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Thom Gunn in New York

Michael Nott



THOM GUNN spent the summer of 1958 in New York City. ‘It was wonderful, and revelatory as it always is,’ he told his friend Tony White. ‘I learn more about people and myself in NY than anywhere else. I got offered a job in a tough-queer 3rd Avenue bar the day before I left, and if I hadn’t been under contract to Berkeley I’d have accepted it’ (he’d been given a visiting lectureship at Berkeley on the strength of his second collection, *The Sense of Movement*). The bar was probably the Lodge, one of New York’s first leather bars, which Gunn had first visited two years earlier. He’d been staying at the William Sloane House YMCA on West 34th Street and developed a routine of ‘drinking all night, having an enormous meal at the Automat (which fascinated me) at 4 a.m., and then sleeping about five hours’. The Lodge, on 3rd Avenue between East 53rd and 54th Streets, opened in 1952. It took its cue from Shaw’s, also on 3rd, which according to one former patron, was ‘a narrow little bar that gave you the feeling you were inside a bus . . . You would come in the front door and the bar was full of filthy, dirty, scuzzy paraphernalia hanging from the ceilings.’ On that 1956 trip, while his partner Mike Kitay visited his parents in New Jersey, Gunn began his lifelong romance with New York. ‘If England is my parent and San Francisco is my lover,’ he later wrote, ‘then New York is my own dear old whore, all flash and vitality and history.’ While he was there, he was introduced to S&M, ‘made various interesting but inconclusive experiments with the more extreme evidences of perversion’, and bought his first black leather jacket. ‘I’m not sure what it meant to me,’ he said of the jacket: ‘I couldn’t say. I thought I was the only pervert in the world.’ After all this, he wrote in the summer of 1956, ‘San Francisco seems a let down.’ The first dedicated leather bar in San Francisco, the Why Not? – on Ellis Street in the Tenderloin – didn’t open until 1960 and was quickly shut down. Its successor, the Tool Box, opened the next year on the corner of Harrison and 4th, thus beginning leather’s long association with the South of Market neighbourhood.

Assuming Berkeley wouldn’t renew his 12-month contract, Gunn had ‘3/4 decided to give up universities after my year at Berkeley’, as he wrote to John Lehmann, ‘and go to New York . . . Christ knows what I will do, but I’ll find something. I’m no longer interested in educating people – if I ever was.’ Gunn in fact taught at Berkeley until 1966, when he gave up tenure, and then returned in 1973 as a visiting lecturer, teaching in the spring term every year until he retired in 1999. His romance with New York settled into a routine of annual visits, often during the summer or during trips to give lectures and readings. Gunn lived in the city for four months while lecturing at Princeton in 1970. First he stayed in a cheap hotel, then sublet the art historian Lucy Lippard’s loft, a 15-minute walk from Christopher Street, the new hub of gay life after Stonewall. One night at the International Stud he ran into the young August Kleinzahler – out on a bar crawl with his gay older brother – who later described him as ‘a tall, handsome-looking galoot in a T-shirt and leather vest, with lurid tattoos on his arms. He didn’t look like any sort of poet to me, more like a predatory sex addict.’ The Lodge was long gone, but Ty’s, a new leather bar on Christopher Street, became a favourite. ‘I’ve never enjoyed New York so much,’ Gunn

wrote of a visit in 1973. At Ty’s he met Pieter Sweval of the band Looking Glass, who introduced him to cocaine, ‘a fine fine drug, far too expensive to make a habit out of, but I’ve had it about ten times now, and by the tenth time your body has learned whole new categories of excitement which it didn’t know of even by the fifth time.’ A few years later, in the Meatpacking district, the Mineshaft opened: a members-only BDSM leather bar and sex club whose patrons included Michel Foucault, Rock Hudson and Freddie Mercury. Gunn was a regular: ‘At orgasm I notice something like seven pairs of hands at work on me.’ The dress code was macho and fetish, strictly enforced. ‘The Shaft is an amazing two-storey maze of rooms, stairways, toilets, closets, hallways, bathtubs, gloryholes and sex equipment,’ wrote Jack Fritscher, then editor of the leather magazine *Drummer*. This sounds like Gunn’s description, in ‘Saturday Night’, of San Francisco’s club the Barracks, with its ‘labyrinthine corridors’ and rooms for every fantasy:

If, furthermore,
Our Dionysian experiment
 To build a city never dared before,
Dies without reaching to its full extent,
 At least in the endeavour we translate
Our common ecstasy to a brief ascent
 Of the complete, grasped, paradisal state
Against the wisdom pointing us away.

Of all the ‘different varieties of New Jerusalem . . . I’d only return to one,’ Gunn wrote, ‘For the sexual New Jerusalem was by far the greatest fun.’ ‘He was very interested in sex as a defining thing about the human being,’ his friend Wendy Lesser told me. ‘I never would have said that when he was alive; it wouldn’t have occurred to me. But now that I look at the course of his life, and what sex ended up meaning to him when he was old, it was really central at least to him, his sense of himself, and obviously to his sense of what everyone else was like too.’ It was also central to his poetry. He wrote in a notebook in 1962 that ‘a good poem is simultaneously a tentative and risky cruising, a complete possession and orgasm, and a huge leather orgy. (Whether its subject is related to sex or not.) Motives in sex & writing are for me the same: joyful possession of, mastery over, a piece of life.’

On a visit in 1974, Gunn met Ty’s ‘gorgeous big’ doorman, Allan Noseworthy. He was warm, generous, frank, fun, a voracious reader and a hopeless romantic. He wrote to Gunn of one guy: ‘I’ve found myself thinking about him 18 hrs a day (the six that I don’t are when I’m reading).’ Gunn found Noseworthy

flighty, highly strung, at times silly, but so good in every important sense. I said to him once, and it turned out I was right, I bet no one has ever betrayed you, has he? – because his sensitivity to people was so invariably correct that I can’t imagine him ever in a position where anything like that cd occur. I’m not in love with him, let me add, though I love him a lot.

Noseworthy lived in a loft on Bleecker Street with his Newfoundland, Yoko (the titular dog in a poem of Gunn’s), and two ‘dyke parakeets’ called Hank and Lotsa. He took Gunn to a phantasmagorical basement party on Wooster Street (‘stoned on first acid in months & speed . . . catacombs & crypt, strange dripping cells – universal orgy, where I had a fine time & kept returning’) and on his first Gay Pride march, up 6th Avenue from Greenwich Village to Central Park, in June 1974. ‘I was on quite heavy acid this time,’ he told White. ‘I’ve never done

much walking on acid before, & I must say for about ten blocks I wondered whether I was going to make it. But the general enthusiasm caught me up & carried along. The whole thing was rather good for me.’ For a brief time they were lovers, but sex was often only a small part of these relationships for Gunn. When he returned to New York that November to stay with Noseworthy, they ‘hardly had sex, but laid a solid foundation for a long & loving friendship’.

Noseworthy was a frequent visitor to San Francisco in the late 1970s, often hanging out with Thom, Mike and their ‘queer household’ on Cole Street. Sometimes he stayed there. He called Gunn and Kitay his ‘role models’, admiring the fact they had stayed together for so long, and built a household of friends and lovers. Noseworthy was often in San Francisco with the Creative Power Foundation, which organised disco parties under the direction of the Manhattanite-cum-Market Street hairstylist Michael Maletta. For Night Flight ’77, the first disco party on the West Coast, two thousand people filled the Gay Community Centre on Grove Street. There was ‘dancing, fire eaters, orgy rooms, everything’, Gunn wrote. Later, Noseworthy ran membership at the Saint, a gay superclub in the East Village which held elaborate monthly disco parties. ‘It’s like a maître d’s job for three thousand queers every weekend,’ he told Gunn.

They kept in touch by phone and letter, and Noseworthy’s letters form part of Gunn’s archive at Berkeley. ‘I hope you don’t mind me calling when I’m all down and depressed,’ he wrote in 1977, ‘but I always feel like talking to you makes me feel better.’ In a letter from November 1981, Noseworthy recounts a discussion with someone he met in Spike, a butch S&M bar on 11th Avenue. ‘One of the guys I was fucking with, a craggy big, blond Atlanta boy, had a small band-aid on his chest above his nipple’:

I asked him what was wrong. He said he had to have an operation later in the week. I, nosey fucker that I am, asked if he had a mole to be removed. He said no, it’s a malignant tumour, and proceeded to freak out about the whole thing. Me and my big mouth. Needless to say it put a damper on the day. He was (is) only 25 yrs old and was scared to death. Poor guy. There sure seems to be a lot of this type of thing around these days, much more than say, five or ten years ago. It’s enough to make one try and enjoy life while one can because you never know.

That same month, Michael Maletta was diagnosed with Kaposi’s sarcoma, a rare cancer that forms purple lesions on the skin, and came to be seen as one of the Aids-defining illnesses of the 1980s. Maletta died in August 1982, nine months after his diagnosis. When Noseworthy was out of work early in 1983, he became involved with Gay Men’s Health Crisis and later founded the Aids Resource Centre, a hospice programme in New York. ‘No money in it but great personal satisfaction,’ he wrote to Gunn. ‘It’s hitting more and more friends. Stay healthy ole chap. I’m trying.’

‘Lament’, the only poem Gunn published in the *London Review of Books* ([/the-paper/v06/n18/thom-gunn/lament](https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v06/n18/thom-gunn/lament)), is an elegy for Noseworthy, who died in June 1984 of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, a lung infection common among those infected with HIV. The poem recounts in clear-eyed, unforgiving detail Noseworthy’s final few weeks and his death, ‘this difficult, tedious, painful enterprise’. That May, Noseworthy had called Gunn from Palm Springs – where he was living with his new boyfriend, the porn star Richard Locke – and told him he had Kaposi’s sarcoma. A few days later, he arrived in San Francisco to get treatment. Gunn moved into his study upstairs so Noseworthy could have his bedroom. He was in and out of San Francisco General Hospital for a month before contracting pneumocystis:

Your cough grew thick and rich, its strength increased.
Four nights, and on the fifth we drove you down
To the Emergency Room.

He never came out. He was hooked up to a breathing machine that meant he could communicate only by writing messages on a pad. Thom and Mike went to see him almost every day, and his parents, brother and sister all flew in to visit. He held on for two weeks, but then his lung collapsed. 'I left at end of morning & Mrs N phoned me he was dead when I came home. He must have died between 12 & 1. I shall miss him horribly – nobody was like him. I knew him just over 10 years. I didn't know I had tears left, but cried a lot.'

'Allan was not ready to die,' Gunn wrote in his notebook before starting work on 'Lament'. 'Tired & ill, yet the illness so recent he was still hungry for life, he did not seem to have a mind in a state of peace or acceptance of death.' Gunn wrote the poem in three weeks, from the middle of July to the start of August, unusually quickly for him. 'I couldn't think about anything but it,' he said later. 'I was thinking about it even when I wasn't writing it, trying to live up to my subject, which was him.' It is his longest single poem – 114 lines – and the first of the Aids elegies that would be published in *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992). Its couplets helped to establish their strict form, unsparing tone and plain style. 'It came out in couplets,' he told Clive Wilmer. 'I'm not sure why ... Once you do something that you're pleased with, it's not that you try to repeat it, but it points a way forward to other things.'

That November, Gunn spent eight days in New York. Before setting off, he felt 'restless & uncertain – really about NY without Allan. One moment I want to go, the next I don't.' There, he gave a reading at the YMHA with James Fenton, and opened with 'Lament'. He saw some of Noseworthy's friends and wondered if he'd ever see them again. Once 'the most sociable city in the world' – as he had called it back in 1959 – New York now seemed empty. 'Now, as when Tony White died [in 1976] I lost the London I had acquired through him,' Gunn wrote, 'so now Allan Noseworthy has died I have lost the NY I have acquired through him.' Back in San Francisco he wrote to his aunts:

I got more and more depressed in NY: it was very sad without poor Allan, who I usually stayed with. I went to see his neighbours and the man who rented his apartment: all his things were still there, including some quite valuable stuff and they didn't know what to do with them, so I am writing to his brother. I did notice that he had kept every letter, it looked like, that had ever been written to him, so I located an enormous bundle by myself and dropped them in a dustbin outside. As a friend said who had to clear out Sylvia Plath's flat after her suicide: 'The dead leave everything behind.' Don't they just.