

THE INSIDE VIEW

Sandra Beasley

While young classmates dreamed of becoming doctors and lawyers, Fairfax native Sandra Beasley wrote poems — and never stopped. Now 28, she's the 2008 winner of Poets & Writers magazine's prestigious Maureen Egen award honoring the nation's most promising writers. Beasley has been published in national hipster outlets like Slate.com and The Believer, and serves as the books editor for The American Scholar, the magazine of Phi Beta Kappa.



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Do you consider yourself to be of a specific faith?

I wasn't raised in a religious household, though there was a general belief in God and spiritual afterlife. I can't deny the palpable holiness of some spaces; I used to sneak into the University of Virginia chapel to read Gerard Manley Hopkins' poems before an audience of empty pews. I locate my hope in building a community that sustains a common good, both social and aesthetic.

As a young person, did anyone or any event have a unique influence upon your beliefs or your path in life? How so?

In grade school, I was one of eight students plucked out of class and given to "The Poetry Lady," Rose MacMurray (a legend in the Fairfax County school system), for weekly workshops. We read Edgar Allen Poe aloud, composed concrete poems, learned about ekphrasis and so on — all with this encouraging, eccentric, heavily perfumed and eye-shadowed woman — and got out of class to do it. I decided then and there that I wanted to be a poet, and I've pursued it ever since.

Throughout history, poetry has often taken on a spiritual element. What qualities do you believe are essential to poetry that lasts throughout generations?

Lasting poetry has often been spiritual, but that observation benefits from closer inspection. Religious context isn't a security blanket, protecting poetry from the ravages of time. Spiritual poems tap into a shared vocabulary, cite a known and external set of narratives, and wrestle with moral quandaries. In other words, they have clarity of language or story, and relate to the reader's life. Many of our greatest poets — Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda leap to mind — shared those traits in their work, without advocating according to religious doctrine. One key element to endurance is the X-factor of delight and surprise in the poem's language. Like obscenity: You know it when you see it. Neruda and Whitman captured unfettered delight in their work, and people will hold those poems close to their hearts for the next 200 years.

What professional qualities are most essential to sustaining a writerly career?

Your voice must be unique and undiluted. Be relentless. Be unafraid of rejection. Be an insomniac, or otherwise willing to embrace the off-hours of life. Read, read, read. If you find yourself making the same excuses over and over for not writing, not submitting or not making it to readings, then restructure your life to nullify that excuse. Support your fellow community of writers, whether it be hosting, editing or just showing up. What goes around comes around.

At your core, what is one of your defining beliefs?

I believe in beauty, which sounds venal. But to believe in beauty is to believe in balance, which is to believe in justice, which is to believe in rational process. Scientific studies claim symmetry — eye level, mouth shape — is the principal way we judge beauty. But symmetry is to balance what "an eye for an eye" is to justice: a gross simplification. Beauty requires complexity.

— Leah Fabel