SUPER GAY POEMS

LGBTQIA+ Poetry after Stonewall

STEPHANIE BURT

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A major poet and literary critic leads an aesthetic adventure through poems about queer experience, by writers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, trans, nonbinary, gender fluid, and more.

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my students

your past, your future

still out there: let's see

CONTENTS

SUPER GAY POEMS

Introduction

This book presents fifty-one poems I admire, enjoy, and recommend. It also introduces versions of people: voices, characters, attitudes, representations that might fit, or reflect, or empower, or assist, some of the people who might be reading about them. It's a book about our elders and our youth, about our changing self-descriptions, and about the poets who wrote these poems, who shaped lives, invented characters, or assembled words around what Aotearoa New Zealand English calls, delightfully, rainbow people, which Americans such as myself more prosaically call LGBTQIA+ identities. (The I stands for intersex, the A for aromantic or asexual, the + for other identities and terms: no one language contains an exhaustive list.) These are lives not represented, or not openly, or not often, or not well, in most of the poetry that most of us encounter most of the time, despite the centrality of same-sex desires in such frequently studied poets as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson and William Shakespeare.

These poets stand among those poets' heirs. Here are sonnets, and near-sonnets, and iambic couplets, and rhymed quatrains, and skinny dimeters the shape of a sunflower stem; here, too, are concrete poems, and poems in chatty, chaotic free verse, purposefully inaccurate translations, blocks of not-quite-narrative prose, and expostulations whose strewn fragments defy us to shape them into any unity. The volume has its center in the United States but does not halt at national borders. Here are poets writing, in English (with slices of other languages mixed in), about trans and gay and lesbian identities in, or from, Nigeria, and Guyana, and Jamaica, and Ireland. Here are poets writing from international centers, such as New York City, London, and Toronto, and poets who remain far from those centers. Here are poets working outside English as well as within it: translating their own work between Spanish and English, or incorporating Guyanese Bhojpuri. All of them touch on, or spring from, or represent, some way to live in a body, to experience love, or to feel sexual desire, at variance with gendered roles and norms.

In other words, all of them might be counted as queer. Queerness is, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick tried to explain in 1993, what happens when the

expectations we get from the straight world don't line up with our lives: when we love the wrong gender, or pair up with the wrong gender, or turn aside from genders assigned at birth. Those mismatches make us—if we welcome the labels, and perhaps even if we don't—queer, or gay, or lesbian, or trans, or trans-plus, or demi, or . . . Those labels in turn help shape our inner life. The philosopher Ian Hacking has described the feedback loops by which a category, once loose in the world and adopted in society, builds momentum and affects how we see ourselves: Hacking calls this process "making up people." The poems in this book ask who gets made up, and how we make ourselves up, and how the words in poems can reflect our inner, not only our outwardly visible, lives.

Why *Super Gay Poems*? Why not call the book *Super Queer Poems*? Or *Contemporary LGBTQIA+ Poems*? For one thing, I like the way that "Super Gay" sounds. For another, among the labels that fit some poets in this book, gay and lesbian speak to the recent past, where this book begins. All the poems here appeared in print for the first time after 1969, and almost all were written after that year, the year of the Stonewall riots, of modern, open, visible gay and lesbian and trans movements coming to consciousness of our shared powers. Poets writing in English long before that date now seem, to us, clearly queer. A fifteenth-century Scots poem praises a "friendschip reciproc" between women, likening it to marriage: "Thair is mair constancie in our sex / Then ever amang men has been." Sticking only to the English language, Richard Barnfield in the sixteenth century, Katherine Phillips in the seventeenth, Thomas Gray and Elizabeth Thomas in the eighteenth century, wrote poems of passionate devotion to beloved same-gender friends, and they were hardly alone. Walt Whitman certainly thought that he wrote about a special kind of love in *Calamus* (1860), a charge between beloved men, distinct from the sexual love between men and women. Yet the terms homosexual and heterosexual emerged only in 1869, in German. They came into common use in English during the 1890s, when the public trials of Oscar Wilde, and the growth of psychoanalysis, spread the idea (not brand new, but newly and widely available) that a homosexual, or an invert, might be a kind of person: not just a thing that you did, but a thing that you were.

Whitman, after his death, came to stand for love between men, and for traditions of poems about it: "My hand in yours—Walt Whitman—so," promised Hart Crane in *The Bridge* (1930). Federico García Lorca invoked Whitman in the 1920s as a lonely, disoriented gay man in New York; Jack Spicer wrote a series of letters and prose poems to and about the already-dead Lorca, part of a great cache of material Spicer produced largely in San Francisco during the

1950s and 1960s, alongside two other gay poets, Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan. Allen Ginsberg envisioned Whitman cruising in "A Supermarket in California" (1955), "poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys." For writers wary of Whitman's invitations, W. H. Auden gave worldly, or Anglophile, or urbane gay men another way to be, and to write about being, an invitation taken up by several of the poets in this book. Blues traditions such as Bessie Smith's provided examples for lesbians; Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell, and H. D. did too, though not until the rise of lesbian feminist poetry in the 1970s can we find an open, self-conscious tradition of lesbian poetics, in modern English, comparable to what Whitman began for gay men.

The year 1969 does not, then, represent the start of gay and lesbian poetry. Nor is it the start of gay and lesbian politics, in the United States or anywhere. Public disturbances for gay civil rights, like the Compton's Cafeteria riot of 1966 in San Francisco, predate the Stonewall uprising. Organizations that spoke up for gay and lesbian civil rights, such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, endured throughout the 1950s. Indeed, Spicer served as the secretary for the Oakland, CA, Mattachine chapter. The Wolfenden Report of 1957 argued that Great Britain should no longer treat homosexual behavior as criminal; its recommendations became law for England and Wales in 1967. In New Zealand, the Dorian Society (founded 1962) and the more directly political Wolfenden Association (founded 1967) worked against social stigma and legal penalties. Ginsberg, and bill bissett in Canada, lived openly as themselves throughout the 1960s.

And yet the Stonewall uprising of 1969 represents a sharp change, because it attracted such broad publicity, and because it took place in a media capital, and because small presses, alternative newspapers, feminist consciousness-raising, and organizing against the war in Vietnam had already laid the groundwork. *Gay Sunshine*: A *Journal of Gay Liberation* started publishing in Berkeley in 1970. Women's news journal *off our backs* also began in 1970, while the long-lived lesbian journal *Sinister Wisdom* started in 1976. *the body politic* launched in Canada in 1971 and continued publication until it became *Xtra* in 1986. In 1972, Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku (Te Arawa, Tūhoe), along with other University of Auckland students, founded the Gay Liberation Front in Aotearoa New Zealand, followed in 1974 by Sisters for Homophile Equality. Poets took part, and took pride, in that new gay liberation. Poems from the 1970s claimed new ground (as in Audre Lorde's poem about home ownership) or honored new freedoms (as in Adrienne Rich's poem about a road trip). The gay poetry of the 1980s turned instead—like the visual art and the memoirs and the fiction of those years—to mourning and rage. It reflected the toll and the crisis of HIV/AIDS, whose

impact might be hard for younger readers to fathom. Many of the best poets who wrote about HIV and AIDS died in those years; others remain very much at work.

The poems of the 1990s kept those threads up—anger, mourning, sex, celebration—and wove in new ones, opening up to more kinds of communities, kinds of bodies, ways to be queer, as the word "queer" itself picked up steam. And the range of styles available kept expanding: prose poems; generic hybrids; chaotic visitors from a still mostly straight avant-garde; poems that worked on the printed page but learned much from oral story and live performance. Other kinds of creators, from television writers to makers of literary theory, found more visibility, and opened up more options: as the struggle to prove that we deserve to live seemed to recede, creators became more likely to ask how we should live, and how we should see the shapes of our lives. Should we live as straight people do (marriage equality, liberal individualism, domesticity, bringing up children, what radical critics derided as "homonormativity")? Should we try instead for something entirely new? Can we, should we, subvert everything? How different are we, really?

Though trans poetry in English begins slightly earlier, the 2010s saw the self-conscious growth of trans poetry, addressed to trans readers. Some trans poets (the present author included) wrote from within the gender binary; others took positions outside it, becoming they / them or xe / xir or cy / cy (like Jillian Weise). This book includes those ways of being trans, and looks forward to more, as well as showing the trajectories some trans poets have made through various ways to live out our genders. Six poets in this book (as far as we know) have changed pronouns since completing the poem that we chose. We use their current pronouns except where specified, and we specify if the poem requires it. The book also takes in nations where queer visibility happened later, or more suddenly (as in Singapore). It takes in humor, such as Chen Chen's and Hera Lindsay Bird's, as well as more popular culture and more subcultures, on the internet or at the club. And it includes poets focused on intersectionality: the way that multiple identities make new ones, as sodium and chlorine, together, make salt. Contemporary poets can get salty about how the wider world demands that we live; they can also honor the sweetness and the openness of our sometimes newfound ability to be, and to say, who we are.

As the poet Brian Teare has written—talking about Thom Gunn, and about how Gunn's work changed once he came out—"historically, gay writers have read each other's works not only for aesthetic kinship but also in search of identity and community models, to see how others like themselves have fashioned their lives." This book anticipates readers conducting that search, not only for gay and lesbian and pansexual and asexual and binary and nonbinary

trans lives, but also for particular intersections and overlaps: South Asian gay men, or Generation X lesbians, or autistic nonbinary people, or excitable, anxious trans men, or exceptionally shy trans women. A few important kinds of queer and gender-nonconforming identities—asexuality, aromanticism, and intersex, for example—appear in poems here, but not by poets who claim them: more such poets will surely emerge soon. One of few openly intersex poets to write about that identity so far is the American poet and memoirist Aaron Apps; readers who want major ace and aro poets might look at the life and work of Marianne Moore. Categories and subdivisions of queer experience can multiply indefinitely; some have yet to find a poet in English able to give them memorable words.

I have tried, in these brief essays on poems I admire, to bring out the aspects that make them gay, or bi, or queer. At the same time I have tried to be an aesthetic critic, in the sense articulated by Helen Vendler: "An aesthetic critic is naturally concerned with the generic and formal aspects of an artwork, its implicit poetics, its internal structures of relation, its intellectual argument and its expressive means," as well as with "the internal factors motivating the invention of such idiosyncratic forms"—that is, with how the person in the poem, the person the poem constructs, seems to think and to feel. I write about poets I find aesthetically interesting—which has also meant, in assembling this book, expanding my interests, sometimes far beyond the work I was raised to read.

Does this book, as a whole, have an argument? Beyond "modern queer poems are wonderful, and you might like them"? Beyond "they come from all over, not just from the place where I live, and they differ one from another, in style, in tone, in their sense of how best to live," and beyond (what ought to go without saying, but may not) "there is no one right way to be trans, or bi, or Sapphic, or queer, or gay"? It has—if I have done my work right—at least two. The first of my arguments has to do with time: we rainbow people may (not must, but may) experience the passage of a time in a way that's shaped by our gender and sexuality. We seem to be more likely to double back, to live in the moment (or try), to inhabit a not-yet, a future still unbuilt, to do what looks (to the straight world) like not growing up, or otherwise to reject the pace, the markers, and the milestones that define, for straight, cisgender people, the passage of time. I do not mean that all queer people, or all queer poets, experience the passage of time in the same way, much less that all cishets do. Indeed the critics and theorists who make arguments about the queer passage of queer time disagree sharply with each other. Terry Castle, Jack Halberstam, and Heather Love, in divergent ways, focus on queer "failures," on the ways that queer lovers do not and cannot live out a happily ever after. Other writers

envision queer success, and in relatively familiar terms. Writers on asexuality, polyamory, and found family, from Edmund White to Jessica Fern and Angela Chen, invite us to step off the "relationship escalator" whereby dating leads to sex leads to commitment leads to a life organized around that commitment; we do not have to, perhaps, cannot, organize our lives, week to week, year to year, in that way. Trans lives stereotypically—like gay lives in earlier popular culture—lead to martyrdom, or to self-harm . . . but they need not, and should not. Lee Edelman sees queer lives as best fulfilled in the moment, refusing the standard call to look to a future and think of the children. José Muñoz instead invited us to imagine and assemble utopian futures, better for us than the times we have known.

Above and before all these thinkers (whose work comes up in my discussions of individual poems) this book dives into the pool of ideas opened up by Carolyn Dinshaw, a scholar of medieval literature, who finds her own kinds of queer time in the writing and in the reception of medieval texts. "Queerness," Dinshaw writes in *How Soon Is Now?* (2012), "has a temporal dimension—as anyone knows whose desire has been branded as 'arrested development' or dismissed as 'just a phase'." Queerness includes "forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinary linear measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogenous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether," casting us into a not-yet, or a not-ever, or surrounding us with a right-now.

Queer time isn't news, and it's not just queer people who are habitually late for things, or get caught up in the present moment, or fantasize about unknown times. Those actions, though, or forms of inaction, do seem connected to queerness, to lives that disaffiliate from the standard pace and sequence of cishet life cycles. And they seem connected to—even represented by—the other kinds of doubled, stopped, reversed, rewired time that come with the tools of poetry, and with the kinds of compact, emotionally intense, acoustically intricate poems that we now call lyric. A lyric poem takes place at once in the time that it takes to say, or hear, or recite it, in your head or out loud, and also within the time of a character's life: that time may be one infinitesimal, emotion-laden moment, or it may be the times relived in memory, when life was otherwise. Some thinkers (Sharon Cameron and Michael Clune, for example) argue that lyric poems simply seem to stop time. Others (such as Jonathan Culler) think that lyric poetry invites us into a time of ritual, of repetition, distinct from the one-thing-after-another of our prosaic lives.

Poets, meanwhile, invite us to seize the day in a way distinct from what cishet people take on, to share that day, to accept a once-denied past or a still-

seemingly impossible future, and they shape that invitation's rhythms, phrase by phrase: they are devotedly queer Afro-pessimists or Afro-futurists or Proustian makers of intricate retrospectives, or else they uphold horizontal identities, chosen families, ways to live outside the begats and begots of family time. Jubi Arriola-Headley, "possessed of many genders, of lusts I am / yet afraid to name," asks "before / we stipulate that there are white people in the future / how about / we situate ourselves in the now?" Aaron Shurin remembers the queer utopian now of his own cliques in San Francisco in a prose poem called "Then": "Once we were in the loop . . . slick with information and good timing . . . At night we told stories about the future with clairvoyant certainties." Pam Brown's nighttime sightlines in Australia "suggest the past / not a past / I ever knew / but one I make up," perhaps the same past that contains "a club full / of lesbians / dancing to / Music for Men." All three queer poets could have been in this book with essays about their own poems. (It's easy for me to imagine a sequel to this book—*More Ultra Gay Poems!!!*—if I could only find the time.) All the poets in this book do something memorable and moving and acoustically interesting with the shapes of queer lives. Some of them—even most of them—also do something odd, something queer, with the passage of time, from moment to moment within the shape of the poem as well as from day to day within someone's life course. Time as we know it—linear, predictable, leading (as Byron quipped) either to death, or to a marriage—does not fit us very well; queer and trans poems, especially lyric poems, may do something else with their time.

If there's a second argument that unites the poems, and unites my essays, in this book, here you go: poems are about people. To read a poem is to imagine a life, whether or not it's a life that is or could be yours. Lives—especially lives that are, or have been, oppressed, or erased—deserve to be seen and heard. Poems, moreover, imagine lives by means of style; the poems most worth attention, more worth rereading, stand apart for how they sound. There is no responsible way to separate a poem from its style: what it does, not—or not just—what it says. On the other hand, there is no responsible way to sever a poem entirely from its history, from the language and the lives available when it was made. Poems short and long—and not only queer poems—work to connect the language they use to social and to sensory experience as well as to an inward life, to what J. D. McClatchy calls "the what-I-am instead of the what-I-have."

We can see those connections taking place in great queer poems far too long to fit in this book. Tommy Pico, in his book-length poem *Junk* (2018), mixes literal taste with the "taste" of a movie theater where hookups take place:

> Frenching with a mouthful of M&Ms dunno if I feel polluted
> or into it—the lights go low across the multiplex Temple of
>
> canoodling and Junk food A collision of corn dog bites and
> chunky salsa to achieve a spiritual escape velocity Why am I in
>
> this cup holder? *B / c yr bubbly, dummy* But I feel squeeze cheese
> uneasy. In Faggotland coupling is at best delicate precarious &
>
> rarefied Eggshells At worst a snipe hunt Love in the time of
> climate change Should I be nervous? No, it's too dark in here

"In here": a queer moment, but also a queer site. The poems in this book open into a mess of such sites, well-lit or dark, full of queer people, like the party in Stephanie Chan's dream, or run by skeptical straights, like the playground in Jackie Kay's stanzas. If I have done my job right—and I'm not sure I have—this collection of poems about queer identities is also a book of queer-friendly styles and a set of milieus. It is a book of collective self-representation as well as a book of indissolubly individual works: as Cat Fitzpatrick in *The Call-Out* (2023) says of a trans woman sunbathing, "really it's about the representation / of herself to herself." Fitzpatrick asks, later in the same book, "Are any cisgenders reading this thing?" If you are, even if you are also heterosexual, or if you are questioning, or if you are not sure how to navigate the modern world's set of names and identities, I hope you feel welcome here, too.

This volume cannot include all the LGBTQIA+ poets I follow and enjoy, any more than it can record all the categories and identities that the rainbow over us rainbow people includes. Some modern queer poets' best work is not, or not mostly, about being queer: McClatchy's homages to Horace, for example, belong in anthologies, but not in this one. We could say the same of Ronald Johnson's ambitious assemblage *ARK*, or of his early projective verse. Then there are the LGBTQIA+ poets whose best and queerest work has come (so far) entirely in long or book-length poems: not only Johnson and Pico and Apps and Fitzpatrick but Dionne Brand, kari edwards, Harry Josephine Giles, Rob Halpern, Bhanu Kapil, and Camille Roy. This book includes only poems small enough to fit in without truncation, small or medium-sized poems that stand on their own. I have, moreover, confined myself to poems published in English, as texts without music, and to poems that work on the page, rather than requiring live or recorded delivery. One poet, Elizabeth Bishop, is not here because she would clearly not have wanted to be here, having denied permission to demographically based anthologies in her lifetime; her "rainbow bird" flies in the background nevertheless.

Most poems in this book appear in an order determined by the year of first book publication. A few appear according to first magazine or pamphlet publication instead, as shown by two years and a virgule between them (1979/1982, for example) in the table of contents . You may read the poems here, and the essays about them, in any order, though you may also (of course) read the book from soup to nuts, all the way through. Here are fifty—whoops, there might be fifty-one!—poems I want to introduce, and to put together, and to re-read. And those aspirations, in turn, coexist with the simpler aspiration to build the book I wish I could have seen when I was a baby trans, trying to figure out whether—if ever—I could come out myself. Emily Dickinson asked a correspondent "if my Verse is alive?" Fitzpatrick concludes, "what if the story was: we're still alive?" Some of the poets in this anthology passed away before the book came together, or while I was assembling its contents. All their poems—I hope—live: on the page, and in me, and in my essays about them, and maybe—if I got them right—in you.

Frank O'Hara

Homosexuality

So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping
our mouths shut? as if we'd been pierced by a glance!

The song of an old cow is not more full of judgment
than the vapors which escape one's soul when one is sick;

so I pull the shadows around me like a puff
and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment

of a very long opera, and then we are off!
without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet

will touch the earth again, let alone "very soon."
It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate.

I start like ice, my finger to my ear, my ear
to my heart, that proud cur at the garbage can

in the rain. It's wonderful to admire oneself
with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each

of the latrines. 14th Street is drunken and credulous,
53rd tries to tremble but is too at rest. The good

love a park and the inept a railway station,
and there are the divine ones who drag themselves up

and down the lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head
in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air

crying to confuse the brave "It's a summer day,
and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world."

We begin with Frank O'Hara (1926–1966), known in his lifetime as an art critic and curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and as a part of the first-generation New York School of Poets, so named by analogy with the painters who made up the rest of his social group. Most were (as we now say) gay, though the public term at the time was still "homosexual." When O'Hara died at age forty (in a beach buggy accident on Fire Island), the Stonewall uprising and the well-publicized parts of modern gay and queer liberation movements still lay in the future. He and his friends participated instead in a complex web of open secrets, crushes, liaisons, and shared vacations. Some of his poems record love affairs with individual men, most of all the dancer Vincent Warren, who dominates several years' worth of sex, love, and breakup poems.

O'Hara's informality, his unpredictability, his apparent indifference to rules of composition, his love for the city itself, and his garrulous energies have few equals in any period—and few readers outside his coterie knew of his powers before he died. Though he published books and found some readers in his lifetime (Elizabeth Bishop praised him in her correspondence), the full extent of his writings, and his large fan base, only emerged after his death, starting with the *Collected Poems* of 1971. The producers of the TV show *Mad Men* had his signature poem "Meditations in an Emergency" read on air to demonstrate a straitlaced protagonist's venture into Bohemia. O'Hara's love poems to individuals, and his de facto love poems to New York City, are now widely cited and shared. "Having a Coke with You"—one among many amorous dedications to Warren—has achieved a particularly robust afterlife, thanks to its crisp verve, its undeniable enthusiasm, and its easily available video and audio recordings.

"Homosexuality" is a more ambivalent affair. The poem speaks to and for an urban community just barely in the closet, fearful but prepared for near-public acknowledgment, thirsty and lonely. It's also one of O'Hara's many posthumous publications, first appearing in the high-profile magazine *Poetry* in 1970, though he apparently wrote it sixteen years before. Its chronicle of "masks," of cruising and venturing, finds queerness not only in people but in phrases and especially in places, badly hidden or not-quite-hidden loci for eros, danger, and emotional vulnerability. They are places, moreover, for us ("we"). Because standard English does not distinguish between a "we" that includes the hearer or reader (you and I) and a "we" that includes the speaker but not the hearer (not you, just me and the other members of Starfleet), O'Hara flirts with the idea that you, too, might be "homosexual," and might take off your mask: Are you? Might you be? Do you want him to see? The critic and poet Christopher Hennessy labels this opening "a sly rhetorical question

meant to mischievously implicate the reader," who may remember furtively checking out books on gay topics from a school library, or (at a later date) stalking a crush on social media, hoping to see him drop his own mask.

What does it mean to take off masks but to keep mouths shut? Given the poem's title, it has to mean that "we" are telling one another, perhaps even telling the world (in the mid-1950s), that "we" are men who love men, however dangerous such a telling might be. But we are not saying much—or not in public, or not now—about what it means to love men, about the subcultures that men who have sex with men, and men who love men, have produced. O'Hara's "we" also suggests the Proustian moments in which men might recognize one another simply from a glance, from a stray look, without the need to say anything; this kind of bodily acknowledgement will animate the rest of the poem.

But not yet. Before the poem returns to glances and to admirations, O'Hara will cover hearing, and touch, and scent. Are we—we homosexuals—in bad odor, or unclean ("sick")? Is his sense of himself, of "us," as "homosexual" a kind of judgment? By the 1960s, nearly a century of medical professionals had made that claim, and many of "us" believed it. But O'Hara shrugs the challenge off, or rather squints and stares it down ("I . . . crinkle my eyes"), then charges "off!" "without reproach." The scholar Caleb Crain suggests that O'Hara's poems never stop thinking about "masks," about the false selves that he had to put on and take off, about what Crain calls his habit of dissociation. We hear or see the poet distracting himself, paying intense attention to something at all times, but to nothing for very long: "O'Hara has the confidence to enter a state of disorganization," Crain writes, "where he can play along the border between compliance and fantasy." The long lines here typify his later poetry, but the near-regular couplets do not: he seems to stop and start, to divide his thoughts, as an opera-goer might divide their thoughts between the music and the plot. Whole books—notably Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat*—cover the long connection between gay men and opera. The joke here—and O'Hara rarely passes up a self-deprecating joke—seems to be that even the most devoted of opera-going gay men, if sufficiently virile, or sexed up, or sex-starved, will eventually flee, out of the opera and its stylized physical passions, in search of the real, fleshly thing.

Before he ventures out into the city, into the out-of-doors urban landscapes that control the rest of the poem, O'Hara pauses to do an impression of Whitman, that great, grey godfather of gay American poetry: "It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate." It's a short, self-contained sentence, the only one-line sentence O'Hara uses, and it works as a kind of thesis statement:

how does a "homosexual" voice sound, unmasked? Such a voice will remain, O'Hara implies, evasive, flirty, tricky, even when desperate: a voice that can plead, or invite, with its mouth shut. Whitman himself invoked "My own voice, orotund sweeping and final," extending his reach in the same part of that poem from "the midst of the crowd" to all his readers: "I know perfectly well my own egotism,/ Know my omnivorous lines . . . And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself." This latter-day poet of New York streets and sidewalks announces that he, too, has become omnivorous, as indifferent to spectators' judgment as a "cur at a garbage can." Like Whitman, he conflates self-admiration with same-sex desire, and both (notwithstanding those masks) with a striking "candor."

To roam Whitman's New York is to imagine the inner lives (however briefly) of every pedestrian. To roam O'Hara's later version is to imagine hooking up with other men inside "each / of the latrines." Decades after O'Hara's poem, the science fiction writer and cultural critic Samuel R. Delany would argue, in *Times Square Red Times Square Blue* (2000), that public or near-public sex between near-strangers amounts to a fundamental (pun intended) hierarchy-shattering cheer for human equality, for a democracy of embodiment, where anyone can desire anyone else, with no barrier as to social status. Indeed, the erotic attraction of a much higher or much lower social status might be part of the appeal. Do queer people—and gay men in particular—have special access to antihierarchical thinking? Delany believed that they did, and do, through cruising and public sex: O'Hara, with his ardor, makes a similar if less confident case. For O'Hara's gay men, that sex can take place anywhere private, or semi-private, and especially in public bathrooms, urban "latrines." In a lovely act of metonymy, not the man in the latrine, but the latrine itself becomes "drunken and credulous," or too much at rest. And where Delany and other theorists of semi-anonymous sex sometimes praise a kind of self-shattering, or self-erasure, O'Hara looks back on a psychoanalytic tradition of same-sex desire as redirected narcissism, since homosexuality is, if we rely on etymology, desire for sexual partners who are in some sense "the same" as you (this way of thinking is modern—ancient Athenians would have found it bizarre—but it has shaped our sense of queerness now). "The good / love a park" because parks recall the classy tradition of classical pastoral, and permit the fiction or perhaps the fact of other people watching. "The inept" prefer railway stations perhaps because they can meet people new to New York, unaccustomed to more skillful sexual partners, or because—after they disappoint enough partners—they can easily skip town.

As for "the divine ones"? They may be in drag, especially since they sport "long elegant heels." Whether or not they are drag queens, they may search the

streets for sufficiently beautiful or sufficiently willing partners. They may, too, prefer "an Abyssinian head," a triple entendre. A "head" may be a human head, or a latrine (as on a ship); "the divine ones" may be receiving, or giving, "head" (oral sex); and the Abyssinian head, with its long shadow, indicates an African or African American lover. "The divine ones" are therefore Black queens, or else find partners across racial lines (as in Delany's vision of Times Square). And they share a cry (analogous to Whitman's "call in the midst of the crowd"), a cry that tells us what "we" homosexuals truly want: not bodily pleasure, not a new form of sociability, not a narcissistic satisfaction, but the sense that someone else (however hot, however not) might admire our bodies, and want us.

What if you're not into cruising? Or not a gay man? What if you find the particular dance of concealment, danger, self-abasement, and self-revelation in O'Hara's "Homosexuality," a poem that keeps pointing back to its 1950s world of open secrets and risky closets, far from your own experience? As much as the poem survives for its record of history, for its midcentury urban moment, "Homosexuality" also points to an aspect of erotic love that seems ineradicably queer, one that can cut across sexual habits and tastes. O'Hara himself would often choose partners he knew could not reciprocate his affection, "so afraid" (to quote Crain again) that "he would be deserted that he chose people he knew would desert him." He feared, like most of us, running out of love. But he also saw love as a kind of authentication, a way to make sure that someone would pay attention to his body, to his voice.

In this sense the sex in "Homosexuality" is hardly the end of the line. Vividly unpredictable clauses and acts of attention zip through most of O'Hara's poems, sexy and less so, from the early 1950s (when he found his style) to the love poems about Warren and the poems about famous friends ("Fantasy Dedicated to the Health of Allen Ginsberg," for example), through poems about literal abandonment, being stood up for a date ("How to Get There"), and poems apparently drafted on typewriters, at speed, surrounded by partygoers, or in a shop window, watched by pedestrians. These acts of attention—both seeking attention, and giving it—become ways that O'Hara could see himself, and the people like him ("Homosexuality" is all about people like him, people who might like him), as fully embodied, entitled to a presence on Earth, in our bodies, right now, fully real. Sex, by the end of "Homosexuality," becomes an (alas) temporary but undeniable kind of holding and being held, a form of affirming touch, a way "to be wanted." Not to be wanted best of all, to be elevated above other loves, but to be wanted at all: to have someone meet you in private, and tell you that he desires you, and take your pants down, or perhaps simply hold your hand.

There are risks in reading "Homosexuality" as I have, as a version of not-quite-liberated Manhattan, a gay city waiting for Stonewall, or for something else that will break its repression open. There's some risk of what the mega-influential thinker Michel Foucault called the repressive hypothesis, the idea that before a certain point nobody talked about sex, when in fact many people talked about it back then, albeit in unfamiliar ways, or in code. O'Hara's poem flaunts that code. The poem shows how it feels to rely on code, to speak honestly to oneself but in hints to others. There's also a risk of Whig history, reading the past as if it led, by some sort of metaphysical law, to a more enlightened present. But "Homosexuality" does not predict that present. Instead, it shows a network—not quite a community—of men who are into men, eager not for solidarity but for fulfillment, for "divine" and over-the-top attention. And, even as it explores midcentury codes, it looks forward to later "candor": men, and femmes, and perhaps drag queens, taking a long vacation from the straight world, letting their open secrets come to light.

INDEX