



# Poetry in Review: Six Poets

## Citation

Burt, Stephen. 2014. "Poetry in Review: Six Poets." *The Yale Review* 102 (3) (June 19): 152–166.  
doi:10.1111/yrev.12175.

## Published Version

doi:10.1111/yrev.12175

## Permanent link

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If you knew nothing of Paul Muldoon except his poetry, and you learned that he edited a book series devoted to poets not yet famous, you might expect that their poems would resemble his own: clever and sonically complicated, elaborate as Faberge eggs, dredging bizarre words from dictionaries, bleakly comic and puzzling or evasive even when—as often-- they carried torrents of sadness, or joy, inside. The Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets, revived under Muldoon’s aegis in 2010, has published at least one poet of ludic complication, Troy Jollimore (*At Lake Scugog*, 2011). But most of Muldoon’s selections—which they are now complete (Susan Stewart takes over the series for 2014)—tell a different story about what he wants from contemporary poetry and what other publishers do not provide.

Jessica Greenbaum, Austin Smith and Gary J. Whitehead, Muldoon’s final choices, write of different places, in different tones, but all three are mostly restrained, and quietly serious. All make prose sense, but none could be called populist; none could be called hip, or even (like Muldoon) affected by pop music forms. Instead, their poems set up figures and anecdotes, closeups and big pictures, from realistically rendered present-day lives. Surprising in detail, though familiar in kind, they remind us what individual poets and poems can still do, neither blindly devoted to any tradition, nor trying to reinvent any wheels.

Also familiar in terms of what kinds of poems they try to write, but strange and insightful within them, Shanna Compton infuses the love sonnet, the lovers’ quarrel, the city skyline and the prospect poem with language that insists on its here-and-nowness, while Ann Kim redeems the East Asian borrowings, and the object lessons, of our starkest modernists. Stranger questions about what poems are and are not, why we want them and why we write them, come from a poet not earlier known for untraditional ways, Vijay Seshadri, whose *3 Sections* might be the most unsettling book of poems published in 2013.

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Greenbaum's poems in *The Two Yvonnas* record high, low and middle points in a life understood as her own, from the suburban yearnings of childhood to the days of an empty-nest parent in New York. Her effects come mostly from syntax and tone; like other verse autobiographers (say, William Wordsworth), Greenbaum can let the modes of a long, complex sentence reflect belated realizations and unrealized anticipations, ways to set present against future and past. In "Promised Town,"

You hoped your string of tickets  
would last all day, or someone's parent,  
protectively wandering the Fund Fair,  
would buy you more because  
as it worked out, they cared for you. [5]

Some readers will find such lines pedestrian. The rest of us might see, in them, our lives, as we might see our children, or our friends' neighbors' children, in the literal pedestrians of Greenbaum's pleasant Brooklyn street:

Come seven-ten, there are the children being led to the school,  
and some of them, you can tell, would prefer a morning  
in bed with cartoons and cereal galore, their afternoon,  
if it ever came, over a hill with a playground in it.  
But they don't really think ahead because that is the work  
for people like us who bicker about what is up ahead. [45]

Adults "think ahead," in consecutive sentences, in time, connecting causes to effects; children think in wishes, in static images. Readers (like Greenbaum) live not only in real time, in real neighborhoods with parents or friends, but also among our books, in the space they create. Greenbaum's poem "What We Read Then" remembers the all-consuming, credulous reading of 1970s teens:

there was Salinger, of course,

who had set up the speakers for the other guys to use  
then ran around backstage in black when the lights  
were out so we could never see him again, and we read  
the outtakes if he had them; we nodded yes to *Be Here Now*,  
we hid with *Coffee, Tea or Me*, which we honestly believed  
was written by two stewardesses (we ourselves might be)  
instead of by a male hack, dreaming. [9]

It is a wry catalog of youthful escapism, and just when it starts to feel too literal, too  
much a catalog, it ends like this:

and when I think of how publishers lied to us then,  
I have to wonder if Americans who believed the corrupt  
administrations of the 21st century's chilling turn  
are more or less like we were as young adults  
in the public library, peering sideways at bindings  
with the faith that deer in a leafless winter keep for bark. [10]

Greenbaum's style remains so familiar, so friendly, that you might overlook its  
weirdness: its hypersensitivity to the changing microclimates of hours and days, its  
infinitely extensible (and yet always conversational) sentences, and especially its way  
with simile: at age eleven, "the company of my peers felt like/ rows of folding chairs I  
had to walk between." [47] Her verse is almost always stichic (continuous), rather than  
stanzaic, a choice that puts even more weight on sentence shape; she excels when she can  
let her speaking voice meander (her sonnets are unremarkable, insufficiently personal,  
forced). Because it sounds humble, almost apologetic, even when its content would  
justify boasts, Greenbaum's technique suits portrayals of happiness-- either the relief of  
realizing that your partner forgives your trivial transgressions, or the momentary joy of  
one remembered childhood day. Her sentences keep going, as our lives keep going,  
almost without our assent, like the figures (human and floral) in Greenbaum's  
conurbation, where "The cyclists can't help seeming self-important/ and the daffodils

can't help interloping/ on the edges of dark gardens," and "the spring/ can't help its interruptions and the morning/ can't help its illusion of beginning, again." [23]

Like Carl Dennis (the contemporary poet she most resembles), Greenbaum has figured out how to work into the pace of verse the shrugs and defensive admissions and second thoughts that occur when we change our mind while we are speaking. Greenbaum gets help from Jewish-American linguistic mannerisms, along with props of Jewish American life: "it was not a good/ match, my person and that particular kibbutz." [14] "The long paper documenting/ the history of the self was like a page of Talmud." [30] Her New York is the New York (on both sides of the East River) of an unassuming (often Jewish) literary establishment, her "Marriage Made in Brooklyn" almost charmingly indistinguishable from suburbia, "a very fine place" even though "there's not that much backyard per square squirrel/ and they get nervous about how much there is to eat." [45] She's at home with those squirrels, with their nose for the overlooked; in fact, she's at her best with experiences that other poets would find too slight to chronicle, such as the fraught, daily family reunion ("When my husband comes home it sounds like onions/ hitting the hot oil") [46] or the way new weather can change your sense of yourself:

The first seventy-degree April day takes you around the waist  
and because you are suddenly too warm in your sweater  
not only do you pull it off with annoyance, but you never  
want to see it again, because in those seconds it conveys your lifelong  
lack of vision, your foolish decisions, and you actually feel  
sheepish. [38]

Austin Smith's *Almanac* is as much a book of the rural Midwest (he grew up on a dairy farm in northwest Illinois) as *The Two Yvonne*s is a book of Manhattan and Brooklyn. Like Greenbaum, Smith sticks to conversational diction, making the sound of someone who has stories to tell. But he is no digressive raconteur. Mostly his plains contain hard, sad men living hard lives, harder than ever now that Main Street's mostly boards, though there is still high school football ("watching/ their sons play is like

watching some part/ of themselves”); [17] in these small towns, “the boys become their fathers,” 39] practical or beaten-down, and it is no surprise when another father turns up “dead in the machine/ shed, holding a monkey wrench in his hand.” [22]

Smith also writes prose fiction (he is a Stegner Fellow in fiction at Stanford) and most of his poems are like short, hard-bitten prose fiction, when they are not very much like earlier poems, by William Stafford or Jim Harrison or Ted Kooser, about the tough men of the unadorned Midwest. Smith repeats himself, and repeats his models: *Almanac* can be prosaic, and it is too long. Yet its best parts tell stories that had to be poems, their shifts in perspective building to tragic surprises, line by line. In “Resonance” a local foundry donates “little iron horses” to deaf children. One girl loves to play with her horse, but her parents, ashamed of her deafness, take it away:

The girl looks for her horse for a few days,  
then gives up and sits for hours  
looking out the window at the meadow.  
She pretends her hands are horses in love  
and runs them along the sill. [51]

And in “The Brinkmeiers,” a family of “grain farmers” suffers, with understated finality, some Midwestern bad luck:

And even though the newspaper  
will report that when the grain  
bin burst the Brinkmeiers were fast  
asleep, suggesting they didn’t suffer,

Sam Brinkmeier has just turned  
the lamp on again to read  
one last chapter in his book  
about dinosaurs. It’s one of those

big picture books. He has it  
propped up against his knees,  
a picture of a brontosaurus  
spreading across both pages. [19]

I would traipse through a lot of cornstalks to get to that ending.

Gary J. Whitehead, in *A Glossary of Chickens*, also prefers his settings homely and rural: “There’s the future, like the lost pair of sneakers/ we found in the spring. and growing between/ their double-knotted laces a sapling.” [6] But he goes to nature for similes, not for stories, and that nature is resolutely Northeastern: wet, human-scaled, not sublime, and full of vicissitude. His free verse can end up sad, or saggy, or anticlimactic, but rarely boring, because Whitehead (to quote the Pet Shop Boys) is never bored: anything, the more pedestrian the better—scrambled eggs, “pokeberry ink,” [36] a car battery—can prompt a real poem. So can his experience as a high school teacher: he teaches in New Jersey, and lives in exurban New York, though he seems most at home among animals, either the poultry of the title poem, or the insects he addresses late in the volume. Nonhuman nature, his poems suggest, can make your disappointing life more bearable.

That claim runs like a red thread through the book, and makes more sense once you realize that it is also a book about divorce. To be a good person, to be of use to other people, Whitehead’s deflated lines suggest, you have to set your expectations very low, lower than America—and perhaps lower than the book’s ex-wife-- expects: he tries to celebrate such sentiments as these: “No one I know will die today... My dog will eat and drink/ and do his business in the yard.” [15] That is a good day only for a depressed person, someone inclined to agree with Larkin that “Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.”

But Whitehead does not always seek oblivion: sometimes he seeks, like his “One-Legged Pigeon,” “no pity,/ just a crumb,/ something to hop towards.” [20] And sometimes he seeks, though he never finds, much more. Consider the extended simile of “Tied Dog”:

How it must feel to be choked always  
at the end of a line,  
teeth just out of reach  
of whatever’s worth snapping at:  
to run the rut of hard-packed earth,  
to open the throat all day full of faith  
in the symbol of a yip, a yelp, a bark. [35]

No one should call Whitehead especially ambitious, but to reread his book is to see its invention—and to wish it were longer. (He repeats moods, but not scenes, and not conceits.) Whitehead’s alter egos include Herman Melville (in old age) and death watch beetles; his contrastive anti-selves include butterflies (“quite at home in the brightness/ of their own being”) and fruit flies, whose “incessant transit” occasions a lumbering, rueful *carpe diem*: “Let’s support their art in our employment./ Why over-prioritize long-term plans// at the expense of our present enjoyment?” [52]

All three of these poets might easily be called regional—Whitehead with his forests and chickens, Smith with his grain elevators, Greenbaum in Prospect Park. They bring to mind Auden’s remark that good poets are like cheeses, “local, but prized elsewhere,” and bring home the truth that the best poems of any kind (“regional,” plain-spoken, super-Baroque, avant-Gurlesque) prove their endurance by their effect on readers who “do not usually like this sort of thing.” Heavily ornamented poetry faces its greatest test with a sensitive reader used to the plain style, plain surfaces with readers who seek complexity, Frostian home truths with the avant-garde. It is a truth that more book editors might pursue.



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All of the Princeton series poets work more or less in established modes; that is not to say they do nothing new, but rather to say their novelty takes place within the bounds of existing kinds—and that is one reason that these poets can represent, as effectively as they do, particular demographics, whole kinds of people, who can see themselves (or ourselves) in kinds of poems. You could say the same thing about Shanna Compton, though it is a demographic just now coming to be represented in books of literary poems. Compton—based in Princeton and in Brooklyn—writes the eclectic, distractable poetry of people just a few years younger than I am, or the same age as, but more plugged in than, I am, people who grew up with electronics in everything, pursued by glowing screens. (Her first book was an edited collection about the pleasures of video games.) Though her poems of *Brink* belong to venerable genres—the aubade, the erotic sonnet, the sequence about a breakup, the “Panoramic View”—their delights lie in the verbal swerves and sparks that belong only to our time, or else to a time just ahead of ours. Her lines are a millefeuille of generational markers, coming of age between the advent of the Internet and the first season of *Girls*, in or near a New York of toxic assets, multiple piercings, collapsing finance:

We’re still in the skinflint sheets  
of a place we’d rather not be,  
languid among no-account debris...

I’ll pretend to miss the day we met  
if you can try not so much to mind  
the piercing when we go wrong,  
foaming in the evening, toxic refraction,  
to baffle this diminishing sun  
into peach-rust-gold derivatives. [45]

There is nothing quite like this exuberance, on the edge of paraphrasable sense but not over it, among Compton's contemporaries, though many of them have tried. It can remind me at once of Frank O'Hara and of Edna St. Vincent Millay (as with Millay, we can fear it will seem dated later, or just enjoy the way it sounds now). Compton rakes in diction that has not turned up much in serious poetry before—if it is not the lingo of today's teens, then it belongs instead to her own youth: "He gave me a nonsarcastic thumbs up in the parking lot." [16] "A neon/ ring above an extincted/ window showcasing something/ formerly fabulous now kinda/ poignantly disappeared." [12] When Compton is off her game, her poems can edge past the hyper-contemporary into the ridiculous, the quasi-sarcastic, the perhaps deliberately bad: "I celebrate the tanginess of your gruntly curves." [50] It is, perhaps, the kind of risk that any writer willing to be explicit about eroticism must take.

Compton knows that her "tendril-like projections/ of youthful slang" [24] have not often made it into poetry before, but that her topics—urban disillusion, political snafus, falling in and out of love—certainly have. "Timetables & Humble Pie" translates, into its 21st century screen-driven lingo, Shakespeare's sonnet 129, with its "waste of shame": "Alas, the day is wasted. Toss the scrapped commodity/ in a pile like snipped stockings, admired/ in the morning but soured by noon." [56] Compton, like Shakespeare, asks whether "love" names a commodity, though for her it is a commodity that did not exist before: "What will we do," she inquires, "if affection/ is discovered to be... something we inhabit/ like a hoodie from H&M, hot yellow/ and scored at a deep discount?" [47] She speaks to her heart, as Philip Sidney spoke to his heart, but she speaks in the era of biodegradables, of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch:

Preening heart I have tended  
like a weak flame on the beach,  
do you have a box of bag  
(the tearing aside for a moment)  
to pursue our decay?...

Perhaps, my precious clutter, let us recast  
our likeness in plastic and endure as timeless litter. [14]

“Timeless litter,” both ephemeral and perdurable, eternal and apparently without use:  
there are worse figures for poetry.

*Brink* is a good book to come upon last in a stack, or last in a year: rather than complaining about how bland and frustrating everything is, in the city or in the country, Compton takes it upon herself to make everything interesting, to make daily life spark and fizz. So do the friends she imagines alongside her poems: “We shout in marquees. We stud the clamoring/ traffic in our brightest, most orange cones.” [26] Two sequences about couples, in love and at loggerheads (parts two and four of this four-part book), cannot retain the power in Compton’s always accelerating stand-alone poems, because their construction requires them to slow down, or to look back. Even the sequences, though, can succeed in making the familiar strange: after a quarrel,

Each sentence held back an ache to crack  
the domesticated shell. It’s as if  
an illustrator has come through with a fine-  
nib pen, to hatch and crosshatch everything. [71]

Ann Kim’s first book, *Lobster Palaces*, does not identify itself so thoroughly as Compton’s with a generation and its props, but it does speak to our moment. Like other poets associated with her Chicago-based publisher, Flood Editions, Kim writes tightly focused poems indebted to William Carlos Williams, laconic poems that aspire to emulate physical objects. She also looks back, beyond Williams, to Imagism, and to East Asian classical modes, even paying comic homage to “In a Station of the Metro”: “Then a platter of steamed bread--/ beauties coming out of the bath!” Kim presents a bitter equanimity, whether she is regarding the history of civilization or the ephemera of daily weather, or both at once, as in the looming ironies of “New Year’s”: “Mead is forming in the clouds,/ I guess, so no one starves.” [23]

This short book of short poems excels, in spots, by presenting a restraint it invites us to emulate, bare sketches across which our imaginations can glide. One set of sketches, or short poems, takes poem names from colors (mostly jewel tones); another, longer set takes names from flowers. Here is “calla lily”:

one window at a door  
one bird at a time.

afternoon cantata.  
my lotion’s on.  
a new appointment  
dusts the day [51]

If you are the wrong reader, these lines might mean nothing; if you are the right one, they fall together into a portrait of this pale stem, the Eileen Fisher of flora, and of a personality, expectant, patient, lamost resigned. Kim can be as elegant as the flowers she examines: in “poppy,” “after dark, a black car/ floats through a door.” [63] And she can be funny: “Hydrangea” are

mirth-damaged  
craniums.  
there, there,  
use a tissue  
to blow your nose. [55]

Do not confuse the brevity in *Lobster Palaces* with lack of ambition: Kim has brought haiku, tanka, other properties that say “Japanese” and “Chinese,” into her poems and made them *au courant*, rather than exotic. And she has animated flowers, more than a dozen of them, without emulating either the neo-Victorian cliches of garden-poetry, or the influential, loquacious plants in Louise Glück. Kim represents—rather than extending

or reinventing—a cluster of poets now composing subtle, brief, apparently impersonal, thinglike poems (Joseph Massey is another); and she does it in her own, literally colorful, way.

All these poets write poems I am going to remember; none of them poses deep questions about what poetry is and does, or (at least) none of them takes those questions as reasons to invent a new kind of poem. You might think that kind of query, that boundary-testing, belongs only to the so-called post-avant garde, to poets descended from Pound or Loy or Stein. If you thought so, you would be wrong: you can find such questions all over Vijay Seshadri's *3 Sections*. Most of the volume compiles short poems in long, flat lines allergic to enjambment, lines that may break on the full stop, or on the phrase. It is always clear what Seshadri's lines say, though thanks to his layers of irony, his air quotes, we may not be sure what he means. Take the opening lines of "Memoir":

Orwell says somewhere that no one ever writes the real story of their life.  
The real story of a life is the story of its humiliations.  
If I wrote that story now—  
radioactive to the end of time—  
people, I swear, your eyes would fall out, you couldn't peel  
the gloves fast enough  
from your hands scorched by the firestorms of that shame. [8]

Seshadri calls that poem "Memoir"; other poems have titles such as "Surveillance Report," "Script Meeting," "New Media," as if he were trying to figure out what poems do that other texts, other genres, cannot do. He uses the freedom of the verse line (where the poet nothing affirmeth, therefore never lieth) to say things he is not sure he can believe, to test their sometimes shocking implications, to see how he would feel if they were true. The frame of the poem, like the moat on the tiger exhibit (Seshadri implies), keeps the truth from mauling our everyday selves, even as the process of writing it allows us to ward those selves off:

Why I wanted to escape experience is nobody's business but my own,  
but I always believed I could if I could

put experience into words.

Now I know better.

Now I know words are experience. [20]

Like David Foster Wallace, Seshadri can sound suspicious of the self-consciousness that has become a keystone for his style, desperate to give us warmth, or helpful answers, or unproblematic mimesis, if only he could believe in them. American Freudianism in life and literature (say, confessional poetry) hypothesized that our sadness had a cause, that the cause lay in our past, and that the right sort of words (say, in poems) could diagnose and even cure it. Seshadri's disturbing, uneven lines go out of their way to reject all those ideas, waving off all the readers who ask him "to make your secret anguish your secret weapon." [39] Instead, he decides, "There's nothing underneath," just

these facts, bright and emphatic—  
Mother in her cave and Father sleeping;  
Mother in oblivion and Father weeping;  
Sister and Brother forever searching the attic  
for the terrible family secret  
that is not, and never was,  
and is the cause, is the cause... [28]

(Seshadri is quoting *Othello*, act V, scene 2, where the "cause"—Desdemona's unchastity—is unreal.)

These poems face with rare clarity the proposition that the most basic questions about poetry—why do we bother? why do we write? Why do we *say the thing that is not?*—will never have logical, satisfying answers. They oscillate between trying to be "poetry" anyway—with imagery, details, metaphors, significant line breaks—and trying

to be something else more honest, and more sad: it is as if Seshadri had disassembled the parts of the well-made American “realist” poem, in order to find out what makes it so popular, and could not put it back together when he was done. He entertains more optimistic views, hopes that poems can instruct us, but he rejects them, or at least imagines how it would feel (giddy, yet sad) to reject them: “No one can tell me anything more about the people I know/ than what I know already about the people I know.” [42] Seshadri’s poet instead resembles the blind London beggar in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, who cannot know what face he presents to the world, or (in Seshadri’s modern update) the begging mother near Grand Central Station, who “came up to me saying ‘Please, mister. Please, mister.’/ She had a boy in tow/ who was wearing a purple hoodie and looked about nine.” [36]

So far I have been describing only the short poems that make up the first of Seshadri’s sections. If you have given up, or rather if you want to experiment with giving up, on the goals of the lyric poem, you might try writing discursive, descriptive nonfiction, collecting real facts and arranging them into arguments, and that is what Seshadri does in his second section, “Pacific Fishes of Canada,” a prose memoir of his weeks on a boat off Alaska in 1979-80, days when “some of my illusions had to be pushed to their limits before I could relinquish them.” [49] Namechecking Melville, and barfing like Roquentin, the essayist imagines the north Pacific as a void in which we discover our true, final selves, except that we do not have any; they do not exist. The denouement is also the only place in *3 Sections* (unless you count Urdu translations) where Seshardi highlights his ethnicity: as the boat swayed and rolled, “I said to myself ‘I’m an Indian. What am I doing here?’ I said it over and over. It wasn’t exactly what I meant to say to myself. Despair... makes thought imprecise. But, in fact, what I meant to say exactly I couldn’t possibly have put into words.” [55]

The last of Seshadri’s three sections, a 17-page verse essay entitled “Personal Essay,” uses the same uneven, flat line as the first. It is the most compelling non-radical, non-avant-garde statement about what poems do and cannot do that I’ve seen in a while (its competitors are prose: Angela Leighton’s *On Form*, for example). Seshadri begins

with a paradox: “The experience I find compelling enough/ to imagine sitting at a screen writing about it” has a “polar opposite,” “the experience by which we become aware that what we see, smell, hear, feel, taste” does not “resemble anything.” [56] Everything is itself, and everything passes, and words can do nothing about it. Words cannot even present the “Vijay Seshadri,” or the “Stephen,” who has such thoughts, but only “an object, a thing,/ one more thing that throws a shadow.” [57] You might call this experience a Heideggerian mistake (imagining the self as ontic, not ontological) or a Stevensian journey (akin to “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” with its “dust that traverses a shade”); later Seshadri will take a Stevensian walk through Brooklyn, “under the elevated tracks of the Long Island Railroad”). [61]

You might also identify it with depression. It is, in any case, the kind of experience that poetry tries to resolve, or at least to depict, and poetry can never quite do it. The poet looks at other people, then back at himself, and asks how they know who they are, how he knows who he is, and why anyone cares. The speech that comes out of the poem is like speech from a dead person, and only a long passage can give you its bracing, comic, morbid flavor: that speech emanates from

A thing, an artifact wrapped in its artifactuality,  
an anthology of arbitrary gestures made by space—  
which itself is active and passive, itself something and not nothing—  
a congeries of angles and broken lines,  
maybe not nothing but  
not the image of anything but the image of  
nothing, a face astonished by itself in the mirror  
(that couldn't be me, could it?),  
a body on a gurney that sits up  
and makes claims that scare the attending medical personnel. [58]

After such passages, excellence in familiar forms and scenes—like Greenbaum's, like Compton's—might seem unambitious, or it might seem like brilliant relief; and



relief, along with entertainment, is not the least of what art can provide. Unsettling in its clarity, the poetry of *3 Sections* is not for everyone. But no kind of poetry, established or new, is for everyone. No kind of poetry, on the other hand, is only “for” the people it represents: Smith’s farm disasters make memorable reading if you care about poetry whether or not you care very much about farms, Greenbaum’s whether or not you care about Brooklyn, Kim’s whether or not you care about flowers, and so on. As for Seshadri’s new book, it is “for” people who have entertained both high hopes, and grim doubts, about the worth of any art; in pursuing those venerable doubts, Seshadri makes art that stays new.