

The Intersection of Poetry and Human Sexuality

by Alexander Chen

Advisors:

Assistant Professor Dr. Anthony Butts

Associate Professor Sharon Dilworth

Department of English

Spring 2006

Abstract

This thesis discusses the intersection of contemporary poetry with homosexuality specifically in the aspects of human sexuality and social commentary. The thesis features my original work as well as poems by other contemporary gay and lesbian poets. Sexuality is an abstraction, and poetry is a vessel for the discovery of a truth within the context of desire. My thesis strives to enlighten the rhetoric and poetics in the gay and lesbian community.

"When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses."
- President John F. Kennedy

"In itself, homosexuality is as limiting as heterosexuality: the ideal should be to be capable of loving a woman or a man; either, a human being, without feeling fear, restraint, or obligation." - Simone de Beauvoir

Poetry is the key between President Kennedy's belief of poetic richness and de Beauvoir's plea for sexual tolerance; the essence of poetry is the connection of language to the human world. Gay and lesbian poetry touches on the specific aspects of social commentary, personal issues and ideas of beauty, life and freedom. As a marginalized group, the gay and lesbian community currently lives in hostile times where discrimination and hate are still prevalent against those who do not fit the tight mold of heterosexuality. Poetry guide society in celebrating diversity and the gift of life. The gay and lesbian community fights for nothing more than the ability to exist in a society of equality and justice. Poetry is an escape to a world that doesn't judge or hate. Gay and lesbian poetry shine light on the many issues dealing with this marginalized group and its role in society overall.

The foundation of gay and lesbian poetry is the idea of "desire." Desire encompasses the elements of passion, love and even lust; these are all parts of the human psyche. Poetry explores the complexity of desire, and gay and lesbian writers use art and words as venues to channel their inner feelings of a sexual difference from the rest of society. French theorist, Luce Irigaray explores the concept of "sexual difference." In her book, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, she explains that our modern society finds desire to be troubling and tensional. Irigaray disagrees with that notion. She believes that "desire ought to be thought of as a changing dynamic whose outlines can be described in

the past, sometimes in the present, but never definitively predicted” (p. 8). Irigaray’s theory is that desire is ever changing and not static; this can categorize homosexuality as a cultural evolutionary concept. In Irigaray’s theory, sexual difference is grand and has the ability to change the way society thinks of sex, love and desire: “[Desire] would be a fecundity of birth and regeneration, but also the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new *poetics*” (p. 5). The birth of gay and lesbian poetry symbolizes the creation of a new poetics.

Irigaray also mentions the Greek philosopher Diotima who studied the idea of sex and love in the area of philosophy. Diotima associates sexual desire to a sense of divinity, and the importance of union and procreation that go hand in hand with sex. Irigaray, interpreting Diotima’s philosophy states, “Procreation and generation in beauty – this is the aim of love. Because in this way the eternity and the imperishability of a mortal being are made manifest” (p. 26). There is a link between mortality and immortality by the grace of love. Diotima surmises that beauty, love and sex become immortal and collective goods that are more important than procreation. She states, “It is in this way moreover, that it comes to pass that love between men is superior to love between man and woman” (p. 31). Diotima thinks the love of men should be categorized as something divine. The love progresses beyond the natural world of family and procreation. Irigaray traces the divinity that Diotima describes back to its roots: “To attain this sublime beauty, one must begin with the love of young men. Starting with their natural beauty, one must, step-by-step, ascend to supernatural beauty: from beautiful bodies pas to beautiful occupations, then to beautiful sciences, until one reaches that sublime science which is supernatural beauty alone, which allows the isolated knowledge of the essence of beauty”

(p.32). Irigaray and Diotima philosophize the classics of sexual desire and its ties with divinity and beauty.

There is a link between contemporary gay and lesbian poetry and the classical Greek philosophy of love between men. Greek philosophers like Diotima view love between men as something grand and profound. One might believe that specific kind of love transcends time and evolves into modern homosexuality. Contemporary poems and interpretation of love between men are perhaps the return of the classical sexual thinking. Modern gay men's love could be compared to the deep love of ancient Greeks. Both groups of men share the bond of status and behavior within their own group. Today there are trends of gay men unifying based upon interests, political agendas and desires. These elements are almost identical to the coupling of ancient Greek men. The term and identity of homosexuality did not exist in ancient Greece, but the behavior and state of being were clearly prevalent. Gay and lesbian poetry can now be the vessel to renew the past of love between Greek men.

In understanding Diotima and the classical love between Grecian men, I wrote a poem, which focuses on the divinity of sexual desire in a context of the masculine versus the feminine:

Red

*Sweat drips off the eyelids of a pelican
who waits for fire, sultriness in the air.
Desire is not a six-letter word but Diotima's
mystery; the sexless angels manifested
to couple a subject and the other.*

*The subject then touches the breasts of "I'm
Women" and craves the fluidity contrived
between a soft spot and a heated place. Sensation
sets free those who seek wisdom of the body.*

*Hummingbirds come in pairs because nature
deems it so; they flutter, bringing pollen
to drench almond nectar on closed holes.*

*One day the apprehension for blossoms
will lead to the evolution of tongue and flesh.
It is the theory that produces an ethical history:*

*The philosopher sang carols of a mother tongue;
she saw a dragon once, then forgot the music.*

Socrates would have been proud of her.

This poem focuses on the historical aspects of desire based upon Diotima's understanding of divine sexuality. In the poem, I characterize femininity as a living element and also as a female philosopher. The poem makes a statement about sexuality within nature but also plays with elements that go against nature. There is an undertone of change about sexuality and human nature; people and their sexes evolve and are never static. I allude to the fluid state of sexuality and the evolution of a "mystery." The mystery is not knowing the truth of sex or love. I view homosexuality as part of the mystery, unknown to men why it exists.

Poet Carl Phillips' "Pygmalion" is a combination of Greek mythology and love between men. The poem is based upon the Greek mythology of a sculptor who falls in love with his creation. Phillips adds a new context of homosexuality to the nature of Pygmalion and his affections towards his statue:

Pygmalion

*He's up to something, they say.
They say he's had marble carted in
from who knows which of over several
gods knows where. And now he's made
this statue, a woman. The reasons given*

*for why are as many as we are: that
our women are unclean, and he especially
minds this; that he prefers boys, that
this explains why a statue, that however
much the statue is one of a woman, the*

*cool marble comes closest to the flesh
that is only a boy's – that hard, and
uncompromising. It is true he has
had some – boys – but what of it?
We are all of us, first and last, human.*

Phillips creates an extra part in the narrative that Pygmalion had physical relationships with boys. Pygmalion's actions are defended in the last line of the third stanza. Phillips complicates the poem with the aversion towards women; this is emphasized by the lines of the women being "unclean." The statue's sex is female, but the marble is described as that of a "boy's" and "hard." Both references relate to male sexuality. The poem is unclear whether Pygmalion prefers boys or women, but Phillips makes the question of desire a clear aspect of the poem. He breathes a new direction to a classic Greek mythology while implementing the ideal love between men believed by Ancient Greeks.

Sexuality is unclear and a blurring of gender roles and physical desires. Even modern individuals are not concretely defined as homosexual or heterosexual. Diotima's sense of the unknown can still be discovered within the gay and lesbian community today. The mystery of our desires and sexuality is an abstraction. I explore this grand and loose concept in this poem:

Touching

*Fullmetal men border the pink
continent and lie down to rest.
They roll in leaves and glass
praying for the cuts to mend;*

silly mammals hide within.

*Tender intimacy instills in lips,
subtle because boys like that –
wet sensation in the center
of an holy spot where comfort
and the taste of zinfandel collide
reproducing and then grabbing*

*the craze. Juicy shivers
at midnight prove that the virgin
still begs for another, just one;
he takes it so well. A hint of glitter,*

*after the hair and a lick, is too close
to ignore. Tropicana dangles
and frustrates but to set it cold
is utterly impossible; then disco*

*will keep the thump
and thump going.*

With this poem, I emphasize a strong sexual and physical theme while keeping the narrative abstract. The first stanza sets up a contradiction with the mentioning of a harsh phrase “full metal” next to a softer word “pink.” I do this on purpose to show that this contradiction can work in a poem; the lines that follow also play with the ideas of contradiction. The language of the poem is graphic and specific because I want clarity in a poem that does not necessarily set a designated location. There are strong images of sexual traits and actions, but the almost vulgar language challenges the comfort and strictness of sexuality in our current society. The poem ultimately focuses on the theme of abstraction within sexuality.

I draw a connection between “Touching” and Carl Phillips’ “I See a Man.” Both poems share the same raw edge in regards to sexual images and actions. Phillips’ poem is honest with the ambiguity of sexuality and desire.

I See a Man

He has just had sex. I can tell by the way, when he notices his shadow ahead of him, broad, spilling over both curbs to the road he is walking down slowly, most of him wants to stop and, as if remembering, stand briefly at a kind of attention. He has just had sex, it's unclear with whom. It was a man, it was a woman...

There's this sense in which it can't matter – sex being, for him, any attempt to fill a space in so there's no room left, for a while, for what he surely calls a suffering inside him – that his brow gives away...

...He's thirty, thirty-two – it's easy, still, to say a thing like that. Write it down, even. Call it a poem.

Phillips leaves room for interpretation in regards to the protagonist of the story. He has sex, but the reader knows very little about the action. Is the protagonist gay or straight? Phillips keeps it open ended but focuses on the state of simply being sexual. The poem also develops a sense of struggle in lines seven through nine. Phillips even uses the word “suffering,” which can be interpreted as the struggle to understand one’s sexuality or role of desire. There is another interesting element to “I See a Man” that focuses on the nature of poetry. The last line of the poem addresses the narrative directly and demands for the poem to be considered as an *ars poetica*.

I also want to explore the darker side of modern sexuality. One specific case is with men who live two lives. There is often deception and a struggle for concreteness in the abstraction of desire. Sociologists have discovered a new niche of men who live normal lives on the surface but possess homosexual tendencies in secrecy. I was inspired to write a narrative focused poem. I wanted to tell a direct story with a heavy impression:

Dualism

I.

Development of desire is poetics

*of this century; sex moves the body.
Golden tigers chase after their prey in the
nature of live or lived. The hunt is a reflection
of the inner penis or the throbbing vagina.
Doll 1 fingers her nipples in a tight motion,
but Ken 3 prefers his tennis rackets.*

II.

*Peter works at the American Apple Bank,
twenty dollar bills in twenty hours.
Plain honesty molds structure
and gives calcium to his bones.*

*He cards out with a smile, lavender
tie finally loosens around his neck.
Condom in back pocket is a lucky
charm for the adventure to come.*

*White bread man P. parks his five by five;
the alley looks alive in the darkness.
He sees a twink in the middle of the glam
and black.*

Fuck yeah! moans P.

*The transaction lasts twenty minutes
like the bills and hours at the bank.
P. is sore but warm; the boy winks
with a silver coin in his pupil.*

*Clockwork time is homemade dinner;
Dolly probably made his favorite pot roast.
Peter giggles and tosses away the condom;
he must help Billy with homework tonight.*

The first section of poem is more general and plays with the traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. The second stanza of the poem refers to Barbie and Ken but a sexual evolution of the two classic American symbols; Ken 3 is meant to be a homosexual. The narrative of the poem centers on one man but two subjects, Peter and P. I create two personalities within the poem who are very different. Peter is the

heterosexual husband who works hard and supports his family. P. represents the inner hidden lust. The two subjects coexist but not truly in harmony. The poem shows the disharmony as a statement about the complexity of sexual orientation. How would one define the sexuality of the protagonist? The language of the poem also adds a sharp edge to the narrative, an unwillingness to accept how ugly the truth can be.

Carl Phillips' "The Hustler Speaks of Places" is an intensely sexual poem commenting on the sexual actions of gay men particularly hustlers or escorts. The narrative is shocking but honest.

The Hustler Speaks of Places

I've known places:

*I've known places weary as the flesh when it's had some,
as rivers at last done with flowing.*

My soul has been changed in places.

I mouthed a man dry in the Ritz-Carlton men's room.

I built a life upon a man's chest and, briefly, found peace.

I watched a man sleeping: I raised a prayer over his brow.

*I heard the stinging, in bars, of lashes coming down on a
man's bare ass, until it tore to the red that is sunset.*

I've known places:

shaven, uncut places.

My soul has been changed in places.

The narrator describes his adventures vividly as an escort and provides specific images for the readers. There are very telling lines such as the hustler finding temporary peace and his knowing of certain places. These statements show a deeper layer in the hustler's actions. The ending line is dramatic with the use of the word "soul" and points to a

change in the narrator. Phillips' "King of Hearts" is another poem dealing with sexual prostitution, but focuses on the side of the "client" rather than the hustler.

King of Hearts

*Somewhere now, someone is missing him,
since here he is for the taking, nicked
at three of his four corners, decked out*

*in the fade of much play, his two heads
laid prone on the sidewalk before you.*

*Like you, in this heat and humidity, no
wind, when it comes, moves him. Like you,*

*he knows a thing, maybe, about wilting –
how, like sleep or some particularly*

*miserable defeat played over but this time
in slow motion, it has its own fine beauty.*

*

*Tonight,
once you've found him, when you've*

*brought him home, the man with a face as
close as you'll ever get to the other one,*

*the one it was easy enough, earlier, not to
pick up, to step on, even, and move slowly*

but unbothered away from, you'll only remember

the part about wilting.

And even that, as

*you lift his ass toward you, as your hands
spread it open until it resembles nothing*

*so much as a raw heart but with a seemingly
endless hole through it – even that will*

fade.

Him, between drink and the good money

*you've paid, doing whatever you tell him.
Him throwing back whatever words you hand out.*

"You're the king, you're the king," him saying.

This poem's narrative focuses on the discovery of the narrator through this sexual interaction with a hustler. Like "The Hustler Speaks of Places," there is a development in the understanding of the narrator. The characters in the poem are complex and do what they do for deeper reasons rather than just sexual satisfaction. There is a sense of loss in the poem with the idea of the hole being nothing, and the ending seeming insincere. The client is only a fake king for a temporary moment. "The Hustler Speaks of Places" and "King of Hearts" both show a complexity dealing with men and escorts. Phillips brings light to a common relationship within the gay community.

Poet Mark Bibbins' poems explore modern homosexuality in unique and creative ways that are accessible. His poems talk about male images and trends within the gay community. Bibbins explores taboos and uses their shock effects to comment on aspects of male homosexuality. This poem focuses on prevalent gay issues like steroid usage, relationship difficulties and sex hustling:

El Super Guapo

(a.k.a. Outhouse Crank Diva)

shows the world beauty

is neither fleeting nor quantifiable.

Switch stylists, light will cradle the body.

I've only to look at something and it tangles –

the boyfriend overheating., for instance, smug,

not "seeing" the "hustler" – we've come that far –

*but he turns down the radio so he can learn
the notorious effects of steroids
upon temperament and testicles:
that could be the banner or banter un which no one's
first summer lurches and strains.
Envy the sand he covers now and trade in smart for wise,
a shell to my ear, the same goofy hat.
Who wouldn't have preferred a longer June?
Only flirt for one reason and make your exit.
Make it into sand and shape. Feed it a cold sea.
Pimps and fisherfolk and bold moves,
such salt skin he disappears.*

The second part of the poem has a stronger narrative; the story seems to be of a summer romance. There is a combination of the heavier elements in the beginning and the lighter narrative that explains the poem. The poem also has a tongue and cheek feel in its tone. Bibbins' "Tingling in the Extremities" has the same effect by being almost seductive with its images and language.

Tingling in the Extremities

Here is a misplaced forecast from the spring:

*a big Sorry in the alfresco restaurant,
his whole posse gathered to see
what he's become*

*Nothing worth repeating
over the tin-can telephone,
the one he loves fills his water glass
and is gone*

*He cuts his finger on the lobster shell
and glides down the walk*

*Nothing worth repeating
over the tin-can telephone.
the one he loves fills his water glass
and is gone...*

*He is forever going down
for the sand, the air quivers
and holds bodies aloft...*

*You'll love our m-m-malts
"I love a promise," he confides.*

*He has forgotten the need
for transitions,*

*or hasn't learned it yet
beside the clam shacks*

*where the men all act
alluring and young.*

There is an innate beauty within the narrative of "Tingling in the Extremities." The narrator wants stability in a setting of artificiality; this is shown in the last two stanzas. Both poems by Bibbins end with a sense of uncertainty; they leave the reader with a subtle afterthought of longing.

Like Bibbins' poems, I wrote this poem to comment on the superficiality and image consciousness of the gay and lesbian community:

Lessons On Aesthetics

*Stargazers bloom out of a beautician's
hidden secrets. She claws away plaster
looking for a crevasse to shine
or the romance of an indigo silhouette.*

*Utopia is dark chocolate glazed in perfection
and a taste of royalty on the tongue.*

*Princes no longer look pale in the light
but wink at one another during dawn;*

they never forget about the ivory

*buried beneath the orchards. Divine
beings pick up the dropped apples
and use delicate hands to shape
smoke into figures of veins and skin.*

*The masses bow to fireworks high above
and scoff at darkness collecting beneath
their soles. They collect beauty in honey
jars waiting for light to transcend*

*the solidity. However, the apples
eventually rot and one has to wake
from all the peaches and dream.*

*Worship those who shine,
the fake book declares.*

*Some do realize that lilies don't
crystallize and can be found on the ankles
of concubines who wear plastic red heels.*

The poem focuses on natural elements in the beginning and progresses to more concrete images. A major theme of the poem is the attraction towards superficiality. The images I use are beautiful but somewhat meaningless. Flowers introduce the poem, but flowers fade and are not absolute in life. I mean for this poem to draw a parallel between the current gay culture of popular trends and the concrete ideas of a future. This artificiality does not represent the entire gay and lesbian community but definitely a portion of it.

Another aspect of the gay community that I wanted to focus on is the difficulties of growing up gay; gay teenagers and children grow up knowing that they are different. This poem deals with the difficulties of discovering a gay identity:

Bruised
*He holds it back,
the sharp taste of black;*

*injustice is in motion
and learned constraint
steadies his faulty sense.*

*Football games, the chill,
the other boys had normality
while he played an illusion –
American perfection, darkness
lives in a vulnerability.*

*A happy family versus
passion for the male,
not simply a choice
of one way, but a decision
to live or believe.*

*“Faggot” owns him,
a rapture so strong
to beat down the inherent
man, wary of everyday.
Suffering is the smoke,
not evanescent but a permanent
aura unable to lift.*

*Deliverance –
the chance to continue,
he shall step forward
living honesty.*

*He seeks only
a humble gift, essential
to a desired pink sky.*

The narrator does not accept the differences and simply wants normality. The poem features strong language to portray a sense of pain and discomfort. There is also a reference to “American perfection,” which excludes the concept of homosexuality. The all American boy is not gay. There is a disconnection between the perceived perfection and the reality; not every male plays football and is the epitome of masculinity. The poem points towards differences and the truth of those differences.

“In Too Deep” like “Bruised” tells the story of a young man trying to understand his sexuality as he grows up. However, the narrative is more complicated and abstract. The poem focuses on the hardships and differences of homosexuals. It plays with preconceived notions of gender roles. One important thing to know is that the poem is not in chronological order.

In Too Deep

I.

*Men are meant to carry sticks
made of evening steel. They forget
the chance to cover a vulnerable hole
that leaked nectar, sour to the taste
but rich to the touch. These are the men*

*of yesterday. Today gentlemen exist,
wearing oxford shirts with loud ties.
A poodle's face placed next to clean
cut lines show him that he can be pretty.
I didn't mean to be enraptured.*

*Football on the ground is appropriate.
It is the game of savages, a survival
of skills. A statement of bury
the weak to enlighten the future.*

II.

*A boy in the courtyard looks up
and sees gray next to the empty
school. He just wants colors,
but there is a danger in desire.
It is not a sin to vibrate in brightness.*

*He covers his eyes trying to see
the glamorous days to come.
A tune in the current of the air,
Walk in the lines of yourself.*

The boy waits for the show.

III.

The aches leave his sweaty body.

*A moment attracts the last senses;
he has been in too deep all these years.
The chirps remind him he was
once a disco prince on the neon platform.*

The poem is the journey; each section represents a different time period and theme of the narrator's life. The first section sees the narrator in college, and it emphasizes the idea of stereotypical masculinity. The references to "football" and "gentlemen" offset the personality of the narrator who does not fit into that specific role. The second section shows the narrator as a child. It deals with the idea of hope and betterment. The child is naïve and simple and not jaded by society. I mean for the child to symbolize the idea that homosexuals are people like heterosexuals starting from childhood and going onto adulthood. The third section focuses on death and loss. The narrator is dying from a disease (possibly of AIDS) and only has past memories to comfort himself. I make this last section to be an ode to the gay men and lesbian women who died of AIDS, a disease that haunts the gay and lesbian community. The final section shows despair within the narrator but also comments on the prevalent negativity that still attacks homosexuals.

I further explore the idea in the last section of "In Too Deep" in another poem dealing with the idea of desperation and loss. "Shattered" focuses on the downfall of a young gay man living in Manhattan.

Shattered

*He means well in his talk of Apollo,
but the sun doesn't shine in the midnight
sea. The beautiful god abandoned him
when he lost his virginity to an older gentleman.*

*His favorite bistro on the corner, with a hint
of testosterone, stopped serving steroids
in coffee cups. He knew in earnest*

that the place has never looked better.

*Diamonelle goes well in his palm,
but it is still an imitation. Nothing
like the real element that shines with
multicolored lights dancing in unison.*

*He wants and doesn't stop wanting
because anything less would be sacrilegious
to the Chelsea devils. It is the lust for skin
that drives him back to a certain heat.*

*Caress from a peacock and he moans,
"Cut me once more and I will promise."*

*The years of doing and dying make
him hesitant to try again: the ideas
of a stable job, wearing turtleneck sweaters
and maybe even settling; any kind of settling.*

*No –
he lies naked face down on the white mink rug,
willing to take it again. But he just might be too old
and perhaps even too plain for all this.*

The poem begins with the reference that the narrator was once beautiful almost like Apollo. However, he fades due to drug use and his submission to the "Chelsea devils." That term refers to the drug and party scene in a prominent gay district of Manhattan. I was inspired to write this poem because of my observations in New York City dealing with the crystal methamphetamine epidemic in the gay community. The problem is a serious one, and many gays and lesbians become susceptible to HIV under the influence of the drug. The poem ends with a message of plainness and has a sympathetic tone.

Homosexuals in the United States face many other threats than just AIDS. They suffer from social stigmas and intolerance on a daily basis. Even though societal acceptance of homosexuals has improved, there are still many more battles to fight.

“Getting Beaten” is a poem dealing with violence towards the gay and lesbian community. The first line of the poem is a set up referring to those who are different; in this case, it is those who see and understand the world differently.

Getting Beaten

*Those who see double remained,
Step 1: arms up and just dance.
Boys in little indian suits prance
about on the green freeway until
one falls over for the winky winky.*

*I lick my open cut based on reaction.
Sitting by the snowball bear,
I make myself up so pretty. But then
the silly cowboy with all his Texan
flare bashed the glory into my face.
He does it so well, my lips don't lie.*

Step 2: let go.

There is an interplay dealing with the classical roles of Indians and cowboys; the metaphor deals with the submissive and the dominant. I use this metaphor because of the gay community being a minority in society. The second stanza tells a narrative that shows the narrator's vulnerability. It is interesting to note here that the violence is caused by a Texan cowboy, which references to President George W. Bush. Bush is a president highly disliked by gay and lesbian rights advocates because of his stance on same-sex marriage and sexual orientation protection. The poem also features two special lines describing “steps” for those who are beaten, literally and figuratively. The steps construct solidarity within the context of social exposure. “Getting Beaten” is a poem molded in fear and uncertainty, emotions a lot of homosexuals still feel today.

To combat the dangers that the gay and lesbian community faces, gay rights advocates invest in politics and the judicial system to bring about change. It is necessary to change laws and impressions in order to achieve equality. The political arena is a powerful avenue to protect homosexuals and make sure that their rights are not taken away. "Losing Southern Comfort" is not a poem that directly addresses the gay and lesbian community, but rather deals with the African American community. I draw a parallel in this poem between the two minority groups because they both face the same hardships in American history.

Losing Southern Comfort

*Lyndon had led the way,
wedging a glass fragment
into a cracked land
owned and regulated by two.*

*Fast forward –
a familiar sky fades,
healthy vapor dried in the Alabama wind.*

*The old slave's grandson's grandson
doesn't wine and dine;
fat cats know the opposite,
the real deal that ends
idle talk and turns switches.*

*The one from Arkansas
brought temporary unity
yet his tailcoat trails short;
perfect façade lingers after
the long lessons for a republic.*

*Actual issues don't burn,
rather the holy embeds a fire
into the white men of the good and old.
Known for order, they cut
and mold Americans with efficiency.*

Those gentlemen grasp Confederate bonds

*not willing to whisper to the blacks.
They shout in a rhythm*

without one note off beat.

I wrote this poem after the 2004 presidential election when the Republican Party came to power in Congress and the White House. There is a social culture among Republicans to label homosexuality as an evil; they did this effectively with the issue of same-sex marriage in the 2004 election. They demonized homosexuals for their own political advancements. In "Losing Southern Comfort," I demonize Republicans, particularly Southern Republicans as violent members of the Ku Klux Klan. This is to show the climate of fear that African Americans felt during the civil rights movement. The gay rights moment of today is the new civil rights movement of yesterday, but it is still a long and tedious road especially under the current religiously conservative environment.

Same-sex marriage is a pivotal issue within the American cultural war. It is an issue that both sides of the debate are very passionate about. I wrote "All They Deserve" as a proclamation to marriage equality. I was inspired to write this poem when the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that gays and lesbians are entitled to marry under the Massachusetts Constitution.

All They Deserve

*Hand in palm and ring on finger,
he stood proud
by him, his husband,
a tower raised towards the heavens.*

*Black and white tuxedos
move in modest steps
towards the altar
under the high wooden cross,
a moment of vindication*

under His eyes.

*Heart to brain form
purple sharp bruises
from days of forbidden
held hands and back door kisses –
a secret that was never meant to be kept.*

*Sodomy the others said,
a term so foreign
to him and him.
Undefined in their minds by that word,
it is a feeling within for them.*

*Shattered pieces
try to recollect
and brave all tides;
a battle has started
but a war needs to be won.*

*The first canon has fired
loud and clear, a victory
now and by fate later.
Pristine hope now sets a future
for other hims and hims.*

The poem focuses on the intimacy of two men's love. Marriage is a partnership based on love not procreation or traditional norms. The poem challenges the misconception that marriage will lose its sacredness if gay men and women are allowed to marry. "All They Deserve" also makes a subtle reference to the complexity of religion and same-sex marriage, and the poem has a tone of approval. The last two stanzas also incorporate elements of actual warfare into the cultural war of gay marriage. Ultimately, marriage is an institution that should be offered to all citizens in the United States despite their sexual orientation.

"Blaze a Trail" addresses the idea of change and the need to work towards positive change. Millions of gay men and women are fighting for a revolution of how homosexuals are treated in this country. There have been many battles in the past and

many more to come. The poem is meant to inspire but also understands that to improve society is a daunting and long task.

Blaze a Trail

*He no longer waits
since the sun burns still, hollow
core with red minted steam.
His weeping song sings to those
closed ears – musty silence;*

*he whispers shark fangs, pushing
the immovable, an inert entity.*

*Why speak out when you
can stay and still gain?*

*It is the defense that digs
so deep, an action to bear*

*the consequences of a leak.
Drops of paradise tickle his brows,
a pleasure he must alter
for the rain will hit and hit*

*hard, enough to shake
bejeweled hands and the upper body.
Morning's evanescence marks
a would-have-been grave.*

*Create a legacy, the stone says.
He knows defiantly it will be
an over-arch and a chilling one.*

The ending of the poem seems dark but in actuality is meant to acknowledge that success is sometimes hard to achieve. The narrator is not a weak character and is determined to “create a legacy” like he has been told. However, there is doubt in the poem; many homosexuals doubt their identity as well as their role in society. “Blaze a Trail” is a poem that aims towards the future and the uncertainty to come.

The last two poems to be featured are of a personal nature. They deal with my personal romance and understanding of love as a gay man. The first poem has a sterile tone and focuses on a relationship that falls apart:

Scissors

*Magic turned the corner for us on a day
when strawberries rotted away.
I mumbled infinity into the chilly air
while you clipped the leaves at midnight.*

*It was darker than emptiness and I
told lady fate a lie, one so solid
it collapsed our lungs seconds later.
You were dry and whispered*

*Don't leave the backdoor open,
let the light bugs wait outside.*

*Karma bit beneath synthetic skin
and did not let go easily.
You cut with hesitation and I
stopped believing in directions;
torn pieces fell and followed*

*'til I took the instrument out
of your hands. The lawn smelled
fresh; it reminded me of where we stood.
You and I didn't look at each other
as the statues began to stroll*

*instead we stared far into the whiteness
where three pandas nibbled for a bit.*

The poem shows the heartbreak of the couple, and their inability to change their destiny. The actions in the garden at midnight are intriguing and speak to the odd nature of the situation. The characters settle for immobility and look on instead of doing more. There is a play on light and darkness in the poem, which makes a statement about this relationship

being interracial. I create this element to make a reference to anti-miscegenation laws during the civil rights movement.

The second personal poem speaks to my experiences in dating and getting to know a potential significant other:

Particular About Courting

*A geisha's face is deceit in a pink box.
So pretty and welcoming, it doesn't matter
if the red lips leak subtle venom.*

*Talking becomes weak; knowing
is the chain that holds back the next inquisition.
Those questioned will wear organza veils.*

*Sentences act as left over change in denim
back pockets. Skipping the verbal exchange makes
the game moot, but honesty in a locket will still be there.*

*Male X and Male Y walk down a stone path,
words unspoken between them. The softness
settles in the air, waiting for a moment to glow.*

*His dark eyes don't pierce but rather warm me,
then African jaguars line up next line up one
after another in my stomach. I reach
for his hands, they are inviting. He kisses me
as the lights darken; midnight is upon us.
Is the lie really black and filled with debris?
I conquer allure and the game of playing coy.
However unlike Kayoko, I am not that skilled
in the clever art of conversations.*

The poem is actually divided in two parts; the three line stanzas set up the abstract emotions while the block stanza tells the actual narrative. The element of the “geisha” shows the art of seduction that is a central theme in the poem. I make a statement in the end that I am not as skilled as a geisha in the ways of courting. There is emptiness in the ending where the narrator and the other character do not form a relationship. Both

“Scissors” and “Particular About Courting” are very personal poems for me. I am a member of the gay and lesbian community and use poetics to display my feelings and ideas on life.

Poetry inspires and creates life. It is a world of catharsis and creativity for the gay and lesbian community. It is a vessel for gay and lesbian poets to generate dialogues on sexuality, desire and identity. I write poetry to comment on what I know and understand; my poems aim to invigorate positive change for homosexuals. Poetry is ultimately a discourse of truth and light that gives the gay and lesbian community hope in a world of intolerance and violence. Homosexuals have progressed drastically but still need to move forward; a new era of sexual poetics will come. I along with other gays and lesbians will look forward with determination and the wish for a brighter dawn.

**Original Poems
By Alexander Chen
Featured In This Thesis**

Red

by Alexander Chen

Sweat drips off the eyelids of a pelican
who waits for fire, sultriness in the air.
Desire is not a six-letter word but Diotima's
mystery; the sexless angels manifested
to couple a subject and the other.

The subject then touches the breasts of *I'm*
Women and craves the fluidity contrived
between a soft spot and a heated place. Sensation
sets free those who seek wisdom of the body.

Hummingbirds come in pairs because nature
deems it so; they flutter, bringing pollen
to drench almond nectar on closed holes.

One day the apprehension for blossoms
will lead to the evolution of tongue and flesh.
It is the theory that produces an ethical history:

The philosopher sang carols of a mother tongue;
she saw a dragon once, then forgot the music.

Socrates would have been proud of her.

Touching

by Alexander Chen

Fullmetal men border the pink
continent and lie down to rest.
They roll in leaves and glass
praying for the cuts to mend;
silly mammals hide within.

Tender intimacy instills in lips,
subtle because boys like that –
wet sensation in the center
of an holy spot where comfort
and the taste of zinfandel collide
reproducing and then grabbing

the craze. Juicy shivers
at midnight prove that the virgin
still begs for another, just one;
he takes it so well. A hint of glitter,

after the hair and a lick, is too close
to ignore. Tropicana dangles
and frustrates but to set it cold
is utterly impossible; then disco

will keep the thump
and thump going.

Dualism

by Alexander Chen

I.

Development of desire is poetics
of this century; sex moves the body.
Golden tigers chase after their prey in the
nature of live or lived. The hunt is a reflection
of the inner penis or the throbbing vagina.

Doll 1 fingers her nipples in a tight motion,
but Ken 3 prefers his tennis rackets.

II.

Peter works at the American Apple Bank,
twenty dollar bills in twenty hours.
Plain honesty molds structure
and gives calcium to his bones.

He cards out with a smile, lavender
tie finally loosens around his neck.
Condom in back pocket is a lucky
charm for the adventure to come.

White bread man P. parks his five by five;
the alley looks alive in the darkness.
He sees a twink in the middle of the glam
and black. *Fuck yeah!* moans P.

The transaction lasts twenty minutes
like the bills and hours at the bank.
P. is sore but warm; the boy winks
with a silver coin in his pupil.

Clockwork time is homemade dinner;
Dolly probably made his favorite pot roast.
Peter giggles and tosses away the condom;
he must help Billy with homework tonight.

Lessons on Aesthetics

by Alexander Chen

Stargazers bloom out of a beautician's
hidden secrets. She claws away plaster
looking for a crevasse to shine
or the romance of an indigo silhouette.

Utopia is dark chocolate glazed in perfection
and a taste of royalty on the tongue.

Princes no longer look pale in the light
but wink at one another during dawn;
they never forget about the ivory

buried beneath the orchards. Divine
beings pick up the dropped apples
and use delicate hands to shape
smoke into figures of veins and skin.

The masses bow to fireworks high above
and scoff at darkness collecting beneath
their soles. They collect beauty in honey
jars waiting for light to transcend

the solidity. However, the apples
eventually rot and one has to wake
from all the peaches and dream.

Worship those who shine,
the fake book declares.

Some do realize that lilies don't
crystallize and can be found on the ankles
of concubines who wear plastic red heels.

In Too Deep

by Alexander Chen

I.

Men are meant to carry sticks
made of evening steel. They forget
the chance to cover a vulnerable hole
that leaked nectar, sour to the taste
but rich to the touch. These are the men

of yesterday. Today gentlemen exist,
wearing oxford shirts with loud ties.
A poodle's face placed next to clean
cut lines show him that he can be pretty.
I didn't mean to be enraptured.

Football on the ground is appropriate.
It is the game of savages, a survival
of skills. A statement of bury
the weak to enlighten the future.

II.

A boy in the courtyard looks up
and sees gray next to the empty
school. He just wants colors,
but there is a danger in desire.
It is not a sin to vibrate in brightness.

He covers his eyes trying to see
the glamorous days to come.
A tune in the current of the air,
Walk in the lines of yourself.

The boy waits for the show.

III.

The aches leave his sweaty body.
A moment attracts the last senses;
he has been in too deep all these years.
The chirps remind him he was
once a disco prince on the neon platform.

Bruised

by Alexander Chen

He holds it back,
the sharp taste of black;
injustice is in motion
and learned constraint
steadies his faulty sense.

Football games, the chill,
the other boys had normality
while he played an illusion –
American perfection, darkness
lives in a vulnerability.

A happy family versus
passion for the male,
not simply a choice
of one way, but a decision
to live or believe.

Faggot owns him,
a rapture so strong
to beat down the inherent
man, wary of everyday.
Suffering is the smoke,
not evanescent but a permanent
aura unable to lift.

Deliverance –
the chance to continue,
he shall step forward
living honesty.

He seeks only
a humble gift, essential
to a desired pink sky.

Getting Beaten

by Alexander Chen

Those who see double remained,

Step 1: *arms up and just dance.*

Boys in little indian suits prance
about on the green freeway until
one falls over for the winky winky.

I lick my open cut based on reaction.

Sitting by the snowball bear,

I make myself up so pretty. But then

the silly cowboy with all his Texan

flare bashed the glory into my face.

He does it so well, my lips don't lie.

Step 2: *let go.*

Losing Southern Comfort

by Alexander Chen

Lyndon had led the way,
wedging a glass fragment
into a cracked land
owned and regulated by two.

Fast forward –
a familiar sky fades,
healthy vapor dried in the Alabama wind.

The old slave's grandson's grandson
doesn't wine and dine;
fat cats know the opposite,
the real deal that ends
idle talk and turns switches.

The one from Arkansas
brought temporary unity
yet his tailcoat trails short;
perfect façade lingers after
the long lessons for a republic.

Actual issues don't burn,
rather the holy embeds a fire
into the white men of the good and old.
Known for order, they cut
and mold Americans with efficiency.

Those gentlemen grasp Confederate bonds
not willing to whisper to the blacks.
They shout in a rhythm

without one note off beat.

All They Deserve

by Alexander Chen

Hand in palm and ring on finger,
he stood proud
by him, his husband
a tower raised towards the heavens.

Black and white tuxedos
move in modest steps
towards the altar
under the high wooden cross,
a moment of vindication
under His eyes.

Heart to brain form
purple sharp bruises
from days of forbidden
held hands and back door kisses –
a secret that was never meant to be kept.

Sodomy the others said,
a term so foreign
to him and him.
Undefined in their minds by that word,
it is a feeling within for them.

Shattered pieces
try to recollect
and brave all tides;
a battle has started
but a war needs to be won.

The first canon has fired
loud and clear, a victory
now and by fate later.
Pristine hope now sets a future
for other hims and hims.

Blaze a Trail

by Alexander Chen

He no longer waits
since the sun burns still, hollow
core with red minted steam.
His weeping song sings to those
closed ears – musty silence;

he whispers shark fangs, pushing
the immovable, an inert entity.
*Why speak out when you
can stay and still gain?*
It is the defense that digs
so deep, an action to bear

the consequences of a leak.
Drops of paradise tickle his brows,
a pleasure he must alter
for the rain will hit and hit

hard, enough to shake
bejeweled hands and the upper body.
Morning's evanescence marks
a would-have-been grave.

Create a legacy, the stone says.
He knows defiantly it will be
an over-arch and a chilling one.

Scissors

by Alexander Chen

Magic turned the corner for us on a day
when strawberries rotted away.
I mumbled infinity into the chilly air
while you clipped the leaves at midnight.

It was darker than emptiness and I
told lady fate a lie, one so solid
it collapsed our lungs seconds later.
You were dry and whispered

*Don't leave the backdoor open,
let the light bugs wait outside.*

Karma bit beneath synthetic skin
and did not let go easily.
You cut with hesitation and I
stopped believing in directions;
torn pieces fell and followed

'til I took the instrument out
of your hands. The lawn smelled
fresh; it reminded me of where we stood.
You and I didn't look at each other
as the statues began to stroll

instead we stared far into the whiteness
where three pandas nibbled for a bit.

Shattered

by Alexander Chen

He means well in his talk of Apollo,
but the sun doesn't shine in the midnight
sea. The beautiful god abandoned him
when he lost his virginity to an older gentleman.

His favorite bistro on the corner, with a hint
of testosterone, stopped serving steroids
in coffee cups. He knew in earnest
that the place has never looked better.

Diamonelle goes well in his palm,
but it is still an imitation. Nothing
like the real element that shines with
multicolored lights dancing in unison.

He wants and doesn't stop wanting
because anything less would be sacrilegious
to the Chelsea devils. It is the lust for skin
that drives him back to a certain heat.

Caress from a peacock and he moans,
Cut me once more and I will promise.

The years of doing and dying make
him hesitant to try again: the ideas
of a stable job, wearing turtleneck sweaters
and maybe even settling; any kind of settling.

No –
he lies naked face down on the white mink rug,
willing to take it again. But he just might be too old
and perhaps even too plain for all this.

Particular About Courting

by Alexander Chen

A geisha's face is deceit in a pink box.
So pretty and welcoming, it doesn't matter
if the red lips leak subtle venom.

Talking becomes weak; knowing
is the chain that holds back the next inquisition.
Those questioned will wear organza veils.

Sentences act as left over change in denim
back pockets. Skipping the verbal exchange makes
the game moot, but honesty in a locket will still be there.

Male X and Male Y walk down a stone path,
words unspoken between them. The softness
settles in the air, waiting for a moment to glow.

His dark eyes don't pierce but rather warm me,
then African jaguars line up next line up one
after another in my stomach. I reach
for his hands, they are inviting. He kisses me
as the lights darken; midnight is upon us.
Is the lie really black and filled with debris?
I conquer allure and the game of playing coy.
However unlike Kayoko, I am not that skilled
in the clever art of conversations.

Sources

- Ashbery, John. Hotel Lautréamont. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1992.
- Bibbins, Mark. Sky Lounge. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2003.
- Hacker, Marilyn. Squares and Courtyards. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.
- Hodges, Michael. "Age After Beauty?" Out September 2005: p. 108 - 115.
- Irigaray, Luce. An Ethics of Sexual Difference. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Osborne, James. "Sex, Lies, and HIV." Out January 2006: p. 42 - 47.
- Phillips, Carl. Cortge. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1995.
- Powell, D.A. Cocktails. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004.
- Quittner, Jeremy. "The Price of Beauty." Out October 2005: p. 66 - 77.
- Rimmerman, Craig A. From Identity to Politics. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.
- Wunderlich, Mark. Voluntary Servitude. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004.