



meet your neighbor
Sandra Beasley
urban poet



meet your neighbor

Sandra Beasley: The Poetry of the City



BY KENDRA LANGDON JUSKUS

This Silver Body

A man is gutting this fish on your walk to work.
Or, your walk to work goes past a man who is
sluicing his knife like sharp water to these gills.
It's a sticky day. You put your briefcase down.

He is kneeling off the porch, over newspaper,
but instead of changing a bicycle chain
ropes of intestine reel out of this silver body
and still you want to ask, What speed?

You hope for one last flop as he severs the spine.
You hope for a steam burst as he slits this heart.
There's just this click of ice as he packs the belly.
There is no smell except your rancid coffee

in its cooling cup. He flicks loose yellow gel.
You clear your throat because if it's shad,
this might be roe. But he begins to hum,
deep-fried baritone, and picks up the next one.

He slips a thumb in that eye for a better grip.
He bounces that weight to his palm. He rolls
both shoulders against the ache of morning.
You're learning this was never for your sake.

[This poem originally appeared in the New Orleans Review and will be published in Theories of Falling (New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2008).]

When people outside of Washington, DC, think of this city, they think first of the president, congress, think tanks and lobbying firms. And although DC is home to some of the country's premier art museums, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the creative genius of artists like Langston Hughes and Duke Ellington, most people still do not associate the nation's capital with the arts.

Sandra Beasley does not fit into the category of "most people." She knows something that everyone should know: the arts are thriving in Washington, DC.

Beasley grew up in Northern Virginia, attended the University of Virginia for undergraduate studies in English and completed her Masters of Fine Arts degree at American University in 2004. She has always had "a keen appreciation of DC as an incredible metropolitan thing," and expresses a profound love for the charms and incongruities that mark this city.

Living in Adams Morgan now, Beasley is on the editorial staff for the American Scholar Magazine, which is headquartered in Dupont Circle. She is also a poet.

"I have been enthusiastic about writing and reading, and poetry in particular, since I was a kid," she says. "It was always something I did. So I always knew that I wanted to write."

Beasley's work has appeared in well-respected journals such as "32 Poems," "Poet Lore," and "Meridian." Her first book, "Theories of Falling," will be published in spring of 2008. Her poems are complex but accessible – touching universal chords of relationship, childhood, success and failure, insecurity and identity – with robust and startling lyricism. Beasley has an equally approachable personality. With a welcoming smile and a ready laugh, she is obviously intelligent, but affably so; a guileless sharer of both amusing anecdotes and striking insights. She is not the morose misanthrope that many conjure when thinking of poets.

"I think that writing is such a solitary pursuit that it's very easy for writers to fall out of the tracks of communicating with other areas of the arts," she says. "For me, the fact that I've always embraced live music and the visual arts and meeting people within that community and trading things to go to – I'm making it sound like I'm an ambassador of poetry!"

But poetry can be a curmudgeonly pursuit. Maybe it needs a few ambassadors."

Beasley is an enthusiastic ambassador for poetry in DC. "Poetry is a very portable thing," she says, "but I think the fact that there is a national poetry community and I'm a DC poet is where my responsibility lies."

She gladly welcomes visiting artists to the local scene, which has embraced and been nourished by her devotion. When she first moved to the city, she joined The Word Works community, participating in its publishing work, reading series and poetry seminars, and ultimately becoming its temporary editor-in-chief. She also takes part in the Arts Club of Washington, and is looking forward to the upcoming Split Rock Poetry Festival, headed by friend and fellow local poet Sarah Browning, coordinator of DC Poets Against the War. Beasley trusts that Split Rock will show poets of national caliber that "DC is also a poetry town. It's not just a political town."

But even as she and other local artists work to bring prominence to the DC poetry community, the poetry of the city itself continues to inform her work.

"The second book that I'm working on has a lot of surreal imagery," she explains. "I think a lot of that comes from being in a city where the juxtapositions of the things you see on any given day are surreal. I think it's a lot easier to write about American culture and that kind of mix – both high and low culture – right up against each other, living in this city."

Beasley's work cannot help but be shaped by the life of her community and the city she has always loved. And ultimately, that arts community, and the city that is its proud home, cannot help but be shaped by her rich work and the dedicated passion behind it.

"At the end of the day," Beasley says, "I think the greatest service an artist can do for the community around her is to do the best art that she is capable of."

Beasley's best art is bringing the poetry of this city to life.

Discover more of Sandra Beasley's work and learn more about the arts in Washington, DC, visit www.sandrab-easley.com. ■

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