

Thom Gunn

In 1968, while a senior at Cornell, I returned home for spring vacation. In New York, I could go to a bar legally at 18, but in California I did not achieve this milestone until I reached 21, so I now eagerly looked forward to freely frequenting a gay bar in my own state. Consequently, at my first opportunity, I rushed off to the only one I knew of, The Capri on upper Grant Avenue in the North Beach district of San Francisco, a distinctly bohemian establishment. In its dark and exciting interior I later met my first lover, Chuck Owen, though he figures but little in the history at hand.

A tall bearded man clad in leather clothes initially attracted my attention, but as I was still a novice in the art of flirtation, I had no idea how to approach this interesting saturnine gentleman. When the bar closed and patrons departed, I observed him to set off on foot, so in the fond hope of engaging him I embarked in pedestrian pursuit. I intended to walk to my customary hitchhiking corner anyway and his way seemed to lie in the same direction, so to my delight and by my design we fell in step together. Alas, he evidenced no sexual interest in my callow charms, but nonetheless he seemed amenable to my company and conversation ensued as we strode along on our mutual way. In spite of his dark and dangerous look, I soon discovered in him an articulate man of singular learning and we began to speak of books. I had recently read The Portrait Of A Lady by Henry James, a book he knew well, and as a follow up he suggested I seek out What Maisie Knew by the same author which he thought an excellent read; he told me a little of the plot and I determined to honor his suggestion. Along the way he told me his name and that he was a poet; our ways parted for the night and I thought little more of the encounter.

At vacation's end, I eventually returned to Cornell to complete my senior year; I also obtained, read and enjoyed What Maisie Knew. My friends at the time included a burly freshman named Bill Wright who teamed with me in a school production of the Ben Jonson play "Bart'lmew Faire"; we played all our scenes together as a pair of low-life scoundrels seeking to corrupt the virtue of the play's heroine. By this time my friendship with John Button had flowered and I included Bill in our circle whenever possible. John enjoyed the concept of a straight blond footballer camping it up with a gaggle of gay men, so he encouraged the connection. In the course of subsequent conversation, I mentioned that I had met and tried to pick up a poet named Thom Gunn and to my surprise Bill's eyes widened in recognition. He told me his poetry class had recently covered Thom and that he admired his work, especially a poem about a leather-clad motorcyclist. Prior to this, I'd had no idea of Thom's exalted literary stature but Bill's description of the poem confirmed the identity of the author in my mind.

Subsequent to my circuitous return to the Bay Area after graduation, I met Thom again, but this time as an intimate of a circle of artistic gay hippies, a family whose kinship I recognized and with whom I gladly allied myself. We gathered around a couple of charismatic patriarchs, all of whom seemed to have known one another for years. Jere Fransway, my particular patron in this set, had at one time been lovers with the man I now dated, Chuck Owen, so I soon found acceptance through this connection. Much of

our social life took place in a duplex in the Upper Haight, a dwelling owned by Thom, though my social life therein took place in the other unit; a back staircase communicated between them and we frequently shared meals. I continued to see Thom and to seek out his erudition as frequently as possible.

A few years later, circumstances brought me to live above Thom in that same unit and we became housemates of a sort. Like me, he led a nocturnal existence, frequenting bars until closing time, whereupon we would meet in his apartment and to converse quietly before bed. His erudition extended to all literature and his front hall held a large library. He often recommended books, which I made it my business to read. At that time, I was reading Dickens and as I finished one book I would ask him to recommend my next book by that author. His suggestions included Our Mutual Friend, Martin Chuzzlewit, and Bleak House, all of which I read. I returned the favor by procuring plants for his garden, including irises from my great aunt Suzie, flowers he particularly fancied. I also contributed labor and care to the garden plot.

Here is an entry from my diary on 8/3/76:

“...Thom said a wonderful thing to me. He said I was the only intelligent person he had ever known to be in a fraternity. Intelligent was the word he used. I appreciated that. I love conversation with him and his household. Stimulating, intelligent, literate. I will have to go a long way to replace that...”

And another from 9/7, shortly before I was to leave San Francisco:

“Thom just said a nice thing.

I was enumerating the things it would be hard to replace and before a few words were out, Thom said, ‘including you’. I was touched.”

Alas, when I moved away to Los Angeles our intimacy waned, though by this time I had become sensible of the distinction of his friendship and continued to seek him out whenever possible. When I purchased a volume of his work, he did me the honor of not only signing it, but also of making a correction or two to the text. A few years later I swelled with vicarious pride when he received a MacArthur Genius Grant. From time to time I continued to call him, but by the time he died the halcyon days of our intimacy had passed.

JPK – 7/31/05