

**Simeon Kronenberg**

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**Thesis**

Love in contemporary American gay male poetry. Challenges and expansion in the works of Allen Ginsberg, Thom Gunn, Randall Mann, Eduardo C. Corral, Richard Siken and Jericho Brown.

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**Poetry**

*The tilted house*

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## ABSTRACT

That the gay experience of love is profoundly different from other love experiences is the foundation of this essay and is an idea that will be tested and explored via readings of the works of a group of contemporary American, gay male poets: Allen Ginsberg, Thom Gunn, Randall Mann, Eduardo C. Corral, Richard Siken and Jericho Brown, as flag-bearers of the gay male experience. This paper will investigate the ways in which gay poets view the world, especially in relation to notions of love, and how these are expressed through an identifiable and uniquely gay-male perspective.

The research paper is the first section of a two-part project. The second part consists of thirty-three poems that echo some of the core interests of the research paper, centred on the character of the male gay voice in contemporary poetry. Some of these poems have been (or will be) published in various journals and anthologies including *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *Cordite*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Contrapasso* and *Australian Love Poems, 2013*. The poems form part of a manuscript titled *The tilted house* that will be presented to publishers for possible publication.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown.<sup>1</sup>

Walt Whitman understood that the experience of being a gay man was profoundly different from that of being a straight one and that this division impacted as a strain on the fabric of American democratic life. In aching for an age when homosexuality would be glorified, rather than despised (or ignored) he adopted a utopian and homocentric fantasy as deep comfort. We are still waiting for Whitman's utopic vision to materialise, when 'manly friendship' will be applauded in all 'the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America' (and the world). In the meantime, we are left with the world as it is. Despite clear progress towards gay and lesbian liberation, in the West anyway, oppression and derision maintain their belligerence.

That the gay experience of love is profoundly different from other love experiences is the foundation of this essay and is an idea that will be tested and explored via close readings of the works of a group of contemporary, American, gay male poets, Allen Ginsberg, Thom Gunn, Randall Mann, Eduardo C. Corral, Richard Siken and Jericho Brown as flag-bearers of the gay male experience. This paper will investigate the ways in which these gay poets view the world, especially in relation to the notion of love, and how these notions are expressed through an identifiable and uniquely gay-male perspective.

However, firstly, what must be acknowledged is a range of dilemmas to do with the term 'gay poetry'. There are many questions that coalesce around this difficulty, best put by the American contemporary poet and critic, Brian Teare, when writing recently about Thom Gunn:

when I write "gay poetry", the phrase immediately, anxiously separates into critical questions: What exactly is "gay"? How do I define "poetry"? When these words are yoked together, what kind of writing practices do they signify, and do they in fact remain anomalous? And, perhaps more important, with

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, in Robert K Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition In American Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 1998), epigraph.

what intentions do I go about reading this obvious, elusive category of literature?<sup>2</sup>

As well as addressing these questions, explicitly or implicitly, there are many other critical questions to do with the nature of gay love and relationships, which will also need to be considered. For example: what kinds of relationships are available to gay men? Should these be judged in the same terms as heterosexual relationships? How meaningful are notions like ‘monogamy’? Are heterosexual models suitable for all relationships? Does longevity in relationships mean success? How are attitudes towards fucking critically different for gay and straight men?

Gay poets, in the main, are determined to claim difference by questioning orthodoxies that corral issues about the provenance of sexuality and love and the functioning of these constructs within an urban, heterosexist reality. These issues are always pertinent to gay male writers because they must bear the burden of political self-consciousness in a heterosexist world. As Robert K. Martin writes:

most writing has traditionally been heterosexual, not by declaration but by implication ... And heterosexual assumptions are presumed to be universal ... [F]or the homosexual man, who must repeatedly observe the differences between his own sexuality and the prevailing assumptions about ‘everyman’, sexual definition is a matter of individual struggle and personal decision.<sup>3</sup>

With Martin’s claim ringing loudly, this paper is an investigation of the development of a particularly assertive (if at times despairing) gay voice in contemporary poetry.

The essay begins with two poets whose influence is clearly manifest: Allen Ginsberg and Thom Gunn, who were among the first wave of post war poets in America. Also, in order to outline a clear context for these voices and indeed for the poets’ attitudes towards love, the paper investigates the work of four, contemporary, prize-winning poets: Randall Mann, Richard Siken, Eduardo C. Corral and Jericho Brown. While these later poets are treated relatively briefly, a more thorough investigation of Ginsberg and Gunn underpins this investigation in order to suggest that the younger poets are part of a clear lineage. Further, this exegesis will explore a thematic to do with love and its critical importance within the poetry. The bias therefore will be towards understanding a narrative of difference and will only glancingly deal with

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Teare, ‘Our Dionysian Experiment’, *At The Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, ed. Joshua Weiner (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006), 182-3

<sup>3</sup> Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, xv-xvi

more formal considerations, such as rhyme, meter, form and so on, and then only in terms of immediate relevance.

I am interested in what makes poets determined to express the essence of love as they see it. This is not necessarily a 'confessional' impulse, although it may well be, but is rather politically assertive even triumphalist and certainly challenging and, I would add, radicalised through apprehensions of difference and separateness, and so subversive as represented (particularly) in the works of both Allen Ginsberg and Thom Gunn, as context for an investigation of contemporary poets who came after. To that end, this study will be posited on the basis of the following key areas of interest: homosexuality as decisive difference, the idea of 'separation' as necessary, sexual explicitness (sex as sex), the significance of the AIDS crisis and the insufficiency of Queer theory, and tied to this latter notion, the persistent imperative of a liberatory, gay politics.

### **Allen Ginsberg and Thom Gunn: progenitors of radical thought**

Allen Ginsberg lived at a time when gay men were vilified and the act of love itself between men was outlawed. Against this reality, both potent and demeaning, the poet defiantly trumpeted gay, sexual love as central to radical change. His view was that love itself formed the locus of revolution and resistance and in this at least, he paid allegiance to imperatives first promulgated by Walt Whitman, the great 'courage-teacher'<sup>4</sup> himself.

Ginsberg had come to this stance after the horrors of the Second World War, as it slowly became clear how bestial and depraved many had acted during it. This knowledge had a disturbing effect on the young writer and his friends who began to see, on the streets and bars of New York, an alternative society forming, one made up of resistant and diverse groups: blacks, junkies, Hispanics, gays and prostitutes, and artists, people for whom:

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<sup>4</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'A supermarket in California', *Collected Poems 1947-1997* (Penguin, London, 2009), 144

a new set of values was needed ... how could life continue as before after the horrific revelations of the concentration camps and the complicity of ordinary German people, and the dropping of the atomic bomb.<sup>5</sup>

To Ginsberg and the other writers of his generation in New York (particularly the Beat poets), and artists across the country:

the denizens of Times Square – the junkies and prostitutes, the hustlers and thieves, the con-men, homosexuals, transvestites and outcasts ... were more real, closer to real human values, more in touch ... than the uptight citizens behind their white picket fences and in the corridors of power.<sup>6</sup>

Ginsberg wrote in bitterness and shame, often deploying lacerating irony in order to attack American democracy. He had lost faith in American ideals, and his country had failed gay men, so Ginsberg found himself an outcast, inhabiting a homophobic and oppressive society, one which would certainly change over his lifetime, but nonetheless continued to manifest the kinds of homophobic and war mongering imperatives that Ginsberg and his brother poets continued to rail against.

Importantly, illicit sexual behaviour, that which Ginsberg promulgated and celebrated, was a touch-stone for protest, and fundamentally transgressive in nature.

As Tim Dean writes:

Whenever same-sex erotic activity is explicitly outlawed [as indeed it was in Ginsberg's time] ... an air of the transgressive clings to its every representation ...<sup>7</sup>

Once laws are enacted that legalise, or at least decriminalise same sex relations, it is difficult to claim transgression, or even to continue to believe in the hegemony and purpose of a radically defined and resistant politics. The issue then becomes, what is the nature of absorption and acceptance for 'outsiders' within the state (those for whom their very identities were tied to the notion of the outsider, gays, women and so on), and how is it possible to maintain a radical and resistant stance once the state accepts and absorbs (and flattens) 'difference' in terms of sexual expression and preference? Does absorption mean death to a distinctive gay identity? Has acceptance betrayed us? Perhaps Ginsberg's eventual flight into Buddhism should be seen as his response to these questions.

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<sup>5</sup> Barry Miles, ed. *The Beat Collection* (Virgin Books, London, 2005), xii

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Tim Dean, 'The Erotics of Transgression', *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, ed. Hugh Stevens (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011), 67

Thom Gunn lived through the same period as Ginsberg, but came to an understanding about his own sexuality and the impact of that on his poetry (and life), much later. However, when finally he accepted that he was gay, this found expression in moving and deeply loving accounts of the lives of friends living with AIDS. His compassion was realised in poems about personal bravery and stoicism in the face of tremendous horror. As a consequence, Gunn became the chronicler of one of the darkest periods in gay history and it is to him that we owe so much in relation to an understanding about the significance of the AIDS epidemic in America in the early years, especially within the gay community in San Francisco, then one of the largest such communities in the world. In the Nineteen-Eighties, Gunn's friends lived under the constant threat of a profoundly debilitating disease that scythed through gay ranks in a way unmatched in the rest of the community. However, despite this reality, Gunn's poems also celebrated the power of sex, eroticism, and drug taking, understanding that the combination of drugs and sex could lead to greater consciousness of the self and the world. In Thom Gunn's poems, sex and drugs:

became dual aspects of Eros: on the one hand, drugs and sex can open us up to vistas of human freedoms and discoveries; and on the other, they can lead to darker recognitions about the world and ourselves. Gunn's poems explore both aspects in a way that is compassionate, nuanced and wide ranging in scope.<sup>8</sup>

Gunn came to articulate a kind of liberated, open sexuality, which included the potential for drug use and the possibility of bliss at a time when the fear of AIDS was most prevalent. His defiance reflected a development in both his thinking and in his attitude towards his own sexual practice and came as a direct consequence of his having moved to America, where, in San Francisco, he lived within the most 'out' gay community in the world and where, initially anyway, there was enormous freedom in regard to gay, sexual activity. This altered during the plague years, and Gunn's own poetry along with it. However, Gunn never lost his belief in the necessity for love as a defining force, both within individual lives and for his community. His views were shaped partly in considered and careful political opposition to the homophobia he felt emanating from the state, which he resisted in poems of great compassion and love.

Gunn and Ginsberg both died in the early years of this century, but their poetry continues to influence those who came after. Younger poets, like Randall Mann,

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Sleight, 'Tom Gunn's New Jerusalem', *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, ed. Joshua Weiner (University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 2009), 242

Richard Siken, Jericho Brown and Eduardo C. Corral (along with many more not investigated here, such as David Trinidad, Dennis Cooper and Rafael Campo to name only a few) have distinguished themselves through a kind of determined, politically aware rage, still relevant because the conditions that define homophobia abound. As Michael Farrell and Jill Jones point out, at least in liberatory and social justice terms, issues to do with homophobia and its consequences still exist: 'five minutes in a high school, or of watching a TV sitcom should be enough to tell you that'.<sup>9</sup>

Sexual explicitness and imaginative bravado, that has to do with the very intensity and meaning of gay sexual practice (and fantasy), continues to be a legacy left by Ginsberg and Gunn, reflected in the poetry of the younger generation who bravely continue to 'doggedly explore the epistemology, ontology, and phenomenology of nonheterosexuality'<sup>10</sup> and in so doing, enact, describe and promulgate a radical imperative. This is undeniably attractive to the contemporary reader, because of its very thorniness and its transgressive, dramatic energy. For the reader, particularly the gay reader, there is intense pleasure to be had through undertaking what might be called a 'perverse' reading style, that:

which is insistent about taking pleasure in the disjunct, the places where dominant codes of meaning, identity, identification, or desire are held off by mysteriousness, excessiveness, or obliquity [and] might find the burrs on a text the most delectable bits of it because of their burr-likeness, because they do not simply flatten into the fabric, because a perverse reader can attach to the unattachedness of these moments.<sup>11</sup>

Deeply provocative sexual energy, as expressed in the poems investigated, has its beginnings in the work of both Gunn and Ginsberg (particularly in Ginsberg's 'Please Master', a poem about a dominance/submission scenario, uncompromisingly opening up possibilities for poets that follow) and also in Gunn's collection, *The Man with Night Sweats*, because of its insistence on deep compassion and love for a clearly identified and 'outsider' gay brotherhood, where irony remains potent but in check to sentiment.

Living in a new age of anxiety, many gay male poets feel the weight of a profound dislocation from heterosexual social/sexual norms and this characterises their

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Farrel and Jill Jones, *Out of the Box: Contemporary Australian Gay and Lesbian Poets*, (Puncher & Wattmann, Sydney, 2009), 9

<sup>10</sup> Vincent, *Queer Lyrics : Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*, xv

<sup>11</sup> Vincent, *Queer Lyrics : Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*, 4

particular and collective voices. Their best works are, as a consequence, critically provocative, declamatory and often self-consciously radical, offering both a critique of and resistance to heterosexist and (particularly) suburban notions of what love and sex are and by extension what love poetry might be.

### **Homosexuality as decisive difference**

I understand the world in translation. That is, as a gay man, I am surrounded by and live within an overwhelmingly heterosexist hegemony. Everything I know and desire is filtered through notions of normativity, defined according to heterosexual imperatives. My fundamental desires, those that determine purpose and relations with others, are viewed as essentially ‘other’, because contextual, cultural tropes are inevitably tied to heterosexist notions, delivered via heterosexist terminology. This occurs in literature, the visual arts and in music and indeed in all cultural expressions. As a consequence, I (mostly) feel like a foreign visitor, struggling to understand an alien language that is figuratively and conceptually heterosexualised. This is a story whose ‘repetition constitutes not only the continuation of cultural values but also the continuation of culture itself’.<sup>12</sup> The burden then of ‘translation’ falls to me and to my gay brothers. We must always translate the world or remain in the cold.

Further, and importantly, it remains critical to recognise that homosexual sex (that which defines us as gay) is not the same as heterosexual sex and so the experience of sex and love is deeply different from that of our heterosexual neighbours and this impacts on the core of meaning in the lives of gay men (and poets) and the work of the poets I will examine.

As readers of poetry, we are also different and this difference too is marked. As Jill Jones in her introduction to *Out of the Box: Contemporary Australian Gay and Lesbian Poets*, rightly claims when speaking of a readership:

Who ‘we’ are as writers is central even if that ‘who’ isn’t always easy to pin down ... (but) it does make a difference, whether we like it or not, when

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<sup>12</sup> Hugh Stevens, ed. ‘Homosexuality and Literature: an introduction’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011),1

readers know (or rightly suspect, in some cases) that a lesbian wrote this sonnet or a gay man wrote that sestina.<sup>13</sup>

### **Separation from the mainstream**

It is necessary to separate gay poets from their heterosexual contemporaries if the significance of gay poetry and its proper contribution to the culture is to be understood. Leaders of the Black Panther movement apprehended this imperative in the Nineteen-Sixties, when black people felt the need to develop a challenging, defiant and separatist platform from which to seek justice and equality, otherwise (in their view) they risked 'Uncle Tom-ism', that is the weakening of their radical, political/cultural purpose through absorption. The gay movement needs (still) to do the same. It is entirely necessary to proclaim separate identities as a first step towards fundamental equality and eventual integration.

Also, each of the poets examined subverts comfortable notions developed to sustain the idea of the 'success' of gay integration (so far) and, by implication, profoundly questions orthodoxies regarding sexuality within a suburban, heterosexist setting. Instead, gay poets celebrate eroticism and love through descriptions of sexual practice and fantasy that might remain distinctly uncomfortable for many heterosexual readers (and indeed for some homosexual readers as well). Poets like Siken and Brown in particular, repudiate (perhaps ambiguously but nonetheless effectively) what is promulgated in 'straight' society as normative and instead proclaim intensity in difference through an awareness of the otherness of a gay and separate sexual identity.

The imperative for the gay male poet to 'come out' or not (necessary because otherwise he will be presumed to be heterosexual) is not an issue for a heterosexual poet. Gay poets must in fact proclaim, stand by, declare, tout, reference, and exalt their identities as distinct sexual beings. Otherwise their poems will be mis-read, mis-identified and as a consequence, diminished. This need for declaration is not a problem for heterosexual writers, whose sexuality is presumed. It is for gay writers to

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<sup>13</sup> Farrel and Jones, *Out of the Box: Contemporary Australian Gay and Lesbian Poets*, 23

bear the burden of self-consciousness and if they resile from some sort of declaration, overt or covert, they risk weakening, or at best, mis-directing their purpose.

Further, in poetry anyway, it remains true that identification with author and subject makes for a more satisfactory reading of any text and is the source of great pleasure and excitement. There is considerable delight to be had by the queer reader through undertaking a perverse (self-conscious) reading style

which is insistent about taking pleasure in the disjunct, the places where dominant codes of meaning, identity, identification, or desire are held off by mysteriousness, excessiveness, or obliquity ...<sup>14</sup>

Gay poets are defined as gay because they:

doggedly explore the epistemology, ontology, and phenomenology of nonheterosexuality.<sup>15</sup>

This is not to be undervalued, especially in a world where gay voices are only occasionally heard, or often mis-heard.

### **Sexual explicitness**

That much gay poetry is explicit and challenging is of great import because it flags a determination on the part of some gay poets at least, to be true to fundamental (and separate) sexual identities, practices and interests, which can be seen as antithetical to heterosexual mores expressed through bourgeois, heterosexual behaviours. Michel Foucault reminds us that we remain dominated by a Victorian sexual regime even today, where 'the image of the imperial code is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality'<sup>16</sup> and he contrasts this with prevailing attitudes in the Seventeenth Century when:

a certain frankness was still common, it would seem. Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Vincent, *Queer Lyrics : Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*, xii

<sup>15</sup> Vincent, *Queer Lyrics : Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*. xii

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans, Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, New York, 1990), 3

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

It appears that gay poets today are keen to return to an equally restraint-free sexuality, via a kind of radical explicitness, perhaps more in keeping with Seventeenth Century attitudes. Jericho Brown writes:

We're against the law.  
No one keeps me big as you. Fatten me sweet ogre.  
Get me some meat. Bring home food. Feed.<sup>18</sup>

There is nothing here of the 'monotonous nights of the Victorian Bourgeoisie'<sup>19</sup> but rather a lascivious delight in the coded explicitness of language used to explore penetrative, raw, gay sex. Poets write with such demanding intensity and ferocity because they are gay and because they remain conscious that they live within a heterosexist/patriarchal social order. This results in an acute awareness of difference and demands an imperative to sharpen the defensive and declamatory knives, as it were, through language that is sharpened and made challengingly explicit, coded as that may be.

### **Anti-sentimentalism (sex is sex)**

Notions of love as a sentimentalised trope are manifest in literature, and are often combined with an attendant perception that sex should ever only be the unique expression of love. This raises the problem of monogamy, surely a self-defeating, impossible-to-live up to 'ideal'? Gay men have understood for a long time that monogamy is simply too difficult to maintain and strains relationships unnecessarily. Thom Gunn for one knew this and while he valued his relationship with Mike Kitay, he was nonetheless free to explore sexuality and sex, as bodily necessity, rather than the expression of 'faithfulness' foisted onto all of us by pleasure-denying prudes. Sex is sex and while it might bring with it a consciousness of the oneness of experience through ecstasy (at its most fulfilling during orgasm perhaps), it might not. It is just as likely to lead to an apprehension of aloneness and alienation and indeed further separateness, even within relationships. In gay experience, sex is more often than not, just that, sex. That a whole bourgeois superstructure of taboo, restriction and denial exists around sex is certainly not the fault of gay men.

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<sup>18</sup> Jericho Brown, 'Why I cannot Leave You', *Please* (Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 2008), 59

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, 3

## The crucial significance of AIDS

The devastation of AIDS, a ‘plague’, as Thom Gunn so persuasively apprehended it, cuts across and through the gay male, community, demanding very particular and sustained political and emotional concentration and so determines a deep re-definition and re-evaluation of the very notions of love and sex (and sexuality), creating in particular a renewed consciousness of being gay in a hostile world, as well as deep anxieties regarding love-making and sex.

The profound impact that the burgeoning AIDS crisis had on the gay community in particular was devastating but is perhaps hard to fathom now that we are on the other side of it (at least as far as gay experience in the West is concerned). But, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of the Nineteen-Eighties:

The first reports of the disease had come out only in 1981, and its sheer newness, its untreatableness, and its ballooning mortality brought a sudden, encompassing experience then to be in a room of vibrant young people, conscious that within a year or two, all but a few of them would have sickened and died ... an unremitting horror comparable to that of wartime ... [in] a war full of disowned losses without a home front, generating grievous news that no one was willing to receive<sup>20</sup>.

Even today, AIDS remains a threatening reality. In Randall Mann’s most recent collection, *Straight Razor* (2013) the syndrome is a constant, looming presence in the poems about love and sex, where desire is conjoined with fear:

... give it up and let  
me have my way. And the gin-soaked dread  
that an acronym was festering inside.<sup>21</sup>

The AIDS epidemic has meant that gay writers were (and are) forced to recognise a deep fissure between their own desires (for a kind of free-for-all as far as sex was concerned) and the fear of contracting AIDS. It seemed to some that the pleasures involved in liberated sexual practice were the reason for a kind of moral punishment meted out to them. This profoundly destructive attitude was widely held, in particular, among the fundamentalist Christian fraternity, who saw (see) AIDS as God’s punishment, and San Francisco in particular, as Sodom or Gomorrah. Also, there was

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<sup>20</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 2008), xv

<sup>21</sup> Randall Mann, *Straight Razor* (Persea Books, New York, 2013), 3

a growing gap between the gay male's experience of the world (social, political, sexual) and the experience of the rest of the community. The AIDS epidemic is a scourge that cannot be ignored in any investigation of what it means to be human in the Twenty-first Century. It remains a moral marker, just as the Holocaust does. Further, it is fair to say that the AIDS crisis only came to general public notice once the disease began to threaten the heterosexual community. This was a profound moral failing on the part of various governments of the time, one that reverberates still. Also, as Eve Kosofsky Sedwick writes:

The intense dread of that period included a political fear that AIDS phobia and the attendant sex panic would offer a pretext on which the entire society might be stripped of its liberties... (and) how the punishing stress of loss, incomplete mourning, chronic dead, and social fracture ... imprinted a characteristic stamp on much of the theory and activism of that time.<sup>22</sup>

And I would add, on the poetry and writing of that time as well, and this is relevant even now. Given this tortured political history, it is hardly surprising that AIDS continues to impact in a marked way on contemporary gay poetry. We are still living with its victims and dealing with the fact that expressions of sexuality are fraught with profound risk.

### **The insufficiency of queer theory**

'Queer' theorising has complicated and undermined the achievements of the politically radical, gay liberationist movements of the Nineteen-Seventies and Nineteen-Eighties and has made sexuality (and therefore identity) so ambiguous and contingent that it is difficult to stitch together any protest, let alone a cohesive, liberationist strategy in any traditional left-wing political sense.

While supporting the development of queer theory, Annamarie Jagose makes the following claim, 'as queer is unaligned with any specific identity category, it has the potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions...'<sup>23</sup> Indeed, and here lies the problem. While Jagose claims 'profitability' in 'Queer's' very diffuseness (and therefore presumably its capacity to be tacked on as 'value adding' to just about

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<sup>22</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, xv.

<sup>23</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York University Press, New York, 1996), 2

anything), there is also the potential for dilution of the urgency and focus necessary towards a radical, political thrust. Radical effectiveness is therefore profoundly and irrevocably compromised, as even Jagose seems to acknowledge (somewhat uneasily) when she asserts that queer identification should still be understood 'largely in relation to the more stable, more recognisable, categories of 'lesbian' and 'gay''.<sup>24</sup> Really? Then what is the point of 'queer' if indeed it should still only be 'understood' in terms of 'gay' and 'lesbian' anyway? Jagose clearly wishes to have her cake and eat it.

It was (and remains) simple: the binaries that determine our lives exist. They define and constrain us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as much as they did in the 'nineties and earlier last century. Certainly, 'gay' and 'straight' are essentialist, binary categories and I am aware of the negative and limiting notions surrounding them and of the work that Judith Butler, among others, has done to subvert their 'abjected'<sup>25</sup> histories (and even those of gender itself). However, if we check with any young gay lad in an Australian outer suburban high school, or in a Chicago tenement, or in the mid-west of America, or within a farm community, or on the gang-ridden streets of Harlem or South LA, or on the streets of Muslim Senegal, black or white or Latino or Asian, he knows exactly what it means to be a 'gay' boy in a 'straight' world. Being concerned, theoretically, about his identity is not a luxury he can afford because his enemies are not so troubled by such niceties. The lived reality for the gay boy forced to eat his own shit, or be driven to suicide, or have his home burned down around him in Senegal<sup>26</sup>, is that the binaries define him. Essentially, they define his life in terms of the failure of hope.

The gay liberation model remains the most effective in practical, political terms and is therefore optimistic at its core, in that it asserts core identity as a given, from which a radical, activist movement can be initiated. This position is neither conservative nor reactionary, despite the potential anxiety that promoting 'fixed' discourses to do with sexuality might provoke. I maintain that the only logical and indeed radical position is one that asserts gay as different (and oppressed) by a straight hegemony, and that in its political dilution, the queer debate (in being all things to all) has fundamentally misfired, and so sacrificed political agency and urgency, and has thus been seduced

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> See Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer' in *Bodies That Matter* (Routledge, New York, 2011), 169-185

<sup>26</sup> As described by my friend, Kafka, who recently fled from Senegal fearing for his and his family's lives, after the Senegalese court found him guilty of the 'sin' of homosexuality.

and absorbed.<sup>27</sup> This at a time when, according to José Esteban Muñoz: ‘Queerness is not yet here’<sup>28</sup> anyway. He goes on, in his introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, to claim that:

Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued as a potentiality...used to imagine a future.<sup>29</sup>

This is all very well, comforting perhaps. However, in the anxious meantime, it remains incumbent on the gay community (and on gay poets) to assert particular and different (and determined), radical imperatives based on clearly defined thought and practice. The poets I will examine in this paper all do this.

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<sup>27</sup> For the counter argument to my assertion that ‘queer’ is fundamentally passive politically (and so negative in its effectiveness), see in particular, Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*.

<sup>28</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, New York), 1

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

## 2. ALLEN GINSBERG

I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.<sup>30</sup>

Allen Ginsberg was not reticent about his gay identity; it was at the core of his consciousness and breathed life into his understanding of himself, as both a poet (working within an important trajectory in the wake of other gay poets, notably Walt Whitman and Hart Crane) and committed radical activist. Ginsberg's gayness was the determining driver of his poetic output and the aggression and determination of poems like *Howl*. His gay identity was and remains the most significant and telling aspect of his development as a poet battling conformity and cant. As Catherine A. Davies writes,

homosexuality...functions at the very centre of Ginsberg's vision for America ...with sexuality acting as the catalyst for his challenge to traditional Anglo-American forms.<sup>31</sup>

Ginsberg identified with a long tradition of gay exemplars in poetry and found particular inspiration in the works of Walt Whitman, a poet whose prophetic and rhetorical works formed the foundational grit for Ginsberg's own, especially in the early poems. Moved by Whitman's notions about 'adhesiveness' ('the love of men for each other' as equals<sup>32</sup>) Ginsberg developed an even more radical challenge towards straight society, tied to concepts about American democratic imperatives and their spectacular and oppressive war-mongering failures. Further, and importantly, Ginsberg found in Whitman's long lines and free verse a loosening, democratic trope that opened up possibilities about what poetry should and could become, free of formal structures. He developed a declamatory style, expressing his own implacable drive to celebrate what he saw as homosexual consciousness, modified through a deeply realised antagonism directed at the repressive, anti-love and capitalist America. In this, he implicitly lamented the passing of any Whitman-style political idealism. As Richard Bozorth argues,

Much of [Whitman's] importance for later gay poets [and Ginsberg in particular] came from his prophetic lyric mode, in which several kinds of liberation are interwoven: that of the poetic line and rhythm from constriction

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<sup>30</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'America', *Allen Ginsberg: Collected Poems 1947-1997*, 154-156

<sup>31</sup> Catherine A. Davies, *Whitman's Queer Children: America's Homosexual Epics* (Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2012), 77

<sup>32</sup> Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, 30, and 33-37

by prosodic convention, a verbal liberation from poetic diction and reticence about the body and sex, physical liberation of the body from sexual repression, and all these things with a vision of progressive American freedom ... and an exploration of homoeroticism [through] the modern cityscape as much as the conventional landscape of the pastoral.<sup>33</sup>

Ginsberg's own poetry borrowed much from Whitman, both formally and politically, and certainly in terms of taking a stance against an establishment, which he saw as critically corrupt, war-obsessed and therefore, love-denying. Also, and not incidentally, Whitman's 'American-ness' was of great import to Ginsberg, who, as one in a line of gay American poets, saw himself as implacably 'American' even while he felt dislocated from the mainstream, separated as he was by both his Jewishness and his sexuality.

His sense of 'American-ness' is most apparent in the ferocity and bitterness of his attacks on the State. The poem 'America' in *Howl* is unrelenting in its expression of rage and loathing for the country of his birth:

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.

...

I can't stand my own mind.

America when will we end the human war?

Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb...<sup>34</sup>

No one who cared less could have written these lines, they are the product of a deep and pervading rage to do with Ginsberg's own identity as an American, and ambivalence based on love for a country where his parents and family had found refuge.

Ginsberg's poem, 'Pull My Daisy' was written in 1949 with Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, when Ginsberg was enjoying the company of both men as well as that of William Burroughs and other writers of the 'Beat' generation in New York. 'Pull My Daisy' is not a love poem, but rather a polemic addressed to a broad public, whom Ginsberg exhorts (or hectors perhaps) to think radically about sex and love. The poem provides the beginning of a context within which many of his future love poems can

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<sup>33</sup> Richard R. Bozorth, 'Naming the unnameable: lesbian and gay love poetry', *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, ed. Hugh Stephens (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011), 210.

<sup>34</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'America', *Collected Poems 1947-1997*, 154

be read. It is the seed of a political, anti-corporate challenge, tied to an apprehension of his own sexuality. 'Pull My Daisy' exhibits the poet's determination to claim sexual territory as subject matter of a very different kind, centred on the cock and asshole and the pleasures to be derived from a thorough exploration of both. The asshole has always been a contested site and sodomy was long outlawed as a sexual practice in America and the West, and still is in many parts of the world. In the 'fifties, the taboo remained very firmly in place in America. In Ginsberg's poem a definite and forceful challenge tears at conventional notions about sexuality, expressed determinedly in terms of fucking and licking. Further, Ginsberg's insistence on the joys to be had via the asshole is transgressive, and remains subversive. At the time of its writing, no one, except perhaps in the pornography industry, or on the streets, used words like 'asshole' or 'cock', or talked about a 'golden beam' (piss) as Ginsberg did so shamelessly in 'Pull my Daisy'. The use of this kind of terminology was (and was meant to be) both challenging and funny:

Rob my locker  
lick my rocks  
leap my cock in school  
Rack my lacks  
lark my looks  
jump right up my hole  
Whore my door  
beat my boor  
eat my snake of fool  
Craze my hair  
bare my poor  
asshole shorn of wool ...<sup>35</sup>

This poem is essentially a word game and a nonsense song, indeed the poets insist on verbal play and silliness, and delights in his own cleverness. The poem mocks and stretches credibility, as in 'craze my hair' and jokes about contemporary buzz words: *craze, pot, nut, hole, dig, hip, bone, rock* and so on, words with clear sexual origins and familiar enough to jazz aficionados. These words were certainly part of street culture vernacular, but they did not usually find themselves in the company of high art. 'Pull My Daisy', in being both experimental and sassy, is a self-conscious

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<sup>35</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'America', *Collected Poems 1947- 1997*, 154-156

challenge to orthodoxies, both literary and sexual. Because of the boldness of the language, the poem has a pungency and delightedness (not to mention an erotic charge) that is hard to deny. It is a poem of exuberance and displays an exhibitionistic love of sex, asserting an energetic abandon and the cheek of youthful energy. Nonetheless it remains highly serious in its transgressive, politically radical determinations. Importantly, 'Pull My Daisy' was written at a time when homosexuality was illegal and sodomy could lead to prison terms for authors (or indeed anyone) found guilty of it. Indeed, sodomy was prohibited in some states in America until the present century. In defiance, Ginsberg writes: 'jump right up my hole' and 'bare my poor asshole shorn of wool', seemingly oblivious of the legal dangers, or rather challenging them at the deepest level, via a lip-smacking use of potent swear words. And here lies the poem's essential character, as an expression of wilful transgression, within a profoundly realised political purpose. The poem proclaims and celebrates erotic territory that is challenging to heteronormativity and so poses a threat to any sanctified notions of sex and love.

The poem is radical in its essence and an early expression of the resistant stance Ginsberg continued to develop in 'Howl', where a kind of visionary and epic, if sometimes hysterical and manic, sensibility becomes manifest; and where Whitman-like lines deliver a deeply problematised view of America, a country both poets loved and admonished equally: loved for its promise of democratic freedom, loathed for its (hetero)sexualised timidity and latent violence. 'Howl' is a challenge to the drab formlessness and flatness of middle-class life in America.

In the poem, 'Malest Cornifici Tuo Catullo' Ginsberg addresses his writing friend, Jack Kerouac, also famous for his interest in boys (along with his profligate heterosexual adventuring):

I'm happy Kerouac; your madman Allen's  
finally made it: discovered a new young cat  
...  
You're angry with me. For all of my lovers?  
It's hard to eat shit, without having visions;  
when they have eyes for me it's like Heaven.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'Malest Cornifici Tuo Catullo' (Things Cornificius Your Catullus), *Collected Poems 1947-1997*, 131

Here Ginsberg proclaims the joy of eating a young and beautiful boy's ass, because this act provides him with visions, an extraordinary claim but one entirely consistent with Ginsberg's view of the world.

'Many loves' is another early poem that exemplifies a clear attitude towards another part of the body of great interest to Ginsberg, the cock. In this poem there is a long description of two young men finding themselves (after a night out drinking) sharing a bed and then experiencing desire, tenderness and sex, which finds final expression in fellatio. The poet remembers the incident perhaps some four or five years later and that the lovemaking was enormously significant to him and possibly to Neil Cassady (his remembered companion) as well, although this is less clear. Certainly the event was an important discovery for Ginsberg because it led to a deeper apprehension of the symbolic value of 'passivity' in the sexual act, as fellator rather than fellated, as fucked rather than the one who fucks. The poem describes in great detail how the lovemaking occurred. This would have been impossible of course for Whitman or Hart Crane and was even in Ginsberg's times, radical. The poem begins boldly and is arresting in its unapologetic directness:

Neal Cassady was my animal: he brought me to my knees  
And taught me the love of his cock and the secrets of his mind<sup>37</sup>

Ginsberg introduces us to a love poem very different in tone from any of Walt Whitman, even though, like Whitman, the poem is a love song, loosely iambic and conversational. Its subject is Neal Cassady, his friend, fellow writer (in letters at least) and occasional lover (Cassady, a singularly handsome and charismatic man, was also the inspiration for the character of Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's novel 'On the road'). What is shocking in Ginsberg's poem is the very intensity and determination of the claim that Cassady taught him 'the love of his cock'.<sup>38</sup> There is no obfuscation here, no idealised muffling. The poet lays bare the physical actuality of his love interest in all its raw power, unambiguously expressed in a straight forward (even exultant) description of homosexual intent and practice, making the poem alive and politically charged. Not many poets since have dealt with gay male love in such audacious terms, and certainly none publicly before Ginsberg, except perhaps the

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<sup>37</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'Many Loves', *Collected Poems 1947-1997*, 164

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

libertine Earl of Rochester in the Seventeenth Century and W. H. Auden in 'A Day for a Lay', a kind of pornographic joke and a work that was anyway repudiated by the poet. 'Many Loves' is not a joke and is not pornography, it moves through an intensely realised and visceral description of lovemaking between two men who loved each other, ending in a description of fellatio.

The poem is conversational in tone and relaxed in terms of its rhythmic structure, echoing 'real' speech and breathing as far as possible. It is characterised by beautiful, simple and lilting cadences that are at once clear and evocative:

And we made shift to sack out in Harlem, after a long evening

...

His own loins against me soft, nestling in comradeship, put forth & pressed into me, open to my awareness ...<sup>39</sup>

And just as in Constantine Cavafy's poetry, the significance of this moment, fleeting and transient as it was, is recollected. The poem represents the physical act of love remembered *within* the body, as a kind of talisman. Here, the very point of love lies in its capacity to engender a sense of comradeship, across time and space, confirming an identification with a much larger brotherhood of gay men and with physical pleasure as the centre of meaning, through blissful acceptance:

That my body shudders and trembles [now] with happiness, remembering ...<sup>40</sup>

It is the body remembering, the body that knows the visceral warmth and pleasure of sex which engenders a profound sense of belonging.

A different kind of love is explored in 'Please Master' (1968). Here, there is a challenging apprehension of love and sexual expression, in a poem that represents a particular aspect of homosexual interest, sadomasochistic role-play. 'Please Master' raises issues of Ginsberg's notion about the interdependence of sexual and political freedoms, problems at the very core of his contribution to any understanding about contemporary gay love poetry.

In 'Please Master', a complex and ambiguous relationship is developed via fantasy, which troubles critics who wish Ginsberg simply to bear the liberationist torch, like Whitman, where comradeship itself is seen as the apotheosis of lovemaking. In

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

‘Please Master’ we are presented with something that is unlike anything else, opening (troublingly for the squeamish) with a ‘wish list’ of sexual subjugation fantasies:

Please master can I touch your cheek  
please master can I kneel at your feet  
please master can I loosen your blue pants<sup>41</sup>

The love act in ‘Please Master’, is not representative of any idealised or sanctified notion; instead, sex and lovemaking do not even look like love, but something much darker. The ‘passivity’ explored is the source of transcendent joy for Ginsberg, echoing his claim that to eat shit is to experience visions. Indeed, he relishes the very idea of submission, and this stance is to have profound implications in terms of his understanding about love and will impact on poets who follow him.

‘Please Master’ is confounding. It is certainly joyous as Ginsberg clearly delights in developing his fantasy about complete submission. The poem is masturbatory, and asserts a psychic as well as physical subjugation, through the depiction of the unrelenting power of the phallus and by extension of the meaning of penetration of both the mouth and anus. The poem’s graphic and ‘pornographic excellence’<sup>42</sup> allows Ginsberg to engage in a fantasy that is at once visceral and oppositional to any ideas about sexual ‘normalcy’. The master himself is a kind of walking phallus, removed from any ‘conscience’ to do with humanity, tenderness or empathy. The phallus remains the driver and progenitor of the action. His slave (the poet imagining the scene) exists merely as a receptacle for the throbbing thing and must beg to be used. This has proved too much for some critics, even those who wish otherwise to support Ginsberg’s political imperatives. Robert K. Martin, for example, believes that the emphasis Ginsberg places on the fantasy, embodied in the figure of the master in the poem, can only lead to ‘destruction of oneself as lover and poet’<sup>43</sup> and is therefore a betrayal of the ‘heritage of Whitman’<sup>44</sup> who, according to Martin, was able to imagine and incorporate an ideal of love-making where couples could swap roles in bed, and exchange sexual roles/positions so the ‘fucker became fucked’<sup>45</sup>. He sees ‘Please

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Martin. *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, 170.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*

Master' as problematic because of Ginsberg's willing acceptance of only one possible role, and the poet's unrelenting wish to be the passive, servile partner in an anonymous sex act. Martin laments the lack of any meeting of the minds or ideals of kinship and mutual affection. He asserts that Ginsberg, because he is willing to submit, betrays any capacity to adhere to a truly revolutionary imperative, through the maintenance of a coherent, active and politically stable identity and instead believes that his position leads to a kind of 'general resignation'<sup>46</sup> which is the very opposite of energetic and active revolutionary zeal.

There is a bias on Martin's part that to be fucked is somehow less virile or less potent and therefore less powerful than to fuck. He reflects attitudes that Ginsberg is challenging. Ginsberg, in questioning these notions, claims new territory and allows the self to be transported (in fantasy and perhaps in reality) though total subjugation. While it may not be to everyone's taste, sado-masochistic relationships exist and can be seen, as Ginsberg sees them here, as liberating because during sado-masochistic play, the sex act is predicated on a fundamental equality in the relationship, however fleeting or imagined. There is a distinct and potent 'mutuality' here that can make a claim for equality, because both parties are serving the needs of the other. This is what is claimed in 'Please Master'. The lovers are equal because they willingly act in unison as 'comrades' with the same purpose, to seek bliss and transcendence for themselves and for each other during the sex act, in whatever form that inhabits.

However, it is true that 'Please Master' is essentially, outside the political imperatives of much of Ginsberg's other love poetry, in that the act of lovemaking described promotes an antithetical kind of interest, an acceptance of pain and penetration (expressing what Gregory Woods calls a 'welcoming servility'<sup>47</sup>). This attitude challenges bourgeois notions about sex, and supports a radical re-assessment of love that celebrates passivity and forces a new apprehension about role-playing that has at its basis an understanding of power. The poem throws open the idea that love making may well be (and often is) a function of penetrative force, allied to submissive power, the two being interdependent and therefore equal. Passivity is celebrated as powerful in its own terms, and this is deeply problematic for those who hold conventional

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Gregory Woods, 'Allen Ginsberg', *Articulate Flesh: Male homo-eroticism & modern poetry* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989), 210

fantasies regarding bourgeois 'comradeship' idealities. Ginsberg was not afraid of exploring the dark side of sexuality.

### 3. THOM GUNN

I stand on a hill and see / A luminous country under me ...<sup>48</sup>

Thom Gunn's poems, contemporaneous with Allen Ginsberg's, are so different it is difficult to comprehend that they were written at the same time or even in the same epoch. While their responses to profound historical changes (the Gay Liberation movement and the AIDS crisis) deeply affected both of them and changed the course of their poetry, these cataclysms (one liberating, the other confining and shattering) impacted the poets very differently. And it was Gunn, the cool, British import, who apprehended most clearly the moral and political crisis that the AIDS epidemic was to pose for America and the world, and gay men in particular.

Gunn came ultimately to write a searing and heart-breaking account of his own life and that of his friends in *The Man with Night Sweats*. The title already a visceral marker for the subject matter, with its focus on the day-to-day reality of AIDS, as it wreaked torment through the gay communities of the United States. San Francisco, where Gunn lived, was the epicentre, where 'night sweats' were emblematic of the suffering many infected gay men endured. The common reality was (before the advancement of sophisticated drug-cocktails) that infected men suffered agonies of discomfort and fear. Night sweats came to be the most important marker of AIDS (AZT, the original drug used to attack the AIDS virus, was woefully inadequate and its side effects devastating). For many sufferers, an early, painful and mostly, humiliating death was inevitable. And for those of us old enough to remember the particular horrors of friends living with AIDS, night sweats were a trial for many loved ones, most of whom ended by enduring terrible, scarred deaths.

In *The Man with Night Sweats*, Gunn looks out at his community, to friends and lovers (and his partner) and attempts to apprehend the nature of the disease and its relentless scything of those around him. He himself never developed the illness, perhaps because he was in a relationship and so less dependent on bars and bathhouses for sexual gratification. But nonetheless, he was no prude and certainly always availed himself of the delights of sex outside of his long-term relationship with Mike Kitay.

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<sup>48</sup> Thom Gunn, 'A Map of the City', *Collected Poems* (Faber and Faber, London 1993), 103

However, Gunn only came to his humanist and empathetic understanding of love as expressed in *The Man with Night Sweats* after some time. He certainly did not begin as a liberated gay poet in any sense at all. His coming of age was a long journey, as it never was for the American-born Ginsberg, whose own 'coming out' was available in his earliest poems. Ginsberg's declamatory, triumphalist style (despite his despair about America) was anathema to Gunn, who's very Englishness perhaps determined a more particular reserve.

Gunn had deliberately hidden his own sexuality (much as Auden had done) by using the pronoun 'you' in his poems about sex and love, even until the later volume *Jack Straw's Castle*, 1971. Gregory Woods wrote in 1987:

The poems are still evolving, of course, and in a manner directly related to their author's sexual orientation. When Tony Sarver asked him, after the publication of *Jack Straw's Castle*, if the Gay Movement had helped him as a writer, Gunn replied: Yes, very much I think. In my early books I was in the closet. I was discreet in an Audenish way. If a poem referred to a lover, I always used 'you'. I figured it didn't matter, it didn't affect the poetry. But it did....<sup>49</sup>

In earlier poems, Gunn's struggles to come to terms with his own sexuality are, in hindsight anyway, certainly clear. It could be argued that those difficulties were even represented in the forms of the poetry itself, which hid as much as they revealed and were characterised by an intensity of interest in distancing formality. Gunn's was not poetry of the hallucinatory, 'blissed out' style of Ginsberg's, centred as that was on the breath and by implication on the body and sexuality itself, where visceral images were allowed to crash headlong through the poem's loose boundaries. Gunn's poems remained conscientiously worked, and were distant, intellectually rigorous and disciplined. Their very containment, within the framework of form, was antithetical to the kind of freer and seemingly careless expressions of his fellow poet. Nonetheless, some of the earlier poems do confront issues of sexuality, while doing so in a way that masks Gunn's own proclivities, perhaps even from himself.

In the strange, early poem, 'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy', the struggle to come to terms with the lure of sex is contextualised within the relentless suffocation of a

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<sup>49</sup> See, Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male homo-eroticism & modern poetry* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987), 228-229.

conventional world inhabited by the poet. The allegory is a kind of love song, addressed to the adolescent Gunn himself perhaps and is filled with longing for freedom:

The causes are in Time; only their issue  
Is bodied in the flesh, the finite powers.  
And how to guess he hides in that firm tissue  
Seeds of division? At tennis and at tea  
Upon the gentle lawn, he is not ours,  
But plays us in sad duplicity.<sup>50</sup>

This poem expresses a fantasy, driven by recognition of the pain and suffering an adolescent Thom Gunn felt as he realised the tug of his natural sexual instincts, opposed, as those were to the prevailing moralities and repressions of his day. Even the 'gentle lawn' was a site of great moral conflict, enacted upon the young boy's burgeoning sexuality, and so he is forced to play in 'sad duplicity', hiding his feelings and his identity.

This is what the boy was made to do, as all gay men and boys were forced to do in order to live within a system that was actively hostile, or at least, ignorant of their desires. The wolf boy is a mask for Gunn's own disquiet and unease in the face of approbation and represents the suffering gay men endured everywhere. However, the poem offers a solution through masturbatory, revenge fantasy. Further, erotically charged imagery, suggests perhaps, sexual release, and the metamorphosis that takes place (boy to wolf) has distinct sexual and erotic overtones.

The language in the poem, while controlled and ordered through rhyme is tellingly visceral, as the boy 'feels' the changes in his body as he transforms:

As yet ungolden in the dense, hot night  
The spikes enter his feet:  
...  
Which  
...  
Shall loose desires hoarded against his will  
By the long urging of the afternoon.  
Slowly the hard rim shifts above the hill.

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<sup>50</sup> Thom Gunn, 'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy', *Collected Poems*, 61.

...  
[And he] Feels the familiar itch of close dark hair...<sup>51</sup>

'Close dark hair' is deeply sexual, as is the word 'will', here both a description of a state of mind and name for the penis. The very 'itch' described is like the itch of pre-sex (adolescent sex?) where the body begins to experience inexplicable rushes of blood and energy through muscle and skin. This is powerful, direct imagery, unambiguous in its force. However, the object of the boy's sexual interest is not gendered and Gunn is careful to avoid such identification, solving the 'problem' by developing a self-loving fantasy that shifts his immediate male-to-male desire to a more generalised one. In the dream depicted, a boy becomes a sex-seeking wolf, somehow morally unquestioned and neutral. After all, it is natural animal behaviour Gunn is talking about and generalised sexuality. But there is a cost to this masking of Gunn's own desires. While the boy has certainly transformed and so confronted his own nature, he has 'bleeding paws'<sup>52</sup>. Residual guilt and shame are the direct result of the repression and psychic violence perpetrated on the boy, even as he transcends the world that denies him. On all fours and covered in prickling new fur, a wild, sexualised beast, he still carries the pain of societal rejection. This is inescapable, as Gunn well knew. At the time of writing the poem, he was himself a young man in his twenties, offering perhaps, a self-fulfilling erotic fantasy as comfort to his own adolescent self.

'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy' is a poem written in strict form, rhyming neatly. Nonetheless, within the restrictions thus imposed, the poem remains erotically charged, expressive of deep longing for sexual release and a wistfulness that is energised by forceful images. There is aggression too, at once exhilarating and disturbing, if muffled, and this has to do with the sense that the poem is more open than it appears, as it outlines Gunn's understanding of what it was to be gay but proscribed.<sup>53</sup> Rage is ever present and is a force that is sometimes disquieting in its implications. Indeed, some of Gunn's earlier poetry can be seen as fascistic, or politically naïve to say the least, as they express Gunn's deepest anxieties about being

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> See: Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male homo-eroticism & modern poetry*, 222. "Gunn has said that this poem 'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy' is about himself, leading a straight life and being gay".

gay and where love (universal or otherwise) is the last emotion the poet is interested in.

In 'Lines for a Book' for example, from the same volume as 'The Allegory for a Wolf Boy', *The Sense of Movement*, (1957) Gunn endorses male supremacist attitudes through violence. There is no love for fellow man expressed here but rather contempt and derision.

I think of all the toughs through history  
And thank heaven they lived, continually.  
...  
It's better  
To go and see your friend than write a letter;  
To be a soldier than to be a cripple;  
To take an early weaning from the nipple  
Than think your mother is the only girl;  
To be insensitive, to steel the will,  
... and to despise the fool.<sup>54</sup>

Here the 'will', is steeled as a kind of baton of power, a crude symbol in itself of manliness. These attitudes are certainly questionable and are the product of a defensive posture of self-denial and frustration. Military power and order are valued over tenderness and compassion and it appears there is simply no room in Gunn's early poetry for the humanity that characterised his later work. He had not yet been through the crucibles of gay liberation or the AIDS crisis. This was to come some twenty years later. Earlier, he was locked in to self-aggrandising and over-compensating fantasies of masculinity as a defence against being seen as homosexual.

Interestingly, the poem, 'Lines for a Book' expresses its political venom via use of the 'heroic couplet', a rhyme scheme certainly out of favour at the time and so perhaps a clue to Gunn's own sense of exaggerated irony. At least that's what we hope it is, rather than the expression of some right-wing notion of the 'heroic'. However, Gunn repudiated this poem in 1978 as 'fascistic and foolish'<sup>55</sup> yet, interestingly, still included it in his *Collected Poems* of 1993. So, perhaps he maintained some affection for it and by implication some residual pull towards its very uncomfortable attitudes.

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<sup>54</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Lines for a Book'. *Collected Poems*, 56.

<sup>55</sup> Thom Gunn in Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male homo-eroticism & modern poetry*, 213.

Gunn, in 'Lines for a Book' seems determined to laud an ideal of masculinity that is deeply at odds with any notion of tenderness or love between men (or anyone else for that matter). Instead the poem proclaims a world of action over feeling, of violence over empathy, of intolerance over civility and again masks Gunn's own uncertainties about identifying as a gay man.

I praise the overdogs like Alexander  
To those who would not play with Stephen Spender...<sup>56</sup>

Fellow poet, Stephen Spender, is treated contemptuously and made to look like a 'sissie'<sup>57</sup> in contrast to Alexander, the embodiment of the heroic, male figure (gay, but certainly not a sissie). The poem reveals a very suspect stance in that it validates the prevailing social attitudes towards gay men as effeminate and weak, not truly male and hearty (like the poet?).

However, there was to come a major shift in Gunn's attitudes about love that came about at the same time as he found new flexibility in his poetry. It is probable that the changes from strict metrical form and 'remorseless end rhymes'<sup>58</sup> in his poetry from *My Sad Captains* (1961) on had something to do with his increasing sense that his own sexuality was opening up. This new freedom was delivered as a consequence of his life in San Francisco. After all, he had (relatively recently) come to terms with being gay, both privately and publicly and had lived in San Francisco for six years. Robert Martin asserts: 'one can argue that the poetic form was altered to suit a new sense of himself'.<sup>59</sup> A sense of new purpose and direction is manifest in the poems of *My Sad Captains* and those that follow, in which Gunn explores much wider possibilities of thought and action. In loosening the rigors of form he released formal restrictions and welcomed experimentation and flexibility.

'Modes of Pleasure' from *My Sad Captains* is a poem that mockingly describes a common enough event in gay San Francisco, a casual, street pick-up and expresses a deeper and very particular understanding about love:

New face, strange face, for my unrest.

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<sup>56</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Lines for a Book'. *Collected Poems*, 56

<sup>57</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male homo-eroticism & modern poetry*, 213

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, 165

I hunt your look, and lust marks time  
Dark in his doubtful uniform,  
Preparing once more for the test.<sup>60</sup>

There is restlessness reflected in the rhythm of this poem, a jerky unease, patterned through abrupt short lines and phrases: 'New face, strange face, for my unrest'. This structure reflects a lust-filled imperative tied to the poet's sense of dislocation, a consequence of lingering guilt perhaps? Or, maybe, this represents a residual anxiety from previous times of closeted-ness? That Gunn sees the encounter in the poem as a 'test', betrays his unease. The experience is emblematic of his struggles to come to terms with a new and freer way of living in San Francisco, where the pick-up, on the street and in the baths, 'tests' Gunn's moral mettle and his resolve to experience life as it is lived as a gay man. The poem asserts a new morality for Gunn, not hidebound by heterosexist imperatives about monogamy and love. Gunn has moved a long way in his thinking. The poem continues:

You do not know you are observed:  
Apart, contained, you wait on chance  
(and here is the doubt)  
Or seem to, till your callous glance  
Meets mine...<sup>61</sup>

The poet and the observed stranger are now locked in a 'warm game', despite the 'callous' glance. They are pursuing the same object, 'a warmer prize'. Each is able to provide for the other, and an implied sexual contract is made towards the ultimate aim, that is immediate sexual release and the pleasurable fulfilment of restless desire. This will at least temporarily quiet the overall unrest. However, as the poet well knows, this very fulfilment leaves a sour taste, even a kind of (dis) taste. So, the poet leaves the scene, at least mentally, even as he is within it. He steps back and ruminates on the significance of the act and is characteristically, matter of fact:

Yet when I've had you once or twice  
I may not want you any more  
...  
Why should that matter? Why pretend  
Love must accompany erection?

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<sup>60</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Modes of Pleasure', *Collected Poems*, 102

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

This is a momentary affection...<sup>62</sup>

Gunn accepts that love may be fleeting, casual and transitory, but nonetheless, for gay men anyway, it is still fervently desired even during 'callous' acts of bodily necessity, and is expressed in the poem as 'affection'.

Gunn also apprehends something that figures in his poetry from here on, an awareness that love is compromised and difficult, but nonetheless worth struggling for, because it links us to each other as a community. And further, he argues for a fluid and open connection through love, one that is able to inhabit even the pick-up or slightest glance from one gay man to another. He has come to understand (and celebrate that he is part of a gay community. Within this recognition there is great strength, manifest in the kinds of questions implied in the verse: who is to say that love is only properly attached to the long-term (heterosexual) relationship? Who decides morality?

Sex in the San Francisco gay ghetto anyway, was for Gunn, a matter of shared (and generally recognised) bodily need and was to be celebrated for that. Bliss is certainly possible and the poet knows that through orgasm the individual transcends time and is freed from constraint (at least temporarily). This idea is revelatory and freeing for Gunn, even though there may be evidence still of some lingering anxiety, even guilt perhaps.

In *Touch*, 1967, Gunn describes the act of getting in to bed with his sleeping lover, most probably Mike Kitay, his long-term partner.

You are already  
asleep. I lower  
myself in next to  
you, my skin slightly  
numb with the restraint  
of habits...<sup>63</sup>

The lovely, conversational opening: 'You are already / asleep. I lower / myself in next to you', places us immediately into the scene, feeling that we are in for a comfortable journey, indeed perhaps a banal one. But the poet shifts that initial relaxedness very

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Touch', *Collected Poems*, 169

quickly, through a deeply felt self-consciousness that alerts us to his profound uncertainty. He does this by using an abstracted almost old-fashioned notion, 'my skin slightly / numb with the restraint / of habits'. 'Restraint' here and 'habits', both language of a former age, are powerful indicators that the poet has metaphysics in mind. The words belong more to the age of Donne and Marvell, rather than San Francisco in the seventies. Clearly, this is to be a poem that is to track love through a broader apprehension of place and time. It is not to be simply a cosy description of lovers in bed. Also, there is a kind of hesitancy, made clear by the shifting, even awkward enjambments. It is as if the poet is thinking aloud as he writes the poem, making it up as he goes along. This is very persuasive in that it allows the reader to 'think through' the issues as Gunn does, apparently at the same time:

....You turn and  
hold me tightly, do  
you know who  
I am or am I  
your mother or  
the nearest human being to  
hold on to in a  
dreamed pogrom.<sup>64</sup>

The 'dreamed pogrom' is a startling and disquieting image, one that immediately raises the nightmare of the Holocaust and the fact that this horror targeted homosexuals as well as Jews. The poem was written only twenty years after the events of World War II, well within Gunn's living memory and its echoes are manifest here.

The poet moves on to place himself and his lover in to an 'old / big place', the cosmos or eternity.

... you are already  
there ...  
it is hard to locate.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid

What is more, the place is  
not found but seeps  
from our touch in  
continuous creation, dark  
enclosing cocoon round  
ourselves alone, dark  
wide realm where we  
walk with everyone.<sup>65</sup>

This place of ‘continuous creation’ is situated in the vastness of the cosmos. The poet links the lovers in bed together, their bodies being the pivot. This is a conceit from which all else expands in a poem with something at least of an Elizabethan spirit (as in John Donne’s ‘The Good-Morrow’).<sup>66</sup> The lovers here, touching together in bed, are the fulcrum of a humane and loving universe, imagined through their own love. The poet walks ‘with everyone’ in making this discovery.

Thom Gunn arrived only gradually towards his much broader understanding about love between men and although he was never in any sense a confessional poet, he did come to evince tenderness and compassion and in so doing expressed notions of love which are energised by an evolving humanity.

In ‘The Hug’, Gunn explores what it is to be in a long-term, domestic relationship and the poem is a celebration of ordinariness, of domestic certitude and strength in the face of the chaos and despair of AIDS.

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

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> See, Clive Wilmer, ‘Gunn, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethans’, *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, ed. Joshua Weiner (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009), 45-67, for an outline of Gunn’s indebtedness to and interest in the poetry of William Shakespeare, John Donne and other poets of the Elizabethan age.

I dozed, I slept. My sleep broke on a hug,  
Suddenly from behind,  
In which the full length of our bodies pressed:  
Your instep to my heel,  
My shoulder-blades against your chest.  
It was not sex, but I could feel  
The whole strength of your body ...  
...  
I only knew  
The stay of your secure firm dry embrace.<sup>67</sup>

AIDS is not mentioned in the poem, however it is clear that the poet had the disease very much in mind because he included 'The Hug' as the opening poem in *The Man with Night Sweats*. The scourge of AIDS and the recognition of that are like ghosts that haunt this poem, against which there is the reality of the strength of a welcomed comradeship ('not sex') and courage, as expressed through a kind of 'dry' resilience, love being the bulwark against the certitude of encroaching death.

*The Man with Night Sweats* is a collection of poems that deals with the impact of AIDS on the lives of gay men in America (particularly in San Francisco) and crucially on Gunn himself. The victims of the AIDS epidemic included many of Gunn's closest friends and this small volume is both a lament for the scourges of the 'plague' and a triumphant resistance to it, through apprehensions of and acts of love.

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<sup>67</sup> Thom Gunn, 'The Hug', *Collected Poems*, 407

#### 4. RANDALL MANN

The looming presence of Thom Gunn is writ large in the poetry of Randall Mann (the poet refers to the older writer in his second collection's name: *Breakfast With Thom Gunn*). Gunn's influence is to be found both in the formal elegance of the verse and in a certain tough mindedness or distancing between the poet and reader, and between the poet himself and emotion. Mann has written three volumes of poetry to date: *Complaint in the Garden* (2004), *Breakfast with Thom Gunn* (2009) and *Straight Razor* (2013).

The poetry is lacerating in its direct depiction of the poet's life within the gay community of San Francisco. And, like Gunn, Mann challenges any sentimental view about love expressing instead (mostly) an unease felt alongside a febrile anxiety. Further, while the poetry demonstrates compassion, it is nonetheless often scathing and embittered, and while the poet explores autobiographical concerns (and his own social-sexual development) he does this ironically. It is as if he requires a certain emotional distancing, a trope also present in his depictions of the gay community he inhabits. Most often, Mann demonstrates a somewhat off-handed, but ever reluctant acceptance of frailty. As a consequence, the work expresses brittleness and (at times) contemptuousness or sneering. Further, the poetry, while compelling in terms of its formal, even exacting structural imperatives (flirting, if self-consciously, with a Gunn-like interest in complex rhyme schemes, various forms and the like), it nonetheless remains resistant to any easy attractiveness. This is because of its sometimes-bitter cynicism, even despair. And again, like Gunn's, the poetry itself is determined by a rigorous refusal to accept or be comforted by, any easy sentimentality. It is as if the poet holds up hypocrisy and cant to the light. A spade is always a spade in Mann's verse, especially when it rhymes.

This is particularly evident in 'Late Epithalamion' where the poet describes his own wedding day. The poem begins with a telling description of the Community Church Minister and his lover:

Draped in a rainbow sash, diamond stud  
in his right ear, the minister  
lit two unity candles, his lover

no help, leering at the two of us instead – <sup>68</sup>

This is already shocking in its depiction of both the minister and his ‘leering’ lover because an epithalamion is a poem that traditionally celebrates marriage. However, this one is called ‘late’, so in a sense Mann is recording the death of the tradition (along with his own hopes for a celebratory event perhaps). Any notion of ‘celebration’ here is compromised in even the first few lines. There is something deeply critical, if not utterly contemptuous, in the casual description of the officiating minister’s ‘diamond stud / in his right ear,’ especially because this is followed by the minister’s ‘leering’ lover. How truly awful this person is. Mann is clearly laughing derisively at the man, suggesting an apprehension of a whole community:

Early afternoon in our old apartment,  
the wedding there  
because the MCC church resembled  
a Quonset hut, and I *refused*  
to be married in a Quonset hut... <sup>69</sup>

There is archness in these lines and a self-deprecating irony that undermines any romantic notions about marriage or weddings, particularly felt in the emphasis on the petulant ‘refused’, where clearly the queen is stamping a foot! However, while the poet is so readily critical of the pastor and his lover, the poet is also contemptuous of his own early self. He too was part of the community and (apparently) eager to participate in this ridiculous wedding, despite its inherent shabbiness and cant. The poem goes on to subvert any conventional joy we might expect to experience on such an occasion:

.... the wrong Mozart,  
blared from the stereo,  
dripped wax congealed on the carpet.  
When he (the minister) called for the rings,  
I thought of the salesgirl at the small jewelry store,  
awkwardly addressing our hands.  
We could afford the cheap white bands. <sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Randall Mann, ‘Late Epithalamion’, *Complaint in the Garden* (Zoo Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2004), 34

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

This wry commentary says much about Mann's attitude towards 'marriage', especially this one, couched as it is in the commonplace and tawdry. The event is diminished by the reality of absent (but nonetheless 'present') wider communal disapproval and by a contrast between the dreamed of wedding (a living cliché of form) and the actual event. Gay men, while they might marry each other, will never experience the 'real' thing. So, inevitably, the music was 'wrong', the carpet stained and the wedding rings cheap, hardly an auspicious beginning for any marriage.

And interestingly, there is no real mention of Mann's partner in this somewhat shabby affair (he is not named):

'Will you welcome the newly united couple?'  
My father then welcomed champagne,  
and more champagne ...<sup>71</sup>

Conventional enough, but our expected response has already been severely undercut by Mann's persistent criticality and so it is easy to regard even these lines as driven by contempt, especially in the phrase 'and more champagne'. Mann's father apparently is a happy lush, needing little excuse to party on.

The final lines offer at least a glimmer of hope, subverted as this is:

Much later, the plastered minister  
would lift his cup in praise of the green  
days yet to come.  
Outside, the rain like luck  
Licked our filthy windows clean.<sup>72</sup>

There is something of T.S. Eliot's urban bleakness in 'filthy windows' but more than that; the phrase is a savage indictment of Mann's previous life (before 'marriage'). A time, apparently, when he was happy to live with the dirt and squalor of gay existence in downtown San Francisco. 'Filthy windows' references that life in an image of extraordinary force. It is as if the life lived by Mann and his community is being represented by the phrase and it is 'lucky' indeed that the rain is able to wash away the filth, like rinsing away sin. However, the metaphor used, that of the rain 'licking'

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

the windows clean is a disturbing one. There is something viscerally unpleasant about the image of rain, not washing, but licking something clean.

The critique in the poem (to do with the broader community, one that Mann inhabited, for better or for worse and still inhabits) is devastating. Those members of the gay milieu who appear in the poem are seriously problematised and any hope of redemption, through love and/or marriage, is denied in the persistent and unrelenting attack that Mann mounts. It is simply not possible to believe that 'luck' has any agency at all and it is not possible to hope for Mann's good fortune in this marriage, or indeed in his life. Both are clearly fraught and bloated with the potential for decay and death.

This bleakness is brought out strongly in his next book of poems, *Breakfast with Thom Gunn*, a group of poems mostly concerned with the poet's life in San Francisco, where he had finally moved (from Florida) in the late eighties. The collection opens with 'Early Morning on Market Street' and already even the landscape is compromised and far from providing any kind of solace, as we might expect (or hope for), Mann's landscape is represented as an extension of his own anxieties and pessimism. The landscape in this and other poems is fraught, mirroring the poet's grim forebodings to do with the failures inherent in the pursuit of love and desire, areas of concentration and obsession that the poet re-visits again and again.

The moon, once full, is snow.  
The line of transplanted trees,  
thin and bloodless, The pink neon  
bakery sign, 'Sweet Inspiration',  
a mockery of loneliness...<sup>73</sup>

There is no comfort in the landscape, no respite nor sense that place can be anything other than a gloomy projection of the poet's own state of mind. Even the trees are 'transplanted' (from another state perhaps, like Mann?) and are thin and bloodless like many of the gay men who had earlier flocked to the city because of its promise as a gay mecca. The irony here is that these men found themselves to be 'transplanted' just like the trees and are equally thin and bloodless.

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<sup>73</sup> Randall Mann, 'Early Morning on Market Street', *Breakfast with Thom Gunn* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009), 3

... And though desire  
is a dirty word these days, what  
else to call the idling car, its passenger door  
pushed open ... Or me,  
rubbing dirt from my eyes, wanting,  
again, a man I do not want.<sup>74</sup>

Rubbing dirt from my eyes? The dirt of the city? Or the gaze itself perhaps, where the object is necessarily unworthy, temporary and possibly diseased? This 'dirt' represents AIDS, moral filth as well as the actual grime of the city. Mann is playing the Christian moralist here, worrying that his desires and indeed his actions, bespeak compromise and hypocrisy. The man he wants after all is a man he does not want.

Desire then, forces its own impulses. Mann confronts what he sees as a true, if conventional, duality, that between the body and spirit. While this is hardly new, indeed it is a cliché; it is interesting that this duality so afflicts a poet ready to brag (at other times) about his sexual triumphs. Mann has clearly not escaped from the provincial and religious imperatives, prevalent across America, and is victim, like many, to profound anxieties regarding sex, sexuality and morality. He paints a bleak landscape, one familiar to gay, urban men where lust and desire might lead to death and where the city itself is an ambiguous and troubled place both of hope and despair.

However, Mann for all his moral dilemmas comes to a kind of febrile peace in some poems, where love is seen as manifest and perhaps worth pursuing. These notions are delicately put in 'The Long View':

Two lovers sit atop  
Delores Park: they stop  
their argument to see  
a church, a bridge, a sea.  
They play a little game:  
each man proceeds to name  
his list of lovers dead.  
There's no one left unsaid.  
Anxious pigeons wait  
for crumbs to fall. It's late.  
The weather starts to shift:  
All fog, all love, will lift.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Randall Mann, 'The Long View', *Breakfast with Thom Gunn*, 47

There is a tender hope expressed here, with quiet gentleness. A hope couched in the reality for gay men that love is to be treasured because it is vulnerable to a range of threats, not least that of the AIDS epidemic itself. However, unlike Ginsberg's poetry, where love is seen as thumpingly triumphant (even within doubt), in Mann's poem its possibilities for redemption are more uncertain.

## 5. RICHARD SIKEN

Richard Siken and Randall Mann were born within five years of each other (Siken in 1967, Mann in 1971, but are dealt with here in order of their first publications). However, it is as if they inhabit different worlds and psychologically at least, they do. While Mann writes with a certain ‘old-fashioned’ precision and delicacy (and within formal structures that contain and pattern his poetry), Siken expresses himself with what might be called post-modern abandon, where images shift or cohere, apparently at random and where prose-like sentences stretch and bend in long lines. Siken has dispensed with any formal restriction such as rhyme, in a bid to ‘get it all down and fast’, in long, iambic lines, unimpeded by anything that might otherwise block his flow. In this, he is most like Ginsberg, and as a consequence, his eloquence appears anarchic, obeying the imperatives of immediate thought and stream of consciousness, rather than reflection mediated by formal structuring. Or, at least that is how it appears. Further, there is a heightened sense of hysteria in much of Siken’s poetry, an outpouring of the urgent and immediate, while Mann by contrast, is nothing if not controlled. Siken’s poems, with their shifting elisions and dramatic enjambments, extended lines and rhetorical urgency, owe much to Ginsberg and so to Whitman, while Mann remains forever, the student of a very different approach, that of the cool and contained Englishmen, Wystan Hughes Auden and Thom Gunn. Within the contemporary gay canon, theirs are expressions of profound difference, in temperament and impulse.

The first poem in Richard Siken’s *Crush*, ‘Scheherazade,’ displays an attitude and energy that is immediately seductive and distinctive:

Tell me about the dream where we pull the bodies out of the lake / and dress them in warm clothes again ... the horses running ... how we rolled up the carpet so we could dance ... and the days were bright red ... Look at the light through the windowpane ... These, our bodies possessed by light ... Tell me we’ll never get used to it.<sup>76</sup>

These lines reveal a cinematic quality, expressed in careering images, juxtaposed through montage and are theatrical and melodramatic.

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Siken, ‘Scheherazade’, *Crush*, 3

In borrowing heavily from contemporary cinema, the poetry rings all the bells at once and is anything but restrained. It is as if, in Louise Gluck's words, the poet simply, 'can't stop'<sup>77</sup>. He is driven to verbal and imagistic excess as protection against the void of silence. If he stops, even for a moment, he faces 'catastrophe'<sup>78</sup>, as Gluck says.

In the driving thrust of the rhythms and the accumulation of disparate images (some considerable distance from the kind of mordant view of the world that Mann and Thom Gunn inhabit) there is considerable imagistic and verbal power to enthrall the reader. This is post-post-modern, resulting in a cacophony of clashing images that somehow seem entirely appropriate in the midst of lives lived within the contemporary world, seen (for all of us at times) as if from a speeding car, racing across an apocalyptic landscape of threat and anxiety, as in Robert Creeley's 'I know a Man':

As I sd to my  
friend, because I am  
always talking, - John, I

sd ... the darkness sur -  
rounds us, what

can we do against  
it, or else, shall we &  
why not, buy a goddam big car,

drive, he sd, for  
christ's sake, look  
out where yr going.<sup>79</sup>

In 'Scheherazade,' Siken demands that we simply let the poem's images wash over us and through us in a flood. To stop is to die, movement forward, no matter how desperate, is desired - and all that is possible. However, within this general motion towards disorientation, there is the controlling mechanism of love, obsessive and difficult as that might be, but at the centre nonetheless. For Siken, his dead lover 'is a

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<sup>77</sup> Louise Gluck, 'Foreword', Richard Siken, *Crush* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2005), vii

<sup>78</sup> Louise Gluck, 'Foreword', Richard Siken, *Crush*, vii

<sup>79</sup> Robert Creeley, 'I Know a Man', *The Penguin Book of Twentieth Century American Poetry*, ed. Rita Dove (Penguin, New York, 2011), 244

fever I'm learning to live with'<sup>80</sup>. Many poems in *Crush* address this male lover directly, a lover who died in the early nineties. This from 'Dirty Valentine':

There are many things I'm not allowed to tell you.  
I touch myself, I dream.  
Wearing your clothes or standing in the shower for over an hour, pretending  
that this skin is your skin, these hands your hand  
...  
We're filming the movie called 'Planet of Love'—  
there's sex of course, and ballroom dancing,  
fancy clothes and waterlilies in the pond, and half the night you're  
a dependable chap, mounting the stairs in lamplight to the bath, but then  
the too white teeth all night,  
all over the American sky, too much to bear, this constant fingering,  
your hands a river gesture, the birds in flight, the birds still singing  
outside the greasy window, in the trees.  
There's a part in the movie  
where you can see right through the acting ...<sup>81</sup>

The poem challenges the usual sentimentality of the valentine, which is (more usually) a love lyric, given by someone to a lover. What Siken does is to 'dirty' this cliché in a poem that subverts the very essence of the form. Again there is a demanding accumulation of images and ideas that while desperately enjambed, somehow begin to make sense as a direct address to a lover. This conceit provides a focused viewpoint, febrile as that might be, because this too is undercut and questioned. However, as in the ode, where formal address shapes the poem, here that address acts (sometimes) as a stabilizer within a sea of images, a still point (or points) in the apparent chaos of the utterance. This is only ever temporary in the poem, because the very notion of love itself is seen to be fugitive at best anyway.

In the frenzied landscape of 'Dirty Valentine' (apparently 'set' again for a film) the particular address is ever-present, anchoring the accumulation of disparate and conflicting images. The self, the one who asserts the 'you', is at the heart of the poem and that self craves love as a divining principle, no matter how fraught, fugitive and elusive that might be. This critical notion serves to give weight and stability to the poetry and to a world we can understand, through often violently clashing images,

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<sup>80</sup> Richard Siken, 'Straw House, Straw Dog', *Crush*, 31

<sup>81</sup> Richard Siken, 'A Primer for the Small Weird Loves', *Crush*, 22

while providing it with a ‘formally differentiating’<sup>82</sup> mode that protects us against the overwhelming complexity of that world. The images then are made plausible because they coalesce around a centralising and patterning notion, love.

In Siken’s work, love is often couched in terms of violence. Indeed, it is not possible to discuss the poetry without addressing the issue of brutality, especially because it is tied most often to sex, or at least it is expressed in sexual terms. This is both disturbing and compelling, like the poetry itself. Further, the genesis of Siken’s apparent compulsive interest in violence appears to come from a fraught, personal history (if indeed the poems themselves are to be believed as autobiography). The poet was attacked as a child, for being gay, not uncommon in the histories of gay men. In ‘A Primer for the Small Weird Loves’ Siken writes, as if explaining something to himself:

The blond boy in the red trunks is holding your head underwater  
because he is trying to kill you,  
and you deserve it you do, and you know this,  
and you are ready to die in this swimming pool  
because you wanted to touch his hands and lips and this means  
your life is over anyway.  
...  
You know how to ride a dirt bike  
...  
and you know that a boy who likes boys is a dead boy, unless  
he keeps his mouth shut, which is what you  
didn’t do,  
because you are weak and hollow and it doesn’t matter anymore.<sup>83</sup>

There is rage here, expressed in the bitter sarcasm and scorn, rage that all gay men know as a consequence of being attacked by straight men. (The same rage that sparked the Stonewall Riots in the sixties, driven by a determination to hit back at the police and other bullies who had, until that time, enjoyed free reign)<sup>84</sup>. However, here too is the inner-shame and doubt that informs gay men in a heterosexist world, one

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<sup>82</sup> Lyn Hejinian, ‘The Rejection of Closure’, *Postmodern American Poetry, A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover (Norton & Company, New York, 1994), 653

<sup>83</sup> Richard Siken, ‘A Primer for the Small Weird Loves’, *Crush*, 22

<sup>84</sup> At the Stonewall bar in New York in June 1969, gays, transvestites and drag queens representing the gay community, finally retaliated in rage at hitherto constant police harassment. They rioted over several days, creating the spark for the development of the Gay Liberation Movement. It has never been the same since and Stonewall has become the symbol of gay resistance.

where every nuance of self-hate and fear is deeply absorbed and understood. And it is perhaps this self-loathing that drives the poet's particular rage, which in turn drives a kind of sexual, retaliatory violence.

Like Ginsberg (and Mann and Gunn in their evocations of the S&M world), the poet confronts power being played out within defined sexual roles that might seem coerced, but are nonetheless eagerly embraced. This is certainly not poetry for the squeamish:

He hits you and he hits you and he hits you.  
Desire driving his hands right into your body.  
*Hush, my sweet. These tornadoes are for you.*  
You wanted to think of yourself as someone who did these kinds of things.  
You wanted to be in love  
and he happened to get in the way.<sup>85</sup>

There is a remarkable and somewhat chilling sense of casualness in these lines, as if the poet is describing something completely ordinary. Also, love is apparently discardable within the cauldron of power and pain as alluded to here, in a landscape utterly familiar to Richard Siken, where, the figure of his dead lover is ever-present (and forms the crucible through which the poet views the world):

You are a fever ... and everything is happening  
At the wrong end of a very long tunnel.<sup>86</sup>

Siken forces us to recognize our own proclivities and passions, thus making us complicit in the violence of his poetry, or at least the wish for the compelling fantasy of it. So there is a kind of relief, made possible by the very savagery of the accumulating images, which undercuts any romantic notions about love or relationships, or indeed the possibility of either. It is as if Siken addresses a subliminal reality, one of much greater force than any socially imposed and sentimental one.

In acting out violent fantasies within the poems, the poet demands of us a recognition that might be uncomfortable, but is nonetheless riveting for that. Deliberately

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<sup>85</sup> Richard Siken, 'Straw House, Straw Dog', *Crush*, 31

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*

undermining suburban clichés about love and sex, Siken demands that we look again at motivations and desires, within a very difficult landscape and within poems that force a re-evaluation of notions of power, agency and control. That love survives the attacks made on it is proof of Siken's commitment to its force (as irreducible)

## 6. EDUARDO C. CORRAL

Eduardo C. Corral (1970), like Richard Siken, won the Yale Younger Poets Prize for a first volume in 2012. The senior, gay poet, Carl Phillips, selected the manuscript. (Richard Siken was selected for the same prize by Louise Gluck in 2004).

Importantly, Corral was the first Latino poet to win the prestigious award and writes in both Spanish and English, often utilising both languages within the same poem, enacting important themes in the poetry itself: identity switching, anxiety concerned with ‘home’ and the very notion of ‘borderland’ (both metaphoric and physical). Corral’s voice, particularly as it is honed via the slippage and ambiguities available through the subtle use of two languages, especially in relation to love, is nonetheless distinctive and direct.

In ‘*Our Completion: Oil on Wood: Tony Rodriguez: 1998*’, he begins with:

Before nourishment there must be obedience.  
In his hands I was a cup overflowing with thirst.  
Eighth ruler of my days, ninth lord of my nights:  
he thrashed above me, like branches...<sup>87</sup>

Already there is the insistence on power as the driver of love, expressed via an apprehension of love’s darker imperatives. However, significantly, shame and guilt are not part of this scenario. Instead there is sensual celebration:

The back of his knees: pale music.  
We’d crumble the Eucharist & feed it to the pigeons.  
Sin verguenza (*without shame*).<sup>88</sup>

Religious guilt ‘crumbles’ before the triumphant power of sensuality and love, even when these are expressed through a disjunctive relationship, characterised (as here) by dominant/passive sexual tropes. Corral asserts that the potency of love and sex lie in their capacity to blot out all-else: shame, religion, even time itself. The poem invokes

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<sup>87</sup> Eduardo C. Corral ‘Our Completion: Oil on Wood: Tino Rodriguez: 1999’, in *Slow Lightning* (Yale University Press, 2012), 3

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

what might be called ‘ecstatic time’<sup>89</sup>, when normal modalities of linear time are made irrelevant by the sheer force of the immediate experience. It is as if the world simply drifts away during the moment of bliss, so its restrictions, judgments and so on cease to be. The world of the poem is therefore a hermetic one, involving only the poet and his lover and in this the poet denies negative imperatives latent in any restrictive or hostile, wider context. The sexual/blissful moment is all.

Here, we are dealing with the same kind of ‘welcoming servility’<sup>90</sup> of Ginsberg’s ‘Please Master’. And again, in Corral’s verse, there is a clear and deliberate celebration of darker sexualities, made possible through urgent fantasy. The poem ends with a remarkable and beautiful image that could easily have come from magic realism and the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca:

...When I’d yawn,  
he’d pluck black petals out of my mouth.<sup>91</sup>

This is a tender image, one that resists any notion that the lover might simply be an unrelenting brute bent on punishment and violence and holding ultimate power. However, the petals are black, signifying death perhaps, or more positively the death of moral imposition.

In recognising tenderness, what comes is the realisation that the submissive/dominant play is just that, a type of conscious ‘play’, indeed it is a kind of theatre, a performance and it requires two willing parties. Within this very active dynamic the two lovers are equal (and so equally dependent on each other) and in this case they hold great love for each other. Here we have a developed nod to Ginsberg’s ‘Please Master’, however, the players are no longer part of an anonymous fantasy, but actual lovers. This fantasy is based on the lived reality of a sexual relationship and within that, the lovers choose (together) to play out dominant/submissive roles. In this they transcend the limits of the normative, or everyday, and create instead a wholly more energetic, fugitive and shifting relationship, aligned to their deepest sexual desires. As a consequence, the raw honesty of this declaration is remarkable and challenging.

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<sup>89</sup> A term used by José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 185-187

<sup>90</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male homo-eroticism & modern poetry*, 211

<sup>91</sup> Eduardo C. Corral, *Slow Lightning*, 3

In 'Ditas Deus' (God enriches), Corral confronts another powerful taboo, that of the more usually suppressed link between eroticism and filial love, a connection in fact that Carl Phillips calls, a 'disorientingly thin line'.<sup>92</sup>

I learned to make love to a man  
by touching my father.  
I would unlace his work boots,  
pull off his socks,

& drag my thumbs  
along the arches of his feet.

When he slept I would trace  
the veins of his neck,

blue beneath my fingertip.  
He would lift me each morning

onto the bathroom counter,  
dot my small palms

with dollops of shaving cream  
so I could lather his face.<sup>93</sup>

As expressed here, the thin line between sexual and filial love is indeed 'disorienting'. However, there is nothing forced nor coerced, indeed, nothing more than the warm and natural (and loving) skin to skin contact between a father and his young son. Perhaps this is something more readily accepted in cultures other than white, Anglo-Saxon ones.

There is another poem in which the 'line' between eroticism and filial love is even more dramatically problematised. In 'Want', the poet links his father's desperate hunger, while crossing the desert in Arizona, and the poet's own 'hunger' to fellate a man:

Abandoned by his coyote, my  
father, sand seething beneath  
his sneakers, trekked  
through southern Arizona:  
...

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<sup>92</sup> Carl Phillips, Foreword to *Slow Lightning*, xi

<sup>93</sup> Eduardo C. Corral, 'Ditas Deus', *Slow Lightning*, 17

he picked up  
a rock, killed a blue lizard  
...  
shoved guts & bones  
into his mouth  
...  
the first  
time I knelt for a man, my  
lips pressed to his zipper,  
I suffered such hunger.<sup>94</sup>

While this poem makes perfect sense, in a visceral way, it is certainly confronting in that it represents an attitude (an acceptance perhaps) of the complex, difficult and at times, violent relationship between a straight father and a gay son, recognising a powerful collision between these two, especially within notions of 'manliness'. It is as if in the very act of kneeling to a man (a 'master') the poet repudiates the hostility and contempt that a 'straight', strong man might have for his 'weaker' gay son by willingly (demandingly even) accepting submission. That the son recognises his sexual 'hunger' as something imperative and undeniable (and indeed understands it within the frame of his father's heroic gesture of eating the lizard) is extraordinarily telling in relation to the dynamic between this particular father and son and by implication between straight and gay men more generally. The act of fellatio becomes a powerful statement of the valorisation of power, in celebrating the 'passive' act as equal to the otherwise heroic mandate occupied without thought by straight men. The act itself is a subversion of male, penetrative power and so, claims violence, tenderness and love as complex and ambiguous and belonging to the same order.

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<sup>94</sup> Eduardo C. Corral, 'Want', *Slow Lightning*, 17

## 7. JERICHO BROWN

Pain, violence and love form a potent and volatile mix in the poetry of Jericho Brown. His poetry has great sensual power and immediacy. And like Corral, Brown's own father looms as a determined presence in the poems in *Please*, occupying an ambiguous but vital space in the work. It is as if Brown's father and the poet's ambivalent feelings towards him is the ever-present ghost in the machine. (Brown's first collection *Please* was published in 2008. His second, *The New Testament* was published in late 2014),

At times the father is portrayed as a gentle and loving man. In 'Again', the poet writes:

Right now my mother's asleep  
On my father's chest.  
His arm has landed  
In the same place around her  
Most of thirty years.<sup>95</sup>

This seems to be tender enough and loving, but even in this apparently soft recollection, there is the carefully placed word, 'landed', suggesting the brutality of a 'landed blow' or the deliberate cruelty and ordinariness of a hand raised against a woman and/or child. Any 'landed' blow is a practiced one. Yet, in the same poem, we are told that the poet's mother continues to love her husband, even if his hands are (or have been) 'laid heavy against her'. Clearly the father is capable of great and loving tenderness and is loved in return. But feelings here are more than complicated and Brown is nothing if not alert to the bewildering and ambiguous ramifications of his father's violence. It is that which proscribes Brown's own shifting attitudes towards the man he both loves and (once) feared as a child and about whom he continues to be ambivalent.

The poet addresses the reader directly in the poem and thus implicates us in the

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<sup>95</sup> Jericho Brown, 'Again', *Please* (Western Michigan University, 2010), 15.

psychological drama being played out. In a heart-felt cry of exhaustion, he moans as if the very telling of the abuse is such an old tale that its re-telling seems hardly worth the energy expended:

I'm so sick of it –  
Another awful father  
Scarring this page to – <sup>96</sup>

Brown here voices criticism of his father (by implication, all fathers perhaps) and the repetitive banality of the abuse. He protests that father-centred violence is so common, that to bring it up yet again is wearisome. He is sick of it and so, presumably are we. His father 'scarred' the page as indeed he scarred the lives of those closest to him. The poet feels (now), resentment, because he is forced to address the issue of his father's abuse and so the abuse remains naggingly potent and still therefore traumatic. The poet is unable to be truly rid of the implications that violence is a relentless pathology that is nonetheless made ambiguous by love and memory, both of which remain suspect within the framework of the poems. Brown becomes the most (un) reliable witness as the chronicler of his families' frailties. His memory is compromised because he is a participant.

Brutishness and violence, acted on by his father, remains troublingly potent in the poetry. Susanna Childress writes:

... even at this [early] point in the volume, readers understand the urgency — the potential voicelessness, misunderstanding, meaninglessness — of the speaker's reckoning with his parents and a childhood that is like the repetition of too many others ... [T]he self-awareness here allows readers to see how worn thin the speaker is with the repetition in his own life and others'; voicing this makes it palatable.<sup>97</sup>

Within that recognition however, the poet also displays moral determination and in addressing the violence head on as he does (clearly taking his mother's side), he expresses (and perhaps releases) some of his own rage.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> Susanna Childress, *Four reviews: Jericho Brown, Stephanie Brown, William Greenaway, and Cathy Hong* (Valparaiso Poetry Review: Contemporary Poetry and Poets). Accessed: 11/10/14  
<http://www.valpo.edu/vpr/childressreviews.html>

Brown lurches out of the poem in order to address the reader directly, a technique he adopts regularly, as if to remind us that we are looking at art not at life directly. He becomes almost archly self-conscious: 'I'm so sick of it....' The voiced frustration, is an appeal to our own cynicism and world-weariness and is as if the poet is saying: 'if you agree with me here that we are all utterly sick of it, that makes you complicit and so open to renewed manipulation. You will side with me in my descriptions of my father and so be sympathetic to my view. You will shrug and say: *Ah yes, they (fathers) are all the same*'. We are being corralled here, via the very self-deprecation implied. This is seductive because Brown is sincerely wracked by ambivalence and so wrestles, even within the poems, with a shifting view about his father and his relationship with his readers. Both it seems are loving and ambivalent.

In the midst of this complication of emotions, the poet asks (as if angry with himself):

And why don't I mention  
He kissed my forehead  
Before covering me  
On the couch that was my bed?<sup>98</sup>

This tender memory, and its consequent heart-breaking guilt, is reminiscent of Robert Hayden's poem, 'Those Winter Sundays', in which 'another awful father' is eulogized in a poem where the distance between fear, anger and love within a family, is narrow and where it is only time that enables proper insight, leading eventually to the diminution of rage. But, nonetheless, in Brown's poems, memory continues to ferry great pain and regret, if not remorse, for, like Hayden, Brown comes to understand at least something 'of love's austere and lonely offices'<sup>99</sup> and in this he also understands the depths and potency of his own filial love.

It seems that the very first poem in any collection offers much in the way of clues about the poet's particular core interests and frame of mind. The first poem, more often than not, is a marker for the poet's central concerns, in that it sets the scene and

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<sup>98</sup> Jericho Brown, 'Again', *Please*, 15

<sup>99</sup> Robert Hayden, 'Those Winter Sundays', *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, eds. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (W.W. Norton & Company, New York. 2003), 62

tone for the remainder. This is certainly true of Jericho Brown's wonderfully confident opening poem, 'Track 1: Lush Life' in *Please*.

The title immediately alerts us to the fact that the poet thinks of his poems in musical terms, or as songs anyway, like tracks on a CD or record (or tape). This trope is repeated again and again in the collection, as if the poet wants us to view the grouping of poems as we might on a record album, that is with different 'tracks' developing a theme, or at least a consistency of thought, presented within strong relationships in terms of pace and rhythm. Further, Brown often references actual songs, mostly from the rhythm and blues repertoire, not just in the titles of the poems but also within the poems themselves and in his detailed notes. However, his reference points are not to any songs, but distinctly to those belonging to a 'cooler', earlier age of rhythm and blues, an age that was context for the early lives of his parents and grandparents and for himself. He grew up with those 'tracks' and they formed the context of his life. The song 'Lush Life' itself, is a standard from the great American songbook and was written by Billy Strayhorn, Duke Ellington's legendary and influential composer. However, while Brown is careful to note the source of the song, his emphasis is on the singer, Mary Griffin, a woman he saw perform many times in New Orleans (where he worked as a speechwriter for the Mayor of the city). Mary Griffin is a female singer in a litany of women singers Brown writes about, including Patti Labelle, Diana Ross and Janice Joplin, all icons in the world of popular music, blues and jazz, women who understood pain and love and who sang about both.

Brown opens the poem, 'Lush Life' with the startling:

The woman with the microphone sings to hurt you,  
To see you shake your head. The mic may as well  
Be a leather belt...<sup>100</sup>

The voice carries pain, delivered as if by a leather belt (the same kind used by his father to beat him). The voice somehow triggers the memory of being beaten, the two are entwined in pain: the suffering is made to be the same thing, carried by instruments of pain, the tongue and the belt (and here Brown is playing on the musical

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<sup>100</sup> Jericho Brown, 'Track 1: Lush Life', *Please*, 7

connotations of ‘belt’, a description to do with singing in a particular way, with force and power):

You drive to the centre of town  
To be whipped by a woman’s voice. You can’t tell  
The difference between a leather belt and a lover’s  
Tongue.<sup>101</sup>

This conflation between the lover’s tongue and a leather belt is a confronting one. It is as if the poet, so damaged by the fact of his father’s (straight male?) violence and rage, sees the two objects, tongue and belt, as equally damaging. Love’s tongue no less so than the leather belt used once to whip him.

The lover’s tongue might even call you ‘bitch’, a term of endearment perhaps (as he claims in the poem), but a sexual put-down nonetheless, an expression of the power held by the dominant partner over the submissive other. The term enacts the very contempt of the dominator towards the lesser (and weaker) partner, recollecting the kind of power play in the relationship between the poet, as a boy, and his father. This reckoning goes to the very heart of Brown’s apprehensions of sex, violence and love.

... you can yell, Sing bitch, and I love you,  
... but you can’t  
Remember your father’s leather belt without shaking  
Your head.<sup>102</sup>

The poet shakes his head, remembering pain and wondering at it. But this is not all; the very conflation of tongue and belt is played out yet again here, insistently. Also Brown invites (almost lasciviously) his lover to call him *bitch*, he ‘asks for it’, as it were, offering the promise that he will sing all night. His very sexual excitement is aroused by the tongue of the singer who ‘does not mean to entertain’ and especially by the term *bitch*. Orgasm (it is implied) will follow:

Speak to me in a lover’s tongue –  
Call me your bitch, and I’ll sing the whole night long.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

<sup>103</sup> Ibid

The beautiful half-rhymes of 'tongue' and 'long' leave us with a sense of something having come to an end (at least sonically). These last two lines mirror an apparent summation. This resolution, however, is not in fact closure<sup>104</sup>. Instead the poem opens up to a range of vulnerabilities felt by the poet (and seen by the reader).

Brown's deep sexual interest is determined by the humiliation of being called *bitch*. However, it is not in fact ever as simple as that. In the very passivity of the role, the poet here asserts equal power, like that outlined earlier in relation to other poets. As he is fucked (or hit or abused), so he gains pleasure, but a pleasure heightened by the act of submission, where the male body itself is proved to be penetrable. The penetrating cock of the 'other' (almost disembodied here as in Ginsberg's 'Please Master') is only an instrument towards that pleasure and if the word *bitch* is used before and/or during the fucking, then pleasure (or better, bliss perhaps) is even more likely.

The realm of love in Brown's poems is ambiguous and shifting, and has to do with the deliberate playing of sexual roles and thus of sexual gratification at the deepest level. Sex is a dark and mysterious rite and is both a challenge and a release. But, whatever it is, it is certainly neither conventional nor suburban. This sexual play is of a different order and its ramifications regarding love are manifest.

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<sup>104</sup> The concept of 'closure' as alluded to here, is developed further by the poet, Carl Phillips, in *The Art of Daring* (Graywolf Press, Minnesota, 2014), 21

## 8. CONCLUSION

I wish to end this paper by asserting a beginning, in the context of what might be called 'insistent perspectivism'<sup>105</sup>, that is defining a stance and point of view as coming from a clearly defined sense of self or selfhood, that is (essentially) both gay and male. It is important to do this because I wish to claim legitimacy in holding to a position of political consciousness and indeed, conscientiousness. It is not productive (for me anyway) to resile from positioning myself in this way because it provides the context for informed political thought.

Eve Kosofsky Sedwick helps by prescribing perspectivism as useful, as encountered in her own seminal work, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990):

Along with the ready use of the first person, this may have been something learned from 1970s feminist writing: that concerning social relation, the question of Who's speaking to whom? Who wants to know and what for? What do these answers *do*? are not only politically conscientious but crucially productive. And where the topic is sexual knowledge itself, such questions go to the heart of what is discovered as much as to the process of inquiry.<sup>106</sup>

As a gay man and poet, I wish to inscribe my work with what I understand to be political conscientious thought. The poets I have discussed in this paper are writers whose own political conscientiousness is manifest. Importantly, their views (and mine) were formed in the fire and then embers of the AIDS crisis, a catastrophe that clearly marked (and marks) gay men forever as separate and outside. As a consequence, Essex Hemphill, a gay black activist poet, who died from AIDS in 1995 wrote:

[w]hom did he love? It makes a difference. I can't become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, xv

<sup>106</sup> Ibid

<sup>107</sup> Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies*, in Dwight A. McBride, 'Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin and Black Queer Studies' in *Black Queer Studies*, eds Johnson E. Patrick and Mae G. Henderson (Duke University Press, 2005), 69

What Hemphill pointed to was that we exist within binary oppositions and that these define us: gay-straight, black-white, man-woman, master-slave, heterosexual-homosexual, nurture-nature and so on (the 'ass-splitting' truth he needed to know in order to determine 'loyalties', was whether someone was gay or not). We all understand these dislocations and they determine our lives and our loves. However, partly through the development of queer theory, we have come to feel something like guilt in simply identifying with any of these defining terminologies; we now see binarisms contested and rightly so perhaps. However, the danger in ascribing to any overarching 'queer' position (one that attempts to dilute difference or at least spread it so thin that it disappears) is that queer flirts with assimilation and the concomitant negative politics. Dennis Cooper, a gay male poet and novelist points to this danger:

If you just pour homosexuality into the models of fiction and poetry that have been there forever, that's inherently assimilationist ... I just don't understand why anyone would just reupholster the usual with *queerdom*.<sup>108</sup> (My italics).

If we view 'identity' as fundamentally contingent, then it is equally nebulous, elusive and politically inert. It is the 'fixed' nature of the liberationist stance about gender and sexuality that attracts me. fixity means solidity and therefore a kind of certainty in terms of self-identification and purpose, at least theoretically. Taking a definitive stance in relation to one's sexuality provides a parapet from which to shoot cannon. I argue that if gay men are certain of their identity (and then following that in the performative act of 'coming out', which has as its purpose the liberation of the individual from the untruths of closetedness) the incipient and destructive damage done to a sense of selfhood that is not so defined is ameliorated, because closetedness is clearly not politically 'conscientious' but instead, passive and melancholy in the face of overwhelming hostility. Coming out, or proclaiming identity as separate, is empowering and so liberatory. This argument is contested by some who would ascribe to being 'queer' identified. The theorist Michael D Snediker (in *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* writes: '[t]he year I told myself I was gay was also the year of my first sustained encounter with depression'<sup>109</sup>. I would wish to deny the 'causality' claim here, it remains unproved

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<sup>108</sup> Dennis Cooper in *Our Deep Gossip: Conversations with Gay Writers on Poetry and Desire*, ed. Christopher Hennessy (University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 139

<sup>109</sup> Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, 5

and runs counter to most stories of coming out and to the evidence available in reading the poems of openly gay men. One can only wonder what the depression might have been if Snediker had not come out.

Even in 2015, there remains the potent, political (radical) imperative to claim one's individual sexuality (or race or whatever) and this links us with particular brotherhoods (or sisterhoods or transgenderhoods<sup>110</sup>), which are potent and oppositional and so, form a platform for political change and action. Essex Hemphill understood the potency of an insistent identification as radical, and promulgated the significance of being out as both gay and black and in so doing proclaimed identities proudly and with radical purpose. Thom Gunn also understood the necessity to come clean about his sexual orientation, and having resisted, for a time, eventually managed it because:

Edmund White said at one stage that he thought coming out in public was good for any writer's work. It was for mine because the subject matter is so much greater. You can never write about anything after having censored yourself ...<sup>111</sup>

This kind of performative action, remains hugely significant even today, but it was always thus. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of the nineteen eighties (during the AIDS crisis) when:

I was very aware of the politically progressive, personally transformative effects that a wave of gay coming-outs had been creating across the culture.<sup>112</sup>

In Hemphill's case, coming out demanded a particular respect both for his black cultural history and his gayness. (He had clearly understood the lessons of the Black Panther movement and of Malcolm X's insistence on separation as necessary resistance to the dangers of assimilation). For Gunn, his coming out was more functional for his writing self. He needed to free himself from self-censorship, and by

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<sup>110</sup> Trans-gender individuals are perhaps best placed to understand the overwhelming power of the male/female divide. They exist within the very architecture of difference in that they wish to change their bodies to reflect identity. They understand, better than anybody perhaps, that being in the 'wrong body', and so mis-identified, can mean intense suffering. They clearly define 'difference'.

<sup>111</sup> Thom Gunn in 'Thom Gunn', *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*, ed. Christopher Hennessy (University of Michigan Press, 2008),10

<sup>112</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, xvii

so doing (and so accepting a kind of sexual fixity and sexual identity) he freed himself from the chains of any denying self-expectation and was able to radicalise his poetry.

Many gays and feminists understood the significance of 'separation' at the time and were radicalised (as a first step) from positions of difference. This is then representative of a foundational gay liberation position, one that resonates today. Things have not changed, except for utopian mirages on the horizon.

Older gay men are left today with the residual memory of the devastation and fear of the AIDS crisis. We still live with its victims and mourn many dead friends. We are also alert to present dangers. HIV infection remains present and the fear that it is growing again within the gay community is ever present. Younger gay men have come to sexual maturity without knowing the harrowing realities suffered by their older brothers. They no longer face the daily agony of watching friends suffer towards death, so their own sense of danger is diminished and their sexual practices therefore are (at times) 'liberated' from condom use or any concerns regarding safe sex. As a consequence, younger people, it appears, find it difficult to understand either the devastation that AIDS brought, or the denial and neglect, as we attempted to wrest positive action out of the chaos of loss and despair.

What we remember bitterly is that:

the word AIDS didn't cross the lips of the U.S. president [Ronald Reagan] throughout the early years of the epidemic, while legislators and pundits busied themselves with devising more or less frankly punitive schemes for rounding up, classifying, tattooing, quarantining, and otherwise damaging men and women with HIV.<sup>113</sup>

This is hugely significant in political terms and continues to impact on the lived reality for gay men - whether they know it or not. And as long as there is a gay man alive suffering the consequences of HIV infection, there remains a persistent threat to all of us from the State (all States, not just the Russian State in particular). We could easily revert to a climate of prejudice and/or denial and 'the uncertainty about what kind of response to AIDS might crystallize from the state and the public sphere'.<sup>114</sup> It is imperative therefore, to remain alert to the history of the struggle. Unfortunately,

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<sup>113</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, xv

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*

we are not done yet with AIDS in the context of the larger world-wide threat; we are also not done with it within the gay community, despite the fact that many of us may have forgotten much of its impact. We have been muffled by the successes of the treatment of HIV infection and because individuals are no longer dying so quickly. As Kosofsky Sedgwick points out:

the punishing stress of loss, incomplete mourning, chronic dread, and social fracture, and the need for mobilizing powerful resources of resistance in the face of such horror, imprinted a characteristic stamp on much of the theory and activism of that time ...<sup>115</sup>

and I would add, on the poetry and literature of that time as well, especially in the gay community and this concentration still impacts today as exemplified in the works of the living poets, Randall Mann, Richard Siken, Eduardo C. Corral, and Jericho Brown. For all of them, the looming spectre of AIDS is a present reality and continues to be a marker in their poetry. Jericho Brown writes, heart-breakingly enough, in a recently published poem:

I live

With a disease instead  
Of a lover. We take turns

Doing bad things  
To my body, share a house

But do not speak ...<sup>116</sup>

The reasons for maintaining a liberatory/social justice position, identified in terms of 'fixed' (and angry) notions of sexual and gender identity, remain critical. Queer politics does not cut it because if we must wait for utopia, we will be waiting for a very long time. Also, if the 'here and now is a prison house'<sup>117</sup> then we must attempt to escape it now rather than risk waiting for eventual change. If we do not, we risk profound melancholy, delivered to us by a flood of contingent (but inert) possibilities. Fixedness denies utopia perhaps, but utopic mirages will not be sufficient, a 'forward-

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> Jericho Brown, 'Another Elegy', *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon Press, Washington, 2014), 39

<sup>117</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 1

dawning [queer] futurity'<sup>118</sup> sounds like political quiescence and no more than a self-defeating fantasy.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid

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## **THE TILTED HOUSE**

## **PUBLICATIONS and PRIZES**

### **The darkness doesn't descend and then it descends so quickly**

*Australian Love Poems, 2013.*

### **Distance**

*Meanjin: Volume 72, No. 3, 2014*

### **The barbarians have come**

*Poems 2013, AP Members Anthology.*

### **Kalutara**

*Cordite: March, 2014, 'Monthly Poem Feature'.*

### **Death of a bull.**

*Southerly: Volume 73, Number 3, 2014*

### **Tea and salak and bubur ayam,**

Winner, Inaugural *SecondBite Poetry Prize, 2014*

Published online – APJ, 2014

### **Winter**

*Meanjin: Volume 73, No, 3, 2014*

### **Naming**

*Australian Poetry Journal 4.2, January, 2015 (current)*

### **Bundanon night walk, Summer**

*USYD Anthology, 2014, March, 2015*

### **The unravelling,**

**Looking south west at Petitenget Beach at evening**

and

**Legian Beach, evening**

Contrapasso, 'Long Distance', forthcoming, July, 2015

**Bermondsey Street**

and

**Bringing It All Back Home**

*Meanjin*, forthcoming, September, 2015

**Giotto in Cimabue's studio, 1308**

Long-listed for Ron Pretty Poetry Prize, 2015

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**1991**

“My thoughts are crowded with death”

Thom Gunn, *In Time of Plague*

For SP-L

Well-schooled and writhing within the guilt of it  
you said: “Thank God, my mother is dead.”  
Or, it could have been much worse  
and you already rode a hearse of remorse –  
guilt and grief and bitterness – love forgotten,  
joy in touch gone, enduring AZT, incense,  
candles and the rest; a cornucopia  
of the useless. Then, you found faith again,  
praying to St. Francis, the healer. Still,  
plague burned across your body in lesions  
of charred skin and bloodied Karposi,  
stigmata and holy wounds. Finally, you raged,  
sheetless, radiated, morphine-scratched, incoherent  
as I leaned at the door like a wrung cloth, rent.

## **Banyan**

Pantai Saba, Bali, January 2014

Krishna's resting place, the banyan  
looms out of a family temple occupying the sky

in a complication of dark struts, lifting leaves  
as banks of high, green cloud that lean in the sea-wind.

Rooted by cascading water pipes, the tree stands in the wet-mossed  
earth and drinks. It wears a shawl of damp vine, hosting fig wasps

that feed on syncarps, while mynas make nests  
in limb-joints, housing a nursery of screeching chicks,

beaks hinged back, like tiny shed doors. Diligent parents flash  
in the dark, flying in from the sun, to jab offerings

into open throats – fluttering moths, beetles and wobbling worms –  
while tree snakes in costumes of black and yellow, slide

along the damp limbs in search of easy pickings. But the tree  
is as big as a city rail yard and nests (like offering cups)

are built by birds who hide their young in dark shade.  
Still, some chicks, cheeping, are swallowed

by hungry snakes, as parent birds flutter and protest  
hovering just beyond the reach of fanged

mouths – hissing, pink like baby skin.

And soldier ants track and march the height of the tree,

workers carrying bits of leaf and dead creatures  
to their queen, guards massed, wary, ready for war.

At the base, villagers place bamboo trays  
of chicken and rice (food the rats find) yellow frangipani

and silk-fringed umbrellas in pink and white.

Young girls in temple sarongs bring gifts in rituals

older than the great epiphyte. They sing to it, their voices  
soft like clouds, their laughter fragrant like incense.

## **Bermondsey Street**

For Shaun Gladwell and Tania Doropoulos

The ancient stink of the Thames drifts in fog along narrow streets and lanes, still cobbled where modern intent has failed, a blessing for those who like to hear the hard clack of boots in the mist, a hollow ring that echoes against the stone of history. (A royal few heard that last sound and smelled their last river as axe-deaths came to them in Tower's yard, from the executioner's low house in Bermondsey Street). Now, three of us walk, breathing in the January cold on a day already dark, muffled but for the insistent clack, clack of our boots.

At times, we seem to swim in moons of orange light that fall as lulling pools from street lamps strung along the curve. We talk of other places, home mostly, where brash sunshine blazes days and time is like an exultant dog, oblivious, rushing and demanding. Here, time insinuates itself as a damp and unfamiliar rub against our skin, we shiver within it as the waiting dead must have done.

**Billie Holiday sings *Fine and Mellow***

Her eyes are shut as she listens, rocking  
to the measure between torpor and beat –  
her body thinned by smack – but able still

to swing with rhythmic thrust and echo  
in the hollows of her frame, the tick of time  
passing. The tracks of her life lead to this beat,

this clack and spring, this slowed tempo,  
her own slung weight, her tapping foot.  
Now her head dips at the scrapes and bangs

of the drum kit, the intervals, the horns  
heard while her hands shift and flutter  
like anxious mice, obeying the febrile

demands of the latest fix. But singing,  
she refuses easy sentiment, will not look up  
and riffs alone protected, shy somehow

but exultant. She finds the beat again  
as if by chance and smiles in recognition;  
she got here, it still works.

Her face is alert – and shadows cross  
as she whispers through the vibrato  
and sinewy men coerce (loving still)

and follow her into songs that  
yearn as she bends beneath the dizzy stone  
of smack, always like Ma said

paying attention to the rhythm.  
Rapt, she throbs with more freedom  
near the end – her tender brothers

on bass and drums and tenor.  
(Lester's horn mimics, leads, forever  
catching her before she falls from grace).

Her head, crested with flowers, nods  
under the relentless tug of horse  
and melancholy, dope and pain

but she sings and taps and swings  
and we listen – not breathing.

## ***Bringing It All Back Home, 1965***

Reading Allen Ginsberg's *First Party at Ken Kesey's with Hell's Angels*

Hot black night thru melaleucas,  
and cars rest in moons of yellow  
from poles that hiss and burr.  
Stars blaze above in navy linen  
and the tops of flame trees breathe  
insects that drift in a warm breeze.  
And parents, in the drive, tend  
barbecue and smoke (acacia, gum),  
pretending happiness, but their eyes belie,  
while their tired son in leather jacket  
sweats the cool and itches in the dark,  
rubbing tobacco and weed, furtive  
in corners. Other leather jacketed  
boys smoke dope under the citreodora,  
purposeful, concentrated,  
and way too cool for school.  
I cross the lawn and beer-can litter  
to climb the steps. Two boys  
in army shirts lean at the screen door,  
half-hearted guards, smoked-out  
listless and benign, like domestic cats,  
their girls, one in scarlet tights,  
and long dress, sweat in her hair,  
is busy kissing an energetic boy,  
who leans in to her on the lounge floor.  
Her boyfriend guard doesn't notice,  
instead, he looks across the lawn, stoned,  
smiling a welcome like Buddha.  
Others talk on couches,

but most move to the music –  
twenty of them – to the vibration thru the floor.  
They sway in the middle of the room  
and bend like Vietnamese huts in wind.  
I join them and lift my arms  
to the new, sudden rush of sound  
like war, the beat we came for –  
pounding, shrill, the music charges,  
electric, we rock and shift – like choppers  
in a storm. A red-haired boy,  
tight jeaned, moves like Nureyev.  
He smokes a roach, eyes shut.  
I look at his crotch and want to marry.

*Bringing It All Back Home* is the name of Bob Dylan's first 'electric' (non-acoustic) rock album.

## **Bundanon night walk, Summer**

Flat paddocks circle the stone house. Near the river,  
prone to flood, sand sticks in cattle tracks

and a fetid ooze is flaked, chalk edged on drying platters of dung.  
A bull looms in the moon dark, as big as a back yard shed,

its flanks are thick, corded as it pants the wind.

Falling stars scorch the blue-black sky, dropping in white light,

spectacular, over in seconds while surrounding peaks

hold the basin like dry-handed monks, penitent, saffron robed

offering a blessing. Tomorrow, fire threatens again.

In the already burnt eucalypt, ridged arms wait for conflagration –

I walk in the dry night-smell of it and taste the flames.

## Ceremony day at Pantai Saba

The sky shifted to grey. Rain and lightning  
streaked a luminous back-fill of slate  
and villagers padded along the wet sand

in temple sarongs, black and white  
sombre, but dramatic too, like check cloth  
at a party, their children laughing

in the rain. Older daughters carried offerings –  
chicken, rice, fruit in baskets – placed on the ground  
against the sacred stone under the yellow frangipani.

In a white shirt and white sarong,  
his face marked and toothless, skin like pocked  
leather, the priest grinned, then sat, chanting.

After a time, eyes closed, he pronounced  
the rice goddess satisfied, placated at the loss of her land.  
The snake gods too were appeased and had left

the land already. He said: “No snakes now, all gone.”  
The villagers smiled, satisfied  
and walked back, along the sand.

Next day a builder’s boy ran to seize a green snake  
fallen from a tree – he shrieked, delighted –  
holding it by the tail as it twisted.

The boy threw the snake over the wall into a paddy,  
leaving others (no doubt) to hiss and hunt in our palms  
and fall to earth every now and then and slide

across the ground like small green ribbons,  
to track mice, lizards and frogs and flightless, fallen  
birds, cheeping their feeble protest on the wet earth.

## Cicadas

Pantai Saba, Bali

Cicadas clatter tymbals  
in an alarming *tour de force*, so loud  
it drowns the rock and thud  
of waves on the reef.

We look up from lazy pleasures,  
startled and listen as the thundered  
beating occupies the world –  
until the dark slides in

across the beach – and we feel  
threatening sky in bones  
and new, cooling damp on skin  
and stone. Cicadas boom

their huge choir, then stop,  
suddenly! They too are shocked  
by night's triumph as it takes the day,  
like a tiger takes a deer.

**The darkness doesn't descend and then it descends so quickly**

D. A. Powell

After a blaze-yellow afternoon  
on Saba beach, we track back to the house  
and walk under purple mountains.  
The sand eats our feet and we are impeded,  
like buffalo slowed in paddy mud.

So we stumble and clutch in to each other –  
clumsy drunks.

Birds shriek in the black palms  
above our heads and protest  
the quickening night,  
the sea drifts into pink and grey.

Finally, the daylong hot breath of insistent wind drops  
to become nothing more than the cool reminder of itself.  
And in the looming dark, you are a silhouette,  
we are shadowless.

Your arm remains a hot and heavy yoke across my shoulders

still, I do not shrug you off.

## **Death of a bull, Korumburra, 1951**

He stood with his father outside the circle of men who told jokes  
and blustered as they watched the bull thrash in sticking mud, too spent  
to lift its own weight or do more than raise its head. It bellowed,

the mouth a loose, wet scar, eyes like damaged moons.

Finally, the men acted. They tied ropes, slipping in the ooze, taking hold,  
trying to lift the solid weight. They attached the ropes to a tractor

and heaved as the machine banged into life, lunging forward.

Suddenly, the stench of mud and shit corralled the boy and he retched  
but it was familiar, almost welcome, as he breathed in a draught of stink and fear.

The beast was lifted and dragged. Swaying, it got to its feet  
where it loomed and rocked, like a building on sand, then buckled  
collapsing on to the mud defeated by its own weight,

legs twisted like discarded cord. The boy's father took the rifle and aimed;  
he fired two shots then looked hard at the boy – who swerved to watch  
the hills and sky and a hawk drift upwards in the distance.

## Distance

Constantine Cavafy and Po Chu-i

It's not such a stretch really  
to think about Cavafy and Po Chu-i together.  
After all, both were trapped by failure  
and overlooked in distant towns –  
but, they railed still against provincial lives.

Po, forced from his delightful Ch'ang-an  
remembered (through hot tears)  
mazes, gardens, palaces and intrigues –  
and he recollected amours that thrived,  
peerless friends too, Yuan Chen, Leng Li and Wang Fu –  
and that hectic, sensual life made possible  
in the capital with young clerks (always eager to rise).

They found him malleable in all pleasures,  
he, in turn, delighted in their young bodies,  
revealed under official silks and beads.  
Together, they quaffed wine on lustrous, western nights  
and after, were always eager to nibble and lick and probe.

But, disgraced, for some minor protest or other,  
(a lapse in taste to be truthful, no more)  
Po Chu-i was banished from his beloved capital,  
compelled to creak and haul his way up Yang-Tze gorges  
in ancient boats, *a whole life receding with every stroke*.  
First, in the lower rapids, searching for fugitive lanterns  
the boat plunged in and out, like a dizzied moth.

After days, wet and afraid, yanked unmercifully to shore  
(praise heaven) Po was manhandled by panting coolies  
speaking gibberish (what were they saying?) and laughing  
through broken teeth at his clumsiness and rage –  
only to face at the terrible journey's end, that interminable journey,  
a dreary land-locked town, *a city of isolated men beyond mountains*  
where flowers bloomed in vain and poets lived in indolence  
and despair and the faltering hope of return,  
to die in Ch'ang-an.

A 'whole life receding with every stroke' is borrowed from Hilary Mantel's *Bring up the Dead*

A 'city of isolated men beyond mountains' is borrowed from James Wright's *As I Step Over a Puddle at the End of Winter, I Think of an Ancient Chinese Governor*.

## Engine driver, Korumburra, 1951

He shone with the glamour of soot, skin covered in a thin film of sticky coal dust and engine smoke, his fingernails etched with half-moons of black, his eyes, pools of watery red in grey, clay skin. And he stood at the screen door, each night, shirt grimed, body patched, sweating, spectacular.

She came to the door, knowing the routine and scolded him: *Don't you dare bring those filthy boots in here, I've just washed the floor and I'm not doing it again!* He growled low in his belly. *This is my house*, he said but laughed.

He stripped to his braces and pants and sluiced water over himself, from a bucket she had left out for him. For a moment, it was like standing in fresh rain and enough, but he scrubbed and rinsed, dutifully and like a wet dog, shook himself dry before she could scold him again – and wash the day away properly at the gully trap, there for the purpose.

Hours after, he still coughed gobs of black phlegm and spat and heaved into worn handkerchiefs that he stuffed roughly into his pockets, winged like pale birds.

Next morning, he trudged off again, leaving her, knowing she couldn't flush the phlegm from his lungs. But she waited, quiet, for his return each afternoon, in the small white house under the green hills.

## **Rome to Florence, 1978**

*... where all movement had stopped / except for that of the wind*

Thom Gunn

A sudden, frozen winter, unexpected – weighted snow, new to us  
(and to everyone it seemed) demanded very particular attention.

And we shook in the chilled carriage, riding out the blizzard with new friends  
on the death-cold train, racketing forward, despite the warnings of track points

down, while railway men, silhouettes, gathered at the sidings and blew  
on their hands, melting ice with torches, their muffled faces lit by lamps

in the dark. And like them, we raced to cheat the cold and shivered  
on towards the city. And after, the two boys – Americans, lovers, friends –

stayed on for a while, looking at the David in wonder and laughing  
delighted at the city. But, finally, they returned to live lives in Alabama,

decorating houses for the rich. Then the plague came and they lost  
eighteen friends and endured eighteen funerals in the winter of it.

## **If only**

Imagining that John Keats sailed to Bali for his health in 1815 and met Ida Ayu

If only he had shipped out on a creaking schooner,  
Dutch or Portuguese, and listened to sailors' tales  
of deep-water monsters and winds that lunge  
at the edge of the world – and if only he had known

the cloak-warm sky over his head as he dined  
on edam and beer at the captain's table.

A Javanese boy, Adri, eyes like brown sugar  
would have served him, while the sailing toy,

delicate, feminine, moved across tropical seas,  
a creature on wrinkled glass, picking carefully  
between pirates, blue-green islands, fishing boats  
and jutting volcanic rocks.

If only he had known the heat of arrival into Singaraja  
(the white-suited Governor greeting him beneath scarlet umbrellas,  
his batik-clad wife bearing tumultuous flowers amid the screech  
of sacred monkeys) and felt the bone-deep heat, a welcome salve

for his aching frame, rubbed onto his skin by weighted air.

If only he had seen the sun on his first, radical days  
lift the shroud of night, dispelling it, in exchange for hours  
of sticking skin with Ida Ayu – his life breathing

again in the slowed, wet sliding between flanks.

And in the Governor's shining house, high on Lovina Hill,  
Dutch-style, spare and tiled like a Turkish bath  
they would have steamed together, under mosquito nets and fans

and rolled in the blessed days' heat like two cats  
licking each other clean of winter.  
At noon, he would have called for quills and ink,  
laughing, demanding sherbet and mango too – watching  
  
as house lizards tracked swarming moths –  
and in the evening sun, roamed on peaks, a lion cub,  
prowling in the warmth, his cheeks red-lit,  
the breeze a reminder of the sea that brought him here.

## **Jakarta love poem, 2002**

All around, the rhythm and wave of a language  
I still don't know – *Bandung, Kota Kinabalu, Flores,*  
*Denpasar* – and laughing and drinking and cigarettes  
at a table of abandoned food. He slaps his thigh and laughs  
until the tears come. Pale beneath his flushed face,  
perhaps finally exhausted after too much wine,  
he smokes and drinks some more and every now  
and then remembers me and translates

the impossible banalities of friendship, the jokes  
and banter. He smiles and shrugs – sorted.  
Amidst it all, beached in a way, I'm warmed  
hearing talk I can ignore, with friends whose lives  
are less than his, but who love him anyway.  
He too, loving, remembers me and loving too, I stay.

## **Kalutara**

I will go to Kalutara. I read of it once in a poem  
and was won by its beautiful, cluttered name.  
It thrilled me into desire for the elegant

lean limbed fishermen with black legs  
like knotted rope (shiny and clean up to their sex)  
half-hidden, beneath sarongs that hang like tea towels.

Grinning through gleaming teeth  
and bright pink gums they are perfect masters  
of their skin and slim destinies

and daily, they haul in a catch worth having,  
live, silver bullets, some thrashing still  
mouths agape, manhandled.

Women come to the beach with baskets  
and children, ready to claim what's theirs.  
The thin-legged men shout names, Lakshika, Hashani, Dini  
and they laugh, their eyes like dark fire on marble.

## **Legian Beach, evening**

A myna's throat rips a cry, sharp like rent silk (it is mating season).  
Clouds tumble – like clean sheets in wind – and night slides in, quiet  
as I feel the soft grit and mineral glitter of sand under my feet.

I walk, slowly and I shade my eyes at the glare and remaining heat  
my left hand dangling sandals, careless. Fishermen, curved in a row  
like shark's teeth against the lowering sun, line the beach

their rods jammed in the sand, caught fish gasp in plastic buckets.  
The men muse and smoke clove cigarettes (watching the pink, frothed sea  
as it sloughs skin and shifts weight back in rhythmic bands to the horizon's curve).

A fisherman absently rubs his crotch, his sarong fabric swells – he sees me, laughs  
and turns to re-cast – concentrated again, alert to the sudden, struggling  
fish at the end of his line. Like a silver coin it flashes a promise in the dark water.

## Looking south west from Petitenget Beach at evening

Reading Charles Wright

I've always liked the view from my lover's beach  
at evening. Fishing boats, lit by single lamps

bright along the horizon line, like glittering  
insects on a darkening map,

manned by slim-limbed fishermen  
roped to wooden planks, who toil to take a catch

worth having, faces lit by fired light as the sun  
explodes pink and orange – reflected

at the water line – quivering, fugitive  
and disturbed at evening by bubbling

crab mounds, like tiny volcanoes erupting breath.  
Scores of wanderers take to the shore

as lovers and shift in the dusk to splash  
in the low-tide and feel the day's last warmth

in bone and skin, as the sun lowers itself,  
an old man into a chair – and tourist planes

slide in and out of Denpasar – silver  
pencils, drawing lights across the sky.

Beach sellers, exhausted, move home,  
bundles balanced, hands loose, they call out,

‘Watches! Sarongs! Kites!’

Twittering last attempts. Then, half-hearted,

they leave the beach to strangers

and to us. And to the soccer boys

in squads, who deny the end of light

until the last and play in noisy triumph under an ark

of new stars, reflected fire in the pink-grey water.

Suddenly, the boys are sinewy creatures,

savage. I know a few among them, Gusman,

Adri, Agung, boys whose lives are less than this in listless days

but who, lovely-limbed and golden, play football

on their beach as warrior princes whooping war.

## Lost battalions

Reading Allen Ginsberg

The bearded bard, made mad after an *angry fix*  
moved west, to be at peace in the garden  
and to feast on plums, away from city lights, tram cars  
and smack, in the *strange new cottage by the Pacific*.

Still, he railed and chanted (always listening to the *terror through the wall*)  
despite the gentle buzz of pot, his lines singing now like veins pulsing  
blood and meaning within a new insistent music.

Outside, garden tendrils hooked the sun,  
inside, a multitude of scattered pages, scored by wind and words  
(*Jew-boy, fag, Brooklyn, Pacific, sublime* – typewriter words)  
were washed and finally imagined through water.

He lived his life, or part of it, with Orlovsky, the boy  
who couldn't spell, but could fuck like a dream and write of love,  
weeping, straight, but taking it, like Kerouac and Cassidy,  
man-toughs, who dragged and looped across country,  
leaving bugged mattresses and New York fixes  
for beds of warmth and cock in the cottage by the sea.

They came through rock and deserts of indifference or rage,  
and wandered or rifled along highways and made it west,  
despite too much sex with strangers on motel beds,  
sticky with gin and cum, where fairy boys, moonstruck  
and dumb with love, turned tricks for silver dollars.  
Through it all, Ginsberg, like a luminous biker king,  
the century's bard, cried out for love of men and boys  
his *lost battalions* – glimpsed through blanked and muffled  
histories, amid the flowers and the damned.

## Naming

*Such richness can make you drunk*, 'Flying Above California', Thom Gunn

For Luke Fischer

In Luke's poems: *Samos* and *Damascus* and the *Abbaye de Senanque*,  
the towers of *Tubingen* and the weeping *Schuylkill River*. In Cavafy: *Antioch*  
and *Thebes*, the towns of *Osroene* and *Serapis*. And in mine: *Gyanyar*, *Panta Saba*,  
*Ketewel* and *Denpasar* – places of the heart.

Reading place names (thinking) warms, bringing tears like music  
and *wanderlust*, visceral, a beat in the body, the hot urge to go,  
to seek unlikeness, conflict perhaps – or a place to die (as Marianne always said),  
or to wobble, excited, in the shock and puzzle and glamour

of new people and trees and structures. Names conjure lives lived  
in intrepid geographies, in stone huts or palaces, near grass and towers, or spires  
and crofts and water catchments, minarets, dams and flattened plains  
or mountains (*Agung* comes to mind) or deserts of ice and on great river snakes:

the *Thames*, *Neckar* and *Scamander*, the light of stars, the lean  
of trees and clutter of waves. Names describe an earthly ache.

## Plague

Reading *The Man with Night Sweats*, Thom Gunn

They always had that feeling, even though they *had* been happy  
but it was all too much and they hosted guilt, absorbed  
through skin like particular kinds of poison –  
the same as the disease itself – another canker  
driven through tissue to bone, along with the blood-  
damage of infection. They were never fools and it was too late  
to do anything other than live anyway, knowing that death  
and life were paired, as one after another  
of those first darlings, those babes in the woods,  
smiled and fell. A frightened finish for most, families  
lost and only brave-soul nurses holding still.  
The great shame was, these men had been warriors,  
death should have been a long way off, but they leaned  
and bent so quickly – and like sparrows, fell in the end.

## Right eye cloudy

*Beard white, face a little ruddy, / pleasantly fuzzy, already half drunk.*

Po Chu-I, *Song of myself* (838) translated by Burton Watson

Forced to read manuscripts, maps  
and injunctions from his Emperor  
(in dim official halls in Ch'ang-an)

Po's eyes ached –  
streaming in heat and cold  
and red like persimmons – ruined.

But study promised much,  
position and the glint of honour,  
so he worked through months of nights

into early mornings, seated  
on a rush stool at his bamboo desk  
as the water clock stole hours and wind

heaved in pines outside,  
lifting the roof thatch in the dark.

It bent the bamboo, shaking

it until the walls were scratched awake.

But on a few still and lustrous nights  
in the capital (persuaded by love)

Po met his friend Yuan Chen.

Suddenly, careless, they drank  
together, carousing in taverns,

finally wobbling home, to fall  
laughing on the straw bed  
(their red cheeks like apple moons,

their lips moist with wine).  
The broken shutter and bamboo leaned in,  
holding them as Po slept in the crook

of his lover's arms until late morning,  
when, bleary-eyed but glad, they woke  
together, touching again, deliberate,

while the sun pierced the shutters,  
marking their bodies in stripes  
as they rose and fell.

Years later, in bitter exile,  
memories of these couplings were ointment  
for misery and loneliness.

But still, Po mourned each banishment,  
each rejection (his own and his friend's)  
when dismissed for some petty infringement

or other, they were driven away  
over frothing Yang Tse gorges  
and across the great plains

and mountains to T'ung-chou  
and desolate places beyond,  
on bleak journeys south and west.

In the end, he came back  
to Lo-yang, a warm, sad old man  
whose fingers ached as he gathered poems  
  
in ribboned volumes for Tung-lin and Shang-shan,<sup>2</sup>  
content to drink wine under the paulownias  
watching the phases of the moon.

1: Po Chu-I, *In Sickness Reading Sutras: To Present to My Monk Companions* (842) translated by Burton Watson.

2: Buddhist temples where, towards the end of his life, Po deposited his manuscripts.

## **Seminyak rain on January afternoons**

Rhythmic like gamelan, rain-notes fall in lush sounds that beat and rush  
in floods to polish leaves and roofs.

Rain channels into every crevice, searching, lifting discarded bits  
of plastic and paper and floats muck on voyages across streets and paddies

from newly-choked subaks, heavy with refuse and fallen water.

Caught, people skip or trip like awkward dancers (hands flapping uselessly)

and pivot over broken pipes and stink; water sudden, rushing below  
now, where this morning it was stagnant, still.

Broken concrete shards threaten unsteady legs while dogs bark like savages  
at stalled taxis and the rain's insistent, heaving thud to earth.

On the beach, water sheens grey sand and ducts as big as new creeks  
wash through muddied deltas to the sea and we are caught, drenched

and fall laughing into each other, feet stuck in sandy mud, toes black with grit.  
We hold sarongs over our heads like flags, dodging logs, dumped

by streams from Ubud, while broken nylon nets offer a sacrifice of small dead  
fish and crabs, washed up in the tumult, their shiny mouths gaped in shock.

We laugh and jump and in the wet and warmth of it, my hand finds damp skin  
under your sticking shirt.

## Settlers

Scotland to Australia, 1837

For Judith Beveridge

Under clouds, frothed like soured beer,  
and a cold glare, demanding shaded eyes,  
(even in the grey of it) they left crofts and ditches  
and hayricks to the damp – and gathering children  
like stones, carried them to Leith, where docked,  
the creaking ‘Duncan’ lay, readied, neat.

They took not much and not enough,  
but left the sleet to find new and intermittent  
rain and yellow pastures below the Strathbogies,  
where dogs barked, delighted, harassing  
scattered sheep – and stone children grew  
into trees that scraped an opal sky.

## Suppiluliuma considers war

Circa 1338 BC

Suppiluliuma I, the great Hittite king, defended and expanded his empire, centred on what is now Asia Minor. He developed treaties with the Egyptians at the time of the Assyrian invasions from the east. A marriage between his son, Prince Zannanza and Tutankhamun's widow was planned, in order to cement relationships between the conflicted nation states. The marriage never occurred.

He stares out from the palace of bones, his head scarred with the wreckage of old wounds,  
only half listening as his generals squabble about borders and marriages and tributes.

Impatient, he turns on his twisted leg to poke at a map with a cedar stick; he spits.

Afraid, his generals shift like smoke around the room. Only the eunuch, eyes like agates,  
shouldering a leopard's pelt, imagines sweet satrapies and urges the king to war.

The boy slave, Thutmose, the king's new favourite (a placatory gift from the Egyptians)  
brings bowls of honey and bread but in the great hall of men hovers, uncertain,  
blinded by language. The king sees him: "Get out, get out. Damn you!"

Shocked, the boy stumbles and hits his head on the stone floor, spilling blood and honey.

Suppiluliuma takes the throne, ignoring the boy who flees to the kitchens.

Seated, pain from his leg easing, the king finally decides,

he will send Zannanza to Tutankhamun's widow, there will be no war.

Later, he will fuck Thutmose; after that, the guards can have him.

## Tea and *salak* and *bubur ayam*

Tourists maraud his island like clattering macaques,  
demanding but oblivious. He is used to them and steeled  
for the season. Each morning he works with mops

and brooms, washing in graceful arcs, shining floors,  
flooding a tide across tiles and wood, not looking up to see  
the quick ascent of the sun as it hurls off the night.

At evening, light slants through green palm shadows –  
and he peels mangoes, pounds chilli and turmeric for *sambal*,  
steams rice, fish and snake beans – making platters fit for greedy

princelings. Sometimes, he is garrulous and shows teeth and pink  
gums in a laugh as white as a crescent moon as he talks of his mother  
and sisters, working in a timber shack on a muddied road in the tea

mountains of Bandung, where they make *soto ayam* and *nasi goreng*  
and *lumpiah* for neighbours, handing orders through a window  
to the rutted street, for workers, toughs and school boys, who

wait, drinking sweet red tea and smoking clove cigarettes, their smoke  
drifting up into the night from half-lit, stick-legged tables.

But, alone at Pantai Saba, under a sky as blue-deep as a Bedegul

lake, Agus watches stars crash whiter than waterfalls.

Tomorrow, he must prepare food for guests: tea and *salak*  
and *bubur ayam*. After prayers, he stretches for bed, fluent as a wild cat.

**The Elizabethans, *wheels racks and fires.***

Reading Thom Gunn

It's the dark glamour of their torture  
that draws us, happening as it did  
among the pantaloons, spiced

apples, stockings, linen ruffs and banquets.  
There was another world – of gibbets,  
spikes, damp-hot rooms and blood.

## **The tilted house, 1994**

For HR and MB

She lived *at a slight angle to the universe*, laughing,  
delighted at the world, but odd, like a deer in a tree.  
Then illness came and her life swayed away from her as she lurched,  
forced to learn again how to walk, talk and shit.

Friends saw the helpless effort to stay recognisable  
despite the sudden mugging in her head as the tumour beat her up.  
Finally, she couldn't remember directions home, she cried  
(I thought she was stoned or drunk, she hoped she was).

As the tumour galloped, they took it out. After, she staggered on for a bit,  
like a new colt, lopsided. Then, tut-tutting, her mother came for her and fussed,  
while her father muttered into his paper, wanting to be fed. She sat  
blurred for days, drifting in a too-warm room looking at an English garden.

She missed her white-limbed citreodora and acacia and kangaroo paw and hosing  
down  
windows in the palpable heat on the sloped street in Clifton Hill, her tilted house  
wide and weatherboard, her own.

## The unravelling

Yes, I worked the damned loom, for three years  
and more, in the frayed light waiting for that dissembling arse-hole.  
I fended off the others and denied the gilded sky,  
the wine-dark sea, the threaded breeze – and all of that –  
and each day I wove a shroud for Laertes,

while the suitors, Amphinomous and the rest lounged in my courtyard  
like they owned the place, listless with liquor and witless too.  
They never saw my unpicking, my bloodied fingers,  
the stuttering pull at the threads, the unravelling at night  
in the bitter mirror of those interminable days. No, keen for the mantle,

they sat, dumb and watched, unseeing, as murderous death  
came, inexorable; and I laboured again each day ragged with pain.  
My bones ached as I struggled in the warp and weft of it  
but I refused speech, I had nothing to say. But, as it turned out  
he denied himself nothing: feasting, sex, companionship –

he even bargained with the gods for more time. Slimy dealer,  
safe in his precious honour, while I moaned for him. Finally  
he returned to bleached Ithaka (his body worn by old wounds,  
his lips now a twisted sheep track. How I once loved his mouth on me,  
in me) and Athena helped him, she made his body glow again

like threaded gold. Then I tested him, proffering an impossible bow –  
its string so tight it sang death like a funeral lyre and in the end,  
after a time, after a long time, I recognised a husband.  
He knew again the wool-warmth and silk of my bed –  
and I had to bear it – I miss my loneliness. Yes.

## Two aunts

*...two aunts*

*Loom on the screen...*

James Merrill

I missed the finish – for both of them. Creaking in husks, never robust, they were taut, poised to fray or snap (but once, they were slim, red-haired girls in floral cotton, cinched by fabric buckles and buttoned to the neck, prim like Loretta Young). They were whispers at the close.

For one, a tip into drink and sneering – an upturned, grey mouth and green, faded eyes – her face and eye-lids, dry, like dust on snake-skin. She managed, in a long brown house that leaned like grief, next to a woodpile (stacked by her son – reluctant, intermittent). Mostly, she sat on a once cream chair in the kitchen, a wireless tuned to the races, scratching at piles of torn racing forms – and she lurched, after whisky.

She broke a hip or two (*heard the cracks*) on raised linoleum shards, a snare across the floor, shuffling a long, dark passage to bed – along a corridor of tongue and groove boards, fitting once, but split now, in a poverty of circumstance.

Everything gone, used up, scraped clean, discarded – no need to replace anything. What for? Just her now, *toiling from chair to chair*, in a brown cardigan, across a worn track.

While the other, older, lived in a trim, white house on the main road out of town, looked at by furniture and photographs (she vacuumed every day, leaning into the task like a shaky bird). And she perched in a small, warm kitchen and made tea, humming old tunes. She knitted, missing a lost husband.

## Waking

Reading Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*

On solemn days of coltish pride, saddled  
with a haughty aunt who would not die, despite her beautiful  
but useless time, endless family misery (snobbery and envy come to mind)  
a difficult *Mama* and absent *Papa*, you found poetry  
and guilt as you shoveled, anxious, in the silt of family memory.

And *paralyzed by fact* (murder to your wives)  
your friendships never stopped the lows.  
You retreated to asylum in the pines, where ping-pong  
and *accoutrements* of various kinds reminded you of millionaire  
cottages on Maine, except the baths were fetid,

and the attendants often stained. And if you woke, afraid in your cot,  
in that narrow, linoleum room, to morning glare and scattering mice  
it was better still than Boston and your mother's house,  
where you shook, neurasthenic, through Mayflower privilege, feeling  
you deserved much more of marriage than *Miltown*, or much less,

depending on your mood (and always bearing the burden  
of things: that awful furniture, Edwardian bling, gilded bed-posts,  
mahogany dressers, *a bulwark against the ordinary*  
your mother said, but weighted for you by the lead of family history).  
You were trained for better things, not spillage in a mental home,

nonetheless, neurotic, you lived there, as if in a grand hotel,  
moving through difficult nights with hot toddies  
and manic fellow travellers, blue with dog depression  
or sometimes the tearing eagle of elation, but you knew  
that both were lies. Still, you managed it all, the ins and outs,

a compromise – in doubt but with singular hauteur, playing  
again the raconteur. You were good at that, even within the blur  
and pain of hospital and again, political in your wanderings as patrician poet  
(Democratic bent, despite the Kennedy boys) hoping for another revolution  
of sorts, McCarthy and all that.

But this too ended in sordid failure to make *lost connections*  
Thrive – and now, a mean spirit stalked America again at bloody war.  
Deaths came, way more than yours but for you a reason to withdraw  
from fight and write. And who could blame you? This was a conflicted time  
and your illness made music in its rhymes.

## **While you sleep**

For Adri Valery Wens

I watch you sleep, your sarong rises and falls  
like leaves, breathing over undulating ground.

But it's not enough for me to glory in the beauty  
of your closed eyes, nor to delight in the fall of your lashes  
like combed shadows across silk.

No, there should be candles and feasting  
and a triumphal march under the forum,  
the mob cheering as they greet their new  
and ravishing god and black-hulled ships  
must clog the ports, with slaves and gold  
and the finest wool, pale, like spun milk,  
as pale as your neck and arms.

You should have torches enough  
to illuminate Rome and to frighten off  
even the rude barbarian.

You are my Apollo on the sofa, covered in leaves  
a lit animal at rest, your skin barely able  
to hold in your sinewed might.

You wake and stretch, careless like the god,  
your eyes are dark honey.

## Winter

Reading Emily Dickinson

Snow drifts only occasionally here, but always hushed  
in the otherwise winter-dry husk of the lower slopes,  
where frozen pipes and puddles crack and burst with expanding ice.

Once every ten years or so, it snows through a gentler cold,  
not frigid, but loving, tactful, drifting in heartbreaking whiteness  
to muffle the town and cover the grass in a *chilly softness*.

I pause at my winter window to boil water for tea  
and watch. I hold my cup as flakes as big as dinner plates  
fall on trees and gates and paths in a garden

newly compassionate, where this morning  
it was winter cruel, evidence of toil and hurt  
and scarred need. Then, the garden beds, like graves

were sharply dug, hard, bulked, now they are turned fragile  
like unmade beds and left-out garden tools are re-figured  
as filigreed, decorated staves, festive, delicate.

New snow weighs lightly on the spears of ginger and agapanthus  
and oleander, gentled white, calmed somehow (denying the shrill green  
of bright spring days or the burned-off, hard brown of winter

dry and rasping in the cold, cold air). Snow, like a wedding feast,  
is inviting, full of promise, white. We are charmed,  
and in the delicious, tactile joy of it wait

inside the house for something more to happen.

But no, the snow has seen to that. Muffled, we read a bit, listen to music, do anything but observe ourselves within the riddle of our lives.

There is tenderness in the dust of old habits and I want for nothing more, only the occasional light touch, like snow.