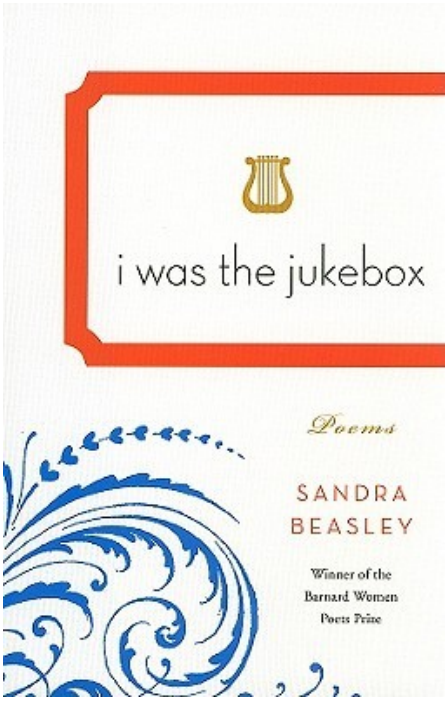

I Was the Jukebox: Poems

Sandra Beasley

I Was the Jukebox: Poems

Sandra Beasley

I Was the Jukebox: Poems Sandra Beasley
“These poems are fresh, crisp, and muscular. They are decisive and fearless. Every object, icon, or historical moment has a soul with a voice. In these poems these soulful ones elbow their way to the surface of the page, smartly into the contemporary now.”—Joy Harjo, prize citation

from “The Piano Speaks”

For an hour I forgot my fat self,

my neurotic innards, my addiction to alignment.

For an hour I forgot my fear of rain.

For an hour I was a salamander

shimmying through the kelp in search of shore,

and under his fingers the notes slid loose

from my belly in a long jellyrope of eggs

that took root in the mud.

I Was the Jukebox: Poems Details

Date	:	Published April 5th 2010 by W. W. Norton Company (first published 2010)
ISBN	:	9780393076516
Author	:	Sandra Beasley
Format	:	Hardcover 96 pages
Genre	:	Poetry

From Reader Review I Was the Jukebox: Poems for online ebook

Abraham says

There is nothing particularly wrong with these poems. They are light and clever and moderately well-crafted, but they violate Isaac Bashevis Singer's fundamental rule about writing. The writer must feel that this story absolutely must be told. I can't say what Beasley felt about these poems, but it would be hard to believe it was an existential exigency.

Jenna says

Sandra Beasley's sassy and cute poems could win a Miss Congeniality prize. Cut in the mold of Wislawa Szymborska, Beasley builds her sparkling snow-forts around fanciful conceits, asking playful questions like: What would the sand say if it could talk? Does God prefer the breaststroke or the backstroke? Like Szymborska, Beasley delights in the eccentric's hobby of making whimsical lists: "Face it: I will never/appear on the flipside of a nickel,/or as a balloon floating down Fifth Avenue;/no one will give my name to a variety of rosebush,/or a way to throw fastballs, or a beetle/with four strange, silvery wings" ("Immortality"). "Unit of Measure" is a Szymborska-esque poem that is especially effective.

Not only cleverness dwells here, but poignancy and pathos as well (Cf. "The Minotaur Speaks," or the final couplet of "Love Poem for Wednesday"). But although Beasley sometimes engages with "big" topics such as death, miscarriage, and war, her poems on those topics have a rather distant feel and are somehow less memorable than her poems concerning more "trivial" subjects (e.g., college life, or dating).

At times, while reading these poems, I yearned for more weight, more ballast, more global significance. ("More weight..." Giles groans in *The Crucible*.) While reading the poem "The Natives Are Restless," in particular, I was struck by the cranky thought, "This is the kind of poem only a white American would write." And the fish/voyeurism passage in Beasley's poem "The World War Speaks" pales when compared with a similar passage in Jorie Graham's "Salmon." All in all, though, *I Was the Jukebox* is highly readable, smartly crafted (the sestina form is especially well-handled), a nice weekend companion.

James Murphy says

Sandra Beasley is that kind of poet I admire very much, one who translates event into language. She's a young woman. She's at the beginning of her career with I Was the Jukebox, her 2d book of poems. But I'd say she's already finding her own possibilities and moving beyond her frontiers. These poems are solid with confidence and maturity. Her poems pulse at times with a verbal frenzy that seems to teeter on the edge of losing control, yet time after time she steadies them. "The Story" and "Osiris Speaks" are good examples of this. They're affectionate poems speaking of the warmth and nurture of healthy relationships. I think them love poems, though without the usual valentine sort of declarations. "Love Poem for Wednesday" may be the loveliest poem here and a good illustration of that exuberance straining to elude the poet's grasp. Its mix of words and image seems as aimless and searching as bees, unharnessed, yet almost imperceptibly you feel movement as direct as an arrow taking you to that pure moment when poem and reader come together. And Beasley is the sure fletch of that arrow. She's written a book full of wild and beautiful rides, all gentle arcs

and swoops that startle the mind and cradle the heart.

Kirsty Hughes says

Wow. This is only the second collection of poetry I have read, and I gotta say I absolutely loved it. This is great. Recommend it to anyone that likes poetry that is almost dream-like, yet profound. If I didn't have to turn this back in to the library, there would be highlighted lines all throughout this book. Only wish I didn't have to write a paper on it for school right now.

M says

To the Lions

Stop perhapsing--
the savannah will not save you.

Everything is dead or dying;
running, or about to run.

Time to stop lifting the wallet
from the corpse's pocket.

Time to gather your most
fuckable queens.

Isn't that the sun, draped
around your neck?

Stop this kitty kitty nonsense,
this apologetic yawning:

Show us why your tongue
is covering in hooks.

Sara says

Witty, inventive, and daring. Sandra Beasley doesn't approach her work in a straightforward manner. Instead, she assumes unorthodox perspectives, creates strange and thought-provoking metaphors, and challenging herself with poetic forms such as sestinas (and does she OWN that form like a boss). All of this is evident throughout I WAS THE JUKEBOX, where Beasley writes about everything from platypi and minotaurs, to college students and music. Sometimes she's humorous and flirtatious. Other times, pensive and visceral. Still others, passionate yet philosophical.

My only critique is that, even though I thoroughly enjoyed many of the poems, I wasn't as moved

emotionally by I WAS THE JUKEBOX as I have been by other poetry books I've read this year. Beasley is more of a thinker and innovator with her work, and some readers may find that quality more appealing. That said, I would read more of Sandra Beasley's poetry in a heartbeat and would recommend I WAS THE JUKEBOX to any poetry fans who are seeking something a little more unconventional.

Ellen Mcgrath says

I Was the Jukebox by Sandra Beasley took me by surprise, it gave me so much joy to read. The language pops, it opens sudden windows to an unexpected insight. It has a good sense of intimate rhetoric, as does Shaughnessy; as in Human Dark with Sugar, an intimate second-person address to a lover is frequently employed. Both poets are strikingly alike in their project of uncovering an intimacy of address that is near-subcutaneous in that these poems do not delineate the personal or fill out the setting of the autobiographical. I think of it as being so close you can't really see who it is you're seeing. What takes the place of the distance and the seeing the "you" and the "I" in the usual social scale -- complete with clothes, a personal history, trappings of family, and product placement -- is a sense of knowing them in the way one knows oneself.

I think this is a feature you see in a lot of the younger poets under 40. It's not as if it never existed: I think, for instance, of how this collapsed sense of social separation in poetry is something Ashbery does a lot of, and Jack Gilbert; I'd say Jean Valentine, too, but I don't see much of her work so much as coming out of the interaction between persons (a sort of floating third person) as coming from inside the shell the speaker is at great pains to shed.

So, what I'm saying that I see in I Was the Jukebox is both an unpeopling of the poemspace and a repopulating it with the stuff of the interaction rather than the actors as people being seen as if from outside (though it is often actually from the inside, or the movie of the mind, which is itself influenced by the outside movies we make and take into us, in an endless loop of projection and ingestion). I'm not saying all of the poems in this collection are perfect to me; enough of them are, though, for me to enjoy the others – there are many stay at the "clever" layer, or whose endings strive too hard to dazzle and end up feeling contrived, and a few of the sestinas seem too beholden to the form and not generative of enough felt expression of content. This is a poetry of content. It's far from the content of the 80s, far from what Charles Altieri referred to as the "scenic mode," which, when I started writing, entailed a quasi-journalistic establishment of the 4 Ws. If that was the poetry of the videocamera, maybe this is the poetry of the phone camera or Google glass: so close sometimes you end up fading out on what is actually around that little mobile lens.

No sooner have I asserted that my overall impression is that of an un-scenic poemscape of a book than I start to leave through to note the poems that most grabbed me, and the first one I land on, six poems into the book, does in fact establish scene. It's "Antietam," a short narrative about a childhood field trip to the Civil War site. It's pretty straightforward in its delivery, beginning with "We all went in a yellow school bus, / on a Tuesday. We sang the whole way up." The blunt delivery seems to capture the blasé tone of young kids not quite registering the solemnity of historical landmarks ("The old cannons were puny. We asked about fireworks."). The takeaway for the child the speaker was has little to do with the war, or maybe a lot to do with it within a child's scale of the universe; the poem closes on the most memorable event:

On the way back to the bus a boy tripped me and I fell –
skidding hard along the ground, gravel lodging
in the skin of my palms. I cried the whole way home.
After a week, the rocks were gone.

My mother said our bodies can digest anything,
but that's a lie. Sometimes, at night, I feel
the battlefield moving inside of me.

OK, so that's more or less the scenic mode, complete with epiphany at the end. But it's delivered in a flat voice, and so, even though that's a pretty dramatic claim at the end there, there's no effort to hoist it up to the level of the universal. Maybe that's the difference in this later generation, or a difference, anyway: an unapologetic centering of the drama on the self, without explanation, without any edifying universalizing. I went for that last line, and I still like it. But lately I've been coiling inward, figuring all I can do is row my boat; we're about to bomb Syria because Assad has been found, according to a report released to the public, to have killed over a thousand people with chemical weapons. And I have been keeping this on the far border of my consciousness, which is not usually how I am about such things. I've had a stressful string of personal events in my life and have attained a certain provisional equilibrium. Parallel to this process of attaining personal equilibrium, I have detached from my usual emotional involvement with politics. I wouldn’t' even call it cynicism. I'm pretty sure it's not apathy. For the moment, all I can say is I seem to have come to accept the general mayhem of the world and have decided just to row my little boat. And honestly, this is probably tinged with a sense that there are only some things I can have any agency about. Not to mention my awareness that I'm not currently in a place that's being bombed and so have the option of just rowing my boat. What does this have to do with this poem and its closing. These poems are boats being rowed. Each one is a boat. They hold together well, though some threaten to spring a leak, like this one, called "Making History," which is fittingly placed right after "Antietam":

All I know of the Spanish-American War
is what Virginia boys, kept safe at college,
etched into the mortar with their pencils
so that leaning against a brick wall
a hundred years later, I can make out
Cuba libre! and Remember the Maine!
I don't remember the Maine, only
that a Cuba Libre is made of run, Coke,
and lime. What I know of sacrifice is

the tin spoons that always fall into
my dorm room radiator. Cereal: spoon.
Ice milk: spoon. The world is lousy
with spoons. The world is lousy
with lentils, flash bombs, lo-fi, hi-speed.
Somewhere is a petition I should be
signing. Somewhere a parakeet is
driving a tractor, and I am missing it.
A pair of scissors is thrown and the boy

catches it with his arm, the blade sinking
inches deep, so fast there is no blood.
His roommate says What do we do now?
Pull it out, says the boy, but no one wants
to be the one to pull it out. That's when
they turn the camera off. Some nights
I dream we meet: You have to help me,

he says. Cuba is burning. I reach into his arm.
I pull out spoon after spoon after spoon.

As in "Antietam," this poem acknowledges the personal luxury of being only indirectly touched by an historical event. There's even the implication that the condition is ongoing, that involvement in history is somehow optional, though understood to be admirable ("Somewhere is a petition I should be / signing."). But this vague sense of duty is undercut by the parallel sentence that follows, with its absurd evocation of a parakeet driving a tractor, the tractor possibly being a metonym for contemporary Cuban communism? Similarly, the subject of "sacrifice" at the end of stanza 1 is deflated by the predicate, the loss of spoons behind a radiator in a dorm room, and the speaker is clearly showing that she, too, was "kept safe at college" from knowing real sacrifice. So, in terms of the little boat analogy, this one is hitting some rough water as a poem, but finding a way to right itself by the evocation of some dormitory accidental violence and bringing up the sacrificed spoons in the dream image at the end.

We are rowing our boats. We are floating our boats. We are lucky for now to have a little lake on which we can. There is so much more to say about the skill and the spirit and the play and the pathos in these poems. I will be reading much more of Sandra Beasley's poems, and much of what I've written here has more to do with what's on my mind and nerves at the moment than with what's on the pages of this book, which I've enjoyed much more than a lot of poetry I've read in the past year.

Antonia says

About Beasley's previous collection, Theories of Falling, I said: "The speaker is educated, intellectual, wise perhaps beyond her years. Truly an artist." I also said, "[Her poems] make me want to push the books aside and get back to writing." That goes double for Beasley's more recent collection, I Was the Jukebox.

I hardly know where to begin. This is fabulous work, one of my favorite poetry collections. The poems are vivid, complex, and to me, endlessly fascinating. (How does she do it??)

I absolutely love the poem "You Were You," which contains the line that gives the book its title. This is the one I had to read to my nonpoet husband.

"I dreamt we were in your favorite bar:
You were you, I was the jukebox.
I played Sam Cooke for you,
but you didn't look over once.
I wanted to dance. I wanted a scotch.
I wanted you to take your hand off of her. . . . "

And so many others. I love the way that Beasley gives voice to inanimate objects: Sand, The Piano, The Eggplant, The World War. Oh and the ending of The World War Speaks is so brilliant. I'll not ruin it for you here. Read the poem. Oh and I love the poem, My God:

"He smiles when astronauts reach

zero gravity and say *My god, My god.*"

Lots of anaphora, lots of repetition. I find that I like it, that she makes it work. There's a lot of playfulness here, but the poems are highly intellectual. Cerebral, as another reviewer here puts it.

By the way, poet friends, in the Acknowledgements, Beasley says, "Many of the poems came out of NaPoWriMo."

Cecilia Li says

Monologues that Thrust Deep –
Poetry Review of I Was the Jukebox by Sandra Beasley

Anything can speak in Sandra Beasley's poems, even sand, piano, world war I, Minotaur and eggplant. They are living things with stories and emotions. Personification is not even considered as a figurative speech in her poems because it occupies each of her poem. In the most sensuous and implicit way, and in the least dramatic way, those objects are telling you a drama that stains. In a tone that is calm yet sarcastic, mournful yet forceful, Sandra Beasley pulls you into an emotional vacuum that you have never been before.

When you were a jukebox and were in love with a man that comes to the bar everyday, what would you do? You would play a song for him, but he will never notice. You are jealous of the woman that he brings – "her hair looked like plastic./ But then my mouth was plastic./ I weighed 300 pounds./ I glittered like 1972." She uses irony and contrasts to dramatize the bitter, unrequited love the jukebox has towards the man. Filling her poems with imagery – "the shirt that makes your eyes green", and "the bubbles in my blood were singing", Sandra has painted a scene with unsatisfied desires and passions. The jukebox tried to show her love but ended up broken – "in the morning, they came to repair me". By closing her short poem in this way, Sandra has constructed a small tragedy – an unrequited love with an ironic ending. The monologues that Sandra wrote are not detached from hard facts in reality. On the contrary, exactly because every imagery she built is based on the individual personality of different objects, it can truly appeal to the readers, in an expressive, and sometimes whimsical way. Because the jukebox has a liquid-filled tube that produces bubbles when the jukebox is functioning, Sandra relates to this fact by writing "the bubbles in my blood were singing". "A man tried to seduce me with quarters" also utilizes the fact that the jukebox can be controlled by anyone who is willing to pay. With just 23 lines, this poem You Were You is really a short fiction in a poetic form. Borrowing the voice of a jukebox, Sandra Beasley unrelentingly cuts into the story of those people with uncontrollable fate, unchangeable life, and unexposed love and feelings.

The World War Speaks is another spectacular monologue-styled poem. Narrated both plainly and figuratively, this poem needs to be read closely. In this poem, the world war is disguised as an innocent child that was nourished by bombs, gases, hydrogens, and grew fiercer everyday: "I learned to dig a deeper kind of ditch. / I learned to start a fire in three minutes. / I learned to sharpen a pencil into / a bayonet. Sometimes at night/ I'd sneak into the house of our neighbors, / into the hall outside their bedroom, / and watch as they moved over each/ other like slow, moonlit fish." Indirectly, Sandra exposes the cruelty of war in the most emotionally unstirring way as if all were just a joke and some naughty trick of a child. However, this plain style of narration with rich imagery, surprisingly, can thrust into your heart and arouse your deepest compassion. "Slow, moonlit fish" degrades men into fish that die when they are still in their dream. "Slow" gives me a slow-motion picture of people being blown up by the bombs. Sandra painted, not wrote, her poem in my head. Her ending is as always ironic and dramatic: "They wanted an only / child: the child to end all

children.” There, a stain left in my head.

Although very short and concise, Sandra Beasley’s poems are essentially narrative poems, with an obscure timeline, several vague characters, and free associations. Actually, Sandra Beasley has dedicated a poem to her definition of a story. Starting with “As soon as you put two things/ together, you have a story” by John Baldessari as the epigraph for her poem “The Story”, Sandra continues to list several pairs of completely unrelated objects and events – “In the story I am the nightingale, and you/ are usually the hotplate; though occasionally/ you are the subway token, and I am the Queen/ of Norway.” Those seemly incidental events and irrelevant objects can be composed together by some irrelevant person now or in many many years in the future – “Then a priest/ holds the paper to a candle flame; and the nun’s/ love letters, writ in lemon juice, come to life.” Chance, is the most magical force in the world because it has the power to bring totally unrelated things together and make them a story. Love, Friendship, Family, if you really think about it, are all by chance. In a way, it is also saying that everything around us can be part of the story. So we should treasure everything single piece of our life.

Sandra Beasley’s poem is hard and sometimes abstract. In her poem “Fugue”, the subject matter and the composition is organized in a “Fugue” way, in which multiple layers of narration are going on. Through modified repetitions, interchanges of underlying functionality and identity, and varied permutation and combinations, she extracts musicality from her poems. Just like the Blue Ride painter Kandinsky tries to compare his paintings to music and entitles his paintings “symphony” and “composition”, and aims to elevate his paintings to a spiritual level, Sandra Beasley’s poem “Fugue” also conveys a meaning that is abstract and spiritual.

The Trees cup light in their low branches.
The sidewalks are dying.
I am walking from pharmacy to pharmacy.
I pull bits of teeth from my mouth.
I pull concrete from my mouth.
Ahead, another green cross is winking.
The song in my mouth is dying.
The name in my mouth is not my name,
The tree cup pharmacies in their branches.
I offer the sidewalk a tourniquet.
I pull the knot from my mouth.
I tighten the truth with my hands.
The trees thank me for stopping.
A green cross turns away, embarrassed.
Here, let me hold that blood for you:
I need something to do with my hands.
Here, will you hold this name for me?
I need something to do with my mouth.

Kandinsky distills forms from real objects and distances them from the physical world. Sandra Beasley also detaches objects from their original functionality and gives them functions that don't belong to them. For example, how can sidewalk die? How can tree cup pharmacies in their branches? It is unclear what meaning she tries to convey, but just as modern arts don’t aim at depicting a real event but instead leave bountiful space for imagination, Sandra Beasley successfully sets the tone for your feeling and leave the rest for your own interpretation. The scene is obviously at the streets, with concretes, sidewalks, and trees. It is full of emotional intensity and psychological malfunctions, as if the “I” in the poem suffers from serious anxiety.

Words like “knots”, “tourniquet”, “tighten” and “blood” spread a feeling of emergency. “I need” something to do with my hands and “I need” something to do with my mouth expresses pressure, stress, as if the meaning is lost and the main character needs something, or literally, anything to do with her hands and mouth.

She is good at creating paradox: “Once I asked a broker what he loved/ about his job, and he said Making a Killing. / Once I asked a serial killer what made him/ get up in the morning, and he said The people.” – Vocation

She is good at painting imagery: “For an hour I stood on two legs/ and ran. For an hour I panted and galloped. /For an hour I was a maple tree, / and under the summer of his fingers/ the notes seeded and winged away/ in the clutch of small, elegant helicopters.” – The Piano Speaks

She is good at arousing sympathy and empathy: “When they make a movie of this war/ I am minute ninety-seven, soot tears/ applied with a Q-tip, the one whose roof/ collapses on her head before/ her pie is done…My death is the clip they send to the Academy;/ later they will kill me in Spanish, then French.” – Cast of Thousands

Taking mundane objects in our life, and turning them into living creatures that speak, Sandra Beasley is not just exposing their inner voices. She is borrowing their voices to convey some meanings much deeper. Her languages are beautiful but poisonous. Those beautiful imagery is not there to just appeal to your visual and aesthetic enjoyment; It is there to satirize and to reveal something ugly. Without any extravagant words, or complex plots, or forceful narrations, her story comes word by word, line by line. The simplicity in her narration is in some degree close to the minimalism in art. With the least details, Sandra Beasley’s poems give you the most imaginations.

Diann Blakely says

Sandra Beasley’s *I Was the Jukebox* first allures the reader’s ear with its taut syntax and jazzy tonalities, often harshly assonantal. Brash and brassy, her sonics are at their arguable best when counterpointed formally, either by the sestina’s strict demands--“Returning to the Land of 1000 Dances”--or the looser ones imposed by unrhymed quatrains and couplets. Fourteen of the latter, all but one self-contained, which ends in a colon, comprise “To The Lions”; and here, Beasley amps up the tension midway with consonants that verge on aural assault:

Stop perhapsing--
the savannah will not save you.

Everything is dead or dying;
running or about to run.

Time to stop lifting the wallet
from the corpse’s pocket.

Time to gather your most

fuckable queens.

Isn't that the sun, draped
around your neck?

Stop this kitty kitty nonsense,
this apologetic yawning:

Show us why your tongue
is covered in hooks.

How will the lion, a stand-in for the often bestial male, reply to the injunction to stop stealing dead people's wallets? After all, he wields the greater power to harm: one moment, he may be cutesy, coy, and wanting to be petted and praised, but it is his tongue, not the poet's, that "is covered in hooks," presumably not the sort that cause any damage to the male lion himself. The word itself yanks us back to Plath's "Tulips," where the husband and children in a photograph the speaker has brought with her to a hospital room--presented as a peaceful and quiet haven from the noisy demands of domestica--are far more dangerous and frightening than the mere disruptive power of colorful flora: "Their smiles catch onto my skin, little shining hooks."

But if "To The Lions" shows a fondness for giving orders, Beasley also professes a love for demands, or "small tyrann[ies]," in "Another Failed Poem About Music." She relishes scenarios of submission--in "Vocation," the poet pleadingly offers to "file your 1099s / ...to make love to strangers of your choice"--and domination, sometimes within the same poem. Furthermore, if Beasley underscores her themes of constraint with certain formal choices, her frequent use of short lines and sentences results in a syntax that is terse and reminiscent of a drill-sergeant; or, to continue with the animal imagery, one might say reminiscent of a snapping turtle closing its jaws around whatever victim it has selected . In fact, many of her lines are single sentences of the declarative / S-V-O variety, as in "Fugue," or "You Were You," the latter serving as origin of the volume's title. (Remember that a jukebox takes commands and has a mouth-like slot for coins.)

Though there's alternation here as well: just as Beasley quick-changes from issuing dictates to wheedling a sense of mastery from an Other, an uncanny number of her poems are comprised equally, or nearly so, of these one-sentence lines and those that use enjambment, sometimes so abruptly it's as though a rubber band has been pulled out taut only to slap us into the line that follows. "My father was led away by a rope / around his neck. My mother / gave me the apple of her breast, / and I bit it off," Beasley writes in "The Minotaur Speaks."

The qualities described thus far are probably those that summoned Joy Harjo, who awarded Beasley the 2009 Barnard Prize, to praise *I Was the Jukebox* as "crisp" and "muscular." Doubtless someone else has compared its persona poems, which often have inanimate objects--including talking eggplants and sand--as their speakers, to Ponge's. But even before *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl*, Beasley's memoir of a life with allergies—which in her case range from the usual suspects like peanuts and mold to cucumbers—any astute reader should discern the melding of style and subject matter in Beasley's world, which is full of predation, various forms of food, and cutlery. Beasley's sand is "omnivorous," and her god "eats bacon."

In other words, Beasley is hungry like the wolf--or starlings--and her poems gain their power from that hunger, a feral nature combined with a need to cut free, and a relish in the American idiom. *I Was the Jukebox* contains many fine history poems, and these serve not as departures but vehicles for her most persistent themes. In "Antietam," for example, we learn that this poet's very body has taken into itself mementos of carnage: on a school outing to the bloodiest of all Civil War battles, a boy trips Beasley and

“gravel lodg[es] / in the skin of her palms.” Though the rocks disappear in a week and her mother says “our bodies can digest anything,” Beasley is quick to contradict this particular source of authority. “That’s a lie,” she writes. “Sometimes, at night, I feel / the battlefield moving inside of me.” Kill or die. Eat or be eaten. These are the United States, and these lines recall Louise Gluck’s declaration that "a woman's body / is a grave; / it will accept / anything." The precise title of the Gluck quotation? A sequence titled “Dedication to Hunger.”

for *Harvard Review*

Chelsea says

More reviews available at my blog, Beauty and the Bookworm.

I'm not a huge poetry person, so when "A book of poetry" was included on a reading challenge list, I was not thrilled. Because I am very ambivalent, at best, towards poetry, I decided to do something I don't usually do for reading challenges and re-read a book I'd consumed in the past. I originally read I Was the Jukebox for a literature course at my university, and I hung onto it (unlike most of my textbooks) because there was one poem in it that really blew me a way. Also, at under 100 pages, it was a quick read for an evening--I don't have the patience to break up and savor poems though that is, apparently, how you are supposed to mindfully consume them.

This book is roughly divided into three parts, though I quite honestly am not sure what the divisions are supposed to signify. But there are a few running "themes" throughout the book, scattered across the parts. There a number of sestinas, which I distinctly remember Beasley describing as poetry acrobatics (she came to speak in my class) because they use very precise alterations of word order in the ends of lines to create an ongoing flow. There are a series of "_____ Speaks" poems, in which the peom is written from the perspective of the item or being in the title, such as Osiris, orchids, sand, the world war, and the minotaur. Another series is "Love Poem for _____" which includes things like oxidation and Wednesday. And then there's the "Another Failed Poem About _____" series, which features things like music, starlings, or the Greeks.

While I feel that there was probably something lurking in most of the poems that I didn't "get," I might just be looking into it too much and deciding that I'm missing something when there's really nothing there to miss. Despite that, though, there were a few poems that really stand out in this collection, even to someone who's generally anti-poetry like myself. The main one of these is called "Cast of Thousands." It's a poem about a war, and how it affects people, and how the pain and suffering of war has been commercialized for entertainment and used to sell things--gyros are specifically mentioned. There's an incredible set of lines here: "They burned my village a house at a time / unable to sort a body holding from a body held / and in minute ninety-six you can see me raise / my arms as if to keep the sky from falling." But the whole poem is written as if it's about a movie being made, which creates this great surreal duality that I really enjoyed and found striking.

Another good one was "Antiquity," which is about how the people of the future will look back at our time and study us. There are also a few poems that have good comedic elements, such as one about a platypus and "Another Failed Poem About the Greeks," which starts out seeming like it's going to be some sort of epic, and then actually transforms into the story of a very strange date with Heracles. And finally, the last poem in the book is called "Proposal" and ends with this line, which just struck me: "Promise you're worth my weight

in burning."

It's an eclectic collection, with most of the poems being short--less than a page, for the most part. I think they vary in how powerful they are, greatly, but I think that it's a solid collection if for nothing more than "Cast of Thousands," because it's just such an important message and it's beautifully, achingly, powerfully done.

3 stars out of 5--it's a good collection, I guess, with some particularly poignant parts, but it's just for me overall.

Leonard says

This is one of those fine books of poetry that make reading all the not-as-good ones worthwhile just to get to a gem like this. One of the comments on the jacket describes these as "fresh, crisp, and muscular." I agree, especially with the muscular. I'll do something I rarely do and include one of the poems in this review.

You Were You

I dreamt we were in your favorite bar:
you were you, I was the jukebox.
I played Sam Cooke for you,
but you didn't look over once.
I wanted to dance. I wanted a Scotch.
I wanted you to take your hands off of her.
You were wearing your best smile
and the shirt that made your eyes green.
If you had asked, I'd have told you
her hair looked like plastic.
But then, my mouth was plastic.
I weighed 300 pounds.
I glittered like 1972.
A man tried to seduce me with quarters
but I could her his truck outside,
still running. I was loyal to you.
I played Aretha, Marvin, the Reverend Al.
You kissed her all the way out the door.
Later, I tried to make my own music,
humming one circuit against the other,
running the needle up and down.
The bubbles in my blood were singing.
In the morning they came to repair me.

This is great poetry and I really enjoyed this book. May even have to get my own copy some day. instead of just checking it out of the library again and again.

Valerie says

I group Sandra Beasley's poems together with Julianna Baggott and Aimee Nezhukumatathil--they write accessible poems that I really like to read. They are poems I would give to someone who wasn't into poetry, or someone just starting to read poems. They are straightforward, easy to understand, but still really good. I think these poets are great for poetry.

Beasley said in her book that a lot of the poems were written during NaPoWriMo. I saw a lot of them posted to her blog every day as she was writing them. I was so impressed by her poems, I tried NaPoWriMo myself the next year (I do it every year now. I love the weird poems that happen when I am forced to write a poem every day). In some ways you can tell that they were done during NaPoWriMo: there are a lot of poems with similar titles (The Piano Speaks, The Sand Speaks, The Platypus Speaks, etc.) There are also a lot of repeating lines in the poems. I am sensitive about repetition, and I don't think it was overused in these poems.

All the poems in the book are either one stanza, or are broken into stanzas of the same length. I think there is one or two that breaks this rule, but will have another orderly method of breaking lines (three line stanza followed by a two line stanza throughout the poem).

My favorites from this book:

Unit of Measure

The Piano Speaks

You Were You

Proposal

Laura says

Sandra Beasley was already one of my favorite poets before I read this book, but this collection is what puts her over the top 5 of my current favorites. I read each poem several times, savoring every unexpected image, and sounding out the wonderful consonances of her words. Reading it was a little like eating French pastry, each little piece so artfully constructed, so appetizing, and so flavorful and surprising. I read so many poems out loud to my husband as he was brushing his teeth and getting into bed. I just couldn't wait to share them. Now I promised the book to my colleague and wish I could hold on to it forever. I guess I'll just have to buy another copy. If you have poet friends who need a Christmas gift, this would definitely please them.

Michelle Tooker says

One of my favorite collections of poetry.

My review from Elevate Difference, below:

As a poet myself, it's inspiring to come across a writer like Sandra Beasley. Not only is she highly talented, but she's also a young, female poet who has already published two book-length collections and received national recognition and awards. In her latest collection, I Was the Jukebox, it's easy to see why she's so successful. From the first page to the ninetieth page Beasley blends refreshing imagery with unique diction. She mixes myth and modernity. She creates lines that float from the pages and haunt your thoughts.

"You Were You," which features the title line, is a primary example of Beasley's mastery. From "I wanted to dance. I wanted a scotch. / I wanted you to take your hands off her" to "I played Aretha, Marvin, the Reverend Al" you can hear the rhythm in her poetry and you can clearly visualize the speaker's life as a jukebox.

In "I Don't Fear Death," Beasley examines what's behind nature and life from a female perspective: "what I really believe is that / we keep growing: infinite corn, / husk yielding to green husk. / I look back on the miles / connecting me to Earth, think / I'd have never worn those shoes."

"Japanese Water Bomb" explores a relationship from both a male and female point of view. The subject of fragility is paired with Beasley's vivid descriptions and musings and culminates in an explosive ending. Lines like "How the difference between an igloo and a block / of ice is only the body sheltered beneath it" lead to the powerful last few lines "How the moment splits, / a mitosis of love and chronology: how he is / her present. How she has become his past."

Unlike many poets, Beasley effectively gives her subjects a voice. I Was the Jukebox includes a series of poems that allow things like an eggplant, a platypus, and a piano to speak. These poems make you stop and think "Wow, music really does seem to 'slide loose' from a piano," and "Why is it called a duckbilled platypus anyways?"

Poetry is supposed to accomplish all that Beasley's poems accomplish—it should make you think of something in a new way, it should leave you breathless, and it should follow you long after you're done reading.
Written by: Michelle Tooker, June 13th 2010
