

body-prints of mayflies,  
 a legend half-heard  
 45 in a train  
  
 of the half-man searching  
 for an ever-fleeing  
 other half<sup>1</sup>  
  
 through Muharram tigers,<sup>2</sup>  
 50 hyacinths in crocodile waters,  
 and the sweet  
  
 twisted lives of epileptic saints,  
  
  
 and even as I add,  
 I lose, decompose  
 55 into my elements,  
  
 into other names and forms,  
 past, and passing, tenses  
 without time,  
  
 caterpillar on a leaf, eating,  
 60 being eaten.<sup>3</sup>

1986

1. In an essay Ramanujan compares the Hindu myth of the god that "splits himself into male and female" to "the androgynous figure in Plato's *Symposium*, halved into male and female segments which forever seek each other and crave union."

2. During the first month of the Islamic calendar, Muharram processions, often including dancers

in tiger masks, commemorate the martyrdom of Muhammad's grandson, Husein.

3. According to a poem in the ancient Sanskrit *Taittiriya Upanishad*, "What eats is eaten, / and what's eaten, eats / in turn" (Ramanujan's translation, in his essay "Some Thoughts on 'Non-Western' Classics").

## THOM GUNN

1929–2004

The son of a London journalist, Thomson Gunn was educated at University College School, London, then Trinity College, Cambridge, and Stanford University, where he studied under the antimodernist, classically inclined poet Yvor Winters. In a poem addressed to Winters, he wrote: "You keep both Rule and Energy in view, / Much power in each, most in the balanced two." The poems of Gunn's *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957) aimed for the same balance. They were influenced by the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne and the twentieth-century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and introduced a modern Metaphysical poet able to give powerfully concrete expression to abstract ideas. Along with Philip Larkin, he was seen as a member of "the Movement"—English poets who preferred inherited verse forms to either modernist avant-gardism or

high-flown Romanticism. In the second half of *My Sad Captains* (1961), he began to move away from the will-driven heroes and the tight-fitting stanzas of his early work into more tentative explorations of experience and more supple syllabic or open verse forms. "Most of my poems are ambivalent," he said. Moving from England to San Francisco, he experimented with LSD and moved also from poems presumably addressed to women to poems frankly homosexual. *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) ends with a sequence of poems remarkable for their unflinching directness, compassion, and grace about the deaths of friends from AIDS. Gunn was a poet of rare intelligence and power in all his protean changes.

## Black Jackets

In the silence that prolongs the span  
 Rawly of music when the record ends,  
 The red-haired boy who drove a van  
 In weekday overalls but, like his friends,

5     Wore cycle boots and jacket here  
 To suit the Sunday hangout he was in,  
 Heard, as he stretched back from his beer,  
 Leather creak softly round his neck and chin.

Before him, on a coal-black sleeve  
 10   Remote exertion had lined, scratched, and burned  
 Insignia that could not revive  
 The heroic fall or climb where they were earned.

On the other drinkers bent together,  
 Concocting selves for their impervious kit,  
 15   He saw it as no more than leather  
 Which, taut across the shoulders grown to it,

Sent through the dimness of a bar  
 As sudden and anonymous hints of light  
 As those that shipping give, that are  
 20   Now flickers in the Bay, now lost in night.

He stretched out like a cat, and rolled  
 The bitterish taste of beer upon his tongue,  
 And listened to a joke being told:  
 The present was the things he stayed among.

25   If it was only loss he wore,  
 He wore it to assert, with fierce devotion,  
 Complicity and nothing more.  
 He recollected his initiation,

And one especially of the rites.  
 30   For on his shoulders they had put tattoos:  
 The group's name on the left, The Knights,  
 And on the right the slogan Born To Lose.