

Bruce Sager

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BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

1st Prize Awards resulting in publication:

2014: The William Matthews Poetry Prize
Billy Collins, Judge

2010: The Harriss Poetry Prize
Dick Allen, Judge

1986: The Artscape Literary Arts Award
William Stafford, Judge

Many journal publications, mostly poetry. Recipient of Maryland State Arts Council Awards in both poetry and fiction. And -- a good twenty-some years back -- a juried award from Baltimore City, presented by Mayor Kurt Schmoke. But I forget what it was called. Honest.

Available through Amazon, B&N, and other booksellers:

Famous was published in 2011 by CityLit Press. Well-reviewed by Connecticut Poet Laureate Dick Allen, who characterized it as a "tour de force."

The Indulgence of Icarus was very recently released by Echo Point. An epic book-length poem. (Sounds scary. Nah, it's an easy read.)

The Pumping Station. 1986 chapbook chosen by U.S. Poet Laureate William Stafford, who wrote lovely, generous things about it. Mercifully out of print. In fact, I buy up old copies and burn 'em.

Four new volumes -- one of short stories, three of poetry -- are (theoretically) forthcoming in 2017 via Hyperborea Publishing and BrickHouse Books.

First Saturdays

On the first Saturday of every month
he would summon us to the kitchen,
my older brother first, then me,
the linoleum tile already fitted out
with a used white bath towel
defending the floor for the occasion

and I would stand on that towel
in the small scattering of my brother's curls
stripped to my t-shirt and shorts
and look past his doe brown eyes
and the soft hairs on his ears

as he took a pair of sewing scissors
and a straight razor vintage WWII
and brutally sheared back whatever progress
my scalp had made since his last attack.

He said it saved the family money,
and money don't grow on trees.

It was quick, at least, speed is a mercy
in mortification, it took him no more
than six minutes to get through it,
though the teasings I took

in the schoolyard for my explosive
choleric jutting hair would cut
much longer, longer than the school
year, longer than my first marriage,
my second, children, jobs, longer than
the end of his life, outlasting even
this untamed bruised defiant line
that both confesses and consults the past.

Ithaca, an afterthought

Ten years
at Troy, ten years
upon the sea
among the islands

this was an accident,
you say? A chain
of misfortunes?

Actions scream
where notions
whimper.

The journey
was everything.

Life became a toting
of its days, took on
the shape of
battering waves.

Odysseus the Cunning?
Yes, cunning.

He made the life
he wanted to live.

He went where
he wanted to go.

The stars were clear
as the lines on a map.
And he was clever.
The seas were not
so vast. He could
have made a run
for it, he could
have made it home
one night's sail
under a clear sky,
done business.

Poseidon would have
looked away.
Anger recedes.
Poseidon would
have relented.

But a god can read
a human heart
the mercy was
in no mercy.
No happy
concession.

Poseidon gave him
only what
he wanted the gift
of odyssey.

Ithaca could wait,
his wife could wait.

For what
were Penelope's
withering paps
to the durable breasts
of the Sirens?

What was her fidelity
against the faithful clap
of rock and sea,
the enduring lust
of Calypso, Circe's
ferocious mouth?

A witch can tame
a human heart.

Of quest or desire,
quest. The greater
hunger.

The journey
is everything.

The destination,
the known thing,
no thing.

Hell

*Hell. It's where the devil lives.
The devil lives in the details.*

It's nothing that would kill a soul,
just the slow drip of a bad cold,
just the slow drip of a bad boss,
it's biting the inside of your cheek,
shit on the shoe, piss on the seat.
It's writing a check out to the ex.
A frozen screen, a frosted wife,
it's where the devil forks a life.
Hell is a meter about to expire.
Hell is two pimples before the prom,
two inches left of your dental floss,
the ding of a cell phone during sex,
it's orange hair and a nuclear bomb.
Hell is the reddest part of the fire.
In certain hands it's piano wire.
Hell is the Century of Inventions.
Hell is a rogue shaved with good
intentions. Hell is a mullet. Hell is
a rearview of red and blues, booze
on the breath and a missing wallet.
Tailgaters, line jumpers, louts and
loons, liars, losers, mutton shunters,
it's unguarded sneezes, misplaced
passwords, roadside cameras,
check-out chatters, ninnyhammers,
nitpickers, ninnies and nits. Hell
is something wrong with your starter,
a stocking run, professional martyrs,
blowhards, racists, pimps, poltroons,
the silent treatment, movie talkers,

it's thirty years of Johnny Carson,
public toilets insisting on change
and not a penny on your person,
not a farthing to your name.
Expresso. Supposably. Very unique.
Pilates sessions six times a week.
Ur on. Ur off. Ur lookin gr8.
It's drop down menus state by state.
It's bloody boogers in library books.
It's eating whatever your other cooks.
It's getting old. It's losing your looks.
It's getting up, not feeling great,
hardening arteries, softening bones,
hell is a swerve to your skeleton,
it's three calls lighting up your phone
 one from a lawyer with ugly news,
one from a lover who has the blues,
one from a douche at Microsoft,
his accent thick as pepper soup.
Hell is offers you can't refuse. Hell
is a three-headed dog at the gate.
Hell is the chance to obliterate.
It's a leaden foot and a golden shower.
Hell is the sudden loss of power.
Hell is a promise, a broken truce,
it's all of whatever has broken loose.
Hell is a marriage off the rails.
Hell is a bucket of coffin nails.
It's what it feels like when you lose.
Hell is exactly the hell you choose.

Simulacra

Now it is the time of shorter hours and fuming silences

Now it is the time of the Sandhill crane, once every five years
ambling though our gardens, our lives, but a constancy
to the visits, a fidelity, something to be counted upon,
however vaguely the arrival of the Sandhill crane
looking for all the world like the sacred ibis, but gauche,
gawky, disjointed, ludicrous, pinning beyond our doors
all that we hoped to keep from sapping our brio

Now the neighbors' houses are just spotted instances of light,
invisible through the tree line during the day, beaming at night
into our trees, their windows hanging like stars in the needles

The evergreens hold their steady line as sentries might, the pale
between our property and theirs, but ornamented incongruously,
the cold small burn of stars steady as the lights in the skies

There are hours I stand in the deep dark by the brushes of the trees
and peer through to the houses beyond, and sometimes
there are people moving within, and though I am not looking
for them, yet they are there, suggesting the warm, the normal,
as a glimpse of an airplane might evoke normalcy for someone
in a jail, as a flirtation might define the unchanging for a seducer

Now is the time of the ornamental grasses, grasses that grew lush and riotously wild last fall before going to seed in the end, riotously wild, party wild, standing in for us, the sway and silence of them wagging in the wind, a despondency, all of the unhappiness of abandon. Of being abandoned

It came to a head in the late summer, this one just past, the one that meant the end for us. But maybe not our last summer, not just yet, for endings can be long in the coming, the undoing of long habits longer than their making. But it is coming, and now is the time of shorter hours and fuming silences

And this morning, the unlikely and rawboned Sandhill crane that lives invisibly, prehistorically, very close to us, though we are neither wetland nor marsh country, though there are no rivers or basins in these dry hills, this morning the Sandhill crane showed up once again to tour our gardens, to splash through our pond, looking for all the world like the fabled sacred ibis, which, in ancient Egypt, was a symbol. Bird of knowledge. Bird of wisdom. But that was then. Later interpretations got closer to the point. My point. The death of beauty, bleeding, bleeding to death. Simulacra. I think there was more to it than that, even, I think the real meaning went deeper, spear deep. I think it meant bird of shame, bird of sorrow, bird of lament. Or should have