when the hepatitis hit. He remarks in his diary "Apr 27 Sat: Lost temper with DD [Doody], TT [Tanner], BC [Condon] on pretext of being woken, actually in jealousy of thr drinking" (*Diary 1962-1966*). It was an obviously highly reflective statement, presenting how Gunn dealt with psychological issues intellectually, sorting out his behavior by identifying his needs behind it. At the same time, this self-knowledge might also be one of the reasons that Gunn often came across as emotionally distant, which in a way he was, not having regular outbursts when triggered. It was a character trait which helped him maintain an inner peace, when for other people quarrels would have been unavoidable. After being supported by his friends, Gunn left them on May 22nd to move back to his old apartment at 975 Filbert Street, still not healthy enough to return to drinking as usual. When Kitay returned to join Gunn at their apartment after his stay in New York, Gunn remarked about Kitay's good attitude, giving some hope to resolve their issues, at least for a while. During that time, Gunn also explored the multiple uses for his diary, by implementing a beer count, willing to get back to drinking again, but controlling the intake a bit by documenting the amounts.

During his exile from Filbert Street, Gunn started another project, induced by the absence of alcohol, but also the struggles with Kitay, the illness and political issues during

¹¹⁰ See Barbra Archives.

that time. The fact that he also had fruitful intellectual discussions with Doody, and Tony Tanner, who was in this circle of friends, also played a role in the starting of a long poem that Gunn initially called “Survivor”. Doody’s and Tanner’s impacts were clearly marked and honored by the poet dedicating the poem to them, when it was finalized and published under the title “Misanthropos”, which will be talked about later.

Gunn wanted to celebrate his recovery from hepatitis, and he convinced Don, the friend he spent so much time with at the beginning of the year, to join him on a trip to Mexico, despite Doody’s notorious lack of money. On June 13th in 1963, Gunn was sitting in Doody’s 1958 Buick with Doody and Tanner, on their way to Fresno. Further south, they dropped Tanner off in Los Angeles, while the remaining duo continued to Laguna Beach to start off in the spirit of the trip that was to follow, by seizing life and sleeping in the car. The trip was about enjoying life and collecting memories, and was also intended as a new source of inspiration, as Gunn needed these impulses. Right from the beginning, Gunn and Doody argued abstractly about play, probably sexual play, before leaving Laguna Beach for San Diego, shortly to cross the United States-Mexican Border into Tijuana, only to return to the States, visiting Yuma, Arizona and the surrounding desert. Staying in Tucson, Gunn is awestruck by seeing the Milky Way from the desert, which lacked light pollution in its night sky, providing an amazing view into the universe. The next day, the pair of friends finally crossed the border at Nogales to stay in Mexico for the next couple of weeks, having no plan, intending to see where the road would take them. And it took them to Guayamas, where they took a dip in the sea before sunset. Gunn met a drunken sailor who was staying there with his boat while Doody was touring the whorehouses of the city. After spending the next day exploring town on foot, they continued south for another 150 miles, spending the night sleeping in the car parked in the desert. While Doody was driving, Gunn read Edward II, and while eating noticed how his taste was changing, allegedly due to the change in climate, which Don confirmed with his own observations. When they arrived at Mazatlán, they continued with their habit of walking around, finishing by swimming at night. With his very distinct sense for detail, Gunn took notes of things he found interesting and noteworthy: the unexpected meeting with Patricia Taylor, one of his students from Berkeley, band playoffs at a bar they visited, and of course the usual sleeping in the car after having half a beer, slowly starting to drink again. After arriving at Guadalajara, where Gunn read Marlow’s *Dr. Faustus* at the Hotel Francis (where they stayed this time), he was particularly struck by the line of men

waiting in front of the local brothel. The next day was occupied by sightseeing and getting in touch with the local culture and cultural history.

Being an open-minded person, Gunn never wrote down his observations judgmentally, but rather in the style of a report and with noticeable fascination. The details which he found most obscure went into the notes, sometimes without making immediate sense to the reader, but rather summing up into a collection of the whole experience. Here the diary writing makes sense in the way that it was easier for Gunn to reread the written observations, in order to make the connections of what his mind was up to after experiencing the moments. It also makes it easier to ignore the small obstacles, like the trip not running so smoothly all the time. A tire broke on the day that Doody and Gunn wanted to continue to the eleven villages, while the writer had bad stomach pains from too much beer and the exotic food he had eaten the night before., which his stomach was not used to. Being unwell, Gunn had trouble sleeping and had bad dreams. Being observant of the details, he notes a dream of a dystopian vision where he has “dreams of the world as ultimate corruption” (*Diary 1962-1966*), depicting a world that Gunn disliked to be a part of. Like his dreams would sometimes tell the story of his mind in abstract terms, the whole trip to Mexico would not be represented in Gunn’s poetry in direct subjects later, rather in ideas about experience.

The travelers continued to Mexico City which served as a starting point for the next few daytrips, while they slept at the same place for a while. Gunn was still suffering from dysentery, finding it fitting as their arrival in the capital was accompanied by thunder and lightning. With his stomach getting slightly better, the friends visited the Castle and Park of the Chapultecs, Tenampa as well as the Palacio National, the Law Courts, and the Cathedral of Mexico City, ticking off the touristy places from their bucket list during the day, with the typical tour of the whorehouses at night. Gunn was intrigued by the night life of cities, even by the brothels, which he did not visit as a guest (as there were only women, which obviously did not interest him sexually), but because those places had a dirty gist that Gunn fancied. One evening he went out on his own, exploring the night to tell his own story about the city. To complete the list of sights, in the following days Gunn visited the university and San Angel, before attending his first bullfight a day after, recounting it as “mediocre, result distasteful, tho one matador was a pretty.” (Gunn, *Diary 1962-1966*)

The friends left Mexico City for Acapulco, where they would stay with Bill and India Bradley, friends of Doody’s that Gunn immediately liked. Unfortunately, the

Bradleys were soon in a quarrelsome mood, which infected the travelling friends, who also argued and left in a depressed mood. Gunn seemed to be longing for harmony rather than fights and would describe the time at Acapulco as disastrous. The tensions led to more quarrels between the friends, while the dysentery seemed to have moved from Gunn to his friend who felt progressively worse while the writer was recovering. The tensions faded though, when they moved on to Puebla, where a fifteen-peso hotel seemed to satisfy Gunn much more with its simplicity than the Hilton at Acapulco. Puebla was also an opportunity to avoid visiting the loud and dirty Mexico City again.

Gunn's interest in the new and exotic had become very visible by now: not afraid of the unknown, but rather embracing new experiences, being open-minded, trying things out, and failing sometimes, was the foundation on which he built his adventures. In this mindset, he made friends with a man named Sergio, after climbing the tower of Puebla's Cathedral, and watching baptisms taking place from above. Making friends with Sergio also meant, for Gunn, that he would use his new acquaintance to improve his Spanish skills, with little success. All the excitement of that day led to his conclusion that it was "a good day" (*Diary 1962-1966*). The trip went uphill again from this point. He was sleeping in the car more often, meeting interesting people and enjoying the landscapes from beaches to rolling hills with their coffee and banana plantations, crossing the rivers by ferries, until arriving at the Pyramids of the Niches in Tajun. Fascinated by the sights, unfortunately, the dysentery returned, which, in one specific way, also brought Gunn closer to nature. Tampico, the next stop, had a special impact on Gunn, who tried to capture the town by drawing a map into his diary. In the sketch he depicts locations of special interest, including the market and the whorehouse, as well as their hotel, between the water and the roads in their distinct pattern. Leaving the city after taking a guided tour left the friends in a regretful state, as they also ended their journey to the foreign country with that last stop. When he returned from Mexico, Gunn brought with him his second "Revelation of the primitive that is not barbarous." (Gunn, *Diary 1962-1966*) as a result of his experiences, grounding him even more than he already was. When the friends finally returned to the United States by crossing the border at Corpus Christi, they were sleeping in the car again, which was difficult due to the heat wave in the midst of July.

Leaving Mexico did not mean finishing the road trip just yet. As for the next stop, New Orleans seemed good for Doody and Gunn, as the latter had been there a few years earlier with Kitay. The return to the United States seemed to channel Gunn's sexual energies, more than the time in Mexico. In New Orleans, he met Mike Chittin with whom

his sexuality found a revival in a passionate fling. After returning from Mexico, Gunn also left his hepatitis behind, showing why it made sense to introduce the beer count in his diaries, although this was followed by a sudden rise in consumption in the bars of New Orleans. All in all, New Orleans was a well of reunions and restoration of energies that had been on a break, reviving Gunn's spirits. While travelling stimulated Gunn's urge for the new, Mike Chittin was a more bodily stimulation, which he needed for balance. Being really drunk for the first time since November, before his infection, he described his inebriation as a salvation, and indeed he celebrated it. In New Orleans, Gunn mentions communicating with Kitay for the first time since his departure from San Francisco. He called him just before having a good time with Chittin again, which seemed good enough that Gunn "meant to leave, but didn't" (Gunn, *Diary 1962-1966*). From New Orleans, Doody and Gunn continued to their next big destination, Doody's hometown of Chicago. Before they arrived there, they had a stopover in Memphis, which of course was an important destination for Gunn, who had admired Elvis from the beginning of his career, writing a poem about the singer. On the way home, Doody's mood got progressively worse, as they were getting closer to his parents Bob and Karen Doody. Upon meeting them, Gunn realized the unfortunate similarities between his friend and the father, which at that point was no compliment to Bob. Apart from meeting Doody's parents, more happy reunions took place. Tony Tanner, who was dropped off at Los Angeles a few weeks earlier, met his friends again when he arrived in Chicago, telling Gunn the bad news that Kitay might have gotten hepatitis again. This worried Gunn as much as Doody's intention to move back to Chicago, which Gunn judged to be a bad idea, especially after seeing the dynamics between his friend and his parents in person. Because of Doody's resentfulness, Gunn decided to stay at the Y on his own for a few days, where he called Kitay again, checking up on him. During the next days, there was lots of meeting people, including the hunt for sexual adventures and seeing paintings at the Art Institute, while at the Doody's the chaos progressed when his mother fell down the stairs, breaking her spine. After getting a closer look for a few days, Gunn's impression of Chicago, or rather its suburbs, was disastrous, as he found it devastating and boring. The constant quarrels between the young and old Doody's of course did not help him like the place any more. On August 18th, Don Doody and Thom Gunn were joined by a friend and continued their journey, this time directed to San Francisco. Gunn describes the countryside between Dallas and Amarillo as "flat, gentle, expressionless" (Gunn, *Diary 1962-1966*), but finds it beautiful nonetheless, especially commenting on the men in the area as "beautiful men

with blond hair & uncomplicated faces” (Gunn, *Diary 1962-1966*), describing his observations rather poetically. Continuing via Santa Fe, Denver and Salt Lake City, where a city tour was mandatory for Gunn, they headed home relatively quickly. After a phone call with Kitay, Gunn dreamt again. This time of his lover as his brother Ander, subconsciously identifying Kitay as close family in a way. Shortly before finally arriving back to San Francisco, where Kitay awaited Gunn with two kittens, the two friends on the road had one highlight left: They celebrated Gunn’s 34th birthday in the magnificent surroundings of the Yosemite National Park, a worthy place for that occasion.

Frederick Walter Kuh was an eccentric man,¹¹¹ and thus special in his own ways. Afflicted as he was growing up by an obsessive-compulsive disorder which manifested as purchasing Victorian style furniture, he quickly ran out of storage space in his apartment. His solution was simple: he rented an historical pasta factory and decorated it with the furniture, including chairs hanging from the ceiling. This was the beginning of the Old Spaghetti Factory in 478 Green Street, San Francisco. Since then, the Factory (which had closed, shutting down its production a few years earlier), had served as the unofficial headquarters of Adlai Stevenson’s 1956 presidential campaign. After Kuh’s reopening, the venue became an instant hit and was a meeting space for the bohemian society of the neighborhood. The place was famous for the worst pasta you could get for a cheap price, and giving shelter for the bohemians and artists, straight or gay.¹¹² As neighbors, Kitay and Gunn were regulars at the place from the 1960s onwards. The place was a bar, restaurant and theatre at the same time, and the couple mingled there with people, watching plays like *An Evening at Widow Begbick’s*. Of course, Gunn and Kitay were not only patrons, but also friends of Fred Kuh, and enjoyed the company of likeminded people at this San Francisco institution.

The atmosphere of the Old Spaghetti Factory was immortalized in a painting in 1963, when Kuh asked local artist (and friend of Gunn) Mike Caffee to paint a mural. As payment, Fred Kuh offered free, lifelong dining for Caffee at the venue. For the mural, the most famous patrons of the Old Spaghetti Factory were asked to sit for Caffee, who painted with a fast brush. In the center of it, he put Fred Kuh, the owner, next to bare breasted artist Flo Allen. Mike Kitay and Thom Gunn also had a place in the piece of art, between North Beach’s famous artist Millie and other more or less famous guests, as they

¹¹¹ See Kuh’s obituary by Pimsleur.

¹¹² On the atmosphere of the Old Spaghetti Factory, see Wry Spaghetti Revuers.



Figure 1: Mural from the Old Spaghetti Factory

belonged to the restaurant's bohemian society. Gunn is seen in the lower right corner, dressed in jeans and black pullover, spreading his legs while looking at the observer of the scene, with his vigorous look, which was vividly caught by the painter. One month after finishing the mural, Caffee moved to England,¹¹³ leaving Kuh behind with a very good deal, not having to pay much for the artist's food after that. The mural became a visible landmark for the decades to come.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ See interview on Vimeo.

¹¹⁴ Besides the mentioned portrait of Carl Timmer, some other paintings and drawings by Don Bachardy, Chuck Arnett and other local artists, the mural is one of the few artworks publicly visible depicting Gunn. The mural is now placed on a wall at Al's Attire, see Hoodline.

In general, Gunn's political agenda was rarely public, or at least not attached to the poet Thom Gunn. Although he had a clear view and strong opinion, he would mostly discuss politics among friends and not in interviews, at least not until the 1970s. According to Kitay, Gunn's poetry was never political as such, although interpretation today would sometimes make it seem that way. The poet's political views only came through in a way that was not to prevent interpretation, by means of personality and perception through which Gunn writes. As in his poetry, in his diaries human and personal experiences were prioritized. Public events only rarely find their way into the diaries. One example of a public figure mentioned several times would be John F. Kennedy, about whom Gunn commented in a letter, with a simple "God am I delighted about Kennedy" (*Letters* 128), leaving open whether he was delighted about Kennedy winning the elections, or perhaps his opponent losing against him. In all the lack of clarity, Gunn cared about that president enough, to be shocked on November 22nd in 1963, when he writes "assassination of the president – radios all over campus, very shocking" (*Diary 1962-1966*) and adding the following day that the assassination resulted in not having to work the following day.¹¹⁵ Although he does not assess the event further, the simple mention of it shows interest and how unemotional Gunn's writing in his diaries can be, leaving some room for speculation of his thoughts, although being one of the most personal sources about him as a private person.

Among all the political chaos, chaos also prevailed in Kitay's and Gunn's relationship. In the first half of the 1960s, their constant troubles continued to bother the couple. Fueled by depressive thoughts, feelings of confusion, and insecurities on Kitay's side, quarrelling was assured. Gunn's relatively clear view of what he wanted, and even more distinct view of what he did not want, added some clarity on the one hand, but on the other it was not helpful in deescalating things between the lovers. The poet's curiosity for anything sexual along his way (especially the leather scene), which Kitay did not share, opposed the latter partner's longing for stability and commitment as a couple. Although the relationship was open for sexual adventures, Kitay stressed that it was Gunn who opened it, which itself signifies a certain imbalance.

When the couple lived apart on several occasions, with Kitay in New York, or Gunn travelling or back in England, they fought their quarrels on the phone or via letter.

¹¹⁵ Gunn was also careful accepting information quickly, which becomes clear, reading this from years later: "Th March 2: ... Clay Shaw (met 1963) arrested in N. Orleans for complicity in Kennedy murder. I do not believe in plot." (*Diary 1966-1970*).

In one of the letters, Gunn argued that he would not want to go back to who he was, nostalgia not being hardwired in his mind, while Kitay still wished for things to go back to the way they were in the beginning, with all the passion they shared.¹¹⁶ Although often resolved in a ceasefire and a more positive outlook, Gunn often notes some heaviness in his diaries. In 1964, he describes it vividly to a later self:

Jan 28: [...] I will not be able to think calmly about this time of my life for another 10 years. Is it my own fault or the blackmail of circumstances. I am a tenant in my apartment, and a tenant to M's [Mike Kitay] tyrannous misery, which he cannot help. - I must be strong, I must contain myself, & not complain. It is my choice to live with him after all. DO NOT BELLYACHE, Gunn. (*Diary 1962-1966*)

His clarity about the effects of his actions and the deliberateness with which he acts characterize a strong-willed man, with an open heart towards himself and the people he loved.

In the summer of 1964, Gunn started another endeavor. He returned to England for a full year, planning to write, meet his family, and experience life back home, ten years after he had first left. With the relationship situation in the back of his mind, he left California. He had last experienced a prolonged distance from his lover when the American left England for his military service, which had at first been an uncertain period. Shortly after his arrival in England, Gunn notes “Jul 8, Wed: My feelings are mixed: depression at the almost inevitable split with M - after 10 years this wonderful man is (probably rightly) leaving me & will no longer be part of my life. Yet the situation is given unreality from being in London again - a London exotic & without the strain of Father's presence.” (*Diary 1962-1966*) In all the confusion of emotions, Gunn remained as calm as possible, not falling into the trap of being influenced by the ups and downs of life, sticking to his decisions, trying to make sense of what was happening. He knew that fighting the inevitable would not make sense at all and trusted in life to turn out good for him in the end. This of course does not mean that he did not think of Mike in sadness. Dreams about Kitay's death and other afflictions, which can be found in his diaries, show how deeply he still cared.

Luckily for Gunn, the confusion was balanced out by another turn of fate, one that greatly helped him stabilize. For the first few weeks in England, he shared the flat with his old Cambridge friend Tony White, whom he had missed a lot in recent years. Living together gave them the opportunity to catch up on what they missed in each other's lives

¹¹⁶ Gunn's remark is one that induces a coming of age, a process of growing: “well, I don't play with teddy bears any longer” (*Letters* 123).

for as long as Gunn needed until he found his own place to stay. When he found that place at 80 Talbot Road, just a few blocks away, this did of course not mean that he spent much less time with White. They still saw a lot of each other, sharing thoughts and ideas, as in the old days, and drank together. White by now had been in theatre, and out of it, and was now trying to make ends meet by translating texts and writing pub guides of London. Gunn was convinced, though, that acting was White's true purpose, and tried to convince his friend to pursue this career. White did not agree, as he just did not want to deal with the formalities and restraints in theatre, finding them too exhausting, while knowing he could be happier by doing something different. Gunn had to accept that, and later always said that White was too smart for what he did, but on the other hand, that his friend was strong enough to make his own decisions and not worry about the future too much. When Gunn was not spending his time with Tony White or other friends, or at the few official appointments he had, or meeting with men for intercourse, he was visiting his family, as was usual when in England. Among the extended family he counted Thérèse Megaw, about whom he writes down in his diary this time on August 12th, 1964 "Thérèse knows" (*Diary 1962-1966*), by which he most likely means that she knew about his sexual orientation. He never mentioned it to her, but she seemed to deem it important to let him know that she was informed. Several meetings with his aunts were always fit into his agenda, in addition to catching up with his brother Ander, as another pillar of his life in England.

Professional meetings, which were much easier to hold while present in London than by mail, included get-togethers with Ted Hughes, with whom Gunn was professionally working together, Mr. Maertin from the *Observer*, T. S. Eliot (as his possible publisher) and Douglas Cleverdon from the BBC, who suggested to Gunn a project involving music for radio plays. Apart from these meetings, Gunn was of course concentrating on his goal to write poetry, but also prose, with a focus on "Survivor", which he usually refers to as "long poem". In the course of his visit, Gunn was invited to Faber & Faber in September 1964. The occasion was special, as he was supposed to meet Thomas Stearns Eliot, the publisher of Faber & Faber since 1925. The meeting would happen just a couple of months before Eliot's death. Gunn's anticipation was high, as the young poet later in life recalled the meeting, and the huge disappointment upon hearing that Eliot did not actually choose him personally, but instead had people to select the

poets to be published, which in Gunn's case was Charles Monteith.¹¹⁷ When Eliot told Gunn this during their meeting, the young man's face must have shown his disappointment, as the publisher explained, "I didn't choose you, but I like your poetry very much" (Gunn and Campbell 32) which was supposed to smooth the disappointing experience. In addition to being his publisher, T. S. Eliot also had an influence on Gunn's career as a poet, and Gunn had a high opinion of him, despite telling his friend Tanner in a letter, that he now preferred his heroes Pound, Williams and Lowell, Stevens and Lawrence, "but not Yeats and Eliot" (*Letters* 197).

Shortly after Gunn's arrival, Kitay came to visit for the first time, on a trip through Europe. Both men were happy about their reunion, although Gunn realized a change in his everyday life due to their dynamics. Gunn had gone hunting for men before finding his room on Talbot Road, which he moved to on August 31st. On September 18th, he writes "Mike arrives in eve at Victoria. Lovely to have him here, tho he seems a bit silent. - My life changes for next month: from writing poetry and having sex to writing criticism and going to shows." (*Diary 1962-1966*), summing up his sentiment. After Kitay's departure another five weeks later, he continued with the usual habits, when he was on his own, of his life in London: writing, cruising, sex, movies, bars and official appointments. The occasional concern with politics still makes its way into his diaries but does not bother him as much as finding out that he had caught crabs by the end of the year, slowing down his sex life as the responsible man he was, apart from being annoyed by the pest alone. It did not get Gunn down too much though, having enough to do, with life going on. Instead of whining, he increased his cultural appearances and spent more time with Tony White as well as Tony and Marcia Tanner.¹¹⁸

As a British citizen, with interest in music, Gunn was one of the many people admiring a new band which revolutionized the industry. He admired the work of The Beatles from early on, and wanted to visit their concerts, if he had a chance. That chance came on January 14th in 1965, at the height of Beatlemania, when they gave a series of concerts called *The Christmas Beatles Show at the Hammersmith*.¹¹⁹ Gunn was there among screaming teenage girls, trying to hear the lyrics he admired so much. Don Doody

¹¹⁷ After this visit, Gunn describes Eliot as "a colossal man whose speech is beginning to get a bit vague & stumble. Groucho's picture on the wall." (*Diary 1962-1966*).

¹¹⁸ At the end of 1964, Gunn summarizes the year as follows: "On 1964 I am aware of my weaknesses, at least. But it has been a year of luck in some ways. The agony of Mike me is suspended, or out of mind, or over, neither of us knows which. I have written a bit, tho less than I should, being incurably lazy." (*Diary 1962-1966*).

¹¹⁹ See *The Beatles Bible*.

arrived for a very sexual visit, just in time, after the concert. After having noted earlier in his diaries that he could not imagine having sex with Doody anymore, the change of place seemed to have had an influence on the decision. Doody was present on many occasions, being one of the few friends who were introduced to Gunn's family, a rare occasion of intertwining his social circles.

The early part of the year 1965 was characterized by feeling depressed for Gunn, for which he compensated by having sex, making the depressed episodes worse at times, as it can make one more vulnerable, especially when trying to outsource affirmation to others and being rejected. Being a person who was always reflecting on his self-consciousness, he was aware of the effects he was experiencing. During his time in England, Gunn added a new ingredient to his sex life, quite literally, by discovering poppers and starting to use them. Poppers are a substance or mild drug which is sniffed from tiny bottles that pop when opened, hence the name. It has a relaxing effect on muscles and on blood circulation and thus enhances the sexual experience in addition to chemical reactions in the brain. From the moment of his first use, Gunn would enjoy sex even more under the effects of poppers, which he would thereafter always have at hand.

In between spending time with friends and family, Gunn also finds time to visit his Alma Mater at Cambridge, conveniently being Tony Tanner's place of work by now. Gunn was always welcome to drop by for intellectual exchange as a poet and teacher. During one of his visits, he met a student of Tanner, whom he found bright, and with whom he builds an immediate personal connection. Clive Wilmer, who was a poet himself, impressed Gunn in such a way that they developed a friendship that would last a lifetime.¹²⁰ Returning to London for such a long time also presented the potential to relive former memories in a different way. Living on Talbot Road, his childhood playground was relatively close. Although Gunn wrote in the beginning of his year abroad "Jul 20, Mon: [...] But my two fevers have departed, for the time: the Mike fever of despair & the (allied?) cruising fever" (*Diary 1962-1966*), this was a realization that had to do with homesickness for San Francisco rather than a change of mind. During the following months, he visited Hampstead Heath quite regularly for a more grown-up kind of play in the evenings and nights of London. The Heath has been a famous place for meeting and having anonymous sex with interested men for a long time, and was quite busy at times. Gunn reports orgies on the Heath, providing proof for a substantial amount of sexual

¹²⁰ "Jan 7 [1965], Th: ... Clive Wilmer in eve, (TT's student)" Gunn (*Diary 1962-1966*).

action in the woods and bushes of the large park. For gays, cruising was an important tool, with only few gay bars and of course no dating apps¹²¹ around.

In February, Gunn finally finished his long poem, which he had started around the time of his being sick with hepatitis. The piece was formerly titled “Survivor” was now renamed “Misanthropos” and indeed turned out to be long, and painted a dark image. Initially started as a single poem about the survivor of a nuclear catastrophe, the piece grew to include more ideas which Gunn had gathered along the way. The philosophies included range from Camus and Hannah Arendt to Selwyn Mauberly, who found the way into the piece especially in the part called “Epitaph for Anton Schneider”.

“Misanthropos” (Gunn, *T* 29–49), dated 1965, was a huge experiment for Gunn. He invested more than two years in composing the epic, which consists of seventeen parts and is written in free verse and meter. The main plot concerns a man who survived a “long war” (30) and seems to be the last man on Earth. This situation is the starting point for the poem to show how dependent human beings are, as a social creature, by stripping his protagonist of this social surrounding. What is left of a person, when there is no opposite, or no other person to communicate to or to relate to? Gunn discusses the whole spectrum of individualism and being part of a group within this “Long Poem”, which also seems to reflect a lot of his own philosophy, on the fantastical scale of a post-holocaust Earth.

Gunn starts by putting “The Last Man”, (Gunn, *T* 29) as the first part is titled, in a setting of vast landscapes. He realizes he is alone and would have the “entire world to choose from”. (29) Yet he stays on one single hill, setting up traps to catch prey for food and provide for his basic needs. He feels safe enough to do without a watchtower, as he is most probably the last of his kind; and if he was not, a watchtower would only give him away. Gunn takes up his image of the birds from “On the Move” again, saying that the survivor lives like them “self-contained”. The man is lonely and spends his time hunting and thinking, remembering the war with agony. Without the people he supposedly fought in the war as a soldier, he lacks all humanity as he, “the final man walks the final hill // without thought or feeling”. With the lack of fellow humans, he is a caricature, as “he lacks motive”, having survived his own race.

The second part of the poem reads like a man talking to himself, lacking a partner for conversation. It’s written in syllabics, where every couple of lines is succeeded by a repetition of parts of the last word of the preceding line, but twisting the meaning. He realizes his being alone from a simple conclusion:

¹²¹ For modern day gay networking, see Payne.

I passed no human on my trip, a slow one.
Is it your luck, down there, to know one?

No one.

What have I left, who stood along mankind
When the firm base is undermined?

A mind. (Gunn, *T* 30)

And he finishes this soliloquy by letting the fallen solitary protagonist conclude in doubt about his self “is there no feeling, then, that I can trust, / in spite of what we have discussed? / Disgust.” Lacking a counterpart, the discussion must be in the past, a mere memory, and wronged by the fact of being alone now. What he believed is now not true anymore, because the circumstances have changed into his loneliness. In the third part, Gunn revives the image of the birds and uniforms, as he used them in “On the Move”. But while in the earlier poem, the uniform was fulfilling its part in making the individual belong to the group of motorcycle riders, here his fellow soldiers, wearing the uniform as a symbol for their unity, had faded and so do the clothes as material sign for this belonging. “His uniform was peeling from his back” (31) and all the comfort it had has gone. He is stripped of his rank, not by dishonorable discharge, but by the lack of people who he can relate his rank to. He does not take or give orders, does not send or receive messages. The theory of pose now meets a special circumstance. As the only person left, the soldier has no role. His curls, which are mentioned as a physical feature, are his alone and do not tell anyone about his character. Although “the wind / utters ambiguous orders from the plain” the man can only try to add meaning to dead materials, which are fading from him. By now “his poverty is a sort of uniform”, the man slowly letting go of what remained from the past, but still trying to stitch the clothes he has left.

Afterwards, in the fourth part, the soldier accepts his smallness in the world and the universe, by realizing he does not have much choice. He relies on his imagination as a central human quality. In the fifth part, he then begins to redefine his reality. The universe is vast, but what is in his reach, the direct nature that surrounds him, is limited. His solitary hill is a chosen confinement, in which he roams, lives and hunts. “Bare within limits. The trick / is to stay free within them” (33) is one of those poetic moments where Gunn’s character comes through his words. To move within limits is what his life is about. The limits of his talent, the limits of living his sexuality freely, and the limits of other people’s choices. In the next part, which Gunn subtitled “Memoires of the World” (34), winter is breaking onto the lonely man. He collects wood to build a fire. Again, birds

appear, but only in the distance, maybe only in imagination, they seem to make conversation. “Nót now, nó now, nó now”, is what the man hears them say, as if to remind him that survival is his primary goal at this moment. That line repeats at the end of each stanza.

Birds and uniforms are not the only subjects from 1957 that get their revival in “Misanthropos”. The seventh part starts out with dark glasses, used as a disguise, as the “Goggles donned impersonality” (Gunn, *SM* 11). Only, now, there is no one to hide from in sight. Still, there is this remnant of training, this habit which had been practiced for its usefulness. The protagonist contemplates in the last stanza of this part:

I was presence without full
Being: from the streetcorner,
In the mere fact of movement
Was entering the role
Of spy or spied on, master
Or the world’s abject servant? (Gunn, *T* 35)

The world opens up by closing the chapter behind him, but lacking definitions from before. The question ‘Who am I without people around me?’ is one that must be dealt with now. Or does it? In part eight, the poet goes into contemplation about the fire that keeps him alive by consuming the material it is fed, ending in ambivalence. Nothing is black or white, and sometimes it is very hard to even make out the clear border between destruction and creation. For the fire that means “The neighbouring cinders redden now together, / Like earlier worlds to search” (36) and the speaker relates to that by continuing “where I am shown / Only myself, although I seek another, A man who burnt from sympathy alone.” After considering the purpose of fire, the man turns to his own purpose in the new world. He is not a servant to “both sexes” (37) anymore. His charm is unnoticed by non-existent passers-by. He is not needed by anyone, which was part of his purpose when he still shared the world with a society. His role is now his own survival, his diet now being “berries, / water, and the gristle of / rodents” while, in contrast to fire and life-purpose, the next part concerns the subject of snow. The snow covers the surface of the world and hurts the survivor’s eyes. It represents an emptiness which is emphasized by the thick layer of frozen water, flattening out little uneven parts of the landscape. His “mind loses hold” (38) with no clear features to be seen around him, the man freezing, relying on the food supply he was able to store so far. The image described is pure agony. The man shields his stinking body with shreds of fur, looking how men are depicted from before we called human societies civilization. He is indeed uncivilized, and he is giving up. He feels his end is getting nearer, still perceiving “what is”, (39) waiting to fall asleep.

The tenth part of the poem, which is written in couplets, ends with a glimpse of hope for life, when it seemed lost “yet still there maybe something retained / against the inevitable end.”

At this point, Gunn chooses to leave the reader, which on television would be called a cliffhanger. The flow of the poem is interrupted by part 11, which is titled “Epitaph for Anton Schmidt” (Gunn, *T* 40). The poet includes this poem here as a reminder of what humanity is about. It is almost another version of “Claus von Stauffenberg” with Anton Schmidt being a more common hero. He was also a soldier who obeyed orders, but who was strong enough to change his mind again when facing too much injustice. Characterized with “Reposeful and humane good nature” and “Unusual eyes, / whose power no order might determine”, he now awaits his execution. The reason was simple: “Aware that action has its dangers, / He helped the Jews to get away / -- another race at that, and strangers.” Anton Schmidt was aware of the freedom of his choices, following “a distinct direction” while accepting the consequences of his actions.

Part twelve, titled “Elegy on the Dust” 41), deals with death and its presence. Nature is “vexed with constant loss and gain” and so death seems not final, but part of something bigger, while the sea, seen as a big graveyard, makes everything the same. “From stone to claw, scale, pelt, and wings / Are all reduced to one form and one size” (42). This part is an intermezzo, grasping back the reader’s attention after the story of Anton Schmidt. Part thirteen marks a new start, beginning with the promising and contrasting title “The First Man” (43). Gunn starts with the statement, “The present is a secure place to inhabit, / The past being fallen from the mind, the future / A repetition, only with variations”; being in the moment is the key. He poses the question about his protagonist “Is he a man?” if he “does not dream at night.” The time in loneliness takes its toll, “he is bent, looks smaller.” His posture makes him animalistic, “molelike”, getting further from the confinements of civilization and closer to what nature seems to be, he is blending in, seemingly losing his humanity. Part fourteen starts with a surprise: “What is it?” (44) is what the lonely person asks himself before spotting an unusual sight in the plain below his hill. Something is coming closer, and it seems to be men. Again, his self-definition is challenged. He who made so much effort to accept the fact that he is the last surviving creature of the human species, and has to adapt his knowledge yet again. His human qualities quickly return, as he begins to dream again of all those blessings of human civilization, planning his return into a society, by thinking about cleaning himself,

like baptism, in a pool, to re-emerge before getting in touch again. The group of forty men and women becomes a piece of hope, and it shows what is important to human beings: “In picturing man [he] almost becomes man too.” (45) In part fifteen, he calmly observes the group, which could also be a risk to him. What if they don’t include him, the foreigner, who could also be seen as an intruder? By observing one member of the group leaning on a stone, he becomes more and more secure, moving toward the people in the end. He, the observer, is now also being observed, “bombarded by perceptions, rearranged” (47) as human beings have a mutual impact on each other. Yet, there is not much defined yet, though clarity is growing.

Part sixteen is the big reunion of the human family. “Others approach” (48) and make contact. “As they pass, they name me” points out the importance of definition. Man is nothing without a name. “What is the name Adam speaks / after the schedule of beasts?” Gunn, who changed his own name, elaborates on this name giving. Touch and thought bring the group and the surviving soldier closer together, but the definition is not fully restored. To the leader of the group, the protagonist is “neither / his lord nor his servant” and the reply of the soldier to being named by the group is to give the leader a name, too, thus starting their conversation. The last part represents the beginning of a new cooperation. The world has changed again for the survivor and the group. It is like a resurrection, like a phoenix from the flames. Now there is a new story to be told with “the dust yet to be shared”. (49)

Looking at the process and events accompanying the production of this poem gives insight on how Gunn crafts and manufactures his work. From the basic idea, which was conceived in a relatively sad time in Gunn’s life, being troubled by illness and continuing relationship issues as well as the world’s political situation shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the tone is clearly set, the crisis being an obvious source for the idea of a nuclear holocaust. From that nucleus, the idea of the poem grew in Gunn’s mind and was crafted in notebooks, written down, corrected, and rewritten. As, by that time, Gunn was confident in being able to write in free verse, after having practiced his rhythm in syllabics in *My Sad Captains*, he used this poem to master the skill. The crisis with Kitay surely contributed to the general mood of the poem, as had his return to England. Although in his summarizing thoughts on the year 1963¹²² in his diaries he expects to be

¹²² “A heart attack from guy in next bed in hospital made an inauspicious opening few minutes. But an interesting & unexpected year: illness brought me distance from

done in 1964, he needed a few months more to finalize it. Partly because of the never-ending new ideas seeping in, and partly because Gunn's process of involving friends and trusted intellectuals for commentaries took much time, as he usually involved the friends via letters. He also started new projects while writing, including "The Life Artist", which can be considered as a kind of counter poem to "Misanthropos", in addition to essays and criticism.

When he finally thought he was done, he presented the poem to Alvin Alvarez¹²³, one of the leading figures in poetry criticism at that time, who did not like the piece very much. Unimpressed by this verdict, Gunn handed in the poem to the BBC, where it was read and broadcast on March 4th by Alan Bobie and Julian Glover. With a few small alterations to the version Alvarez¹²⁴ disliked, Gunn also published the whole poem, encouraged by his friends and readers, in *The Statesman*, using the media channels

myself, and I perceived one thing (depressing too) about me - that I tend to create alibis everywhere, with everyone, and for everything.

A year of friends, particularly. Spring and recuperation at Don's and Bryan's - a very good time, I was relaxed, modest, & I could be calm without any background of emotional downs and ups to battle against. Tony Tanner continued an admirable man-vigorous generous, perceptive. Got very involved with DD- partly because he nursed me, partly because of what he is. He has real warmth, but is frightened of his emotions, hence the insistence of control. The concept of the "life artist". And what he makes of his life is genuinely strong and achieved. The fact that he will not take certain emotional ... limits his strengths, but it also defuses it. For less limited strength there is only Jesus and Billy Budd. He comes level with T White and only below Mike in my life.

The spring & growing strength. The sun, the beach writing more than in all of last 4 years, junk and lot of it - but for the survivor is almost all drafted with luck I may finish it at the end of '64. Reading: the great discovery of Thomas Mann.

The summer: Mexico, Revelation of the primitive that is not barbarous. New Orleans: Mike Chittin. After (Chicago) Don at his worst, treacherous in his unhappiness, yet seeing his weakness only gave more body to my admiration for him (*turn over page*)
[on 1963, continued]

Fall & problems with M. They are not resolved. He is brave, yet his dependence on me terrifies me & inhibits me- This fall I have given way to it more and more, which seems to help him, but I doubt if it does in the long run. And there is no easy way out - I love him & I too need him yet am filled with cold impulses of self-preservation. I must be aware & try to adjust myself without being cowardly.

Sexually the year deeply unsatisfactory. Spring I was in bed. With Don any sexual relationship totally out of the question. In the summer, I made out mainly with fools (except Mike Chittin & Denver). In the fall, hampered by set up. I must expect more of this year by year- I must try to want it less in my mind.

If I make resolutions, will I keep them? To be brave as Mike, generous as Tanner, & lacking alibis as Don Doody. Thus I learn from other people." Gunn (*Diary 1962-1966*).

¹²³ See *The Alvarez Generation* by Wootten.

¹²⁴ Alvin Alvarez was a critic who was regularly in touch with Gunn. See also "Signs of Poetic Life" or "Turning in to a New Voice" by Alvarez ("Signs of Poetic Life").

available for his poetry to find its audience in different shapes. Additionally, Gunn also continued to produce criticism, as he had since he graduated, but with a change to what he had done before. After some contemplation, he decided to only write about poetry that he liked in the future, minimizing the negative impact of writing about things he did not like.

Another work that developed during his time was unique in Gunn's oeuvre. Having the time to meet his brother without the spirit of the presence of their father, the siblings had the opportunity to have deep talks about their professions. Ander Gunn, who was a photographer, and Thom Gunn, the poet, developed the idea of working together during their meetings. Ander also took some of the photographs which were used by Thom in official publications, as he trusted his brother, which is an important condition for good portraits. Over the course of discussion, the developed the idea of a book that would consist of poetry by the older brother opposite pictures taken by the younger one, following human life from birth to death. As a title they chose *Positives*.

As opposed to the success in writing, the final weeks of his return to London were emotionally not as positive as they could have been. On the same day he had his long poem published, he notes with grief in his diary "feelings of guilt & despair envers M. I have after 13 years thrown away the precious jewel I had, the one thing of value in my life" (*Diary 1962-1966*), after returning from cruising the Heath, revealing a bit of sorrow and even some of doubt about his behavior. On his way back from England, Gunn had a stopover in Chicago to meet his friends there, before finally returning to San Francisco in mid-July 1965. Reading his diary, it seems not much had changed: Gunn moved back to his old apartment on Filbert Street and frequently visited the usual bars, restaurants, and beaches. Although having had troubles in England, he moves back in with Kitay, who premiered his own theatre play a few days after Gunn's return. Kitay seemed to be content with the result of his work. Gunn was also comfortable about the presence of Tom Gee, who spent time with Kitay, after their liaison that ended in a wedding, a couple of months previously, not showing much jealousy. Gunn took his openness seriously, by granting Kitay the same freedoms that he claimed for himself, trusting in his lover's honesty and the course of life. After leaving England in the state of crisis, with the wounds not completely healed, the bond between the two men was still there, now reshaping and adapting to new circumstances, stabilizing in its changing character. On the financial side, Gunn gained stability by returning to Berkeley to teach after his year abroad.

This stability would soon be challenged by the other circumstances of Gunn's decisions. He was about to face a whole new experience, which would change his life, and would be a more intense experience than poppers or marijuana, which were the drugs he had used up to now. As Gunn was feeling a certain responsibility as a teacher, he planned his first use of LSD on a break from university to make sure the effects would not mingle with his abilities in front of his students. On Friday, June 10th in 1966, he writes in his second diary, which he just started, "Sunday is LSD day!" (*Diary 1966-1970*) as if he were a child waiting for his 10th birthday to come, an analogy which bears some truth, as this was a kind of birthday for a different person. Two days later, he followed through with the plan and describes his experience as follows

Sun June 12: to Jerry's at Brisbane, whr LSD supplied for me by Chuck & Bill. Don Doody there. Beautiful, none of the pretentious bullshit about it is true, it is merely a gt awareness, sensitivity to what there is. Flowers, trees, the view thru binoculars, fruits, people. Pancakes, beer and pot also. Hot, hot, afternoon, seemed to last a day. Very good, must repeat. (*Diary 1966-1970*)

The life changing entry is marked with a large number 2 on the margin of the notebook. Gunn decided to keep track of his trips, to find them more easily when browsing his diaries on later occasions.¹²⁵ Within the course of the next few years, he would mark well over 30 trips in his diaries, describing his experience while under the influence.¹²⁶ While the number 1 is missing, it is very likely Gunn starts the entries at the second trip, having the first experience in 1958 in mind, of which he has kept no direct record.

¹²⁵ He documents that at least once when he rereads his diaries with "great interest" Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986* 40)

¹²⁶ Just to give a few examples:

"Sat 20: the trip with M. I hadn't realized this, but this lot of acid is very strong. To Aquatic Park, when it started to work, I realized we shd go home. The way home, the astonished people. My panic. I change my trip from bad to good by concentrating on M. The woodwork in the room disintegrates 'the world meeting me, me meeting the world'. Curtains billowing without a wind. The light and dark of a god's wingbeat pulsing. The brightness, almost too beautiful and terrible to bear. - We were still having slight hallucinations nine hours after taking capsules (12.30 - 9.30), and the actual center (vortex) of the trip was dementia. We nibble food at Miss Smith's unsuccessful café go to bed around 10.30 ...

Sun March 6: acid party from Stud. at 1.00, on a Barrett Bus to GG Park whr dropped. 1000s of people & music. (M here too) Back to Stud. my long conv w. ABC man in effort to turn him on to place. Gorgeous day. The trip was on people. Not especially meaningful, but v. euphoric. ...

Mon May 3: w. family & Jere & TW & DD to Point Reyes, bei Spence Candlemaker & Nancy. I bum trip again. Must stop acid for a while, I think. Only one bad hr, tho, the rest beautiful, on hills & afterward. DD takes us to French restaurant in eve." Gunn (*Diary 1970-1974*).

Gunn's first description sums up well what, for him, was the object of taking drugs as a mind-opening device. The purpose was to gain easier access to the subconscious, to open up a place in his mind where the barriers of self-restriction were not present, which led the poet down a path towards his own self (which was not the ego). In fact, this opening up was a great source for new poetry, which he started writing during that phase. He would later remark "These were the fullest years of my life, crowded with discovery both inner and outer, as we moved between ecstasy and understanding." (*OP* 182) Here a very interesting and unique thing happened. Gunn, who educated himself to write free verse poetry in a pleasing rhythm that also meant something, tried to adapt his new style to his drug related experiences. He soon figured out that free verse was not a form he could use to tame the chaos in his mind that drugs induced. As he had practiced and mastered metered forms for decades, he decided to use these well-known structures to restrain the vast energy of the un-structured reactions induced by the drugs. Sticking to strict forms helped Gunn to control the energies in his perception and bring aspects of his trips to paper, which he would not have mastered by sticking to his new shape of poetry. This is not to say he abandoned free form; it was just not fit for writing under the influence. As a result of his intense practice and training in classical poetry, he was capable of producing excellent poetry while high, which is supported by the statement "He's probably the only poet to have written a decent quintain while on LSD, and he's certainly one of the few to profess genuine admiration for both Winters [...] and Allen Ginsburg [...]" (Orr). Using drugs was certainly a mind opening experience for Gunn; not so much an addiction, it was rather a door-opener to previously unexplored regions within his own persona and psyche.

1966 was indeed a very full year for Gunn, in seemingly marginal occurrences as well. In July, he met Bill Schuessler at the Tool Box. What started as a usual fling at a leather bar would become a relationship that would last a lifetime. Schuessler, shortly after their first sexual encounters, became a close friend and ally for Gunn in many ways. On his 37th birthday, Kitay invited Gunn to celebrate at Los Gallos, a Mexican restaurant where they had food and drinks to celebrate, while a few miles away at the Candlestick Park, the Beatles, one of Gunn's favorite bands of all time, were giving their last concert in front of a paying audience. They would from then on only publish albums without touring, and finally split up a couple of years later. As far literature was concerned, 1966 was a very successful year for the writer, as his productivity in England paid off. When Thom and Ander Gunn developed the idea to produce a book together, they probably did

not anticipate how quickly the process would go. The whole genesis of the book is unique on several levels. On the one hand, it was Thom Gunn's first and only collaboration with another artist, on the other hand, the content was created at an incredible speed. The idea was conceived sometime in late 1964, worked on from early 1965, and the book was accepted by the publisher in August that same year and published in November 1966. The piece was made up of the poet's free verse poetry on the pages on the left, accompanied by the photographer's black and white photographs on the pages to the right. The pictures show people at different stages of their lives in a chronological order from birth to death. The writer never really liked the caption-like poems of this volume, but something about the project as a whole was striking. Maybe the poems simply did not work without the visual context in which they were meant to be presented.

As indicated, *Positives* is quite a unique piece, as it is not only a collaboration between the Gunn brothers but also between their art forms. Ander's lively pictures are accompanied by Thom's sassy and sometimes naughty poetic comments. The poems, almost like captions, are lyrical descriptions of what is seen in the photos, although at times they seem as if the text was there first, and the pictures serve as illustrations. *Positives* merges the two forms together, making both artists and their approach visible. Alongside a picture of a tired or sad looking child cuddling a puppet, Thom Gunn writes "But childhood takes a long time. // Something is feeding on you, / and it is what you feed on." (Gunn, *P* 10) Hinting at the circular notion of life he so often sees, the line is spoken in an almost fatherly voice. A girl sitting bored on a chair, he annotates with a quote from *Alice in Wonderland* "'Drink Me' / 'Eat Me'" (12) adding, "In a bus it is nice to ride on top because / it looks like running people over" as if to soothe the impatience of the waiting girl. A rebellious looking young man with a cigarette is the visible example of Thom Gunn's view on energetic young human beings "Youth is a power" of "an animal that can smile" (20) summing up the human qualities he admired and celebrated. Young men like a challenge, and this is what Gunn highlights in his poetic description of the image.

A rather special example reminds the reader of Gunn's poem "Elvis Presley" from ten years earlier. In the image, a man is playing a guitar, and singing into a microphone on a stand. The poem is not only made up of words, but also musical notation. It starts with a clef, then "the music starts" (24) and the rhythm of the piece is produced by setting double bar lines within the text. Yet, the music described is secondary. It is set in an environment where nobody is listening, but instead talking. It is reminiscent of the lyrics

of “The Sound of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel. Slowly, the crowd begins to realize what the song in their background of conversational noise is about, when the reader of the poem has the feeling that the remark “The music has started” is true for the first time. The next photograph also shows a guitar (which happens one more time), but this time there is a title, and it is the only time in *Positives*, where the title gives a name: “Pete”. (26) Thom Gunn refers to “Mackie” who is “indubitably back in town”, quoting from Bertold Brecht, before on the next double page moving on to an image, well known to the poet: a motorcycle, a subject that also repeatedly appears in this book. This time, it is a description of the front part, starting with “two mirrors” and including “a battery of headlights”, (28) the rider is in the background, yet capable of finding himself, by riding, like the boys in “On the Move”.

The Gunns move on with weddings, starting a family, and living everyday life. One poem is titled “Lebensraum”, (46) the picture showing a walking silhouette of a man, the poem suggesting that somebody is looking for purpose by moving, saying “So I must run into the open / alone”. During the course of aging, Gunn cannot resist letting his socialist worldview become visible, by writing “money is a form of dirt / to be shoveled around”, (54) as the caption to a picture of well-dressed men, who could be leaders of companies or bankers. In the end, the brothers finally arrive at old age in their documentary on life. An old bent woman can be seen on a dirty sidewalk. The caption starts “poking around the rubbish, / she can’t find what she wants.” (76) indicating the still acute problem of poverty at age. The last double page includes a poem and an image that is unique, in that for the first time, the subject of the picture is repeated. It’s zoomed in from the poor lady poking around in rubbish before. Now, the portrait is accompanied by a dying scene. “Something approaches, about / which she has heard a good deal” (78) is the introduction of a person awaiting death without fear. A shadow is creeping in, rendered by moonlight, but she is willing to accept, only asking “Will it hurt?” She gives in to everybody’s fate and concludes “Let it come, it is / the terror of the full repose, / and so no terror.” This poem, and “The Conversation of Old Men” (Gunn, *CP* 166) are the only texts from *Positives* that made it into Gunn’s *Collected Poems* in 1993, the quoted one under the title “The Old Woman”. The final page of *Positives* shows a snowy landscape with leafless trees and undistinguished people. After death, there is still life, like the seasons it is all a circular movement of breathing in and out, coming and going. The Gunn brothers have produced a volume that, in its structure, proves they can deal

with every aspect of life, from birth to death. There is no poem to accompany this image, leaving the future path open.

Riding on the wave of inspiration, there was soon to be another publication credited to Gunn, adding to *Positives*, the soon to be published book of poetry *Touch*, and essays written as criticism along the way. In his role as an intelligent reader of poetry he developed the idea to edit an anthology of Fulke Greville's poetry. Greville was well known as a statesman and councilor, but he was also a talented Elizabethan poet, a fact that the wider public was largely ignorant of. Gunn's fascination for Elizabethan poetry was one factor for choosing this subject, and his desire to shed new light on the forgotten oeuvre of a talented writer was another, so he started his research in February 1965. The urge to write prose and the intellectual challenge to reintroduce Greville and edit his work, as well as collect the poetry in the first place, were Gunn's primary motivations, but doing solid research that would hold the possibility of earning some money was also on his mind, as well as producing something other than poetry.

Besides offering insights on Gunn's taste and fascination in early 17th century poetry, we can learn more about Gunn's working style by observing his effort on Greville. After his proposal had been accepted by Faber & Faber on February 20th in 1965, in the middle of his stay in England, Gunn dove deep into the work of the author and immersed himself in his oeuvre. Research in England, and later Berkeley, was done in Gunn's very self-controlled and focused way. While attention to detail was one of his strengths, it was also an obstacle, as it led to several pauses in writing, when he was not content with what he had produced. In November 1966, he estimated that he would complete his goal and finish the book by January 1967. As he missed the deadline by many months, it is interesting to look at the possible reasons why an experienced writer would guess he would be done within two months and proceed to miss that deadline by more than a year. The celebration of the Summer of Love was certainly a big factor in the delay, and Gunn's newly found creativity for writing poetry, setting the priorities straight, was surely another. In March 1968, Gunn sent in the final version of the book, to be published by the end of the same year. In the end, he was responsible for editing the selection of the rather unknown (as compared to his contemporaries) poetry of Fulke Greville, and thus reintroduced and reaffirmed the meaning of his poems to a new age. It fits Gunn's view of literature that anything good that has been written serves a purpose, and deserves to be accessible to a broader public. In his meticulously written introduction to *The Selected*

Poems of Fulke Greville,¹²⁷ Gunn tries to explain the historical context, and in writing about this, reveals much about himself and the existential anxieties of the 20th century writers, like himself, thus drawing parallels between Greville and modern days.

During these years, full of new experiences, Gunn made a courageous decision. He intended to quit his teaching job at Berkeley after having done it for a few years, even though he was very fond of his bright students. Some of these were among those people who were initiating the hippie movement, which was to arise soon, and he grants them the quality of having been able to teach him at least as much as he was teaching them. After his first contact with LSD, Gunn found arguments against continuing the hard work at the university, which he did not like as a part of his job. He especially disliked the faculty meetings, grading and preparing courses, which was the unfortunate downside of all the fun he had teaching. He was not a man for formalities, which was also a reason he had quit his PhD program. The only option he could see was to get out, and so he announced his decision. UC Berkeley was so eager to keep him that they offered Gunn tenure as an incentive to stay, but he was clear in what he wanted, having made up his mind. Giving the reason for his departure as needing more free time to be creative and write, he finished his duties at Berkeley in 1966. Later, he admitted it was much less the hard work that burdened his creativity that made him want to leave, but the fact that at the time, he could afford it, and wanted to experiment more with drugs, and getting closer to his self, without the restraining structure of the university schedule. In early 1967, he officially handed in his letter of resignation, sealing the departure.

At around the same time, Gunn decided to give poetry readings another try. His approach was not to recite his poems, like an actor would, “but more as an entertainment – an advertisement for poetry as a whole” (Gunn, *OP* 183). Although he did not like speaking in public, he took advice from friends and gave reading another try.¹²⁸ It shows just how selfless Gunn is towards his poetry. It was not that his poetry needed advertisement, but he wanted to be a part of something bigger, being one way in which he was not the proclaimer of the one and only poetic truth, but rather a poet who contributed to the diverse world of literature. “Gunn was a profoundly ethical writer and that he was so in contexts that recognized the demands of our physical nature.” (Wilmer, “Foreword” 1)

¹²⁷ see Greville and Gunn.

¹²⁸ MK says he gave Gunn the advice to read slowly, as the ear is not as quick as the eye, who was grateful for feedback.

Gunn accepted the humanity behind the contradictions, controversies and continuities that made up his life. One of these controversies came up when the pacifist Gunn was starting to attend concerts that were sponsored by the Hell's Angels, a group that was notorious for their violence. While Kitay did not join the concert, so as to not support the organization, Gunn deliberately put his focus on the music and not the reputation of the group, enjoying the beer, the company of friends, and the company of likeminded beauties. After all, the Hell's Angels also stood for what Gunn liked: power, strength, energy, and rebellion, dressed in leather jackets and riding bikes. One specific concert included a heterosexual orgy as well, which was a sight Gunn surely did not dislike, although disinterested in the participating women. He enjoyed seeing human beings immersing themselves in a sexual way, while reducing the sense of their individuality. Over the next few years, Gunn would get in touch with the Hell's Angels several times, but he would also remain critical, being aware of his moral compass and what he did and did not think was justifiable. He was clear about where he drew the line, making a fine example of how he valued his own opinion, while granting human beings the benefit of doubt as opposed to seeing the world in black and white, and blindly following public opinion and judgement. Instead, he enjoyed the colorful variety of human nature, trying to set an example in what he thought was good. (Gunn, *Diary 1966-1970*)

Just at the beginning of Gunn's free time after quitting his teaching job, a very special event took place. On January 14th in 1967, the Human Be-In¹²⁹ was held at Golden Gate Park and would mark the beginning of an unprecedented era of freedom and self-expression. The event was accompanied by protests and rallies, focusing on and promoting the hippie ideals of individualism, personal freedom, environmental awareness, and political decentralization, as well as being open to the effects of drugs on consciousness. The timing was right, just weeks after LSD had been made illegal by Californian law. As a term, the movement also introduced psychedelic drugs, to indicate the possible use of the substances. This new counterculture movement present at Golden Gate Park developed partly from groups of dissatisfied students at elite universities, such as UC Berkeley, who opposed the ideas of middle-class morality at the time. The diversity of the participants ranged from those communities to the Beat poets. Allen Ginsberg and

¹²⁹ Gunn attends, noting: "Sat 14: ... then just in time to catch last hr of Human Be In in Polo Grounds - beautiful for everything. The prayer to the sun by Snyder, Ginsberg, etc, as it goes down." (*Diary 1966-1970*).

Gary Snyder were not only present, but also read poetry at the event. Gunn was impressed by the mantra-like fashion of their presentation, and particularly enjoyed “Prayer to the Sun”, fittingly read during sunset. The event hosted at least 20,000 participants, giving a visibility to the movement that was hard to ignore. It made the Haight-Ashbury quarter of San Francisco the new center of the Hippie Movement, and started the time that was later called the Summer of Love. Gunn, who by then had already adapted to the spirit of the time philosophically, also changed his appearance according to the fashion. Wearing flowered patterns, laced shirts, growing out his hair and beard, the poet was fully part of the movement that wanted to set accents in a conservative society.¹³⁰

In the tumult of flower power, Gunn’s next book was published in 1967. The poetry in *Touch* seemed to have fulfilled the purpose of transition. While *My Sad Captains* was written half in syllabics, the new book marked Gunn’s mastery of free verse, abandoning syllabics as a means of getting to free verse. Practicing and finding his own rhythm, putting together his words in a new voice and fashion was the core progress that showed in this edition. The centerpiece of *Touch* was clearly the long poem “Misanthropos”. For the rest of the collection, there were only a few pieces Gunn found worthy of reproducing outside this book. He was not particularly fond of *Touch*: for one he found it boring for the audience, for another he was not content with the quality of verse and rhythm. It was another piece of apprenticeship, and in a way, “Misanthropos” was the masterpiece, with lots of practice around it. His patience with himself was lower, now that he was more established as a poet, and felt he was not allowed to need more practice to perfect his craft. He seemed to overlook the fact that adding the skill of free verse to an existing mastery of structure, while not abandoning the old way of writing, is a unique skill in itself, and asking a lot of himself as an artist. Only a year after *Positives*, *Touch* was published in September 1967.¹³¹

Touch was a book Gunn did not like very much. Months after he published it, already realizing that it was not very popular among the audience or critics either, he reveals something about his view on poetry, while judging this volume; in a letter he

¹³⁰ “Fr Aug 29: & I am 40. ... We return home - a lace shirt, a see through shirt, & beads from M, a tanker's shirt from Bill. Tanners stay night.” Gunn (*Diary 1966-1970*)
“Th 1 April: to Gary for haircut. End of curls, rather too short haircut ... (later I like haircut very much)” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

¹³¹ In later publications, e. g. *Collected Poems* from the mid 1990s, he would omit *Touch* as a book completely. “Misanthropos” would appear as a separate entity and poems from the book would be added under the title ‘Poems from the 60s’ along other pieces that did not appear in *Touch*.

wrote “It’s a rather poor book, actually, but reviewers disliked it for the wrong reasons – I can’t be bothered any longer with their assumptions about what poetry should be – and it was important for me to write the poems in the book as part of my direction toward something else.” (*Letters* 242) In fact, he omitted many of the poems from this book when putting together his collected poems in the 1990s. The ones he felt were good enough to present, were “Misanthropos”, and those collected under the title “Poems from the 1960s”. From *Touch*, he later omitted the poems “Bravery”, which was written about a painting by Gunn’s friend Chuck Arnett, “Breakfast”, “Snowfall”, “The Girl of Live Marble” and “The Produce District”, all of which Gunn later found too boring or unfitting to include them in his repeated publications.¹³²

For what is left of the original volume, of course the title poem “Touch” plays a central role and is characteristic of the more humane approach. The book is about connection, and more precisely bodily connection. In “Touch” (Gunn, *T* 26–27) the speaker describes how a close person is already asleep. He describes Mike Kitay, and his act of coming back to bed with his lover

I lower
 myself next to
 you, my skin slightly
 numb with the restraint
 of habits, the patina of
 self (26)

The unconscious embrace in the second half of the piece is one of holding dear. He says,

I am or am I
 your mother or
 the nearest human being to
 hold on to in a
 dreamed pogrom. (27)

The humane part is the relief that comes with the embrace, which is enhanced by the presence of a cat, completing the image where the couple is also producing their “dark / enclosing cocoon”, before finally falling asleep.

The poems “The Kiss at Bayreuth” (Gunn, *T* 14) and “Berlin in Ruins” reflect the impact of Gunn’s time in Germany. While the kiss could be set anywhere else, it happened to be in Bayreuth, to enhance the notion that lovers can fully leave a chaotic scene and “for one moment and only / that moment, not think of themselves.” Or, perhaps, not think

¹³² In his *Collected Poems*, he adds “From an Asian Tent”, “The Clock”, “Aqueduct” and “The Inside Outside Game” to those poems he was prouder of from the sixties.

at all. “Berlin in Ruins” (Gunn, *T* 15) seems like a material addition to “Claus von Stauffenberg”, where Gunn contemplates the memorial function of the ruins of a grand train station as a remnant of war; the poem is subtitled “Anhalter Bahnhof.” Those ruins are still there today and give an enhanced level of understanding of the poem. The “many edges” which remind “of bronze imperial fantasies” are characteristic of “That great ruin” which “totters beneath associations.” Without naming him, Gunn talks about Hitler, who is

the dark hysteric conqueror

returning from France in triumph as
the hectic that overtakes process,
beneath a silk tent of swastikas.

After all the past terror, the ruins support themselves and stand against the fading memory. The central poem “Misanthropos” from *Touch* was later important enough to Gunn to stand alone, while in the book, it was positioned as a climax, right in the middle.

Written at the same time and more revealing about the poet and his sources for inspiration (assuming the speaker is Thom Gunn himself), is the poem “Confessions of the Life Artist”, (Gunn, *T* 18–22) which starts with the lines “Whatever is here, it is / material for my art” (18). This is perhaps one of the most precise summaries of Gunn’s range of subject matter. He again uses the image of air, this time as a condition that needs to be accepted, to really be alive and productive. In the second part of this ten-part poem in free verse, Gunn deals with the thought of ‘morrow’, the condition that is not here and now. This time, birds are the vehicle to transport the notion of being in the moment, when “they have lost themselves in action”, the action that opposes the observation of the author. As a reminder of his own philosophy, he ends this part with the line “I / must not lose myself in thought”, which surely was very hard for the writer at many times in his life. The third part mainly deals with circulation. A windy “sense of choice” follows the wisdom “you control what you can, and / use what you cannot.” (19) As Gunn’s life insisted on continuities, he here says that “the goodly people ... live between extremities.”

Opposed to these choices, he poses a question “But what of the unchosen?” in part four. They are dead, non-existent. They are still important, as the unchosen validate the chosen, like the very telling and even personal statement (considering the circumstances of death of his mother),

what
could me more fortifying
to one’s own identity

than another's suicide?

In part five, the speaker considers the possibility of “her” having control over him or his life as soon as he agrees to tend to her needs. Whoever is meant, this is an inconvenient thought to the author, yet he accepts it, waiting for life to figure out how to deal with it. The second half of the poem, which starts with part six, now deals with bodily needs. In the first four lines, the poet defines the range of sexual interaction:

To give way to all passions
I know, is merely whoring.
Yes, but to give way to none
is to be a whore-master. (20)

He talks about this sexual balance and continues as the whore-master in his brothel, interestingly still in a heteronormative way, as all the girls are bound to their male master. The next section deals with another balance or range, and the artist's tendency to not elevate what he has, but rather what he wishes to have. Always longing for the greener grass on the other side, the artist continues to strive instead of feeling content with what is available.

Almost like in “Misanthropos”, the next part seems like a cut. Suddenly, a picture is described. It shows “a little Jew / in Warsaw” (Gunn, *T* 21) on a photograph from a couple of years ago. About him, the speaker states

Whatever
those big shining dark eyes have
just looked on, they can see now
no appeal in the wide world

The next part of the poem deals with destiny. Gunn writes “prophecies become fulfilled, / though never as expected” (22) accepting the lack of control he has over life, as the order of things seems strange to him. But he is at peace with this, as acceptance gives him more freedom in other parts of life:

But I am concerned with my
Own knowledge that the design
Is everywhere ethical
And harmonious: circles
Start to close, lines to balance. (*T* 22)

The artist gives in to his being small when compared to the universe, and ends in a kind of hubris, or if you look closely, a form of understanding. He begins with “The art of designing life / is no excuse for that life.” But what is it worth, as a moral statement? Gunn gives an answer,

People will forget Shakespeare
He will lie with George Formby
And me, here where the swine root.
Later, the solar system
Will flare up and fall into
Space, irretrievably lost. (T 22)

The speaker accepts the meaninglessness before the ending of everything by mentioning George Formby, a British comedian and musician, in a row with the great Shakespeare and the speaker himself. In the end, all becomes the same, and so he closes “For the loss, as for life, / there will be no excuse, there / is no justification.” In a nice detail, the poem starts and ends with quotation marks; the “Life Artist” is really making his confession as the title suggests.¹³³

There is another ending on the horizon, though. Being in doubt for a couple of years as to whether his former mentor and teacher was fond of Gunn and his poetry, despite being invited to Winters’ retirement party in 1966, it was important to Gunn to stay in touch with the older poet.¹³⁴ After studying under Winters, Gunn sent his former teacher poems, which Winters would react to, sometimes praising them but later more often criticizing.¹³⁵ As Winters suffered from throat cancer, his decline in health was noticed by Gunn. When Winters died on January 25th in 1968, Gunn started to write a review on him, dealing with the loss in writing.

In early 1968, Gunn started accepting more and more offers for poetry readings, of which he got plenty. Now that his time was not restrained by teaching regularly, and to earn money, which he no longer got from a regular job, he read all the more intensely and frequently. In the course of his readings, he spent about a month in Los Angeles in February, presenting himself as poet and teacher to the audiences. Unlike his cautious

¹³³ This is true for the original version in *Touch*. In *Collected Poems*, the quotation marks have been omitted.

¹³⁴ “Sun Jun 5: YW’s retirement party, then to Trinpis. YW didn’t seem overpleased to see me, but was no doubt in a troubled mood, [crossed out section]. I was very nice to the Pinkertons & Trinpis. Talked most with Mike Miller. Liked Ann Stanford (White) a lot.” Gunn (*Diary 1966-1970*).

¹³⁵ To Tanner Gunn writes “Saw Winters a couple of months ago, which was very pleasant, in spite of the fact that he told me all my recent poems (including “Innocence”) were journalistic and melodramatic and I ought to give up poetry for a few years and concentrate on criticism. He is also too old to be told he is wrong.” (*Letters* 142)

In his diaries he writes: “Mon 24: forgot to say I heard from YW about recent poems in a letter. Very discouraging. This in combination with drinking too much, w general confusion & depression, etc. makes me feel very fucked up.” (*Diary 1966-1970*).

approach in July 1966, by now he was not separating trips from work as carefully as before. On the reading tour, he did not care as much about performing well, mixing duty with drugs, while still sometimes being worried about his qualities as a reader or at least evaluating his appearances on podiums, always collecting and valuing feedback from his friends.

1968 was also a year when Gunn added two important names to his list of famous acquaintances: Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Duncan. Bishop appears in Gunn's diaries for the first time in March. Initially it seemed the two poets had not much in common besides their homosexuality, although they differed in their preferred sex. The female friends in Gunn's life were usually introduced by friends, or were the wives of friends, like Sheila Ballentine or Marcia Tanner, but Elizabeth Bishop was one of the few women who seemed to have impressed Gunn without having been a part of his already existing circle. During her relatively short presence in San Francisco, the two poets, who differed quite a lot in style, met regularly, including for dinners with partners and later with Robert Duncan, forming their own temporary cell of poetic influence and admiration, and enjoying the San Francisco lifestyle together and occasionally drugs.

Robert Duncan came into Gunn's life on September 11th in 1968. Gunn took part at an event that was titled "The Society for Individual Rights Poetry Workshop at San Francisco", which was in fact initiated and run by Duncan. It was the occasion of the workshop when the poets first took notice of each other personally, and from then on would develop a lasting friendship, one that would support the two men personally and professionally, with the exchange about values and ideas. After their first meeting, their paths crossed more often, and their various common interests were the perfect ground on which to expand each other's intellect. They had much more in common than being gay and writing poetry, and in their differences tended to impress each other. Duncan admired Gunn's courage to try new things and exist in new ways, and Gunn admired Duncan's approach to poetry. Every time they met, they discussed highly intellectual topics, with Duncan talking a lot, never leaving Gunn uninspired. In fact, Gunn claimed that every time he returned from a meeting with Duncan, he wrote down at least a few notes for poetry, having been intellectually stimulated. And the inspiration was mutual.

After a bad trip on LSD in September 1966, Gunn had been experimenting with other drugs before he returned to acid in May 1968, continuing his journey of mind enhancement. In fact, he was inspired to write a vast amount of poetry. Among the poems are titles like "Street Song", "Kirby's Cove" and "At the Centre", which Gunn intended

to combine into an early collection, one he wanted to title “The Acid Garden”. It was also supposed to contain prose pieces, like a description of the Golden Gate Park, and fragments of unfinished poetry. In the end, the project was not realized, and the poetry planned to be in the book dissolved into *Moly*, while the prose part was fully omitted.

In October 1968, Gunn departed for a weekend with his friends Don Doody, Jere Fransway, Barry White, Chuck Arnett and others to San Rafael, where they wanted to celebrate the Renaissance Fair that was held there. It was a celebration with hundreds of people dropping acid and speed together, enjoying life. After his long break, the effects of the LSD on Gunn returned in a sudden and nearly overwhelming way. He describes people falling from trees, dancers, and an atmosphere he enjoyed a lot. The fair itself was a loaded event in many ways. People in attendance let their hair down (literally) and indulged in their world of fantasy and hallucinations. Without judgement. This setting caught Gunn’s fascination, which inspired him to write the poem “The Fair in the Woods”. In the poem he indicates the otherworldly character of the fair and notes at the end “LSD, San Rafael Woods, Renaissance Fair” (Gunn, *CP* 210) as the place and circumstances of the poem’s conception.

In the case of this poem, a very direct translation could be made between Gunn’s observation in his notes and the poem. In the diary, he recalls the events as follows:

Sat Oct 26: I meet w. DD, JF, Barry White, Chuck etc etc in Stud, about 20 people, to go to 'Renaissance Pleasure Fair' in San Rafael. There, we all drop acid (350 + a little Speed) My first time in 2 years. Possibilities of all good & all bad trips apparent. Many lovely things happen. The boy on horseback, the speed family of dancers. I ??? cramps successfully. Dale falls from a tree. A walk w. Jerry at closing time - the great vision I have: 'le son du cor, le soir, au fond des bois.' The buckskinned foresters, somewhat elongated, at evening, blowing horns & merging into the similar colors of wood and earth. Then Mike C & I lost in dark parking lot, I close to panic, at least dependent. We find our people. Back to Stud. Later in eve I meet up w. Warren (from NY, at Berkeley). A fine day, & I have confidence in myself w. acid again. (*Diary 1966-1970*)

The first stanza of the poem seems merely like a slight rearrangement of the words, leading to the conclusion that it was already in the writer’s mind, somehow.

The woodsmen blow their horns, and close the day,
Grouped by some logs. The buckskins they are in
Merge with grounds russet and with tree-trunk's grey,
And through the color of the body's skin
Shift borrowings out of nearby birch and clay. (Gunn, *M* 39)

While Gunn was developing professionally and personally, his friends also underwent some changes. Doody was now the manager at another gay bar called The

Stud, and Arnett was always looking for places to show his art. In this case, it was easy for the friends to cooperate. Doody found that The Stud also needed a mural, which he hoped might make it as famous as the Tool Box. As Arnett was the artist behind that mural as well, and because he was Doody's friend, he seemed the obvious choice. While the 1962 mural at the Tool Box depicted men in leather, painted in black and white, times had changed. At The Stud, Arnett adapted the color scheme to the time of flower power, producing a psychedelic blacklight neon image for the bar. On July 29th, Gunn as a friend had the privilege of previewing the artwork, which he found fantastic. As the manager of the Stud, it was part of Don's job to bring guests to the bar. By the end of 1968, he had an idea for how to make that happen. At the height of sexual freedom, he organized an event, with Arnett as decorator, initiating a party he called Saturnalia¹³⁶ in honor of the Roman god Saturn. This new edition of the antique festival was held twice in San Francisco on December 17th, of both 1968 and 1969.

After the first event, Gunn writes "Tues Dec 17: In eve 9-2, we go to Saturnalia, party given in Stud by 6 of Folsom Street. 150 people, all likeable, of whom 100 drop acid in M & me. (M's 2nd trip), ... then upstairs, whr M has long sex w. Alan & I w. Francis. M can't drive, so at 6 we get taxi home, whr M has a bad 1/4 hour. I am good w. him. ... The best party ever." (*Diary 1966-1970*) The allusions to the Roman celebrations were appropriate, as the party was not lacking the decadence of the late Roman Empire. The occasion exemplified how the sexual freedom among homosexuals was celebrated with the help of drugs – and it was exactly to Gunn's liking. After the second event in 1969, which was as well-equipped as the first, the party was not repeated, as the summer of love was gone, and so was the energetic spirit that carried its values. More police raids, as well as the acceleration of the gay revolution made the Saturnalia superfluous in a way, or outdated. Of course, this also inspired poetry.

As Gunn was without a regular job, and readings were only covering parts of his expenses, he accepted a formal offer to teach at Hayward for the first quarter of 1969.¹³⁷ He gladly accepted the offer in March 1968 and started teaching the following January at the California State University, Hayward (which is called California State University,

¹³⁶ "A friend of mine was manager of The Stud – The Stud in its old location. The Stud had only been going for a year, and it had not done very well, so when my friend told the owners he had a new idea, they said 'Anything, as long as it works.' So he turned it into the first druggie gay bar in the world." Breindel 22.

¹³⁷ "Th, March 7: v. rainy; I get formal offer from Hayward; I go to St. Mary's College. a Catholic U., all the teachers & Brothers appear to be queens." Gunn (*Diary 1966-1970*).

East Bay today). Having progressed personally, he did things a little differently now. Commuting between Hayward and San Francisco by bus took him some time, but also gave him the opportunity to observe and get in touch with the people around him, including regular conversations and quarrelling with Nazis. At university he considered his class to be solid and became quite popular as a teacher, his class being “too full” (*Diary 1966-1970*) at times. During his time as a teacher, he did drugs, and was tripping not only on holidays, but also on the weekends between lessons, as he felt acquainted enough with the substances to make good enough judgements to not influence the quality of his teaching. After leaving school, he would trip on Saturdays, having time to recover before returning to teach the following Tuesdays. To him, this was a very easy and solid phase, which came to an end in March, Gunn being happy to be done, as it was still more exhausting than he imagined it to be. He celebrated his success the weekend after finishing up, again at the Stud, with drugs and thousands of people and music. Already, on March 19th in 1969, though, the next teaching opportunity was offered to him. This time, a bus commute would not be sufficient: Princeton was asking Gunn to lecture in New Jersey. (Gunn, *Diary 1966-1970*)

Chapter Five: Courage, a Tale

One of the most remembered events on television of the late 1960s was surely the moon landing. It happened in July 1969, when Neil Armstrong said his triumphant “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” – a quote that most people on Earth know. Gunn’s remark in his diary reads less fascinated than most of his contemporaries seem to have been by the event. It reads, “Sun Jul 20: (landing on moon, as if I cared)” (*Diary 1966-1970*), lacking enthusiasm and giving a precise example of his indifference towards the struggle of nations in their competition with each other. He did not really care for technological achievements, if made for the wrong reasons, as in this case to prove to be the better nation because you won the race to the moon, by investing vast amounts of taxpayers’ money and fossil fuels, while wars and hunger crisis rage on the surface of the Earth. Technology for him was supposed to help human beings make life easier or sexier, like typewriters or motorbikes, but not as a means of competition with no other effect but winning or losing. Gunn was a person who believed that there were more important problems to solve than being the first nation to land on the moon. He was a humanist, not a nationalist, his pride in being a human being was much bigger than his happiness about an American putting a flag on the moon.¹³⁸ His passion for deep and true emotion, and expressing those emotions on paper as truthfully as possible, was his art and his way of dealing with life. Gunn was probably more intrigued by what Armstrong said when he returned to Earth upon being asked how it felt to walk on the moon. The astronaut replied that as soon as they had left the moon, he only had the question in mind of what else there might be, giving a prime example of the human hunger for more, and proving Gunn right in his doubt about the capability of humans to feel satisfaction. People are doomed to always run for the next goal, after having achieved one they aimed for.

¹³⁸ “Wed July 22 (for Don Allen's book on Cruising)

It's time perhaps we stopped emphasizing our specialness. There are more similarities than differences, after all, between gays & straights, both in thr sexual & artistic and thr social lives. I'm appalled by the very delusion of the 'gay sensibility', the divorce rate is much the same; etc. Similarly w. cruising. The very word cruising; & trolling. But we're probably looser.

Cruising is not only rewarding in itself but very good exercise & also fertile for the side-product of the active but undirected mind. We are all authorities on cruising, as we are all auth. on braking. Cruising, from which we expect everything & nothing. Streets, parks, Lands’ End, movie theatres, toilets, baths & bars.” Gunn (*No. 4 1981-1983*).

Gunn was probably more struck by another development, one that was happening at the same time and had to do more with earthly humanity, not to mention himself. Three weeks before the landing on the moon, there was news about riots in New York, an uprising that yet had no parallel. The revolts at the Stonewall Inn and the spirit of change they sparked would change the lives of many queer¹³⁹ people for the better. Gunn had already embodied that spirit in his private life. He and Kitay had opened their relationship sexually years earlier, and while Gunn greatly enjoyed the opportunity of promiscuity, his partner preferred serial monogamy. Eventually, in 1969, he started an affair that turned into a relationship. The man was Bill Schuessler, whom Gunn had met some time before he introduced him to Kitay. Factually, this was the last step to turn the open relationship between the couple into a polyamorous construct, as they did not officially split, they just extended. It was only logical that Schuessler would move in with Kitay, and thus also with Gunn. In the end, Gunn was always longing for human connections, and as he had done with Thérèse Megaw in London, who was not a relative but as good as family, he did the same with Schuessler. His moving in was the start of a close circle of friends and lovers living together, which Gunn would refer to as ‘The Family’.

As his private life took some turns, his professional life followed. Although Gunn had been publishing successfully since graduating from Cambridge, his early fame and the reputation as a Cambridge poet did not carry on forever. As he changed style, publishers were more and more hesitant to willingly accept everything Gunn offered to them. Struggling sometimes, as writers do, he had been until now persuasive enough to find outlets to publish his work, in magazines, papers and by publishing books. In September 1969, he experienced one of those unsuccessful occasions. On the advice of his friend Robert Duncan, he had submitted poems to *Caterpillar Magazine*, but was rejected. His self-critical judgement was quick, and he accepted the rejection, assuming on September 9th, 1969 his new poems were “not avant garde enuf” (Gunn, *Diary 1966-1970*). Gunn, who refused to write poetry for audiences, but rather did it for the sake of producing true poetry, of course did not change his approach and continued trying to write. While finding his voice, he succeeded more often than he failed in the end.

He was also questioning his role as a poet, and often contemplated the hierarchy within literature genres. At times he would consider poetry the easiest form of writing, and he thought prose, especially the novel, was a natural development and progression from poems. While trying to develop as a writer, Gunn stepped out of his comfort zone,

¹³⁹ “TG ‘Queer’ was always good enough for me.” Teeman 2.

trying to write a novel again, after abandoning the genre several times before for the sake of writing poetry. In the archives of Berkeley, one attempt at a novel titled *San Francisco Romance* can be found, but it ends after only a few handwritten pages. The manuscript starts with the relatively clumsy and uneven text:

And was sure of him, for the first time. So, George fell asleep, his arm around Jason, and heard foghorns on and off, all through the night. But there must have been a time, that night, when he slept deeply because there was a later time when he was aware of foghorns again and now there was something lacking, and that was Jason's body wrapped around his own. He slept again, and then remembered to reach out, but there was still nothing but cold crumpled sheet and blanket to the edge of the bed. (Gunn, *San Francisco Romance* 1)

The manuscript is marked with the information “written in 1969.” The erotic story of a gay man in San Francisco reads less elaborately than one might expect from someone mastering the different forms of poetry, weighing every word for meaning and intensity. After realizing he was not able to write good prose besides his criticism and essays, he left the project unfinished, focusing on poetry again, especially the works about his experience with drugs.

The ways Gunn was being affected as a gay man played an important role in these days. It is possible that his inability to finish the novel was also rooted in the fact that he was not out as a gay writer, and thus it was hard for him to publish something so bluntly gay. Until now, his poetry had been genderless, and innuendos were the most one could find regarding his homosexuality. Certainly, they were there, but only understood by people who knew. In a gay community that had to hide parts of their identity, the longing to be accepted for who they are was growing, and the signs were there. Anti-gay rules like the Hollywood Hays Code and the taboo of discussing sexual topics in public were coming to an end. There was hope for an end to living in hiding, but the price to pay was the courage needed to take the risk associated with coming out.

To understand the times a bit better, the historical background must be considered. Alfred Kinsey had published the first American study about sexuality in 1947, thus opening the discussion of sexual orientation that had previously been a taboo. This was shortly before the gay movement formed into groups in 1951, significantly enhancing their visibility, beginning with the Mattachine Society, which was founded in Los Angeles as the first organized union of gay men that decided to become visible in society. “See and be seen” became their credo. The importance of California as an epicenter of gay matters was solidified when the California Supreme Court upheld the right of bars to serve queer people in that same year, against movements within society and nationwide

legislation. What might seem an unnecessary step was actually significant, considering the fact that in 1952 the American Psychiatric Association (APA) listed Homosexuality as a ‘sociopathic personality disturbance’, casting the decision by the Supreme Court in a different light. However, in the same year, homosexual immigrants were banned on a nationwide level. (Bronski; Eaklor)

After Kinsey published his study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953, sexuality was again a topic to be talked about publicly. *ONE*, a controversial magazine which openly discussed issues facing the homosexual community, was also released, causing trouble when postmen delivering the printed media claimed to find it obscene and wanted the publication to be banned, which culminated in a Supreme Court ruling as well. In this ruling in 1956, it was the first time that homosexual content was not considered equal to obscenity, meaning that *ONE Magazine* was covered by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. The Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian group, formed in San Francisco in 1955. As a female counterpart to the Mattachine Society, their members were encouraged to blend into society as if their lifestyle was as ‘normal’ as the heterosexual lifestyle. One year after that, Allen Ginsberg published “Howl”,¹⁴⁰ a poem that introduced discussions on the sexual level as not many poems had before. Only five years after being founded in California, the Daughters of Bilitis began to operate nationwide, spreading their impact from the West Coast across the nation, and through their success showing the need to organize in visible groups, “If you don’t see me, I don’t exist” being one of the mottos behind this movement. In 1961, Hollywood started to again allow the depiction of homosexuality on screen, leaving its Motion Picture Production Code behind in the same year that the first openly gay person, José Saria, ran for public office in San Francisco. Meanwhile, Illinois became the first state to abolish its laws against sodomy, long used to prohibit and punish gay sex. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act provided minorities with the broadest protection against discrimination so far, and *Time* magazine published the story “Homosexuality in America” in June, giving the topic visibility. At the same time, the Society for Human Rights was founded in San Francisco, only one year before the first official drag ball in San Francisco was held, which was a massively big step for the queer society, although all attendants had to cross a police picket line to get there, showing again how extraordinarily contentious the clashes between queers and the rest of society were. It also showed the impact of being visible on a growing atmosphere of change, a presence that was easily interpreted as a threat to the

¹⁴⁰ see Ginsberg.

conservative lifestyle. ‘Getting out of the Closet’ and into the streets, being the strategy that seemed to work best, was the motto of the opening of the first gay bookstore in New York in 1967. Still, in the same year, the Supreme Court ruled that it was constitutional to exclude certain people from immigration for being homosexual.¹⁴¹ One year later, the APA reclassified homosexuality as “non-psychotic disorder”, following a trend towards a reduced official stigmatization of homosexuality, with changes happening at a faster pace. In 1969, everything accelerated. Until then, the Gay Movement had been an attempt to change society by being a part of it, being visible, being there – upholding pride against various groups that were against LGBT people and movements, and seeking acceptance as normal members of American society. In this year, however, the atmosphere had a radically more progressive and strident flavor. It was during the era that also produced the spirit of Woodstock, when in 1969, the Gay Liberal Front was founded as a militant group that used its publicity to stay visible, the Gay Alliance was formed, the weekly newspaper *GAY* was published, all the prelude to an event of massive impact. (Peeples; Beemyn; Eaklor)

Shortly after the death of gay icon Judy Garland, in June 1969, a police raid at a gay bar was met with resistance when people started to fight back. The revolts at the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in New York City signified the start of changes in the social status of queer people, and took place from June 27th until July the 2nd. The revolt is still celebrated today with the Christopher Street Day Parades in Europe and Pride Parades worldwide every year.¹⁴² Though the reconstruction of how and why exactly it happened that first night is hard, the importance of it happening at all is vital. From this point onwards, the queer community acted with more open defiance and confidence.¹⁴³

Instead of going on a trip to Australia, which Gunn planned in 1969, he accepted the spring teaching offer he got from Princeton, which followed the idea of many universities at the time to invite writers as first-hand experts on the subject of writing. It was logical that Gunn, who had some teaching experience as well as a formidable reputation as a poet, was considered a good candidate for that position. When he took up the offer, he also recognized the opportunity to be in New York, his “old whore”, at a time of change for gay people, and to be close to history in the making, experiencing a

¹⁴¹ Which affected Gunn as a holder of a green card

¹⁴² On the coming to be of the Pride Parades see Holland.

¹⁴³ See Ahmed; Angelides; Butler.

spirit that would surely have an effect on his writing. Typically for Gunn, his preparations were detailed and meticulous. In a letter to Tony Tanner, he reveals how much he hopes to surprise the people at Princeton by not being as dull as he remembered his graduate work at Stanford being. Part of his preparation was a personal visit to Princeton Campus to clear up some questions in late 1969. About this visit, he writes,

I visited Princeton when I was in the East. It certainly will be a very easy job. When I returned from my afternoon with them I felt very uneasy, and finally localized the cause. I had been using my Englishness on them and they liked it too much. Too easy. And of course (I could have foretold it) Princeton loves an Englishman. I'll change that in February. (*Letters* 255)

In a letter to Elizabeth Cray, the executive director of the Academy of American Poets, shortly before his visiting lectures would start, he points out his plans for the course. He promotes poetry as a form of literature that is present everywhere, in rhymed political slogans as well as advertisements and music, apart from just books. Making this presence visible to his students is one of his goals for the course. To reach this goal, the reading list he proposed to Princeton was shocking and surprising, as it includes the songbooks of Bob Dylan¹⁴⁴ and the Beatles, as well as *The Poets' Tongue*, the book he read at school, edited by Auden and Garret, but also selected poems by Wilfred Owen, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg. Diversity was clearly a key part of this course and indicates Gunn's approach to poetry very well. In his opinion, it is important to know the range of poetry, even if there is the potential to dislike certain aspects of it. After shocking the officials with his progressive syllabus, the job at Princeton was a very lucky pick for Gunn. Teaching came relatively easy to him and being in New York right after the Stonewall events must have produced an incomparable energy in him. His accommodations in New York were also very versatile. He started off staying at the Albert Hotel, a cheap place in Greenwich Village, where he was robbed not only once but twice, when burglars broke into his room and stole everything that was of value there, including his typewriter. Gunn, who seemed calm as always, simply noted the incidents in his diary. Then he moved to a new place, very different from the hotel. Between teaching by day and enjoying the men of New York at night, Gunn was lucky enough to stay at a friend's loft on Prince Street, which had everything the Albert Hotel lacked: space, security, and a closer proximity to Christopher Street and the gay bars of New York.

¹⁴⁴ Bob Dylan would receive the Nobel Prize for Literature 52 years later, which shows how progressive Gunn was in his assessment.

The early 1970s were a time of revolution in the United States in general. After standing up for their rights at the Stonewall Riots, the gay community grew more and more connected and outspoken, and so grew the gay people's desire for recognition for who they were. Coming out was becoming more common, though homosexuality was still stigmatized by large groups in society, especially religious and conservative people. It was still risky to be out and proud, showing your face, but more people understood that only visibility would make society realize that it was blind to the full scope of diversity around it. The question of coming out thus became more and more of a political question as well as a personal one,¹⁴⁵ although one thing was clear: once you took that step out of the closet, there was no way back. For Gunn, the legal status of a non-citizen green card holder and a teacher made it riskier for him, and this was his main reason to hold back his sexuality publicly, besides the fact that he wanted to be recognized as a poet and not instrumentalized as a gay poet, another category that did not suit him. He strived for general truth in poetry, trying to avoid those labels like the Movement and queerness. He would later often say that he was a coward, and in the same turn explain why staying closeted was also the reasonable thing for him to do, from the historical side of things.

In December 1970, Gunn's curiosity for the mind-enhancing capabilities of drugs led him to try another substance. Between Christmas and New Year's Eve, on the 27th, he took a dose of 3,4-Methylenedioxyamphetamine, abbreviated MDA, often back-formed as Mellow Drug of America, due to its soothing effects. The released happiness hormones serotonin and dopamine lead to the ability to strongly empathize with other people, enhancing Gunn's given strength in that respect even more, and helping to connect to others. This quality was one of the reasons why MDA was used in psychiatry for a while, as opening up more easily helped many patients to make fast progress in their therapy. Due to the quality as a 'hug drug', it became one of Gunn's favorite sexual enhancers during the next couple of years and an elementary part of his first aid drug-kit.

While the experiments with drugs slowly calmed down a bit, with Gunn knowing almost all the substances available, it was time to settle down career-wise, step by step. In 1971, Gunn returned to Stanford, the university which had given him his opportunity to enter the United States, where he had since remained. Now that Winters had passed away, Gunn had the opportunity himself to teach relatively freely for the first quarter of the year. Having no strings attached, his approach was similar to the one he had taken at

¹⁴⁵ This was a notion especially pushed by Harvey Milk and his movement

Princeton, and he felt very confident teaching in his own way, not having to attend those faculty meetings he despised so much. After three months, he closes the “easy term” (Gunn, *Diary 1970-1974*), finishing classes on March 12th, leaving Stanford behind again five days later.

As living on periodic engagements did not provide a regular income, Gunn wanted to bring more stability into his finances. Although writing criticism and publishing from time-to-time added money to his account, as well as teaching at Princeton and Stanford and doing excessive reading tours¹⁴⁶, he longed for something more sustainable. At one point he had the idea to apply for a Guggenheim Grant, which could be a relief to his uncertainty in income. The John Simon Guggenheim Foundation says about its own program, “Guggenheim Fellowships are grants awarded to around 175 selected individuals every year. The purpose of the Guggenheim Fellowship program is to provide Fellows with blocks of time in which they can work with as much creative freedom as possible.” (John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation) which seemed to fit Gunn’s needs perfectly. Planning other steps to be more independent, like acquiring a house to avoid having to pay rent, Gunn applied for the program and in March 1971, the grant was approved. The Foundation, claiming their goal was to “add to the educational, literary, artistic, and scientific power of this country” (John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation) fulfilled its promise by supporting the poet with enough financial stability at the time to organize his own environment in a way that helped him write, taking drugs and having sex with men along the way.

At the same time as his finances were secured, another one of Gunn’s wishes was fulfilled too. After years of persuasion and countless cancelled trips, his university friend Tony White finally managed to visit in San Francisco. Upon his arrival in April, Gunn takes immediate care of him, introducing White to his circle of friends in San Francisco and their habits. After the obligatory touristy stuff, White was shown the hidden spots of the Bay Area, like the ranch at Cobb, and was introduced to the drugs that enhanced Gunn’s life at this time. While they were together, the two friends enjoyed their time a lot, so much indeed, that Gunn decided to take a break from acid for a while, as his many

¹⁴⁶ During the Michigan Reading Circuit, Gunn gave eighteen readings of poetry in fifteen days, from October 20th to November 7th in 1969. Gunn (*Diary 1966-1970*) On the similar California Reading Circuit, he writes “Fri 25: I commit myself to going on the Calif ptry-reading circuit this fall. I hate the thought, but I shall need the money.” (*Diary 1966-1970*).

trips had regularly turned out to be bad. White also visited Tanner in Seattle, while he was in the United States, which gave Gunn the opportunity to rest a bit.

While the private person Thom Gunn thrived on having sex, enjoying drugs with friends and organizing his social life, receiving the grant did not hold Gunn back from doing other jobs he liked. He took over as poetry editor of the counterculture paper *The Organ* in 1971. By the end of June, though, he notes in his diary, “Mon June 28: proofreading for Organ - my first possibly their last issue, a lot of work in vain.” (*Diary 1970-1974*) His view would turn out to be well founded. The paper folded in July, making this job one of the briefest in his career.

In his private life, Gunn had to deal with the fact that the summer of love, a time he had enjoyed so much, was over. This was partly being replaced by the “Winter of Heroin” (“Night III”), when people mostly moved on with their lives as drugs were becoming commercialized and criminalized. Only a few still practiced free love, including Gunn. He felt he was getting older and he thought his attractiveness would decline quickly, which he disliked. He was longing for a stronger sense of stability in his life, in a way, to be able to continue with his dual role between observing and taking part. Based on Kitay’s experience with real estate, the lovers decided to live in a place they actually owned and could call home, not to pay rent anymore, gaining a different kind of financial freedom. One day after Kitay’s 40th birthday, on May 22nd Gunn writes “Sat May 22: ... In aft M & I are shown places by Paul Langley (realtor), one very groovy place on Cole St in Haight Ashbury.” (*Diary 1970-1974*) Another couple of days later the sale was secured, and after a few initial renovations and preparations, Gunn, Kitay and Schuessler moved in.¹⁴⁷ The community in the queer household, which Gunn called the Family, was split between downstairs and upstairs with changing constellations of residents. One thing remained constant though; the concept of the house for Gunn, who was taking the role of a fatherly figure, was never to make a lot of money, but rather to rent out the excess space to friends for a fair price, which he used to pay for the house. Especially in the first years, the house needed a lot of fixing and like in a small commune, everybody had to share the burden, taking part in the household plan for cleaning and cooking. After some costly repairs, fixing the pipes, roof and windows, the house was the center of Gunn’s social life for years to come and would preserve a bit of the spirit of the

¹⁴⁷ “Wed Sep 1: we MOVE, Jim & others helping. 1216 COLE.” Gunn (*Diary 1970-1974*).



Figure 2: Thom Gunn's House on Cole Street

late 1960s and the summer of love. As his notion of family was already broader than only including close relatives, the house served the purpose of providing a space for loved ones.¹⁴⁸ Close friends were indeed family to Gunn, according to the motto “Friends are the family you choose”. After acquiring the house, Gunn had a place to easily preserve the ideas he shared with the Summer of Love movement, as he remained a hippie at heart within those walls. The house was the physical fulfillment of the open relationship, which became polyamorous with Kitay and Schuessler’s long-term relationship.

With the purchase of the house on Cole Street, Gunn also came into possession of the adjacent garden. It may come as a surprise that he was the family member who took over the main part of the gardening. His experience in growing plants was limited to helping his aunts in England, and despite parts of his mother’s family having been descendants of farmers and growing some vegetables on the windowsills of his old apartment, his knowledge was lacking. Taking a second look, Gunn as a gardener does not really come as that big of a surprise, though. Gardening united many parts and qualities that were important to the poet: structure, producing something beautiful, arrangements, truth, reality, sustainability and not least a level of control. Being influenced by the Hippie Movement, it was also not a bad idea to partly self-supply the household. This had a double meaning in Gunn’s case, as he would not only grow carrots and tomatoes, or flowers he liked and found beautiful, which actually took up a large part of his diary entries about gardening.¹⁴⁹ In the diaries one can also find clues that other herbs were present, as he noted in 1976 that he found it necessary to harvest his dope plants as the neighbors’ plants had been stolen. The garden was a visible product of Gunn’s own hands, and planning the actions was part of his new hobby. The outcome then served as the perfect surrounding for relaxing and gathering new energy for his creative work. On many occasions he went to his garden to proofread texts, correct exams or write poetry, having created his own natural retreat in the middle of the bustling city of San Francisco.

On the other side of the spectrum, Gunn’s poetic development had taken another leap in recent years. After the big step from the syllabics in *My Sad Captains* to the free verse of *Touch*, he finally felt he had mastered his new style. He omitted many of the

¹⁴⁸ “Mon 28 June: paid off first notes on house. House now 1/3 paid for (fully in 1995).” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

¹⁴⁹ He protocolled which flowers he planted, how they grew, what he liked about them, etc.

poems from *Touch* in later publications, disliking most of them and finding the poems mostly boring and not very artful. One of the main reasons for the lack of artfulness might have been that during the time of writing the poetry for *Touch*, Gunn was caught between a rock and a hard place, living in England, and being troubled with Kitay, while searching for a new voice and being on the brink of discovering drugs as a new means of mind enhancement. *Touch*, in a way, was a stepstone for Gunn that he had to take before leaping into what was to come. Right after handing in the manuscripts for *Touch* in 1966, Gunn dove into the new area of writing under the influence, where his productivity rose to previously unknown heights. What the experience of a new country was to him in the mid-fifties, the experience of the world that drugs opened to him was in the late sixties. While figuring out more about his skills as a free verse poet, he also realized for himself, that poetry manifested under the chaotic influence of drugs is best written in structured verse, in order to bring order to the chaos of the mind. This made Gunn an outstanding writer, as he did not abandon his ability to write in meter with the mastery of free verse but accepted both styles as tools to express different things. His observation led to the statement “the acid trip is unstructured, it opens you up to countless possibilities, you hanker after the infinite. The only way I could give myself any control over the presentation of these experiences, and so could be true to them, was by trying to render the infinite through the finite, the unstructured through the structured” (*OP* 182). His decade-long training in the classical structures was now becoming a key facet in his approach to handling the chaos of his mind, which in turn gave experiences in handling the unstructured language of free verse and its rhythm, and opportunity to concentrate on what seemed vitally important to him: control and truthfulness. He developed an ability and a will to use these abilities for the purpose they seemed to fit most. Unlike other poets, he let these abilities coexist, leaving the whole range of subject matter more open.

The result of this first outburst of drug-influenced work was *Moly* from 1971, which he initially titled *Sunshine*. *Moly* was another breaking point in the poet’s career. It was totally different from his previous works, something new for him, and thus also quite controversial for his readers. For Gunn it also meant that his British audience, who were still trying to wrap their heads around the free verse style of *Touch*, from their formerly highly anticipated poetic rebel, were overwhelmed by the rapid development of the writer. Some did not appreciate this development very much. In some anthologies, Gunn’s poetry was listed up to the year 1967, and he was simply ignored from that time on, with *Moly* not even mentioned in official literature. It was Gunn’s fall from grace in

his home country. For a man who was doing what was right to him, only the financial aspect was playing a role. As for his self-consciousness, he reassured himself that he was not writing for fame but for his own sake and because it was his way of producing art and dealing with life, sharing his mind with the world. If the world did not want to take up the offer, he was fine with that. Of course, it was not the case that Gunn lost all his readership. If anything, he gained a whole new audience. *Moly* was highly appreciated by some people for the same reason others disliked it: the book's frank treatment of drug consumption. One of the copies of the book, which was published with a shiny yellow cover, fitting the original title of *Sunshine* was gifted to Gunn's friend Robert Duncan, who indulged in the book. In Gunn's archives at Berkeley, this copy, which Duncan returned to Gunn, can be found and used as a document of how this edition inspired Duncan. The book includes plenty of notes and additional stanzas to Gunn's poems written by Duncan, who was even inspired to write his own Moly-influenced poetry, leading Gunn to hope that he did not destroy his friend's poetics by giving him his book. After publishing *Moly*, Gunn writes in his diary "Fr Mar 31: Duncan visits in aft. He has written a sonnet. I hope I am not a bad influence on him." (Gunn, *Diary 1970-1974*) Duncan did seem to think so; in fact, he returned his copy of *Moly* to Gunn, with remarks and additional lines for poems. He had filled all the blank pages in the beginning of the book, and most other spaces, with his criticism and elaborations. It had inspired Duncan so much, he would soon add a set of poems to his own oeuvre, creating his own *Moly* collection.

In his dedication "to Mike and Bill", (Gunn, *M* 7) Gunn stresses the importance of his family. It is also a sentiment that helps to depict an image of a man whose primary goal was to be surrounded by people who were their true selves, and could thus support Gunn in his own development. The theory of pose was opening to the possibility Thom had gained from drugs and San Francisco.

The book *Moly* was truly another turning point in Gunn's writing career. It gained him some respect, especially from Robert Duncan as noted previously, who was a big fan of the poetry. It was the drugs, mainly LSD, which had helped Gunn to open his mind and to finally write poetry about everything he deemed important. There were only a few problems. To Gunn, trips were visual and not verbal in general, and the effect of hallucinogenic drugs was mind enhancing, yet very chaotic to him. He needed a way to translate all the experience into words. While trying to render "the infinite through the

finite” (Gunn, *OP* 182), he decided to use meter and structure to somehow restrain and contain the possibility of the poetry for him. Free verse would just not offer him enough control over what he wanted to express, and thus, Gunn is one of the few poets for whom learning to write free verse was not a way without a return, rather it was an enhancement of his style instead of a mere progression. He now had a vast pool of techniques to choose from, and he gladly made use of it. On the publishing side, of course, this made it harder to categorize him, but for Gunn that was someone else’s problem.

Fittingly, considering his development, the first poem in *Moly* is titled “Rites of Passage” (Gunn, *M* 13), and Gunn goes right back to his beginnings with mystical legends from ancient Greece. This first poem is the direct prelude to “Moly” (14–15), with the speaker talking about his horns and being born. In a way, this birth represents Gunn’s birth into the world of hallucinogenic drugs, which was so essential to him as a person and a writer. “Moly” follows as the second piece of the book and deals with the transformation of one of Odysseus’ men into a pig by Circe. The transformed man then holds an inner monologue, discovering his new shape. “Nightmare of beasthood, snorting, how to wake. / I woke” (14) is how he opens the poem that takes the reader onto the journey towards salvation to the poor man who turned into a swine. “I root and root, you think that it is greed, / It is, but I seek out a plant I need” is referring to moly, which is said to have the power to relieve the cursed from his pain. It is a parallel to Gunn, who also seeks this salvation. Moly, for him, is LSD (or the like), and in contrast to the speaker in the poem, he has now found his herb of miracles.

Moly as a volume has a very wide range of topics, mixing the scenery of ancient Greece and its legends with stories, characters and scenery of the United States. It is the profane but profound that interests Gunn here, which he now sees through different eyes. “Justin”, “Apartment Cats”, “The Rooftop” and “the Discovery of the Pacific” are examples of everyday life description.¹⁵⁰ “The Garden of the Gods”, “Listening to Jefferson Airplane”, “The Fair in the Woods” or “Grasses” deal with drugs in particular. “Street Song” is a special poem in that range, as it imitates early English street merchants, and transfers the concept to drug dealers in San Francisco. In what could be called typical Gunn style, the poet combines very old structures with new subject matter, at least to the reader, and he talks about the so far unseen, even though it is very likely that drugs had been sold in the street far earlier than Gunn’s writing poetry about it.

¹⁵⁰ Fitting his second revelation from the trip to Mexico

Gunn's development as a poet is especially visible in the piece "From the Wave" (*M* 26–27), which is often seen as the counterpart to "On the Move". While in the fifties, central themes had been human against nature and the fight for action, a willingness to be on the move, in this volume from the early seventies, the approach is different. The shape of the poem is built with eight four-line stanzas, in which every second line is indented, visually indicating the regular movement of the waves of the sea. Gunn describes surfers, who like motorcyclists seek action, but who do not use machines. They use boards, their own bodies and the energy of the moving water, to which they must adapt. They are "Half wave, half men", (26) instead of being "half animal" (Gunn, *SM* 12), and in "The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of His Death" fighting against "nature, though brought out of it." (28) the surfers' interaction with nature is much more aligned. It is characterized by patience, not by force. The last stanza reads

They paddle in the shallows still
Two splash each other
Then all swim out to wait until
The right waves gather. (Gunn, *M* 27)

It describes Gunn's new gentle approach very well. This is how he roams his worlds now. Drug induced experience, going with the flow of hippie culture, waiting for the right waves to connect with and work into poetry, with friends, and trusting life and the universe to be at one with him eventually.

Although Gunn was a regular participant in San Francisco's nightlife, he was not regularly seen participating in activism. For him to take part in demonstrations or marches, the pain must have become unbearable, especially as he was still in the closet as a gay man. At exactly the time of this struggle with being publicly gay, another personality developed in the Castro. A young gay entrepreneur moved to San Francisco to find his fortune and wanted to make an impact, for himself and the gay community. Harvey Milk first opened a photo shop, before becoming a very visible member of the San Francisco gay community, out and proud as a gay man. He was fighting the battles he thought needed to be fought against the injustice of society and pulled his weight on that issue. Later, he ran for office, and after several failures, he finally succeeded in being elected to the Board of Supervisors of the City of San Francisco.

The ideals of the hippie counterculture were a perfect fit for Thom Gunn. Sharing many of the values, like the core socialist ideas and pacifism, as well as the positive stance on drugs and free love, the movement of the mid-sixties and Gunn were practically made

for each other. Although he left Berkeley the year before the Summer of Love, he was still a part of the spirit that broke free at the Human Be-In and developed into the Summer of Love. Gunn indulged in the society forming around him by fully adapting: growing a beard and long hair, wearing lace shirts and beads, he looked like a poster boy for the hippie image of San Francisco. Long after the Summer of Love had ended, Gunn continued to practice the values, as had always been his, but at the time, it was the most he had ever overlapped with a society he was in. The queer household on 1216 Cole Street, and weekends retreats at natural reserves and beaches, prolonged this Summer of Love feeling for him, at points almost nostalgically, conserving the memories.

What helped him a lot was an activity Gunn had discovered after his return from England in 1965, and which suited him well for the next couple of years. He practiced nudism as a form of self-expression and a way of letting go of cultural restraints. It is not a big surprise that he was drawn to the nudist lifestyle, knowing Gunn and his character set; nudism is a form of realness, honesty and unity with nature that could not have gone unnoticed by the man who was always on the search for approaches to get closer to these values. Cronkite Beach was one of the places Gunn and his friends frequently visited. On one of these occasions, he had the chance to observe a family of three practicing nudism and he could not help but notice them. He was so struck, that he turned his observation into the poem “Three”. It was right after he had finished his book on Fulke Greville. The image of the naked family, being in the natural state of their body, reminded him of the notion of innocence. This is a nice example of how Gunn collects his material: Observing the seemingly banal things in life that come along, and trusting his mind to bring the memories up when he forms an idea of about what he wanted to write.

The poem “Three” was eventually published in the collection *Moly* in 1971. The main motif of the piece, innocence, has often be mentioned by Thom Gunn when discussing the text. Compared to “On the Move”, a real development in Gunn’s style is evident in his newer poetry. Since his experimental use of free verse made way for new poetical experiences, Gunn had also changed the nature of the topics he dealt with; in “Three”, real people are the protagonists. The family in the poem might not have names in the poem, but they have a gender, a relationship to each other and they are separate characters whom he saw in real life. The narrative character of the short poem, composed in ten stanzas with four lines each, is ballad-like. Compared to the syllabics and free verse poems from the 1960s, it is worth noticing that “Three”, like most poems from *Moly*, is written in meter again, to control the chaos of drug-influenced consciousness. Compared

to other poems in *Moly* “Three” does not bluntly deal with drugs¹⁵¹, it only evokes the impression of a widening perception, which could also have been induced by the high which poetry can itself produce.

Gunn also comments on this poem’s genesis in the text “Writing a Poem” in *The Occasions of Poetry*. Here he says that he had the subject of innocence in his mind for quite a while. When visiting a beach, he came across that family and his mind connected them with the image. He described poetry coming to him, as though he were reaching out and coming back with loot. For the notion of innocence, there were several attempts. The obvious one, “Innocence”, about the soldier, had already been published. He also tried to capture the subject matter by using the metaphor of an empty house, but realized that if innocence was materialized, it would certainly not be materialized as an empty house. In “Three” (Gunn, *M* 23–24), he looks for innocence in nakedness, or rather in the carefree nature of a child. Gunn starts the poem with a simple statement “all three are bare”, (23) summarizing the protagonists and putting them in the setting before describing them and their behavior individually, three stanzas each, for three people. He starts with the father, who is depicted in a hippie style with long hair being the only signal, as he was naked, who has just exited from the water. His long hair is “matted like rainy bracken”, putting the father into context with plants and nature, alluding to Botticelli’s Venus in a male version. The strict division of nature versus man as was depicted in “On the Move” is not a central part of Gunn’s poetry anymore. In the second stanza, the reader learns that the father has just emerged from the Pacific Ocean, setting the poem in a clear location. Again, the poet connects the human body to nature itself by merging the ocean with the father. The water becomes sinews that remain on the body of the human being who is thus still in touch with the ocean. The third stanza relates the whole action of getting out of the water and drying to the imagery of an act of creation or birth; although the father is still not really at the beach, it remains a part of where he came from as he had adapted to the waves and there rhythm so well. The waves seem to be imitated by the indented first and third lines of each stanza, which are of different lengths, evoking the varied, yet regular tide hitting the shore. The last line adds a notion of intercourse, or at least an intimate relation with the water, “the cock hangs tiny and withdrawn there now” as if it

¹⁵¹ Unlike “Street Song”, where “Keys lids acid and speed” Gunn (*M* 37–38) play a prominent role or “The Fair in the Woods”, which is remarked in the bottom line with “LSD, San Rafael Woods: ‘Renaissance Fair’” (40)

was a separate part. Indeed, the intimacy here cannot be overlooked, for the swimmer is as naked as he would be during sex.

The mother is introduced in the middle third of the poem, described here lying pressed against boulders on the beach, as if to connect with earth, which is warmed by the sun. Providing the image of “earth’s bones”, Gunn humanizes the earth and nature, and simultaneously naturalizes the female body, which is looking for close, intimate contact. “Hard bone, firm skin” evokes the impression that the mother is a young woman, having rested at the beach for longer than the father, as she is already dry again. The fact that her body, and presumably the father’s body as well, is “striped white where clothes have been” says something about her general behavior in life. She has clearly not always been a nudist, but had to wear clothing from time to time. In this particular scene, she has decided to give herself to the sun, as “the heat that sponsors all heat, from the sky.” Her pose and the white stripes, together with the nakedness of father and mother almost give an impression of an alternate garden of Eden, one where the fig leaves have been removed, but their marks are left, showing the change in attitude.¹⁵²

The son, in contrast, “is brown all over” and does not care about social norms and conventions of clothing. He has not yet been marked by the sun as a person who is ashamed of his nakedness. “His three-year nakedness is everyday” as the poem clarifies in line 18, which means he behaves normally in accordance with his concept of everyday life. In playing the games of life, being naked does not make a difference to him; he does not question nakedness as something naughty or obscene. The son is the personification of unlearned innocence, as he feels no shame in being naked. He “swims as dogs swim” (24) – following his instinct and not letting himself be restricted by social limitations. This is the point where Gunn’s use of drugs is most prominent. The psychedelic effect of LSD frees the speaker from any judgement about social rules or breaking them, rather admiring people’s individuality and the diversity of life’s designs as the point of living. As Michelucci puts it in her book *The Poetry of Thom Gunn – A Critical Study* “The consumption of hallucinogens brings to light another type of contact with the world, or, more precisely, an immersion in the world and all of its parts: the grass, flowers, sounds, colors, and odors of nature. This experience liberates Gunn from his existential angst and assists his rediscovery of an Edenic innocence.” (139) The boy is the strongest character here in personality, as he is not even discouraged by strangers, incorporating the whole

¹⁵² “the symbol of a lost Eden that must be found, even though 'all three are bare.’” Michelucci 139.

world into his game, and there is no shame or harm in playing games. Leaving the game in his parents' direction, in the last stanza the meaning becomes obvious: the parents have not yet freed their minds from learned conventions, yet. They watch their boy until he naturally returns to them. The last line gives a solution, as the parents "had to learn their nakedness" (Gunn, *M* 24) suggesting there is both stigma and hope. The stigma is that they come from a place where nakedness was or is shameful, and though they are naked now, still show the marks of their previous behavior. A simple change of habit does not make the marks of a life disappear, innocence cannot simply be acquired but must be learned anew, with a chance it will never be as pure as if you had never unlearned it. The parents, however, take their chance to make progress, acquiring their innocence again by remembering and acting on their newly won freedom of mind. The marks might stay, but acceptance of one's story is also a part of the way to new innocence.

A different, more direct and more sexually nuanced poem was inspired in the beginning of the 1970s, when Gunn visited a geothermal area a few miles north of the San Francisco Bay. The area was called the Geysers, and the visitors were granted entrance for a dollar per day and were free to roam the area and sleep under the stars. The amenities were basic and included a small store for simple drinks and food, as well as meeting areas.¹⁵³ Gunn's affinity for this special mix of natural magic and people was of course recorded in his diaries and later turned into the lengthy poem "The Geysers". It was indeed a very hippie place to be, even in the 1970s, a paradise for those who wanted the Summer of Love to last a little longer. The priorities of those who went there were deep connection to nature as well as to like-minded people. Gunn's poem reflects those values, that kind of freedom and being without limits; definitions did not work in this place, only personal taste and following the flow of the moment.

The poem "The Geysers" (Gunn, *JSC* 21–27)¹⁵⁴ is thematically similar to "Three" yet very different in tone and style. While "Three" concentrates on innocence and how it

¹⁵³ Gunn sets a preface to his poem which reads

"They are in Sonoma County, California. You could camp anywhere you in the area for a dollar a day, but it was closed down in 1973. There was also a bath house, containing hot and cool pools. It was about seventy years old: it may have originally been open to the sky, but in the seventies was roughly covered in with sections of green corrugated plastic.

Thou hast thy walkes for health, as well as sport." Gunn (*JSC* 21).

¹⁵⁴ The diary Version of the poem reads "Fri Aug 13 - Sun 15: despite from bring house-trip: Bill Taylor & I go Fri eve to the Geysers, 16 m from Geyserville. I arrive stoned in very freaky Bathhouses, like in F's Satyricon. Shooting Stars. We sleep on a

gets lost, “The Geysers” rather focuses on those not lucky enough to grow up with the freedom of the boy in the earlier poem. “The Geysers” consists of four parts, which in themselves differ in style. Mirroring Gunn’s development in his style of poetry, the first part, titled “Sleep by the Hot Stream” (21) is written in structure and rhymed meter, which is partly broken by half-lines that are set off from the main stanzas. Right from the beginning, the writer is taking up the topic of breathing again. In and out, up and down, his approach to poetry (and life at the time) is in steady rhythm. It is Gunn’s love poem to nature, with which he wants to have a new and closer relationship. He feels part of it, with distant sounds and nearby perceptions. He feels at home, and calls the place where he is sleeping under the sky his “Bedroom, where we learn the air”, with “sleeping bags laid out in the valley’s crotch.” He is struck by the number of meteors crossing the sky and sounds happy about being part of this great oneness. Part of how he achieves this oneness is nudity, as waking up after sunset, the speaker states “We get up naked as we intend to stay” before reconciling the rhythm of the trip by saying “Sleep by the hot stream, broken. / Bright, faint, and gone. What I am now has woken.” Again, hinting towards another kind of rebirth, or at least a kind of awakening.

The second part contrasts with the first, titled “The Cool Stream”. (22) Now the poet expands the scope. It is not only his company he is mentioning, but other people who stay in the valley as well. They are, as he joyfully puts it, “people at play”, within nature. The landscape fascinates him, and he describes the details of walls, pools and streams, the vegetation and its ability to grow into open spaces. He now sees humans as even closer to nature; after using the image of birds, he describes his fellow visitors as “the talking animals” who also “enter an unclaimed space”. Nature to him is elegant, lacking the human quality to observe and explain its own being. The gathering after the small migration of people is also very playful. “And some are trying to straddle a floating log, / Some rest and pass a joint, some climb the fall” each as they please, without leaving behind much more than footprints, and Gunn concludes “For though we have invaded this glittering place / And broke the silences, yet we submit:¹⁵⁵ / So wholly, that we are details to it.”

hill, next morning to a beautiful waterfall, walking upstream in a gorge.. Rest of people tho mainly long-hairs. half gay, half not - & not caring, i.e. the world as it shd be. After bathing in stream, back to main place. Bill & I do MDA for aft, eve in one of baths, orgies hetero & homo. Next day falls again, a visit to a geyser, drive home. Even tho I was a bit lethargic, a very good weekend.” Gunn (*Diary 1970-1974*).

¹⁵⁵ In contrast to the willful motorcyclist with his vision of his death

In the third part, Gunn elaborates specifically on “The Geyser” (23) as it is called. This natural wonder catches his attention in its majestic precision. As in “Three”, he personifies the planet, describing “Earth’s bones”, which are embedded in a moonlike landscape. His path is accompanied by “small puffs of steam” which must have had a mystical effect on the hiker. He reaches the geyser at the top of the steep climb, which crowns the area. But there he is reminded of brute force. It “is merely a searing column of steam and ash // a cinderfield that lacks all skin of soil”, there is no delicate life there, just fire or heat. It is to him “Like a beginning, also like an end” which he has not learned to deal with, yet. He merely sees the chance resemblance to something inside himself “Fire at my center, burning since my birth / Under the pleasant flesh. Force calls to force. / Up here a man can shrivel in his source”.

The poem culminates in the fourth and by far longest part, which now lets loose from the clearer structure before. The title “The Bath House” indicates, that now something is built, not naturally grown, at the center, changing and almost destroying the innocence of the valley. It is night now, the heat is “barely endurable”, though the lights are not artificial; the place is candle-lit. The “breath coming slow” is still natural but not as easy as in the opening of the piece. Now the diversity of the space is mainly defined by all sorts of people who are present, “old men, pubescent girls” (24) whose “bodies locked soft in trance of heat” is a quality they share, fully relaxed or indulged, giving in to the heat of the pool. Touch “of hot water on the skin” is the dominant feeling he notices. His mind is hazy, and he is able to let go of hard feelings, sometimes reminded of who he is in the life outside the valley. He states “[I] wish I knew / no longer for certain who is who”, willing to lose the sense of personality of others, or their relationship to him. He himself is “Not certain / who I am or where” and he enjoys it. He feels at the height of his being, feeling the rise of “a new kind of blood” and just exists, questioning the grand scheme of the universe: “New gods are shining over me / What flung Orion’s belt across the sky?”, (25) half dreaming, he just breathes and experiences. Then he moves on to the image of a mother, underlining this feeling of being born “bobbing in the womb, all around me Mother / I am part of all there is no other”, fully dipping into this goal of unity, which he seems to be longing for. All becoming one is his revelation and he gives birth to himself by allowing his own translation. Suddenly in this trip, partly induced by heat, drugs and letting the mind wander, while diving deeper, he is stunned, “cannot breathe”, to wake up from his dream, and to “meet // dreamers” (26) surrounded by a

“smell of dope”. The others surrounding him have a soothing effect, and he calms down quickly, yet feels constrained.

I am trapped

It will begin

Pubescent girl and bearded boy close in

I give up

Hope as they move in on me

Loosened so quickly from it

I am free

(Gunn, *JSC* 26–27)

He now finally falls into this unity he was seeking, understanding why he was in this place. Everything has purpose. He reflects “I am part of all” (27) continuing “my blood is yours” and after a break concludes

Torn from the self

In which I breathed and trod

I am

I am raw meat

I am a god (Gunn, *JSC* 27)

How much nudity reflected Gunn’s mind, and how he found his self-expression in practicing it, becomes clear when reading a letter to Tony Tanner from 1971 where he describes his adventures at the Geysers. A third of the male visitors were gay, but he also notices heterosexual couples, which led to some kind of mixed orgy which to him “seemed very natural – just like the world ought to be” (*Letters* 280). He closes off his report to Tanner with two interesting comments: “What a strange time and place I live in. (I mean, apparently a year ago people couldn’t go nude in this place till after 11p.m.)” (280), because the societal rules seemed to have changed in his favor, at least here, where nudity was now allowed and embraced. The second comment shows how he sees himself, compared to how others might interpret his actions: “Maybe this is what Clive would call hippie sentimentality, but the beautiful naïve impulses that started up about 6 years ago are much too powerful to be obliterated by the shit that has been piled upon them, and that they have sometimes directly caused themselves.” (280).

While nudism leaves out most of the cultural afflictions normally expressed by clothing, for Gunn it usually comes with another activity, especially in the gay world:

cruising¹⁵⁶. But cruising could happen everywhere, at bars, in public restrooms¹⁵⁷, or at cinemas. Cruising was confined to somewhat safe spaces, and you needed to know where to look, you needed to know where to go. At special locations which were especially used for cruising, the risk of getting caught by someone who was not using the space like a gay man was lower. For real safety and a high concentration of willing men, there were special places, where you would only find people interested in sex or at least not appalled by it, such as gay bath houses, and they were very popular in the 1970s. The concept is very simple: the bath houses were a safe place for gays, who would roam half lit areas equipped with saunas, steam rooms and pools, as well as fetish rooms and dark rooms for totally anonymous sex. If you were successfully cruising a guy and wanted some privacy, there were also private rooms available. The biggest and most famous bath house in San Francisco were the Club Baths or St. Mark's Baths, which Gunn regularly visited for adventures. Another bath was the Folsom Barracks, which were regularly at the center of attention of conservative citizens of San Francisco, and which burnt down in 1980, due to an accident.¹⁵⁸ Although the cause was clear, many reports blamed or at least talked about the gay customers and the perverted games they played in those rooms that burnt down, when the location was supposed to be refurbished and turned into a hotel.¹⁵⁹

After some years of freedom from teaching at only one place, on January 3rd in 1973, Gunn took over an office on the top of Berkeley's Wheeler Building, starting to teach there again. While during his break he was teaching at Hayward, Princeton and Stanford, he was ready for something regular again. He felt good about his return; teaching generally went well, despite the annoying faculty meetings. He proudly noted how he joined the library as a university member. Of course, his observational skills still worked and so he did not fail to notice changes, one of them being the different student to teacher ratio, which has been 7:1 when he left and now was at 11:1. The arrangement he was offered was still a positive one to him, as he agreed to work winters only in order to have the summers free for creative work and leisure. On the creative side, he was in between books. *Moly* had been published in 1971, and he was writing poetry at a moderate rate. In order to keep himself visible as a poet, in between his books, Gunn also wanted

¹⁵⁶ "Cruising, from which we expect everything & nothing. Streets, parks, Lands' End, movie theatres, toilets, baths & bars." Gunn (*No. 4 1981-1983*).

¹⁵⁷ Where famously George Michael was caught by the police

¹⁵⁸ On the fires see Flanagan.

¹⁵⁹ This change was described in the short story "Star Clone" under the name Browne, allegedly written by Gunn.

to realize ideas that might not contain enough poetry for a full collection, but that he still felt were important enough to be published. He was always collecting and arranging poems that were connected in one way or another. In the early 1970s, also at a financial low, he used the format of the scrapbook and other low barrier formats to get his poetry to the readers. Among those pamphlets or scrapbooks were *Songbook* from 1973 and *To the Air* from 1974.

It was also in April of 1974 that Gunn embarked on another of his trips to England, but not without the usual stopover in New York. This time, he notes that after meeting his New Yorker friend Doric, he made a date with a man named Allan. After managing to change to a cheaper room at his hotel, which was typical for the thrifty poet, the date was successful in Gunn's opinion. In his diary it reads "Tues April 9: managed to change hotel room into one smaller & cheaper" (*Diary 1974-1986* 3). The forty-four-year-old Gunn quickly included AN3, which was his shorthand for Allan Noseworthy, into his inner circle of trusted friends, which would have a huge impact on the course of the following year and the rest of Gunn's life as a gay man. As his stay in New York was merely the usual stopover before going on to England, Gunn stored some of his things in New York to pick them up on his way back. Noseworthy was the person Gunn trusted with the storage of his dope during his absence, even though they barely knew each other.

Gunn moved on to England from New York, where he was staying a couple of weeks again. This visit was a combination of work and leisure. Besides interviews for the BBC, poetry readings and official lunches, Gunn saw a lot of his family and friends, especially Tony White. One of the readings, he recalls, was not so good as he had been out drunk the night before, when he had not drunk for eight days before that, so he reflects that he was rather intoxicated during the event "but people seem to like it" (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 4). It was also a journey full of realizations. Here Gunn 'sees' his book *Jack Straw's Castle* clearly in front of his eyes, but he also dreams of never going back to England again, which he writes in his diary, without a judgement of whether he finds it good or bad or even scary. What is clear was that it was one of the things on his mind. He was close to himself in England, which also led to the inspiration for some poetry while he had time to read a lot. (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 4-5)

Gunn also took advantage of his time with Tony White by travelling together in Europe. Twenty years after their first trip together they visited the French capital again, starting their journey on June 10th of 1974 on a night train headed to Paris. After the convenient trip, Gunn started to develop a cold, as often happened to him when travelling,

and he decided to fight it with medication to be able to enjoy the trip as much as possible. On the first full day the friends indulged in the joie de vivre of Paris by walking a lot, enjoying food at the classically tiled restaurant Bullion Julien, which Gunn dubbed 'Julian'. The trip itself typically consisted of get-togethers with White's friends, giving Gunn the opportunity to practice French again, although he found their accent slangy, which made it hard for him to follow. They also visited the touristy places. During their five-day trip, they visited Belleville, many gardens in Paris, the Forest de Marly, Pigalle, where they wandered between Kung Fu Movies and sex shops before turning into the Jardins du Luxembourg, the Quartier Latin, the Bois, the Trocadero, the Eiffel Tower, Montparnasse and the Butte Chaumont, a place Gunn liked a lot. When not involved in the program, meeting White's friends was a welcome change, even though some family members showed right wing tendencies, which in turn gave Gunn the opportunity to discuss and show his talent in accepting different opinions. All in all, the memorable trip was enjoyable and finished off with a last stroll along the Seine, and partying with friends and wine. The two friends returned to London satisfied about having shared a little time together, too little considering the depth of their friendship, though. (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 5-6)

After a few more days in England, Gunn returned to the United States with a planned stopover in New York, during which he saw a lot of Noseworthy. The two new friends took drugs together, went to bars and clubs and cuddled at night. Within fourteen days of his return, Noseworthy asked Gunn whether he was in love with him, but fell asleep before he had an answer to the question. This was the night before the Gay Pride Parade in New York of 1974. On June 30th, five years after the first brick was thrown during the police raid of the Stonewall Inn, starting the uprising of the Gay Revolution, the event was celebrated colorfully. This time, Gunn was finally convinced by Noseworthy to join the celebrations and go to the parade with him. Gunn, who had been reluctant to show his face in public during gay events did not have many reasons to stay away this time, and after additionally being motivated by his friend, he joined. It would be life changing for him. His diary entry was different from the usually very report-like notes in the books, as this time he writes

Sun June 30: what a day! Gay Pride march, from Christopher St to Sheep Meadows ... on excellent acid. An epic march thru Manhattan, I felt all the cliché emotions. (It was wonderful, tho Allan & ex-lover David had a tendency to squabble. & the leather men out of the closet. Then (a total of 3 speeds later) to C St. bars. Drinking outside Keller's on street (Allen & I had gone to his home briefly & he gave me a gold ring - his father's wedding ring.) I went back with

shaved head Norman, but - tho he was fine - wished I'd spent night with A instead.
(*Diary 1974-1986* 7)

Being in New York instead of his home San Francisco gave him the freedom to show his face in public, with lower risk of being immediately recognized by colleagues or students, after just resuming teaching a few months ago. His friends, of course, knew about his sexuality, but there were still risks in fully coming out and being seen at occasions like this, especially when he still relied on the goodwill of the immigration agency. After the parade though, his mind had changed, and he was overcome by a feeling of freedom. It impacted his courage, and he knew exactly what he needed to do. This was one of the rare occasions when Gunn opened his mind immediately and brought a sketch of a poem to paper. Although it only remained a draft, possibly due to the very confessional character of the piece, the notebooks give a clear insight into Gunn's thoughts about this event. The poem reads:

Gay Rights Parade (Ny, 74)

What does it feel like to be a queer?
I'll tell you. Cutting a swathe
thro the middle of Manhattan, the traffic
being held up on 42nd street,
jubilant & boisterous
with forty thousand others
handsome, homely, exotic, pedestrian
to feel the kinship, ...

having deserted the family

– the more I deviate from the family the more I am
of it – (Gunn, *No. 1* 1978)

The piece is a powerful opposition to a phenomenon often called Gay Loneliness, in which one's own otherness and the urge to feel belonging play a big role.¹⁶⁰ The poem allows us insight into Gunn's emotionality towards those topics. He, who would usually get along with being himself, as long as there were interesting people around him, shows his desire for a deeper belonging in a community for the first time, although not denying a certain individualism. At the parade, he felt real and at his best, free in the best possible way. This set in motion a process in him, which he could not control, and he was very much willing to give into it during the following months.

¹⁶⁰ Deeper insight on the topic of Gay Loneliness, see Hobbes.

Unfortunately, buying a house and having many things to repair, as well as not really holding back with the drug intake, is a costly thing. By the end of September 1974, Gunn realized that there was only ten dollars left in his bank account. Although he was not a guy who worried about money, this somewhat alarmed him. Of course, he quickly thought of a solution to his problem. His resilience was one of his strongest suits. He elaborated on the idea of selling his notebooks, cashing in on his fame as a poet. He deliberately chose his notes up to the year 1967,¹⁶¹ considering everything written up to that point as outdated by now or useless enough to get rid of without too much pain. This additionally would create some more space in the apartment. It is interesting that the chosen period basically marks Gunn's transition from *Touch* to his *Moly* poetry. To get rid of the not-so-beloved basis for his poetry in the 60s, he used his network to find out how to sell the books as conveniently as possible, finally finding a contact who would put them up for auction. It was a clear sign of Gunn's chaotic side, that he realized in the moment of letting go of the old stuff, that some of the content might still be useful, and he sat down, copying the relevant passages by typewriter.¹⁶² While his money issues were now settled, at least for a while, he spent his time gardening again, to loosen the remaining tension, his garden fully unfolding a meditative function as well.¹⁶³

There was always something imminent in the back of the Anglo-American poet's mind. Gunn, who since arriving in the United States had tried to minimize his doubts about staying, was facing a moment of clarity as far as his citizenship was concerned. So far, he had stayed on a student's visa at first and then as a holder of a green card. The next plausible step would have been to obtain the United States citizenship. The fact that he never became a United States citizen was deeply rooted in his political beliefs. In later interviews he would claim that for the most part his pacifism stood in the way. Every time he would consider the change, the United States started some "nasty little war" (Forester) which he just did not want to support. Apart from the ideological argument, which of course leaves out the convenience of just retaining the citizenship you've been born into when travelling home, his gayness stood in the way. After the gay pride parade, by the end of 1974, he writes "Fr 22: reflecting, this has been my happiest 6 months since 1968

¹⁶¹ "Mon Sep 30: Have only \$ 10 left in checking account. But suddenly realize I could sell all notebooks till 1967 & be pleased to have them out of the way, so in eve I catalogued them (A-S) & wrote off to George Bixby." Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

¹⁶² "Tues Oct 1: ... I have realized thr is stuff I may want from notebooks, so I'm doing a lot of typing." Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

¹⁶³ "Wed Oct 9: worrying about money I feel a lot of tension so do some gardening." Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

or 1969. Not quite sure why - it's just that a lot of things have come together & I have not been abnormally silly, & reaction from England, and writing something that meant something to me. Also realized I am ready to become a citizen if it weren't for questions about gayness." (*Diary 1974-1986* 7) Now, his sexuality was adding to his arguments against citizenship, and it was an argument he was not in control of. In the end, the timing just never seemed good enough for Gunn to change sides and thus he remained an Anglo-American poet with a United Kingdom Passport, which was certainly not a reflection of a national pride.

Coming out as a gay man always happens in several stages. First you have to admit your being gay to yourself, then usually the process includes close friends and / or family, then a greater circle of friends and finally, you do not want to hide anymore. It is a process that never ends. In Gunn's case, several factors added to his process of coming out. He found out about his homosexuality and accepted it very early on, and he also included his friends in the sharing of this personal knowledge. But as a poet, he was also a public figure, which means he was also dependent on more than the trust in his circle of friends and family.¹⁶⁴ In his early poetry he used neutral forms to disguise the gender in love poems, which on the one hand opened up the possibilities for interpretation to the potential reader who could associate more levels of meaning to a specific poem. On the other hand, it was also a restraint, not being fully able to express what he felt. The restraint became a more and more painful factor for Gunn, which during later interviews almost made the otherwise very relaxed poet seem almost aggressive when asked about his late coming out, always arguing with the historical plausibility when trying to play it safe.¹⁶⁵

After attending his first gay pride parade, things changed, and Gunn decided he could not stand hiding any longer. His writing was already conveying more gay related topics, and in hindsight, one can feel the energy knocking from behind the curtain, urging to be brought to light.¹⁶⁶ In his upcoming *Jack Straw's Castle*, he had already collected material which could not be explained without the notion of the writer's sexuality. *Jack Straw's Castle* was basically a by-product of his process of coming out and a driver of

¹⁶⁴ Jack Fritscher describes how he took care of not showing Gunn on pictures taken on a trip to the Geysers, due to his being a public figure ("Thom Gunn (1929-2004)").

¹⁶⁵ "It was good reasoning; it was not just cowardice. I mean, it was cowardice as well, but there was good reason not to write openly." Wilmer ("Thom Gunn, The Art of Poetry No. 72").

¹⁶⁶ "Allegory of the Wolf Boy" Gunn (*SM* 35).

his change of mind at the same time. It was supposed to be published in 1976 and in preparation, Gunn read poetry on several public occasions. On May 20th, 1975, he writes

Tues May 20: M takes me down to Stanford, whr I give a reading to large audience. Davies, Conquest, Janet Tanner w. Jack, Tim, Ken Fields, the Petersons, etc etc. I stumble a little, being nervous, becoss I decide I will say I am gay in the explanatory remarks of J S's Castle. I do OK but not really well. Party afterward. Nice seeing Bob Conquest. I try in vain to convince him how good DHR's ptry & short stories are! Then TT, & M & I go to a wonderful dinner (salmon) at Des Alpes. Then to an evening of talking. TT in very good shape, looks fine, is gentle. A good evening. (*Diary 1974-1986*)

After having taken a step, he could not go back. It was his giant leap.

His public coming out now opened a whole new world of subject matter to Gunn. Although he deliberately worked hard to not write too much on gay topics in order to avoid being labelled as a gay poet (instead of a poet who happened to be gay), he gladly accepted the opportunities and the possibilities of the new angle. His sexuality came through now, but it was by far not the only fresh and vibrant topic in his subject matter. Besides his poetry, his newly found openness also found a way into his criticism. As if it had been waiting for him, almost immediately after his coming out at the reading, Gunn was asked by Robert Bertholf to write an article on Robert Duncan's homosexuality. Gunn's friend and fellow poet was one of those rare men who stood up for his sexuality as early as the 1940s, and as such a role model, Gunn had to agree to the task, after Duncan agreed on the article as well. He started to write the piece and finished it quickly during February 1976, feeling good about it.¹⁶⁷

The regular winter arrangement at Berkeley gave Gunn security and a rhythm, which structured his year, while giving him the space he needed to write and to plan. His life consisted of huge amounts of creative writing and poetry as well as teaching and reading. In 1975, he added more universities to his list where he functioned as guest lecturer, which became another pillar of his income. The University of Toronto in particular started inviting him regularly in the following years. During those occasions, Gunn befriended Douglas Chambers, a likeminded scholar with whom he had a sexually loaded friendship based on their mutual interests and intellect.

Gunn's interest in the cultural aspects of life meant that opera, theatre and cinema were on his evening program as often as sex. Especially from the early 60s onwards he added another program point to his list of activities. He developed into a great concert- and festival-goer. His wide interests and the situation of being in San Francisco made him

¹⁶⁷ Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986* 24–26).

an early appreciator of many music acts, seeing rising stars like Barbra Streisand before she was famous and attending indie concerts regularly. In the sixties, The Beatles, The Byrds, Jefferson Airplane and Pink Floyd were on the list of bands he saw. Concerts were the perfect setting for Gunn, partly for the music, but also for the crowds, with which he was later tripping while dancing and listening to the performances. He brought friends to enjoy taking drugs together at festivals, while The Doors or The Who were playing. Later he started a special relationship with the Grateful Dead, who quickly became one of his favorite bands, observing their story closely. In his diaries he remarked when there were rumors about them splitting up and made more remarks when he went to their next concert, because they had changed their minds. Their music and lyrics, as well as their style in performance, were the perfect background for Gunn's mind enhancement, enabling him to get lost in the experience. Lyrically, he had clear favorites, too. The Beatles spoke his language and he was undeniably a great fan of their music. Yet, there was another musician whose lyrical talent he endorsed, even more than that of the Fab Four. Bob Dylan was a master of his trade, and Gunn admired this. It was the reason he put Dylan's songbook on the reading list for Princeton, and of course he went to his concerts, writing effusively in 1974 after having seen Dylan perform "Feb 11: ... Boy! Best concert I'm ever likely to see" (*Diary 1974-1986 2*) – and Gunn saw all the big ones: the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, Neil Diamond, and many others. Again, his wide range of interest is less surprising than typical for a man like Gunn. He was open to appreciate and celebrate all kinds of arts; he was more apt to regret that his range to produce writings was not wider, than to judge artists for having and using a different voice than his own, as long as they were truthful and not holding back behind a façade, conveying what they wanted to say. For him, it was all part of the same expression, and he embraced the idea by joining concerts and widening his reception of the new by lowering the barriers of his mind's self-defenses through the use of drugs.

In the big pool of bands, the Grateful Dead had a special standing in Gunn's taste.¹⁶⁸ They were the group he saw most frequently, following their course closely. As he was an enthusiastic participant in hippie culture, this was hardly surprising. The band was formed in the mid-sixties and grew on the wave of the counterculture, in part due to

¹⁶⁸ "Sun Nov 11: Bill & I to yet another all-time Dead concert (Winterland), quite a fast me, they played 4 hrs, nice trip, then we came home & drank beer & laughed for 2 hrs." Gunn (*Diary 1970-1974*).

the support of Ken Kesey.¹⁶⁹ They were the band most often invited to play at Kesey's "acid tests". Their home was in Haight-Ashbury and it was no wonder they were deeply connected to the hippie movement that led to the Summer of Love. The band certainly can be counted as one of the longest lasting and most successful music groups of their era. Every hippie listened to their music; their concerts were unique events. For Gunn, like many others, Grateful Dead concerts were the perfect venue to trip and listen to music with lyrics that matched the occasion. In an uncollected poem, he describes his experience of a sense of unity, and feeling of belonging, during a concert at Kezar Stadium. In "The Secret" (Gunn, *Poems Given to Mike Kitay undated*) he expresses the indescribable sensation he felt when under the influence. He writes about a kind of freedom that does not have to be explained, indeed cannot be, but rather remains mystical "at the edges of the understanding". This unified feeling, fewer differences, more similarity, is what Gunn sees as holding the world together. It is what drives him and gives him the feeling of being able to compose poetry. As soon as he tries to force something, the flow immediately stops. In a way, this is the similarity between the band and Gunn. The Grateful Dead did not like the music business and its commercialized habits, they wanted to be free to move and not be confined. Gunn did the same with his poetry and sex and by staying in the moment. The Grateful Dead lasted for more than thirty years, being successful, on and off, just like Gunn, who accepted his writing droughts and producing poetry in which he tried to be as true to himself as possible.

In January 1976, Gunn wrote a special birthday card. He realized it was the first he had written to his dear friend Tony White. The tone of the greetings was warm and friendly, as was common for the two men's relationship. The card's motif was the Pleiades, a star cluster which is also called the Seven Sisters, which coincidentally happens to fit the description of Gunn's maternal side of the family. He had developed a certain interest in astronomy by that time, an interest he shared with White. When Gunn mailed the card, he did not anticipate that his friend Tony would never read it. He died at the age of forty-five, supposedly from a blood clot causing a heart attack, after breaking his leg at a football match.¹⁷⁰ When Gunn learned about the incident a few days after it happened, he was in shock, and devastated. The only comfort for him at the time was the soothing

¹⁶⁹ Ken Kesey author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and supporter of the Grateful Dead

¹⁷⁰ The full account of this can be read in Sam Miller - Fathers

words of his friend Holmstrom, who had to break the news to him, reassuring Gunn that White died a happy man. When Gunn was telling his brother and aunts about the loss, he confesses “He did mean an awful lot to me – as he did to a lot of other people. He made a better thing of his life than almost anyone else I know.” (*Letters* 322) He quickly finished the letter by apologizing about not being in the mood to write much more at the moment, revealing how deeply the news hit him.

As sad as Tony White’s death was, it had the benefit of bringing together old Cambridge friends who had lost touch for a while. Karl Miller asked Gunn to contribute to a memorial article about White that was supposed to be published.¹⁷¹ Gunn tried to reconcile this with the assumed attitude of his deceased friend, thinking White would not have approved of it. The writer here shows again his favoritism of life versus death and said it would be good to write something, reasoning that “if it would help some of his friends deal with their grief I couldn’t be against it” (*Letters* 322). In the end he declined, as he was “not ready for him to disappear into literature just yet” (322). For Gunn, the loss was comparable to the sudden loss of his mother more than thirty years ago. He regretted not having seen more of his old friend due to their geographical distance. This situation again shows how conflicted and yet clear Gunn was about his own feelings. In the case of contributing to the article, he knew he had to put his own needs for grief before the need of others who might need help in their grief, in order to be able to help when he had found his own stability again.

Gunn had been suffering from writer’s block more often since the sixties. He assumed that it had to do with his enormous drug intake, and while that might have been true, it was surely not the only reason. And the creative flow that was induced by the drugs opening up new subject matter was also balancing it out a bit. It was during highly emotional times when writing did not necessarily flow. After White’s death, the writer was devastated, and the effect was painfully evident. Although the feeling of accomplishment after publishing a book often had the effect of drought, in the case of Tony White’s death, it lasted almost two years. He figured that his approach to writing poetry had to change, but he had no idea how to do it, yet.

Luckily, another opportunity was presented to him, which this time was more helpful. In the spring of 1976, he was asked to write a text on his time at Cambridge, some

¹⁷¹ “Tu 22 Jan: Karl wants me to join in a collection of things about TW for the New Review. I can't. All I can thing is - if only I cd have a last beer w. him at Becky's.” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

twenty years earlier. As he was already attempting to write autobiographical texts, though with little success so far, he took up the task and wrote a memoir for a book titled *My Cambridge*, where Gunn's account of his time was supposed to appear alongside those of fellow graduates such as Donald Davie¹⁷² and Arianna Stasinopoulos. Each of the contributors was asked to give a glimpse of their experiences at the prestigious university, and so did Gunn, who explains in great detail what Cambridge meant to him and how studying there changed the way he thought. For him, it was a welcome opportunity to write about his late friend Tony White, without writing him a send-off, which he could not manage to do yet. The book was published in 1977 and Gunn reused much of the text he wrote for the autobiographical part of his later book *The Occasions of Poetry*, although he altered and shortened parts of it.

Luckily, Gunn had a book publication on the horizon, which coincided with his writer's block. *Jack Straw's Castle* was about to be published and it contained all the energy of recent years that Gunn wanted to exorcise from his mind. Some of the poems in *Jack Straw's Castle* were a mirror of the gay angst many people were suffering from. The shut closet doors barricaded their inner self, and Gunn's way out of this prison was partly the drugs he used, cultivating his mind to stay open, while slowly pushing against those barricaded doors in his mind. By the time of his coming out, he had written a good deal of the poems in the volume and noted in a chronology, "I 'see' next book" (Gunn, *Chronology [1978]* 2), referring to his collection to follow. What sounds like a mystical epiphany in fact seems to represent a moment of great clarity, knowing what would feel right and made sense at that very moment. The subject of coming out, even of your own closet or prison, being truly oneself, was a central topic to him. The seeing of the whole in its parts was a particularly Gunnean aspect of it, fitting the image of an epiphany. A great deal of the book and the ideas of what to do next were inspired by Thom's relationship to Allan Noseworthy and his personality. In a handwritten dedication in Noseworthy's copy of *Jack Straw's Castle*, Gunn says

to Allan
who haunts this book from end to end, waking up with his ass against silly Jack
Straw's ass, and leading Yoko around —
with huge love (of course!)
from Thom
just arriving in New York 15 Nov 76, Hudson St. (stoned (of course!)) (*Jack
Straw's Castle*)

¹⁷² Davie played a significant role for Gunn, both as poet and as critic. Gunn also contributed to his *Under Briggflatts*. See also Bell.

He finishes off the note, which says so much about him as an author and a person, with a sketch that reveals even more about his relationship to sexuality. At the end of his dedication, he draws a sketch of a heart, that is pierced by an erect penis instead of an arrow. Noseworthy's influence as a muse, as well as a friend who had great influence on Thom's personal development and his coming out, was undeniably essential for this book. His influence on the title poem is as evident as his dog's influence on the funny poem "Yoko". The book also contains many spiritual allusions that can only be guessed at, but is visibly spiced up with sexual energy and the power of the two men's friendship.

Although much of Noseworthy's influence in the book is evident, *Jack Straw's Castle* is dedicated to Tony White, who died in the year of its publication. Gunn in the end wanted to set up a monument to him, and this book undoubtedly was a fitting one which alluded to the strengths in White that the poet admired so much, like the strength to pursue his goals, ignoring other people's opinions. The book also unites Gunn's several lives he so far had held separately: his sexual persona, the American, the English, the nude, the hippie. *Jack Straw's Castle* is certainly a book that was worthy of coming out with a bang. It is also a bridge between Gunn's love for his friends and his erotic admiration for some of them. It holds everything between Tony White and Allan Noseworthy.

Jack Straw's Castle was the printed manifestation of Gunn's coming out. From here there was no way back, literally. For the title, he found it important to stress, that it had nothing to do with the bar of the same name, which was located right next to Hampstead Heath in London, and even more coincidentally was very close to the cruising area. However, this was not Gunn's Jack Straw. In his *Collected Poems* Gunn elaborates "the Oxford dictionary defines Jack Straw as a 'straw man'; a man of no substance, worth, or consideration" (CP 491). The meaning of words here is more important than specific places. In general, the book opened a whole new chapter for Gunn, who found a new access to emotion and humor in that work. The author divides the volume into three parts, which are well mixed in subject matter. The first poem is called "The Bed" (Gunn, JSC 13) and it deals quite bluntly with an orgasm in two four-lined stanzas, as if to make a statement of how important sex is to Thom Gunn, and how openly he will deal with it from this book onwards (although, of course, he started much earlier to write and publish about the topic). He presents the subject in a very poetic way though, saying "the pulsing stops where time has been" and then describing semen in pubic hair as a snow-bound garden in the first four lines. The second half is about the intertwined aftermath of the

couple that just climaxed, but he is not done with the sensation. They lie “Like wrestling statues; but still goes on / Inside my head.” It is the new typical Thom Gunn, who hints on the fact that life goes on, and the orgasm is just the beginning of the next phase of enjoyment. The fact that he frames the story in the metaphor of a garden leads to the assumption of decorum. Society is not yet ready for the naked truth, but if you put an orgasm into nice metaphors and formulas, you could write about them as a poet.

In the first part of *Jack Straw's Castle*, Gunn also returns to his fascination for cities. In “Diagrams” (Gunn, *JSC* 14) he opens with a skyline, with office towers and cranes like “diagrams from the sky”, which is followed by a more important piece, which would bring Gunn some visibility again. The city poem “Iron Landscapes (and the Statue of Liberty)” (15) is about Gunn’s great love for New York. Having been printed successfully in magazines, it resonated well with the literary world. Gunn describes the iron landscapes seen from the city, heavy and almost brutal. He is at peace with this force, though; “buildings must be hard to last”, and for him this works as “a dream of righteous permanence, from the past.” The decorum is symbolized by Nixon, who for Gunn stands for an unlikable and pretentious society.¹⁷³ The Statue of Liberty, though, is a beacon of hope. She “seems hard, but hard like a revolutionary / with indignation, constant as she is.” The speaker is longing for “Liberty, tiny woman in the mist” hardly seen from “Barrow Street Pier, New York / May 1973”, but giving hope, to break the strains of conservatism, “saluting with her fist.”

In the following build up to the gravitational center or centers of the book, Gunn continues with “Fever” (Gunn, *JSC* 17) and his will “to loot” at gay bars, reminiscent of the cruising fever in London, 1964, and describing the hunt for connection and bodily involvement in comparison to his memories of the military, which is another kind of hunt. He balances force with softness, which is also induced by the imagery of fog, which recurs regularly. “The Night Piece” starts with fog rolling down a hill, and is in fact a poem which had been set to music.¹⁷⁴ Memories of his “Last Nights at Teddington” in England can be found, as well as “The Geysers” or poetry about sleeping. The first section of *Jack Straw's Castle* is then rounded out by a set of three poems which Gunn sums up under the title “Three Songs”. (Gunn, *JSC* 28–30) The three songs are called “Baby Song” (28) about the transition between the time in the womb and the time after birth, almost alluding

¹⁷³ “Tues 7 Nov: Crocodile Nixon won election easily, as expected. Marijuana Initiative lost 2-1, restoration of death penalty (Calif.) won. But still Demo senate & Congress.” Gunn (*Diary 1970-1974*).

¹⁷⁴ The score can be found in the Thom Gunn Papers at Bancroft

to the kind of birth gay people go through when coming out, saying “Things were different inside Mother.” The second song is “Hitching into Frisco”, another description of the gay mecca in California, which welcomed Gunn, too, when he was ready to move there. Giving an account of being dropped off on Fell Street, walking to Union Square in the center, seeing the homeless, which it seems have been a standard sight of San Francisco for some time. The third song titled “Sparrow” (29) exaggerates that freedom of the hitchhiker even more, by using the well-known image of bird, but the speaker shows signs of being tired. The sparrow is a pitiful creature here, he is one of the homeless of the city. “I stand here in the cold / in a loose old suit bruised and dirty”. He is poor, and the weather outside also withers his skin, but he has hope or at least acts like he does. “I’ll be a daredevil then / millionaire stud in my right mind”, (30) all he needs to get there is money for some booze. The millionaire is a passing person, though, who upon walking by is cursed by the poor man left behind.

The second part of the book is again a mixture of past subjects with new observation. “The Plunge” is the starting poem, bringing in some lightness, before “Bringing to Light”, Gunn’s way of bringing the reader a little closer to the author’s state of mind, talking about picnics in Kent and a confining cellar in which the speaker finds himself. In “Wrestling” (40-41) which is dedicated to Robert Duncan, the big opposites act together, and fight like in Gunn’s poetic beginnings, but on a stellar level. He speaks of a “Discourse / of sun and moon/ fire and beginnings”, (40) which lifts everything on a grand scale. The beginning is one of the central subjects here, also the

continuous discourse
of angels
of sons and angels
of semen, of beginnings

The fight and discourse is balanced by waves now and then. “The Outdoor Concert” (42), which follows next, brings those waves into a musical shape, music being one of the most frequent images of this part. Music is a tool, as it also is a secret. The cryptic phrase “The secret / is still the secret” makes the whole poem mystical. Gunn knows that certain things do not reveal themselves, it is merely a pursuit of finding connections. The secret

is not a proposition:
it’s in finding
what connects the man
with the music, with
the listeners, with the fog

It is not clarity which needs to be achieved, but action itself. He concludes with a spider which becomes one with its web, which is “a god existing / only in its creation.”

“Saturnalia” (43) is the poetic celebration of an eccentric party at Don Doody’s bar the Stud, and the poem does not hold back with the details that made the parties special. It is a revolutionary occasion where we find “outlaws / in majority”, building “one body”. It is indeed a decadent happening, where the participants and the speaker are

finding our likeness in
being bare, we
have thrown off
the variegated stuffs that
distinguished us one from
one
 here in orgy
a Laocoon of twined
limbs

It is perhaps one of Gunn’s most sexual poems, describing his “beloved flesh”. He goes into more detail, when he describes

the whole body pulsing
like an erection, blood
in the head and furious
with tenderness. (43-44)

He indulges in a saturnalia, which makes the location become “a zone of Eros”. (44)

The poems “Faustus Triumphant”, where according to Gunn the speaker “has an amphetamine problem” (Gunn, *CP* 490), and “Dolly” about how childhood play affects the adult self, build up to “Jack Straws Castle”, (Gunn, *JSC* 48–56) where the nobody Jack Straw sits imprisoned. “Why can’t I leave my castle” (48) he asks, wondering if the castle is what it seems. It is an allegory of the hidden life of homosexuals. Living in disguise to protect a status quo, one that might not be worth living in at all, but is imagined to be better than what might happen after a coming out. Much like “the castle that every snail / must carry around till his death” hints at the burden it feels like to live this lie. It induces nightmares. In part four of this eleven-part poem, the author mentions his “Dream sponsors: / Charles Manson” (50) not implying a very light feeling of happiness but rather forceful murderous thoughts. Willing to outstare Medusa in the shape of kittens, he anticipates the leap of faith. Part five starts with “The door opens / There are no snakes”; maybe the fear was not as realistic as anticipated as so often. The speaker in his relief says

I
catch fire

self-delighting
self-sufficient
self-consuming
till
I burn out” (51).

The door opened, but he is not there yet. Sinking back “into / darkness into / my foundations” he finds himself in the cellars, where he loses hope once again in the sixth part. The next four lines make up part seven and lets us follow the self-definition of a man:

I am the man on the rack.
I am the man who puts the man on the rack.
I am the man who watches the man who puts the man on the
rack. (52)

It petrifies him in fear, he feels alone again and sees no hope. “I spin like a solitary star”, (53) he lets the reader know. Again talking about the horrors of Charles Manson, he still longs for salvation from these horrors. He will take control. The last part starts with “Down panic down.” (55) He commands himself “The castle is still here / And I am in the kitchen with a beer / hearing the hurricane thin out to rain”. He realistically sees upsides and downsides to his self-created home. It is not as bad as it seems, and yet, he is exhausted by the recurring nightmares and the confining walls of his dark prison. The relief lies in the last five lines of the poem, when help from outside is coming nearer. It

Comes from outside the castle, I can feel
The beauty’s in what is, not what may seem
I turn. And even if he were a dream
-- Thick sweating flesh against which I lie curled –
With dreams like this, Jack’s ready for the world (56)

Dreams are all that is required to make oneself along the way, and thus Jack Straw, a nobody, but still an individual, sees his way out of darkness, by dreaming of reaching something he could call happiness. He finds his strength to not fear the future but to also see the potential that lies within it if he manages to take over control. “An Amorous Debate - Leather Kid and Fleshly” (57-58) seems like a fast forward on Jack, describing a very visual scene between two guys who share their leather fetish. Gunn’s language becomes very strong, open and clear, with phrases like “Let’s fuck”, (57) “you have / a hard cock” or “moved his head to suck at / the nearest flesh to / his mouth” (58) Gunn is not holding back in this piece. It is Jack’s price for being courageous, after all. And it culminates in the most important thing to Gunn, bodily unification “And they melted one / into the other”.

The third part of *Jack Straw's Castle* is even more personal in a more direct way, as it connects to Gunn as a person. Here he includes poems about Hampstead in "Hampstead: The Horse Chestnut Tree" and "The Cherry Tree", his existence in cities and with friends in "The Road Map" and "Yoko", written from the point of view of Allen Noseworthy's Newfoundland dog, and poems about complex issues like trust are also present. The very humorous poem "Courage, a Tale", about lies told to children about masturbation, is a personal highlight in the book, in which the protagonist, like Jack Straw, chooses to face death, and upon realizing his real freedom knows no boundaries anymore. He finishes the book with "The Release", (74) which can only be overcome by facing "the sense of mild but constant risk" and "Breaking Ground". I want to shift focus back to the most personal poem of the poet Thom Gunn, which opens the third part of *Jack Straw's Castle*, dealing mainly with the sexual persona of the writer, but also the personas of the friend, the lover, the doubter and the visitor.

In "Autobiography" (61) he condenses who he is as a writer. It is an account of what he tries to achieve in writing. The first two lines almost serve as a confession. "The sniff of the real, that's / what I'd want to get", are about how he felt sitting, studying as a child. It is the seemingly profane he wants to encapsulate, but by saying 'would', he evokes the assumption that he knows he is not there yet. He is talking about his late youth, where potential was sheer and unlimited, and reading poetry was a huge influence.

As the poet recounts, with Lamartine's poems,

life seemed all
loss, and what was more
I'd lost whatever it was
before I'd even have it

This depicts the melancholy he so often referred to as normal for an adolescent. In a way, he, the poet, still has the same goals as the yet undecided youth

longing so hard to make
inclusions that the longing
has become in memory
and inclusion

Once again reveals that sense of unity as motivation for his poetry. *Jack Straw's Castle* is a very important book for Gunn. It once again expands his range as a writer, trying to express the profane in delicate words, but more significantly, it is a very personal book, which leaves him more courageous than ever, looking forward to the world after living through the nightmares of Jack Straw.

Gay bars were a social hotspot for Gunn, He went there frequently for conversation, drinks, drugs and hook-ups. He ran into all sorts of people there, which he enjoyed a lot. On the evening of May 18th in 1978, he picked up one such interesting person and brought him home, commenting in his diary “Wed, May 18: ... eve to Ambush & bring home great NY Robert (fotog. ...) for nite. He has lots of coke for us.” (*Diary 1974-1986* 38) The following days, they met in the bars again, as they shared an interest for the leather scene. As it turns out, this great photographer was Robert Mapplethorpe, who liked to call himself pornographer and who had split up with singer songwriter Patti Smith¹⁷⁵ in 1968, prompting him to come to San Francisco for the first time to sort out his sexual orientation once and for all. To Smith he said “Please! If you go, I’ll become gay.” (Morrisroe 57)

When the two men talked about what they did for a living a couple of days after their first encounter, Mapplethorpe suggested that he and Gunn do a book together,¹⁷⁶ with his photographs and Gunn’s poetry, similar to *Positives*. Mapplethorpe’s idea was to make the book “hard-core and kinky” (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 39), but Gunn, who had come out two years earlier, was not too comfortable with that kind of blatant art, as he was striving for “the sniff of the real” (Gunn, *JSC* 61) rather than sexual confessionalism. It must have been Mapplethorpe’s strong and fixated mind that opposed Gunn’s idea of flow, and their approach to art just did not match as well as their sexual interests. The project, although they discussed it a few times, was never realized. There were other things that happened though, during professional meetings between the two artists. Gunn, who did not much enjoy being photographed, except by his brother, agreed to do a photoshoot with Mapplethorpe (who also took pictures of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Madonna at that time). One of the photos, showing Gunn in leather at the age of fifty, became iconic and made it onto the cover of his *Collected Poems* a few years later.

The process of taking it also triggered the observer in Gunn and inspired him to write a poem, which was titled “Song of a Camera” (Gunn, *PJ* 45–46). Here, Gunn chooses very short lines to express the notion during a photoshoot. The clicking of the camera is indicated by the clicking of the words assembled and lines that are no longer than five syllables. Gunn describes the act of taking pictures as brutal; “I cut the sentence

¹⁷⁵ “Because the Night Belongs to Lovers” Patti Smith Group.

¹⁷⁶ “Th June 2: to Robt Mapplethorpe, Mark Twain Hotel, in aft, to see his pics & discuss the poss of doing a pornographic book together.” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

/ out of a life” (45) he starts the poem, separating a piece of life from itself, to look at it isolated. It does not matter than from which context the subject comes, the subject is shown alone, whether “dressed or undressed / young full-full grown” Gunn mingles the “Song of a Camera” by talking about photography, as if it was poetry. The pictures in his poem are words, thus creating the staccato of photographing, consisting of bits which are non-fitting. He “wants to add /adverbs to verbs”, but it would not work out. The desire is too strong and violent for tenderness. It is somewhat empty in the end when he concludes

Find what you seek
find what you fear
and be assured
nothing is here (46)

giving the camera a full-grown personality in the last four lines, and a huge ego, coming to that

I am the eye
that cut the life
you stand you lie
I am the knife.

In September 1978, Gunn embarked on another return to England, with the usual stopover in New York. On the plane there, he sat next to Ken Kesey and engaged in a little chat about literature.¹⁷⁷ During his visit to the city, he caught up with Oliver Sacks and Don Doody. With Sacks, he remarks about his spark within his texts, and the fascination he shows when he has a book in progress. This fascination was something Gunn loved to see, and observing his friend talking about his project also raised his spirits. New York also offered sexual opportunities which reveal something about Gunn. This time, he met a guy who alluded to Moby-Dick while flirting. He told Gunn “Call me Ishmael” (Melville 31), and Gunn replied, after being offered the part of Ahab in this construct, that he would rather want to be Queequeg, making this flirtation a very intellectual negotiation about sexual preferences. Literature and sex had an indivisible connection in Gunn’s life. On his last night in New York, Gunn split drugs with another couple of his friends Andrew and Norm Rathweg, whom Gunn deemed to be among the five most attractive guys he ever met. At his advancing age, which had induced a decline

¹⁷⁷ “Tues Sept 5 ... On plane SF to NY, I recognize Ken Kesey. He talks to me, & we have about 1/2 hr's v g conversation. I tell him I like his 2nd novel. He says he prefers it too. About family, indicating his children: Don't think I'll be able to write another novel till they're grown up. The eldest, & beautiful blond girl (15?). Going with a mass bookings of Grateful Dead crew for a GD concert by Sphynx in Egypt.” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

in his belief in his own attractiveness, Gunn doubted how they could like him, contemplating superficiality.

Going on to England, Gunn rated the following visit as one of the best since his year in England in 1965. Although Tony White was deeply missed, the visit was full of events that pleased the poet. After starting the stay with his aunts in Snodland, helping them to do some housework like gardening, he left for Cambridge, considering his aunt Barbara might be in a condition where he might not see her alive again. At Cambridge, he spent his time with his old friends Tony Tanner and Clive Wilmer for both friendly and professional reasons, including the work on his upcoming selected reviews, which would become *The Occasions of Poetry*. All in all, the journey was accompanied by nostalgia for Gunn, seeing family, his childhood friend Ruth Townsend and his dear friend Thérèse Megaw in London, catching up with his brother Ander, and talking about his family and their challenges. He also paid a visit to Talbot Road, which by now had changed and thus did not induce the touching feelings he would have expected. Besides writing a little poetry and roaming in the past, nothing unusual happened during his stay, before flying back, this time via Montreal and Toronto, meeting Douglas Chambers and giving a few readings.

This was also a time of backlashes against gay rights. Homophobic agents like Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen and now conservative activist, and John Briggs were a threat to the queer community. It was at this time, when San Francisco finally elected the first openly homosexual politician into office as a city supervisor. Harvey Milk, the entrepreneur and owner of Castro Camera, was a beacon of hope in an otherwise darkening world of hatred against people based on their sexual orientation. Milk's win was celebrated in his Castro neighborhood by people of all walks of life, around his store. This surely did not please Bryant and Briggs, or their supporters, and in the following months Briggs started a ballot proposition. The Briggs initiative was a ballot initiative, to be carried out in 1978, and officially called California Proposition 6. This proposition was supposed to not only prohibit gay people from public office like schools and government, but also made it possible to fire people who publicly supported homosexual people and gay rights. It was designed to cut off queers from society, based on the narrative of fear that gay people would have a bad influence on children, if they were allowed near them. It was people like Harvey Milk and Sally Miller Gearhart, as the first openly lesbian to get tenure at a university, who strongly opposed the Proposition 6 campaign. On election day, in November 1978, it became clear that the efforts of gay

activists had paid off, as the people of California defeated the initiative by over a million votes. As always in life, where there's a winner, there are losers as well. In this case, former policeman, firefighter and now member of the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco, Daniel James White, was struggling with Milk, the mayor, and what he saw as corruption in the city's politics. He was also having problems fulfilling his duties on the Supervisor's salary, which was lower than that of a firefighter and policeman, and resigned from his office. After White's supporters urged him to reverse his resignation, Mayor George Moscone at first accepted his request to be reinstated, but later refused to do so. Considering San Francisco's mayor George Moscone his enemy, he carried a pistol to city hall, found the mayor in his office and shot him. In an additional act of violence, he went to the office of his fellow council member Milk, reloaded, and shot him as well, just one year after his election on November 27th, 1978.

Gunn, who as we know had not been the most political of his contemporaries noted in his diary "Mon Nov 27: Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone shot & killed by clean-cut crybaby Dan White, ex supervisor. I am as shocked as I was at JFK's assassination & feel more grief. In eve walk w. big candlelight parade to City Hall whr thr were speeches - Joan Baez, etc." (*Diary 1974-1986*) Gunn's attitude towards Dan White and his presumably disingenuous manner becomes clear in those few words, which are rare in their obvious anger.¹⁷⁸ The shock about Milk's assassination went deeper than that of Kennedy in some respect, as of course the geographical distance was shorter – and Milk was closer to Gunn in other ways as well, as he stood for gay rights. In this case it was a clear-cut decision for Gunn to join the procession to commemorate Milk and Moscone, although he struggled to identify as a part of the gay community in general, but he considered that after all, he was closer to them than to the conservatives. After the march, Gunn immediately went on with life, celebrating it at the bars and joining the gay community there, which now was facing a more challenging world again, having one less advocate.

In December 1979, the fifty-year-old got hit by a very unpleasant surprise. He was diagnosed with Bell's Palsy, a disease that showed symptoms such as a loss of control of one's face, partial paralysis and the loss of the sense of taste. Gunn describes this as "one of the more dramatic diseases of [his] life" (Gunn, *Letters* 348). The man who could

¹⁷⁸ A decade later, Gunn is still touched by the assassination: "Sun Nov 27: I walk on the 10th anniversary march of the City Hall murders - candle light & so on. Too much Democratic Party rhetoric but I did like Cleve Jones, who did the introducing." (*Diary 1986-2000* 19).

always rely on his luck was now confronted with ambiguity and bodily vulnerability.

Seeing his attractiveness fading for good, he writes,

I was scared shitless, partly because it could have been a tumor of the brain, and partly because if it was Bell's Palsy then it can sometimes take as much as a year to get your face straight again, or sometimes, for reasons no one understands, the face stays lop sided for ever. I tried to tell myself that maybe I would just have sex in pitch black orgy rooms with other deformed people; I also tried to convince myself that paralysed is punk, and thus fashionable. To tell the truth, I didn't succeed in reassuring myself. (Gunn, *Letters* 348)

The painful realization had struck him hard, but his luck returned within a fortnight, when he was healed again, without visible marks, making him unspeakably happy. This happiness also gave him the energy to write poetry again, and he worked a lot on the following poem, after regaining his inspirational energy and dreaming about the poem during the time of recovery.¹⁷⁹

“Talbot Road” was published separately as a booklet in 1981 and then appeared as the second to last poem in the collection *The Passages of Joy* in 1982 again. For Gunn's standard, it is a long poem which consists of five parts, written in free verse and reading almost prose like in its flow. Content-wise, it covers several topics, from autobiographical to geographical and sociological aspects of London across several points in time between 1964 and the late 1970s, when the piece was written and finalized. The five stanzas will be analyzed separately before considering the poem as a whole, considering the explicit language and description as well as the general messages that lie within.

“Talbot Road” (Gunn, *TR*) is written in free verse and reads quite naturally; it was this natural rhythm that Gunn was seeking in his free verse poetry. The main topic of the first part or chapter can be isolated in a socio-geographic picture of Westminster in London as it was intended (for burghers), such as Notting Hill and Belgravia.¹⁸⁰ It also includes other parts of the city near Buckingham Palace. Signs of decay quickly become apparent and the quarter falls to laborers, most probably during the late industrialization

¹⁷⁹ On December 29th of 1979, Gunn writes “That last draft was written, partly from a dream, the morning of the afternoon I got my Bell's Palsy diagnosed. After that, I was too hyper on cortisone injections & anxious about the illness to even read poetry, let alone write it. & right now, tho better, I'm too up & down to tamper, or even to revise old poems. I have to judge my moods before I write.” (*No. 2 1979-1980*).

¹⁸⁰ “Gentrification - the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use - is without doubt one of the more popular topics of urban inquiry. Gentrification has attracted widespread attention since its birth in London, England, and in a number of east coast U.S. cities in the 1950s and 1960s.” Lees et al. xv.

and early urbanization movement. A certain violence and racist repulsion of the British original inhabitants – should a thing like that exist – is also present.¹⁸¹ Out of the blue sky over London comes the first sexual allusion of the poem: namely the “promiscuous mix” (I) of Polish, Italian, Irish, Jamaican and Yugoslavian inhabitants who live and mingle in the area, representing a certain diversity which has yet to be acknowledged by those with power in society. Again, like the way films tell their story, Gunn, who no doubt is the literary I of this poem, zooms in to Talbot Road, where he lived, describing his 1964 room as excellent, with a balcony as a connection to the outside world. This space provides him with “complete access” to fresh air and, interestingly, to friendship. This is where the subtle protagonist of this poem is introduced: Tony White¹⁸², who by the time of the early setting of the poem was living from hand to mouth doing translations from French to English, instead of pursuing his acting career. The end of the first chapter reads

I could see, blocks away,
The window where Tony, my old friend,
Toiled at translation. I too tried
To render obscure passages into clear English,
As I try now. (Gunn, *TR*)

And it is a nice example of how Gunn communicates with his poetry: as a form of translation, transforming emotions through thought into words, and those words into a piece of art that is more than the sum of its individual parts.¹⁸³ A special focus here is the transformation of Gunn as an Anglo-American author: he writes about England, but uses American Spelling (colored), within the English scenery and the very British feeling of some of the expressions which appear throughout the poem.

The following second chapter is completely dedicated to White, now described in a whole range as “glamorous and difficult” (2) as well as a “helper and ally.” Their friendship had grown from the time they spent together at Cambridge, and went a long way, including long distances in between, while they developed as individuals, one in England, one in the United States of America. Struggling with individual choices, Gunn’s concept of pose comes in again, appearing to be his excuse for disguise in his life. Yet he

¹⁸¹ The timelessness of this first section is reflected in the fact that the imagery of this 1981 poem also has some relevance for the reader who draws parallels to the international discussions around the topic of the Brexit.

¹⁸² Ramazani describes “Talbot Road” as a love poem, which it certainly is, considering it was a piece that was written to overcome the death of a dear friend.

¹⁸³ Gunn’s *The Occasions of Poetry* give a good account of how he does that in the chapter “How to Write a Poem”

finds it sort of ridiculous when he compares the posing to chauvinist “studs in a whorehouse”, who need to show off how great they are by boasting of their manly behaviors, posing in public. Interestingly, he suggests that their posing is part of their private lives, rather than connecting it to acting, which was White’s profession after graduating from Cambridge. The nature of the content takes a swift change in direction and dedicates itself to White’s appearance for a whole paragraph. Gunn, as the narrator, compliments White’s looks, but in a rather pitiful way. By alluding to F. Scott Fitzgerald¹⁸⁴ with the line “the rich are different” and projecting the same information on beauty as the subjective judgement on outward appearance, the message is that people who have grown up under certain circumstances just cannot comprehend how others behave and why, because their experiences differ. The same is equally true for money, beauty and sexuality.¹⁸⁵ The next part of the poem is about posing as well as the nature of White’s true desire, which thus far seems to have been unclear. White had several simultaneous romances and affairs, with diverse partners¹⁸⁶ – none of whom, however, were able to recognize his true self, and they would never pose questions. This rather had to do with the fact that people did not ask him about his personal feelings, meaning he never had to lie about them to keep situations calm. On the one hand, he could feel lucky to have so many admirers, but on the other hand, by comparing the good looks in a fiery metaphor, there is also something destructive and painful in this fact. Again, there are several levels on which Gunn is operating: the surface appears idyllic, but the inside comes with a hellish burn. “The mighty giving of self” always contributes to fulfilling other’s needs, not one’s own. Something is missing in White’s life, but again the question about what it could be remains unanswered. Gunn does not even capitalize the “what? what?” which puts the answer even further at distance. Even the intellectual approach, an allusion to E.M. Forster and his *A Passage to India*, does not bring him revelation. The final paragraphs of Chapter Two reveal at least one of the things White was looking for at a time when poses were no longer needed, when the friendship between the two aging men had turned into something special, bearing a unique intimacy between a heterosexual man and his homosexual friend. White seems to long for indications of faults, in order to relieve him from the pressure to maintain the perfectionism others perceived in him. The

¹⁸⁴ See the short story “The Rich Boy” in *All the Sad Young Men* by Fitzgerald.

¹⁸⁵ Stein and Plummer discuss the topic of gay thinking in their essay “I Can’t Even Think Straight”

¹⁸⁶ He even fathered a child with his friend’s Karl Miller’s wife. The son of this affair, Sam Miller, describes this in his book *Fathers*

anecdote told by Gunn breaks this boundary by saying “I was too angry to piss”, which, under usual circumstances can only be understood as a critical remark about something which had gone wrong. Yet, White “exclaims with delight” and a lot of relief that this anger meant so much to him, as it was the first time Gunn had ever shown an emotion other than affection to him. This is what friendship is actually about: sticking together in good and bad times. But if there are only good parts, you will never know how meaningful a friendship really is.

Chapter Three of “Talbot Road” is a rather harsh interruption of the very intimate encounter between the two friends, which had been described in the second chapter. This one is not about the kind of intimacy and trust in long-term friendships. As in “On the Move”, the focus here is on instinct. This instinct as a part of human nature is not subtle but rather flaunted in the reader’s face, shamelessly. Gunn as an individual had by this point certainly acquired lots of self-esteem and played with the newly gained freedom from shame. The break in the narrative is underlined by mentioning the long time that had passed since Gunn left London and the United Kingdom. He gets his chronology straight within the poem, when he returns after twelve years for his sabbatical on Talbot Road in 1964-65. This time, the speaker meets his past self, or someone with whom he can identify in one way or another, almost as if Gunn were looking back on how he remembers himself. In the situation described, the stranger communicates with the narrator in a very sexual way. Having something in common, as the poet assumes, they have a ground to connect on. The thing they have in common in this case primarily being sexual desire, the result seems inevitable: the two men have sex, which is only slightly masked by describing it as “the conversation of bodies.” (3) The relief that it gives both men is emphasized by the laughter of relief, which suggests that not only sexual relief is described here, as this would be too vapid for Gunn. By having a sexual encounter with a person who reminds him of his younger self, Gunn also reconciles his own mature self with his past self; a process that could also be described as learning to accept oneself for one’s own true identity.¹⁸⁷ The loathing of one’s own self is still an issue queer people often deal with today: the fear of not being accepted in society, being wrong about oneself

¹⁸⁷ See *The Occasions of Poetry* on Robert Duncan where Gunn writes “Certainly, homosexuality is as central to Duncan's poetry, to its origins and its realization, as it is to Marlowe's or Whitman's, whose work can hardly be discussed comprehensively without taking account of it. Yet, as I have implied, he is no more than they merely a Gay Poet, sexuality being only an important part of his whole subject-matter” (128).

and trying to change or adapt but being doomed to fail.¹⁸⁸ This inner conflict still leads to the highest rate of attempted suicides among teenagers. The age indicated for the boy in the poem is nineteen years, which corresponds to Gunn's age when he went into national service. Having been thirty-five in early 1965, the age gap seems quite a long time of forgiving yourself for being who you are and for your desires. Although Gunn later stated that he always was fine with his sexuality and accepted it as normal for himself, some things always struck him. In the act with this specific boy, he even speaks of having committed an illegal act¹⁸⁹, as at the time it happened, the age of consent in the United Kingdom had been 21 for homosexuals (as it was until 1994), and thus different from the age of consent for heterosexuals. The situation can be read as an act of abuse, or statutory rape, but it is instead meant as a confession, of finally accepting that consenting sexual fun is acceptable with somebody who is considered old enough to die for his country in war, and there should be no differences in rules between heterosexual and homosexual people. Forgiving himself for having had a youth is a typical statement for Gunn, considering its multiple meaning: He forgave himself for having had sex with a man in a public space,¹⁹⁰ whom the law considered to be too young for him. The passage can also be read as Gunn finally forgiving himself for not having acted out on his own needs when he was at his partners age. Within the first paragraph of Chapter Three, it becomes obvious that it is not sympathy or the personal contact that plays the defining role of having sex in this specific arrangement, it is the mere intention, based on interpretation and the communication of bodies, that is the main point, which in itself can be a passage of joy.

The second paragraph of the third chapter deals with cruising freely now, in a rather special comparison. The cruising area Gunn is writing about is the same area where he played as a child. In the first two lines, Gunn still tries to apologize for his intentions, even though nothing has yet happened. The paragraph describes the rediscovery of a well-known place he thought he knew everything about when he first discovered it as a child. Now, in a different light, a whole new world opens in front of him; at night, the world of his childhood memories is taken into a new perspective. The earlier imagery Gunn used in *Fighting Terms* and *The Sense of Movement* now reappears, the violent imagery of

¹⁸⁸ APA status of homosexuality

¹⁸⁹ Although the United Kingdom decriminalized homosexuality in 1967 (see Agar) there was still a long way ahead of the community

¹⁹⁰ See Gove's article "Cruising Culture"

soldiers and forceful men evokes an opposite feeling when compared to child's play.¹⁹¹ Yet, there is similarity, as the term play is still used. Only the neighbors' children as companions are replaced by "troops of men" who are willing to take what they need at the "Orgy Tree", a term that does not fit children's play at all. Instead, it highlights how everyday terms, everyday descriptions of the nighttime scenery can be combined, and adapted to add another level of meaning, with specific relevance to gay issues. A weird atmosphere is created by the different settings depicted in the short passage. Only the birch trees are mute watchers of what branch and bush cannot fully cover from their view, a very vivid description of what is going on. Whilst cruising, grown up men also play hide and seek, to find or be found, giving away only what they want to give away, in relative anonymity, without regrets. The familiar smell of young leaf could either refer to springtime and the woods that are the setting of the scene, or alternatively to hashish, often smoked to increase pleasure during sex. The description of the surroundings as "salty, explosive" depicts the sweaty bodies in their impatient action, forgetting the world around them, as well as the potential side effects of sexual intercourse. Comparing Hampstead Heath to a "Forest of Arden, in a summer night's dream" is a direct allusion to Shakespeare, but contrasts the events of *As You Like it*, as love is certainly not primarily what the men in the woods are looking for. The allusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes the point more clearly, as the fairies who play with the intruders may well represent the image of pure instinct that seeks sexual satisfaction. In this consenting community, there is no need for guilt or regret. Everyone is there for a reason, and everything can be forgiven in his adventure, or better yet, nothing needs to be forgiven in the first place. There are no longer any moral questions posed, as long as it is accepted that morals are shaped by society and you are living an alternative lifestyle¹⁹², or rather another life. Just as the meanings associated with locations can change, people's opinions can also change, which reflects an existentialist approach again.

Chapter Four begins with a major enjambement, leaving the impression that Chapter Three should actually not be separated from it. That said, starting the chapter with the word "but" (4) opposes the preceding paragraph, implying that 'in spite of all the good feelings in the Forest of Arden', coming back is the only choice the speaker has.

¹⁹¹ "*The Passages of Joy* has one theme, cropping up everywhere: literally child's play, to which adults adapt, in many odd, off-beat ways." Dyson ("Watching You Watching Me..." 85).

¹⁹² In "Sex in Public" sex outside heterosexual norm is discussed in more detail by Berlant and Warner.

After a seemingly long and eventful night of pleasures that were not exclusively of a sexual nature, the speaker returns to Talbot Road, his home for the time being. Describing the route via Wimbledon, the pubs and the railway arches, Gunn also creates a sense of distance; between the newly discovered parts of Hampstead Heath and Talbot Road, there is a huge gap, not only locally, but also emotionally. It is a sort of homecoming after discovering the world outside, and yet, all these experiences make up life as a whole, however contradictory they might seem. This contradiction is also mirrored by putting bricks and cement faces, coal holes and flat pillars in pairs, as these represent natural building materials and industrial materials, as well as dirtiness and luxury.

Leaving the adventures and the old life behind like melting snow, which is the image used here, it is time for the next part of life: the well-known, the lasting friendships that lived through time and distance. When the snow that covered Gunn's balcony, his window to the world, is gone, he uses this space outside to spend time with his friend Tony White. This section represents the emotionally supportive, mutual friendship between two men, who enjoy reminiscing about their independent younger lives. Gunn's confessions about his private life are not met by White with disgust or judgement, on the contrary, White asks himself whether he would be happier if he was gay himself. The interesting thing about this is that, in Gunn's eyes, White had always been idealized as a person, and he would never have considered the need for change in any of his friend's character traits. Gunn wonders how his friend could even want to be anyone but himself. This is a reversed coming out; while queer people are usually measured by the heteronormative, and sometimes wish to be straight for the sake of an easier life or a little more acceptance, White wonders, whether his being straight is the cause of his problems. As the saying goes, the grass is always greener on the other side. The most important discovery here, though, is that it is only by being oneself that true happiness can ever be found. Trying to adapt to society will only result in failure, as society will always find reasons why one is not good enough. The casual departure from this meeting further emphasizes the nature of this friendship: within this relationship, everything is harmonious, there is no judgement, there is no jealousy. Telling each other about their most private thoughts and feelings is just as important as enjoying each other's silence. Here, the emphasis is clearly on the unconditional nature of their friendship and the quality time spent together. This is the core of this love poem from a homosexual poet to his heterosexual friend, whom he admires as he is, in his honesty, and his beauty. It depicts a relationship which has developed to a degree of intimacy that probably would

never have been reached if both had been straight or both had been gay.¹⁹³ It is this deep connection in the poem that makes it even more emotional, considering it had been written after this close friend had died.

The following break in the poem marks a different goodbye. White had organized a farewell party on a boat. The poem does not say who else is aboard and thus it focuses on his good friend again. The departure concerns the relationship between White and Gunn.¹⁹⁴ The interesting twist of this party is the setting on a different kind of road, a different network, but still one of Gunn's passages of joy – and it changes the angle. Although both friends have seen London and know the city well from walking or taking the bus, the change of view opens a whole new set of possibilities. As an analogy to Hampstead Heath by day and night, London as observed from the banks of the Thames is different from the same city seen and observed from the water. Almost like in Venice, looking behind the façades, making discoveries, and confirming what you have always suspected about your surroundings or refuting the acquired knowledge, reveals to you a life that had been hidden in plain sight. This multi-layered approach describes Gunn's thinking very well and it is what Gunn's and White's friendship is all about; knowing each other inside and out, not asking questions because no one is hiding anything behind the façade of his pose. The fact that seemingly negative qualities can actually be very different when looked at from another perspective is emphasized when smoke-black walls appear coral in the light of the setting sun. The sun has been used as an image earlier by Gunn, representing a source of life and energy which humans are not capable of creating by themselves. The boat is the door to awareness and confirmation of the long presumed, the open secret.

The fifth chapter of "Talbot Road" starts with another jump in time; Gunn, as the narrator, now reports from the present. The main part of the poem is about memories from fifteen years ago. In the last part, it is early 1980. In the second part he describes a massive decay in his life. Tony was dead by now, announced in a seemingly emotionless way, just like the tearing down of the block where Gunn lived on Talbot Road for a year. A bitter

¹⁹³ Lord Byron once said: "Lovers may, and, indeed, generally are enemies, but they never can be friends; because there must always be a spice of jealousy and a something of self in all their speculations."

¹⁹⁴ In the respective diary, he gives a more detailed account: "June 12, Sat: a busy day - lunch with TW - him & me with a trunk to Barnes. Gorgeous evening, barge from Little Venice to Greenford, whr a pub, then back, having br[ough]t food and drinks on barge. 13 there: Ander& Margaret, TW, Shielah B, TT, Marcia, Mick, Barry, ... , Sean & Adrienne. Barry a slobby bore, but the rest v good." (*Diary 1962-1966*).

remark follows about the mind which tries to reach a level of perfection, a permanent state it cannot acquire, as all that is human must end sooner or later.¹⁹⁵ Gunn creates the impression that memories are fading away, long absent, soon forgotten. He uses the metaphor of tearing down buildings to describe how suddenly, places one knew could vanish. In turn, loved ones too can vanish, and for what purpose? The street has opened up, which was surely the intention of city-planners following an airy, expansive fashion in architecture at the time, but Gunn does not make out a “character at all”. (5) The process that is described here is a social-geographical process and refers to the first chapter of the poem, where Gunn describes the quarters of London, and the decay that led to the social structure, as “rich jostling flow” (I). In geography, the whole process behind this observation is known as gentrification; a process which was first observed in London and New York, and in Talbot Road, cleverly described by Gunn.¹⁹⁶

Gunn and White, who are the main actors, geographically speaking, in “Talbot Road”, are part of those people who “pioneer” a process of gentrification. Indeed, there are many groups in society which affect this kind of development; students prefer the run-down areas because they are usually more affordable than modern, well-maintained areas of a city. Artists, such as Gunn and White, perceive that special vibe or character of these areas as inspiring. The gradual influx of interest inevitably leads to a capitalist desire to develop and refurbish these areas, accompanied, of course, by profit. In turn, these developments force an area’s original inhabitants to move away, because of the increasing costs of living which accompany the higher quality of life. “Classical gentrification is the type of wave of gentrification that Ruth Glass (1964) based her coinage of the term on. Here, disinvested inner-city neighborhoods are upgraded by pioneer gentrifiers and the indigenous residents are displaced.” (Lees et al. 10)

Knowing this, the meaning of “the mind is an impermanent place” (5) and “the street opened up / into no character at all” can be expanded. The mind is the place where a better world can be imagined and realized, which is what Gunn tries to do when he writes about his dreams of what could have been. The missing character of the street, even though – or maybe just because – it opened up, is a clear statement against what happened to Talbot Road as a result of gentrification. This change offers a deep contrast to the idyllic imagination and memory of the poet, who prefers the vibrant and diverse

¹⁹⁵ “In that poem [Talbot Road] (the fourth section) we experience a perfect moment of happiness, [...] though the next section, fifteen years later, is in bleaker mood.” Dyson (“Watching You Watching Me...” 97).

¹⁹⁶ On Gentrification see N. Smith *Gentrification of the City*

mix of society to a middle-class dream of sterile living. The “sentimental postcard of a dream / of a moment between race-riots!” is the poet’s tranquil utopia, presumably not only for Talbot Road, but for the rest of his world. This also includes the struggle of homosexuals, as they are also a group of people who fight, but not because they are prone to violence, but rather have no choice but to fight, to gain a certain freedom and acknowledgement.

Thom Gunn would not be Thom Gunn if he did not offer a solution for this downward spiral faced by society, widening the gap between rich and poor. As is typical for him, he sees hope for a life that prevails. In contrast to his ‘Talbot Road at night’ which could have existed, had it not been torn down, he refers to what had been instead of what could have been, by starting with a clear memory of his final week in his room on Talbot Road in 1965. The flashback to fifteen years earlier, when his much dreamed-of future was still possible, supports the reader in obtaining a clearer vision, which renders meaning to a life that seemed so hopeless at times. Observing a teenage boy, whom the narrator Gunn does not get to know personally, assuming that he was staying with his grandmother, the poet gives the reader insight into what life is all about, at least in his mind. Simply pictured in a white shirt, artificially rendered and neatly framed by “a Gothic arch of reduced proportion” (5) the boy is depicted with the color of innocence in an almost religious setting, the arch resembling the architecture of many churches. The boy does the same as Gunn does: he observes. In the writer’s observation and imagination, the young man is taking something from this observation, and although Gunn does not exactly know what it is, he assumes that the boy is learning. Again, combining the residential “human traffic, of all nations, / the just and the unjust”, Gunn arouses curiosity about what is going on in the street from the boy’s point of view. Gunn sees himself in that boy, projecting, seeing him waiting to take part in society. He describes the boy as “Poised, detached in wonder”, patient, until he becomes ready to join the public flow and “climb down into its live current.” In contrast to the boys of “On the Move”, this boy will join the current, he will not merely be afloat, being forced to move with the current or opposing it forcefully. This boy will one day make his own conscious decision to take part in whatever he finds. This is Gunn’s way of depicting a life that is continuous, but he assigns the human being the power to decide to do what is right for himself, without neglecting the inclusive nature of a society that builds the reality that surrounds everyone. The scene also is reminiscent of a circle of life, in a positive way. The boy stands for the new generation, who instead of destroying everything that comes to mind, are cautious

and thoughtful in their observations. As representative of this generation, the boy will make up his own mind before dealing with the world in his own personal way, not blindly following the masses. As opposed to the boys in “On the Move” he is an individual, he has a face, and he will be an independent individual in his approach to life, which is also very much a trait Gunn pursues in his life.¹⁹⁷

During and after writing “Talbot Road”, there was movement in the house, as people moved in and out. Kitay ended his relationship with Bill Schuessler¹⁹⁸ and started a new one with Bob Bair, while Gunn was following his urge to live out his promiscuous sexuality. On August 2nd in 1980, a new era began for Gunn at 1216 Cole Street. Due to a reshuffling of the family's rooms, he got to move into a new work room in the upstairs section of the house. The small space bore the opportunity to design a place that was now specifically dedicated to his writing and creative process. A small desk with just enough space for a typewriter and a few notes was put there, leaning against the wall. It was also the last time Gunn moved his stuff and so he also started a different creative project that would be archived after his death. On the empty wall, he assembled snippets from magazines, postcards, posters, advertisements, as well as pictures of friends, family and celebrities, and attached them with little needles. Partly chaotic, or at least in a vastly cryptic arrangement, those pieces made up a huge collage of Gunn's life, which was a very different kind of art from his writing.¹⁹⁹

The size of this assemblage spanned over almost two of the room's walls from top to the lower third. It gives a peculiar visual insight into the mind of the creator of the piece. Large sections of the wall highlight his fetishes, be they posters of the Lone Star Saloon (a famous leather bar) or the St. Marks Baths, rows of sorted postcards showing leather boots or just the back of heads with shaved hair or Mohawk hairdos. Looking through the material, one can also find more explicitly sexual material, like naked men or erect penises, with personal notes which seemed to have served as presents to Gunn by friends. In contrast to the very sexual and avant-garde decorum, there were also pieces

¹⁹⁷ Another image that the boy provokes is of the homosexual person still forced to deny their true sexuality. Homosexuals usually have to go through the process of ‘coming out’ on several levels, as Gunn has shown, too. ‘Coming out’ or revealing oneself is exactly what the boy is waiting for behind that window.

¹⁹⁸ “Fri 15 Feb: Bill and M separate. It has been 5 years of very great happiness for me, and I've been lucky to have it at all. So Bill leaves in the morning, & I dunno where he spends the nite. ...Cried a lot before I went to sleep.” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986*).

¹⁹⁹ Presentation on Thom Gunn's Collage by James Eason.

that were supposed to remind people to wear condoms to prevent AIDS, pictures of cats, gardens, images of stars in the night sky and flyers to advertise exhibitions such as the example of a Mapplethorpe exhibition with a handwritten note by the photographer himself, inviting his old acquaintance, in between those flyers advertising readings in which Gunn participated as a poet. Non-paper pieces which were literally outstanding included a baby doll arm and a tea bag that looked like it was dipped in blood, which are very unlikely to ever reveal their original meaning to Gunn. One thing that is a lot easier to read, although the full meaning will also never be uncovered as the meaning to Gunn was complex and ever-changing, are two photographs which framed the assemblage on the left and on the right. While close friends like Allan Noseworthy and Bill Schuessler, the poet's brother Ander and his family, and many others, can be found scattered along the two walls, on the far left, just at eye level, is Mike Kitay, a man whose meaning and importance to Gunn was inestimable, accompanying each other through a lifetime of highs and lows. On the far right of the creation, at approximately the same height and easily seen when sitting at the desk, Gunn put a picture of himself as a baby, held by his mother. It suggests that these two people acted as pillars of his life, which here framed everything that was between them, holding his rich experiences together, providing a kind of stability and spiritual freedom that Gunn was grateful for.

Religion did not fulfill this role, as it played little to no part in Gunn's upbringing, at least on his family's side, despite being in touch with church for compulsory events such as school prayers. Other than that, he was rather proud of his atheistic upbringing, opposing the role of religion on several occasions. It was not his ignorance or being unaware of the concept that led to his opposition, rather it was quite the contrary. He had contemplated von Stauffenberg's religion in the context of his actions; he was clear about the religious motivation behind several homophobic political movements, and the bigotry that often came with it. Despite his rejection of organized faith, in August 1981 he wrote something into one of the notebooks he used for collecting ideas for poetry (and sometimes abused as a kind of extended diary), contemplating about where he stood with regards to religion. The full excerpt makes his stance on the matter very clear.

I have to admit that I have little religious inclination, less almost than anybody I know well. I do not say this proudly, as I would have 30 years ago, but with some regret. I watch M do exercises that lose the world to him. I read Ish's books on the Ramakrishna with appreciation and interest. But I am all the more forced to admit that there is in me a certain lack of spiritual hunger.

(The closest to spiritual I can come is in my love of Mike, which is quite extraordinary: as the family love superceeded the sexual love, so something like

a spiritual love has superceeded that. It is intense and enormous, but I think only myself & perhaps he can understand that.)

I live in maya and I love it - love not only the exotic, but continually, actively delight through my senses in a factory town, a humming bird, my own body, bergamot flowers gradually taking on color, sexual play, & orgasm etc. etc. The world is my fetish and I know it, but I love it nevertheless, I too am part of maya. If the Hindus are right, I am destined to be reincarnated time after time after time. What happiness. (Gunn, *No. 4 1981-1983*)

Regrets were usually not on Gunn's to-do list, but in the case of religion it was rather a painful realization that people around him had something to cling to that he had no access to, be it only for lack of exercise. He fully relied on people around him, whether for counselling, company or for sex, and of course he had literature. He was also aware of the fact that this had formed the man he was, but it also triggered a kind of longing for an emotional repertoire only religious people have. It comes across almost as an excuse or a kind of hope, that his feelings for Mike might bear characteristics of religious sorts of feelings, in a way that was only accessible to him and Kitay. The image of Maya underlines the kind of self-made spirituality that was constituted in Gunn's personality, the feeling of unity being the driving force behind most of his actions, whether it was social contacts or creating poetry. His humanistic approach to life cannot become more visible than in the last sentence of the entry: Life is a circumstance that has the potential for happiness, despite odd things that might be happening, and it should be lived in a way that you would want to repeat everything all over again.

Gunn's longing for religious or spiritual feelings of calmness inspired him to search for a way to deal with the subject poetically, but the approach, he noted a week after the first entry, only came to the plan to write a series of poems about the seven deadly sins. This idea was never fully realized due to the lack of material. It was too theoretical for what Gunn's poetry by now looked like. "Sweet Things", a poem that was later printed in his next book, fit the subject of gluttony in Gunn's opinion. Having said this, it becomes evident that the matter of good and bad, holy and sinful, is always also a matter of the angle from which you look at things. Gunn was not judgmental about life choices, except maybe the life choice to be judgmental, which finally meant that Gunn found a way to show a prejudiced reader his own bigotry.

His next book, which was published in 1982, was very different from the relatively dark *Jack Straw's Castle*. While *Jack Straw's Castle* was written in a period when Gunn needed to find the courage to come out of the closet as a gay man, and escape from the prison of his own mind, the next book presents the lightness deriving from the newly

found freedom, as evident in the title *The Passages of Joy*. The title is a reference to Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, which Gunn even quotes in "Transients and Residents", a collection of poems where he writes about his friends as compared to characters from literature and cinema. Friendship and light moments are prevalent in this book, which seems almost like the culmination of everything he had gone through in life. It is those passages he had to go through to finally arrive where he was now. One could say it is almost a nostalgic work, which also comprises fresher memories of happiness. Fittingly, it ends with the poems "Talbot Road" and "Night Taxi", which refer to both older and newer memories of joy.

The Passages of Joy can only be understood in the context of *Jack Straw's Castle*. While in the 1976 book "there are signs that the two kinds of verse have begun to influence one another. In the metrical poems the rhythms are looser, the language more conversational, the structures based more on sequences of perception than on patterns of logical thought." (Wilmer, "Definition and Flow (1978)" 49), the 1982 book depicts a more open image of the world of Thom Gunn. When Gunn had his coming out with *Jack Straw's Castle*, the times were changing: "As the 1960s turned into the 70s, his restraint and dislike of self-expression began to look unfashionable, so that even when, in his 1975 collection *Jack Straw's Castle*, he 'came out' as a homosexual, it attracted little attention." (Wilmer, "Foreword" 2) For Gunn, it was a step into a freer way of writing about his experiences as a gay man. The shameless and fearless approach he had acquired by now clearly comes through, proclaimed joyfully. His newly found pride was liberating: "Fuck! I'm telling everyone I'm gay. There was a wonderful moment. I was walking with my leather friends, and I got a little ahead or a little behind to be among some of the other people in the parade. I saw this guy who looked like a bank clerk; ... and I thought, 'He's one of us too. We are all of us brothers.' After that I was rather open about it." (Forester 9). According to Randall Mann,²⁰⁰ *The Passages of Joy* are mainly about friendship and about hide and seek. And as it is, you have to seek the joy at first. The book opens with poems titled "Elegy" and "Adultery", not so joyful topics. They hint at the complexity of joy. What is joyful? Does it get harder to feel joy, when growing older or, worse, wiser? In "Elegy" (Gunn, *PJ* 11–12) Gunn concludes about his protagonist, who "shoots himself in the head" (11) that an "odd comfort" is what the speaker finds "in playing the same game / where everyone always gets lost" (12). The topic of friends and hide-and-seek are present already in this piece, a reminder that joy is delicate, but can be found. As for

²⁰⁰ see Mann (*Breakfast with Thom Gunn*).

friendship, “Bally Power Play” (15-16) is a good example, as it is about one of Gunn’s friends, who was drawing attention by playing the pinball machine at a bar.²⁰¹ The protagonist is so good at this game and so focused on it that he does not always notice who is observing him, as “he seldom takes his eyes / from the abstract drama of the ball” (15). Again, one of Gunn’s protagonists unifies with a machine, only now it is not a motorcycle. Still, Gunn is trying to be very precise. In the process of writing, he deliberately takes his time and goes to the pinball machine to make sure he does not miss details. He also asks his friend what it means to him to play, and merges the reply in the end of the poem by writing “he once told me he never starts / to look for the night’s partner / until half an hour before closing time. / The rest is foreplay.” (16) By combining play and foreplay, this becomes an erotic story, supported by phrases like “the hard edge which he presses ... / just where the pelvis begins” (15). Gunn concentrates on the sexual part, and finds a setting to express it that has not yet been used much in literature. In “New York” (17-18) a druggy experience which leads to sex is central, with allusions to Allen Noseworthy very much included (“my dear host in the bed and / his Newfoundland on it” (17) mentioning his dog Yoko again, who is also the main subject of the poem “Yoko”). Again, friendship is the basis on which Gunn builds his *Passages of Joy*, and friendship consists of connection.

In “The Conversation” (19-20), Thom Gunn elaborates on a form of this connection, about the expression of thought by talking to others. He says, “your talk defines / bit by bit what / it is indeed about”. (19) Conversation is a form of “Expression”, (21) which is the title of the next piece in the much lighter and life-celebrating book. In this poem he talks about the poetry of others, namely his creative writing students. It is part of his life, as is his interpretation, and his judgment after the first part is that “It is very poetic poetry”, before he goes in the second part of the piece to the Art Museum to find inspiration for his own writing. He goes not knowing what he is looking for, but he finds it in “an early Italian altarpiece”, which Gunn describes. The depiction of Jesus and his mother²⁰² is lifeless in his eyes. He says, “the sight quenches, like water / after too much birthday cake”; the eyes of mother and child are matching, but “void of expression”. “Selves” (22-23) is dearer to his heart and more real than an old painting. It is about, and dedicated to, Bill Schuessler, who has drifted away into problems. After his breakup with

²⁰¹ In his endnotes to the poem in *Collected Poems*, Gunn points out, that Bally Power Play was the name of a specific model of a pinball machine.

²⁰² Allusion to his poem in *The Sense of Movement*

Kitay and his drug experiences, he still lives on Cole Street, but Gunn intervenes regularly, being worried about his flat mate and friend by saying “I do miss / what you formerly were” (22). He describes the result of an unpleasant transformation. The poet calls the main figure ‘son’, being the fatherly figure of the Cole Street household himself. He accepts the personality of his friend and his own fatherly role, by saying “sons grow up”, yet he cannot let go, as “perpetual children are tedious.” Gunn encourages Schuessler to get back into life, going back to the gym, to get out of this fragile state of mind. This shows one thing in particular: how much Gunn values friendship and how much he is willing to give, acknowledging the restraints of life and his own influence.

Gunn follows this with seemingly profane experiences again: “Sweet Things” deals with him doing groceries, “Small Plane in Kansas” (29) conveys the adventure of being closer to nature, as you usually are when flying, like “in the flying dream”, which is as uncontrollable as the subject of “The Exercise”. He then places “Hide and Seek” (32-33) as one of the gravitational centers of the book. His departure point is children playing in the summer. Tying ropes on lampposts, going “higher and higher” (32), the play is free and full of fantasy, until the parents get their children back into the houses. “The bees / have returned to their Queen” (33) shows the children are not yet truly free, despite their play, while the moon is rising “and hugging the earth” and thus makes the meaning of human restraints smaller in the great scheme of things. “The Menace” (Gunn, *PJ* 36–41) concludes the first part of *The Passages of Joy* as a longer poem, again hinting at the dualism of life, starting by pointing out an opposition. Early on, Gunn juxtaposes terms:

guard	father
executioner	angel of death
delivering doctor	judge
cop	castrator (36)

Are they different or merely the same? They definitely span a realm in front of the reader. Child’s play comes in again: “come out, come out, wherever you are” he quotes, being aware of the double meaning in the gay world. The world conveys more than the obvious meaning anyway, in Gunn’s view. It is possible to have “Romantics in leather bars” (37). Gunn wants to “play / with light and dark”, live life to the fullest. And he is in a good place for that; “From imagination’s forcing-house / my man produces / surprise after surprise” (39) which is what Gunn enjoys. All senses are triggered and again he goes around the sexual corner: “The finest palate feels / moments before tasting it / the charge

of semen”, anticipating the taste that follows. The dialectic nature of life makes it possible to play and to interpret what is in front of the eyes. “His terror became / our play” (41) the speaker says, opposing the personified menace. But still life crawls back and everyday obligations make their way into the joy; “Bye babe gotta get to the job” interrupts the play. One has to enjoy moments while they last.

The second part of the book then starts with “Song of a Camera” and “Waitress”, before Gunn turns to a poetry classic with “Keats at Highgate” as a reference to his influence, and literary neighbor from a different era at Hampstead. Gunn’s youth was one passage of joy, as well as “June”, or “Another All-Night Party”, (51-52) which Gunn dubs “another night of passages” (51) right in the second line of the poem. The companions at this party were friends and, of course, drugs. The night had its effect on the speaker, who is Gunn. As “the drugs wear off”, he walks on fifth street, and on “Pavements as empty as my head, Stone city under pale blue sky” Gunn and his company enjoy the early day and begin “to feel part of it”, (52) which again, is his main goal when roaming New York or, as the next poem suggest, “San Francisco Streets”. The vast majority of the *Passages* are sexual. “The Miracle” (55) is a cheeky poem about sex in a McDonald’s restroom at an airport. Gunn is brought there, and his driver suggests sex in public. Not in the restaurant, but the restroom seems safe enough to not annoy people too much. Gunn who was of course in his full leather uniform, as usual, fulfilled his role, while his counterpart makes him cum. Gunn calls his ejaculation a miracle, before the sex partner has his orgasm, too, leaving his sperm on Gunn’s boot. Gunn tells the story to another friend, saying “I can still see him shoot / Look at the snail-track on the toe of my boot” and upon wondering how long that had been there, Gunn explains, that he is so fond of this story, that he would renew the marking, as a trophy. The renewal of traces of ejaculate on his boots for Gunn is a miracle in the religious sense, alluding to practices where the church produces its own miracles. “Just like they renew a saint’s blood out of sight. / But we’re not Catholic, see, so it’s all right.”

The third and last part of the book opens with another account of Elvis Presley, who in “Painkillers” (59-60) has “grown pudgy, almost matronly, / Fatty in gold lame” (59), now lacking his early energy and having become a parody of himself. “Dying at 42” was tragic, but the question remains to Gunn: “What was the pain”? His answer is the artist’s life story

The story of pain, of separation,
was the divine comedy
he had translated

from black into white.

Gunn realizes here that the boundaries between skin colors have been breached by Elvis and no longer exist as before. The pain still is the same, Elvis suffered and took action through medication. But the alternative is also not appealing to Gunn, because he feels that “the ultimate pain // of feeling no pain” (60) was actually what was eating the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll from the inside. After this, Gunn follows with some poems of observation again, before he comes to the collection that gets to the heart of the value of friendship to him.

In his notebooks, he was planning this out, trying to render his friends into literary figures both real and non-existent. “Transients and Residents” (72) is indeed, as the subtitle suggests, “a sequence interrupted.” It is about Gunn’s friends whom he works into the following poems titled “Falstaff”, “Crystal”, “Crosswords” and “Interruption”, before going on to his highlight of the passages of joy, “Talbot Road”. But as the children must return home after playing outside, Gunn must return home, too, after his play outside. For that, he takes a “Night Taxi”, which describes a real ride home, which the poet found so inspiring, he made a poem out of it, an ode to the good-looking taxi driver and the city of San Francisco.

Chapter Six: On a Dying Hill

In the first months of the 1980s, Thom Gunn seemed to be more morose and in a worse psychological shape than before. His phases of depression and grumpiness got longer and somehow his spirit of joy seemed to have left him just after finalizing *The Passages of Joy*. Contemplating the lack of religion in his life, as well as the lack of feelings of unity and connection²⁰³ with the world around him, led to another drought in writing which left him in a bad mood generally. On February 12th in 1982, he even notes “if every day was like today, I'd have ulcers. Every person had a problem to bring me. I was only just resilient enough” (*Diary 1974-1986* 85) and thus he exposes one of those rare moments when he left his intellect and gave into his negative emotions. Knowing that the world view of a person is influenced by what he perceives, and given his ability for reflection, he did not see an easy way out of this. A week later, the world looked different, though, when he realized how much his own condition had to do with this, writing “F Feb 19: For the first time in my life, I find myself with ‘nerves all short’. I think it is jetlag or sumpna but everybody at school is making demands on me of different sorts. & at home I feel mighty uneasy. But classes went well. One boy, ... wrote a marvelous essay, I read out.” (*Diary 1974-1986* 86) This realization about his mood and thus his situation was the basis for some severe decisions Gunn felt he needed to make, before time took its course. As life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans, it was Thom Gunn’s intention to keep as much under control as he needed for his own stability.

The effects of Gunn’s sudden old man’s grumpiness, as one might call it, become very clear during his stay as visiting lecturer at Amhurst College in Cincinnati, Ohio, in September 1981. Only one day after his arrival he met his colleagues, and his description does not sound friendly “Almost all the men have beards. Still lacking in energy.” (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 82) One can read this as an outburst of a judgmental attitude about conformity, which is new for Gunn, at least in this clarity and extent. His curious energy as a teacher, which he held onto dearly, almost seemed to have fully diminished in Cincinnati, when on October 1st he writes “1 down, 9 to go” (83) as if he already had to motivate himself after only one day of teaching by implementing a countdown. In fact,

²⁰³ “Wednesday July 1 (1981) Drained of that unifying energy. Have to wait to fill up with it again. Have I ever NOT had trouble after finishing a book.” Gunn (*No. 4 1981-1983*).

he did not seem to enjoy many things in Ohio, except for the Cincinnati Art Gallery, which he frequently visited, at the end of his stay even bidding farewell to his “favorite lioness” (84) at the museum, an antique Corinthian plate exhibited there.²⁰⁴ Other joyful moments included visits from Allan Noseworthy, who spent some time in his friend’s company during a short break around Halloween. Everything else that used to give Gunn relief and joy in San Francisco or New York failed him in Ohio. He reports of his beloved walks around the city, that “I go down town, but it doesn't seem to exist.” (82). Interaction with his students seemed blunt to him, even apart from teaching²⁰⁵, and after having to spend Thanksgiving alone and away from his family, he wanted to lighten up at a gay bar a bit, but resumed “feeling the most unattractive person” (84) after returning to his place. This constant grumpiness was new to Gunn’s character, as being judgmental and opinionated had before always been reasons for him to dislike a person. Now that he probably disliked himself for acting like this, if he noticed at all, it surely made him feel even worse. Luckily, one day after his last class at Amhurst, he would leave for his San Francisco home²⁰⁶ again, but not without making a last remark about the head of Amhurst called Amer, who according to Gunn “is terribly vulnerable and obsessed with being head of Dept.” (84). Gunn just did not applaud people who take pride in titles, and by now also freely shares his opinions of such people in his diary.

While clinging to titles was much to Gunn’s dislike, his admiration for his former mentor and the person who made it possible for him to come to the United States was unbroken. In the wake of his autobiographical phase at the end of the 1970s, Gunn decided to write about his friend and teacher Yvor Winters. His essay “On a Drying Hill”²⁰⁷ was structured autobiographically; Gunn was telling the story of Winters as he had experienced his mentor’s presence, covering his own first years in the new country as well as how he had learned from Winters. His fascination for the Stanford professor’s intellectual achievement and his clarity shows just as much in the essay as Gunn’s understanding that even a man of Winters’ intellectual capacity misinterprets the world

²⁰⁴ There is even a postcard depicting this piece on the assemblage of his wall.

²⁰⁵ “F 16 Oct: I give an interview to a student, for student paper. She is dumb, I suspect interview will be a dud.” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986* 82) as one of the rare superficial and unbalanced notes in his diaries

²⁰⁶ When Gunn finally settled, San Francisco was his real home. Donald Hall put it this way at the Robert Kirsch Award: “If he belongs to a nation it is San Francisco; or perhaps homosexuality is his country--but I do not find him pledging allegiance to anything except his own alert, unforgiving, sceptical independence.” Hall (“1988 Robert Kirsch Award”).

²⁰⁷ Gunn (*SL* 197–212).

at times. Gunn also reflects on how he was influenced by the poetry that Winters suggested he read, and how that helped Gunn to expand his own belief systems. Winters challenged Gunn by dismantling the genius of Yeats, who Gunn held in high regard in his early days. After complimenting Gunn's "Santa Maria de Popolo" as a close-to-great poem,²⁰⁸ Winters stayed true to his values when he commented on Gunn's poetry after 1958, judging that some of the poems Gunn had sent his friend for reading lacked energy, and sounded journalistic to Winters. His advice was probably for Gunn to change to prose, which he tried, though other than criticism and some essays failed at, sticking to poetry instead. Gunn's relationship to Winters and his wife was friendly as well as professional and intellectual, one of gratitude, admiration and sentimentality. He appreciated Winters' judgement despite sometimes disliking it. It was a relationship that was dear to Gunn, and it stuck with him, influencing his style. From the poem "To Yvor Winters" in the 1950s, via the essay "On a Drying Hill", to one of Gunn's last ever written pieces of prose, the introduction to a collection of Yvor Winters' poems, his admiration for the teacher was also a source for his inspiration. Gunn always acknowledged Winters' influence on himself as well as his achievements in poetry.

In January 1980, Wendy Lesser²⁰⁹ brought Gunn the first issue of the *Threepenny Review*. The literature magazine was founded by the PhD candidate (and still exists today) and Louise Glück sums up the philosophy behind the print as follows: "The *Threepenny Review* is as lively and original a literary magazine as exists in this country. Mercifully compact, uncompromisingly elegant, animated by the curiosity of its editor, it mixes the legendary and eminent with the unknown, which the eminent were when Wendy Lesser first published them." (Louise Glück) It is not surprising that Thom Gunn had a space in there. He came to like Lesser quite a bit and contributed to the magazine not only as a poet but also as a consulting editor for the first couple of months. He officially resigned from this position in early 1982, but was always up for helping Wendy Lesser when she had issues to solve. The two literature nerds regularly met and discussed their favorite works, exchanged ideas, with Lesser publishing Gunn when he felt the need to get poetry out or when nobody else would.

²⁰⁸ "It [In Santa Maria del Popolo] is a distinguished poem and it misses being a great poem by very little. Like many of Gunn's poems, it exists on the narrow line between great writing and skilful journalism." Winters 23.

²⁰⁹ Lesser also promoted Gunn by writing about him, see Lesser ("Thom Gunn's Sense of Movement").

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Gunn and Clive Wilmer worked together on a project, editing a collection of Gunn's criticism and essays. His prose was collected, carefully selected, and put together under the witty title *The Occasions of Poetry*. The book contained eleven essays on William Carlos Williams, Gary Snyder,²¹⁰ Fulke Greville, Ben Jonson, Robert Duncan and others, as well as in Part II, an autobiographical collection of about 30 pages stitched together from the text in *My Cambridge* and *My Suburban Muse*, which gave the reader an overview about Gunn's life up to the 1970s. The book was roughly finished in the beginning of 1982 and published later that year, almost parallel to *The Passages of Joy*. The marketing of the two books also had autograph sessions with Gunn. He did not enjoy those sessions very much, disliking too much trouble around his person, but was cooperative with the publisher's plans. The value of *The Occasions of Poetry* as a piece of literature was to show Gunn from another side than being an author of poetry, namely also being an intelligent reader of poetry, which was undeniably true. It is a supplementary work, giving insights direct and indirect, of what is important to Gunn in poetry, including his own, especially including the autobiographical part. In the first half of this busy year, Gunn also made the acquaintance of another important influence for his later poetry, August Kleinzahler. He was a fellow poet and critic from New Jersey who came to the Bay Area in 1981, moving into the close neighborhood of Gunn. They quickly became close friends and influenced each other a lot, due to their mutual personal and professional respect. Their proximity and seeing each other in the street regularly enhanced this exchange.

The early 1980s were not only a time of personal moodiness for Gunn, but the beginning of a period with severe impact on the world, especially the gay community. On June 5th of 1981, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention published a single report about five men who died under peculiar circumstances combined with pneumonia in Los Angeles. The otherwise healthy young men seemed to have suffered from a sudden immune deficiency. Less than one month later, the *New York Times* wrote about an outbreak of a rare cancer, when forty-one men on the east coast died without any known preconditions other than the sudden appearance of Kaposi's sarcoma, which is in fact a kind of cancer, causing dark spots on the skin by too much blood pressure in the thin

²¹⁰ On Snyder, Gunn says "He does the real thing. He writes poetry, and like most serious poets he is concerned at finding himself on a barely known planet, in an almost unknown universe, where he must attempt to create and discover meanings." Gunn and Campbell 56

vessels, which burst. The new disease was at first only diagnosed among gay men and was quickly dubbed Gay Cancer, which of course would benefit the argument of conservatives who mobilized against homosexuality, but which caused a stigma on many levels. Although from early on there were also straight men and women among the infected, the primary occurrence was for gay men. This was one of the reasons, why the non-profit organization Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) was quickly founded in 1982 to support those who fell sick. Other reasons why people with the infection were basically denied professional help and resources were the lack of information and the fact that very few people in a White House under President Ronald Reagan supported aid for gay people.

It was also in 1982 when the first definition of the new illness was formulated: “a disease at least moderately predictive of a defect in cell-mediated immunity, occurring in a person with no known case for diminished resistance to that disease.” (“CDC's Early Response to AIDS · The Global Health Chronicles”) The disease, which was until now named GRID, which stood for Gay Related Immune Deficiency, was renamed in a more neutral way Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome – shortened to AIDS. Although the stigma of Gay Cancer or Gay Plague stuck for a while, the accumulation of knowledge about AIDS progressed rapidly, but unfortunately so did the spread of it. Somehow the illness seemed to have appeared overnight and San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York were the epicenters. In May 1983 the cause for transmission was finally identified and by knowing that it was the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, there was also a strategy to protect people from infection. As it was a bloodborne pathogen and a sexually transmissible disease, using condoms was the easiest way to prevent transmission through sexual contact. This was a relief, especially as in the panic of the upcoming pandemic, lots of gay spaces like bath houses were closed, causing revolts among the now outlawed gay community. What people did not know in this early stage was that the time of incubation of HIV could be up to fifteen years before the outbreak of the fatal illness AIDS, meaning that many of the people exposed to unsafe sex already could carry the virus without knowing. When this information slowly sunk in, more and more gay people started to worry. One of those people was, not surprisingly, Thom Gunn, whose lifestyle made him an ideal candidate for the risk group. When in August 1983 he celebrated his 54th birthday “with some mild Speed” (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 96), two days later he worries “W Aug 31: My gas problem continues & I think I am losing weight. I stay awake, worrying that this may be AIDS related. (Having recently heard that Joe the model &

Gemini Mike both have AIDS.)” (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 96) Despite the worries, life went on. In the end of 1983, Gunn made his usual rounds through the bars, ending up at Trax, having a good time, and records the following

see what I take to be a hustler. rather long hair, blond, ... and the kind of face that slays me, playing pool and video machines; I go to De Luxe, return, he comes over and says, "You're hot." I bring him back for GOOD night of coke & leather & love. He is 26, ... travelled a lot, works in a warehouse and likes Moly, the best of my book. To bed at 5.00 (*Diary 1974-1986* 98)

The guy unites all the things that were key elements in Gunn’s life, and liking his work, of course, did also help. This encounter stands in contrast to the poet’s mood of the early 1980s and formed the beginning of a wild romance. The twenty-six-year-old’s name was Charlie Hinkle.

On the wave of this newly found enthusiasm, Gunn also made a decision concerning his approach to get around his writer’s block, which occurred regularly after publishing a book of poetry, getting worse from time to time. He made a deal with himself, after discussing the option with his close friends, especially Robert Duncan, to only publish a new book every eight years, in order to have collected a reserve of poems that would allow him to select from a wide array of poetry to compose a book, instead of trying to squeeze out just enough pieces to round up a publication. The idea of having a backup and a head start for the following book appealed to Gunn, and so this device was acted on very strictly.²¹¹

In the fraught early phase of the AIDS epidemic, on May 5th in 1984,²¹² Gunn got a phone call from his friend Allan Noseworthy, and it was devastating. Noseworthy’s news to Gunn was that he had Kaposi’s sarcoma and was diagnosed with AIDS. Already two days later, the two friends coordinated the sick man’s arrival in San Francisco, with Gunn offering to take care of his friend, which Noseworthy gratefully accepted. On May 8th, he arrived, composed but having lost 20lbs since Gunn last saw him. Noseworthy’s bed was set up in Gunn’s room, while Gunn would put a mattress in his workroom to sleep there. Noseworthy did not even stay a month, as on June 4th he was delivered to the emergency room at the hospital. The Family at Cole Street had just celebrated his birthday with him in advance, already knowing his health could decline quickly. A few days

²¹¹ “Feb 9: ... RD comes by, briefly. RD confirms my plan not to have a new book till at least 1992.” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986* 99).

²¹² In his diaries Gunn puts a side note, which reads “(May 5 - June 21: - last days of Allen)” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986* 101).

earlier, they had brought Noseworthy to the hospital due to a fever, but this time he was not released after a short while. His condition quickly became worse during the first few days of his stay, before he was connected to a breathing machine. Gunn felt very sorry for his friend, who had stabilized on the 5th day, but was not really mentally present due to the morphine they had administered for the pain. The following days are the basis for Gunn's poem "Lament", which is the reason why here, the entry from his diary will be written with only a few omissions.

Wed 13: Brother Pete N & father turned up yesterday, father till thurs, Pete indefinitely. A looked startlingly worse today, cheeks so sunk like a skull. ...

Thurs 14: He has been in much danger. but when M & I see him, he is better than he has been any time in June - writing lots of sentences to us on his pad ("conversation"), & M was wonderful ... & making him smile. His nurse, Miss Amor, asked him, apparently, if his father was his "special friend". - Jim provides (buys) a wonderful cooked dinner of lamb for 8 of us, for Billy's 38th birthday. ...

Fri June 15: A continuous coherent & quite relaxed, he was v touched by his father coming. Pete remains, mother arrives tonight. I go to Haight bars.

Sun June 17: Bill comes in with me to hospital & A is much better, he can breathe without a tube, speaks faintly. ...

M June 18: A sad day. Bob & I go to see A & find he is much worse, in fact dying. His lungs collapsed; he had convulsions twice. He is back on machine, never to come off. Opened his eyes when we come in, & waved from under the blanket. Having difficulties with each breath, his body heaving up each time. His mother & sister there. Peter broke down & left earlier. ...

Tues June 19: M & I to see him. He is quite lucid but must be in horrible pain. Why do they have to keep him alive? ...

Fri June 21: M & I went to see him again yesterday, & we knew he was pretty near the end. He held both our hands and went to sleep. Today, Mrs. N phones me early, just as I was getting up, 8.15, to come over. I came over for morning, he was just about focusing on trivia. Nurse gave him a big shot of morphine, I suspected it was the end, I left at end of morning & Mrs. N phoned me he was dead when I came home. He must have died between 12 & 1. I shall miss him horribly; nobody was like him. I just knew him over ten years. I didn't know I had tears left, had cried a lot. Worked in the yard all afternoon. Eve took some things of A's to family - hotel (they leave tomorrow) - to dinner but I watch MTV.

Fri June 22: I feel as if I have been a rocket going through a tunnel at supersonic speed for the last month & now I am suddenly - too suddenly - come to a dead stop in my back yard ... A kind of jet lag. ... I don't know what I'd do without Mike. M reminded me, last week, how AN3 had called me his 'role model', on his first visit here. (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 101)

As close and dear Noseworthy was as a friend, the first line of "Lament" (Gunn, *MNS* 61-64), which Gunn wrote almost immediately after his friend's death, sound almost distanced and analytic. "Your dying was a difficult enterprise" (61), he starts his almost four-page long elegy which is in rhyme and meter, but has only two full line breaks, one more indented line indicating a larger interruption, and four small indentions,

leaving little time to breathe. As it is very long, I will concentrate on the main parallels between the diary and the poem only, instead of quoting the full piece. The iconic “difficult enterprise” embraces the whole poem, as it finds it reprise in the last line, which reads “this difficult, tedious, painful enterprise” (64), defining the loss more and adding more grief to it. In between, Gunn tells stories of the life of his friend and praises his positive energy and humble character to give some context, while mainly concentrating on the promise given by the first line. Noseworthy’s waiting for death is depicted in a very vivid, yet practical way. He arranged his new circle of life around his hospital bed, with everything he needed in reach after his everyday life had changed. He would “read novels two a day”, (61) which already was a distancing “from the habits of ... health” While he spent the first nights in San Francisco at Gunn’s home on Cole Street, he had bad dreams for “Four nights, and on the fifth we drove you down / To the Emergency Room”. The delivery to the hospital, with few hopes to be released, Gunn describes as a withdrawal from “the sun’s kingdom”. The poem also contains many facts about the kind of treatment that was given in the early days of HIV and AIDS. “A gust of morphine hid you” (62) refers to the heavy pain killers given to the patients. “You breathed through a segmented tube, fat, white, / Jammed down your throat so that you could not speak” leading Noseworthy to communicate by a notepad, on writing, which Gunn notes in his diary and then converts into poetry by saying “You wrote us messages on a pad, amused” because, as documented in the diary, the nurse confused his old father for a “special friend”, or lover. After the first break, the focus is on Noseworthy’s being tired, but also his hunger for life, which made it hard for him to let go, referring to the agony in Gunn’s question from his diary about why he is kept alive from. “You’d lived as if your time was infinite” (62) he writes, partly admiring the way of life and partly feeling sorry for the infinity that never existed, and that due to AIDS was cut much shorter that it would have been without the infection. Gunn recalls the details and records them with painful precision; “Your lungs collapsed, and the machine, unstrained, / Did all your breathing now” is almost a direct copy from his diary entry just as is “And so you slept, and died, your skin gone grey, / Achieving your completeness in a way”. (64) He concludes this striving for completeness with his own experience the day after, feeling “ejected with some violence” which is his poetic form for the kind of jetlag he describes earlier. This is a vivid and personal example for how Gunn converts his experience and observation into poetry, which also makes clear how careful he is to keep up with the rules he learned from

Leavis and Winters, not to be trapped in self-pity or be tempted to write confessional poetry.

In November 1984, it was time for Gunn to go back to New York, although he was reluctant to leave. The thought of New York without Noseworthy made him “feel peculiarly restless & uncertain” (Gunn, *Diary 1983-1989*). In the end, Gunn left from Oakland Airport to Newark on November 11th. What awaited him were professional and private meetings with other poets, an architect who was about to repair the Statue of Liberty, and Andrew, with whom he discussed what was to be done with the stuff Noseworthy left behind. Together they went to his apartment, where his former flat mate was not present. “Allen Grunwald not being in, we take a look without him at Allan N's stuff. A whole filing Cabinet of papers & probably valueless but pretty jewelry. As I suspected, A kept every letter & pc I ever sent him - & I must have written him about 12 letters a year. Put them all in a bag & threw them away.” (Gunn, *Diary 1983-1989*) Determined to leave the past behind, or at least the physical reminders of it, Gunn acted very strictly. What was he supposed to do with all the letters he had written to his friend? He would rather keep the memory of Noseworthy and the knowledge of how much they meant to each other. To deal with those memories, Gunn took a former partner of Allan Noseworthy to dinner at a Japanese restaurant after cleaning up at the apartment, reliving a bit of nostalgia together before he went to bed early, closing this chapter of his life.

Since Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, the president's and the poet's philosophies had never been compatible, for obvious reasons. His re-election in the middle of the 1980s, and in the middle of the AIDS crisis, was another story, though. Kitay said later, that if Gunn ever hated people, it was his stepmother and Nixon, and Reagan's early anti-gay agenda would very likely have made him runner up to those two. Although Gunn showed sympathy for Reagan after he was the victim of a shooting in March 1981, he would still not support his policies, especially the ones that he introduced shortly before his second term. Due to Reagan's anti-gay immigration policies, which he backed with specious arguments about AIDS prevention, on January 13th, 1985, Gunn wrote down a decision, which also had a grave impact on his life: He would not visit the United Kingdom as long as those policies were in place, fearing he would be denied re-entry to the United States.²¹³ The officers working in immigration enforcement were

²¹³ “Fri Jan 11: I am seriously reconsidering this summer - new Reagan anti gay imm policy might just mean I couldn't get back in the country...” Gunn (*Diary 1974-1986* 105).

given the option to reject non-United-States citizens from entering the States based on their homosexuality, and Gunn, who had publicly come out ten years before, did not see a way of denying his personality if he had to. In the end, this phase amounted to a total of thirteen years, during which Gunn did not visit his family in England. Cancelling the plans he originally had for the summer of 1985, he now had extra time to take care of his friends and write poetry.

But people around Gunn did not only die of AIDS. On May 13th, 1985, Josephine Miles passed away after a long friendship with Gunn. She was the person who enabled his first period of teaching at Berkeley, and played a big part holding the doors open for him when he returned in the 1970s. Miles was the first woman to receive tenure at Berkeley in 1947, and subsequently was the first woman to become a university professor in 1972. Gunn, who always was grateful for her help and support, maintained a deep friendship with her, which he honored in her last years by frequently visiting his old friend, and reading to her when she was unable to do so by herself. When he wrote her obituary, Gunn remembered her strength, despite physical inabilities which were traced back to an illness in her childhood. As she completely fit Gunn's role model for not suffering from self-pity, he admired her will, personally as well as poetically. At her memorial service in September, though he still did not like speaking in public much, he was the first to speak, and read four of his poems and a few words in the memory of his friend, mentor, fellow Berkeley teacher and poet.

After finishing "Lament" relatively quickly in 1984, the first half of 1985 did not seem very productive. Gunn only wrote some poetry in July, after about six months of a break, when in August he mentioned having written out four poems as this year's work, adding that it "didn't look too good" (*Diary 1974-1986* 109). Filled with grief about friends and acquaintances dying, weighing his own risk of having contracted HIV, and depressed at the notion that the decision he had taken in the last months had not been fruitful, he started to let go of pressuring himself. And suddenly, in November that year, he felt inspired again, surprised about the fact that this was about Jim Freeman "out of all people" (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 111) Inspiration comes when least expected, and in the following weeks, Gunn resumed writing criticism and notes for poetry in his books.

It was Armistead Maupin who told Gunn about Christopher Isherwood's humorous comments on his mental decline. "The entire East Wing is dark" (Gunn, *Diary 1974-1986* 108) was an expression that impressed Gunn in its density and clarity as well

as the dark humor in it. He goes on by writing, “how wonderful to be able to kid about one's declining powers. I certainly have marvelous models.” (108) It was not until the end of the next year that Gunn found out about his friend's terminal cancer, just three weeks shy of his death in January 1986, which Gunn read about in the papers. In a little chat with Isherwood's partner Don Bachardy, he also learned that his friend had started forgetting things since the early 1980s, and had had the diagnosis since 1981. His journals were read and edited by Bachardy, to be published a few years after his death. Hearing of Isherwood's condition inspired him enough to write a poem dedicated to his old friend. The piece “To Isherwood Dying” was almost finished by Christmas. By the end of the year, he had written seven poems in total, “The Liberty Granted” being the last of them, and the curse of writer's block seemed to have been broken.

Charlie Hinkle was close to perfect for Gunn as a man, in his youthful looks and energy, his intelligence, loyalty and feistiness, his similarity to Gunn in having this “wonderful combination of opposites - there was so much still to come. Poor darling, brave wonderful little fucker.” (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 9) This captured the poet's imagination, seeing lots of potential in the young student of literature. Hinkle was certainly a character, and Gunn could not get enough of his presence. The sexual beginnings of their affair were boisterous, but unluckily for Gunn (and not very surprisingly), Hinkle was a free spirit who was not easy to grasp or hold. Gunn, whose self-doubts about his showing age and loss of attractiveness still tried to satisfy his younger friend. Sometimes he succeeded with his attempts to get hold of Hinkle, but felt devastated when he did not. The young man travelled frequently and spontaneously without feeling the need to report to his new friend, which now left Gunn in an ambiguity he could not easily bear. As he did so often, he was quick to accept this and tried to enjoy the meetings they had as much as possible, noting those meetings down in his diary, especially when they got personal and deepened their mutual relationship. Gunn breathed in as much of this energy as he could. Only two months after they met, Gunn contemplates “Sun Feb 19: brunch w. Charlie (he forgot he made date, but I got him anyway). ... I am crazy about him, but I guess shd settle for friendship. He is 26, his energy takes him in every direction, he has everything to give to the whole world, & my instincts with him are greedy & pervasive ... as in a French Novel.” (*Diary 1974-1986* 99) With a tone of resignation and settling for less than he wished for, Gunn held up the friendship, which in the end inspired him a lot. As if he could transform Hinkle's energy into his own, despite the continuing ups and downs between them, Gunn acted as a counsellor when

Hinkle plans to travel, and when they discuss poetry, and even wrote letters of recommendation for him.

While the virus was rampaging around him, Gunn's voice was progressively getting louder, to increase awareness for AIDS and lift the stigma, giving the pain a face or at least a voice and presence. A friend of the couple paid Gunn and Kitay a visit on March 8th in 1986, in order to record their reactions to AIDS on tape, to use the interview for a BBC program about the disease. Gunn's readings for AIDS related causes increased in number, with "Lament" being one of the most frequently read poems. Gunn's interest in engagement for the community was rising, and the community was gratefully accepting any contribution that was raising attention to the topic and was soothing. At one point, Gunn even contributed a recipe to a cookbook for the cause of AIDS awareness.²¹⁴

Gunn wrote the following about his friend Larry's condition: "Larry Hoyt's lover George (I've never met) who says L has a respiratory complaint, as of this last week is in Franklin Hospital, his kidneys almost gone, dying." (*Diary 1986-2000* 3) The next day, Gunn writes

I went to Franklin Hospital. Poor Larry! He was out on morphine, breathing through one of those same tubes as Allen had; his skin yellowish grey. The only person here (it was about 12:30 in aft) a friend of his (Diane?) stroking his hair. I spoke in his ear to say goodbye & stayed an hr or less: I shall miss him. I didn't see him much these days, but he was so young (about 36), & such fun, & so good, & even so useful to the world - a generous & robust man. - at night George phoned me - Larry died at 1:30 pm, a few minutes after I left. Alas! (*Diary 1986-2000* 3)

He was greatly moved by the loss, and to a mutual friend and poet Ralph Pomeroy, Gunn wrote a mourning card, revealing a lot about his view on AIDS, death and strength in people. It reads:

²¹⁴ *Food for Life ... and Other Dish* was the book in which Gunn contributed among gay celebrities as Ru Paul and Tony Kushner. Gunn's recipe for Tomato Bread Barcelona Style was presented in a Gunnean way, sexualized despite being prepared in a very simple way. Gunn knew how to spice things up.

This is so easy that you can make it even if you think that you're too macho to cook. It is from Catalonia and would be perfect to attract that Catalan Highway patrol man you have been after for so long.

...

Take a slice of French bread (bâtard not baguette), brush it with olive oil and put it in the oven until it is toasted a bit. Then cut open a ripe tomato and rub half of it over the slice. ... serve the tomato bread on the toe of one of your boots. Balance with a line of your favorite aphrodisiac on your other boot toe, and you have Felipe just where you want him.

Sprinkle a bit of salt on the tomato bread if you can manage it. Gunn ("Tomato Bread" 34).

Dec 14/86

Dear Ralph,

As you probably heard by now, the memorial services for Larry were held yesterday. They had his body up front but I didn't „view“ it as I was sure it had been cosmetized out of recognition. From what others told me, I was right. But I could see his poor dead nose sticking up out of the casket behind the speakers in a comical way I think would have tickled him.

George read both your poems and your letter right away. I especially liked your physical description of Larry in the letter - it was both honest and affectionate and gave a real sense of his physical presence. Then a teacher + trick of Larry's (called maybe Stuart?), then Larry's father who was the best of the three. An intelligent, perceptive man - feeling without being sentimental (the other 2 were sentimental, talk about Larry waking for his last credentials, now, with the greater teacher of them all, viz. God!!!). I met the family (cute younger brother), co-workers, friends, tricks, etc. One guy had the courage and (I thought) taste to wear full leather (I told him so too). (I was chicken.) Then a party afterward. I suppose the fact of such ceremonies helps to allay grief, but the grief is unallowable. Thought I'd let you know, anyway...

Happy holidays

to you & Tom

xxx

Thom (Gunn, *Pomeroy, Ralph*)

This text makes it very clear how Gunn cultivated his ability to have the whole range of feelings in a short time, and his capacity to reflect on them. From grief to disgust, from the surge for the raw reality to contemplation, why sentimentality can be helpful at times to humor, and his sexual drive that he even commits to at a wake with an open casket. It is the pure and full observation of Gunn that opens up the world in a place where death seems to be the determining factor. His resilience, made up of the ability to see the nice things in life, describes his character as much as the ability to really mourn the loss of a loved one at the same time.

Towards Christmas of 1986, a time that's prone to sentimentality, Bill Schuessler's partner Jim Lay, who also lived at Cole Street as part of the Family, was growing weak very quickly. Feeling his end was getting nearer, he apologized to his partner Bill by saying "I hope I wasn't mean to you" (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 3) as an act of love. Seeing Lay's weakness on Christmas Eve, upon this expression of love, Gunn had to leave the room, because he did not want to cry in front of his dying friend and housemate. In moments he felt strong enough though, Gunn pulled all his weight to take care of Lay, by moistening his lips with a sponge when Schuessler or the attendant were not there, as Lay was too weak to drink. On the 25th of December, the Family on 1216 Cole Street had only one other guest, which was rare, as dinners were usually big get-togethers and social events. During dinner, an attendant watched over the patient, while

Schuessler was checking on his lover from time to time. At 7.30 pm, Schuessler came to the kitchen again, saying he believed that Lay was not alive anymore. When the rest of the Family joined him upstairs, they could only confirm his assumption. Lay “had died, his eyes crossed as if stares at the end of his nose, fixed, his mouth gaping” (4). Another close friend had passed away in a horrible way, on Christmas. To support Bill in his grief, Gunn took his friend out for dinner at the revolving restaurant at the San Francisco Hyatt Regency, which he found to be “not good, not cheap, but it was good to do something grand, as Bill has proposed” (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 4). Adding to the pain of their loss, Kitay’s niece Amy, who was a rather disliked guest, arrived on the 27th, as Kitay had not managed to decline her wish to visit for New Year’s Eve.

Gunn’s New York friend Norm Rathweg was a success in the gay scene of the Big Apple. When Gunn met him in 1976, he was blown away by his good looks and wondered why Rathweg and his boyfriend Louis liked the poet, who was significantly older than the couple and far less trained.²¹⁵ Rathweg’s dazzling physique was the result of his severe working out, which he did to put on muscles. He not only went to the gym regularly, but being a businessman, he also owned a gym. His Chelsea Gym became another venue where the gay men of New York were cruising in times of closed bath houses. At that time, the sexual energies in a gym were flowing heavily: sweat, muscular men working out, and then relaxing in the steam room were basically gay fantasies and were already the subject of themes that bathhouses had been playing with in the decades before. When Gunn came to New York to clean up Allan Noseworthy’s apartment, he stayed at Rathweg’s place, but not without visiting his Chelsea Gym, “watching all the massive men torturing themselves on machines” (Gunn, *Diary 1983-1989*). Although Gunn appreciated the looks of his friends and liked them a lot, his relationship to them was not as deep as with many others, as he later writes “I did not get close to Norm & Louis, warm & thotful as they were to me: I doubt if anyone could get close. They are surface people (nice ones) but do not exist below that surface. They are rich & powerful & like knowing the famous. I perceived them for a week & this is no way meant to be an ungrateful comment on them.” (*Diary 1974-1986*) While he wondered if he ever could afford to visit New York again, with the rising prices for everything, of course he kept in touch. In 1987, Rathweg and his lover were planning to visit Gunn and the Family in San

²¹⁵ For health reasons and to stay in shape, Thom Gunn occasionally went to work out at gyms or went swimming, especially to strengthen his back, but he was never only doing it to look hunky.

Francisco, but Rathweg was hit by the disease and his HIV infection made it impossible for him to travel in May as planned, which made Gunn feel sorry.

Rathweg was in line with many of Gunn's friends. In March 1987, Rathweg, his friends Allan Day and Lonnie Leard and his good friend and muse Charlie Hinkle were diagnosed with HIV almost simultaneously. It was a lot to take for Gunn, who was usually so resilient. He writes "F May 1: pleased that term will soon be over. 'My nerves are short' Everything is just being too much for me: I think all my friends, 4 close friends, with AIDS is what is doing it to me" (*Diary 1986-2000* 6). Surrounded by sick friends, Gunn had persistent fears about his own health status, considering a flu to possibly be pneumonia. While this turned out to be panic, during the gay parade of that year, he had a breakdown. The AIDS epidemic was now acknowledged within the march, as Gay Pride was always intentionally raising attention about issues facing the minority group. When attendees of the parade walked past Gunn showing their signs of certain death, their Kaposi's sarcoma, he broke into tears, the culmination of all the sadness the epidemic caused in his life. It was one of the few sentimental outbreaks that are documented about the otherwise very reserved poet.

When on August 8th of 1987, Norm Rathweg died of AIDS,²¹⁶ losing young and otherwise healthy people to the illness was no novelty for Gunn. What was unusual though was the closeness of the impact and the density of deaths in the following weeks. The four close friends that were diagnosed in March all died, including Rathweg, Lonnie Leard and Allen Day²¹⁷ who even passed away on the same day, and topped by Charlie Hinkle as the last and probably most important to Gunn of the four. It was a lot to take, and Gunn could not possibly write enough to cope with this intensity right away. But he would deal with the loss in the way that had worked out so well for him so far, writing about his friends, letting out the pain through writing and grieving properly in the months to come. As one of Gunn's closest friends, the story of Charlie Hinkle was documented in the most detail of the four. He was delivered to hospital at the end of March 1987, immediately calling his friend Gunn to inform him about the diagnosis of pneumonia. During the course of his suffering, the young and energetic man had lost weight, and

²¹⁶ "Sat Aug 8: Greg Freeman (Norm's other roommate) phones to say Norm died, of pneumonia, this morning. Never to see that huge, handsome man again or hear his lovely drawl..." Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 8).

²¹⁷ "T Aug 18: during this sad day I heard from Michael Grove that Lonnie died at 5 a.m. Later from Louis that Allan Day died this morning after 20 hrs of coma (pneumocystis). ... Hardly slept Tuesday night." Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 8).

much of his eyesight, and he returned to San Francisco from his journeys. Gunn, being very fond of Charlie, visited very often, although he really suffered from seeing his friend in such a devastated state. In May, Hinkle already looked bad, much worse than Gunn had seen other friends around him, and he wondered how long Hinkle would go on living. When visiting Hinkle, who lived with his friends Allan & Jay who also had AIDS, Gunn regularly rode the J-Line to get there. He would take Hinkle out to have lunch or dinner, looking after the boy. As a caretaker of his dying friend, Gunn could not even think of producing poetry in June, when Charlie, who was losing his eyesight quickly, left for a last visit to New Orleans. It was only possible to resume writing again when the young sick man called to inform Gunn about his return a few weeks later, showing the importance of Hinkle to the poet. Towards Gunn's birthday at the end of August, the detachment of Hinkle's retina had progressed further and made Gunn realize how bad the outlook was for his friend. In addition to already having lost three of his friends to AIDS, Kitay developed a fear of the onset of dementia, which his father suffered from, upon realizing how often he lost his concentration and focus. Gunn, contemplating how his life is going at the moment, writes "M Aug 24: ... I am smoking, will give up for good after 58th birthday. - A depressed & loving note from M. Says he can't concentrate, wonders if this is his father's disease started. Says he hopes he hasn't disappointed me too much & I was thinking just yesterday that knowing him 35 years has been an education in love." (*Diary 1986-2000* 8) He was now so much affected by loved ones suffering, that in addition to taking care of everyone in need around him, he decided to quit smoking after his fifty-eighth birthday, to take charge of his own health matters.²¹⁸ After visiting Hinkle on August 29th, Gunn hit the bars again, but it had no cheering effects on him. When calling to check on his friend on September 8th, Gunn was told he was in too much pain to answer the phone. The next day, Hinkle was dead, and Gunn writes "this afternoon dear difficult beautiful Charlie died, in pain & longing for death, as Allen Rockwell told me on phone. Bill Mc Pherson was in lane from DC at time, phoned me & I put him up in M's room We talk till 1:00" (9), contemplating a few days later

T Sep 15: Charlie's death hit me very hard indeed. Also, I suppose there's the accumulating impact of Norm's death only 4 weeks before, then Lonnie's then AD's. But Charlie was so full of an exquisite promise - it was not merely his looks, merely his intelligence, merely his loyalty & feistiness... Bill McPherson helped me & I think I helped him too, we talked about Ch for hours, for evening. I decided, & he agreed, we shd bring out a booklet of Ch's 10 best poems, which I must say seem incredibly moving to me now. On Sunday, Allan Rockway held a

²¹⁸ Gunn attempted to quit smoking several times, according to his records.

kind of memorial for Charlie, we knew hardly any of the people - none of Charlie's friends that I knew, really just those he and AR had in common. as Bill M said, it was partly for the sake of AR that it was held. He looks dreadfully thin & weak & I don't think he has many weeks left himself. It was OK, but in no sense summed up Ch, since I got the feeling some people there barely knew Ch & had a sentimental view of him. He couldn't be summed up. I was very exhausted afterwards. (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 9)

Kitay, in hindsight, calls Charlie Hinkle his only real rival for Gunn's love. Although the erotic relationship was rather short, he says: "Who knows, what would have happened, if that boy had not died?" (Kitay, "Thom Gunn as a Life Long Partner")

A very active public figure in the Gay Movement in the San Francisco area was Cleve Jones, who focused on making visible what it meant to be gay in the United States. He was working with Harvey Milk in the 1970s, but in the 1980s his focus was on different topics as the decade progressed. AIDS was a very visible part of gay life, a stigma which was used by conservative groups as an argument to prove that homosexuality was an ungodly lifestyle, and trying to blame the community for the illness. Banners saying 'GAY - Got AIDS Yet' were held up to support this narrative at demonstrations, implying the illness was fair and expected punishment for being homosexual. Cleve Jones took a stand against this and juxtaposed something humane against this cruel message of hate. He initiated the *Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*, which was a huge work of art,²¹⁹ which commemorated the friends and family members who died of AIDS in individual patches which were created by the surviving community and stitched together as a quilt. In this way, the quilt served as a collection of names, restoring the individuality of the deceased from the mass of victims. Though it could not give everyone who died a face, it at least had a space for their names. The project started in San Francisco in 1987, where Gunn visited a presentation of the project. About that day he writes "Sun Dec 20: I go to see the Quilt (Names project) at Moscone Centre. Very moved. It was sad but also wonderful - postcards to the dead - wonderful affectionate jokes on the patches. As M ... said: such a terrific hippy way of memorializing. Then I said: And perishable!" (*Diary 1986-2000* 11) A few days later he went to see the quilt again, this time particularly looking for friends: Bill Schuessler had handed in a panel he made for Jim Lay, Allan Day, Norm Rathweg, Charlie Hinkle, and Allan Noseworthy, and many others had by now been remembered in fabric. Gunn was touched by seeing the project, mentioning it several times visiting more often and watching the project grow.

²¹⁹ As of 2019 it weighs 54 tons and is considered the biggest art project of humanity.

The importance of the piece for the visibility of the gay community was becoming clear, when after several attempts during a presentation in Washington, D.C., the quilt was visited by President Clinton and his wife on its last full display in 1996. It was an acknowledgement of those who had died and those who still lived, carrying the virus in them. The project was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Visibility was important for getting help and funding to fight the illness. Gunn was unfortunately able to observe how long the suffering could take with his old friend Chuck Arnett. According to the poet's recordings in his diaries, Arnett was close to death on December 17th of 1987, but passed away after a hard struggle on March 2nd, 1988. There seemed to be no end to the deaths, and the passing of his friends had a profound effect on Thom Gunn. Gunn had claimed that his generation, at least since the end of World War II, was not exposed to unexpected deaths due to peace and medical development, but AIDS was now proving him wrong.²²⁰ Dealing with the sudden change, Gunn wanted to commemorate his friends and the many others. Writing poetry for him was one way. For Charlie Hinkle, he found another way, too. He wanted the public to be able to remember Charlie's free spirit, as he admired it. As Gunn had access to his friend's few works of poetry, he developed the idea of publishing a booklet containing Hinkle's poems, to make his words last. Later, he would also use some of Hinkle's words as epitaphs in *The Man with Night Sweats*. For the poems of Charlie Hinkle, Gunn cooperated with William MacPherson with whom he put together the booklet in a short time and printed it at the expense of \$568 on June 15th in 1988. "It looks good, he would have liked it" (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 15) was Gunn's satisfied comment on the creation. He was happy about the reception of the work, and delighted about when he saw its presence and impact in public, for example seeing the ad for the book in the notable gay paper *Bay Area Reporter*, or *BAR* for short.

As an individualist, Gunn often stated his dislike for the term Gay Community. He was as appalled to be considered a member of it, as he had been with the Movement. It had nothing to do with disrespect for fellow gay people, but rather with his disapproval of categories. Yet, he also realized how there were different levels on which a gay community could operate in its endless diversity. The community of bar goers, leather

²²⁰ "I think the reason it hit us so hard, for our generation and subsequent generations: we hadn't known death. My parents knew friends who died of diphtheria. In the late 40's antibiotics were invented, so we didn't see contemporaries of ours dying except in freak things like traffic accidents. It was uncommon for young people, and suddenly it became all the rage. The first few years of AIDS were deeply shocking." Forester.

gays, lesbians, and whoever joined the parades regularly since the Stonewall Riots were living proof of the queer movement being alive. Their connection was their queerness, and fighting for equality, to put less emphasis on the differences between the queer and the normal, was certainly on Gunn's agenda, too.

The gay community of San Francisco had a special role in the beginning of the AIDS crisis, when heteronormative society stigmatized the queers just because of what they had in common: their supposedly 'unnatural' sexuality. People who had AIDS were denied proper health care as, in the beginning, the causes were not known. As a result, it was mostly the fellow queer people, their families, and friends who took care of their dying loved ones, especially in the Bay Area. This fits well with the general stance of the Northern Californian population, who were always backing their health care system, be it in elections or on the streets. This produced a certain feeling of community which even reached Thom. During a reading from his AIDS poetry, he said that no matter how much he disliked the term gay community, he started to feel a part of it and engaged in it more actively when he suddenly lost half of it due to AIDS. The illness was the trigger for him to write again, and by doing that, to give something back to his fellow gay people.

One of Gunn's dear friends and colleagues was the future poet laureate Robert Pinsky, whom he met at Berkeley. The two men occasionally met at work, but their professional friendship gained more speed in the following years. Pinsky became one of those people whom Gunn trusted with his poetry when asking for help or an opinion. Now that Gunn had written many poems due to his losses related to AIDS, he of course also shared them with Pinsky, who then urged Gunn to publish these poems. Gunn already finished the main parts of his next book *The Man with Night Sweats* as early as 1988. But Pinsky was not influential enough to persuade Gunn to do away with his decision to only publish every eight years, and the publication had to wait until 1992.

Robert Duncan's decline in health was slow but steady. His kidneys started to fail in the middle of the 1980s and he was treated with dialysis. Gunn tried to take care of Duncan by spending time with him, taking him for walks and talking with his old friend. He wanted Duncan to feel as comfortable as possible and went to great lengths to achieve that. When Carolyn Kizer won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry over Duncan in 1985, Gunn was pushing Tom Parkinson's idea to create an award in his honor, a strategy which Gunn had often followed before with poets he liked, on a smaller scale. On August 26th, the Robert Duncan Poetry Award was presented for the first time, but unfortunately the

namesake poet had to cancel his presence on short notice. He still appreciated the gesture very much.

Due to Duncan's state of health, the meetings with Gunn became less frequent, but still happened from time to time. Gunn was eager to provide his friend with the opportunity to have lunch together or go to readings. In January 1988, Robert Duncan was delivered to St Mary's Hospital and died two weeks later from heart failure. Gunn, who considered the death of his friend as a salvation for a man who in his view had been living the life of a "posthumous poet for 4 years" (*Diary 1986-2000* 12), mourned the death of his friend and mentor as he so often did, by writing about and remembering him with mutual friends, in this case Jess, Duncan's partner. As the late poet had inspired Gunn on so many levels, he not only managed to write poetry about him after his death, but also an essay, which was finished within 6 months, before "Duncan" was drafted and finished in the two following months. Through this, Gunn honored his friend's talent, his writing and his importance. After the period of two more years, Gunn wrote another essay on Duncan, having had the feeling he had not yet said enough about the grand American poet.

In early 1989, the Family was worried about Bill Schuessler, not only by his recent problems with drugs but also because there was a suspicion about him having been infected with the AIDS virus. Gunn, who was always worried about his friend's mental state, found "it very difficult to deal with this idea" (*Diary 1986-2000* 20). Ten days later, a blood test confirmed the suspicion, Schuessler got the diagnosis of AIDS Related Complex (ARC), which by now was an intermediate term for the state of the infection, when AIDS had not yet fully developed. Though the doctors reassured him that he would not suffer from the full effects of AIDS for another two years, this still came as a shock to the family. What they could not know by then was that medical progress was accelerating, and medication was quickly becoming more effective. It was a turning point in the story of the plague, and in fact, Schuessler would outlive Gunn. By the end of the 1980s, AIDS was losing its status as a death sentence, though without the people suffering from it realizing this shift, yet.²²¹

The decade had also positives in store for Gunn. In 1989, the teacher was wrapping things up in Berkeley after his winter semester was over. Since his return in the early 1970s, more than fifteen years had passed, and after the tumultuous circumstances brought by Anita Bryant and consorts, the threat of Proposition 6 and all the little things

²²¹ See Jansohn.

under Reagan that made life hard for a homosexual man wanting to teach, Gunn finally received the security of employment. The final letter confirming his benefits in writing, including not having to worry about being able to work for ten more years, as well as health insurance, arrived in June 1989. The last part included the coverage of dental issues, which seemed to be important for Gunn, who regularly reported visits to the dentist for root canal work, probably due to being a heavy smoker despite his efforts to quit. For Gunn this was a big relief, as in addition to enjoying the role of a teacher, his arrangement gave his year a structure, functioning as a stabilizing routine on the long scale for the poet.

But all in all, the 1980s were rather bad years for Gunn and so, at the end of the decade, Kitay and Bob Bair went through a crisis. After several splits and reconciliations between them they finally decided it would be best to break up. Unlike Schuessler in the 1970s, Bair decided to make a clear cut and move out of the house, too. For him that was a bit complicated, as he had his dog Alice with him, and finding accommodation with pets had always been a struggle, but on November 12th he moved out after twelve years on Cole Street. At the end of the year, Gunn wrote a list in his diary, and regretfully writes that by moving out, Bair was “effectively ending the family” (*Diary 1986-2000* 29). Understandably, Kitay was also not in a good mood after breaking up, and grieving a lot. Despite the grief, though, he seemed light-hearted to Gunn, as the end of the relationship came as a sort of relief. Kitay’s psychological issues with feeling unwanted were healing after escaping the toxic situation at the time, which had a relieving effect on his soulmate Thom, but as much as the relief counted, Bob’s empty room left a lasting impression on the queer household.

Even years after Isherwood’s death, the friend inspired Gunn’s writing. By the end of those chaotic eighties, Gunn marshalled all his energies and started drafting a long article on his late friend, to be titled “Getting Things Right”.²²² In the essay, Gunn describes his personal relationship with Isherwood as well as what he admired most in his friend, especially the clarity of his language in writing, as well as the clarity and openness about his life. Gunn wrote on Isherwood’s openness about sexuality, religion, and political beliefs, especially in times when telling your truth was a great risk. In that sense, the title was wisely chosen and again reflects the multiple meanings Gunn so often liked to imply. Isherwood was getting things right as a private and public person, and as a writer, and Gunn was making things right by honoring his friend whom he so admired.

²²² Gunn (*SL* 173–96).

He finished the drafts of this article in December 1989. With that, the decade might have finished, but life had another close loss in store for Gunn. On December 12th, 1989, he received a call from his niece Jenny to inform him about the death of his aunt Barbara. His mother's oldest sister had died at the age of ninety-one. According to Gunn's diaries, Barbara was "one of the people I have most loved in my life, but I did not cry" (*Diary 1986-2000* 29). Accepting that he had expected her death for more than ten years now, he was capable of emotionally containing his grief in a very reflective way. Despite this mindful contemplation, this death at the very end of the year changed something in Gunn, as it was the first time a relative from his mother's family had passed away, so close to the 45th anniversary of Charlotte's death.²²³

May 1990 was very unlike the sadness of the 1980s, superficially speaking. Gunn was working on a second draft of a poem about the Barracks, the bathhouses that had burnt down, previously one of the most sexual venues in San Francisco. In addition, he wrote a real novelty, a poem titled "My Mother's Pride", his first piece about his dead mother since shortly after her suicide in 1944. He was finally writing about this person who had meant so much to him and was his first source of inspiration, but he did not yet touch upon the subject of her death. The work, rather, reads like a list of tenacious family orders or belief sets which she imposed on her sons Thom and Ander through example. Gunn presents his awareness of his origins and the natural and psychological traits he inherited from his mother. This becomes very clear when he closes the poem with the words "I am made by her, and undone" attributing to her the sheer unlimited power mothers have over their children. Gunn accepted this, but at the same time he did not overly glorify it .

²²³ "Sat Dec 30: thinking of what happened to me in the eighties. - ten things list like in the papers.

1. AIDS invented itself
2. Jim died
3. Billy got AIDS (ARC)
4. Allan died
5. I met Charlie, & he died of AIDS
6. others died of it, in 1987, Allen Day, Norm & Lonnie, as well as Charlie, all died in one month
7. I didn't go to England; & I stopped holidaying in NY after Allan & Norm's deaths
8. M & Bob split up; M is sad all the time; Bob moved out, effectively ending the idea of the family
9. In England, Barbara dies at 91; and Ander remarries (and that's good)
10. I wrote a lot of good poetry, which is the only other [entered later] good thing that happened, of importance." Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 29).

As Charlotte Gunn had introduced her oldest son to the importance of literature in life and its possible impacts, he turned this philosophy into action. One of Gunn's ways of contributing to the gay community was writing and reading his poetry, which he did intensively, especially after the start of the AIDS crisis. He read and did so for the beneficial cause of bringing awareness and attention to his community. His AIDS poems were soothing to those who had to deal with loss, and those who had to deal with being ill, and they helped him to put his own grief into words. He also attended festivals like the San Francisco Queer Art Festival, showing his face, reading and discussing his work in a queer setting, to strengthen the community.

Thom Gunn's work as a poet was also acknowledged on a bigger scale now. During a five-day trip to Washington, D.C., which started with a heavily delayed flight, after which he was taken to the Capitol Hill Hotel (which he liked a lot), he read from his work several times. The first reading was not attended by many people, as the organizers had forgotten to advertise it, which Gunn noted in his diary, but he did not show any anger. A much more important reading happened away from the public: Gunn was to be recorded reading his poetry for the archives of the Library of Congress, recognizing his work as culturally American and an essential contribution to American arts and literature. During his spare time, the poet indulged as he often had in other culturally American art, visiting the important buildings of the capital, as well as a vast amount of the museums.

Gunn was still very active in the nightlife of San Francisco. Now at the age of sixty, he still indulged in his fetishes about leather and rough sex. At one point a young, Indian looking man came around and offered Gunn to give him a ride on his motorbike, which he could not refuse. Still into the image of the biker, Gunn fell for Robert Gallegos, the handsome man of Spanish origin who fulfilled Gunn's sexual needs as the poet did in return. Although Gallegos carefully kept control, it was easy for Gunn to accept this, enjoying the affair too much to complain. The two men met regularly for two years, staying friends after the sexual attraction ebbed. It was a time when the coolly adult Gallegos made boasts of the energies within Gunn, though he kept his boundaries very clear. To him they were boyfriends, not lovers.

Between 1984 and 1988 Gunn's writing was at the height of its productivity. Besides several essays, he wrote a great deal of poetry, mainly triggered by the AIDS epidemic that he suddenly found himself in the middle of. But he did not only focus on the issue of death and illness. Gunn says about his next book *The Man with Night Sweats*, that it was supposed "to be about my idea of aliveness—not of getting on with life, mostly,

but of the intensity of lives in past and in present.” (Teare 234–235) This was a rare clear statement about the intentions of Gunn’s otherwise so hard to define poetics. During the rage and grief of the AIDS crisis, he finished a total of twenty poems within twelve months, which was a period of personal productivity not seen since his two years of writing a poem per week at Cambridge. The causes and sources of inspiration were as different as his way of writing. The poem that broke his dry spell in the early 1980s was “Lament”, one of his longest works, which deals with the death of Allan Noseworthy. In this case, the poem came to Gunn immediately after the loss and was finished relatively quickly, with him putting in all the energy that surrounded him at that particular time. “The Reassurance” was another poem about Noseworthy, but it bears a very different tone, having been written in a much different time and mood. His pattern remained roughly the same, though. Gunn transforms his deepest emotions into words, as he did after four friends died within one month. In this case he would not concentrate as much on the individual people as he had with Noseworthy, who happened to be the first close case of AIDS for Gunn. In the density of misery of 1987, Gunn worked on several pieces at a time, and writing about several people in one piece. These poems are a good example of how Gunn deals with his feelings. Kitay says that instead of talking much or showing much, the only chance of seeing what Thom Gunn felt was to read his poetry.

With this productivity, the poems in the book were soon finished, but were rearranged several times while waiting to be published. He was clear about the intended structure of the first and last parts of the book. Poems that in the end were written but did not make it into *The Man with Night Sweats* were kept for the next volume.²²⁴ The poems “The Hug” and “To a Friend in Times of Trouble” are the opening pieces of the book and are poems written about Mike Kitay. “The Hug” here is a prime example of how much time it would sometimes take Gunn to compose. In the poem, he writes about Mike’s 44th birthday in May 1975,²²⁵ spent in Kitay’s holiday home on the Russian River. Gunn was inspired to write something about this closeness, and started right away, but could not seem to find the right approach. In fact, he wrote a draft in one of his notebooks, that seems to have nothing to do with the final version. The page, right after his note and draft of “Talbot Road” in the notes, is commented with “I’ve saved you for the last, my love”

²²⁴ Like the poems about his mother “My Mother’s Pride” and “The Gas-Poker” which were finished before the publication of *The Man with Night Sweats*, but were different in to what Gunn intended for this book in tone.

²²⁵ Gunn’s diary note reads “Wed May 21: nice hugging M all night after so long. He is 44 today. We drive back on Rte 280, Bill cooks.” (*Diary 1974-1986* 17).

(Gunn, *No. 2 1979-1980*) indicating the immense meaning Kitay had for Gunn. The poem was also initially titled “Mike / The Hug” (Gunn, *No. 2 1979-1980*) and starts “I have tried to find a picture²²⁶ that sums up / A man’s past & perhaps his future too!” going on about “the clean cut college boy” who was “self-willed”. In the printed and published version of “The Hug” (Gunn, *MNS 3*), he takes a different start, saying “It was your birthday, we had drunk and dined / Half of the night with our old friend”, staying much closer to the experience, leaving out the memories and nostalgia he felt in the first place. “My sleep broke on a hug” is what he remembers as comforting in that night, and the nostalgia still comes in when Gunn refers to their former passionate love, which was now gone. “It was not sex” he says, but points out that something from their early connection remained, when he feels “the whole strength of your body set”, speaking to Kitay, who embraced him. Adding to his lover “as if we were still twenty-two”. All that Gunn needs to remember in the end is the only thing he “Knew / The stay of your secure firm dry embrace.”

Also written about the cabin, “To a Friend in Time of Trouble” (4-5) is Kitay’s favorite poem.²²⁷ Reading it, it draws a very loveable portrait of the man in his delicate character. In the first of its four parts, the poem describes a man who gets in touch with nature, while standing next to a dog, who is different, but seemingly strives for the same goal. Both indulge in the air deriving from “Fountains of fern that jet from the coarse loam”. (4) In the second stanza, the main figure of the poem, who is Kitay, gazes into nature, interacting in his subtle way. The third stanza begins with a contrast. Kitay handles a job at his cabin, by hauling “large stones uphill” (5) to pile them up, to keep the plant beds from eroding. He manipulates nature, to gain some control over the processes. This hard work is why Kitay comes to the river, to be distracted from “the memory of your troubles in the city, / until you view them unconfused by pity.” Just like Gunn himself does his gardening on Cole Street. In the last stanza, the protagonist is unmistakably described as Kitay, as “a handsome, grey-haired, grey-eyed man” who is looking for peace in the open nature.

The rest of the first part of the book is contemplative and mostly about close family and friends. “An Invitation” is about Ander Gunn, who is supposed to visit his poet brother in San Francisco. “Lines for my 55th Birthday” (11) is a harsh judgement on sex

²²⁶ Originally “posture”

²²⁷ Kitay told me this in our interview, adding that he read “The Hug” at an event commemorating Thom Gunn, as “To a Friend in Times of Trouble” seemed too long.

as a guy in his mid-fifties, which according to the poem “is not worth a lot” as you cannot easily tell whether its enthusiasm or a spasm. Gunn closes the first part of *The Man with Night Sweats* with “Seesaw”, intended to be a song. The second part is entirely made up of a poem that would not fit into the book in any other way, titled “A Sketch of the Great Dejection”, while the third part is a collection of observations in the broad understanding of the poet Thom Gunn. When assembling the work, this loosely connected poetry was clearly seen by the author as fitting together. In “The Life of the Otter” he writes about an animal, describing its quick energetic movements through water. Gunn’s lightness comes through in the loose collection of subjects revolving about closeness and observation. In “Tenderloin” the famous poverty of the San Francisco district is the main subject, and in “Jamesian” (46) the poet discusses relationship problems in a short but precise way in only two lines, reading “Their relationship consisted / In discussing whether it existed.” Those pieces in the first part are very personal poems about life, the Family, and Gunn’s friends, and not rooted much in the AIDS epidemic. Yet, it hints towards death, as the dedicational poem “To Isherwood Dying” (41) has found its way in. Here, Gunn holds a nostalgic imagined conversation with his old friend in Santa Monica, resuming sounds and memories “of Berlin fifty years ago”, before he hears “a single whistle call”, wondering if it was meant for him; it is death waiting for the cancer patient. The poem was written shortly before Isherwood’s death, in “Christmas week, 1989,” as indicated underneath the poem.

The title poem of the book, *The Man with Night Sweats*, opens the fourth and final chapter, which deals with the epidemic and is a very personal piece for Gunn. He, who was exposed to everything that increased the risk of being infected, woke up several times scared or at least wondering whether he had the Virus in him. The publishing of the whole book precedes the movie *Philadelphia*,²²⁸ which depicts the struggle and the stigma attached to this ‘Gay Cancer’ very intensely. Its ending shows the huge opposition that homosexuals still had to face at this time, adding to the enormous impact of the illness itself, showing the actuality of Gunn’s poems. This is also the main reason the poet gained a certain fame again upon publishing this volume, including many awards and the status as a speaker of the queer society, at least in a certain respect. As the last part of the book deals with AIDS as a general topic, here the focus will be on this poem.

Decay is paired with the motif of fear as the main subjects of the piece, and they are masterfully interwoven in “The Man with Night Sweats”, which is not the first poem

²²⁸ see Demme.

in the collection. As the first chapter opens with “The Hug” which has nothing to do with the disease, but rather vulnerability and intimacy, values that are stressed by the order of the poems, “The Man with Night Sweats” is a sort of balance in the last chapter. Gunn makes use of this counterbalance, revealing about the poet that giving up or remaining hopeless is not an option for Gunn, who is instead dealing with the obstacles of life, looking for options. Homosexuality and its stigmatized existence in society may be one of these obstacles, but is not necessarily a reason to feel excluded. Homosexuals have mainly the same needs as heterosexuals and thus the same chances of having them fulfilled, emotionally and sexually. In “The Hug”, Gunn gives a romantic account of how he understands love. The poem about Kitay shows the essence of their connection and love for one another. In contrast, “The Man with Night Sweats” is intense and deals with the poet himself. It is relatively short and paints a very nightmarish image of a situation that leaves a person fully unguarded after a sudden awakening. It is the confession of a frightened person, who knows that in his world seeking pleasure and living it out can shorten their expected lifespan radically.

Right from the beginning, the dark atmosphere becomes clear when the protagonist, an antihero so clearly opposing the men on motorcycles from the beginning of the author’s career as a poet, who were proud to collect the dust which defines their history, starts to tell his night’s story. This “lyrical I” wakes up, freezing, probably from a dreamless sleep, remembering the times when “dreams of heat” (Gunn, *MNS* 57) defined the joys of life. But now those dreams are only remnants of a former life that seems long gone, fear has replaced joy, and carelessness is now expressed by the cold sweat that saturates the sheets. The following two lines amplify this memory of better days by glorifying the younger body as something god-like, a machine that could heal itself when attacked or damaged. Still in memory this praise of the body continues, though interestingly divides the body from the mind, as in “Talbot Road”, as if it were two entities that have to work together as a team, which is a reoccurring image in this piece.²²⁹ It seems as if the body’s illness has broken the unity of the self apart, into the good and the bad, the strong and the weak, the physical and the metaphysical. The body was a tool the speaker could, and did, trust, and it helped the speaker grow and mature. This machine was willing to learn from the risks it took, whether knowingly or unknowingly, and grew

²²⁹ “The theme of conflict between body and spirit recalls one of the central subjects of seventeenth-century poetry, which had such profound influence on Gunn.” Michelucci 140.

stronger, even when it hurt from time to time. Again, the two lines that follow summarize this concept: the miraculous world that would open up, if one were prepared to take the risk and see life as a “challenge to the skin”, only hurting the surface, but certainly not damaging the person’s insides; superficial damage is nothing to be afraid of.

Right in the middle of the twenty-four-line poem, a break occurs, leaving the positive thoughts and memories behind. The “lyrical I” acknowledges that being sorry is the only choice at this point in time, as things cannot be undone. The body and skin, now described as a gift, the basic equipment for life, has stopped healing itself, or at least slowed down. It has reached its limits in a way, yet there is no remorse. Even though life did not go as planned, the view is directed to the future, despite being filled with fear. The “mind reduced to hurry” captures the feeling of hastiness, the realization that the days on earth are limited anyway. This fact becomes painfully and suddenly obvious, because the flesh is now “reduced and wrecked”, insinuating the immense loss of weight and vulnerability of the body caused by HIV and the later stage AIDS. Even though the body is weakened, and the mind is restless, another play on opposites within Gunn’s poetry is the fact that the protagonist remembers his duties; in this case, to make himself feel better. Implicitly, the lines “I have to change the bed / but catch myself instead” transport an uneasy feeling of loneliness. It is clear that without assistance from the outside world, the degree of helplessness increases. The speaker is left alone, an outsider, who seems to have decided to talk to the reader because nobody else would listen to him. The act of trying to change the bed, an action that could count as a simple everyday task and is not supposed to be exhausting, results in a breakdown. Whether this is a nervous breakdown or a muscular weakness is neither specified nor does it really matter. It is the preparation for pain that actually induces the fear that is present. Realizing this fear, the speaker stops in his upright position and again separates the self from the body, the now damaged shield towards the outside that has given up its functions. This body is now prone to be the victim of the vicious attacks of the malign world, and variations of illnesses that surround it. Hugging the body to oneself is a desperate attempt to keep it all together and be one’s own help, holding what you can hold. This is to be done as long as possible, in order to use the strength that is left before the inevitable pain takes over. Gunn may have experienced this already, or observed it already in his deceased and dying friends, the illness taking over their bodies first and then leading to their end. The last two lines of the poem enhance the perceived hopelessness even further by comparing it to a deadly force of nature, an avalanche. The hands are only helpful to provide the passing feeling of

warmth that is not even present in the first line of the poem. Waking up cold is compounded by the image of the masses of snow that fall down on a figure who has no chance of withstanding the forces, sweating a cold sweat induced by fear of what is about to come. In contrast to Gunn's earlier poem "The Unsettled Motorcyclists Vision of his Death" (Gunn, *SM* 28–29) from *The Sense of Movement*, where the poet starts with "into the walls of rain I ride" (28), showing the pure power of willfulness of a human being rebelling against nature, the last line of "The Man with Night Sweats" closes with the image of an avalanche, which is snow, frozen rain, that moves towards the protagonist, who is weakened while the natural forces have increased. The shortness of the poem and its individual lines, which never have more than seven syllables, reflects the short time span that is covered by the narrator, in which the thoughts come and go. Here, memories of better times play a role and give in to a certain acceptance of what is to be expected sooner or later. Like Gunn's poetry during his experimental drug phase, the poet uses structure and meter, but this time they serve to contain the chaos of fear instead of the chaos of hallucinogenic drug use. The rigorous rhyme scheme of ABABCC, and the alternating length of the separate parts, evoke the feeling of a song, with verse and chorus supporting the precision, almost like a corset into which the raging emotion is forced. Yet, this form still gives the staggering pain and fear a channel through which they can be transported. The shortness of the lines also emphasizes the nightmarish character of the poem, as if its beat imitates a racing heart or short breaths. The element of decay also becomes realized in the structure of the two lines as a sort of poem within the poem, thus giving the whole piece a unique quality. The two lines go from a healing body, via challenges to the skin, to the body that is overwhelmed by the avalanche which it cannot possibly hold off. The body goes from strength to weakness, from health deeper into illness, from life towards death.

But is there really an end to the poem? Not yet, the finale can only be anticipated, and it is left open. Perhaps this death will come earlier than without the disease, perhaps it will be more painful. What is certain is that it will be just as inevitable as it is for everyone. The memory of the healthy body is not presented with resentment; it is on the contrary, a good memory. "The risk that made robust" (Gunn, *MNS* 57) is a hint that the speaker would likely not change much in the course of his life, if he had the chance, it was the life chosen by the "lyrical I", and the protagonist in this poem still only suffers from fear, not the illness itself. Keeping in mind that AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s was

predominantly understood to be almost exclusively a gay disease, Wilmer draws the following conclusion

The speaker of “The Man with Night Sweats,” for example, is talking about a problem that might be thought peculiar to gay men: the fear that, through sexual adventure, he may have contracted AIDS. Yet, it is also a poem about something all of us share: the fear of death combined with the consciousness that a risk-free life is hardly a life at all. (“Foreword” 3)

Gunn managed to do something special in this poem, by staying vague in the outcome but very clear in the emotional expression, which also transcends the rest of the collection. He focuses on human needs, instead of homosexual needs, seeing them as similar if not the same. Sex is subtle and the poem is in fact about being loved, being cared for and being accepted as the person one really is, not stigmatized by otherness or illness.

The poem following this very personal account on Gunn’s own fears is “In Times of Plague”, (*MNS* 59–60) which deals with the epidemic on a grand scale, comparing it to the health disaster in medieval times. Gunn deals with the agony of helplessness against an invisible enemy, which leads to inevitable death, and so he opens “My thoughts are crowded with death” (59), clearly an uncomfortable situation. It even attacks Gunn, the speaker, in one of his most important safe spaces as “it draws so oddly on the sexual” and thus is, as he says, “attracted / by, in effect, my own annihilation.” Sex seems to be the cause of this disease, when in fact it is the spread of a virus mostly through sexual activity. Gunn questions this way of living out sexuality with anonymous men from all over the world, to whom he finds a sexual connection to without really knowing them or wanting to know them. Gay men in times of plague still “thirst heroically together / for euphoria” and so does Gunn. But at what price? “I weigh possibilities” (60) he says, having to do it for the first time in his life, as mortality was so far merely theoretical, a concept which did not occur to young people around him. The piece is the opening scene for what was to come. Brad and John are the names given to the anonymous encounters that partly led to Gunn’s fear in the first poem of the fourth part. What follows are personal accounts of closer friends who Gunn lost to the plague.

“Lament” is the first of these, which makes sense as it was the first one of those death poems Gunn wrote about Allen Noseworthy. It is followed by “Terminal” (65) on Jim Lay, whom Gunn gently describes, with now exchanged roles, where “the eight years of difference in age” becomes a much greater disparity in the face of the final stage of the disease. The older of the two now takes care of the younger, who is dying “with firm and gentle guidance by his friend”. Gunn expresses the exchange of roles in the last line,

comparing the younger man to “Oedipus, old, led by a boy”, where the boy is the older poet himself. In “Still Life” (66), about Larry Hoyt, Gunn describes the sight of his dying friend. “I shall not soon forget / The greyish-yellow skin” is an account of a horrible sight, staged as a still life, as if the person was dead already and not only doomed to die. “He still found breath” seems a statement about a miracle. It was only the machines that kept the friend alive, who after all was “a life-long breather”, only now the breathing is supported by “the tube his mouth enclosed / in an astonished O” describing the choiceless position of the lips around the breathing device, the only thing keeping an almost dead person alive.

“The Reassurance” (67) is the first soothing poem in this line, and in it Gunn remembers Noseworthy, who “came back in a dream” ten days after his death. In that realistic dream, Noseworthy was hugging everyone as if to say he was fine now. For Gunn, this describes his friend’s character. “How like you, to be kind / Seeking to reassure.” Realizing how much of his own interpretation as a human being is part of that, Thom Gunn concludes “And, yes, how like my mind / to make itself secure.” This poem describes parts of the process of grief, especially the very important one of letting go, which seems so much easier if reassured. This little grieving sequence is completed by “Words for some Ash” (68) which concludes Jim Lay’s passing. It is written like a sermon at a funeral, remembering Lay’s passing on Christmas. Recalling that Gunn “had to squeeze / dental sponge against your teeth” or that “Christmas Day your pupils crossed”, now the only things that remain are the memory and “a bag of ash / scattered on a coastal ridge”. In the fourth stanza of this poem Gunn juxtaposes fire and water

Death has wiped away each sense;
fire took muscle, bone and brains;
next may rain leech discontents
from your dust, wash what remains

before the circle restarts in the ocean, “briskly in the water’s play”. The poem concludes with the wish to Jim Lay, not to be worried anymore, only “by the currents argument”, which works on the shore like the breath he had given up. Gunn interrupts the dense mourning for his friends with “Sacred Heart”, which is more a description of hospitals, and the unnatural habitat they are, than about specific friends. “Her Pet” then is about thoughts on a graveyard, and includes the descriptions of a tomb by Germain Pilon, which Gunn saw in Michael Levey’s book *High Renaissance*.

Going on to mourning friends who died of AIDS, Gunn now continues with “Courtesies of the Interregnum” and “To the Dead Owner of a Gym”, written for Norm

Rathweg, from his New York circle of friends. The first poem is subtitled “a memory of the Colonnades, Sept. 1986” (73-74) Here Rathweg is characterized as a social person, hosting a big feast. Yet, Gunn states about Rathweg’s account on his health status, “He speaks of eating three hot meals a day” (73) to keep himself healthy. As an “expert of health” he also looks into the possibility of medical improvement, staying up to date with the development. Rathweg is not losing hope and has a goal, which is “To hold on to the substance that is him / Once sternly regulated in the gym, / prime flesh now softening on his giant frame”, indicating the decay had already started. The social person hosts huge events, dealing with every problem there is and entertaining his guests, who are mostly well-trained members of the gym. The last part of the poem is about this strength, which is “not physical but social” (74), part of his friend’s values. In the second poem, Gunn elaborates on his memories of how Rathweg ran his business, with his sense for design and perfection, like “that read line of tile / as margin round the showers”. (75) Here, the poem is addressing his friend by name, praising his “dashing a physique”. But for what? While writing, Gunn was aware that all those muscles had faded, and Norm Rathweg had died. He concludes “Death on the other hand / is rigid” and,

Finally as it may define
An absence with its cutting line,
Alas,
Lacks class.

Next to Noseworthy, Lay, Hoyt and Rathweg, Charlie Hinkle was the person whom Gunn wrote most about. His presence is also there in the epitaph for the fourth part of *The Man with Night Sweats*. He was the inspirational source for “Memory Unsettled”, “The J Car”, and “To a Dead Graduate Student” with his spirit also lingering in the more general poems. “Memory Unsettled” (76) praises the strength of a dying person Gunn much admired. He immortalizes the dying man’s wishes and at the same time fulfills them. Gunn writes

When near your death a friend
Asked you what he could do,
‘Remember me,’ you said
We will remember you.

It is the promise fulfilled by this piece, in which the good nature of Hinkle’s character is pointed out in the last four lines, where the sick person shows his comforting qualities, which impressed Gunn.

You climbed in there beside him
And hugged him in plain view,

Though you were sick enough,
and had your own fears too.

“The J Car” (77) is the record of Gunn’s visits to his friend, which the poem prior is an example of. In this poem he remembers the outside world, his way to Charlie Hinkle, to visit or take him “out for that German restaurant.” It is a friend's attempt to make life as comfortable as possible. The poem also provides a lively example of how much Gunn pays attention to detail, as before finalizing the poem, he took several rides on the line which had taken him to visit Charlie Hinkle so often, to make sure he recorded it all correctly.²³⁰ In “To a Dead Graduate Student” (79), Gunn condenses much about his affection for Hinkle’s intelligence and will, or as he puts it “the whole rich process of twined opposites.” To Thom Gunn, Hinkle’s life seemed promising, but was “killed, wasted”. He contemplates “What a teacher you’d have made”, as if doubting his own talent as a teacher compared to the young dead friend. His own values are mirrored when writing about Hinkle’s “tough impatient mind” and his “flowering looks.” He finishes this poem with a compliment, writing that Hinkle would have convinced other rebels “to share your love of books”, which had always been important to Gunn, since he was taught this love by his mother.

Allen Day and Lonnie Leard, the two men who both died on August 18th of 1987, entered indirectly into other poems of the series, like the following two. The first one titled “The Missing” (80-81) was written in August 1987, the month Rathweg and the other two died in a very short period of time. Gunn realizes the epidemic is unstoppable, as he watches “the progress of the plague”, (80) his friends who would fall sick “and drop away.” It is devastating for Gunn, who loses joy gradually, seeking relief in the “image of an unlimited embrace”. His friends’ deaths leave Gunn “less defined” lacking “their pulsing presence”. He confesses “I borrowed from it, I was unconfined” and thus relied on his friends in a way. Now, the world is “abandoned incomplete” (81) and he sees no way out in this moment. He finds “no escape / Back to the play of constant give and change” which had defined him for so long before the plague hit his circle of friends. The second of those poems is “Death’s Door”, (82-83) which dives into this grief, Gunn

²³⁰ “Th June 4: ... Later on the wonderful J Car to Charlie on 29th whr he stays w. Allen & Jay, who also both have AIDS. Ch & I eat at Speakman's, a great German restaurant, whr I do not make a secret about trying to stuff him & get him to put on weight. He is much more cheerful. But says he will be blind in 3 months. His left eye has already gone. I leave, look at the young moon, the beauty of physical things, and think of what he will be losing.” Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 6).

stating “the dead outnumber us”, making use of the image of “their recruiting army” (82) as if it was a combat that could be won. The inevitable end of life is nothing Gunn wants to accept here. It is the first mention of his mother’s death “forty years ago” which is in such plain sight, although he does not specify it. Again, he talks about “these four, who though they never met / died in one month” which connects the strangers, in a way. The setting in which the poet puts the deceased is in front of a television set, watching the relatives who are still alive, but without the option to intervene. In the end, they grow bored and turn their back on the living. The personal aspects of all these pieces make it important for Gunn to mention their names in the otherwise relatively short notes at the end of his *Collected Poems* from 1994.²³¹

One poem is left in the book, and after leaving the imagined dead friends behind, the poem “A Blank” (84-85), which was initially titled “Last Poem”, is fittingly different. The dead are still present, but they do not define the days as much as they had before. “The year of griefs being through” (84) Gunn starts, signaling he is ready to move on. “The view its loosened cloud lose edge” make it easier to see behind the dark clouds, although they still only give way to “a voided sky”. Again, Gunn writes about riding on public transport, but this time not to visit a dying friend. In fact, he spots another acquaintance outside. Gunn writes “I caught sight of a friend /.../ A four-year-old child tugging his hand”. The story behind this friend was sexual, and the writer is remembering a certain smile from adventures, which “took place in my bedroom and his.” Gunn recognizes his value of existentialism in this man, letting him say “I chose to do this with my life” about adopting a child “without a friend or wife”. Gunn realizes “So this was his son”, admiring the trick from his past for “his self-permission.” This friend deliberately progressed from sexual play at night to take over responsibility for a child “to educate, permit, guide, feed, keep warm, / and love a child to be adopted” (85). It is the opposite process to every death in the book before. Instead of lives vanishing and losing meaning, bodies transformed into ash, this is the process of birth. Before being adopted “the child was still a blank then on a form.” Reusing the title of this hopeful poem, he continues in the last stanza “The blank was flesh now”; it has become real, with all the implications, growing and developing. It is this that Gunn leaves the reader with. Life is one of his core values and even in times of plague, he does not give up. It is life that will go on, and as much as he misses the lives of dead friends, it means a great deal

²³¹ To be found in Gunn (*CP* 492).

to him to know there are new lives to come.²³² Gunn handed in the manuscript to his publisher in 1990, but the book would not be published for another two years.

In 1991, ten years after the first occurrence of AIDS in a report, San Francisco received a sad attraction. The AIDS Memorial Grove was initiated to commemorate the people who died of AIDS, remembered by their families and friends. It was placed in the Golden Gate Park and received the status of a national monument in 1996. Due to Gunn's activities in AIDS awareness, and having gained new fame after publishing *The Man with Night Sweats*, he was asked to contribute a poem to the monument, which he gladly accepted.

His words

Walker within this circle, pause
Although they all died of one cause,
Remember how their lives were dense
With fine, compacted difference (Gunn, *BC* 44)

were particularly dear to him. After composing these four lines, the Grove's committee had asked him for some adaptations, which he commented on in his diaries "F Aug 16: ... Al Ramsay-Perez tries to emasculate my 4 line poem commissioned for the AIDS Memorial Grove - I won't let him." (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 78). This makes it drastically clear how important words were to Gunn. The four lines about the density of the individual life convey so much of Gunn's philosophy that it is hard to imagine him changing them after he finally was content with what he wrote and considered it done. In a way, this is similar to his stance on the Movement and the term Gay Community. Terms that categorize also limit the possibilities, and to Gunn it was important to leave the space open, despite trying to be very clear in expression. "One Cause" is something unspecified to him, which is one conceivable reason why he does not use the word AIDS here at all. What is important to him is the unifying aspect, juxtaposed with the fact that people are unified by being individuals already. In a way, reading those lines over again, one can easily imagine how, during the writing of the piece that's now carved in stone, the faces

²³² "Fri, April 1: I think I have come close to completing new poem called "The Last Poem" ...

Sat, April 9: ... sent new poem to Steve Rudson to see if he'd mind my publishing it. ...

Wed, April 13: ... bunch of flowers from Steve R who evidently liked the poem, which I think I am calling "A Blank." ...

Sat Mar 17 [1990]: Steve Rudson on the street with his third adopted child, this one Crystal, a girl. He says this will be the last." Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 13-31).

and memories of Charlie Hinkle, Jim Lay, Chuck Arnett, Norm Rathweg and all his dead friends were flashing through the poet's mind.



Figure 3: AIDS Memorial Grove

Chapter Seven: Between Duncan, Dahmer and King David

Gunn had a big comeback to the literary stage with *The Man with Night Sweats*. It was a book that contained great poetry, written in a very distinct personal voice and imparting a positive look on life in dark times. It was an expression of his own personal relation to the disease, his eccentric promiscuous lifestyle and where it led him, and of course his capacity for empathy and sympathy for the people around him. From now on, his career was in the light of public interest again, at least more than the last few years when he had been rather absent. According to his agreement with himself, his next book would only appear in the year 2000 and it would have the title *Boss Cupid*. But, first things first.

The 1990s followed a period of weird uniformity in many parts of American society. Television was at its height and the schedule was crowded with sitcoms on all channels, as well as crime and mystery formats. They all followed a similar, pleasing structure and were made to conform to a standard for commercial success. Most of the time, they did not demand too much of an attention span of the audience; in order to make it easier to casually follow the course of the series, a storyline would usually be finished in one or two episodes before starting a new plot. This was boring to Thom, who rarely watched television on his own. On April 8th of 1990, however, he saw the pilot episode of a show, he would rate as the “best thing I’ve ever seen on the box” (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 31). The box, as he called his TV set, on that day showed *Twin Peaks* by David Lynch, an artist with a similar approach to life as Gunn, other than the chosen medium. Lynch had a belief in the sense of unity like Gunn, and caught the poet’s attention through the complex narrative around the unusual premise: the mystery of Laura Palmer’s death, and the secrets of the seemingly boring inhabitants of the small town of Twin Peaks, as an allegory of the complexity of human life. Gunn followed the show until the season finale on May 22nd and enjoyed it immensely. The two artists’ interest in true emotion is not the only similarity they share. Both show a very profound sense of precision, the unclear and ambiguous, and the humane. Looking deeper, there is also their common philosophy about shared feelings, people being more similar than different and part of a bigger unity, and the importance of achieving flow.

Ann Charlotte Gunn’s suicide was undoubtedly her son’s biggest childhood trauma. His high standards for poetry, and his equally strong dislike of confessional

poetry, were the main reasons he would not yet touch the subject of her death, as well as, of course, not feeling ready emotionally. He barely mentioned the story among his friends, so how could he write about it? After the decade of loss, including that of his mother's sister, something in him had changed. He was deliberately searching for a way to express his grief and work on this subject without becoming a male version of Sylvia Plath. It was Thomas Hardy and a hint of the late Robert Duncan who opened the door for Gunn to finally try writing about his mother's suicide, and he thankfully accepted this chance.²³³

After modelling "My Mother's Pride" on Ezra Pound's "Canto XIII", as a characterization of his mother as he remembered her, he started to touch upon the big issue. On June 11th in 1991, after having had a "haircut (dramatic)" (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 39) he drafted a poem about his mother's death. The way he could handle it was by distancing himself from being part of the story. He had to lift himself, as the poet, to a meta level and observe what had happened so long ago. He wrote about the incident from the position of a third person observer, not himself and his brother as the acting agents. In the poem he tells the story of two boys finding the fresh corpse of their dead mother, putting himself and his brother at the center without making it too personal. Gunn needed this tool to avoid becoming too confessional without losing too much of the deep, traumatizing emotion that was in the memory. In his *Interview with James Campbell*, Gunn was asked about why it had taken him so long to write poetry about his parents. When he was specifically asked about his father, Gunn asked the interviewer why he thought that had happened. After pointing out the poem "Rites of Passage" in *Moly*, Gunn accepted seeing his father in there, but would not confirm that this was a prime intention. The poet was not willing to give definitive interpretations of his work, he would merely provide backgrounds to his audience at readings when he thought the context might be unclear. He does not deny that he finds his inspiration in his life, clearly, stating that "almost everything figures importantly in my life finds its way sooner or later into poetry" (Gunn and Campbell 18), which describes his range very well.

Working hard on several fronts, in March 1992 he worked on "xerox material" (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 47), which was titled *Shelf Life* and which he sent off as manuscripts to Faber & Faber as well as the University of Michigan Press on June 12th of

²³³ Published poetry about his mother, that is. There are drafts on poetry addressed to Gunn's mother at his archives, yet it did not cover her suicide, but rather her influence on Gunn becoming who he was.

that same year. After *The Occasions of Poetry*, this was his second collection of criticism and essays, which this time included an interview wherein the predecessor of the autobiography was to be found. He valued the book very highly, but the accomplishment of publishing this time had a similar weakening as publishing a collection of poetry.

After sending in the manuscripts in June 1992, Gunn lacked the energy to write once again. Reflecting about himself he had several theories “What is this? The dread of England, the self-consciousness of publication, AIDS, the folly of age?” *Diary 1986-2000* 47) This sums up four of his biggest enemies in his own mind and life, one of which he would have to face very soon. A month later he went to England, after not having returned for more than a decade. Would it be as dreadful as he feared? To lighten up, he would of course not leave before attending the Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco. Here, in his willingness to accept controversy before holding back, he notes about the parade “the only thing I was sorry about was the reaction of NAMBLA,²³⁴ who were booed. I applauded loudly, the only one who did.” (47) Gunn applauding cannot be interpreted as him being a man who was attracted to children, although he fancied men who were significantly younger than him. It was his inclusive thinking and his belief that one should be able to discuss things without stigmatizing them that comes to show here. He shows his appreciation of diversity, probably in the most controversial way he has done so far.

He left for England on July first and stayed at Hampstead, which he barely recognized due to its by now gentrified transformation. He stayed with Thérèse Megaw and his school friend Ruth Townsend for a few days, and he had a lot of catching up to do after all those years. After that, he went to Cambridge to see Clive Wilmer; they had planned a long interview.²³⁵ His meeting with Tony Tanner left Gunn in shock. Tanner was drinking an awful lot and despite claiming he was happy, Gunn had severe doubts. Leaving Cambridge, he finally made his way to Snodland, visiting his family for their longed-for reunion. Staying in Snodland and going back and forth for some successful readings, including an AIDS benefit²³⁶ with Wilmer, Gunn recapitulated his time with his

²³⁴ NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) was a queer group that advocated for the legalization of sex with underaged people, conscientiously, of course.

²³⁵ The interview took place between July 7th and 9th and was published in the *Paris Review*. It turned out to be one of the few enjoyable interviews for Gunn, mainly rooted in the mutual sympathy of the attendants. Wilmer helped Gunn to open up asking questions he would find interesting to answer, showing the two men being on the same wavelength.

²³⁶ Gunn was very involved with creating AIDS awareness. He would raise his voice in his non-stigmatizing, love spreading way.

family as ambiguous. While he had the best time with Ander in twenty years, he found the behavior of his aunt Mary (who turned 85 during his stay) rather dreadful. In discussions, she argued in an opinionated way, which annoyed her nephew a lot. After returning to London and one last special sightseeing tour, visiting the graves of the great British writers John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe and William Blake, Gunn returned to San Francisco from the journey to England he had so dreaded.

This was a period in which Gunn's finances were also largely supported by poetry awards he won.²³⁷ In 1990, he received the Shelley Memorial Award, and only three months after returning from England he received notice that he would be awarded the First Forward Prize, which included about \$20,000. To accept it, he would have to go to England again, for the second time in a few months after having been away for so long. He would return for a week in September. The unexpected, short return visit was a mix of seeing his family and friends as well as professional dates. He met Ted Hughes, Tony Tanner, and Ruth Townsend, and visited the museums in London while being driven mad by the attractiveness of the young men on the London Tube. Of course, the official dinner in his honor, where he would receive his award, was on the list as well. Situations like this, which necessitated his being in the spotlight, usually made Gunn feel uncomfortable. Adding to this, he was annoyed by his drunk seat neighbor at his side, and he had to ask Andrew Motion, later Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, to save him from the uncanny situation, not without some amusement about the grotesqueness, when remembering it later. Right after the Gala Dinner, Gunn left and flew back the next day, summing up his adventure saying, "W Dec 9: ... Fun to be famous, but I can't take any more of it, so I'm glad to leave." (*Diary 1986-2000* 52)

In 1993, Gunn was approached to write a libretto for an opera. What started out as another chance for a new cooperative project slowly faded as the connection was not maintained. What was left was the topic and subject matter Gunn had found while conceiving what the opera could be about. When trying to find inspiration and a subject

²³⁷ Examples of the awards and grants Gunn received up to the early 1990s: Levinson Prize (1955), Somerset Maugham Award (1959), Arts Council of Great Britain Award (1959), American Institute of Arts and Letters Grant (1964), American Academy Grant (1964), Rockefeller Award (1966), Guggenheim-Grant (1971), WH Smith Literary Award (1980), PEN (Los Angeles) Prize for Poetry (1983), Sara Teasdale Prize (1988), Los Angeles Times Kirsch Award (1988), Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Writer's Award (1990) Dörfel; Robert Glück | Poetry Foundation Poetry Foundation

that seemed worthy, he stumbled across an article in a newspaper which caught his attention, as he saw a story of passion which he deemed worthy of being turned into an opera. It was indeed a very special story, as Gunn, who always liked to shock people, had by chance read the article by Patricia Highsmith, titled “From Fridge to Cooler” published in the *TLS*. The topic of the article was the crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer, who came to fame around this time as a gay serial killer, and Gunn found everything he needed to know in that paper. Who had to deal with the controversy were the morally inclined readers of poetry. Gunn started a series of Dahmer Songs, written from the point of view of the killer. He was captured by the idea of highlighting the humanity of a man who had been labeled as cold-blooded, accepting the risk that would accompany such an enterprise. “It is the inescapable and irrational, and we've all been through it. Dahmer’s difference from the rest of us lay only in the way he acted on it” (Gunn, *"New Poems and Uncollected Poems" 1997*) Gunn writes, confronting the reader with an extreme version of what he could be himself, if following his passions and compulsions without limits or boundaries. Dahmer merely acted on his emotion when he killed people, as a result of his fear of being left alone. His motivation was love, passion and fear, which are feelings everyone can relate to. Gunn continues “My task was to write a song that could be read on the one hand as a stereotype of emotion, each line on the edge of a formula, and yet something else altogether if taken literally, something we live closer to than we like to think.” (Gunn, *"New Poems and Uncollected Poems" 1997*)

Gunn put his skills and craft in the series he titled “Troubadour”, using Ezra Pound as a role model again, basing the fourth song of the series on “Na Audiart”, relating to Gunn’s chosen title. Although the fifth song was not part of the original conception, it serves as an afterthought, which rounds up the sequence perfectly, supporting the general effect it was supposed to have: inducing shock and perhaps disgust, but if the reader was honest enough, maybe also the realization of self-disgust in the moment of actually sympathizing with the protagonist. As an extra bit of fun, Gunn enjoyed reading the series publicly. If people left to show their disgust, he would react to this act of criticism and say, “Let those who disapprove of my writing from inside Dahmer’s head reflect on the reason they would not have disapproved if I had done the same for Napoleon or Julius Caesar.” (Gunn, *"New Poems and Uncollected Poems" 1997*) He was pointing out the bigotry and hypocrisy of those humans who could not bear listening to the story of a serial killer while at the same time admiring some of them. The only difference was that Napoleon and Caesar were winners, and winners write history.

“Troubadour”, subtitled “Songs for Jeffrey Dahmer” (Gunn, *BC* 87–93), is a series of poems that was conceptualized in four parts, but had a fifth part in the final version, which was added after finishing the first four. Gunn writes the poems from the view of Dahmer, who is the “lyrical I” in this set, consisting of “Hitch-hiker”, “Iron Man”, “The Visible Man”, “A Borrowed Man” and “Final Song” as an encore.²³⁸ Gunn starts by letting Dahmer express his deepest fear, in the view of the writer. “Oh do not leave me now” (87) is the first line of the poem in which the need of Dahmer for stability is expressed. He met the hitchhiker by chance and immediately felt a strong emotional connection to the stranger, which he also connects to his physical attributes. All he seems to have “ever wanted is compressed / in your sole body” with a “boyish glow”, the perfect image the young speaker is drawing in his mind. And he wants to keep that feeling of belonging, to possess it, which is obviously threatened when the other man wants to leave. Gunn learned that Dahmer’s favorite part of the male body was the chest, and so he includes it in his description by letting the speaker praise “the ribbed arch of your chest” speaking to the stranger. The visitor does not respond to Dahmer’s coming closer, but the broken adolescent had learned one thing in his growing up “love must be ensnared while on the run” and so he tries to conserve it. The act of murder is not described, and only knowing the story makes it painfully clear, what “I thought that you were gone, / but you are here and will remain with me” means in this context. What in other songs or poems might seem romantic, with Dahmer becomes brutal. But Gunn does not judge this in his poem. He focuses on the common human qualities the protagonist has. Who does not dream of love at first sight or true love that remains? What follows is criminal history, but in the last lines of the poem is predicted by the “lyrical I”, who says

My song in each reprise
Will follow this first order, strain by strain:
Strain of desire, and hope, and worst of all
The strain of feeling loss (Gunn, *BC* 87–89)

The poem concludes with the solution Dahmer chose for his anticipated misery, when it first alludes to the method explicitly, mentioning the “strain of the full possession once again / that has a dying fall.”

“Iron Man” (89) is the next part of “troubadour” in which Dahmer’s background is described. Gunn lets Jeffrey say how lonely he was, sitting “in the kennel of my

²³⁸ As the original plan was, to write the libretto of an opera, the song structure seems logical. In the end, „Troubadour“ was set to music in 1998 composed by Jay Lyon, sung by Leonard Moors. Gunn (*BC* 115).

inaction” (while his parents were probably getting a divorce). Unhappy about his limited life circumstances, Dahmer chooses alcohol due to its availability, drinking booze and masturbating all day, making his sexuality clear as his “solace was a picture in a magazine, a standard out of *Iron Man*, muscles inflated.” In the last four lines, Gunn uses another double meaning to write about the cruelty of Dahmer, who was “hungry for a life.” He wanted to have an identity, striving for his own happiness, but felt caught, still assuming that “later maybe some *fräulein*” would be his wife, even though he preferred men sexually.

The third part, “The Visible Man” (90), is spoken to a desired victim who is already dead. The speaker states “now I can count on you”, because unlike other restless people who “move too much”, his lover does not. He says “you no longer have a young man’s heart” which is a line with the great potential to shock, again. Dahmer made sure his partner is no longer “hot for experience without review” and that they “do not need to part.” The speaker still realizes that “nothing lasts”, telling his counterpart, convincing the body to hide with him and offering him help to get to the hiding place, because the dead person obviously cannot get there by himself. Dahmer says “Here, I will help you enter.” The fourth part, “A Borrowed Man” (91), starts in “the twilight spot between / floor and foundation” where the hiding place is. His hope for not having to leave his victim slowly fades away due to the process of decay, but now including the following victims. Dahmer has become a collector of memories, trying to make himself the perfect man, just like Frankenstein or Frank-n-Furter, collecting

From him a stammer, from another
A single bicep blue with mother
From one a scalp, with hair’s regalia
From one large hands with lazy grin
From someone reddened genitalia

And finally the chest, his favorite part, or as he puts it now, the “best part of the best”. The main character now indulges in his actions and has no need to see himself in the wrong, living in his own moral inclination and definition of love and closeness. The fourth part is finished in this verdict of a serial killer, who justifies himself by saying “in recapture / flood me with rightness of my rapture.” (92)

The “Final Song” (93) recapitulates the collection of men as if they were memorabilia rather than human beings. It does not fulfill Dahmer any more to own the parts. “A head stood on the shelf / beside lard in a cup / the questioning face gazed up” and as he stares at “each black eye” of the victim in question, he realizes he is still alone.

“Only myself remained / in which I wandered lost” he contemplates, feeling “burdened by [his] erection” while being watched:

a face stared from a shelf
unreadable on guard
connection disconnection
Between headcheese and lard (93–94)

And like that, Gunn leaves Dahmer behind. A broken figure, looking behind the label of a serial killer and monster. Of course, Gunn does not encourage murder, but he encourages us to love or take interest in the seemingly loveless or unlovable.

On June 11th of 1993, Gunn received another phone call that would change his life tremendously. He was told by the caller that he had been chosen to receive a MacArthur Foundation grant for five years, together with Jim Powell. The MacArthur Fellowship is, according to their homepage, a “no-strings-attached award to extraordinarily talented and creative individuals as an investment in their potential” (MacArthur Foundation), for which the three criteria for the selection of fellows are “1. Exceptional creativity, 2. Promise for important future advances based on a track record of significant accomplishments. 3. Potential for the Fellowship to facilitate subsequent creative work.” Gunn, who was too humble to attribute these qualities to himself, found the call hard to handle. To him, the MacArthur was a kind of Nobel Prize for poetry. As a consequence of the shock, he got drunk that night. The prestigious and well-funded fellowship²³⁹ was achieved by Gunn’s persistence in poetic talent, of which he lately reminded the world in *The Man with Night Sweats*. In fact, the pay-out was high enough to finish off the last payments on the house acquired in 1971, several years earlier than the original finance plan suggested, and left room for other things Gunn had not done in the past years. The news of him being awarded the fellowship echoed loudly. On June 14th, he was interviewed five times, and when on the next day the news was finally out, he took the phone off the hook in order not to be contacted, as it had become too much for him. Congratulations came from everywhere nonetheless, from Berkeley, friends and publishers. It surely made Gunn proud, and relieved him from certain financial restraints, but in the end it was not his cup of tea, being asked to give speeches and act on honorable causes. Gunn was a practical man and tried to avoid the world of the famous as best as he could.

²³⁹ In his archives, the letters are present stating a sum of 369.000 \$ in total letter from June 10th, 1993. MacArthur Fellows Program.

When Bob Bair moved out of 1216 Cole Street after breaking up with Kitay, Gunn declared it the factual end of the concept of the Family.²⁴⁰ Although the bond never fell apart to the full extent, Gunn was more than glad about Bair's return on June 19th in 1993. Already, three days later the only entry in his diary is "I am happy to be cooking for 4 again" (*Diary 1986-2000* 55), making it clear how much he valued those close relationships and the trust he found in them.

The ceremony to celebrate Gunn as a MacArthur Fellow was supposed to be held in Chicago in October of 1993. He immediately planned to take Kitay as his company, especially because his lover had never been to Chicago. As the money that came with the fellowship was ample, the lovers took a little detour. In addition to showing Kitay Chicago for the first time, they also went to Europe, with Prague and Venice as the destinations. Venice was a nostalgic part of the trip as it was among those cities they had already travelled to when their relationship was fresh. As they picked up the tickets on August 23rd, the decision must have been relatively spontaneous. Two days after what would have been Charlotte's 90th birthday, the couple set off for the old world together for the first time in a very long time.

Flying to Prague via Frankfurt, the journey started. The couple stayed at an apartment in D'Louha Street in Prague's old town, which was organized by a travel agency to fulfill Gunn's travel needs: cozy, and not too expensive. The couple went out to explore the city on foot right after their first nap upon arrival, the obligatory heavy dinner of duck and dumplings included. Gunn's mind was blown by Prague's beauty in its unique half-Gothic and half-Baroque composition. After a long day of walking around, they rounded up the day of sightseeing with beer, goulash, and a visit to a gay bar, which was very empty in Gunn's opinion. This did not stop him, of course, from admiring the young men in Prague, at least those who were not tourists, being convinced that the Czech youth would spoil his return to the men in the United States by their incomparable beauty. The main daytime occupation of their stay was again sightseeing and shopping to satisfy Kitay's hunger for antiques. On the night before their onward journey, the two men slept lightly, as they had to get up early to catch their flight to Venice via Munich.

²⁴⁰ About the Family, Gunn said in the 1990s "it's a queer household! —which I think was a satisfactory answer. Right now, there's only three of us there. There were five—one of them left and one of them died of AIDS. But we really fit in well together. We really do work as a family; we cook in turn, stuff like that. We do a lot of things together." Wilmer ("Thom Gunn, The Art of Poetry No. 72").

Venice was a contrast to the visit in Prague, although it was also filled with many attractive young men who caught the travelers' eyes. The purpose of this visit was more about nostalgia. Entering Venice by boat, Gunn observed and criticized the tourists as strongly as he praised the locals. Though appalled by the former's ignorance and stupidity, on the other side of the spectrum he enjoyed the art and beauty of Venice with Kitay. Their nostalgia about their first trip to Venice in the 1950s was reinforced by the musicians on Piazza San Marco, who were playing old American standards, trying to please the main group of tourists in the city. Disappointed by Santa Maria del Salute and inversely blown away by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection on the following day, the old couple enjoyed their lunch break with shopping and food, establishing an early routine in Venice before going back to the main square, then visiting the island of Torcello, where they were greeted by stray cats.²⁴¹ The program also included visiting churches and other sights. Upon their return, they had a marvelous dinner at the same restaurant as the day before, only disturbed by a heterosexual couple from San Francisco that Gunn disliked. The next day contrasted the high arts of the Academia and good food with "a ridiculous military ceremony of taking down flags" (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 58–59), giving him the opportunity to express his dislike of conformity and military once again. After a couple of days in Venice, with new impressions, it was time again to leave Europe, moving on to the ceremony which was awaiting Gunn in the United States of America.

On October 13th, they went to the airport and flew to Chicago via Frankfurt. After a short stopover in Iowa for a reading, which demonstrates Gunn's planning efficiency, he introduced Kitay to John Hollander and Jim Powell, who was about to receive the MacArthur Fellowship at the same time. Gunn was genuinely happy that his colleagues liked his long-term lover. The ceremony was held at the Art Institute of Chicago, which was open for the guests to visit at night, including the artwork exhibitions. It was a grandiose final stop for the couple who had spent the first two weeks of their celebratory holiday together night and day. Nostalgia and their deep feelings for each other being the basis for their bond they kept for forty years now, there was now one more reason for Gunn's gratitude and happiness before returning to San Francisco.

Shortly after winning the MacArthur Fellowship, Gunn continued to receive awards in recognition of his work. On September 11th in 1993, he was informed about

²⁴¹ Four years later, he noticed a difference when Gunn writes "Sat Oct 18: to Torcello from the Fondamente Nuove ... on the island, no wild cats this time, there has been a holocaust it wd seem." (*Diary 1986-2000* 86).

winning the Lenore Marshall Prize, which he considered “pretty good” (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 58). The award ceremony took place in New York on November 23rd, which was a good opportunity for Gunn to visit his friend Don Doody, who by now seemed a little more stable than the times they had met before, as Doody’s life had previously gotten a bit out of hand. He also seemed to have gained some weight, according to Gunn. On December 8th of the same year, another surprise was awaiting Gunn when he received a letter from his old friend Ted Hughes, who held the honor of being the Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom at that time.²⁴² He informed Gunn that he had nominated him to receive the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry, in his function as Poet Laureate, at a time when Gunn was gaining fame as a poet again.²⁴³ Honoring their professional friendship, Gunn kindly refused, giving the argument of his absence from England, the award being of a national nature in his opinion. Gunn's refusal was surely also rooted in his opinion about monarchy and the institution of Poet Laureate as well, but he politely held back in communication with Hughes. In a letter to Tanner, Gunn says he was so happy with all the prizes and awards in the recent months, he had no problem to turning the Gold Medal down, adding “Silly old queen” (*Letters* 546) about Elizabeth II, in his nonchalant way. Gunn was very likely the first person to refuse the honor.

In those successful days, Gunn was inspired to write poetry again in January 1994, wanting to write about a biblical character: the legendary King David. Within half a year, this series of poems went from draft to their final version, and Gunn concluded that he needed those poems as a kind of balance to the Dahmer poems he wrote earlier. In fact, in his next book *Boss Cupid*, both series are published as far apart as possible within the third and last part of the book, beginning with “Troubadour” and ending with “Dancing David”. Gunn was asked how the book was composed and how those two would possibly fit together at a reading. He was unsure what it was that made him think that this was the right composition. Someone in the audience helped the poet, when Gunn stated he could not point his finger at it, by saying “It’s easy: both guys are willing to kill for a fuck”, thus going as deep as possible into one of the most human motivations, and one that Thom Gunn understood so well: Sex.

²⁴² On Hughes accepting being the Poet Laureate Gunn wrote “He is an idiot to have accepted the job, though: he can never resign from it, and is condemned for the rest of his life to write about the weather of royal funerals births, marriages, etc.” Gunn (*Letters* 412).

²⁴³ “Wed Dec 8: yesterday a note from Ted offering me the Queen's Gold medal for poetry. I politely refuse, on the grounds of absenteeism - surely it is a national award!” Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 60).

When Gunn earned new fame from *The Man with Night Sweats*, the demand to read him of course also rose. Economically, it would have made sense to publish as much as possible, but he had his rule of pausing for 8 years after publication. That rule applied to new books of poetry, so instead he thought about editing a volume of *Collected Poems* that would cover his oeuvre from the early years of his career until his latest book.²⁴⁴ For this edition, Gunn rearranged some of his old books, omitted lots of poems from *Touch*, added uncollected works and put them together under the title “Poems from the Sixties”, and added “Poems from the Eighties” to make the collection more complete in his eyes. The book was a great success after it was published nearly simultaneously with *Shelf Life*, his second collection of prose. Critics praised Gunn’s formal skills in metered poetry and free verse as well as his effective simplicity and complexity at the same time. The cover of *Collected Poems* showed him as he liked to be seen: in full leather, photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS in 1989.

At a reading in New York at the end of 1994, Gunn met Billy Lux, who was one of those creative men to whom Gunn was quick to connect. Lux was writing scripts, taking pictures, and doing some teaching, and he had encountered Gunn’s poetry on several occasions. He first got in touch when he dealt with Caravaggio in art class and his boyfriend introduced him to Gunn’s poem “In Santa Maria del Popolo”. Shortly before Lux and Gunn met, Lux was captured by “the tenderness beneath the toughness” (Gunn, *Letters* 690) in Gunn’s poem “A Home”, and due to his fascination spoke to the writer after the reading. The two men became half-platonic friends, as they shared a particular view on the world, and shared information about their erotic fantasies in letters, a slow form of what one would call sexting today. Even though Gunn recounts phone sex with Lux, when they met in person, it was always more friendly than sexual. Lux wrote several articles on Gunn, and showed him his movies, while the poet was inspired by his friend’s personality. The composition “Letters from Manhattan” was mostly taken from Lux’s letter to Gunn. In the summer of 2000, the *Gay & Lesbian Review* printed Lux’s interview with Gunn, who was comfortable enough to talk freely about his poetry with his friend. Lux moved from New York to San Francisco in 2000.

Writing poetry had significantly slowed down after finishing the King David poems, in August 1999. Gunn was celebrating his 66th birthday with the Family at his

²⁴⁴ In an essay he writes “A Collected Poems is a monument, and it often gives you little sense of its author’s early poetry, of the ways it seemed fresh, unprecedented, even outrageous to its first readers.” (“Three Hard Women” 37) Which he surely also held true for his own.

favorite gay bar The Hole in the Wall,²⁴⁵ where his friends helped him indulge in nostalgia. His remark on his own birthday is again an example of his dark humor: “T Aug 29: 66 today 2/3 of the Beast” (*Diary 1986-2000* 71). He was bursting with energy, especially sexual energy. Kitay remembers that, unlike other men, who normally experience a decline in their sexual activity, Gunn did not. If anything, his hunger grew, but as he got older, his success declined. In Kitay’s view, this convergence was part of Thom Gunn’s decline in life in a way, including feeling morose due to rejection while longing for the attraction of men. It was also the reason he dove more and more into the realm of drugs, but this time of a slightly different kind.

From the mid 1990s, Gunn’s drug consumption gained speed, literally. LSD and other hallucinogenic or mind enhancing drugs were rarely among his used substances; rather, he began to favor speed, cocaine and crystal meth, as was the pattern for so many gays around that time. Drugs were now used by Gunn primarily to enhance sexual pleasure. One of the side effects of using those substances and knowing where to get them was that it was easier to attract other guys who were using. This came as a plus for Gunn, who found his own appearance more and more appalling with growing age. While poems like “The Speed Bros” and the story behind it give a glance of the intensity of Gunn’s drug network, and his increasingly risky practices in consuming, like “squirting crystal up asses” (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 84), he seemed to enjoy the effects. He once notes the unsurprisingly heavy effect of his experiment of “crashing after flying and in between a Living porn plot/17th cent French romance” (84). He was looking for intense experiences, and drugs were a way for him to get there, though Gunn still was able to reflect on a high level.

He also knew how risky speed was for his aging heart as he had been warned by doctors and friends, obviously being very open about his use. Yet he would not be able to get sober again, although he mentioned quitting several times in his diaries and letters. The benefits of drug use just seemed to be too much of a pleasure to him. Sex and drugs became to Gunn what masturbation became to the protagonist of “Courage, a Tale”, a sexually very overt poem from *Jack Straw’s Castle*. Gunn accepted the risk and said to himself “Fuck it, it’s worth dying for” (Gunn, *JSC* 67). According to Kitay, Gunn never saw his behavior as addictive, neither his drugs nor his sexual activities. Yet, he was reflective enough to see the following in November 1999 in connection to a new fling²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ See Time Out San Francisco.

²⁴⁶ More on John Ambrioso on page 288

“What shall I do about John, I can't do speed any more, but it will turn bad, but John is addicted, & no speed, no John.” (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 101). He was most likely to consider smoking cigarettes as his addiction, as he regularly wanted to stop it. But the negative side effects never seemed serious enough for him to really commit to quitting.²⁴⁷

As if making it a habit, in May of 1995 Gunn booked a journey to Spain for he and Kitay to travel in September of that year. The trip to Madrid and Barcelona was different from their European voyage in 1993, as the two Spanish metropolitan cities were new to Gunn as well as Kitay. The character of the holidays was similar, though: visiting the important sights, museums, and restaurants for food and beer. As in Prague and Venice, they admired the young men of the Mediterranean country who, according to Gunn's observation, seemed to turn unattractive as soon as they turned thirty, when they suddenly gain weight and “become pudgy paterfamilias” (Gunn, *Letters* 583). Luckily for him, the uniformed guards of the Ministry of Defense were rarely older than that. After one week of culture in Madrid, the couple took a train to Barcelona, where they were lucky enough to get a hotel upgrade upon arrival, which was a good start to their liking Barcelona more. Madrid, in general, did not leave the best impression on Gunn, starting with a dark hotel room, only counterbalanced by the museums with paintings by Goya, *Guernica* at the Reine Sofia Museum, and Thyssen. Staying in Las Ramblas in the heart of the Catalan capital of Barcelona was much more to Gunn's taste, and the bustling main street of Barcelona's city life immediately captured Gunn's attention. He writes “F Sep 15: every day begins & ends on the Ramblas.” (*Diary 1986-2000* 71–72) By the second day, the couple had already gotten lost in the beauty of the old town with its cathedral, which they immediately compared to the atmosphere of Venice. This seems like a huge compliment from Gunn, who also thought Barcelona must have been like London or Paris in the 16th century. The rest of the stay was a balanced mix of beach, flea markets, Gaudí, and gay bars. While Gunn fell sick and went to bed early, Kitay used the new space to go on adventures alone. Before flying back, they strolled around the city together one last time, with Gunn contemplating about the right amount of money for traveler's checks, planning the next vacation already.

²⁴⁷ Although in September 2001 Gunn writes: “3rd night without sleep & I get constant hallucinations ... imagining guests in my room. Bob (rightly) angry at the noise, then kind, I am such a mess. OK. that's the last time I do speed. It's not worth it.” (*Diary 2000-2004* 5).

In January 1996, Gunn met Robert Prager in the Hole in the Wall. Prager had developed an interest in gay literature since his time studying at university, and the two men's relationship can be described as mutually beneficial. Prager had access to Gunn, the gay poet, who in return had access to excess, as Prager also shared Gunn's interest in sex on speed, and knew the right networks to acquire the drug. Prager was also provided with other gifts through Gunn's generosity; Prager intended to write a biography on Chuck Arnett and Gunn had first-hand info. Gunn also owned works by Arnett and gave them to Prager, thinking he would probably take better care of them than he would. While that was true, Prager did not necessarily take good care of himself. Kitay was sensitive about his bad manners and the new sexual interest of Thom Gunn was constantly doing drugs, dragging the poet down the alley with him,²⁴⁸ which the writer willingly obliged. Gunn supported Prager, who had led a chaotic life with fascinating turns, which perfectly suited Gunn's interest in the outlaw.²⁴⁹ On the professional side of their relationship, Gunn gave interviews to Prager while their sexual interest was subsiding, especially when Prager was diagnosed with HIV in 1998. They would continue to help each other out with literature and drugs, but lost direct touch eventually. When Gunn met Prager on the street in 2003 by chance, he still found it important enough to take note of it in his diary.

In the later years of Thom Gunn's friendship to Christopher Isherwood, there was a distance between the men that Gunn could not quite understand. Being highly self-reflective, he tried to figure out the reason for this, thinking it was partly his fault or wrongdoing on his part that had caused the break. In Gunn's position though, he was lucky enough that famous friends sometimes got different kinds of attention, and their private information became public. In this case, Don Bachardy, the life partner of

²⁴⁸ "T Feb 25: M expresses his anger at R Prager's 'lack of telephone manners' & so I say 'maybe it's because he senses how much you dislike him' being angry myself. I hope we both have the intelligence to stop this here." Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 82).

²⁴⁹ It was also Prager who confronted Gunn with the 1978 edition of *Son of Drummer*, a gay magazine, after one of Gunn's readings. When everyone had left, he asked his poet friend if he could get an autograph, which made Thom furious. The reason was: in the magazine was a short story, supposedly written by Gunn under a pseudonym. According to Prager, this was a confession, as he reports the following conversation, starting with Thom "'Who else knows about this? Did you tell the guys at The Magazine about it? [... The Magazine...] Did you tell your writer friends?' Thom wanted to know how I found out about this in the first place. He forgot he told me himself a few years earlier. 'I thought you said you didn't care about your literary reputation,' I taunted him. 'I don't but that would be like feeding people false information.'" (Fritscher ("Thom Gunn (1929-2004)")) The *Drummer Magazine* was an early leather magazine, see Fritscher ("Time Index").

Isherwood, had published the edited diaries of Isherwood in the mid-1990s. When Gunn saw his late friend's book in a store on January 28th in 1997, he of course read through it, skipping to the parts that contained information about himself. On seeing Isherwood's side of the story, he realized the reasons for their distance, and writes in his diary "T Jan 28: In bookstore looked up refs to self in Ish's diaries. Things were never as they seemed. The trouble, it appeared was always my neglecting Don B, who flew into rages, becoss he had a crush on me. Well, well, & I'd been blaming myself all this time." (*Diary 1986-2000* 81) Gunn's level of self-reflection made it possible for him to quickly incorporate this new information into his own reality. In this case it was easy, as it was reassuring information, but generally it shows how Gunn knew there was always more than one side to perception. As such, he kept himself open to be able to adapt, a notion that was already present in his theory of pose from his Cambridge days.

By 1997 it seems like Gunn and Kitay had developed a two-year rhythm for their trips to Europe. This time, it was Venice again for a full two weeks. Venice was flooded, but as Gunn knew it could happen at this time of the year, they were still prepared to make the best of it. The two men visited the old familiar places for nostalgia, and new ones for the excitement. Revisiting Torcello, Gunn noticed the lack of the stray cats which populated the island four years earlier; Gunn compares the sudden extinction to a holocaust, clearly locating the reason of their disappearance in people wanting to get rid of them. The obligatory food stops, Kitay's antiques and Jewish shops, as well as the museums, were not missed. After two weeks in the lagoon city, the two men were happy but exhausted, as Gunn sums the trip up "everything went well, but it's an awful journey - I don't think I can ever do it again." (*Diary 1986-2000* 86). They would never visit Europe together again.

After many visits to the hospital and enduring basically every possible calamity a single person can suffer from, Gunn's former lover and lifelong friend Clint Cline died on December 12th in 1997. As unfortunate as this man had seemed in life, so he was in death, as his memorial service had also been postponed when the first attempt to scatter his ashes from a boat was cancelled due to unfavorable conditions. One month later it was Gunn who had the task of emptying the urn, and he almost followed the remains into the sea as the water was still so rough. He points out having been lucky enough not to have

been seasick in general.²⁵⁰ When the AIDS crisis hit the gay community, Gunn was at a high risk of contracting it, sometimes worrying a lot about being amongst the victims. Although he did usually take care after the possibility of transmission through sex was known, he went to testing every year. He remained negative all his life, which surprised him at times. What also surprised him was when he heard there were rumors about him having AIDS. Upon finding out the rumors had their source in Forrest Gander, Gunn was eager to set the record straight, as after all, he had been tested and was negative. Sending a Thanksgiving postcard to Gander, Gunn addressed the issue, clarifying the severity of the illness and not wanting to stigmatize sick people but rather to honor the truth provided by his negative tests. He adds in his unique way “So – one romance for another: if anybody else says you have told them this, I’ll say I got it from you!” (*Letters* 630) The dark humor being a trademark which also makes his words effective.

After finishing his winter term in Berkeley in 1998, Gunn prepared for another trip to New York. As always, he crammed a little bit of everything into it: official evenings, meals with publishers, and most importantly catching up with friends. This time, the official part was not only doing readings; Gunn was also supposed to receive the Medal for Merit of the American Academy of Arts, which included the treat of spending the night at the Grand Park Hotel. Gunn took his pen pal Billy Lux as a guest, which of course meant chatting and drinking through the boring bits of the gala program. The poet did not really appreciate these events, much less the pretentiousness of the people who were found in this environment in a very high density. At lunch, Gunn sat next to a person he found insufferable while her husband, Anthony Hecht, presented the awards. Still, there were enjoyable bits of conversation going on for Gunn, especially when he was caught by surprise. One example of this was John Updike telling the poet that “he did not write the review reprinted as blurb on the back of my paperback *TMWTNS!*” (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 90) His final judgment about the evening was the most devastating, especially coming from someone who wanted to be young forever, noting that “everybody looked very old” (90)

Since he was in New York already, Gunn visited his friend Don Doody, who had now gained more weight and was showing a certain roundness in his face. When Don suggested taking a walk, his friend was more than pleased to oblige, even though for him,

²⁵⁰ “Sat Mar 7: Clint's ashes. About 7 of us went out in the Neptune Society boat - very rough, I thought I was going to follow the ashes as I emptied half of the urn. At least I wasn't sick.” Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 89).

the six blocks were merely a short walk, while for Doody it seemed like an exhausting hike. It was finished off by buying six cartons of cigarettes, which Gunn could not leave unnoticed, commenting “I suppose you are doing this, so I can tell everybody?” adding “he says no, but he is.”²⁵¹ (*Diary 1997-1998*) After having fulfilled his friendship duties with Doody, Gunn was up for fulfilling his duties as a gay man, checking out the Boiler Room, a new gay bar around the corner from his former regular BAR, which had burned down. Gunn went to bed disappointed; bars had turned into a goose chase for men since his early days. In general, this trip illustrated some recent realizations for Gunn: people around him looked old, which meant, he must be getting older too, which was hard for him to accept. Although he was still willing to live up to the days when New York was his “own dear old whore, all flash and vitality and history” (Gunn, *OP* 178), times had changed and he had to rely on his friends to save him “from the boredom of age” (Gunn, *Diary 1997-1998*). These included Billy Lux taking him to a thriller theatre play with Quentin Tarantino and Marisa Tomei, titled *Wait until Dark*, which seems surprisingly fitting for Gunn’s recent situation. He spent a lot of good times with his new friend, and Thom judged that Lux was the best thing that had happened to him those days in New York. As upon his early return to San Francisco and Cole Street, “The Boys” were at Kitay’s cabin at Russian River, Gunn spent his time hooking up with Jason Frost, a friend of Dale Bierne, Charles and Kirk, to celebrate his return with crystal meth, which those guys were having delivered, which illustrates how Gunn now spent his time, when the closest of his friends were not available.

By deciding not to publish a new book before eight years had passed, Gunn restricted his poetic output. He would always publish in magazines and papers, but longer sets of connected poems were usually restricted to books. But he left a back door open, if he felt like publishing. His pamphlets *To the Air* and *Songbook* in the seventies were examples of how he would publish coherent series in between major book publications. He repeated this in the late 1990s when working on poems which he summed up under the topic of gossip. Unlike the intended series of speed-poems or the idea about the seven deadly sins, the series *Frontiers of Gossip* actually appeared in print in 1998. Despite having this sequence of poems published, Gunn would continue adding poems under that topic until he published the final series as a separate section in his book *Boss Cupid* two years later.

²⁵¹ When copying these days from his travel diary into the large one, he leaves out the latter comment, probably realizing it is just an assumption.

At least he was happy enough to write poetry, anyway. He felt the drought of age very intensely. Inspiration did not come as easily to him as it used to. During his 1998 visit, he took an extended walk through Washington, D.C., comparing it to ancient Rome, for its grandeur in architecture and the warmth of the sun. The setting managed to inspire him to write about a painting he saw in the National Gallery there, having fallen in love with paintings by Vuillard. It was a love strong enough for him to revisit the gallery when he returned to DC in 2003. "Painting by Vuillard" was written in a sketch, almost a caricature according to what the writer tells James Campbell in his interview. Again, Gunn was fascinated with contrast, this time the contrast between the admired paintings and women doing such banal things as drinking coffee. On December 9th of 1998, Gunn managed to produce one more poem, this time about his lover and dealer Andy. He titled the poem "Front Door Man", which directly refers to Andy²⁵² delivering drugs on the porch of 1216 Cole Street upon Gunn's ordering the substances. It was Gunn's last poem to be published in a paper, when it was printed in Wendy Lesser's *Threepenny Review* in the Summer of 1999. "Front Door Man" and "Painting by Vuillard", then, were the last poems that were finished and included in Gunn's last book of poetry.

Shortly after learning from Clive Wilmer that Tony Tanner was diagnosed with prostate, kidney and liver cancer, Gunn knew it was serious. He decided to write a letter to his old friend, although it was difficult for him, knowing what the diagnosis would mean. The letter was full of gratitude and hope, ending with "Well dear friend, be strong, get well, be patient with your errant body! Mike sends his love especially, and so do I – & love to Nadia X X X X Thom" (*Letters* 637). Gunn knew that the letter was a goodbye. Tanner died the following December, only six weeks after the letter was written, due to kidney failure. Grieving in his usual place, Gunn had to deal with death again. He called Don Doody a few days later for his birthday, which was also a good opportunity to talk about their mutual late friend, to connect and soothe their pain of loss with a bit of nostalgia.

In December of 1998, when he was inspired enough to write the poems mentioned before, Gunn met John Ambrioso at his favorite bar, the Hole in the Wall Saloon.²⁵³

²⁵² This relationship showed a massive power imbalance and had a chaotic character, which comes through, reading this: "Mon Jan 18: Andy paid me a visit, I gave him some money he needed, we sucked each other's cocks, bt his crotch smelled of his wife." Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 95).

²⁵³ A few months later, he writes "Sat Feb 20: Monday was a holiday, & I got thro the week OK, though so haunted by the excellent drug John Ambrioso on ultimate, living &

According to his established pattern, this was just another step into the drug addiction that was already taking hold of Gunn in his advanced age. They quickly developed a relationship with each other that, from the sixty-nine-year-old's side, could be described as a form of sexual dependency with the help of sex enhancing drugs. Ambrosio was the ex-boyfriend of Robert Prager and, like him, a vivid member of the amphetamine scene of San Francisco. He had just the right mix of good looks, outsidership, drugginess and sense of adventure for Gunn to want to get involved with this free spirit, who often came around with his motorbike to kidnap Gunn and take him places for a change of scene. Gunn, who was almost retired around this time, enjoyed this second youth with the forty-year-old motorcyclist.²⁵⁴ Of course, he was a bad influence on Gunn and especially his health, which he realized, but saw no way out of. John was not giving him what he was looking for. He wrote about his dependency in 1999 "the crystal hangovers get worse & worse; but to give up crystal wd mean giving up John, & I can't do that" (*Diary 1986-2000* 99). Two weeks later he added "I had decided to give drugs a rest for a spell, but John the greatest sweet talker has changed my mind for this weekend, when I'll be alone in the apt anyway" (99)

Being aware of the peculiar traits of his lover, Gunn discussed them with Robert Prager. Both men accepted John Ambrosio's ambiguous behavior as a fact which they had to deal with when interacting with him. Gunn was so drugged up these days that he even found it worth mentioning that he had taken a smaller amount of speed than usual when he was spending time with Ambrosio. Very vividly, Gunn describes what his experience of reality looks like by the end of November

more hallucinations, which I think are real, the woman & man on & u my bed in morning, the several appearances of the red-haired dwarf during day, the brief appearance of the middle-aged Asian masturbating in the garage. At night, a seemed party of the spirits, this time in leather all sizes from tiny to full human - but were there some humans (or a human) in the house as well? Bob, irritated by my roaming around the house & his horror at my seeing people who aren't there, gets me to bed. So, ghosts, spirits, drug-induced hallucinations, are the all the

dying for sex, even better than Andy, probably as selfish as deceitful, but sunny-natured & gives as much as he takes sexually. A guy I'd get obsessed with him. (As RP did some years ago)." Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 96).

²⁵⁴ "A Gratitude" was unpublished and is among the very last poems, Gunn ever finished. He wrote it about John Ambrosio. The piece is as close as it gets to confessional poetry for Gunn, a personal account on the two men's relationship as seen from Gunn's side. Peter Pan had a second youth and childhood with the man on the bike and his experienced freedom and emotional chaos was partly what Thom was looking for, opening the restraints of adult life and living as freely as possible.

same? Blake's Thistle? Bill sympathetic, Bob forgiving, Mike cold. (*Diary 1986-2000* 101)

This loss of his grip on reality, combined with the complications having to do with Ambrosio and the Family, was contributing to Gunn's fading sense of security in himself. His younger lover's addiction to speed, and Gunn's addiction to John Ambrosio, brought the two men closer together in a fatalistic way, turning their mutual rebelliousness into a resistance against the outside world which seemed to be against them. They kept in touch until 2004, despite meeting less after about one year of intense get togethers.

Especially in the last year before his retirement, teaching was an instrument which supported Gunn's routine throughout the year and gave him a rhythm. Working with bright students and teaching them his love for poetry inspired Gunn in return to write more freely during the time after the term was over.²⁵⁵ He surely appreciated the bright ideas of his students as much as he was a precise teacher. Reading through his papers for exams, one can deduce his knowledge of detail within the subject of poetry, and this was also reflected in his expectations. He did not enjoy grading at all, disliking judgement, but it was important to him to teach certain basics. Apart from grading, he hated official meetings, political discussions about university topics, and would avoid those occasions as much as he could. It was his joy in teaching poetry which was important enough for him to endure the Holloway meetings and discussions about the budget. In the end, he even made up his own rules, for example inviting guest lecturers which Berkeley would not fund. He still kept the invitation, and would pay the guest from his own pocket and claim it was from the university.

Gunn was a master of poetry and literature to an admirable extent. Kitay said that Gunn was the most intellectual man he knew. His teaching style was rather classical, with a few modern and revolutionary elements. Steve Silberman reported about how Gunn would walk around in class reading poetry from anthologies, with a unique talent of giving life to the words of those classics which had the potential to bore anyone to death, having collected heaps of dust. Even when teaching, Gunn was a rock star. He would turn up wearing his leather jacket and would never hide who he was behind all his professionalism. During his lectures, when roaming the classroom, reading poetry, he would let out glimpses of the person he was behind the official teacher's persona.

²⁵⁵ Included in his "Gossip" poetry is a poem called "Office Hours" where he deals with his work at university.

Occasionally he would make comments which would be considered very strange even today. When he had a student in class who was wearing a very tight shirt, accentuating his well-trained biceps, Gunn would interrupt his recitation and comment “Your shirt looks extraordinary” (Silberman) and continue reading right away, leaving the student wondering about what had just happened. Gunn was strict with the contents in his exams, and he was direct in speaking his mind. He was not prone to someone sweet-talking him, if the writing was lacking content. But if a student’s work was good in Gunn’s view, he would encourage them intensely. He was as strict with himself as he was with his pupils. His diaries rarely say that he found his teaching was going well, and he was often criticizing himself after classes. When he retired, he would reflect that his best teaching might have happened in the years directly prior to his retirement.

The spring of 1999 was a culmination point for Thom Gunn: It was his last spring break and he spent it with John Ambrosio, giving in to his world of sex and drugs. Gunn liked to tell people, asking about how he spent his Spring Break, “I rehearsed my retirement” (Gunn, *Diary 1986-2000* 96). It was also during this time that he handed in the manuscript for his next book *Boss Cupid*,²⁵⁶ which would be published in the following year, exactly 8 years after *The Man with Night Sweats*. He left Berkeley after teaching his last course on May 24th in 1999. As his self-assessment was highly critical, he could not really enjoy the applause he got from his students when finishing his last lecture. He writes “Mon May 3: My last lecture of a course I didn't teach well, but students applauded for a long time & that made me feel conceited at being so popular, they had probably heard I was retiring.” (*Diary 1986-2000* 97) He left Berkeley deeply touched, although he had never liked to be in the spotlight like that. Following his work as a teacher, a two-day celebration for Thom Gunn’s retirement started on October 4th of 1999. He did not like the idea of being celebrated, but brought his trusted friends Mike and Billy Lux as his company. In the end, Gunn was surprised by how much he enjoyed the event which was organized by Jack Niles. He wrote about it

I thot it wd be absurd & embarrassing but of course it is agreeable to be praised for qualities you are not sure you have. Bob Hass does a bright back unsuspected summary of early poetry, then Wendy, then Ken Fields, David Gewanter, Chris Nealon, & Charlie Atten do a discussion, all but the last v good (he gets us lost in his jargon). I ended up with a reading, stayed on for the dinner, & Lu & Belle, & friend kindly chauffeured me home. Next day, on my own, ptry reading, David, Anne Winters, Belle & Jim. All fine, except Anne, who had a cold & couldn't be

²⁵⁶ “T March 30: ... Sent off *Boss Cupid* to publishers today. Think constantly of John Ambrosio, mechanic of the hedonistic heaven. ... am finally happy with JA's world of bikes & grease & drugs. I learn from him.” Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 96).

heard well. A mass reading by ex-students & associates, e.g., Ishmael, Jose, Kay Sundstrom, Matt Struthers, & a hilarious video of me doing a 1974 reading. Home by shuttle, exhausted. (*Diary 1986-2000* 99–100)

It was a very personal and typical account by Gunn, who always felt he was famous enough, yet he was capable of enjoying a little celebration, even if he was the center of attention. Even when he had retired, Gunn did not fail to notice the details around him. He showed gratitude toward those who wanted to honor him, leaving him only with a little self-criticism even when reading. He did not need a chauffeur but went home by public transport after the celebrations, exhausted but happy. As much as he disliked being interviewed, for the risk of being misunderstood or misquoted, Gunn was willing to reconsider. In 1999 he granted James Campbell lots of time to question him about his life and poetry. Campbell had three consecutive days to interview the poet, finishing the day when Gunn felt it was time for a break, always leaving the conversation in a relaxed mood. His satisfaction with this interview can be assumed, as it was published in April 2000.

As a person who never owned a car and had sold his only motorcycle within the first year of owning one, Thom Gunn had to rely on other means of travelling. Friends and people around him sometimes drove him to places if they were hard to reach, but in general he relied on public transport and his legs to go places. “Night Taxi”, “The J Car”, “Flying Above California”, “Small Plane in Kansas” and parts of “Talbot Road” are products or byproducts of this habit. Also, “A Blank” came to Gunn’s mind while sitting on a bus, seeing the subject of the poem walking on the street. The notes taken on public transport alone could characterize Thom Gunn as patient, yet attentive person, morally inclined to individualism and knowing when not to discuss with people; one of his regular bus drivers was listening to Rush Limbaugh’s program²⁵⁷ and Gunn decided to use earphones instead of trying to convince the driver to listen to something better. But when people were attacked, Gunn also stepped in and spoke up, taking part in his own microcosm of people. Of course, the sexual side did not fall short: Kitay says he was particularly proud talking about bus trips when someone was staring at his crotch; perhaps one of San Francisco’s “gerontophiles” (Kitay, “Thom Gunn as a Life Long Partner”).

On February 26th in 2000, Gunn received a phone call from Andrew Motion in England, the Poet Laureate who followed Ted Hughes. He offered the Queen’s Gold

²⁵⁷ “Sat Jan 21: to Tower Records to buy tapes to play on shuttle (& drown out driver's preferred program, Rush Limbough)” Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 68).

Medal for Poetry²⁵⁸ to Gunn for a second time, as his predecessor had, and for the second time, Gunn refused it politely. His behavior when accepting awards, especially this one, can be seen as stubborn or as moral integrity. Having received enough prizes in recent years, there was no need to accept this one, especially when it is hard to imagine Gunn, who refused to wear ties, meeting the Queen to accept the honor. He was an anti-royalist after all, and did not identify as British citizen except on his passport.

Although he had retired from Berkeley a year earlier, Gunn did not seem to be able to go without teaching, and he criticized his teaching almost as much as his poetry, which is an indication of how much he liked to be good at it. In order to fulfill his need to teach, he accepted an offer to be the visiting Hurst Professor in St Louis for three weeks in October of 2000. He was welcomed and treated nicely by the faculty and organizers, but when he stayed there he felt lonely, which was something he had tried to avoid for so many decades now, and he felt bored. This boredom was the only inspiration he had to write a new poem while he was there. In his diary he wrote on October 14th “I have written a small poem”. (*Diary 1986-2000* 107) The poem was about his life and what it had become by now, at least, as he perceived it in his moment of loneliness, and it was logically titled “Lunch and then a Nap” (107). It is among his last recorded pieces as he grew more bitter with progressing age, telling his close friends he had “lost the juice” (Kitay, “Thom Gunn as a Life Long Partner”) and it was nearly impossible for him to accept this kind of writer’s block, which for him was a hopeless struggle. When Kitay was trying to comfort Gunn by asking whether he tried to write, it was one of the few moments Kitay can remember his friend and lover snapping back at him saying “Of course I tried” (“Thom Gunn as a Life Long Partner”).²⁵⁹ Unfortunately, all the attempts to rekindle the flame of writing poetry failed. Wendy Lesser asked him to write essays for her to motivate him to write again, at least, but apart from these essays, there was not much more coming out of him.

When his next book *Boss Cupid* was published in the year 2000, after he finalized its manuscript on the day of his retirement, it was considered a masterpiece by critics. Its contents sum up Gunn’s career as a poet by presenting the full range of his skill in meter

²⁵⁸ See *The Royal Family*.

²⁵⁹ “I’m not writing,” he would mention frequently, even if you didn’t ask, and though he never seemed to be complaining about it, it was clear that the inability tortured him. He did not live only to write poems—Thom had always lived mainly to live—but when it turned out that he could no longer write them, something essential went missing from his life.” Lesser (“Thom Gunn’s “Duncan”” 281).

and free verse, as well as the densely metaphorical and the seemingly profane, mixing classical subject matter with personal poetry and metaphysical writing into one book. The contrast in life implied by the title, juxtaposing the terms boss and cupid, a deliberate allusion to the Eros Turannos, was the program of the collection. The subjects were death, life, sex, love, profanity, deepest emotion, art and basically everything that defined the life of the poet. It is, at the same time, a continuation and a solution to what *The Man with Night Sweats* was, answering with love, which can also be a fight and struggle and thus even connects to the first book of Thom Gunn, *Fighting Terms*. It is also connected to the predecessor by containing a few poems written before publication of *Night Sweats* but not included in the preceding volume.

Boss Cupid is divided into three parts. The first part collects personal poems from Gunn's surroundings. He opens with "Duncan" (Gunn, BC 3–4), dedicated to his friend and inspiration, Robert Duncan. It is a tribute to Duncan's work and talent. "When in his twenties a poetry's full strength / Burst into voice as an unstopping flood" (3) Gunn starts, hinting at the unstoppable flood of writing he admired so much in his friend. Duncan "went on writing" and Gunn claimed he never returned from a meeting with his friend without at least having an idea or inspiration for notes. He ends the first part of this poem with praise of the productivity, rising from the ability to accept change as it came "while the pen wrote, and looked beyond conclusion" being fully immersed in the process of writing poetry. In the second part, Gunn jumps forty years ahead, Duncan suffering kidney failure, but still restless to write. He gives a detailed account, including Robert Duncan falling down the stairs of the Wheeler Hall at Berkeley one occasion, being proud having been the one who caught his friend. Still, the last years were drawing energy from Duncan; "He was now a posthumous poet" (4) Gunn quotes his own diaries. His end was near, "his life soon to be enclosed / Like the sparrow's flight above the feasting friends" closing the loving memory of a role model. The next poem "The Antagonism" is dedicated to Helena Shire, before slowly moving on to one core of this book. "A Home" tells the story of a child raised in an orphanage, which is not characterized as a good childhood, but at least it builds the foundation to a strategy to master life.

Then Gunn touches a subject he had avoided for decades with "My Mother's Pride" (9), about the values of Ann Charlotte Gunn and the effects they had on him. He realizes in the end that the profound psychological truth of our parents' influence is true, by stating (and accepting) "I am made by her, and undone." The next poem is then Gunn's relief from his early childhood trauma. "Forty-eight years ago" (10), he starts in "The

Gas-Poker” (10-11), writing about when he and his brother opened the barricaded door behind which the brothers found the dead body of their mother. He reports from a third person perspective. It was the only way he could write it, and still, it is a very emotional piece about the death of a loved one. “She had blocked the doorway so, / to keep the children out” (10), he excuses his mother’s fatal action by granting her the good will that she intended to not harm her offspring. Still, it could not prevent the sight from happening. The children of course were traumatized and insecure, “repeating their lament, / a burden, to each other” out of their confusion. “Elder and younger brother” contemplated their agony “until they knew what it meant”. He continues his report with the children functioning, robotically fulfilling their duties, as they “knew how to turn off the gas” and “take the appropriate measures, / telephone the police” (11) The graveness of the view that was so hard to understand is expressed by Gunn artfully and heartwarmingly. He compares the gas-poker which Ann Charlotte used to kill herself to “a sort of backward flute”. The instrument becomes alive and “breathed from the holes aligned / into her mouth till, filled up / by the music, she was mute.”

After this first climax about life and death, where love was incapable of giving enough reason to stay alive, Gunn describes everyday occasions, like “In the Post Office”, where the speaker is reminded of a loved one. In “Postscript: The Panel” Gunn explains the writing of the previous poem in prose, which is a unique approach. He then continues with “The Butcher’s Son” describing the work and life of makers of food. “The Operation” describes the course of life of people who have not been very fortunate. It deals with stealing and the horrors of memories about the Vietnam War. Like in *Moly*, where “Modes of Pleasure” was one title for two poems, in *Boss Cupid*, Gunn opposes two pieces, one titled “Arethusa Saved” to the less hopeful “Arethusa Raped”, evoking the impression that stories are stories. Their meaning is made, made up, and can be altered by the angle the subject is looked upon. In “Cat Island”, Gunn sums up his observations on his trips to Venice, before he includes his drug experiences with “Nights with the Speed Bros.”, (34) (who were actually “lovers, not brothers”) and “A System”, subtitled “PCP, or Angel Dust” (35-36) talking about the effects of that drug, connecting to his main subject in *Moly*. He becomes more blunt with the titles now. “Shit – an essay on Rimbaud” is as good as “The Dump”, before adding a loose collection of short poems titled “Jokes, etc.” which he concludes with a very revealing “The 1970s” (44) relating to his sexuality by comparing it to a biblical subject. The four lined poem reads

There are many different varieties of New Jerusalem,
political, pharmaceutical – I’ve visited most of them.

But of all the embodiments ever built, I'd only return to one,
For the sexual New Jerusalem was by far the greatest fun.²⁶⁰

This is a great transition to the next poem "Saturday Night" (45-46), which focuses on cruising in the Barracks of Folsom Street. He gives a full account of prowling "the labyrinthine corridors" (45) which feels like "being underground / as in a mine" giving a dark touch to the venue. People are "stripping at lockers and, with a towel tied round" went on the hunt for sex "peering at others, as others peer at them". He calls it a "Dionysian experiment", similarly to the sexual New Jerusalem, which was an attempt "to build a city never dared before". Gunn pities the closure of the venue, before it burnt down. He formulates his goodbye, "At length the baths catch fire and then burn down, / and blackened beams dam up the bays of ash" (46), burying the era of gay baths as he buried his friends who died of AIDS. Gunn closes this first part with "Painting by Vuillard", which is one of the last poems written and published by Gunn. It is his description of the profane that happens around museums, where high art can be enjoyed as well as the everyday life that is going on around the premises.

The second part "Gossip" "mainly represents G's playful side" (Wilmer, *New Selected Poems Thom Gunn* 267). They are funny pieces written in free verse. He is talking about friends and family. "Famous Friends" is about New York and what it offered to Gunn, which sums up his experience just like "A GI in 1943", which combines the subject of uniforms and young Gunn's encounter with soldiers at the age of fourteen, when he discovered his own body as a sexual instrument. The sexual endeavor is also represented by "Front Bar of the Lone Star" (57-58) on one of his favorite gay bars, yet with an unusual account of a patron who does not fit the general taste of attractiveness, being described as "Fat flesh egg / 400 lbs. of him" (57) but gay bars are places of wonder where, as Gunn finishes the poem "eventually everyone / can hope for a turn / at being wanted" (58). A heavier poem in this part is "To Donald Davie in Heaven" (59-60) which is dedicated to his dead friend, who the poet imagines in good company. He writes

I try to think of you now
nestling in your own light,
as in Dante, singing to God
the poet and literary critic" (59)

²⁶⁰ Lesser told Michael Nott the following: "I never would have said that when he was alive; it wouldn't have occurred to me. But now that I look at the course of his life, and what sex ended up meaning to him when he was old, it was really central at least to him, his sense of himself, and obviously to his sense of what everyone else was like too." Nott.

Self-irony is also not unfamiliar to Gunn, as becomes clear in “The Artist as an Old Man”. “Hi” (68) is the imagined opening speech of a waiter, as is the custom in American restaurants, only Gunn adds a little to the standard introduction, letting the waiter say things like “I may seduce / your wife, and you / will trust me.” He also reports on venues close to his home, like in “Coffee on Cole” (69) where the creative meet and where “a cup of coffee / can last hours”. As already mentioned, “Letters from Manhattan” is basically composed of letters and postcards from Billy Lux, courtesy of the author. Another account of drugs is “Blues for the New Year, 1997” (76-77), where Gunn was sad because his “dealer left town”, and nothing seems to flow as it used to in his life. He realizes his age and writes

I’m sixty-seven
and have high blood pressure
and probably shouldn’t
be doing speed at all. (76-77)

postponing what seems fun to him but might result in death. Among other loosely collected poems about homeless men and bar fights, which do not even have a title but are indicated by the symbol “§”, one sticks out. It is called “Office hours” (80-81) and it is one of the rarer poems dealing with Gunn’s job as a teacher. He confesses about “big handsome / sweaty boys” (80) who attract him by mind and looks and “chic / ironic girls”. He says, “we sit close / but sexuality / is grandly deflected” as they are merely in touch professionally. Still, he is flirting “they attract / me I make them / laugh”, but he makes it clear

we do not flirt with
one another
it is a poet
we flirt with
together (80-81)

again pointing out how important his love for literature is.

Part three is now the climax of love in the book. Gunn starts with the epitaph of Thomas Hardy’s “Her Second Husband Hears the Story”, reading “Well, it’s a cool queer tale” (Hardy and Gibson 860) and thus summing up the wideness of range that the book contains. Oddly enough, it starts with the series “Troubadour” on Jeffrey Dahmer, whose love is widely covered by the brutality which is also present in the person of the serial killer, making him a good example for the *Boss Cupid* Gunn is talking about. “Rapallo” (96-97) goes way back to the past, when Gunn and Kitay spent their Cambridge summer holidays together. It is a love poem, remembering the first steps of a great love story that

lasted for more than fifty years in the end. It conveys the lightness, but also the exhaustion of a holiday at the beach. Then Gunn continues in the present

That summer I was twenty-three,
You about twenty-one,
we hoped to live together, as we
(not to be smug) have done. (97)

This pride about the accomplishment is diminished though, as reality got hold of it

In four decades matter-of-factly
Coming to be resigned
To separate beds was not exactly
what we then had in mind

But as much as the relationship had changed, “The structure creaks we hold together” is the big finish, as there is something in love that lasts, or as Gunn puts it “Something of what we planned / remains of what was given us / on the Rapallo sand.”

In the next poem he reveals the secret of this great connection. The title says it all, being called “In Trust” (98-99), describing the yearly rhythm of good-bye and welcome back, living each their own life, yet, always returning, leaning into each other. While Kitay goes to his cabin or to his family in Kearney, Gunn stays in San Francisco with the cats. In this poem the cats also serve as an allegory for the poet himself. The cat is still with the couple, left behind in the kitchen, but he does not want “to be left behind, / though all the night he’ll stray”. (99) The “sociable cat” is a fitting image for Gunn,²⁶¹ who also loves company as well as his freedom and adventure. The poem closes with the stability between the two men

As you began
You’ll end the year with me.
We’ll hug each other while we can.
Work or stray while we must

being sure of the fact that they “do hold, even apart.”

After those monuments to love, Gunn goes a level higher, addressing Cupid directly. “You make desire seem easy” (100) he says “To Cupid” (100-101), whose purpose is to do exactly that. Gunn tells Cupid that he has observed the god of love in person. “Front Door Man” about Gunn’s lover and drug dealer and “A Wood Near Athens” are the prelude to the big finale of *Boss Cupid*, and in fact the final act of Thom Gunn’s career as a poet in publication. “Dancing David” (110-114) is the balance to

²⁶¹ Within the assemblage of his work room, there’s also an image of a cat, which is titled “Tom Cat“

“Troubadour”²⁶². He tells the story of the biblical figure in the three parts “God”, “Bathsheba” and “Abishag”, pointing out the morally questionable approach of this hero. In “God”, (110-111) the favored king “danced before the Lord” (110) and tells his situation in which he is not fully happy. In “Bathsheba” (112-113) he finds new hope, seeing the woman from above, nude, and falling for her beauty. The only problem for David is “her husband, loyal fighter” (112), but he has a plan. David says, “He has to carry me a letter / all unaware it dealt with him” plotting his death in battle, making Bathsheba his own, “love leading to duplicity”. Being aware of David’s behavior, the second part finishes with a positive outlook:

Yet for such commonness and greed
A wiser King than I was grown,
For in our very draining need
the seed of Salomon was sown (113).

Gunn is seeing the good in the murderous quest. Without this act of violence, David’s successor, Salomon the wise, would not have existed. The world is what it is, and fate only waits around the corner for another turn. “Abishag” (114) is the final part. It starts, “All my defiance in the past, I lay / Covered with bedclothes but gat no heat”, reminiscent of “The Man with Night Sweats” where the protagonist now is in a sexual situation that does not seem to offer any satisfaction. She is “the source of merely temporary mild heat” and is even compared to a dog, due to her innocence, which equals boredom in this case. In the end, David leans towards a hopeful thought, “a comfort to the memory” in which he

found,
already present in the God-dance, her --
the ultimate moment of the improvisation,
a brief bow following on the final leap.

Those lines are now also Gunn’s bow, before his final leap out of writing poetry.

In the early 2000s, Peter Pan still knew how to fly on happy thoughts, but it had become significantly harder. Thom Gunn never wanted to be old, but realized bit by bit that aging is unstoppable, even for him. On January 26th in 2001 he was alarmed by pain in his upper arm, but after being delivered to the emergency room a heart attack could not be confirmed. He had to submit to all the tests and was released as a healthy man, but he was part of a risk group and the concerns about his heart continued. He still took speed,

²⁶² The preceding poem to this series is titled “First Song” and subtitled “David”, even imitating the structure of “Troubadour” as a series of songs. The theme of music holds the two series together.

willingly risking heart failure and possible death, like his boy from “Courage – A Tale”. Another old man’s illness was cured when in early 2004 he had a cataract removed from his right eye. While he was getting older, in 2001 Gunn received another unpleasant call from his niece Jenny, informing him about the death of his aunt Mary on November 28th. Though still connected to England, the bond weakened with every person who died on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Of his close family, only a few were still alive: His aunts Catherine and Betty, and of course his brother Ander, as well as his friend Thérèse Megaw, all four being direct connections to his mother.

Almost fifty years after meeting his first mentor Yvor Winters in the United States and writing several times about him in the form of poetry and essays, Gunn started another project on the grand master of poetry in America. After reading a conference on Yvor Winters in Palo Alto, where Gunn in a wave of sentimentality checked on his former apartment on Lincoln Avenue, he was supposed to write an introduction to a volume of Winters’ selected poems. Even though Thom Gunn considered this a huge task, he accepted the challenge and finished the text which has been acknowledged as another great essay by the literature critic. Gunn’s love for literature and his deep connection to the movies was evident in one of his last visits to the cinema with August Kleinzahler. The two poets went to watch *The Hours*, a movie Gunn liked, and which reflected his views on literature, as it shows three women whose lives were somehow connected by Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. Literature as a part of life itself, as Gunn’s philosophy was, is put on the screen in that movie.

On February 12th of 2003, Gunn was informed about receiving a prize he could not decline. The fairly new David Cohen Prize was awarded to outstanding writers in London. This time was not only special because the award was being shared by two authors, but also because it was the first time it was given to a poet.²⁶³ The diary entry betrays a well-known old man’s grumpiness, as Gunn feels torn between feeling honored and not caring too much for these official occasions. As he was told to receive it in London, he writes, “probably will, but don't want to” (*Diary 2000-2004* 16) go to Great Britain. Only five weeks later, he sat on a Virgin Atlantic flight to London, tightened up to his neighbor’s elbow, not getting much sleep at all. The official character of this visit was underlined by him being picked up by a limousine provided by the Arts Council, being brought from London Heathrow to Hazlitt’s Hotel in Soho. It was so far from Gunn’s usual comfort zone, yet so fitting for the poetry rock star on the visit that would

²⁶³ The award was initiated by David Cohen in 1993 and awarded biannually.

be his last. The hotel's classical interior design was surely a little heavy for the aged man, who had to get twelve hours of sleep as soon as he arrived, not being the energetic young man he used to be. Of course, he got in touch with his family in England, first of all Ander, who called him first thing next morning to inform his older brother about the very expensive price of the hotel rooms of £190 per night, a price which the poet would have never paid, even if he had won another MacArthur Fellowship. Yet, it shows how much his presence in England was valued, but Gunn was still wondering why the council was so nice to him. Unfortunately, his aunt Betty could not make it to see him in London due to her age and condition, so Gunn followed his modest heart, eating a sandwich while sitting on the grass at Soho Square, watching the skaters, and visiting his ninety-five-year-old friend Thérèse Megaw again, who this time clearly showed her age by having a cracked voice and a bad memory, though Gunn enjoyed her presence a lot. After the day was over, Gunn concluded his evening with a bottle of red wine and pizza.

For the semi-official part of the journey, Gunn was taken care of by his interviewer James Campbell and his wife Vera, whose company Gunn enjoyed by having lunch with them, a walk and then a dinner at their place, being easy to satisfy, as usual. Apart from visiting his surviving relatives in Snodland after Betty could not come to London, he took part in exhausting interviews and an official meeting with Beryl Bainbridge, the co-winner of the Cohen Prize. While he did not like the interviews, he enjoyed the obligatory photoshoot with the Guardian's photographer Eamonn McCabe, who complimented Gunn's choice of wardrobe.²⁶⁴ The poet was pulling off a kind of seventy-four-year-old enfant terrible by wearing a printed t-shirt with the image of Bluto, from the cartoon *Popeye*, on a motorcycle, underneath his leather jacket, contrasting the heavy curtains of the room the picture was taken in.

After another visit to Megaw, it was time for the official award ceremony. Small talk, speeches and presenting the checks to the winners were the compulsory portion of the evening, which featured many important people, including the benefactor of the prize, David Cohen himself. All of this had to be balanced out by Gunn by having on the way back to his hotel in the evening, "some more wine at the Cafe Ronga, which put me nicely out of it." (Gunn, *Diary 2000-2004* 16) The next day was spent at Soho Square, pretending not to look at the attractive men around him, and afterwards with professional friends who took Gunn for dinner at a gay venue in London. Seeing his journey coming

²⁶⁴ "Tue 25: Charming Guardian photos, Eamonn McCabe, he liked my Bluto T-shirt." Gunn (*Diary 2000-2004* 16).

to an end, Gunn contemplated how he sits in “Soho square every day this fine weather, and pretend not to be looking at the macho young men on the benches and grass ... but I feel I was egoistical and less amicable than I might have been.” (*Diary 2000-2004* 16), slowly accepting he sometimes lost the connection to his surroundings, which was something he used to be good at. He grew tired, which also showed on the return flight when he slept before and after food despite sitting next to a hunky gay teacher.

Times had changed, and not only for the aging poet. When Kitay wanted to get married back in the late 1950s, Gunn made it clear he would not want to marry and had stayed true to his opinion until now, but he was still a practical man and for this reason he had already opened a joint bank account in order to have Kitay profit from his retirement benefits from Berkeley, such as health benefits for domestic partners (which they obviously were).²⁶⁵ Gay people did not have the right to be married anyways, but in California, things were a bit different, as in the early 2000s gay couples were provided with more rights. The city of San Francisco even offered for a time marriage licenses at City Hall to same sex couples, which was later ruled illegal by the state Supreme Court. Not wanting to marry anyway, Gunn applied for the next best thing in terms of legal rights for him and Kitay. After more than fifty years of being a couple they filed for domestic partnership, soundlessly, making it easier to inherit from each other in case of one partner’s passing. This was especially important with regard to the house in Cole Street. On June 10th of 2003, when they settled the documents at City Hall, Gunn informed his brother about this step, to spread the news, in case something happened.

As Gunn was always popular as a teacher, it was no surprise he was asked for lectures regularly, especially as he would have more time after his retirement, but usually Gunn would decline. In 2002 he wrote in his diary “Fri Nov 8: Stanford offered me the big job again this year, & this year I am greedy enough to accept” (*Diary 2000-2004* 15). He was most likely not being greedy for the money, as his finances were sufficiently taken care of. It was partly the challenge to try teaching again, and of course to get in touch with students, and the attention, at least a bit, as well as the opportunity to share his knowledge. In 2003 he started his term as Mohr visiting poet at Stanford. He was driven there as a part of the agreement with the university for this term. Being a poetry rock star, he taught in his leather jacket, but felt that he lost his touch. On his last day at Stanford,

²⁶⁵ “Fri Aug 7: M & I open joint savings account, to provide documentation for domestic partners health benefits for him (than me, for UC).“ Gunn (*Diary 1986-2000* 91).

he judges on his efforts harshly, writing “Wed Dec 3: last day at Stanford. I have been boring in this course, even to myself. I think my teaching peaked in my last couple of years before retirement, & I have meanwhile lost the break. So I step back, happily, into retirement.” (*Diary 2000-2004* 21)²⁶⁶

Just a few months after his visit in England, Gunn heard that Thérèse Megaw had died. His caretaker as a teenager and friend of his late mother passed away in January 2004. Gunn took sad notice of her death, writing in his diary that he owed her a lot, which is undoubtedly true and clearly visible as he visited her every time he went back to England. It was also in the first months of 2004 when his neighbor and former student and friend Steve Silberman observed changes in the behavior of the poet. The rock star, who had always been polite and friendly, stopped greeting people on the street, turned inwards, and when Silberman said hi to Gunn at a café, would even ignore him for no apparent reason. “Thom was checking out” (Silberman) said in an interview about Gunn who was slowly gliding out of the life he enjoyed so much.

In March 2004 the poet went to his favorite bar, the Hole in the Wall Saloon, once again, and got his pocket picked, as the bar was notorious for attracting darker characters. Once asked about the patrons coming to the place, Gunn answered that it must be about 50% homeless people. He was corrected; it was rather about 20% homeless people, but 50% of those that Gunn was interested in were homeless. In hindsight it does not appear as a coincidence that the instant he got robbed he met Phil Monsky, a homeless and druggy youngster. Gunn took him home without hesitation and this is where he let him stay for several weeks, despite the Family opposing this strongly. It must have been a very difficult time for Gunn, with Thérèse dead, as one of his strongest connections to home, his age inexorably showing, and then troubles with his Family he relied on so much. As he abruptly stopped writing in his diary on a daily basis, it is harder to reconstruct those weeks, but from the few summaries he still noted down, it becomes clear that he must have acted like a teenager at times and retreated deeper into the comfort that Monsky’s presence provided to him. The affair was sexual and included a high intake of drugs, especially speed. Gunn confused this sexual relation based on drugs with intimacy, which he was desperately longing for. He tried to grasp this piece of hope, and he tried hard. His deepening connection to the boy was only met by more headwinds from Kitay, Schuessler and Bair, who even reinforced the walls of the house to reduce their

²⁶⁶ Gunn wanted to live up to the notion that “the role of the teacher is to facilitate learning.” Robinson.

exposure to the noise that Gunn produced with Monsky. After another break in diary writing, Gunn writes about giving in to Kitay's demand of having Monsky move out until he returns from visiting his mother in Florida. As a response, Gunn who always kept his diary entries neutral or at least descriptively polite, now writes upon his return "M April 19: Phil moved out today because I promised M he wouldn't be here when he returned from FL, where his mother is about 100 & it seems dying" (*Diary 2000-2004* 23). Remorsefully remembering the weeks with Monsky, Gunn thinks about the happy days and threesomes and drugs, also figuring that his young lover would owe him a lot of money. Gunn had acted carelessly by trusting a stranger who seemed to give him what he needed, but who took advantage of this when he saw the chance. It might not have been serious on both sides, but the fact remains, that Phil Monsky was the last person Gunn showed more than sexual affection for. In order to raise Gunn's mood a bit, his friend Robert Gluck invited the poet to read in front of his class at State University on the 19th of April, which Gunn kindly accepted. It was his last reading in front of an audience.

In a culmination of events including the falling out over the Family's values and Phil Monsky, the recent aging of a person who did not want to be old, and his severe drug intake, Gunn found himself isolated by the end of April 2004. Early on April 25th, the doorbell of 1216 Cole Street rang at 6 am, despite a sign asking visitors not to ring before 9 o'clock in the morning. The other inhabitants reported that the reaction of opening the door was quick, so Gunn must have expected a visitor. As Bair, Schuessler and Kitay were out several times on that Sunday, nobody really took constant notice of what was going on, not expecting anything unusual. When around midday, nobody had heard from Gunn, suspicion rose that something was odd. Checking from outside the house, the blinds of his room were drawn. It was Schuessler who inquired if anyone had heard from the poet that day. The others said that they heard voices, and the television was running, which they interpreted as Gunn not being alone, as he rarely watched TV all by himself. When they had still not heard from him at 8 pm, Bair decided to check on his friend and found Gunn's body, with mouth wide open. Although the ambulance came quickly after Bair tried first aid, Thom Gunn was pronounced dead at 8.58 pm, Sunday April 25th of 2004. Heart failure was given as the primary cause of death at first but corrected by an autopsy, which diagnosed "acute polysubstance abuse" (Graham) as cause of death.

Thom Gunn today – What is left?

In a highly polarized time, where people are easily discounted because they do not fully share each other's opinion, it is hard to find a constant that combines so many seemingly contradictory opinions. Thom Gunn wrote about life in many aspects. He did not see in black or white, and was capable of dismantling the nimbus of Caesar and Napoleon as heroes while being capable of reminding people that behind the monster and serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, there was also a vulnerable human being who wanted what everyone longs for: love. On the cover of *Boss Cupid*, there is a quote from Glyn Maxwell, saying the following about Gunn's *Collected Poems*: "Always Gunn has written from that lost and loving center between brain and body, which thinks while it feels, and feels while it learns ... the human frame, fighting its dirtiest war for years, has at least got its strongest poet in the lists" (Gunn, *BC* cover) and it describes Gunn well, behind the praise. His quest for "the sniff of the real" is what carries through all of his poetry, despite the vast thematic and intellectual spectrum he presents. Gunn has a place for everyone and everything, writing for people who doubt, like him, searching for a more humane way, but always finding the same answer to the challenges: acceptance and love.

I hope I was able to shed light on the diversity of the person Thom Gunn in all of his different aspects, as he did not fit into categories at all. I also hope it becomes clear why Gunn is still relevant today, by pointing out and including the continuities his lives insisted on, and by putting them into the context of cultural, literary, homosexual and general history as well as the poetry and criticism he wrote. His life was not only about his timeless poetry, although his experiences and work contributed immensely to one another. It is timeless because it concentrates on the feelings of people, and their humanity, rather than the setting they are in. This is why a Thom Gunn poem can speak to the reader, as it did to me when discovering him for myself, whether it is set in ancient Greece, or the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.. People remain human and they deal with similar questions and struggles in every era, and Gunn gets to the core of these questions. Innocence, heroism, the soldier and his uniform, love and death – he covers all these myriad aspects, with his gentle, yet clear and characteristic style. Though emotionally sometimes cold he never leaves the reader feeling that the poet wants or needs something from his audience, neither attention nor praise. Gunn was capable of giving without receiving. He experienced life and observed it, while at the same time he was able to write about it, after contemplating the meaning. It is valuable enough, that

this alone would make it worth reading his poetry, which tells so much about the human struggle.

It is his authenticity that captured me, his willingness to let himself be guided by curiosity, even if he did not seem to like a poet's work, always giving it another chance. He realized that the stage of life he was in always defined the way he read literature, and thus, his understanding constantly changed. If today's audience understood this, the duality of right or wrong could be softened, edges might become less sharp, and like this, discussion of different opinions could become easier. Demagogues do not stand a chance against acceptance and the willingness to listen to each other, trying to understand. Gunn's patience with the human soul partly derived from his self-reflecting mind, and from his stance on pacifism, which he cultivated from an early age. It haunts his poetry and opens up the chance to see behind the uniform of war or mere violence. This peace-loving attitude makes it easy to forgive the other one or another stray bullet into a subject one, as a reader, might not find appealing, perhaps because it is too harsh, too cold in emotion or too queer.

Gunn's eagerness to not be easily defined is another reason to look into his work again. He was fully aware of the human need to categorize but was trying hard to balance it out. He did not accept the mark of being member of 'The Movement', much as he did not want to be seen as a 'queer poet'. He was a man, who happened to be queer, and thus had a specific angle on specific things. He would rather be a man who happened to be a poet than to accept any label whatsoever. However, it was important for him to be understood correctly. It was an individual voice, but it was all the more important to him that the reader was looking closely. His eagerness to accept criticism, but only for the right reasons, while not caring too much how others defined poetry, was present, as well as the anger about interviews which turned his words upside down. Precision is another quality that could be valuable today.

His defiance towards being defined from the outside was part of his rock star attitude. He lived the life he wanted. Money was less important than friendship or peace, acceptance was key to his philosophy. This stability within uncertainty is what makes Gunn's poetry, especially the newer works, attractive to the younger audience. His spectrum of work can provide easy accessibility, as there is subject available for almost everyone, as well as style variations. Compared to other poets of his generation, Gunn is easier to approach, and less opinionated. You can just read a poem and if you do not like it, move on to the next. Gunn is also a chronicler. Read *Moly*, if you want to learn about

the drug culture of the hippies, or the San Francisco generation of the 1960s, Read *Jack Straw's Castle* and *The Passages of Joy*, if you want to learn about how it is to come out of the closet as a gay person. For solid poetry about everything else, read his early work, and if you want to learn about the deepest sadness an epidemic can bring, brace yourself for the fourth part in *The Man with Night Sweats*, which is not easy to read without shedding a tear (– that is, if there is some piece of empathy in you). Gunn's oeuvre was the result of his lifelong quest of searching for meaningful subjects and putting them in the best context he could find for them. His diligence let him produce poetry that also varied in its genesis. It took him sometimes days and sometimes years to put his thoughts down. His ability to let go and not force the words out is shown in the craft of his words, and it transfers into a certain lightness for the reader. His search for unity in things is a process from his early fight for his own voice, and climaxes in the unfolding of his talent in his late works.

I hope this dissertation and its biographical design inspires curiosity for the poetry of Thom Gunn in the readers. His life was as colorful as the collage in his work room and as complex as poetry itself. Criticize my writing, find the mistakes, care for the man behind the story, but most of all, read what he still has to say. Enjoy his humor, sarcasm, his lack of respect for common understanding as well as his profound love for human qualities. Think of the circumstances the words have been written under, his values and his high expectations of his own craft, and indulge in the “stipulative imagination of Thom Gunn” (J. Miller Vol 4-1) who pushed his boundaries to make it worthwhile. His words certainly do.

After Thom Gunn died, Mike Kitay was asked, whether there would be a service for him, about which Kitay thought, “They're kidding, right? A service? For Thom? He'd turn over in his urn!” (Kitay, “On Thom Gunn”) The humble poet did not like the spotlight. Yet, he left footsteps that cannot be ignored. Besides his lively and profound poetry, there are traces of him for those who want to look for him, and they all lead towards his works. Gunn was the first poet to win the Triangle Award for Gay Poetry in 2001, which he liked, but which was also rather minor, at least compared to the MacArthur. Besides, he wanted to be remembered as a poet, not particularly as a gay poet. Yet, he left a mark on the gay society of San Francisco, which led to the award being renamed to the Thom Gunn Award after his death in 2004.²⁶⁷ Honoring young writers and

²⁶⁷ See also Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry Winners.

their talent was in Gunn's mind at all times. While the Award bearing his name is a very visible symbol of that, it is even more evident in all of those writers he influenced and mentored during his career, counting friends like Oliver Sacks, Steve Silberman, Tony Tanner and Clive Wilmer, and creative writing students like Charles Yu, as well as the people he inspired to write poetry, like Randall Mann. Gunn's work always had, and will continue to have, the potential to add meaning to our experiences, and contributes another valuable perspective to the world of the written word.



Figure 4: Footprint remembering Thom Gunn at the Ringold Alley Memorial

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