

Also by Neil Powell

Poetry

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Editor

SELECTED POEMS OF FULKE GREVILLE

Gay Love Poetry

Edited by Neil Powell

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THOM GUNN

In the Post Office

Saw someone yesterday who looked like you did,
Being short with long blond hair, a sturdy kid
Ahead of me in line. I gazed and gazed
At his good back, feeling again, amazed,
That almost envious sexual tension which
Rubbing at made the greater, like an itch,
An itch to steal or otherwise possess
The brilliant restive charm, the boyishness
That half aware – and not aware enough –
Of what it did, eluded to hold off
The very push of interest it begot,
As if you'd been a tease, though you were not.
I hadn't felt it roused, to tell the truth,
In several years, that old man's greed for youth,
Like Pelias's that boiled him to a soup,
Not since I'd had the sense to cover up
My own particular seething can of worms,
And settle for a friendship on your terms.

Meanwhile I had to look: his errand done,
Without a glance at me or anyone,
The kid unlocked his bicycle outside,
Shrugging a backpack on. I watched him ride
Down 18th Street, rising above the saddle
For the long plunge he made with every pedal,
Expending far more energy than needed.
If only I could do whatever he did,
With him or as part of him, if I
Could creep into his armpit like a fly,
Or like a crab cling to his golden crotch,
Instead of having to stand back and watch.

Oh complicated fantasy of intrusion
On that young sweaty body. My confusion
Led me at length to recollections of
Another's envy and his confused love.

That Fall after you died I went again
To where I had visited you in your pain
But this time for your – friend, roommate, or wooer?
I seek a neutral term where I'm unsure.
He lay there now. Figuring she knew best,
I came by at his mother's phoned request
To pick up one of your remembrances,
A piece of stained-glass you had made, now his,
I did not even remember, far less want.
To him I felt, likewise, indifferent.

'You can come in now,' said the friend-as-nurse.
I did, and found him altered for the worse.
But when he saw me sitting by his bed,
He would not speak, and turned away his head.
I had not known he hated me until
He hated me this much, hated me still.
I thought that we had shared you more or less,
As if we shared what no one might possess,
Since in a net we sought to hold the wind.
There he lay on the pillow, mortally thinned,
Weaker than water, yet his gesture proving
As steady as an undertow. Unmoving,
In the sustained though slight aversion, grim
In wordlessness. Nothing deflected him,
Nothing I did and nothing I could say.
And so I left. I heard he died next day.

I have imagined that he still could taste
That bitterness and anger to the last,
Against the roles he saw me in because

He had to: of victor, as he thought I was,
Of heir, as to the cherished property
His mother – who knows why? – was giving me,
And of survivor, as I am indeed,
Recording, so that I may later read
Of what has happened, whether between sheets,
Or in post offices, or on the streets.

Post Script: The Panel

Reciprocation from the dead. Having finished the post-office poem, I think I will take a look at the stained-glass panel it refers to, which C made I would say two years before he died. I fish it out from where I have kept it, between a filing cabinet and a small chest of drawers. It has acquired a cobweb, which I brush off before I look at it. In the lower foreground are a face with oriental features and an arm, as of someone lying on his stomach: a mysteriously tiered cone lies behind and above him. What I had forgotten is that the picture is surrounded on all four sides by the following inscription:

The needs of ghosts embarrass the living. A ghost must eat and shit, must pack his body someplace. Neither buyer nor bundle, a ghost has no tally, no readjusting value, no soul counted at a bank.

Is this an excerpt from some Chinese book of wisdom, or is it C himself speaking? When he made the panel, C may have already suspected he had AIDS, but the prescience of the first sentence astonishes me – as it does also that I remembered nothing of the inscription while writing the poem but looked it up immediately on finishing it.

Yes, the needs of him and his friend to 'embarrass' me after their deaths. The dead have no sense of tact, no manners, they enter doors without knocking, but I continue to deal with them, as proved by my writing the poem. They pack their bodies into my dreams, they eat my feelings, and shit in my

mind. They are no good to me, of no value to me, but I cannot shake them and do not want to. Their story, being part of mine, refuses to reach an end. They present me with new problems, surprise me, contradict me, my dear, my everpresent dead.

