

Classic Poetry Series

C.J. Sage
- poems -

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C.J. Sage()

C. J. Sage is an American poet and artist, best known for her precise wordplay, internal rhymes, and lyrical poetry. Sage is also the editor of the National Poetry Review and Press. After taking her M. F. A. in Creative Writing/Poetry at San Jose State University she taught poetry, writing, and literature for many years at De Anza and Hartnell College. She works as a Realtor in Santa Cruz and surrounding counties. Sage resides in Rio Del Mar, California, a coastal town on the Monterey Bay. Sage has been a judge of the Dream Horse Press National Chapbook Contest since 2001.

Works

She is author of three collections of poetry, most recently, *The San Simeon Zebras* (Salmon Poetry, 2010). Her second collection, *Odyssea* (Word Press, 2007), is a gender role-reversal of the *Odyssey* tale retold in modern times. Her first collection is, *Let's Not Sleep* (Dream Horse Press, 2001). Sage has also edited one animal rights poetry anthology, *And We the Creatures* (Dream Horse Press, 2003), and one literature textbook *Field Notes in Contemporary Literature* (Dream Horse Press, 2005). Her poems have appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Boston Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Orion*, *Ploughshares*, *POOL*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, *The Southeast Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, et cetera.

Birdsong

I am eagle; don't be fooled by red silk
heels that sound so much like clanking clay
on hardwood floors where you and I one night
did lay when there was no heat left
to warm a chilling breast,
when your dense chest fell wet on mine.
I found a feather when you left,
it lay upon a pillow drenched in you.
Perhaps it was inside. It matters not,
as I have since then eaten it
and cannot prove to you that
it did, in fact, exist.

Before I'd ever heard your name
or pictured how you might have looked,
before I'd seen your constant face --
the one that waits inside dark eyes
to see if I can truly fly, or if instead
you might just plant my pinioned feet
into your waxy wood-grained floorboards,
making plumage turn to twigs that dangle
down a perfect fruit which you could pluck
from your soft bed while I grew old and weary
(but I was eagle; I grew light and wild) --
long before I'd brushed your flesh, these wings
had taken me to heights much higher than those red
silk shoes, those platforms to your dreamworld.

C.J. Sage

Bridge Ghazal

My love and I reside upon the belly of a bridge
with heartbeats of the sky?--the drums upon the bridge.

I've heard of songs that rise at night from pitch black oceans.
I've heard the strums of lyrics made by four hands on a bridge.

My love and I do landscapes for the gardens of the sea.
At night we sleep as seedlings at the center of its bridge.

Once I saw a Sufi breathe in seabirds, and send them out again.
I've seen people bearing blindfolds near the entrance of a bridge.

My love's old love, he says, had tried to douse him in a moat.
He grew gills to save himself and hid beneath a drawbridge.

The masters speak of magic at the middle of the rings
where Yes and No chase each other round the props of any bridge.

My love's new love, some say, makes far too much of things
as fundamental, elemental, as the structure of a bridge.

Anonymous submission.

C.J. Sage

Crisis Counselor

She was a coat of arms
seasoned for the job -- tough
and polished like tortoise shell.
When the women were tougher,
she'd tuck her advice-giving head
back against the executive chair,
let them try to fluff bent feathers,
watch them falling to their feet.
Then, her little turtle arms
would stretch out across the desk;
try to float a form --
a restraining order, maybe
a list of early warning signs --
but they'd keep on sleeping, sleep
hard through the sessions she'd spend
blowing on plastic ships, paper sails
rarely reaching port, and they would cry
like little children watching helpless,
dazed as she sunk their dreamboats,
sat on them, no coming up for air.
And perhaps she'd think of the little turtles
we'd kept confined to bathtubs as kids,
or of the public safety commercials
telling mother how, if she turned her back,
we could fall to sleep, slide and drown
in barely an inch of sitting water.

C.J. Sage

Fawn Ghazal

Inside a snowy blanket which put the trees to sleep,
I heard a fawn.
Out past the window's ice coat in the morning, I
found a sleeping fawn.

There are men in yellow kitchens watching hands of
brown-eyed women
while men in orange jackets dream in secret, of
capturing a fawn.

When I was younger I was taught, but have forgotten,
sweet timidity.
When I am older I will learn, by necessity, the
light-footedness of fawns.

Someone left a lily on my doorstep, eggshell white
with speckled leaves;
the card of introduction said the flower's name was
Fawn.

Sages wonder if it's possible for men to turn to
animals.
I wonder if they've pondered the agility of fawns.

Submitted by Joe Shields

C.J. Sage

Peripetia, Or Flowers For Everyone

How difficult it is to love the stupid
in ourselves, not to mention the shortcomings
of others. Each time I stumble from
a pair of platform shoes, how clumsiness

surprises! I'm astonished - even worse,
appalled - every time a shiny SUV
insists on jumping out in front of me.
How slow I am to understand the obvious!

I'm going outside now to gather calla lilies.
How strange it might be if I still had the brains
of a twenty-something Ph.D.-in-training.
The red ones I've been growing. And memory,

what a laugh, stuck between experience
and precognition - middle of a road
where no one wants to be. What a load
of magic beans that is. I mean, that is, disdain

for the middle of the road, not the precognition.
I know I won't remember what I said tomorrow.
Now I'm up a tree, climbed it with thorough
joie de vivre. Tell me, did you ever get the lilies?

C.J. Sage

San Simeon Hill Zebras

Drifters, if they could be.
Sometimes, when they think
no one is watching,
they near the barbed wire.

Hooves and hooves and hooves.
A silent choir, a mass
of muscle-held cellmates.

Their heads are full of high grass
and long shadows. They dream
of lowland lions grifting gazelle.

Behold the moiré bolting
of the chain-gang jumpsuits
—dust and dust and dust—
safe in their target-striped caps!

C.J. Sage

Sea Canaries

The small white whales in packs of pods
keep their pacts with us, the fated beasts.
They wail their songs and the water wavers,
and we who signed them waive our rights
to have them. Here is where they belong,
all right, and here is where I leave them:
their pale, bountiful bodies to the sea.
I see a pail of fish and I would rather
feed on palm wood than palm one up
to shed it to those seabirds. To bate the brink
of bygone beauty, I bring no bait. A thatch shed
on the shore would keep me closer. O idol
of the gulls and wingèd seagirls and idle guitar
players, paddle deep and far off from my kind
who peddle our wares like love-me-kindly petals.

C.J. Sage

The Egret Floating

I was suddenly back in bristles
when I saw the egret floating,
a stretched spline thrown down

or just knocked off. The threat
was to crack my code,
that back and forth convention

of the highway. From that throne
of all-leaned-back, the chute
was dropping.

Now a huge, drowsy brood
of snowies spangles the cove;
now the self falls absent from the car.

An unbroken seed-head.
Shoots tossed outward. A solar
system. To build planets here,

one forms galactically internal legalese.
The willows go mass-hysterical,
dragging their bodies down.

There is a teeter, and talk somewhere
of legal easement, and then a flush
of waves. Then it's time

to stirrup in and lean.
I am racing along. I am in the current.
I am knee-deep not stirring up the water.

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The Sloth

Her back is an ecosystem,
algaeic and wrapped
beneath a canopy's sun.

Arms forever up and out
above her head—she is
this tall. No height,

no dangers below,
will blanch the beast;
she sees no fear.

A fall will seldom kill her.
Nun ordained to pliancy,
she's slowness made devotion.

The monkeys run
right by her, skitter-shows
their onus; harpy hawks

with sudden plucks
plunge, their hunger flown.
It is true she cannot walk

—when basic need or poor luck
grounds her, she'll have to
pull herself along the muck

of forest floor. So she hangs,
even after life, from branches,
fool-like, face to sky,

her backward-growing
coat a woolish habit.
Even at the tops

of trees, she blends in.
She is cool, and shy seeming;

Her cry's a sure ai, ai.

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