

THOM GUNN

1929–2004

On the 90th Anniversary of His Birth, A Memoir of the “Leather Poet Laureate” of Folsom Street and His Pop-Culture Life in San Francisco

Thom Gunn and I first met fifty years ago, as noted in his diary, in early November 1969 when he was on a reading tour and I was an assistant professor in the English Department at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. I had found his poetry while browsing in Barbara’s Bookstore in Chicago in 1967. Scanning the virility of his texts with gaydar, I also studied the one photo I found of him in a leather jacket on the back cover of *My Sad Captains*. I appreciated his photogenic bone structure and studied his face for the gay cast in the eye that gay men seek to identify each other. The very title *My Sad Captains* is gayer than *Billy Budd*, and sounds like a gay torch song sung by Judy Garland. I figured he was gay, and more than gay. He was a brother leatherman whose inclination framed his poetry. In one of his many notebooks later archived at the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, he wrote: “I say that S&M is a form of love. I think it is, but I don’t think that goes quite deep enough.”

Introduced at 8 PM by faculty poet and professor John Woods, Thom read in a lecture room in Brown Hall that seated fifty—and that night was standing room only. My friend, the author, poet, and MacArthur Fellow Stuart Dybek, and I had attended graduate school together at Loyola University of Chicago and were both teaching creative writing at the time. I began at WMU in 1967, and Stuart in 1968. I was out, and the straight Stuart and I had many gay friends in Chicago. We figured Thom was, in the polite term used then, a “homophile” person of interest, but tried not to project fanciful autobiography into his poems when

such a thing was considered defamatory. The Stonewall Riot had happened only five months before, and few outside New York had yet heard of it.

Having spent May 1969 cruising in London on mod Carnaby Street, and at the Coleherne leather bar in Earls Court, I knew a Teddy Boy from a forty-year-old Leather Boy who was born two years before the slouching James Dean whose cool he was channeling. James Dean's middle name was Byron, courtesy of his mother who loved poetry and died young when Dean was a boy. Thom as a young teen lost his mother to suicide, and like Dean coped with her exit by turning to the arts. "Maybe I'm so cool," Thom wrote, double-daring himself to face death, that "I could out-stare her [Medusa]" and her powers over life and death. Like Dean, he found solace in literature and performance.

Thom revealed the mask that let his creative self stand beside his personal self in *My Cambridge*: "Viewing myself as an actor trying to play a part provided rich material for poetry." Thom, who created many photo collages on his study walls over the years, appreciated the famous Dennis Stock photograph picturing Dean wearing glasses and reciting from his fellow Hoosier's folksy book, *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley*.

The appealing actor, dead young like Byron, Shelley, and Keats, dead before rock stars died, meant a great deal to Thom and me, and to men of our post-war consciousness. Frank O'Hara wrote several poems about the discipline and disorder of Dean. Controversial French philosopher Edgar Morin took a deep dive into the actor in "The Case of James Dean" which was the title essay Thom read in the 1958 issue of the *Evergreen Review* that pictured Dean on the cover, with hustler John Rechy excerpted in the same issue from *City of Night* bragging and complaining that he was followed by the "shadow of James Dean because of the movie." Warhol silk-screened Dean. Lou Reed cited Dean's gender-fluid imprint on drag artist Jackie Curtis, who "thought she was James Dean for a day" in his song "Walk on the Wild Side," produced by David Bowie. Because we all thought we were James Dean, my own essay crushing on Dean was published in 1962.

So I was curious to check Thom out when the elegant John Woods introduced him to an audience that included W. H. Auden

expert Edward Callan, and celebrity poets Herb Scott and Conrad Hilberry whose students at Kalamazoo College interviewed Thom for their literary magazine, *Cauldron*. Of average height, Thom carried his speed-lean body with a kind of aw-shucks diffidence, and confidence. His aura was handsome and, to me, sexy, including his picket smile of clean British teeth. One must sometimes contemplate the poet's mouth. He had carefully groomed and accessorized himself with gay signifiers. He combed his healthy black hair in a brush cut, and wore one gold earring, which was unconventional then and there. He wore that earring in his left lobe, and hung his ring of keys on the left side of his leather belt. In the semaphore of leather culture, the right side signals a bottom man and left says the man is either a top or negotiable. He wore black Levi's 501s with a red bandana handkerchief in his left back pocket and black cowboy boots with a blue denim shirt open two or three buttons down his skinny chest inside his signature black leather jacket that he kept on for the first half of the reading.

Midway through his performance, as part of the show, he bantered with the audience while he removed his jacket under which he was wearing a black leather vest. His shirt sleeves turned up twice at the cuff exposed a black panther tattoo on his right forearm. My longtime friend Samuel Steward, an intimate of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, was also known as both the writer "Phil Andros" and the tattoo artist "Phil Sparrow" who had personally inked a black panther on James Dean's forearm which Dean covered with pancake makeup for filming. Sam told me that the black panther tattoo was popular with sailors and bikers up through the 1960s until the rise of the Black Panther Party.

Thom looked like the incarnation of one of his leather poems the way Edward Carpenter said that Walt "Whitman as a concrete personality entirely filled out and corroborated the conception of him which one had derived from reading *Leaves of Grass*." In the arc of popular culture, we were old enough to be 1950s beatniks who evolved into 1960s hippies who morphed into 1970s leathermen. Thom's presentation was gentle, unassuming, the kind of cordiality suitable to an international poet entertaining a literary crowd in the Midwest. Performing poem after poem, he read for

about an hour and was met with a standing ovation, and then answered a few questions.

As soon as I could make my way to the little stage which was no more than the platform dais where I stood teaching American literature six times a week, I reached out to greet him. I was also up to dress code in my own leather jacket tailored like a Levi's denim jacket by Taubers of California in San Francisco. After watching him chat with students and faculty stargazing at him, I said, and I remember the dialogue planned like a bar pickup line while watching him read: "I like your leather jacket." He said, "I like yours." I said, "Who did your tattoo?" He said, "Lyle Tuttle." I said, "Cliff Raven did mine." The month before, Lyle Tuttle, tattoo artist to San Francisco leathermen, had been on the October cover of *Rolling Stone* while the gay Cliff Ingram, who was taught tattooing and re-named Cliff Raven by Phil Sparrow, was inking leathermen in Chicago.

I then introduced him to my new lover, David Sparrow, a twenty-four-year-old leatherman who was drop-dead handsome. I was thirty, and we were both chicken to Thom who was forty; but he was far from "the fallen rake" in middle age in his poem "Modes of Pleasure." David and I had met only four months before in July 1969 and were a committed couple until 1979, and friends till his death from AIDS in 1992. Thom liked that David had hustled and knew his way around substances. Because I found Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Passer Mortuus Est" ["The Sparrow Is Dead"] usefully coincidental in my imagining of my handsome "petulant" Sparrow, "my erstwhile dear," I wondered if Thom—who liked bad boy types, and liked David a lot—found his surname of coincidental use in the poem he wrote three months later, "Sparrow," in "Three Songs." But then, sparrows figure so frequently in his poetry.

Thom looked relieved at finding fraternity on the road. He was a bard and sex tourist in search of "funny discreet understandings." He wrote that phrase in his diary to describe how he and David and I had negotiated our tryst. His pattern on his junket was the usual gay quest to find sympathetic company in the gay student or gay professor he could latch onto to survive the evening reading and faculty after-party.

David and I walked Thom to my 1969 Toyota Land Cruiser, a purposely macho vehicle used as bait in cruising, and drove off to the reception at the home of a professor of children's literature. The party was a mix of faculty and students talking to Thom who listened and smiled. After an hour or so, he nodded a high sign, and whispered, "Let's smoke a joint." I grabbed David's elbow, and the three of us disappeared into the bathroom. Smoking the joint launched a three-way bonding made all the more exciting because we were a trio of outsider men discovering each other in an otherwise straight soiree of very nice people drinking mulled wine on the other side of the door. We became instant mates. He smelled clean and tasted like cigarettes which at that time did not bother me—as did later his substance use which had prematurely wrinkled his thin skin years before he died with methamphetamine in his system at age seventy-four. He wrote a very short poem, "Listening to Jefferson Airplane," in response to Grace Slick's lyric that "Some pills make you larger, and some pills make you small." In "Street Song," he mentioned shopping for Methedrine, hash, and "...Keys lids acid and speed." Thom was always one smart party drug ahead of everyone else.

Our organ recital in the bathroom was an interlude of twenty minutes. When we came out of that water closet, no one noticed; or, if they did notice, they didn't know what "it" was that happened if it was anything; and they said nothing because it was too soon in gay liberation to know what to say. Times were different then. Freer. No one would dare do that today. That's how cool universities were back in that liberated day of campus revolution. It was not *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, but soon after, my department named me assistant professor with tenure.

During this visit, at my home, I showed Thom a painting done by my immigrant acquaintance Otto Stauffenberg, a cousin of Count Claus von Stauffenberg whom Thom had called "honour personified" in a poem in *My Sad Captains* for his brave attempt to assassinate Hitler with a suitcase bomb in 1944 when Thom was turning fifteen. Thom wanted to meet the ancient Otto (1888-1977) who was an artist in residence at the Kalamazoo Institute of Art, but his itinerary was too tight. To this day, I wonder if he might have found a new poem in Otto.

From my first acquaintance with his poetry in 1968, I had a queer literary detective's interest that was italicized because of his subtle gay content whose dark eros he softened, I thought, for literary consumption that was then still rather homophobic. In his crossover from the tight metrics of his first British poems to the California freedom of his later, he was slowly defrosting his stiff upper lip to write more boldly about gay sex the way Countee Cullen had boldly pioneered emerging "Negritude," his term, in his Harlem Renaissance poems. However, few if any of Thom's lines, composed laterally amidst poetry's San Francisco Renaissance, beat with the bumptious rhythms of "Homotude" that drove the jerkoffian beat of the erotic poetry later favored in *Drummer*, the international magazine that was a bible for leathermen. Erotica is as essential to gay culture as rap is to black culture. Thom dared sensuality, but seemed to shy away from the unpasteurized sexuality awakening in gay literature and pop culture. As the Sixties became the Seventies, times were changing. E. M. Forster's long-gestating *Maurice* written in 1913 finally found its first publication in 1971, the same year Thom's magical *Moly* was published, and two years after Thom read that November night in Michigan.

At age forty, Thom—like his eccentric genius friend, the leatherman and neurologist Oliver Sacks—was a half-generation earlier on the gay scene than the younger people who began their version of modern gay liberation at Stonewall. His poetry, like the cool leather photography of his peer Robert Mapplethorpe, who also did collages, seemed formal, restrained, and clever, but not the kind of art that rouses the reader to orgasm. He lived in a gay culture where gay art came to pride itself on being erotic and confrontational. So why so little frank Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and action on his pages?

It was as if he himself was under a discipline to compose courtly love poems within the conservative specifications of proper literature for his literary audience when he might have also penned more frankly gay colloquial poetry in touch with the real-life vernacular of his gay pop-culture audience for whom eros is the vulgate soul of gay arts, and the barbaric yawp of same-sex orgasm is most often the existential point. But maybe it's better

not to explain too much. If only he had celebrated the raw erotics of gay sex with the same heart-stopping frankness with which he tolled the raw sorrows of AIDS.

In the way playwright and poet Thomas Lanier Williams changed his name to “Tennessee,” William Guinneach Gunn, whose mother’s family name was Thompson, changed his name to Thompson William Gunn out of which he designed a marquee name that would have suited a porn star. “Thom Gunn” could have been as revered in gay pop culture as the “poet laureate of leather” as was our mutual international friend, “Tom of Finland,” the “artist laureate of leather” who drew his erotic art in touch with the common gay man. Like Mapplethorpe, Tom of Finland used paradigms of erotica to create his stylized identity archetypes of homomasculine men and their cool couture. I once wrote that few have ever pleased themselves over a Mapplethorpe photo. Might the same be said of a reserved Gunn poem in a subculture worshipping hot porn? Can intentionally provocative erotica be foreplay, entertainment, and art? Is orgasmic triggering a literary talent? Is any art form more sensationally and beatifically interactive than erotica and its synonym pornography? Is that sacred erotic transaction between poet and reader even meaningful outside the queer eye? Thom’s erotic modesty may have little consequence to some old-school scholars, but it means a lot in the gay measurement of queer authenticity.

I mention this because as editor-in-chief of *Drummer* magazine in 1977, I found an appetite in gay popular culture hungering for literary erotica that didn’t insult the intelligence of readers. The marvel was how the artist Thom, the son of two disciplined journalists, kept producing fine poetry from the conformist 1950s up through Swinging Sixties and Seventies and the *fin de siècle* AIDS emergency. If the immigrant Thom whose legal status was “permanent resident” had not re-invented himself as a true San Franciscan, if he had not been inspired by sex and drugs and drama and plague, how different his poetry would have been. Writing about our then current moment, he stood up as artists do in a community to make sense out of change. He was an artist who was HIV negative who chronicled the plague in much

the same way the HIV-positive Mapplethorpe documented the 1980s.

My Sad Captains should be the title of the inevitable biopic Hollywood or the BBC will make of Thom's life. That title intones Whitman's "Oh Captain, My Captain," as well as Scott Fitzgerald's *All the Sad Young Men*, which, quoted by Thom at the beginning of Part 2, was a heterosexual romantic lament compared to Thom's homosexual existential concerns. Thom's texts, even while modest about sex, were difficult to present to university students in the 1960s and early 1970s because his poetry, as enigmatic as is all poetry to freshmen studying Literary Interpretation, was doubly perplexing to straight students. Classroom discussions of his poems, as with Whitman's, led to teaching moments about gay realities in a culture adjusting to emerging gay liberation.

Thom's name and legacy might have been saluted earlier and deeper inside the ecosystem of post-Stonewall gay American popular culture that was slow to recognize his mid-century poetry as well as the literary company he kept internationally and in the gay capital of San Francisco that made Cupid boss. Even so, the summer after Stonewall, editor Daniel Halpern headlined Thom in the first issue of *Antaeus* with fiction by Paul and Jane Bowles; poetry by John Fowles, Lawrence Durrell, Tennessee Williams, Lawrence Ferlinghetti; and an interview with Gore Vidal. However, inside the gay ghetto, it took till 1977 for the national gay magazine, *The Advocate*, with its politically correct bias against the leather lifestyle, to cover Thom with an interview by Tony Sarver, perhaps because it took that long for his American poetry to come out of the British closet.

Thom had been famous for thirty-four years when the first gay literary prizes, the Lambda Literary Awards, were founded in 1988. It was only in 1992 that *The Man with Night Sweats* became his first nomination for a Lammy, but he lost to Academy-Award-winning poet Edward Field's *Counting Myself Lucky*. Not until 1995 did his *Collected Poems* win the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Poetry. In 2001, Thom won the Triangle Award for Gay Poetry from the literary gate-keepers at the Publishing Triangle. It was only in 2005, the year after his death, that the Publishing Triangle marketing group changed that trophy's name

to the Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry. Why did the Publishing Triangle wait? It wasn't for death because it also named an award for the living Edmund White.

Among the postmortem considerations of Thom, two invocations touched me. In 2009, poet Randall Mann wrote *Breakfast with Thom Gunn*. In 2012, Christopher Bram, whose novel *Father of Frankenstein* became Bill Condon's Oscar-winning screenplay *Gods and Monsters*, channeled Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Representative Men* and Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* and included Thom in his *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*.

Thom crossed the Atlantic and double-crossed the conventions of poesis. He kept his cool dodging labels, and never weaponized his poetry for gay pop-culture conquest and coverage. He never swanned into a bar playing the poet to get laid. The year before he died, Thom told Robert Potts in *The Guardian*: "I don't expect my friends to read me. Most of the people I know have heard I'm a writer, but are not very interested."

"COFFEE ON COLE": PRIVATE LIVES AT THOM'S COLE STREET COMMUNE

After Thom and I met in Michigan, we became friends in San Francisco the way writers become friends. We bonded as mates in a homomale version of homosexuality, which also animates the fraternity in his poetry. Homomale is Whitman's Calamus emotion applied to male-identified gay men bonding together not in separatist patriarchy, but in the humanist best that men do, avoiding toxic masculinity ideology, and living the best of manhood. Thom's friend Wendy Lesser, founding editor of *The Threepenny Review*, wrote in her essay, "Thom Gunn's 'Duncan'": "He [Thom] was always the most masculine of men. There was nothing 'sissy' about his homosexuality, as he might have put it—no desire to imitate the female of the species, no particular bond with the feminine."

When David Sparrow and I moved to San Francisco, Thom and I kept on keeping on via telephone and bars and coffee shops, as was the custom then, which he later pictured in his clever

“Coffee on Cole,” but not at his home with his partner Mike Kitay first on Filbert Street and then later on Cole Street or at mine with David Sparrow on 25th Street because we were social not domestic friends. “South of Market Street” bars, aka “SOMA” bars, like the No Name, the Ramrod, the Ambush, and the Lone Star were our Café Les Deux Magots. There was a nonstop gay party going on in the 1970s that started with celebrations in gay bars worldwide on the symbolically sexy date, 6/9/69, nineteen auspicious days before Stonewall. We figured we could always become domesticated later when we were older.

He wrote in “Lines for a Book,” “It’s better / to go and see your friend than write a letter.” It wasn’t cool back then to ask about another man’s private home life. Thom was genuinely contented with the long-term safety and security and love in his domestic life which gave him the communal home of men and privacy he needed to create in his study and bedroom. Surviving his father’s coldness, his mother’s suicide, the London Blitz, two years in the British army, immigration, and the deaths of friends from plague, he seemed to live a charmed life. With Kitay, he had the gay male equivalent of “happy wife / happy life” which he saluted in “The Hug,” his lovely Valentine of a sudden moment of domesticated intimacy.

Sowing wild oats in the 1970s in the carefree window between penicillin and HIV, leathermen rarely cared to know anyone’s domestic drama because too much personal pathos broke the fourth wall of the carefree sex opera. One of the joys of John Doe/John Doe serial sex was anonymity. The artist Ed Parente and I had brokeback sex a dozen times during two years at the glorious Barracks bathhouse on Folsom until, during one exceptionally perfect night, post coitum, we sat on the stairs and introduced ourselves and moaned with laughter because for years his friends and mine had told each of us that we must meet. We became close friends, but never balled again because personal information killed the buzzed-up Platonic Ideal of the Hard Man neither of us was in real life outside our thrilling anonymous sex. For reasons such as this short circuit, Thom tended to keep his bar life with middle-aged leathermen fairly separate from his sex life with young men.

The main caution that blocked us from developing a closer friendship was his drug use which unnerved me. His home-commune roommate Bill Lux noted Thom's three-day sex and crystal meth binges. I knew that William Burroughs lived his whole long life on heroin, but still. Whatever was going on with Thom's "fiercely attractive" house guests who were trying "to stick their needle in my [his] arm" in his poem "In Time of Plague," I wasn't interested in either a soap opera or a situation comedy with older men and younger hustlers—even though each roommate "cooks one night and each cooks well." When Thom died, the headline on his obituary written by Edward Guthmann for the *San Francisco Chronicle* read: "A Poet's Life. As friends died of AIDS, Thom Gunn stayed healthy—until his need to play hard finally killed him." The medical examiner's report said he passed from "acute polysubstance abuse." Wendy Lesser praised Thom for not being a "careerist," telling Guthmann that Thom's "poems about death, particularly 'Elegy,' will be read as long as people read poetry in English."

THOM'S SHORT STORY IN *DRUMMER* MAGAZINE

Meanwhile, *Drummer* was helping create the very leather culture it reported on. In 1978, when a gay book selling 5,000 copies was considered a best-seller, *Drummer* had surged to a monthly print run of 42,000 copies which, with a pass-along rate of two readers per copy, was a potential audience of 80,000. So I suggested introducing several of Thom's poems to drum up publicity with new readers. In the 1960s, respectable authors saw the pop-culture value of crossover publishing in men's lifestyle magazines. Jack Kerouac, Gore Vidal, Norman Mailer, and Gabriel García Márquez wrote for *Playboy*. Tom Wolfe, Terry Southern, and Tennessee Williams wrote for *Esquire*. But Thom blinked about the aspirations of *Drummer*, perhaps on principle against writing occasional poetry, perhaps for the sake of protecting awards and grants, or perhaps because he could not see the perfect destiny of his canonical poetry reaching its most appreciative end-user audience in a gay men's adventure magazine that during twenty-four years of publication was curating a new street-view canon of erotic

writing. *Drummer* was named after Henry David Thoreau whose marching to one's own drum we quoted on every masthead, with Walt Whitman always in mind: "Your very flesh shall be a great poem."

This situation arose twenty-two years before Thom matured fully into the matter and form of *Boss Cupid* that sang free with a vivid California frankness *Drummer* would have lapped up. Maybe, he thought his imported mid-century literary restraint might not pass hardcore erotic muster with unrestrained smart-ass leathermen subscribers who were the wisened-up sons of the bikers he limned in his 1957 poem, "On the Move." He crafted that poem around "Black Denim Trousers and Motorcycle Boots," the 1955 hit song by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, that played for years on leather-bar juke boxes. Learning as well from Hollywood, he kick-started this motorcycle poem with a shimmering long shot of vaguely Nazi bikers riding "on motorcycles, up the road, they come:...bulges...goggles...gleaming jackets...damned...half animal...self-defined."

That poem of scooter trash manufacturing "both machine and soul" was also sparked by brutalist motorcyclist Marlon Brando who was the butch version of the sensitive James Dean. Brando, the original-recipe Boss Cupid, was the atavistic leather biker with a thousand pounds of hot-steel combustion power thrusting between his legs in *The Wild One*. When Dean went to meet Brando for the first time, he duded himself up in the same off-the-rack leather jacket, boots, gloves, and cap Brando wore in the film. Thom's phallic images of centaur-bikers are sourced in that movie: "...the Boys /...their hum / Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh." A flirtatious girl named Mildred asks Brando, "What are you rebelling against?" Brando sneers: "Whatcha got?"

Our rebel readers, who were also boning up on the straight biker magazine *Easyriders*, would have cheered, not challenged, a Top Gunn for writing a really rockin' "unsettled motorcyclist's vision (of his own death)" or two. Thom had a fluid homosurreal point of view that made him able to write as top, bottom, or versatile—precisely what master, slave, and mutualist readers expected. In "Jack Straw's Castle," like a boy sitting in the curving infinity between facing barbershop mirrors, he wrote his

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

trilocation of his astral self: “I am the man on the rack. / I am the man who puts the man on the rack. / I am the man who watches the man who puts the man on the / rack.”

I had thought to pair four of his poems with four Mapplethorpe photographs the way I had written four poems in *Drummer* 30, June 1978, to caption four photographs by Arthur Tress who later lensed portraits of Thom and me separately in 1995 and 1999. I was planning my “Mapplethorpe issue” in September’s *Drummer* 24 to introduce Robert to international leather readers, and thought to showcase Thom at the same time. I felt he might be open to it because with his brother Ander Gunn he had created the book *Positives* in 1966 which was a collection of his sibling’s photographs each captioned with a poem. I did not know what much later in 2003 he told my neighbor Chuck Forester in “Re-Experiencing Thom Gunn”: “The book [*Positives*] includes ‘very little great poetry, and I was never sure if I was writing poems or captions.’” Perhaps he simply did not want to play second-fiddle and caption yet another photographer in our special September 1978 issue, *Son of Drummer*.

The poems I considered were his then most accessible. “My Sad Captains,” with its reckoning of sex partners past, was to be the first poem as well as the feature title of the poetry photo spread, followed with the born-to-lose biker boy’s initiation in “Black Jackets”; the homomascuine uniform fetish in “The Corporal”; and the tattoo ritual in “Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt.”

Having just commissioned Robert to shoot a bespoke cover for *Drummer* 24 to introduce his work, I pictured Thom writing a bespoke poem more explicitly erotic to match the new sophistication around the art genre of pornography. How wonderful the synthesis of Thom and the lingua franca of leather culture if he had written “a *Drummer* poem.” As editor, I thought he had a tongue for the territory.

In “At the Center,” he wrote an LSD love poem to the ambience of Folsom Street that was illuminated nightly by the beacon of the huge Hamm’s Brewery sign with its giant sparkling rooftop beer glass, fourteen stories high, lit by five thousand golden bulbs continually filling and draining like a water-sports winner’s cup.

He was a fan of *Drummer* and sometimes mentioned writing or illustrations he enjoyed. So he was tempted, but he was conflicted like my dear James Purdy, whose agent did not want Purdy's work in the new erotic magazines. We were all assessing the meaning and value of the gay culture we were inventing in that first decade of liberation after Stonewall. The first slick gay magazines with subscribers only just started up around 1975, and gay book publishers around 1984. So why couldn't Thom's words have been stirred into *Drummer* the way Robert Duncan stirred up Thom's texts in his 1972 sequence "Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn's *Moly*." Duncan thought that one's writing should arise out of one's reading which is a creative reflex similar to one's orgasm arising out of one's reading.

Then something curious happened, perhaps because Thom wanted to sample the force field of being published in *Drummer*, which published fantasies to overcome adversities. The public poet had a private urge toward fiction. As an undergraduate at Cambridge in the 1950s, he wrote three experimental novels, and in San Francisco in the late 1960s, he drafted an unpublished erotic story, now in his archives, called "San Francisco Romance." Shortly after I kited a soft pitch for his poems, the mail arrived with a typed manuscript for a short story titled "Star Clone" which I published alongside photos by Robert Mapplethorpe and one of my own erotic stories, "I Am Curious (Leather)," in the special art issue, *Son of Drummer*, September 1978. I illustrated "Star Clone" with drawings of my longtime friend Dan Dufort by Los Angeles artist Ralph Richter.

The short story's byline cited the author as "Sam Browne" which was also the name of a much fetishized black leather belt, a regulation police/military belt with a narrow leather strap passing from the left waist up diagonally across the chest and over the right shoulder. There was a measure of internal evidence in the story that Thom could be the author. He had written in "Blackie, Electric Rembrandt" about a young man, getting tattooed with stars, becoming "starlike." However, still respecting what was left of our gentlemanly discretion of the mid-century, and in keeping with the tacit balance of our relationship, I did not push the point of authorship, and was happy to publish the sci-fi story whose

hook was akin to the dial-up teleportation of sex partners, like a foreshadowing of Grindr, in the 1976 film *Logan's Run*. I figured in our gentlemen's agreement that Thom knew that I knew what he knew what I suspected, and he knew I would do right by his story and not edit a word of it. He was fully aware that *Drummer* had published fiction by gay literary pioneer Sam Steward who had helped Alfred Kinsey with his culture-rattling book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* which shocked the bestseller lists in 1948 alongside a literary novel that was also raising the American consciousness of homosexuality, Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*.

When I was playing literary detective years later, my friend the late Robert Prager, who lived like a church mouse in a tenement flat he called a gallery at 568 Natoma Street in the heart of the leather district South of Market, wrote to me on June 14, 2013:

My filing system still hasn't recovered from the disaster it suffered the last time I moved. My question concerns *Son of Drummer* which it appears was published in 1978. I'm looking for the Table of Contents. This is because Thom Gunn wrote a story that was published in it under a pseudonym. At his last poetry reading at the Main Library, I waited until all the poetry mavens had their books signed and Thom and I were alone. Then I brought out my copy of *Son of Drummer* for him to sign his short story. This was the one time in the 8 years Thom and I were friends that he was genuinely angry at me. He was worse than angry. He was furious. "Who else knows about this? Did you tell the guys at The Magazine about it? [The venerable gay archive store 'The Magazine,' 920 Larkin Street, San Francisco, owned for fifty years by author Bob Mainardi and historian Trent Dunphy] Did you tell your writer friends?" Thom wanted to know how I found out about this in the first place. He forgot he told me himself a few years earlier.

"I thought you said you didn't care about your literary reputation," I taunted him.

“I don’t but that would be like feeding people false information.”

After the thing at the Library was over, Thom and I automatically started walking to the Hole in the Wall Saloon. His anger didn’t start to subside until after we had crossed Mission Street.

Six days later, on June 20, 2013, Prager wrote:

You’re right. “Star Clone” is the story Thom Gunn was ashamed of. As I recall it, there’s a remodeled South of Market building in the story [a flophouse sex hotel] called “the Arnett.”

The “Arnett” reference is to Thom’s druggie pal, artist Chuck Arnett, the founder of the Tool Box bar, and a frequent contributor to *Drummer*. Thom’s “My Sad Captains” could also serve as the eternal caption for the powerful leather mural Arnett, tutored by artist Dom “Etienne” Orejudos at Chuck Renslow’s Gold Coast bar in Chicago, painted on the wall of the Tool Box. That bar and that mural of leathermen silhouettes became world-famous five years before Stonewall in the June 24, 1964 issue of *Life* magazine which was like an engraved invitation to homosexual refugees everywhere to migrate to the sanctuary of San Francisco. In terms of gay spaces, it is worth noting the actuality and aura of Thom’s nightly leather environment documented in the iconic photo Mike Kelley shot in 1971 of that Arnett mural wall, that monochrome cave painting, standing cool, tough, and unbowed over the ruins of the bulldozed Tool Box at 4th and Harrison Street.

Prager concluded:

When I met Thom, he told me that when he decided he wanted to try being a writer, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to write poetry or prose. This would have been during the early 1950s. I don’t think this story is the kind of prose Thom meant.

“STAR CLONE”:
INTERNAL EVIDENCE OF GUNN AUTHORSHIP

“Star Clone” is a 1978 sci-fi story taken from “federal files,” set five years ahead in a futuristic 1983 San Francisco, and narrated by “Joe Robson,” age twenty-eight, whose name is also the name of two popular British footballers of Thom’s childhood. Coincidentally, the year before this story was written, Robson Books published Thom’s time-bending reminiscences of his school days in *My Cambridge*. For sex adventuring, Joe Robson subversively re-purposes his dead father’s secret invention, a Transistor, that opens the “Transistor Time Travel Portal” that is Alice’s Looking Glass tricked out in leather drag and narcotized by Grace Slick. In 1954, the year Thom immigrated into the American leather scene, the year after Marlon Brando’s *The Wild One*, and the year before Elvis’s first hit and James Dean’s death two hours south of San Francisco, the invention of the tiny portable transistor radio freed rock-and-roll teen rebels from the big furniture radios dominating their parents’ living rooms.

To travel ten years back to the Folsom Barracks of 1973, Joe retreats to his soundproof playroom with its fetish-gear closet and a mirrored fourth wall that serves as the portal in “The small and exclusive apartment house where he lived, ‘The Arnett,’...built inside the carefully restored frame of a men’s bathhouse that had been gutted by fire some years earlier.” Here, the author of the story is prescient about the inevitable: the Barracks burned down in the shocking Folsom Street fire of 1981 just as the news of gay plague first hit the headlines. Joe takes “a capsule of the latest illegal erotic drug...known on the street as Itch...a development from the drugs MDA and MDM.” In his Castro Street poem, “In the Post Office,” Thom identifies sexual tension as an “itch.”

Trips on micro-doses of those two drugs, merged into the MDMA of Ecstasy, lasted approximately as long as the trip permitted by the Transistor that Joe’s father had limited to two-hour tours traveling only one or two weeks into past or the future. This drug cocktail was popular with leathersmen who wanted to play early and fast with enhanced sex experiences on weeknights, and still wake up fit for work the next day.

Joe has planned his "...trip into the past, as an exercise in sexual nostalgia: he would return to the bathhouse before its burning and spend two hours terrorizing the studs of ten years ago. He had worked out the layout in relation to his apartment with enough accuracy to ensure that by placing the Transistor about four feet from this side of his wall he would emerge into the corridor of the second floor of the bathhouse in 1973." This is the same movement maneuver, measuring rooms at home to match rooms at the Barracks, that Thom does creating virtual reality in his mind's eye in "Jack Straw's Castle."

In short, Joe is staging a Mirror Fuck, the narcissistic ritual of solo role-playing to transform one's plastic self into alternative, idealized, erotic selves through fetish costume and shadow lighting while posing with pills, pot, and poppers in front of a mirror. The wishful author describes his avatar Joe grooving on his ideal self. "He took in what he saw—the big well-built body with the baby face, the short blond hair, the transparent blue eyes...." Quintessentially, the leatherman he depicts is very much the leatherboy drawing that years later was commissioned for the cover of *Boss Cupid*. In a way, this is Thom's "theory of poses." He wrote in *My Cambridge* that he liked masks, literal and metaphorical, for role playing. Joe decides not to wear a mask while his visitors arrive each wearing "a black leather mask with slits for eyes, nose, and mouth." The story also references Jean Cocteau's film *Blood of the Poet* in which the artist is transported through a mirror to a hotel as bawdy as a bathhouse. In *Passages of Joy*, he wrote that sex, music, and men helped him lose himself. Joe takes "a last appreciative look at himself in the mirror before...adjusting the timer to the year, day, hour, and minute of his arrival in the past. He took in what he saw." His reflection, the narrator writes, "made a great image for beating off in front of."

Then suddenly, in a revealing ritual of homosurrealism that perfectly fits its poet-author, Joe tries to leave self behind, as Thom wrote in *Passages of Joy*. Instead, Joe's sense of self divides into the first of two masked visitors who are his self, two versions of his self, making for the same configuration of three selves as in Thom's man on the rack who puts the man on the rack who watches the man put the man on the rack.

Being topped by a California Highway Patrol cop in leather, and by a logger, Joe endures and enjoys a vivid ordeal of S&M toys and tortures detailed with enthusiasm and authenticity by the story's sadomasochistic author who, no doubt, turned on and masturbating while writing, says, "He rode the pain like a man." Erotic literature begins with one stroke of the penis.

Joe in an ecstasy of self-examination wonders with pleasure if he is suffering a kind of revenge torture with whips, needles, and catheters. "It was only a few days since Joe and a leather buddy had a sixteen-year-old hustler stretched on it [a ladder used as a rack] for a long afternoon. They found him in Levi's and engineer boots on a street corner downtown, doped out on one of the new erotic drugs, and figured that this was an unparalleled educational opportunity for the kid."

The two men know Joe so perfectly well that he asks at the end of the story: "Are you humans or robots?" The question, asked during the Age of Clones, suits Thom's sense of irony, popular in 1970s bar culture, questioning whether "S&M" leathermen were "Sadist and Masochist" players or just "Stand and Model" poseurs.

When the cop removes his leather mask, he answers: "I'm just you, Joe Robson, a week in the future...And he's you too, but *two* weeks in the future." When the logger then peels his mask, the author states it's "Joe's face duplicated again." Joe asks, "But whose idea was it?" The logger gives Joe an answer that is as perfect as any answer six characters in search of an author could give Pirandello: "Yours, of course."

VIDEO SEDUCTION AND THE STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO

Thom and I shared genial respect. I knew who he was. He knew who I was. In his poem "Carnal Knowledge" in his first book, *Fighting Terms* (1954), he had written the copacetic base line that nurtured equanimity man to man in all his diverse relationships: "You know I know you know I know you know." What was spoken and what was left unspoken was always agreeable.

From 1985 to 1995, I directed many leather and fetish feature videos for my Palm Drive Video mail-order company, providing production stills to magazines like *Drummer* for covers and centerfolds. One day, opening mail, I discovered an order from Thom for four titles. It was cool he liked my offbeat movies. He enjoyed homomale porn and collected his spunk bank of VHS cassettes at home to use as educational television to warm up visiting young men, like the sixteen-year-old tied on the ladder, who for money and drugs and daddy issues chased older men, a fetish identity category begun in the pages of *Drummer* 24, September 1978. I checked the files, and he had ordered several films. I immediately called him and told him I would comp him any videos he wanted.

The Palm Drive tag line was: “Masculine Videos for Men Who Like Men Masculine.” The business name, Palm Drive, designed to look innocent as a return address on a shipment of erotica, was not a street address. Palm Drive was a sex joke punning on the palmistry a man does while watching a sex movie. In his virtual treatment for a film, *The Man with Night Sweats*, Thom “adored / The risk that made robust / A world of wonders in / each challenge to the skin.” From the PDV catalogue, Thom selected tough guy solo films featuring fetishes and sex talk. In “Lines for a Book,” he wrote this line twice: “I think of all the toughs through history / and thank heaven they lived, continually.”

Like E. M. Forster who took up smoking because his rent boys smoked, Thom, nearly always photographed with a film-noir cigarette, had a personal smoking habit that began as a fetish in the 1950s imitating James Dean and continued because the young street trade he liked smoked and bonded in masculine identity over cigarettes—“Got a light?”—as did Robert Mapplethorpe, who smoked Kool Menthols because Kool was the brand favored by young black men.

Imagine a “Walking Tour of Thom Gunn’s San Francisco.” He used SOMA’s Folsom Street as his main drag. In “Transients and Residents,” he wrote that signature line: “I like loud music, bars, and boisterous men.” For sex, he went cruising off-piste in nearby neighborhoods like the Tenderloin and Polk Street. He knew the City and celebrated its street grid in “Night Taxi.”

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

Randall Mann in his venerational eightieth birthday salute to Thom, “A Memoir of Reading,” in the *Kenyon Review* quoted San Francisco’s pugnacious poet August Kleinzahler who edited the 2007 book, *Selected Poems by Thom Gunn*. Mann says that Kleinzahler “. . .in his lovely essay on Gunn, wrote, ‘To travel with Thom was to participate in an erotic mapping of San Francisco out of the bus window.’”

Thom had a taste for young “Skateboard” hustlers. He universalized rough street trade from Rome to home when he rhapsodized about Caravaggio’s “insolent young whores,” “pudgy cheats,” “sharpers,” and “stranglers” in his painterly open-form poem, “In Santa Maria del Popolo,” the first entry in *My Sad Captains*.

He cruised Market Street for the rent boys working inside the dark shadows of the Old Crow bar, and posing outdoors on the sidewalk, framed, as if in a huge Caravaggio canvas *vivant*, against the big plate-glass windows of Flagg Brothers Shoes, a triangle building that stood on the corner of “Market at Turk”—which is the title of one of his Market Street poems. His “San Francisco Streets” mentions Flagg Brothers and ridicules Castro Street for being too middle-class. Wearing the mask of Verlaine, he wrote the hustler-bar poem, “Shit: An Essay on Rimbaud,” and cruised Polk Street where at the southeast corner of Sutter Street his young rim-ram beaux “with sweet sticky ardor” loitered in front of a lighting shop whose sign over their heads read “Any Object Made into a Lamp.” The Flagg Brothers building at 950 Market, now torn down, was featured in the film *Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice whose more erotic work was separated out from her “literary” writing and excerpted for publicity in *Drummer*.

Thom, who had endured the universal gay legacy of scally schoolmates bullying him, also liked the rough trade photos and videos of my friend David Hurles whose mail-order company, Old Reliable, eroticized bully boys who were speedy, trash-talking young graduates of the best reform schools in America. On October 2, 1997, Thom sent me an envelope including a postcard with a leather photo by Kim Hanson from the SoHo Galleries, 1216 Valencia Street, San Francisco. He wrote: “Dear Jack, The parcel

of goodies [four Palm Drive Video features] arrived yesterday. Thank you! Enclosed is what I think I owe you—if I'm out, let me know and I'll send you the rest/ Best, Thom." I tore up his check.

The photo that my friend, British art critic Edward Lucie-Smith, shot of Thom and me together at the 1996 Folsom Street Fair captured our mellow friendship. I drove Edward aka Ted to the Fair to meet Thom in front of the Powerhouse bar, which years before had been poet Ron Johnson's No Name. Thom and Ted had first met when both poets were angry-ish young men in the gritty postwar Austerity Britain of the 1950s. We found Thom in a casual group of our mutual pals surrounded by a milling crowd of 400,000 leatherfolk, many of whom had grown up reading *Drummer* which that year had been in monthly publication for twenty-one years. As eyewitness to the access offered by the Folsom Fair mixer, poet Kevin Killian, co-author of *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*, has written how at the Fair he first met Thom leaning with the sole of one boot propped up flat against a lamppost. Folsom Fair, San Francisco's version of Burning Man, was what it always partly is: an annual health and safety check-up in broad daylight of us pallid creatures of the night.

For a dozen years, I shot street fair video documentaries that can illustrate Thom's poem "At the Barriers" which is about the international Folsom Fair's kinky cousin for locals, Dore Alley Fair. It was fascinating to watch my friends, two senior Brit poets abroad in America, checking each other out. Thom was sixty-seven. Ted was sixty-three. Later, Thom said something nice about Ted; and Ted cocked an eyebrow about Thom "from Cambridge." Ted later told author William Wootten for *The Alvarez Generation*: "We Oxford poets had an inferiority complex about our Cambridge contemporaries. The chief cause was Thom Gunn... [who had] a bully-boy strut." However, on that day, together, full of chat, they represented a literary reunion from 1950s London when, with Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, and others, they were part of "The Movement" that preferred poetry sensual in content and traditional in form. By the 1970s, *Drummer* readers preferred writing sexual in content and free in form.

OUR WEEKEND TRIPPING WITH THOM AT
“THE GEYSERS”: THE BIRTH OF A POEM

In Thom Gunn’s lifelong diary begun when he was fourteen, he noted that on the weekend of July 15-16, 1972, he and I with David Sparrow and several mutual friends took a magical mystery tour to the Geysers, a geothermal resort in the Mayacamas Mountains seventy miles north of San Francisco. For a hundred years, the Geysers’s natural steam and mud baths were a vacation draw for rich nineteenth-century San Franciscans, and became popular with hippies in the Sixties before shutting down in the early Seventies. As an immigrant living among immigrant Beats in North Beach and immigrant hippies in the Haight and immigrant leathermen on Folsom Street, Thom was sensitized to cultures evolving around him. He responded on drugs—pot, acid, mescaline—to the lingering presence of the Pomo Indians who had lived at the Geysers which, in decline for years, was no scrubbed German spa. No health department would have approved. Over the years, the Geysers slid down hill socially and literally till all that we hiked into with tents and sleeping bags and coolers of campfire food was the small mountain stream with its shallow wading pools, the thermal mud-wallow baths, and the ghost-town remains of a weathered wood building on whose horse-stable-like interior framing, at night, sat dozens of hippie-dippie candles dripping stalagmites of wax, flickering yellow through the pale moonlight spilling ambient through holes in the plastic roof.

Because bike runs—motorcycle rides for weekend outings in the woods, much like Brando’s bike run to a hick town in *The Wild One*—were very popular ways to get out of the City, a group of us, all friends together from Folsom Street, decided to drive to the Geysers to camp out, trip a bit, and get in touch with nature and the cosmos in a kind of back-to-basics homomascu-line sex party and psycho-active religious experience. That first weekend after the long Fourth of July weekend, David and I drove together, but I can’t recall if Jim Hart and Roy Siniard and Jack Garcia drove their bikes or a truck, or how Thom, who owned a motorcycle, traveled with us. He may have climbed once again

into the Land Cruiser with David and me. Years later in 1990, Thom told me that Roy Siniard, crippled by unbearable arthritis, committed suicide. For us nighthawks, daylight in the foothills of Gold Country was a shock, a sunburn, and a picnic.

I shot seven frames of a roll of 35mm color transparencies of some of us wading naked in the pools of the stream. Out of discretion, David and I did not shoot Thom, who was a public person privately high on acid. Actually, it's a wonder any pictures were shot at all. We were almost too blissfully stoned to focus. Film was expensive to buy and difficult to develop because of photo-lab censorship in the years before Harvey Milk opened his Castro Camera shop in 1972. Tribally, cameras were not cool because of entrapment, blackmail, and privacy. One camera could empty a gay bar in an instant. Shooting people who were gay and spaced out was a bridge too far in that period before glossy gay magazines of the mid-Seventies liberated us by printing pictures not of models (which had always been done), but of newly uncloseted leathermen who looked like, and often were, the readers. *Drummer* made graphic Whitman's class-defying passion for erotic bonding with ordinary men. When I finished shooting that roll of thirty-six exposures two weeks later, the developed slides of that weekend returned imprinted "August 1972."

Off camera, Thom, chatting, nude, hung nicely, and uncut, mixed in, and together we wandered, wading with strangers, naked up the creek, "with tan black and pink, firm shining bodies," smelling the rotten-egg sulphur of percolating little cinder cones. At night, under the stars, in the wooden barn filled with candles, and the "drifting fume of dope," we gay men, we "bearded boys," sank into the hot mud watching the other mostly straight males and females watching back. Primal in the mud, we had a hippie openness to all comers, joining in, sharing a joint, flirting, sniffing poppers, playing with strangers, as Thom did with "pubescent girl and bearded boy," falling back into the thermal muck, feeling divine under the stars, him writing: "I am raw meat /I am a god."

Thom was forty-three. I was thirty-three. We admired the lovely next generation of young American males and females playing it cool in California, and all that means. Tripping in our altered minds at alpha level, the mind's most creative level, we sat

side-by-side communing in the mud, and on the creek bank, and in the stream. Thom with vine leaves in his hair was a hippie holy man changing the water of words into the wine of poetry. He subverted Alfred, Lord Tennyson's love-me-tender lyric, "I am part of all that I have met," into the love-me-tougher haka, "I am part of all / hands take / hands tear and twine." As a professor teaching literature and writing about gay popular culture, I appreciated my eyewitness front-row seat that long slow weekend observing the magic of his being and becoming, watching the poet with his sleight of hand divining runes of mud, flesh, and stars. The *mise en scene* I was documenting with a camera, he was documenting with poetry. Soon after, he wrote "The Geysers," that enigmatic recital of our, or more properly, his, sensual weekend that for him was so transfiguring; but what's a poet for if not that?

FOLSOM STREET LOCAL COLOR: BARS AS ART GALLERIES

In our Folsom Street Bloomsbury, South of Market, the leather crowd played musical bar stools in search of creative sex and fetish. Thom parked his bike in front of the dozen leather bars up and down the Miracle Mile of Folsom Street where from before the Gold Rush to the 1960s itinerant working men, merchant marines, and military men during the world wars holed up in the flophouse hotels and boarding houses that became our gay bathhouses and bars. In the 1906 earthquake, hundreds of single men died South of Market, some trapped in the wooden wreckage begging to be shot before the advancing fires reached them. That haunting inheritance of proletarian beauty and terror underscored our gay role-playing—refusing to be trapped by oppression and plague—at being roustabout bikers, construction workers, sailors, soldiers, and other Village People.

When Thom arrived in 1954 at the height of the government's anti-gay witch-hunt led by the cross-dressing gay traitor J. Edgar Hoover, he mingled with Beat poets who, in new reporting by historian Michael Flanagan in "Beats, Bohemians, and Bars," had been socializing in saloons like Vesuvio where Jack Spicer served up Lorca poems, and Gino & Carlo in North Beach, and

the Black Cat. Thom also gargled at the Gangway, the Why Not, and Jack's on the Waterfront, a leather bar (1952-1963) located along the Embarcadero skid row near the east end of Folsom Street.

As gay identity bars emerged, Thom became a fixture at the Tool Box founded in 1961 by Chuck Arnett, a former swing dancer from the national tour of *Bye Bye Birdie*, whose popular drawings introduced the hypodermic needle to South of Market Street sex. Thom was also a familiar face at Febe's leather bar founded in 1966 by his pal, fisting pioneer Jack Haines, who also founded the crystal palace of the Slot Hotel, for mid-century gents like Thom who were teenagers on the cusp of coming out in the 1940s. Thom turned twenty-one in 1950 and moved to the Bay Area to attend Stanford when he was twenty-four.

Febe's was named after the magical Goddess of the Dark Moon, and was famous for enshrining Mike Caffee's iconic statue, the "Leather David" which, sculpted from Sam Steward's original idea, was like a plaster Boss Brando, that put a leather cap and jacket on Michelangelo's "David." Copies were on sale upstairs over Febe's in the sex-toy and popper shop, A Taste of Leather, owned by the biblically named Nick O'Demus. In 1970, when my monthly rent was fifty dollars, I bought a copy that was dear at \$125. Thom had been in the city fifteen years when such incoming leather gentrification changed the light industrial area South of Market. During the 1970s, the sheer numbers of bohemians arriving in SOMA turned the Folsom leather bars into art galleries with monthly shows and poetry performances no straight gallery would handle. In its arts' patronage, the Ambush bar, for instance, mailed out engraved invitations for its launch party for two of my leather books based on *Drummer*. In 1978, Thom was a guest artist in attendance when *Drummer* leather poet and Oscar Streaker Robert Opel opened the first gay gallery in San Francisco, Fey-Way Studio, where he was murdered in 1979.

Thom's pub crawl in the 1970s included the Folsom Prison leather bar; the No Name (later the Brig and the Powerhouse); the Balcony on Market Street; and the Ambush on Harrison, a more relaxed hippie-leather bar popular for its pinball machines

that inspired his “Bally *Power Play*” which was coincidentally illustrated by San Francisco leather artist Rex in his pointillist drawing of four brutalist leathermen standing around a pinball machine in the Ambush. After the Lone Star bar was destroyed in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, Thom hung out at the new Lone Star founded directly across Harrison Street from the Ambush by original Rainbow Motorcycle Club (RMC) member, Rick Redewell. In *Boss Cupid*, Thom assessed the blue-collar bears throwing their weight around with curvaceous avoirdupois as the new fetish in his poem “Front Bar at the Lone Star.” He also partied at a kind of in-town biker run, the mass leather orgy of the annual CMC Carnival at Seaman’s Hall which was the source for his “Saturnalia.”

To illustrate the homomale fraternity around the bars, I published a Robert Pruzan photo of Thom standing outside the Ambush with Robert Mapplethorpe and photographer Crawford Barton in *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera* (1994). Their clothing shows the diversity of fetish costume: Thom in Levi’s jean jacket, Robert in tailored leather jacket, and Crawford in denim military shirt. Thom’s look in that photo typifies his bar-days demeanor as a keen-eyed artist who was an embedded poet a decade older than most of us who did sex in public places unlike him who liked to find younger playmates for stoned sex performances in private places during his fifty years on the scene. He was variously present, friendly, stoned on grass, beer in hand, tripping on acid, and ready with a laugh. With dry British humour, he could confide deadpan comments with trademark smirk and squint.

Thom was a lucky sybarite who never looked like he suffered unwillingly for his art. Despite Dean and Brando, he was no romantic cliché of the tortured gay poet. He was a realist well met who got what he wanted and needed and gave as good as he got. Odd that some of his British critics, left behind looking in the rearview mirror, felt that young Thom moved to San Francisco and fell apart as a poet when, in fact, he pulled his act together in full maturity. Did Foucault fall apart being fisted on Folsom?

In “A Map of the City,” Thom states with “delight” that he would never have the “risk” of living in “luminous” San Francisco

“diminished.” He acted out that delight when, in pose and virtual mask, he faced the camera of Arthur Tress. In that comical 1995 photograph, an ironic, camp, and shirtless Thom sits at home suckling a ceramic “cookie jar” shaped like the head of the Man in the Moon with its luridly wide-eyes and a rampant tongue licking at Thom’s tit. The walls behind him are papered with a collage of photos he cut from magazines featuring male faces and nude torsos and most notably Warhol’s superstar Joe Dallesandro.

One of his favorite bars, and mine, was the early 1970s No Name bar managed by poet Ron Johnson and his lover, photographer Mario Pirami, whose work I published on the cover of *Man2Man Quarterly* to which Thom subscribed. When Thom arrived in San Francisco in 1954, two years before Allen Ginsberg debuted *Howl*, at Jack Spicer’s 6 Gallery, the bar buzz among the oft-censored Beats was about the Mattachine startup of its hands-on ’zine, *One: The Homosexual Magazine*, which the Post Office had just declared obscene, prohibiting its delivery by mail as a way to censor the free press of gay citizens. Thom fancied all samizdat poetry chapbooks and gay ’zines like *Man2Man* and *Bear* and Bob Mizer’s *Physique Pictorial* and especially Boyd McDonald’s *Straight to Hell*. He also attended the two multi-media Happenings Ron and Mario and I produced in the No Name in the summers of 1971 and 1972.

Thom and Ron, as poets important to one another, shared a special regard in person and in their letters. They likely had sex on their first meeting in the 1960s after the free-love fashion of the time. Once that fundamental bond was established, our friendships, often with Ron as social secretary, entwined in our affectionate little leather fraternity of writers and artists and photographers. For instance, when poet and RMC member Jack Sharpless died from AIDS, unpublished at thirty-eight, Ron reshuffled our grief by editing the 1989 anthology, *Presences of Mind: The Collected Books of Jack Sharpless* which was endorsed by Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Guy Davenport. Kevin Killian has written about Sharpless and our SOMA salon that “Ron Johnson and Thom Gunn both loved him.” Thom’s archive at UC Berkeley contains a file pertaining to Sharpless.

STARFUCKING AND THE “LEATHERHENGE” ON RINGOLD ALLEY

San Francisco is a fishing village with an opera where everyone knows everyone else. Thom was known as a poet by people who never read poetry. He was a famous name, but not a famous face; so he had some protection in public from starfuckers. To some locals he was a cult figure, but he seemed mostly just another leather guy like Ron Johnson who few knew or cared was also a celebrated poet. When Thom walked into a bar, he bought a beer, and leaned up against the cardboard beer cases stacked like perimeter benches against walls around the pool table. Because he was not cruising so much as socializing, he was soon met by a pal or two. In the 1970s, before the Republicans defunded and dumbed down American education, many guys in the leather scene were intellectually interesting because they had some arts or business or professional credential other than cocksucking.

Thom kept a low observant profile in the hallways at the drug den of the Barracks which he wrote about in his homosurreal poems “1975” and “Saturday Night.” He captured the vitality of cruising through the corridors of open doors, peering into each room for “drug-and-wrestling buddies” like fabled wild man Fred Lee in his chamois-skin loincloth who every six weeks flew down from working on the Alaska pipeline to take on Ado Annie challengers who liked to lose in his reserved room fitted out for knock-down-and-drag-out sportfucking.

In 1976, in the virtual reality of “Jack Straw’s Castle,” Thom, like Joe Robson in “Star Clone,” pictured the repetitious “room on room on room” configurations of both his commune-home and of the circuitous hallways at the Barracks bath where in the rooms the men come and go. His rooms were either “boudoir or oubliette” inhabited by transient “dream” men with “too much of the phantom to them.” From my three hundred visits over nine years of play at the Barracks, Thom’s “Jack Straw’s Castle” seems an almost Dada vision of the Barracks he recalled while lying abed dusted by angels. In that funky gay bath interior, Thom was not the only Duchamp dude descending the staircases of the three-story Barracks that when torched by an arsonist in 1981 put

a symbolic end to the Titanic 1970s at the same moment the first headlines mentioned the iceberg of “Gay Cancer.”

Like the use of the gay identity words, *leatherman* and *bear*, Thom’s animal imagery of pigs and cats might characterize bathhouse playmates orgying in pig piles. Signs and omens of our evolving liberation were revolving in the poet’s mind. Because the bars and baths filled up every semester break and summer with university professors on vacation or sabbatical, the running joke was about scholars doing research on their knees at the tubs. As a teacher, Thom enjoyed the down-low invasion and conversation of hot high-brows who raised the IQ of Folsom Street.

When visiting New York, Thom spent long nights at the mind-blowing Mineshaft bar in the Meatpacking District of the West Village, writing about the “meat” and “meat district” in his poem, “The Menace,” which could have been retrofitted into *Drummer* for its ethos perfectly describing homomale role-playing: “He is not a real soldier / but a soldier / inducted by himself / into an army of fantasy / and he greets another. . . / We play without deceit / compressing symbol into fetish.”

In San Francisco, he kept up with the ever-changing SOMA leather bars as well as the Balcony bar on Market Street near the Castro which he mentioned in “Another All-Night Party.” The word “Balcony” was pronounced as “Baloney” because of the meat pun, but mostly because the “c” had fallen off the bar sign nailed on the mansard awning over the front window, and was never repaired.

In 2010, when the San Francisco Planning Commission set out to designate SOMA as a gay cultural district, Western SOMA Task Force planners Sandra Soto-Grondona and Paul Lord, because of *Drummer*, sent me an email requesting input about who and what might be included. I submitted a dozen friends’ names, among them: *primus inter pares* Thom Gunn, Ron Johnson, Tony Tavarossi, Cynthia Slater, Catholic leather priest Jim Kane, *Drummer* publisher Anthony DeBlase, and *Drummer* itself. By 2017, the City had designated SOMA as a gay cultural district.

Creating what I think is a “Leatherhenge” for pilgrimage, the District installed an artwork titled “Leather Memoir” on the

ancient, and sacred, late-night cruising ground of Ringold Alley where, before the plague, motorcycle headlights steering slowly swept like prison searchlights across the *tableaux vivants* of wild leathersex between parked cars and up against chain-link fences. The design features bronze boot prints set in the sidewalk surrounded by twenty knee-high granite stones, with each bronze and stone engraved with an honoree's name. Thom is boot print 22. Having written since the 1960s about pagan folkways, I find it significant that the granite markers were carved from the City's recycled curbstones because, traditionally in ancient lore, crossroads were marked with just such priapic herms and cairns, rectangular stones often topped with erect phalluses, to define the pale, who was in the pale, and who was not.

AVE ATQUE VALE, TWO ARTISTS, IN FINALE:
THOM GUNN AND ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

In late 1978 or early 1979, I put Robert Mapplethorpe and Thom Gunn together at the Eagle bar on 12th Street and Folsom. I had known Thom for a decade and was in the second year of a bi-coastal affair with Robert. They were two cool artists who seemed instantly amused and mutually respectful. Measuring the two, I figured Robert, urged by Patti Smith, knew his way at least around Rimbaud and Verlaine, so Thom and he might be a fit. Robert soon enough, thinking of scoring pre-modernist "captions" for his images, provided eight of his photos to illustrate a facsimile edition of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*. Imagine if Robert had illustrated a book by Thom. Such a book, in fact, could and should happen. Both artists also dramatized themselves classically as pagan leathermen. Robert photographed himself as the goat-footed Pan with horns in his curly hair, and Thom wrote in "Rites of Passage," his opening poem in *Moly*: "Horns bud bright in my hair. / My feet are turning hoof."

Robert, seventeen years younger than Thom and seeking to make his mark, was more interested in shooting Thom than knowing Thom, and Thom was more interested in knowing Robert than in being shot by Robert.

I don't think Robert photographed Thom until Thom was in New York in 1979/1980 and could be lensed under custom conditions in Robert's studio. Once Robert got the portrait of the poet he wanted, he moved on, as he did with most of his celebrities, and never really looked back. He was always complementary whenever Thom's name was mentioned.

Robert claimed he sent a copy of the portrait to Thom via gallery owner Edward DeCelle whom I interviewed in 1979 when at his Lawson DeCelle Gallery, 80 Langton Street in San Francisco, he exhibited Robert's "Censored" work which I had published the year before in *Son of Drummer*. But Thom may never have received it. DeCelle, some aver, managed to "hang on to" some pictures, but I must testify that DeCelle, whom I found charming and honest in his short life, hand-delivered to me all the photos Robert entrusted him to give me.

Thom's poem about Robert, "Song of a Camera," seems more about Robert's knife-like collages than his photos because Thom viewed Robert's process of assemblage as art akin to the linguistics of constructing a poem by adding "adverbs to verbs" bit by bit. Without being compromised by assimilation, both artists achieved critical and financial independence in the straight world which caused some jealousy among some other artists who at that time would not or could not transcend the politics of the gay ghetto. Robert, who never received any grant or government money, earned his way selling his photographs while funded by his patron Sam Wagstaff. Thom supported himself with university teaching at Stanford and the University of California at Berkeley (1958-1966 and 1973-2000) and with occasional scholarly work such as his anthology *Ezra Pound Poems Selected by Thom Gunn*. Support also came through major literary cash awards from the Guggenheim, the MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant, and the David Cohen British Literature Award.

Regarding that book between Thom and Robert? Back then, everyone pitched a book to someone. Imagine Robert, who by then knew of Thom's poems framing his brother's photos in *Positives*, pitching Thom a collaboration titled *Negatives*. Robert constantly pitched writers. In 1978, he pitched me. An early proposed manuscript draft of the book we began, titled *Rimshots*, is now

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

in the permanent Mapplethorpe Archive at the Getty Museum Research Institute in Los Angeles.

On December 6, 1990, Thom, assisting with my memoir of Robert, sent a copy of *Passages of Joy* from Cole Street to share his poem about Robert, writing all too modestly, “See page 45, but I don’t expect the poem will be much to your purpose.”

He also included a copy of Boyd McDonald’s *Straight to Hell* featuring on page 7 a head shot of a bearded Thom quoted from an interview in the San Francisco *Sentinel* in which he said: “Personally, I have been far more influenced by the wit and style of *The Manhattan Review of Unnatural Acts* [aka *Straight to Hell* aka *STH*] than I have been by the tiresome campiness of Ronald Firbank, who is usually taken as one of the chief exemplars of the aforementioned gay sensibility.”

An Editor’s note at the end said, “As I don’t know from poetry, I enquired about Thom Gunn, an Englishman now living in San Francisco. A professor who is an *STH* subscriber assures me that Gunn is highly regarded.” At the end of Thom’s note to me, he wrote: “The date on the *STH* in which R. M.’s interview takes place is MCMLXXVII, but, as I say, I think it wasn’t published until 1978. X Thom.”

As Thom turns ninety, I turn eighty. I love that he signed off with an “X” for kisses.

So warm. So cool. Such a hug.

