

4. Jessica Bryant (Prof. John Roche) Creative Writing

Jessica Bryant was an A student in my Creative Writing: Poetry class winter term who produced a memorable portfolio of poems titled *Swathed and Stolen*. These poems are organized into three thematic sections, with provocatively opaque titles: “Defining Intrinsic,” “Sun-dried Blades of Thirteen,” and “Lost Liturgies.” At an age when most student poets are writing cliché'-ridden verses about love, self-loathing, and teenage angst, Jessica Bryant is producing sophisticated meditations on philosophical, religious, and scientific themes. Her keen sense of metaphor, her rich trove of words, and her willingness to experiment with forms as varied as the pantoum, the sestina, the villanelle, and the chance poem all make possible a most promising career as a poet.

But what the judges could not see (what you see I'm holding now), is the exquisitely designed chapbook Jessica created to house her poetry portfolio.

Another thing the judges were not able to factor into their decision was Jessica's strength as a performer of her poetry. She has become a regular at the Pure Kona open mic in Rochester, and, it so happens, is being featured tonight at 7 pm in the Writers & Books “Under 25” series. That's at 740 University Avenue if you'd like to come out and hear Jessica Bryant. She will also be reading on May 3.

I'd like to end by reciting one of the poems from Jessica Bryant's collection, titled, “It's Our Secret”:

the slumber of War's ruin

In faith, I believe well
that which turn'st me from hoping
the summer might yet come during winter.

and perhaps you believe me—
to be broken.

bed of desultory shadows and half
light where flickers of words and
glyphs on the walls tell the only tales.

alas, the warmth not left me,
I find winter to be a shield.
which protects against its barrenness.

One

One

which blankets the citadel you,
otherwise, believe to be in wretchedness.

where are the cracked walls?
which fissured head let in torrents
of white frost? which wounds

open

to the cold were this the cost?

In faith, they are here well.
white scars of ice score great walls
of stone. Yet, no more shall wind break
the fortress of these sacred halls.

where, beneath, under
the colorless tide, a quiet
flood of virgin hue is rising.
day it shall scream:

One

No more do I believe!

Defining Intrinsic

Waking

unfamiliar light is soft at unfamiliar angles
vantages untemplated, I think on a haze of angels

my feet are warm
am I lost in clouds?

stuck on the dim
side of –
who cares where.
I'm bedded in heaven.

a silhouette washes over intermitted grey
dawn is slowly fading white as I lay
fast covers drawn, not even awake –in haze
but shadows slow swift the impending sun.

a weight jars equilibrium
and ensues a slow rhythm

breathe, release,
tangled to deceive
which is mine –
I cannot tell.

hard shadows meet soft radiance and I
can barely recognize all but love.

Surviving Sin (Apologies to Adrienne Rich)

Parody of Living in Sin by Adrienne Rich

He had known the studio would never keep;
impossible to dust the furniture of love.
Denying damning, he wishes the faucet less vocal,
the panes restored to shine. A worn rug,
a piano with plastic keys, a cat
nose chasing beetle-eyes to shelter of saucers
he had risen from chipped moldings.
Not that at seven he should rise and writhe
under harsh slaving sun; that morning light
so blazing would etch and caress

flesh so deceptively yet demandingly pure
against his last night's sepulchral bottles,
and the milkman's tramp would beat his mind
sole envoy from virtue's mother . . .
Meanwhile, she, with a yawn,
stared at his dozen notes upon the keyboard,
denied it out of tune, avoided the mirror,
flinched at his beard, paced to fetch the dust cloth;
while he, jeered by the minor demons,
pulled back the door and made to the street and found
a pack to banish blazing flesh,
and returned to burnt coffee, straight sheets.
By evening he is back in lust again,
back on the mattress and hand grazing worn floor.
He never wakes to feel the daylight coming
sleep shuts out the milkman's rattle up the stairs.

So long.

A step and a raindrop.
The synonymous weight and brevity
cause me to pause.

Perhaps I am not alone.
If rain walks beside me as an entourage,
it braves another kind of weather.

Perhaps I said too much,
now the rain speaks.

It embraces as a greedy ravager
whispers to mock and humble.

Vivid images splash into my eyes.
Vision drops out of color
and into memory's revenge.

Maybe my voice was too loud
is that why now I can't speak?

Maybe my memory was wrong
does it feel it must compensate?

Can one lift their head—
to see the sky through dripping
locks of lost hopes.

Is it too clichéd to mention
shattered dreams?

I was too cold laughing,
now I'm shivering.

I forgot to fear unrestraint
and ended here, faint echo of a dirge
for a symphony never played.

A step and a raindrop.
The synonymous symphony drones
cause me to flee.

a year's morning

her hands and heart were no warmer than the hearth stones
on the elemental winter mornings, heat was scarce
Or perhaps the chill was merely sorrow

her day dress is grey,
the color of her eyes,
The color of stone

the hem shows neglect of washing
the dirt of floating through dusty halls and muddy moors
Soiled by catatonic wanderings of a broken spirit

the pig's pink is faded
winter's skies dull color
Especially her cheeks

months after April

Ballad

I woke, surrounded only
by indefinite darkness
shadows and lonely silence
whisper: 'we hold your heart yet'

without hope, rest falls barren
here at the end of all days
every effort could not save
my winter falls with no escape

finally this black sky has
settled into blue morning
I wonder as I watch light
on the horizon forming:

how long has it been since I
woke and knew not the dearth of
sick nostalgia for a dream
of the end of the search of

my April, lost forever
it seems, can beauty survive
cloud-filtered feeble rays
or last enough to revive?

letters by your hand will lay
tauntingly, cold, against mine
my favorite consonants
L and V, I cannot find

in their place a cold request
to which I can scarce reply
a meeting, a look at best
could I go? can I? should I?

I wonder, surrounded only
by indefinite regret
can you be the same as before
winter's course I rashly set?

light never betrays time here
so I count the moments and
perhaps never is better
to stay from my harming hands

I am haunted by her face
maimed by swaths of this torture
rationed cruelly to me through
only fleeting sights of her

though I again know the end
up stories of silence and stone
my window panes see you
but they view you alone

behind courtyard trees I peer
hoping this time we will touch
before you are snatched away
hoping for more but not much

acidic cold has not yet
stolen your fiery hair
or taken your warm heart
the last parts winter did spare

you turn, your fleeting face, I
see in my desperate way
you reach out and scream my name
loves' woe you, dwindle away

gone again, my April gone.
until I turn my eyes far
let you live in my heart, you
will ever be held in shadow

for time

Pantoun

my journal is turned
to open properly this time
make physical the quadrants of mind
words must not be useless

to open properly this time
the lines of scrawled script
words must not be useless
lest pencil marks wear away

the lines of scrawled script
must stay from prying eyes
lest pencil marks wear away
and sense fall from pages

must stay from prying eyes
the internal exposure of
the fallen sense of pages
with time washing by

the internal exposure of
honest reflection against truth
with time washing by
pales scrawled meanderings

honest reflection against truth
always distorts reason of
pale scrawled meanderings
from time washing by

will always distort reason
when feeling truth of self
from time washing by
my journal is turned

Candle

Shape Poem

the snow traps street lights at midnights, midair.
blinds never fully shut the world away. glares.
the panes awake, slats shaft light and dark. pairs.
harsh contour warps on the cluttered floor.
midway to your mind, my stare halts
fractured across a haze of faults
and more wonders. I never new this halting
feeling so well. fingers frozen, faltering.

the haze overhead is a frozen fractured sunrise.
time halts too. on the forgotten edge of existence
our perch next to darkness drawn away from the
causeway of light flitting against, flirting with,
teasing out, the idiosyncrasies of the white walls.
our white walls are flushed pale and cold. not at
all flushed but dormant, parched, departing, dis-
owning all pretense and supposition to color, not
defining or identifying inner with material strains.
Remember our wedding white These walls remind.

your fusion into dreams lasts alongside mine. mind.
flesh never fully shuts out internal infinity. twined.
refrains of our daytimes lull lullabies in breaths. find.
soft contour warps blankets, of snow, of cloth.
midway to your shoulder, my neck halts
fractured across a haze of faults
and more wonders. I never knew this mauling
sensation so well. faculties ravished. falling.

the still air interweaves dreams, I breathe in
breathe in your dreams. Dreams spill over and
into my mind. its waves wash in, eroding every
barrier. Waking is never the same shore, never.
tomorrow we will set sail at dawn. Miles from
yesterday, on our dreams.

but now the walls are calling, you are stirring, your hands
are not faltering and unrestraint is conquering hesitation.

Lets free the fractured sunrise from the sky and paint the walls with glow
of our morning. our own shores. paint them at midnight and map out what the
stars know

Defining Intrinsic

Porch

cleared paper plate sits on a glass table
shielding all but occasional flash of toe
pumping legs back and forth
never brush the wooden porch

shady evening chatter
under lattice nailed together
by young hands

four chairs occupied
around a citronella candle
invisible glow protects
sweating bottle of ketchup

music of the highway
humming of the pool sways
harmony of bird calls

a chorus of night creepers
rises in the woods to the
west where the sun splays
above and waits to be claimed

talk of funny dreams
and next week seems
and thoughts of Disney World

we were really going
in two years—under a clear
orange July sky too far to care yet
watching pink smoke trails of a jet

daddy said we would have to
fly to find Disney World
but wouldn't we hurt the clouds?

grown up talk is for grown-ups
and I never was very tall
lost among the streaks of light on
the grass, whistling of the thruway

mommy don't fold your arms
into the plastic chair—show me,
teach me how to braid my hair

daddy don't clutch your cup
and slowly sip feeble content
teach me how to tune grass
teach me how to read the star map

creepers chorus crescendos
as they seize the sun for lost
the stars shyly enter once more

the thin light's perimeter lights faces
wind, so warm, is a blanket
heads tilt back, locked, caught. but for youth,
I'd have released those priceless secrets

a lamp in the house ticks on
casting limits on gown-up eyes
as the stars drew ever closer

abandoned chairs urge me on
must go alone to a grassy observatory
ethereal instruments of irises await to
devolve galaxy-etched truth

Sun-dried Blades of Thirteen

and falling off the day too soon
until I learn my rightful part

three chairs sit in the living room
in a house of four people

the photos on the wall blend bland
smiles forced, distances terse and

according to the scrapbooks
I never made it past eight

my tragic death must be recorded
in pages since lost, pages I hate

television is humming while I lay
to sleep, and cannot find release

Wednesdays are for breathing
out on my own under the one
expanse of above and I
remember why I seek alone

Thursdays are for denying
symmetry between stagnation
and my existence. A paper due
today: I titled it 'Tragic Idealism'

my room is always closed
and closet always open

my desk always covered
and my chair always broken

my lamp turned upwards
so brighter light seeps down

my hands always busy
and my mind's corners drown

my eyes ever wandering over
purple walls and grease-pencil graffiti

Fridays are for sleeping
week past again in silence
and the words not spoken
will forever lull in my dreams.

A Broken Picture

Shakespearean Sonnet

When all the glass is lying shattered here
All hope, all strength from you wont be forgot
When shards tear at what I once held so dear
Reflecting on this paper what is lost
Cold memories remind me of your warmth
The shades of black in which you now lay
Cloud my eyes as I try to hide from this dearth
While kneeling here I waste another day
Suppressing tears as footfalls meet my ear
They fade away and loss consumes again
I lay my hands among the shattered fear
The glass is swept away with my lost friend
As all the shards won't fit the mold I made
I leave the memories here and lay down the frame

Swing Set

cold stone
little feet run
loose light cloth
hot hard concrete
avoid pebbles
to run across gravel
cool grass
squish and slow
the swing
almost there
a dog barks

to the ring of dearth tucked away? Allegiances
and alliances locked in spires and bridgeless schism
divides intricate flourishes in windowless panes. Hands
leaf and trek through leaves of parched paper worn
by time until the doctrine's flesh beats slow
and rings out of tune with the chimes.

No allegiance lies beneath the clouds on the ground so worn
the Great Schism cannot prey there. Interim so slow
the prayers forgot the very same hands buried the chime.

bombshell womb

languid heat
checkpoints stranded
desert expanses
endless pointless fences
stretching, extending, defending

green clad footsteps
strict shadows
marching martinets
heaving helmets

tread tracks
shifting roads
full stops
retractable traps avoided
steering, peering, leering

perch towers
craning cameras
trained sights
veiled sun-shaded busts

concrete breakers
swells of sand

drifting debris
barbed tumbleweed fence
suspending, stranding, strangling

colored banner
proud wind
empty exposed foundation
splayed spattered shots

wafting cloth
small sandals
sewn beads, dark braids
flouncing, skipping, singing

terse steps
swathed form
hands hidden
loving, nervous eyes
piercing, needing, leading

hoping for redeeming.

19

Its our secret.

Don't tell the world that I think of you.
They would be jealous of our love.
Across land and language,
from third street to third world,
color, denomination, space, race,
hands are hands to help and heal.

Don't tell the world what I do for you.
They already know about your joy,
they don't need to put a face to my love
that gives and trusts and knows
all you face is made better by my
single sacrifice to assuage your sorrow.

Don't tell the world what I mean to you.
They would never understand.
About your lonely mother's desperation,
about your too-short pants and insect infested room,
about strife and disease and mire-filled sidewalks,
about your tin house, about your moldy books,
about your eyes which don't understand words,
about your thirst. about your thirst for better.

Don't tell the world what you mean to me.
They should already know.
Your precious letters I cannot read,
translations of tears and sighs and smiles
I know you are eating drinking of a better world,
I can raise you on my shoulders to see the future.

Designing History

linear acceleration, velocity, channels of propagation
meet your image in my cortex in delta time

atoms, axons, neurons, neutrons,
quantum chaos and the order of electric eclectic thoughts

fabric, fluid, dimensions, time, substrate of the extant
our theories channel forward as Laminar Flows

moments of inertia, cosmic centripetal tension, balance precision
delicate calling of constants lets life live

waves, tones, refractions, reactions,
raise questions and hypothesis over intent and intender

space-time geometry, dilations, more debating out of books, a book
dissonance calls accidents nature's power

big bangs, complex inequalities, in the margins of

the first chapter printed on the thinnest sheets

scratch, algebra, lambda, delta, divide
greatest minds search deeper to find answers

is it too terrifying to consider, too terrible to ponder that
a phase ghost moved upon the face of the waters?

Listen, Truth!

Exercise

Its been a long, lonely night when the angels refuse to hark
little less than grey if the dawn brings no new start
interminable haze droops and transcends the stark
and into the realms of the indiscernible. Red spark
of morning is lost between layers of dusty parts
of sky. The dense white mire amassed, hovers,
not to be dispelled or relinquished—yet
as insulation to the world so wide,
as a barrier against time with its high,
expectations, not to be moved or set awry.

To parch the earth unfiltered, unconceivable.
A new start to spring on nature, unforgivable.
To lose part in rally against truth, irreconcilable.

Say 'hark!' to the great patriarch of suffocation,
and never lose light in translation.

Plaid Man

Experimental Sonnet

to chase a cloud is but to dream
in noon-time grey the head of haze
will mask the weary, you have seen
the orchard ripe a ready place
to stay and know life is at ease

repose on chalkline fences and
to walk and bask in ready peace
and climb the scaffold hand o're hand
for day-time, dusk-time, offerings
relinquish sage and Hippocrates
to cure the beast of slaughtering
and climb the scaffold if you please
to nail the branches to the trees
and catch a cloud to ne'er release

Maiden of Hældhan

Chance Poem

Gaps when nothing
dead died in infant
stages of sleep, again
her silver death
perfectly voiceless
celebrates this white day

slant age's table
toward the beautiful knife
and its company of lust
and punctuate each stab
with an idea, gather
shimmered recollection

Speak what her words
forgot and left—say
profound, brilliant words
to gloss and dress the straits
of River Narrow, waters high,
reflecting streaming banners

top terrace pool swims
beneath maiden's last vessel
mummer a prayer for her
passage down to the sea
when under her reign again,
perfectly voiceless we will be

Pursuit of Escape

Villanelle

to amplify the stars
aberrations refract onto skin canvases
and wisps of shadow melt into sky

the lone bird soars fleeing his only tie
to the betraying earth and into freedom
to amplify the stars

slant trajectory of landing to find
the new perch in cloud-mountains, where
wisps of shadow melt into sky

February's migration follows line
after line of atmosphere distortion
to amplify the stars

aftermark of open wings repeats
beating shadow to cloud havens
wisps of shadow melt into sky

skin landscapes watch for flutters
to put taps into and tag freedom
but watch how he amplifies the stars
as his whips of shadow melt into sky

Lost Liturgies