

Bruce Sager was the recipient of the
2014 William Matthews Poetry Prize

BILLY COLLINS, JUDGE
U. S. Poet Laureate



About *FAMOUS*
Winner of the 2010 Harriss Poetry Prize

A tour de force . . .

these poems are outstanding and moving,
crafted in order to reward us with new senses of perspective –
as only **exceptional poetry** can do. Just twice before,
in the many times I've judged poetry contests,
has a poet's work stood out as strongly as Sager's.
One of those winners is now a "major American poet."

DICK ALLEN, JUDGE
Connecticut Poet Laureate

Famous is a splendid introduction to the work
of this remarkable poet.

Excerpts can hardly do justice to the poems.
Given his characteristic **felicity of expression**,
a cruise through the deep with Sager
brings delights and surprises . . .
a witty, engaging and rewarding poetry collection.

GREG LUCE
Little Patuxent Review



About *THE PUMPING STATION*
Winner of the 1986 Artscape Literary Arts Award

The Pumping Station far surpassed my hopes.
Bruce Sager made me turn from being a judge to
embrace my role as admiring reader.
May this book meet many with hopes like mine,
so that its quality may reach out
and accompany their lives, as it does mine.

WILLIAM STAFFORD, JUDGE
U. S. Poet Laureate

The
Indulgence
of Icarus

Bruce Sager

AN OTHERWISE POEM

MMXVI



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ALSO BY BRUCE SAGER

FAMOUS
THE PUMPING STATION
NINE NINETY-FIVE

THE INDULGENCE OF ICARUS

*Show my head to the people,
it is worth seeing*

WHISPERED DANTON

*We should seek by all means
in our power to avoid war,
by analysing possible causes,
by trying to remove them,
though it would mean the
establishment of personal
contact with the dictators*

WHIMPERED NEVILLE



Always we take
the measure of a man,
but rarely, numbers
in hand, can say –
not with the furnace
blazing in our
faces – which parts
are news, which
parts history.
We cannot tell
weather from climate,
not until a cooling
of the ash.

The furnace
throws its shadows.
Like the sun.
But always we look
to the head, the face
of a man, in good light,
as though features
or physiognomy
might tell us something
he will not. Something
about passion, something
we share: to crave
is to crave the mutual.

We seek the very thing
he hides from us,
the thing he holds
in shadow.
We lust for it.

But some men
hide their heads
behind their texts.

Some men are
trees – a stand
of shadows.

Some men show us
all, conceal thereby,
the marble eternally
under the other cup.

It's magic!
squeals the child.

To conceal in the glare
of daylight: the greatest
pleasure of the con. Yet
some men con themselves.
A special breed of magic.

And so it follows –
Pride. Conceit.
Unwalled belief.
Feathers thundering
against the sun.
And below the sun,
a stillness. Yet moving.

Shadows cannot exist
in darkness. They crave
the light, it is water
to them. What was it
that he said, Danton?
Show my head to the people.

And thus it goes.

The sin of pride.

And so
a waning
of reason.

The pattern
is loss. The pattern
is loss. The pattern
is loss.

But one will rise
from the place where
another has fallen,
words blood in
the mouth. One
man. And then
another. And hence
a nation.

A man will rise
clothed in apostasy.
Clothed in shadow.
As men have risen.

And the cameras
roll. The newsreels:
that crackle and hiss.
And he will try
himself against
the sun. Again.
And the world
forget. Again.

The sin is pride.

And the world
will lie to itself
in many voices,
will be dishonest
as it is slow,
an unreadable lofting
and falling pattern
in which a door
may open
and some pass
through
and some decline
to pass

even as
the heavens
stand empty now
above this little man
mounting a barrel
by the park, and
a crowd gathers,

and the leaves
chase the leaves
in spirits high, blithe
too long by a beer
or two, too much
time and so much
circumstance,

a waxing

of rage,

and isn't that
just it, exactly? –

is this not exactly
how it begins? –

again
& again,
a little timeless nothing
starting up where
the last left off, saying
what must be said
to get where he
must be going, offering
lies like candies,
like Sacher and torte,
his hands shaking
behind the curtains,

yet smiling
as the curtains
part, wagging
his head, shaking
his hands
like a tempest now,
shaking the footings,
shaking the walls,
conjuring bogeys
where none exist,
fulminating,
execrating,

spoiling dogs,
coddling babies,
checking his hair,
catching his breath,
rolling his cuffs.

Crackle and hiss.

So perhaps, as men,
we must fall to our knees
in the end – and sometimes
farther, much farther still –
into an ocean, a deep –

our wages, these.

But perhaps as a nation
we fall to our knees
at the feet of just one man,
one man in the person
of a nation, a man
who makes a symbol
of himself and wears it
like a pulse around
his arm, tearing
at inequities, slashing
at our succubae, beguiling

the chambermaid,
the tailor, a man
who makes the worst
of the best, disdainning
the complex, disdainning
the real – disdainning
the side of the bed
our bread
is truly buttered on
ad captandum vulgas –
a man for the masses,

a man for the mob,
blustering at incubi
that never did, that never
could exist, blustering
like the winter's mouth

until we fire our torches
foamed of dreams and
fan out pitchforked
into the innocent street.

And at the end
of the street,
at the end
of the night,
a great hall, and
a thousand voices
one voice,
a thousand arms
one arm

raised to this
tub-thumper
eyeing himself
in the mirror,

and ever the swagger
to his walk, and now
a hunger to his eye
as he measures
the tiles of the ceiling
tin by tin
as though a ceiling
were a sky,

challenging
any and all
in a voice beautiful
and bare, a voice
that no one
can recognize,
a voice no one
remembers,
a voice no one
can quite understand,
the bluster of Danton.
The tongue of Icarus:

*Today
I am just this X
on your sky map,*

*but tomorrow
I shall have flown
beyond the sun.*

It takes the skills
of the boulevardier
to call out to the
billionth part
that smidgeon
of sky
against which
all hope
has flown.

To pinpoint
the madness
as it begins.

At its source.

It takes the needle
of science and ink
to name it so
deftly, with such
precision, such
knowledge of
the classic, such
appeasement and
such aplomb,

such a sense
of the mathematic,
a sense of draft,
not draw. And such
a sense of the
seismic: to come
home sweaty, shirt-
rolled, at day's end

to set down
with the milk
on the table
this nibble
of truth:

“Trust me
on this one,
honey,
I saw it
myself,”

“this” being
a suspension
of feathers, twice-
measured, floating
from the sky –
measured twice,
then twice again –
for what,
against the
creasing oceans
of time, is a simple
precaution, an
extra measure
or two?

And what
must it mean
to measure so?

Is this the way
he would be tracked
by the arts? A dot
on a sky map? Known

with ease,
yet impossible
to know? Do not
underestimate his very
great allure. Somewhere
an architect calls for
a larger T-square.

*Today
belongs
to us.*

Somewhere
an old man
stoops to a child
and sweeps her
from the perils
of the street.

Somewhere
upon the face
of a clock
the numbers
snake backwards
in the manner
of a serpent
bobbing its head
before the strike,
equivocating,

and decks spread
somewhere beneath
the feet of a man,
a common man,
a mariner's feet,
a froth dispersing,
bending their bubbled
planks to bar time,
stars for clocks –
clocks set ahead
for the rest of us
by the few;

and there is a mob
in the garden,
a trial by thug
at the garden door,
foreseen, dreamt,
yet startling, still,
by starlight.
A mortal
miscalculation.

The riffraff.
The herd.
The great
unwashed.
The proles.
The plebes.
The hoi polloi.

Their taste
for rarer,
bluer blood
refined and
quickenened,
in the dark,
to passion.

The death of passion
is reason. The context
of reason is daylight,

where the steps
to the Chamber
must be reckoned
and wrought, where
the mind must ponder
in its distraction,
as it ascends with
a mewling body,

the labor required
to cut, to move,
to polish and chase
so many blocks
so disobliging to the legs.
But reason is hard,
it tries the brain.
The spirit.
The feet.

So deadening
to the souls of citizens,
simple, direct and
unconcerned, intent
only upon their orders.
Upon their office.
Upon their duty.

And if steps in daylight
lead up, through a
measured conformity,
to some higher ethic,
steps in nightlight
lead down, being far
less wearisome,
and the warm arm
of gravity extends about
the citizen's shoulders
a cloaking crook
of comfort

promising a
redress
of ills,
disclosing with
a conspiratorial
wink, a nod,
a whisper across
the knuckles,
certain half-
truths about
passion.

Passion!

The context of passion
is nighttime, a process
whose midpoint
is hunger –
perhaps the hunger
of the state, perhaps the
hunger of the senator.
Perhaps the simpler
hunger of the page.

The boulevard
hungers, and for
no knowable reason
(and yet for every
reason in this world)
tongues are rayed
and words are raging
already upon
the walk,

and there is salt
in blood, and teeth
in splay numbers,
glass, the mashing
of the haberdasher's
display, glass on
the scissors, glass on
the books, glass
in tomorrow's sugar,
the rain pooling,

the pocked bricks
yellowing to stars
– yellow stars –
against a backdrop
of cushion and art
so far from the roil
of the street, and
then the knock
against the sidelight
through which
only the doomed
will peek

to draw back blind,
half-blooded and
well-schooled: and
boots upon the rug
father brought back
from the bazaar.

Against
the long swirl
of the stars, sprayed
wide as shot,
a curtain
of gypsy fire
consumes itself.
Stars glow brown
behind the fences.

Stars glow pink
behind the fences.
Stars glow blue.
Stars glow black.
Red, brown, green.

Blue Green Brown
Yellow
Black Red Pink

Yellow.

Chickens, in a coop.

Cattle in a car,
barreling towards
Chicago.

And the transport
gives way to a vacant
lot, gives way
to a crackle and hiss,

the bodiless voice
of a speaker, high
up, stitched to a pole
at shadowless noon,
a string of speakers,
an order of speakers,

a mistress hung
by a meat hook,
a million soldiers
milling in the rain,
one hundred women
in a naked field.

Time = 0 + 1

Nothing changes.

Everything changes.

Look now at the sky:
bare arms
flapping,
fluttering,
failures on the front
scorned as treacheries
for which there
are no words,
acts beyond words,
the throw of the glove
at the foot of the sun,
and the long drift down
as through a sea –

tea leaves, intestines,
bells and balls
of crystal, a telling
of things past, a telling
of things to come,
the song of
the haruspex:

and he sputters, in
a fashion, for a time,
this little man:
this hard bright flood
of genius ranges itself
this way and that
as young missy
in her mirror,

and in just this way
and no other, and
this is the beginning
of the end. This
is precisely the way
it starts. Arrogance in
the order, swagger
where there should be
effacement of self,

salt on the rim
where good taste
calls for the clement,
the measured
response, but the moon
will go round
and come back again
according to some
numbers on a chart,

the bells dole
their metrical din
over a birdless deep
upon which bobs
the shattered
casement of
the wings, the
waves unrelenting.

Diminished, displaced,
defeated at last,
what must it be
to slip away, to yield,
in the end,
to gravity, to sense
the fall of the blade,

to watch
the sea approaching
like a grave?

A broken casement
upon the waves.
A wash of feather.

This is the bell of impact,
the clang of conceit
closing like a cell door
upon a man who'd fly
beyond his skin –

perhaps his best hour
his last, this hour
of outflying himself,
this hour
of his nakedness,
foolish, bold
and undeterred,
and he the avatar
of what goes worst
in our dreams.

And we fall to sleep
by a record's
splutter and snap,
the music
finished,

the turntable
running its rounds
mechanically, routinely,
the transport
of crackle and hiss.

And much of death
in the transport

and many ashes
before his,

the cocksure body
sliding in death
beneath the failure
of physics, the failure
of feather and wax,
the failure
of the spider hole
and the pure
ascendance
of heat,

and the bells
give way to a vacant
lot, give way to what,
a crackle and hiss?

The bells, a music.
Music everywhere.
The elevator music
of table talk.
The careful grooming
of the children,
the generations
swooning into themselves,
those textured tunes:
the exigent music
of the spheres.
Cool and ferocious.

That crackle and hiss.



BRUCE SAGER lives in
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and serves as the CEO
of a technology firm
that supports the U.S.
intelligence community.

Being the rarest of

rarae aves

in such an instinctively
conservative society –
a political & social liberal –
keeps him on his toes.

His prior career
was in typographic design.

NIL DESPERANDUM