

Cynthia L. Haven

“No Giants”: An Interview with Thom Gunn

THOM GUNN was cheery and slightly round-shouldered as he padded downstairs to fetch me in his upper Haight district apartment. On this particular late-summer afternoon, 21 August 2003, a week before his seventy-fourth birthday, the poet with the salt-and-pepper crew cut was wearing an old green-and-black tartan flannel shirt and faded jeans. He was much more relaxed, open, and friendly than the slightly grim-faced portraits by Mapplethorpe and Gunn’s brother, Anders Gunn, would suggest—and also as one might fear from his reputation for not suffering fools gladly.

Haight-Ashbury, where Gunn lived, was the center of the sixties. Today, however, hippies have given way to high-end vintage-clothing shops, upscale boutiques, trendy restaurants, wine bars, and Internet cafés in the heart of the city, a few blocks from Golden Gate Park. Thom Gunn lived here for half a century, until his unexpected death on 25 April 2004. His second-floor flat was startlingly outré, and very San Francisco. The walls were covered with a large neon sign, apparently scavenged from a defunct bar or café, and eye-grabbing metal advertising from earlier decades of the last century. “It’s endless,” he had warned climbing the stairs, where rows of larger-than-life bottles laddered up like a halted assembly line—Pepsi, Nesbitts, Hires, 7-Up, and Coca-Cola.



Congratulations on receiving the David Cohen Award—£15,000—earlier this year.

It was divided between me and Beryl Bainbridge. I was very pleased to get it.

I would imagine!

It was a great surprise, because I'd never heard of it. It's only been awarded about six times, I think.

And you were the first poet to receive it. How are you going to spend it?

Oh, frivolities. Drink and drugs and presents for my friends. I'm being looked after very nicely by a Social Security pension.

In the news reports, you said it was your last award. Why?

For one thing, I've stopped writing. For another thing, I'm seventy-four next week. I won't be in the running very much.

Some of the news coverage in Britain focused on the past—your erstwhile image as a young rebel. “The poet in the black leather jacket.” Has that kind of persistent imagery hampered serious reading of your poetry sometimes?

I don't mind. It's my fault, isn't it? Poetry is based on books, but it's not only based on books.

But has it led to, perhaps, an oversimplification, a caricaturing of your oeuvre?

Everybody feels that way, don't they?

Well, I suppose. For example, in the discussion of your award, the Guardian article even reprinted your Elvis poem from the 1950s.

That was such a bad poem, too. It had one good phrase in it, which somebody took for a title about jazz.

The line about . . .

Revolt into Style, by George Melly.

When I saw that poem's inclusion, I wanted to say, “Hey guys! It's 2003!”

Yes. [Laughs.] It was original of me to write that poem at the time; it swiftly became unoriginal.

I very much liked the guy they sent to interview me from the *Guardian*. He said that he had a confession to make. He liked my poetry so much when he was a teenager that he stole a book of mine from the school library. It's the most flattering thing that's ever been said about me. He was a very nice man in other ways as well.

Your American journey began at Stanford. You are one of a number of poets who have sometimes been called the "Stanford poets."

I don't think we're a school. The best poets to come from there were Edgar Bowers, of course, the best of the lot, and J. V. Cunningham. I guess he was connected with Stanford way, way at the beginning, in the 1930s. Charles Gullans and Timothy Steele. But the rest—one mustn't overestimate the achievement of the rest. One shouldn't.

Are you forgetting Ken Fields?

And Ken Fields, who's a very good poet himself. He's a terrific poet. But he's very shy, apparently. He's written a whole sequence that I like very much, but so far as I know they have never been published. A huge sequence—I remember it being about fifty poems or so.

And Janet Lewis?

Oh, Janet Lewis, she started writing before she even met Yvor Winters, didn't she? She's a very different poet. She's better than any of them except Bowers, I would say. She's terrific.

You say you are not a school, and yet there is a group of poets from Stanford, with an easily traceable influence to Yvor Winters, or to his students. However different the poets may be, and though their appearance at Stanford stretches out over some years—it's uncommon even in "schools" to find a cluster of poets with a clearly traceable common influence like that.

They certainly were a group, some of them very sycophantic. I liked the poetry of some of them, and I didn't like the poetry of others. But when I was at Stanford, I didn't overlap with many of these people. I didn't even overlap with

Bowers, who was very close to me in age. He was already gone when I was there. Donald Hall was a poet there. And Robert Mezey, who didn't get on at all well with Winters. Winters said, "He smoked marijuana." [Laughs.] I didn't think it was all that uncommon in those days. I didn't realize.

I can't help but feel that Winters' personal style has distracted from his reputation as a poet and critic—even after forty years. These personal issues ought to have been put to bed by now. He had a personality that offended many people . . .

He was abrasive.

So was Ezra Pound, and yet it doesn't completely derail the discussion of his poetry.

I don't think Pound would have done very well at Stanford, either. I think he would have done appallingly.

No doubt.

Winters was not an ingratiating man; he didn't deliberately ingratiate himself with others, which I hold to his credit. On the whole, I liked him, so it's easy for me to say that.

In Winters' case, it's easy at Stanford to be completely unaware of its poetic legacy. The English Department should be bragging about it.

I don't know what Stanford is supposed to do. I don't know what any university is supposed to do, with dead people. They did have their [Yvor Winters] conference, which was shorter than it would have been because of a [conflicting] conference on Irish poetry, or something or other.

Well, I'm not suggesting bronze statues at the entrance gates, but some recognition that he was there.

He's not a poet who is as widely appreciated in the English-speaking world, let's put it that way, as he should be. Partly because of his—what is the word? I was thinking of "quietness," but that's not the right word, really. He's so unromantic. His poetry has always been so counter to the popular prevailing poetry. Another thing is his use of archaisms, which is quite considerable.

I just edited a book of his selected poems for the Library of America. You know they are running a series of poets quite apart from their big series, the fat books?

He's not going to be featured soon in one of the fat books.

He couldn't be. He was so restrained in how much he published.

When is the New Selected going to be out?

It's going to be out this autumn. It's nice, but I'm sorry that it has to supersede Bob Barth's selection, which is perfectly good. Obviously, it caused him a lot of trouble. He was very gracious about it.

Why did it obviously cause a lot of trouble?

Well, there are going to be two books out, called the "selected poems" of Yvor Winters. Mine is going to be in the more famous series. Danny Winters, the son, was very gracious about this, too.

I know this is a rough one, but can you summarize a bit what you got from Yvor Winters?

It's a very broad question; it's a very difficult one to answer. He taught me a lot about meter that I didn't know, even though I wrote metrically beforehand. I quickly learned a lot more about it. The answer would have to cover numerous minor things, about numerous poets that I hadn't known before. If you think, it's a very difficult thing to ask of anyone you have learned from, any teacher you have learned a lot from.

Perhaps I ask because you have been part of the Winters circle, yet in many significant ways seem to be apart from it as well. So the question of influence is a little bit more nuanced than it might be for others.

How difficult that is! It's like saying "What influence did your mother have on you?" It's so big you don't know where to begin or end. Of course, Winters was taken very much as a father figure by all the students who admired him. There was even one case of one student of his—I only remember the first name now, and I will not give it—who fell in love, or was fallen in love with,

but had to present the young man in question. Oh, I'm going the wrong way. It was a female student. She had to present her young man to Winters to get his approval. He told me this story and he was appalled. I was not surprised. I'm sure this kind of thing happened more than once.

I hope they got married and are still very happy. [Laughs.]

Any new writing, books in the offing? Any projects you're going to take on?

Living and enjoying myself. Hedonistically.

No new writing, really?

I haven't written anything for about two years. People do stop writing. Winters did, for one thing. I remember two of the last three poems he wrote together, and recited them to me. It was marvelous he should be able to [Winters died of cancer of the tongue in 1968], just before Thanksgiving dinner, which he invited me to. People dry up. Poets especially. Poets *always* dry up. Frost did. Just did little teeny things toward the end. It demands a concentration that you are no longer able to give, I think—a combination of concentration and energy.

Edgar Bowers stopped for ten years.

That was alcohol. I thought everybody knew that. He stopped drinking and started writing again. Then he started up again better than ever. If it comes back, it comes back. As somebody said to me, "If you've written a collected poems of five hundred pages [as Gunn has], isn't that enough for you?" [Laughs again.] Yes, it should be.

Winters' circle isn't the only "school" you've been associated with. You were considered one of the poets in "The Movement"—a term coined, I believe, by J. D. Scott in The Spectator. For an American audience under fifty: what is this "Movement"?

The "Movement" was a British thing. It was very silly, because none of us had met each other, and we had little in common with each other. D. J. Enright, Elizabeth Jennings, Kingsley Amis as a poet, John Wain as a poet, Donald Davie, whom I later came to meet and admire very greatly, and Philip Larkin, whom I never met, and he was a wonderful poet. We just emerged right about the same time. Somebody—I think it was in *The Spectator*—half jokingly

referred to us as the Movement. And then it began to be taken seriously. But it never really existed. And there was a bunch of other people, who were writing at about the same time, who came out with an anthology, *The Mavericks* [edited by Howard Sergeant and Dannie Abse, 1957]. They were supposed to be different from us. But their writing, our writing had vague similarities. It's a period style we have in common. But nobody likes to be categorized. And yet it's useful to journalists and literary historians to do so. There is such a thing as a period style, anyway.

I can understand why it happens. Publishers, poetry slams, websites, workshops are pumping out poetry by the boatload. It can be hard for anybody to try to get a handle on what's out there, what's of worth, what he or she might like to read. There is a need for some method of organization and orientation—other than the publishers' promotional blurbs—to help readers sort out the avalanche of material. What else can a reader do?

Well, yes. You go by chance, you get recommendations from friends. You read reviews. It's rather like going to the movies. You go to them by chance. Or they have people in them that you want to see. Good directors, or something like that. This all happens in poetry as well.

That brings us to another question. Poetry seems to have lost the kind of general readership that existed half a century ago, the kind of readership that put the Collected Robert Frost or the Oscar Williams anthologies on the bookshelves of people who weren't English majors at college.

Some people don't read poetry at all. It's not easy.

There's an overwhelming amount to select from—a jungle. Even when there is selection—well, when was the last time you remembered a poem you read in the New Yorker?

They're not very good, are they? Actually, there was a terrific poem by Donald Hall. I do not take the *New Yorker* as of the last couple years, and a friend of mine mentioned how great it was. A friend who is not a poet.

I wish that kind of thing happened more often. But for the most part, people don't read the stuff.

One of the things about poetry—people in general feel like it’s a good thing, you know what I mean? As opposed to mere fiction or plays. There’s a slightly superstitious feeling about poetry—that they should like it, even if they don’t. It’s like religion. They get down on their knees and recite a poem.

You have spoken against the “divide and conquer” tendency in the poetry world today, with a welter of groups, each promoting a particular agenda: “We should all be fertilizing each other. It’s not particularly profitable at this time to be separating ourselves into armed camps. There’s not enough talent to go around.”

Well said. Of course. When did I say that?

Some years ago. That was apropos, as I recall, of the New Formalist movement.

I’m pleased I said that.

But you went on to say, of schools: “They’re only useful when there is a central monolithic tradition that is worth opposing. And we don’t have such a central tradition now. We have fashion, but that’s not the same thing at all.”

That’s true. That was what I said, too.

So much for the literary historians and journalists you mentioned earlier. Do you still see poetry like that . . . is there a central tradition right now?

There isn’t a central tradition. I don’t particularly want there to be one. When Pound was reacting against the central tradition in, let’s say, 1910, it was very different. He had something to react against that was meaningful. I think we are a bit wishy-washy nowadays.

Why is that?

I don’t know, maybe something to do with free verse. Maybe something to do with the fact that there are no giants around. It’s amazing. When I first came over to this country, Williams was alive, Stevens was alive, Frost was alive, Pound was alive, Eliot was alive.

Auden was alive, too.

It was amazing. Those were the giants.

Now, of course, there's yet another movement you have been associated with, more recently, as a paleo-formalist. You have said, "The New Formalism troubles me partly because people might tend to identify me as one of its precursors. . . . I'm not interested in encouraging such a school, because I think they should also be learning from Bunting and Pound and the other modernists." That was back in 1989. Any reason to change your mind?

They are mostly lousy poets. Simply by writing in meter you don't make yourself of any importance—you're not good for that reason. It's slightly unfashionable, but it's becoming more fashionable. But it doesn't make you a good poet.

Well, one can argue that there's an effort afoot to preserve a knowledge of meter and form. To ensure the continuation of craftsmanship, at least. I was surprised recently that a prominent, award-winning poet—a poet with an MFA—told me she was not taught any of this during her education.

Depends where you are, doesn't it? I've done it at Berkeley. I taught it. One of my favorite courses was "Introduction to Poetry." Which is mainly for freshmen, obviously. It was a huge course. Naturally they had to learn about meter to be able to read poetry.

I learned about meter on my own, originally. I learned so much more about meter from Winters, but I learned the basics myself, because I did a lot of reading, and you don't read a lot of poems by Keats and Herrick and Donne and Pope without picking up that there's something going on there, rhythmically. People always did learn that way. Where do you think Shakespeare got it? He knew a little bit of Latin, apparently, but he didn't take courses in literature. None of the master poets did, up to the year 1900.

Your comment about Shakespeare reminds me of something else said about you—that you have the "lines of most near-to-Shakespearean in power in twentieth-century English or American verse."

Of course I like it. I don't believe it, but I like that.

Some think Winters' major contribution was his aesthetic judgment—his attempt to reshape the canon, to reshift it toward many comparatively little-known poets—T. Sturge Moore, for example.

Certainly he did that. Many a teacher, many a critic has wanted to redo the canon, to dismiss the canon as established, or adjust it. I remember at Cambridge, F. R. Leavis did the same thing. And eventually, you do it yourself, don't you? You make your own selection. You say, "These poets are important to me, these poets are of no importance to anyone, so far as I can see." We do that much more than is generally thought. It's not just *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, it's everyone. It's what you have to do, to find out what's important for you.

It's easy to forget that Emily Dickinson wasn't published in full until—what?—1950, and that Winters was one of the first to champion her as one of the greatest poets of the nineteenth century.

Oh, yes, he was a great discoverer. Very early, of course, he distinguished what was great about Emily Dickinson, and what wasn't. Her poems about death—she was so good on death. There are some creepy bad poems that people love. "Hope is a thing with wings." Victorian lady's album verse is the worse kind of thing that she wrote.

Yvor Winters and Ken Fields' anthology, Quest for Reality, focuses on this reorganized canon, featuring what many consider idiosyncratic choices—George Gascoigne, Fulke Greville, Jones Very, and Adelaide Crapsey. The single poem of yours in the volume is your Caravaggio poem, "In Santa Maria del Popolo."

It's not my best poem.

You don't think so? You'd rather see the Elvis poem again?

He thought it was my best poem.

Which is your favorite? Which would you like to see included in anthologies?

I could tell you but you probably wouldn't remember it. "All Do Not All Things Well." It's about amateur auto mechanics.

I remember it—and I like it.

So did he, apparently. He never told me.

Didn't you write it after his death?

Oh, no. 1955 I wrote it. He never mentioned it. But Janet told me he liked it. I wasn't even going to print it because I thought he didn't like it.

Clive Wilmer wrote about you in 1999: "It is almost alarming to look back over the forty-five years of Gunn's creative work and recognize [its] internal coherence."

That of course is something you don't know about and can't calculate. I'll give you an example of something that's almost incredible. Hugh Haughton's review of my book *The Man with the Night Sweats* in the *Times Literary Supplement* praised it very highly. I'm delighted with the review, very intelligent review. He said, "In almost every poem in this book, there is, throughout this book, the continued image of embracing." Well, I didn't know that. I went through the book, and my god, there is! It's true. But it wasn't deliberately there.

The internal coherence. The human mind, the human imagination of any order, has its coherence, its continued associations. Something's going in your mind for about five years or so that attracts certain images.

Caroline Spurgeon was getting that with Shakespeare, I think. I read her when I was an undergraduate, and I used to think: when Shakespeare wrote the *Tempest*, did he *know*? Did he know that this is the time for Macbeth to have an image of fire, or have an image of the dwarf in the giant's clothes, or something like that? "It's about time I did this again, because I haven't done it for several scenes"? No he didn't; that was the way his mind worked. That was a familiar kind of image to associate with the subject. It's not done consciously. That it could be done consciously seems rather oppressive. It's interesting that I never settled that matter in my mind, about Shakespeare, for example, until I read that review and realized that he was right, and I had been, honestly, completely unaware that I was doing something again and again.

So you don't even have an inkling of these things surfacing? The Wilmer quote would seem to imply you have some role in this "internal coherence."

It's very flattering, but it means I have certain themes. Probably themes, whatever that means, you know, that remain important for me. I think most people do. If you think there's some consistency in the way you think.

What kinds of themes, obsessions, are you aware of resurfacing in your work, again and again?

Oh, I don't know. That's for other people to find out. Otherwise, if I worked this out successfully, I'd start doing it deliberately, cheating.

I have a question you might think tacky.

Be tacky. It's on me.

You've written a number of poems about AIDS—but I've noticed it's become a little trendy. Perhaps even mandatory. In workshops: the obligatory AIDS poem.

I just got in first, I think. It wasn't a deliberate move. Some people have even said, "Don't you think you are being exploitative?" As if I said, "This is a good, meaty subject to write about." No, as my friends died, I wrote about them. Eventually I found, by the time I published *The Man with the Night Sweats*, that I had written quite a group of them. They were not intended as a group. Obviously, I was aware that there were quite a number of them adding up. But, I notice now that in creative writing classes everywhere it's become one of the obligatory subjects, in the same way the Vietnam War was the obligatory subject for another generation. It's one of those tremendously troubling things happening in your life and you feel you have to write about it.

I can't accuse anyone individually of exploiting it—it just seems a bit forced, in some cases. A bit de rigueur.

I was certainly doing it independently. I didn't think of other people getting there before me.

But for you it's firsthand. You were on the scene as all this was happening.

No, because we were all on the scene. Even if we're not gay, we have friends. Everybody knows people who have died of it. Almost everybody.

Clearly, it was one of the most shocking events of our era—

The reason it was so shocking to us is that we were a very protected generation; I'm speaking about myself, obviously; I am much older than you are. During World War II, penicillin was discovered. So a lot of the things that people died of in my parents' generation, no one died of now. All those antibiotics and stuff made a difference. We didn't naturally come across death so often, except as the result of a traffic accident or something like that.

That takes us back to Emily Dickinson and all those death poems. According to the folks at Emily Dickinson's home in Amherst, during her childhood, she lost thirty close friends and relatives to tuberculosis alone. That's not counting deaths by typhoid, cholera, cancer, childbirth, and infant mortality. Not surprising where all those death poems come from. That's probably a more representative experience of death than the generation you are talking about.

By the time AIDS came around, suddenly the people around us our age and younger were dying in droves, in the 1980s.

Do you think your poems—as an unintended side effect—drew attention to the crisis?

No idea. It would be nice to think that, wouldn't it? But I don't think it did. The fact itself was quite enough to bring attention to it. If you have friends dying, you don't need a poem about someone you don't know to bring attention to it.

So you came to San Francisco in . . .

1954. I was twenty-five. It was too expensive to go by plane in those days, but my Fulbright covered the passage on the *Queen Mary*. I and a bunch of other students I didn't know came over in a large stateroom. I was very excited, of course. My twenty-fifth birthday was mid-Atlantic.

You came to the U.S. solely, or at least primarily, to study with Yvor Winters at Stanford?

Yes. I was told about creative writing fellowships by one of my predecessors, Donald Hall, whom I met when he had been in England. Very nice guy. I think

he may have somewhat swayed Winters' judgment in choosing me. I was there for a year, came back to do graduate work for two years.

You said in a PN Review interview, "The English think of California as being a good deal more exotic than it is." I notice that some of the critical remarks made about you over the years reveal a certain English resentment of your being a Californian, and a certain amount of stereotyping—"the countercultural slovenliness of his California ethic" being an extreme example.

They think of it having the beaches of Orange County, which are really splendid. Which, of course, we don't have. They are always very surprised when they find out about the fog in San Francisco, the comparative coolness here.

But there is a mystique about California.

There is, nowadays. When I came here, I didn't have any expectations at all. In 1954, we didn't know what California was. San Francisco was just a name on the map.

Really? Despite movies like Hitchcock's Vertigo?

Well, yes. But I don't think there was any very clear image of it—certainly not with poetry. Gary Snyder was not yet famous, nor was Robert Duncan, nor was Winters, except as a critic. And there was Rexroth—he and Winters did not get on at all. Question of temperament, I think. Winters was not easy to get on with, for one thing. And Rexroth was deeply disliked even by people who really admired his poetry. I remember Elizabeth Bishop, who'd known him very slightly in the old days when she was young—in her thirties I guess—and was living here for a year. She said to me, "Oh, I'm going to dinner with Rexroth." So I saw her the next day, or two days later. I said, "So how was dinner with Rexroth?" And she said, "When I got there, his wife and daughter had just been crying. He made them cry a lot."

Bishop's undergoing a revival, too.

Quite a bit of a revival. Enormous. Particularly in England. It's amazing how she was not taken very seriously during her lifetime. Since her last book, which came out, I think, just a few months before she died, she has gotten much more

famous than her best friend Robert Lowell, who was the big poet of that time. Now she's the big poet.

Of course, the English love all that restraint. But I didn't realize what a good poet she was until that last book, even though I liked her terribly much as a person. Extremely nice woman, delightful to know. With her last book, I started to see, in retrospect, how good all of her career had been. She got on very well with Robert Duncan. I think I might have introduced them to each other. They both liked to laugh together, they got on tremendously, immediately, wonderfully. I said to him, "What do you think of her poetry?" He said, "Her poetry? I don't even read it." And I said to her, "What do you think of his poetry?" And she said, "Oh, I didn't read it."

Elizabeth Bishop had a strange life—a lesbian, an alcoholic living a very long, rough ride outside Rio de Janeiro, who couldn't have a drink without getting plotzed and having to be carried out. Yet she wanted to be "normal"—she struggled to be "normal," with her conservative New England programming. That restraint the English admire comes from that contradiction, perhaps, that struggle.

The only time I ever saw her drunk was the first time I met her. This was a meeting set up by a friend of hers in San Francisco. I think it was news to me that she'd moved to San Francisco. She wanted to meet me, which was flattering. So I spent an evening with her, and her friend, whose name I have forgotten. The woman she was living with. I guess I shouldn't say her real name, because everybody calls her "X" or something.

I think it's come out.

Roxanne. Anyway, whatever it was. She was out of it, she was *out* of it. I mean, she was so out of it she was not following the conversation, just making strange remarks that had nothing to do with anything. So I received a message—whether it was from this guy, or whether Roxanne phoned me. It said, "Let's try over," which was very nice to say. So we did try over and we got on excellently. She gave the one good party for poets that I've ever been at. Most of those can be obnoxious or boring or pretentious. She knew all these poets—like Robert Duncan—who were just poets. I think it was a Christmas party. We had a great time together.

You mentioned that, in the world of poetry, we live in an age without giants. Why no giants here? Eastern Europe is still producing them. Czesław Miłosz in Poland, for example. I attended a reading of his at Berkeley a few years back, before he left for Poland—

I couldn't understand a word. The crowd was so big.

It's worse in Poland, I understand, where he's treated like a rock star—although that may be a social phenomenon as much as a literary one. I remember at the book signing afterwards: one Polish man was almost weeping with excitement at being there, in front of Miłosz at last.

It was certainly one of the most crowded readings I've ever been to. The next most crowded one at Berkeley was Gary Snyder. They had to move it to another room. He did something that would never be possible for me—but he did it. He said, "I'll take requests first." [Laughs.] He's a lovely poet.

Joseph Brodsky, too, has the same epic status among Russians.

I never went to a reading of his. I only met him once. I seemed to be one of the very few people he was ever nice to. He was extremely nice to me. He was incredibly rude to everybody else.

The Eastern Europeans are poets of historical circumstance. Is that part of the formula? Why no giants here?

I don't know why there are at some times, and not others. Why the Elizabethans around about 1600? Shakespeare wasn't the only one. Why the early romantics and the late romantics? Why the long periods of nothing much going on in between? It may have to do with subject matter, as you suggested. It may not.

Has your emigration affected your reception among English readers?

It's not wise to think about such things. It's not wise to think about one's reputation. It's a distraction and not important. It shouldn't be important. It's like having good looks or bad looks. Nothing much you can do about it.

Not living in England has certainly insulated you from the bite of London literary opinion, to some extent.

It was nice to get away from England, nice to get away from the English literary scene. I don't think I could live in New York, either—though there were various times I would have liked to—for the same reason. Too many literary personalities you're going to run across at the next street corner. I don't want to be a celebrity. I'd like my work to be well known without me being well known.

This insulation, then, is a welcome side effect of your transplanting. You enjoy the relative obscurity here for an "English" poet. You wanted that.

Definitely. Yes. Well, of course I didn't know I was going to move to San Francisco. Yes, it's a pleasant byproduct. When I was in London ten years ago, I was with a friend, and we were looking for somewhere to eat. We went into some kind of restaurant on or near Shaftesbury Avenue. I could just see—it sounds like vanity, but it wasn't—I could just see a table full of maybe four people. One of them looked at me, with that expression, "Oh, look who that is!" Obviously, most of the other people there looked at me. I'd hate that. When Cary Grant went to Russia, and came back, a reporter said, "What was it like, being in Russia?" He said, "Terrific. Nobody recognized me the entire time." I don't want to be recognized. To be recognized more than once a year is certainly, well . . .

"It seems he becomes more adventuresome as he grows older and is not afraid to fall on his ass trying out something different." That was written of you in The Threepenny Review in 1999.

That was August Kleinzahler. I think he's the only person who ever said that.

True? You've gone in and out of phases, survived a number of literary fashions. Just when people think they have successfully pigeonholed you, you reinvent yourself. You've been dismissed repeatedly over the years—an offhand remark ridiculing your "silliness and self-regarding camp" comes to mind.

[Hoots loudly at the memory.] I really don't care too much what people think of me. If I cared too much, I'd stop writing.

More than most, you've had periods when you have been out of fashion, out of favor. But you've always crept back to acclaim. You're willing to "fall on your ass," as Kleinzahler says.

I think there was in England an implicit feeling from a lot of critics that I had deserted the mother country and also that I had gone on to write free verse.

Is that bad? You're frequently described as an Anglo-American poet, whatever that might mean.

I *am* an Anglo-American poet—I'm delighted by that. I fastened onto that. Somebody asked, "Do you think you are writing for an English or an American audience?" You don't think about your audience when you're writing.

Another criticism you've survived: "Thom Gunn is an unsettled and unsettling poet: nervous, bleak, tense, edgy, committed to a brute masculine energy because, it would seem, he distrusts something altogether gentler, softer, or more whimsical in himself." That was the TLS.

Probably anonymous, probably rather early.

1967, actually. And it was anonymous. Well?

I don't like whimsy, anyway.

This apartment seems filled with it. A Wurlitzer! And where did you find all these huge pop bottles—Hires, Nesbitts, 7-Up, Pepsi?

My lover collects them. Mike Kitay. We've been together since Cambridge, 1952. He collects metal advertising.

While I'm getting personal—where did you get the tattoo?

Where did I get it? In San Francisco, on Seventh Street. From a tattooist who is a very nice man, Lyle Tuttle, who later became famous because he did a couple of tattoos for Janis Joplin, one between her breasts and one on her ear. So he became quite a celebrity and got on talk shows and stuff like that. Now, [there's] nothing on Seventh Street, except a Greyhound bus station, which is closed down.

When did you get the tattoo?

This was 1962 I think I had this done.

Well before Joplin. Why a tiger—or is it a leopard?

It's a panther. Knowing full well I was probably the only teacher at Berkeley who had a tattoo, I would wait till about the third week of term before rolling up my sleeves and watching the reaction of the students. They thought it was shocking. Now, of course, the children of those students give each other birthday gifts of tattoos.

Someone once described you as “an atheist who admits the supernatural.” What does that mean?

I admit the possibility of the supernatural, I admit the possibility of flying saucers, though I don't *believe* in flying saucers. Let's say I don't believe in God, but I believe in the possibility of ghosts.