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Featured Poet

Shanna Compton

In a maudlin way

A raft of apple studded mawkish skins
A draft more often uttered than unloud
Which lack presents the ruddy leaf of gall
So juiced, the press a might less savor fall
& shook some puddled favors to mere dips

However earthen she did roll

A query stirring in a hill
Whose eager geyser never spilled
But quivered sharply all turmoiled
Until a loner's much regard had born

A missing lister must retard

No udder rowing purring of beloved
A pictured fuddle outfitted with a bell
As over loving as the churled mock mail
For new year's fetid unguent quelled

Much, Much Too Late

Subjected to a clubfoot
he grew to possess
a violent tenderness
a cloying temper

His little volume was suppressed
a slender idleness
hardly provocative
but really nobody's fault
but his

Oh, his heroic melancholy!
His fugitive steadfastness
his obscure, rather cold considerables
What we wouldn't have given
to set him square
in a place marked OK

An Occurrence on the Road

On Monday we crossed the river
and toward evening met

a freakish company.

As they rose above the mound
sad and timely (in the setting sun)
we began our leisurely whistling
hoping to pass without incident.

For they, gawkish bedragglers, were poets!

Their rags rent and in pitiful array,
their beards straggled and miteful,
even the youngest among them
was pinched as though she hadn't supped
of grace for weeks and weeks.

But stopped we were,
and plied with verse so villainous bad
we wished them all tinnitus
and soon our poor selves as well.

We paid small compliment to one,
which set the others bitching
till the squabble absorbed them wholly
as we slunk off and away.

Shanna Compton was born in 1970 in Temple, Texas. Her books and chapbooks include *For Girls* (2007), *Closest Major Town* (2006), and *Down Spooky* (2005). She edited *GAMERS: Writers, Artists & Programmers on the Pleasures of Pixels* (2004), while serving as Associate Publisher and Director of Publicity at Soft Skull Press from 2002 to 2007. She also founded the DIY Poetry Publishing Cooperative and Bloof Books. www.shannacompton.com

from [Poet's Bookshelf II: Contemporary Poets on Books That Shaped Their Art](#)

Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!*

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*

Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*

Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation*

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Pablo Neruda, *Five Decades: Poems 1925-1970*

Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*

John Ashbery, *The Mooring of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry*

Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*

Oulipo Compendium, ed. Harry Mathews & Alastair Brotchie

Yes, I've cheated and listed eleven. Most are absolutely common and will have been named elsewhere in this book, or in the first volume. I thought at first of making a list of only rare or unusual influences, hoping to be more useful to you, point toward some undiscovered booty, but realized such a list would give a skewed version of things, and be frustrating to attempt to follow since the books are mostly out of print. I'm guessing though, that this particular combination is unique (have any two poets turned in identical lists?) and so must be replete with whatever chemistry transmogrified me from ordinary citizen to massively important poet person. Anyway, I've changed it, and my approach to it, so many times that I've missed the deadline by two weeks so this will just have to do. For simplicity's sake, I've listed them in the order I came to them, as ranking them would likely take another month of intense fretting.

Fretting? Yes. For example: So many men! Too few women! But wait, am I shaped by men or by lack of women? Was a dearth/unawareness of women writers a "problem" for my younger self? An inspiration? A challenge? I couldn't make a longer list without Virginia Woolf (all of her), Lorine Niedecker, Laura Riding Jackson, Elizabeth Bishop, Lyn Hejinian, Rachel Blau du Plessis, Flannery O'Connor, Anais Nin, Rae Armantrout, Alice Notley, Caroline Knox, Susan Wheeler, can I add some more Stein.... See, I'm doing it again. I think the most profound

influence these women have had on me is the most important influence of my writing life (so far): that my first question, always, is what about the women? If I had to plan, right now, all my reading from today till forever, I could confidently say I'd read the women, mostly, first. Looking back is different though, isn't it?

Dr. Seuss is perhaps a surprising choice, but for me, undeniable. Without Seuss I'd not be a poet, or at least I'd be a much less playful one. I remember first feeling PURE DELIGHT reading his books as a child. It's the first "poetic" experience I recall—preferring the sound over the sense, loving the words for themselves, privileging the physical/emotional experience (elation) over the points of the plot. My favorite was *Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!* and I still have it, a battered hardcover with a broken spine, published in 1975.

Walt Whitman I met in school. Junior high, I think eighth grade. A good place to start a kid raised in the Southern Baptist church, rhythmically speaking. We read only excerpts of *Leaves of Grass* then, in some kind of anthology. Later I got the full book from the library and read the rest. Did I understand it? Not most of it. But I loved it anyway. It sounded like the *Bible*, but better. (Walt's been a big influence on my publishing activities too.)

A few years later, around the same time I began reading Kafka and Vonnegut and Hemingway and all the very male-oriented war fiction and Victorian and WWI novels I was assigned in high school, I also began reading Emily Dickinson, thank God. I've never stopped. I was fascinated, obsessed, with the way her poems seemed so small on the page yet expanded as I read them again and again. I treated *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* like a totem, another *Bible*-substitute (to which there was no going back for me), and devised a system whereby I could use the subject index to work through worries and problems, as a meditative tool in the manner of the *I-Ching*. (A few years ago, I had the idea to turn this system into an actual board game called the *E-Ching*. Maybe I still will, if I can ever figure out a way to truly randomize the poem-picking.)

How many poems and sentences have I written that are but mere imitations of Gertrude Stein? Too many, and there's no indication that this phenomenon will let up anytime soon. If one must be derivative (one must), one could do worse. She's my favorite writer, period. *Tender Buttons*

and *Stanzas in Meditation* are top of the heap, but *Melanctha*, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, really everything, is essential. Even her kids' book, *The World is Round*.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* gave me permission in the same way Stein did: let the words do what they want, the sounds that make them up will lead them; it's okay to be funny as well as thinky; it's better to keep readers guessing than lead them by the hand; objects can be symbolically weighty without being ridiculous; character development is optional so long as the essence is full-strength; repetition is your friend; existential dread makes the best punchline.

I first read Pablo Neruda in Mexico, in Belitt's bilingual edition, picked up for a few pesos at a public library sale. The poor paperback book was already beat to hell when I got it, and I've mended it with duct tape and packing tape numerous times. The pages are browning and crispy and falling out. It's possible that there's no good reason to love it beyond the fact that the months during which I discovered it were some of the most vivid in my life, but I sure can't separate feeling from fact when I read the poems. I find them beautiful, and deceptively simple, and even though my Spanish has suffered long neglect and was never more than Texan Spanglish to begin with, believe them to be utterly gorgeous in their original language. Asked what I wanted out of my writing life, I once picked it up from a nearby table and handed it over as an answer: five decades of writing, a life filled with the stuff.

Earlier when I said Gertrude Stein was "my favorite writer, period," I put in mental/invisible parentheses that I'll reveal now: (along with Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery & Frank O'Hara). An odd trio, perhaps, though Ashbery & O'Hara are always associated. They're actually pretty different though. Ashbery's influence is largely a tonal one, and something that I also absorbed from the other members of the New York School: a witty, conversational yet never "light" tone, allowing for humor as well as more philosophical musings, disjunctive movements as well as narrative and personal lyric tendencies, without ever venturing into the confessional (not a fan, I'm afraid, of that school). Pop culture icons like Popeye are just as worthy as Greek myth or the Union dead or an absent lover as the subject of poetry. From O'Hara I learned much the same thing, but also grace in the mirror. He can take himself and his doings as a subject without ever seeming self-indulgent, whiny, or annoying. I still don't write much about "myself," but when I

do, I follow O'Hara. These two New York School poets (and their friends, including Koch, Padgett, Shapiro, Guest, Berrigan, et al.) were a revelation and a relief.

So that leaves Stevens—and it's his appeal I find toughest to explain. (Technically if I'm proceeding in chronological order he should come before Ashbery as in the list above, but whatever.) I read the usual anthologized pieces in high school—"The Emperor of Ice Cream" in particular gave me a physical thrill the first time I "got it." There's something at once stately and hilarious about his poems that both confirms and belies his rather buttoned-up demeanor as an insurance lawyer. I think his emphasis on the Imagination has been key for me, and his verbal doodlings, which for some reason people don't talk much about. There's a two-volume biography about him by Joan Richardson, as well as a collection of his letters, that I like to read alongside the poems. I appreciate him in all his periods, though certain of the long poems bore me for stretches. (The long poem and I have an on-off-again relationship, in general.) When I first began dating my husband in college, I drove an antique car without a stereo, and during the long trips we'd take driving the back roads of Southeast Texas, he'd read the poems to me. The scenery outside the windows frequently matched the words in imagistic and linguistic oomph. I wish we could do that again.

This last one I can offer without any hesitation: everybody should read the work of the Oulipians. *The Oulipo Compendium*, edited by Harry Mathews & Alastair Brotchie, is a terrific anthology, part dictionary of terms, part exemplars, and it's newly republished. (I have an earlier Atlas edition, but Atlas and Make Now jointly released a newer edition in 2005.) I noticed Dean Young recommended this too, in volume one, saying it's good for "things to do on an empty night." You won't be able to resist trying some of the games and maybe you'll find that sometimes constraints can paradoxically really free things up, and that writing doesn't have to be suffering. I was lucky to take a class with Harry a few years ago and the best thing he said was that a writer's satisfaction should come from the act of writing, not from what happens afterward (meaning publication, reviews, etc.). No kidding. That's pure gold.

If there's anything these books have in common, it's probably that idea: that the writing is a source of pleasure—not suffering! not purity! not asceticism! not intellectual posturing!—for both the writer and the reader. Even Emily was having fun with all those dashes and exclamation

points. You can just tell.

