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CHARLES SIMIC

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM
CHARLES SIMIC: A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

As this journal of contemporary poetry and poetics enters its 50th and final year, with issues 99 and 100, some retrospection is inevitable. Fifty years is a long time to maintain a "contemporary" emphasis, and one thing that has kept us going, all this time, has been the presence in each issue of poets not previously represented and, often, poets who are "discoveries," i.e. still working toward a first book and not widely known or published.

But continuity has its value too, and one small miracle, in my view, has been the loyal presence of poets who have been with us from the beginning and have continued to send work over that whole arc of a half-century: poets like Dennis Schmitz, Sandra McPherson, Charles Wright, and Jean Valentine. Some are no longer with us—Nancy Willard, Philip Levine, Shirley Kaufman, William Stafford, Thomas Lux, Denise Levertov, Russell Edson, Adrienne Rich—but they graced our pages for as long as their life and work permitted. Gratitude for this continuity and loyalty is inevitable; they have been essential to our success. But continuity has never become predictability or staleness. Our regulars have grown and changed along with the journal. Each issue, we hope, has felt fresh and lively. Meanwhile, on the "poetics" side we experimented with various ways of getting poets to talk about their craft, eventually settling on a pattern that involved reviews, by our editors and guests, in the spring issues and, in time, a symposium on one poet's work in each fall issue, the first one in 1979, on Wallace Stevens.

Which brings me to the subject of our final symposium, Charles Simic, one of those poets who have helped us sustain our continuity of excellence. The second issue (Spring 1970) contained two Simic poems, "The Other Life" and "Water." Even those titles act to signal an aesthetic that is at home with mystery while pursuing clarity and economy; they stand for a willingness to explore the unknown and unconscious life, a project that opens bold vistas, charged with wonder and wit.

Simic has continued to contribute over many years and issues, not only wonderful poems, again and again, but short essays (one on the image, one on insomnia) and symposium contributions (on
William Carlos Williams, William Stafford, and Emily Dickinson, in the last instance a poem called “Ambiguity’s Wedding”). He also joined our cohort of translators, with work by Vasko Popa—eventuating in our prize-winning Translation Series volume *Homage to the Lame Wolf* (1979, expanded 1987)—and Novica Tadić, *Night Mail* (1992). These books, still in print, manage to find new readers regularly.

Simic, then, has been an indispensable part of what FIELD means as we come to a graceful close. His sensibility, his integrity, and his evolving aesthetic have formed a harmonious part of our whole, and we are proud to celebrate that with this group of essays by fellow poets and former students (for Simic has been a remarkable teacher too, over many years).

The value of our symposia, I have always felt, lies in getting poets to say, as precisely as possible, what it is they deem important in their predecessors and contemporaries. One can learn a great deal from *Poets Reading*, David Walker’s 1999 collection of the first 18 of them, and from subsequent uncollected ones in the years that have followed. Eventually they will all be available through the online archive of the Oberlin College library.

Often our symposium subjects are no longer living, but when they have been—Merwin, Levine, and Valentine come to mind, as well as Holub—it’s been a pleasure to let them see precisely how and why their work is valued by their fellow poets. May that pleasure now extend to Charles Simic, old friend and, as Charles Wright rightly says, *maestro*!

*David Young*
CONCERNING MY NEIGHBORS, THE HITTITES

Great are the Hittites.
Their ears have mice and mice have holes.
Their dogs bury themselves and leave the bones
To guard the house. A single weed holds all their storms
Until the spiderwebs spread over the heavens.
There are bits of straw in their lakes and rivers
Looking for drowned men. When a camel won't pass
Through the eye of one of their needles,
They tie a house to its tail. Great are the Hittites.
Their fathers are in cradles, their newborn make war.
To them lead floats, a leaf sinks. Their god is the size
Of a mustard seed so that he can be quickly eaten.

They also piss against the wind,
Pour water in a leaky bucket.
Strike two tears to make fire,
And have tongues with bones in them,
Bones of a wolf gnawed by lambs.

* 

They are also called mound builders,
They are called Asiatic horses
That will drink on the Rhine, they are called
My grandmother's fortune-telling, they are called
You can't take it to the grave with you.

It's that hum in your left ear,
A sigh coming from deep within you,
A dream in which you keep falling forever,
The hour in which you sit up in bed
As though someone has shouted your name.
No one knows why the Hittites exist,
Still, when two are whispering
One of them is listening.

Did they catch the falling knife?
They caught it like a fly with closed mouths.
Did they balance the last egg?
They struck the egg with a bone so it won’t howl.
Did they wait for dead man’s shoes?
The shoes went in at one ear and out the other.
Did they wipe the blood from their mousetraps?
They burnt the blood to warm themselves.
Are they cold with no pockets in their shrouds?
If the sky falls, they shall have clouds for supper.

What do they have for us
To put in our pipes and smoke?
They have the braid of a beautiful girl
That drew a team of cattle
And the engraving of him who slept
With dogs and rose with fleas
Searching for its trace in the sky.

* 

And so there are fewer and fewer of them now.
Who wrote their name on paper
And burnt the paper? Who put snake bones
In their pillows? Who threw nail parings
In their soup? Who made them walk
Under the ladder? Who stuck pins
In their snapshots?

The wart of warts and his brother evil eye.
Bone-lazy and her sister rabbit’s-foot.
Cross-your-fingers and their father dog star.
Knock-on-wood and his mother hellfire.
Because the tail can’t wag the cow. 
Because the woods can’t fly to the dove. 
Because the stones haven’t said their last word. 
Because dunghills rise and empires fall.

* 

They are leaving behind  
All the silver spoons  
Found inside their throats at birth,  
A hand they bit because it fed them,  
Two rats from a ship that is still sinking,  
A collection of various split hairs,  
The leaf they turned over too late.

* 

All that salt cast over the shoulder,  
All that bloody meat traveling under the saddles of nomads...

Here comes a forest in wolf’s clothing,  
The wise hen bows to the umbrella.

When the bloodshot evening meets the bloodshot night,  
They tell each other bloodshot tales.

That bare branch over them speaks louder than words.  
The moon is worn threadbare.

I repeat: lean days don’t come singly,  
It takes all kinds to make the sun rise.

The night is each man’s castle.  
Don’t let the castle out of the bag.
Wind in the valley, wind in the high hills,  
Practice will make this body fit this bed.  

*  

May all roads lead  
Out of a sow’s ear  
To what’s worth  
Two in the bush.
"Poetry has been around forever," Charles Simic once observed. "It predates literacy and perhaps even the gods, who, some say, were invented by poets." Though he is no philosopher by training you might well say that he worries about origins and meaning for a living, doing so with a light touch, refusing to settle on anything like explanations or answers to his questions. In truth, at least in his poems, he is opposed to answers and explanations, preferring to reside in the realm of imponderables. A short sequence of his even bears the title "Imponderabilia."

Take his poem, "Concerning My Neighbors, the Hittites," a poem I keep reading and re-reading, and loving, without completely understanding it. Though its certain meaning eludes me, its certain pleasures do not. Somehow this poem, with its many perplexities, holds me; I do not abandon it in exasperation the way I might abandon another poem of such willful obscurity. Why?

For one thing, Simic's playful, upside-down logic is too weird—and funny—to be boring; there is an intelligence and a bizarre near-logic in every line which keeps propelling me forward: this line is nuts, but wait, now I'm beginning to get it ... maybe the next line will reveal what he's after. I want to read the poem like a riddle, which in the end will deliver a moral or a lesson or at least a narrative, if only I can crack the code, find the secret that will unlock its hilarious mysteries. But even as I begin to discern in my reading a possible key, Simic's practiced hand reaches over to grab it from sight and toss it out of reach.

What, for example, can we learn from the pair of apparently linked clauses which follow the opening line, "Great are the Hittites": Their ears have mice and mice have holes. Are the ears of Hittites the holes in which mice reside? And is this strange 'fact' proof of the Hittites' greatness? Did such wacky formulations once constitute an expression of balance and equilibrium in the world that is now lost? Were the Hittites masters of this state of mind? And was that readiness to accept such illogical formulations perhaps fundamental to the creative state of mind necessary for writing poetry?
I keep slipping into past tense, but Simic’s poem is resolutely in present tense. *Great are the Hittites*, the poem repeats and in turn we ask: Who *are* these great Hittites and what makes them *great*? And *where* are they, if they still *are*? The poem *pretends* to answer, demonstrating the truth of its repeated assertion by listing the Hittites’ many attributes. And it does so with absolutely plain language—as if clear language, used repeatedly in a clearly structured sequence of assertions and avowals—could banish enigma. In Simic’s hands, however, clarity is a ruse: we may think we know what we know—the diction could not be more lucid—he seems to be saying, but think again. The Hittites, the invisible but *present* Hittites—I still haven’t found one, have you?

Exasperated, but hooked, we persist, taking in what Simic offers as nominal evidence for his repeated assertions regarding their greatness. The evidence mounts in uneven stanzas with strict nonsensical precision. We scratch our heads and give in to the intrigue. Somewhere in that blessed space where the Tigris and Euphrates flowed—was that where they lived greatly? Did they pre-date the Babylonians with their hanging gardens? How about the Mesopotamians? Or were they elsewhere—in Anatolia, perhaps, where Turkey now stands? Weren’t they referred to in the Bible? The poem teases us with echoes of what we think of by now as historical certainties, so that we reach back to our sixth grade Ancient History lessons and remember, yes, they *were* great: they invented cuneiform (or did they?). Keen on communicating their spoken language, so our history lessons went, they developed a system of signs and symbols to do just that. Not just vocabulary, but grammar and semantics had to evolve to meet the demands of annotating the words used in speech. We are approaching an ah-ha moment—these Hittites, if they are the ones I more or less remember—they really *were* great. Signs, symbols, representations—how far a jump is it to the first metaphor and from there to the first verse? Were the Hittites our first poets? Of course Simic would never make such a claim, but his poem is, if nothing else, a tribute, and to whom would Simic tip his hat so insistently if not to the authors of the first written words?

As Simic’s poem marches forward, declaring with impeccable certainty his illogical proofs, it gathers momentum and spreads its
reach. It flings out a tentacle and draws in a cliché here, a saying there, but somehow on the way to absorption the acquisitions get jumbled and the old saws lose their familiar ring. “Two tears”—not stones—are struck to make a fire. “When a camel won’t pass / Through the eye of one of their needles / They tie a house to its tail.” Did they “wait for dead man’s shoes?” No, the poet answers with authority: “The shoes went in at one ear and out the other.” “Did they catch a falling knife?,” it continues. And did they put the knife in their pocket instead of the falling star we readers immediately supply? Wrong again, the poem answers, thwarting our expectations in gruesome detail. The Hittites were hardly star gazers. Using what resources they had—knives, mice-blood, sky (“They burnt the blood to warm themselves... / If the sky falls, they shall have clouds for supper....”)—against a cold, perilous world, in the end they nevertheless perished. So much for the power of language to stave off extinction.

As the poem winds toward its final turn, it spins associatively toward the edge of the abyss, then recoils. Soberly, it notices that the Hittites are fewer in number now than they once were. How they lost the battle for physical survival is a question which haunts but does not dominate the poem. The ingenuity of the Hittites against the planet’s harsh elements might have proved futile but through the written language they invented—their enormous legacy—they escaped absolute obliteration.

Simic, their accomplice, invents his own cockeyed language and, for the duration of the poem at least, resuscitates them, inviting us to play along by filling in the familiar words to the nursery rhymes and sayings he quotes. We might even write our own endings, but doing so come no closer to knowing the origins of this ancient people, their language or ours. Nor have we begun to apprehend by what alchemy words mixed in a certain way by the right author can work to reveal truths, or subvert them.

Even as it wraps up its celebration in a dark key, Simic’s poem manages to honor the Hittites’ gift of written language by employing it masterfully to house our lexicon of shared sayings with extravagant deviations as “Here comes a forest in wolf’s clothing” or “Don’t let the castle out of the bag.” Or “May all roads lead / Out of a sow’s ear / To what’s worth / Two in the bush.”
With a wink and a smile Simic demonstrates—but never argues—that knowledge is elusive and at best illusory, that language is a tool that can only take us so far in a straight line to understanding. It can, however, take us a crooked mile to the shining house of poetry. It’s a great ride when Simic’s driving and you’ll never know where you’ll land or who your neighbors might be. Look out your kitchen window: you might find it’s the Hittites making all that racket next door.
WHISPERS IN THE NEXT ROOM

The hospital barber, for example
Who shaves the stroke victims,
Shaves lunatics in strait-jackets,
 Doesn’t even provide a mirror...

Eats beans cold from a can
Then scrapes the bottom with a spoon...
Is a widower, has a dog waiting
At home, a canary from a dime store...

Says: No one has seen me today,
Oh Lord, as I too have seen
No one, not even myself
Bent as I was, intently, over the razor.
Marianne Boruch

“BENT AS I WAS, INTENTLY...”

Just to be clear: I straight out love Simic’s poems; they turn and rewind, then: look! And how skewed but normal (really?) his stuff seems, fated and hopeless and ancient and new. Of course it’s a spell, of sorts, and that’s joy, his surprise, his grounded weirdness. I’m writing this off the top of my head which I fear opens not like a sturdy envelope but an old Pez dispenser, a sweet minor offering because it’s late May, the northern hemisphere overwhelmed with the season’s standard amazement: trees sudden into leaf, flowers knowing exactly what to do with blue and red and yellow. Yay you fiddlehead fern! Un-curl thyself to sky and rain.

In 1968, my first year in college, with my last small gaggle of dollar bills I sprang for Paul Carroll’s anthology, The Young American Poets. Since then, I’ve picked up a second copy at a garage sale about which I was jubilant but disbelieving: how could anyone let go of that marvelous book? In any case and in that earlier fit of luck, I discovered Simic’s work. But I keep finding it over and over. That’s what it is to be in the good company of such a stranger. You forget, then abruptly remember how cool that continues to be.

All this is to say—the choice of only ONE poem to consider? I realize that’s the drill in these beloved symposia over the years but... Are you kidding me? I kept rereading rather desperately for days, rattling each collection like a box as if a single dazzlement might fall out, a perfect tooth left behind by the fairy. A sign.

I thought I wasn’t asking much. But outside the ferns too are hard to figure. I understand they grow, yet they appear to be a series of stills overall, mysteriously altered each morning, ferns to straighten and expand as days pass deeper into spring. Not exactly a flip book, but how on earth did this happen? If I picked one, if I dragged out my little fieldbox of watercolors to nab one on paper....

All these terrific poems of Charles Simic for decades: how to do that stare-into walkabout thing with only one? Nope, that’s it. Sorry. I’ve gone rogue. I’m cheating with a couple of teasers first.

There’s “Brooms,” always lying in wait for me inside a book with one of the world’s great titles, Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk:
Only brooms
Know the devil
Still exists,

That the snow grows whiter
After a crow has flown over it,
That a dark dusty corner
Is the place of dreamers and children,

That a broom is also a tree
In the orchard of the poor,
That a hanging roach there
Is a mute dove.

That's section one, and early in his life's work, but every bit of Simic is here: his way with personification (how does he do this, minus sentimentality?), his high-contrast fabled detail—that crow against snow, those corners where we all want to dream off. Here a broom equals tree for some, the roach as needed as a dove. Public and private. World within world within world at an angle. Nothing's merely whatever it is. The dove gets strange too—its well-known song "mute" but emphatic single stresses underscore, to still the heart. This poet hears things, regardless.

Forgive me. I'm going overboard. But this is Simic, for god's sake. Young poets have heroes. He was definitely one of mine forty years ago. Now too. But back there in my own stone age, he was one reason I started to write poems at all.

Another favorite. From his third book, Dismantling the Silence, the poem "To All Hog-Raisers, My Ancestors" which is wry and serious, crazy-moving somehow, and I like to imagine it speaks of part of my gene pool too, those wily Eastern Europeans who got here cheap, in steerage, or never left the old country at all. On and on about their "solemn business" of eating pork, the sense of "land they worked on." (Note: "worked on," never "owned.") Then from a list-serv so familiar (plus honest, plus unnerving), those "Turnip-headed drunks, horse-thieves, / Lechers, brutes, filthy laborers ..." back there in the muddy human seed bank. Welcome to the most unset-
tling family reunion ever. Welcome to Simic. But still, it enters: the oddest uptick of ambition, plus more trademarks: shady, matter-of-fact, hilarious.

If I add garlic to my pork
It is for one who became a minister,
Who left the land, city-bound,
Changed his name, never to be heard of again.

But I will cave, and run a single poem through the x-ray machine for ghostly halos and shadows in spite of whatever seeming clarity marks this work, however its streetwise detail charms us so directly. Thus "Whispers in the Next Room" from *Classic Ballroom Dances*.

First the title, those "whispers" we lean toward, and overhear—which is one of Auden’s claims about poems that I’ve always loved and keep bringing up until people want to gag me. The word itself "whispers" with a stifled S twice to damp-down the who or how many are speaking that low. The backdrop complicates with "...the Next Room" (my italics). Given the whispering—an exchange somehow? A conversation?—is it really only the ghost of future or past, a wisp of cloud or smoke? Frost too is here, his valuable notion about tracking "sentence sounds" and his thoughts about poet-as-listener behind a door or in the same room eavesdropping on the end of a phone call with its pause and pause, its wind-down, a kind of music broken for both ear and page. Simic, so regularly smitten with a declarative syntax and his stubborn-paced out-of-fashion quatrains, seems keyed from the get-go to a measured sound, often on repeat. Certainly there’s more of poetry’s history in such spatial and formal distancing—"The women come and go, / Talking of...." Well, you-know-who, and who famously keeps telling us that. With Simic’s speaker, we are positioned in some eternal time zone, head to the side, absorbing everything too. But all bets are off in this piece that enacts the mystery of origin and the self.

As with his "turnip-headed drunks," Simic uses character here to tap what feels an old story which makes for a quirky empathy. He writes tiny fables really, book after book populated with vignettes
and figures as odd as they are familiar, at times unsavory. This protagonist, though, I looked him up: barbers have been shaving people since at least 3000 BCE. Think the natty ancient Egyptians at the very least, hair on every part of the body cut close as if they could slippery-slip back one day into the womb toward a glorious afterlife. Way before that, with sharpened clamshells under some stony overhang, those almost-human in their Neanderthal slump were apparently shaving something too. This poet begins quite specifically though—

The hospital barber, for example  
Who shaves the stroke victims,  
Shaves lunatics in strait-jackets,  
Doesn't even provide a mirror...

Picture it. Hardcore image as horrific commonplace. That's Simic, his eye dark and brief, the layering built with offhand care. Taking his time, the poet gives us more on this barber until we have what fiction writers like to say is a “narrative arc” and poets like to say “okay, a progression, I give you that.” We strain to hear, curious about this figure who does come to us first as mere “example” somehow arriving midstream, a proof of something. But what? Soon enough his backstory kicks in via shorthand notes or a list of statements that never quite end (instead those breathless, savoring, shrugging ellipses), cast in lines with the subject largely implied, silently carried-over but less and less an afterthought for instance added to the title. He emerges as the main presence “who shaves” then “Eats... ...Then scrapes... Is... Says...” to make one long dangling sentence of the poem, engineered to keep going by pause and lurch. This barber

Is a widower, has a dog waiting  
At home, a canary from a dimestore...

A dimestore! Cherished site of childhood drama and being. The word opens up a semi-sacred place where “helmeted divers plummet,” wrote Laura Jensen once about its back wall of murky
tanks and shining fish some of us might recall, then drift off in the remembering—

I digress, but poems call across world and time to each other, exactly what should happen via their separate dream and parallel orbits.... Plus, Simic’s canary! I’d argue it is genius to recover that creature, to suggest a small, gold-singing insistence that could drive you nuts.

Meanwhile, the poem’s ordinary steadfast barber, home now, is down to supper—

Eats beans cold from a can,
Then scrapes the bottom with a spoon....

Hear it? The whispering might well include the slow meticulous drag of the metal every hand and hunger know well. The get-it-all, every bite, is desire, a minimum elegant gratitude for even what little this world offers. The vanishing ellipses in both cases mean please, never cease, O dime store, O spoon.... So we witness this fellow at work, and at home, but it’s these plain-song side notes, simple images that nail poignancy, the disturbing dearest bits. (Connect, connect says the poem, forever echoing Forster, bringing his well-loved dictum-unto-cliché to life.)

They hover in the wings, the damaged one in his strait-jacket, the stroke victim still hanging around, another neuro-lightning bolt threatening any second, both men unable to see what they’ve come to, no mirror, no way. Because the barber isn’t completely silent. He speaks the last stanza to—us? to himself? to the dead? The disguise is prayer, meaning loss and invocation and ache as he

Says: No one has seen me today,
Oh Lord, as I too have seen
No one, not even myself
Bent as I was, intently, over the razor.

So we also lean and hover exactly how that barber did what he got paid to do. It’s Simic again, keeping everything as is by the unsaid but suggested, the darkest dark going inward to lodge there.
Close is far, to look up is key. First and finally what do we know of anything? Maybe poems at heart are moral tales, thus a reduction. I hope not. But we disappear in them to find out something, and at times live there for days and weeks of mulling. That’s Simic’s haunted grace.
ONCE I KNEW, THEN I FORGOT

Once I knew, then I forgot. It was as if I had fallen asleep in a field only to discover at waking that a grove of trees had grown up around me.

"Doubt nothing, believe everything," was my friend’s idea of metaphysics, although his brother ran away with his wife. He still bought her a rose every day, sat in the empty house for the next twenty years talking to her about the weather.

I was already dozing off in the shade, dreaming that the rustling trees were my many selves explaining themselves all at the same time so that I could not make out a single word. My life was a beautiful mystery on the verge of understanding, always on the verge! Think of it!

My friend’s empty house with every one of its windows lit. The dark trees multiplying all around it.
It may be important to remember, as one critically considers this poem by Charles Simic, that it appears in a book of prose poems which was awarded, much to the chagrin of the neo-formalists of the day, some of whom even spoke out in protest at the time, the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. This is not an unimportant literary event for the way this collection helped to elevate the long-orphaned form of the prose poem into real literary distinction in contemporary American poetry, and because of Simic's highly imaginative take on the form—philosophical fables tinged with the achingly real—he opened doors for other writers who responded with their own variety of versions of the form, illustrating its many formal possibilities which range from early Chinese tales and Biblical Psalms to cartoon-like Russell Edson's oddly tilted world, with an exhaustive variety of styles and takes written by distinguished writers for thousands of years in between. Thinking about it now, it seems a remarkable feat to me that one book could have such a dramatic impact on poetry, but it did, and the controversy surrounding its selection as the Pulitzer Prize winner only drew more readers to its pages. That's a Simic-like irony.

"Once I knew and then I forgot" is like the beginning of a chant, or a sutra: Once I knew and then I forgot, or you could say: once I didn't know, but know I know; it is that kind of knowing, exclusive to those who are willing and able to let go of all sane assumptions and matters of ordinary logic, that the narrator speaks of here. Also, with this simple beginning the narrator establishes himself as a source of deep understanding, and it's critical not to take this simple beginning lightly but to recognize that everything else in the poem is set in motion by that singular paradox. But then almost without notice comes the phrase "it was as if," which serves as an enormous qualifier for all the magic and mystery that happens throughout the rest of the poem. This is an illustration of Simic's distinctly original way of locating us in an otherworldly landscape, a landscape between things: between light and dark, good and bad, between knowing and forgetting in this case. We begin the poem then on a carpet that is being pulled out from under our feet. The trees are not remarkable in themselves but by the fact that they grew in a grove around him while the
narrator slept. But just when we think we may have discovered his method in the form of a magical realism—our world, only in which magic things happen—the narrator provides us with a metaphysics instead which says, “Doubt nothing, believe everything,” the idea forged by a friend whose brother had run away with his wife. All that information comes in only two short sentences and is juxtaposed in a way that allows for the simultaneity of past, present, and future, a heart-stone of Simic’s poetic art.

However prosaic the form, there is still a kind of prosody at work here as well, especially when you consider Simic’s notion of prosody as “a range of musical options,” which he taught to me as his student over forty years ago. These juxtaposing images have a somewhat jarring effect when you allow them to sink in for a moment, and the remarkable way the poet has of reducing enormous ideas to simple phrases is also a musical gesture in music’s widest consideration, especially when read out loud. These structural devices allow for the feeling of an accumulated weight as we make our way down the poem as well. A description of the fate of the jilted philosopher ends what is the first part of the poem. This poor man continues to honor his cheating wife with a rose every day and sits in his empty house imagining that he talks to her about the weather for the next twenty years. What kind of fate is that, and what motivates it in the poem, are fair questions. One explanation is that his actions are pure illustrations of his philosophy of doubting nothing and believing everything. The man buys his wife a rose every day because he doubts that she really left him, and he waits and imagines he speaks to her for twenty years because he believes she will come back. Besides, in Simic’s world that doesn’t end, there occur powerful suspensions of time, not wholly unlike those in Wordsworth, in which the poet is able to hold still for an achingly long moment the crisis of any situation so that we may see and feel it most fully. In this case it is the domestic crisis that takes the stage.

In the poem’s second half (my division; the prose is broken only by paragraphs), the narrator shifts back to himself, introducing yet another paradox that says, “the rustling trees were my many selves explaining themselves all at the same time so that I could not make out a single word,” a phrase which also includes a not so subtle cri-
tique of post-Freudian analysis. The narrator had been dozing in the shade and dreaming that because of his inability to identify the words, his life "was a beautiful mystery on the verge of understanding, always on the verge! Think of it!" It is almost too easy to get drawn into allegory hunting here, and instead I prefer one critic's description of Simic's artistic gesture as one that involves using layers of the literal to tell a fully-dimensional version of things in the world, because that's exactly what's at work here, I believe. This passage is engaging, jarring really, largely because of the fact of its possibility, its literalness. The ending functions in much the same way. We should hear it again: "My friend's empty house with every one of its windows lit. The dark trees multiplying all around it."

It's not complicated. The poem is based on that idea encountered in myths and fairy tales that says that once we knew the great truth (before we were born, or in some inspired moment of our lives) but then we forgot it. The narrator of the poem thinks so. His unhappy and jilted friend seems to concur. He doesn't need evidence to believe in the beautiful myth that his wife hasn't left him. The narrator leaves the poem as if he was leaving the stage during a play, then returns to say in effect how wonderful it is to think of one's life as a mystery on the verge of understanding. It makes even an empty house and the rustling of trees that surround it full of meaning and beauty.
MY SECRET IDENTITY IS

The room is empty,
And the window is open
Charles Wright

CHARLIE IN THE MAGIC FACTORY

Out in the wild blue yonder
Learning the song of the lark
Or shut inside the wardrobe
Scribbling away in the dark

_Ti saluto, Maestro, ti saluto_
I left parts of myself everywhere
The way absent-minded people leave
Gloves and umbrellas
Whose colors are sad from dispensing so much bad luck.

I was on a park bench asleep.
It was like the Art of Ancient Egypt.
I didn’t wish to bestir myself.
I made my long shadow take the evening train.

“We give death to a child when we give it a doll,”
Said the woman who had read Djuna Barnes.
We whispered all night. She had traveled to darkest Africa.
She had many stories to tell about the jungle.

I was already in New York looking for work.
It was raining as in the days of Noah.
I stood in many doorways of that great city.
Once I asked a man in a tuxedo for a cigarette.
He gave me a frightened look and stepped out into the rain.

Since “man naturally desires happiness,”
According to St. Thomas Aquinas,
Who gave irrefutable proof of God’s existence and purpose,
I loaded trucks in the Garment Center.
A black man and I stole a woman’s red dress.
It was of silk; it shimmered.

Upon a gloomy night with all our loving ardors on fire,
We carried it down the long empty avenue,
Each holding one sleeve.
The heat was intolerable causing many terrifying human faces
To come out of hiding.
In the Public Library Reading Room
There was a single ceiling fan barely turning.
I had the travels of Herman Melville to serve me as a pillow.
I was on a ghost ship with its sails fully raised.
I could see no land anywhere.
The sea and its monsters could not cool me.

I followed a saintly-looking nurse into a doctor’s office.
We edged past people with eyes and ears bandaged.
“I am a medieval philosopher in exile,”
I explained to my landlady that night.
And, truly, I no longer looked like myself.
I wore glasses with a nasty spider crack over one eye.

I stayed in the movies all day long.
A woman on the screen walked through a bombed city
Again and again. She wore army boots.
Her legs were long and bare. It was cold wherever she was.
She had her back turned to me, but I was in love with her.
I expected to find wartime Europe at the exit.

It wasn’t even snowing! Everyone I met
Wore a part of my destiny like a carnival mask.
“I’m Bartleby the Scrivener,” I told the Italian waiter.
“Me, too,” he replied.
And I could see nothing but overflowing ashtrays
The human-faced flies were busy examining.
“St. Thomas Aquinas” is my favorite poem in my favorite Simic book, *The Book of Gods and Devils*. The poem is so deceptively casual, loping along at a picaresque pace, a seemingly autobiographical tour of the poet’s early days in New York. All that detail, sketched out and assembled in such off-beat and bewitching sequence—it’s a kind of narrative cartooning, and it reminds you of how Simic has always admired the artist Saul Steinberg, one of whose pieces is on the cover.

But the storytelling is a wonderfully entertaining sleight of hand, a cover for the subversive logic Simic puts in play—the poem wants to transform loneliness into an unexpected gift, and memory into an adventure of the imagination. Has anyone alive written better about our essential solitude than Simic? I doubt it. His tone here, as elsewhere, is soaked in a cocktail of ebullient melancholy, dark humor and waking dream.

It was that tone as much as anything that excited me when *The Book of Gods and Devils* came out in 1990. To be honest, I’d lost track of Simic’s poems for a while at that point. His work had been among my early loves when I started writing poetry in the mid-’70s, the antic but somehow dryly composed sideshow of all those images and metaphors he would set in motion. I may have wanted to escape their influence—certain poets can overcome and smother you if you aren’t careful, the idiosyncrasies of their style something to be resisted as much as instructed by. You don’t have to buy into Bloom’s theories about “the anxiety of influence” to get this; all you have to experience is the pinching or bagginess that occurs when you try on someone else’s shirt and pants.

Maybe too I was still a bit under the spell of Robert Pinsky’s argument with “neo-surrealism” and “Deep Image” in *The Situation of Poetry*. (Has anyone been as wittily dismissive, elegantly precise and wrongheaded reductive as Pinsky when he wrote of the period style of the late ’60s/early ’70s that it represented “a kind of one-of-the-guys surrealism”?) In any case, my own work had moved in the direction of narrative and discursiveness in the ’80s. My heroes then were writing big, psychologically acute poems of self-investigation (C. K. Williams) or big, essayistic, speculative meditations (Hass).
But by the time I read *The Book of Gods and Devils*, as I was finishing my second book, I was getting tired of all the discursiveness, hyper-realistic narrative, and willfully earnest attitudes that seemed everywhere in American poetry. I was certainly sick of it in my own work.

I remember, about that time, reading and re-reading Tomaz Šalamun’s *Selected Poems*, which Charlie had edited for Ecco. I think this obsessive-compulsive reading had two effects: one was that it led me back to Šalamun’s influences, the European avant-garde and the New York School, and the other was that by some circular path I found myself reading Simic again.

Favorite books are favorite books for the most personal of reasons. When I first read *The Book of Gods and Devils* I was closing in on forty, the end of my long American adolescence. My daughter would be born soon; I had a mortgaged home in a gentrifying neighborhood of Cambridge; I’d established myself in the dense, hierarchical world of Boston poetry, and I’d become a contributing editor at the *Harvard Review*; the demands and rewards of teaching had grown more serious too. It was all vaguely disquieting. I felt a split in myself, between the life in my head and the roles I played in the world. Maybe it’s more accurate to say I was becoming more and more aware of this split, and that it had always existed. I felt like I was carrying around this enormous solitude inside me wherever I went.

Something similar seems as if it was playing itself out in *The Book of Gods and Devils*. In Simic’s work of this period, there is a continual dialogue between one man with his feet planted shakily in the social world and another sitting deep inside the cloud of the inner life. The comic patter feels like it comes mostly from the social man. But if the comedy starts out as a way of finessing the consequences of solitude, the solitude often ends up turning the tables on Simic, as at the end of “St. Thomas Aquinas,” with its wretched little visitation: “And I could see nothing but overflowing ashtrays / The human-faced flies were busy examining.”

The beginning of “St. Thomas Aquinas” nods in the direction of a certain kind of absent-mindedness, the byproduct of this split self. The first line is anecdotal, but the metaphor that forms the rest of the stanza turns into a kind of “process image” for the life of a writer or artist. Simic starts by telling us how he left “parts” of himself every-
where in his early days in New York; but in a sense he’s been leaving parts of himself everywhere for decades—what else is the making of poems anyhow?

Each stanza that follows wants to illustrate by way of anecdote what it feels like to take your porous eighteen-year-old soul to the big city; but the fantastic logic that delivers each episode to us creates bulges in space and time, and the characters turn out to be creatures who have embarked on discrete adventures in a city of the mind: “it was like the Arts of Ancient Egypt,” “we give death to a child when we give it a doll,” “it was raining as in the days of Noah,” “I had the travels of Herman Melville to serve me as a pillow.” Simic’s timing in these stanzas is impeccable, and worth a semester’s study in the poetry schoolhouse (should you be interested). The pattern repeats and extends itself, the telescoping events becoming more and more eccentric and elaborate.

The imagination is heroic in the poem—it is the hero of the poem—but so is the spirit of New York circa 1960. The poem is an example of what Robert Bresson called “an autobiography of the inner life,” but it’s also about how a place and its mood, its history and ghosts, radiates that inner life. Simic isn’t the only writer to register this. The New York of “St. Thomas Aquinas” is resonant for me with the New York that Bob Dylan describes in his “memoir,” Chronicles, Volume One, where the place that he arrived at from Minnesota in 1961 seems a city in which the 19th century still lingers in many nooks and crannies. Or try this, from Lucia Berlin’s autobiographical short story, “So Long,” set in the same time period, when the narrator and her children are living in a loft whose heat is shut off at night and on weekends:

One night it was bitterly cold, Ben and Keith were sleeping with me, in snowsuits. The shutters banged in the wind, shutters as old as Herman Melville. It was Sunday so there were no cars. Below in the streets a sailmaker passed, in a horse-drawn cart. Clop clop. Sleet hissed against the windows and Max called. Hello, he said. I’m right around the corner in a phone booth.
Well. They had phone booths in those days, one wants to say. Such a thing seems as much a phantasm now as that sailmaker.

In a piece called "Shorts for Simic," Seamus Heaney locates Simic's gifts with typical succinctness: "There's always that sense of a cellar life going on under the ground floor." The mystery of that "cellar life" has been arrived at by an act of translation: Simic has transformed his immigrant self into a character that is equally rootless but archetypically American in its manner of speech.

In "St. Thomas Aquinas," one part of that manner involves a certain self-conscious artifice at times. I love how Simic plays patches of romantic rhetoric off the storyteller's more mundane vernacular: "upon a gloomy night with all our loving ardors on fire," "it was of silk," "the sea and its monsters could not cool me." He's picked up these phrases somewhere along his winding way, and they're like a kind of costume. This costuming is necessary. You feel the way an exchange is being worked out: we leave behind parts of our selves, and pick up other identities. It's the project of youth, stranger in a strange land. You explain yourself to others, not to mention yourself, by taking on assumed identities. It's like Jung's phantasmagoria of characters in a dream: who you encounter is who you are: "Everyone I met / Wore a part of my destiny like a carnival mask."

"Who am I?" we want to know at eighteen. And maybe the question—it's really a koan—never really goes away, the answers being so absurd: "I'm Bartleby the Scrivener." Fine, you're Bartleby, the man beyond explanation, for whom no explanation is possible, or needed. But the response the waiter gives is the one the Zen master might as well: "Me too." That's when the trapdoor opens.

"And I could see nothing but overflowing ashtrays / The human-faced flies were busy examining." A troubling image. I feel a double perspective in it: the poet at eighteen and in his early fifties. A sort of vertigo and vulnerability—no one ever knows who they really are. The only thing left to do is to keep changing.

Meanwhile life goes on in Simic's city, where we are all stalked by homeless drunks, peripatetic crazies, crucified walkers, bag ladies, idiot savants on soapboxes, haranguing beggars, rounders, ramblers and other inspired picaros. They are the shadow figures, our long-lost brothers and sisters returned to town with the circus.
Simic’s imagination is focused on, as Heaney puts it, “that knife-edge between whimsy and knowledge, the feeling that it could go one way or another at any moment.” Or as Simic himself reminds us in another poem from *The Book of Gods and Devils*, “Madness, and you might say, paradise!” This soulful, mysterious, loony, vulgar, epic, sorrowful paradise/hell is so deeply American we all ought to write Simic thank-you notes for reminding us it continues to exist, even now as we walk its shiny streets, steadfastly ignoring each other, staring down at the screens on all those “devices” we hold in our hands.
CARRYING ON LIKE A CROW

Are you authorized to speak
For these trees without leaves?
Are you able to explain
What the wind intends to do
With a man’s shirt and a woman’s nightgown
Left on the laundry line?
What do you know about dark clouds?
Ponds full of fallen leaves?
Old-model cars rusting in a driveway?
Who gave you the permission
To look at the beer can in a ditch?
The white cross by the side of the road?
The swing set in the widow’s yard?
Ask yourself, if words are enough,
Or if you’d be better off
Flapping your wings from tree to tree
And carrying on like a crow.
Marilyn Johnson

AUTHORIZED

That stark word authorized arrested me first. Are you authorized to speak...? Who’s the you? It doesn’t sound much like Simic, an author who has surely been “authorized.” Over half a century, his poetry has earned him the academy’s stamp of approval, poet laureate, genius label, and all. He was seventy when he published “Carrying On Like a Crow”; he’s eighty now, an age when authors, particularly poets, start their victory laps. Are you authorized to speak...? is an odd question, coming from this author, but a tantalizing one.

It sounds like the language of the state, a bureaucratic query, and yet Simic has no love for the state. A child of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, bombed first by the Nazis, then the Americans, he wandered through a broken place, “A Landscape with Crutches.” When he, his mother, and younger brother walked for days over the Slovenian Alps to steal across the border into Austria, they were caught and jailed, then thrown back to their war-addled country. He’s one of the bugs of history, dodging authorities’ boots, trying not to get squashed. After the war, he scuttled to Paris, then New York and Chicago, a poor refugee who identified with ants and flies: slaughterhouse flies with bloody legs, shit-house flies. His poetry is crawling with bugs. The crows in the title of this poem are a step up the food chain.

Whether it sounds like state language or not, it is a question of authority, and Simic is a subversive. As a child, when he saw a priest on the street, he would grab his own crotch. His poems from the seventies and eighties are irreverent, even devilish. “The Lesson” and “Help Wanted,” two early poems that grapple with authoritarianism, shock in different ways. “The Lesson” ends “At the memory of my uncle / charging a barricade / with a homemade bomb, / I burst out laughing.” “Help Wanted” ends with its eager supplicant “Spreading the cheeks of my ass.” Irreverence is explicitly Simic’s motive and one of the chief appeals of writing poetry; he has an “itch,” he admits, “to make fun of authority, to break taboos... [to do] something the world disapproves of.” And anyone can write a poem, even a poor kid in an occupied city in wartime. All you need is a pencil, a stub of a pencil. And if you identify as a lyric poet, as Simic does, then you wax eloquent about “dirty sex and disrespect for authority.”
So Are you authorized to speak...? is obviously a loaded way to begin, so loaded, I can’t help thinking it must be what the author is asking himself. A quiet, dead-serious question late in the day, from a man who temperamentally and aesthetically, but also philosophically and morally, insists on the importance of the lone voice.

“Are you authorized to speak / For these trees without leaves?” is an interesting question for him. Simic is a product of the city, peeking through the grille of the pawnshop or the dusty contents of a storefront—a hungry Alice in front of a different sort of looking-glass. But now the man lives in the country. He’s a long-time veteran of rural New Hampshire, and maybe because he missed a pastoral stage of childhood, he’s vague about tree differentiation and other matters that Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost could nail. What does Simic know about trees? They’re trees. Trees without leaves.

And speak—these—trees—leaves is a crazy string of assonance. If you’re saying these lines out loud, you’re keening. Two lines in, and this is a desolate place. It’s after fall if the leaves have fallen, but not yet winter, and although Simic prefers to tuck his poems in under layers of white, bone-chilling snow, there’s no snow here. A laundry line with an empty pair of garments hangs suspended, in suspense. The poet demands, “Are you able to explain / What the wind intends to do...?” and the whoosh of that what, tumbling into the almost-triple rhyme in wind intends, followed by the hoot of to do gives it a hushed and eerie noise. We are trespassing.

Then the poet begins piling on more in this still, plain, understated landscape. To the empty trees and empty clothes, he adds “dark clouds” (seriously?) and “Ponds full of fallen leaves.” Well, at least we know where those leaves went. This is a natural crime scene, bleak bit by bit. And on to another marker of human emptiness: the “Old-model cars rusting in a driveway.” Then an aggressive question: “Who gave you the permission / To look at the beer can in a ditch?” as if said with indignation, the permission—and not just the beer can, “The white cross by the side of the road? / The swing set in the widow’s yard?” Who gave us the permission to notice such revealing things? Because someone died here, by this white cross, the homemade memorial, thousands of which litter our country roads to mark the scene of a traffic death; and the widow and children’s yard
wouldn’t have anything to do with that, would they? Their yard was probably the dead one’s yard, too. As for the beer can in the ditch, unless it came from another rubbernecker, driving through this poem’s scene, I’m afraid it belongs with the white cross.

The poem resolves with, “Ask yourself, if words are enough...” —and no, if you have to ask that question, the answer will always be No; words are never enough. Simic has written often that the poet’s mission to capture an authentic snapshot of life is doomed from the start: “Writing is always a rough translation from wordlessness into words,” especially when one is trying to hear the voice at 3:00 a.m., or describe that little something, or dismantle the silence.

“Ask yourself, if words are enough”—with that little hitch of a comma, and a little catch in the throat, knowing that words can’t touch either silence or this tragedy limned on a country road—

Or if you’d be better off
Flapping your wings from tree to tree
And carrying on like a crow.

We know how the author feels, because the title isn’t “Ask Yourself, If Words Are Enough.”

Maybe it’s just me, inclined to respect my former teacher, at a moment in history when the bark of the state grows more insistent and self-doubt is worming in. Maybe it isn’t Simic that Simic addresses. Maybe he’s addressing us, which is to say, me. I’ve always marveled at how he grapples with his dark subjects and still communicates buoyancy, how he can write a poem about death looking for its next victim—and call it, gruesomely, “Eyes Fastened with Pins” (a reference to insomnia?)—and have us wiggle our toes in delight. “Carrying On Like a Crow” lacks this mischief. It’s not “We were so poor I had to take the place of the bait in the mousetrap.” It doesn’t recollect Wallace Stevens and gnaw a bone of mystery, as Simic does in “White” or “Crows,” in which the birds are “further harbingers / Of the coming wintry reduction / To sign and enigma.” But that Who gave you the permission...? It haunts me. Nobody did.
THE INVISIBLE

Don’t the shadows know something about it?
The way they come and go
As if paying a visit to that other world
Where they do what they do
Before hurrying back to us.

Just today I was admiring the one I cast
As I walked alone in the street
And was about to engage it in conversation
On this very topic
When it took leave of me suddenly.

Shadow, I said, what message
Will you bring back to me,
And will it be full of dark ambiguities
I can’t even begin to imagine
As I make my slow way in the midday sun.

* 

It may be hiding behind a door
In some office building,
Where one day you found yourself
After hours
With no one to ask for directions,
Among the hundreds of doors
All lacking information what sort of business,
What sort of drudgery goes on
Inside its narrow, poorly-lit rooms.

Some detective agency
That’ll find God for a small fee?
Some company ready to insure you,
Should one day,
Despite the promises of your parish priest,
You turn up in hell?
The long hallway ends at a window
Where even the light of the dying day
Seems old and dusty.
It understands what waiting is,
And when found out
Appears surprised to see you here.

*

People here still tell stories
About a blind old man
Who rolled dice on the sidewalk
And paid children
In the neighborhood
To tell him what number came up.

When they were away in school,
He’d ask anyone
Whose steps he heard,
The mailman making his rounds,
The undertakers loading a coffin in their black wagon,
And you, too, mister,
Should you happen to come along.

*

O Persephone, is it true what they say,
That everything that is beautiful,
Even for one fleeting moment,
Descends to you never to return?

Dressmaker pinning a red dress in a store window,
Old man walking your sickly old dog,
Even you little children holding hands
As you cross the busy street with your teacher,
What hope do you have for us today?
With the sky darkening so early,
The first arriving flakes of snow,
Falling here and there, then everywhere.

* 

Invisible one, watching the snow
Through a dark window
From a row of dark schoolhouse windows,
Making sure the snowflakes fall
In proper order
Where they were fated to fall
In the gray yard,
And hush the moment they do.

The crow nodding his head
As he walks by
Must have been a professor of philosophy
In previous life
Who despite changed circumstances
Still opens his beak
From time to time
As if to address his adoring students,
And seeing nothing but snow
Looks up puzzled
At one of the dark windows.
Can we talk? Charles Simic is always up for conversation. Even when there’s no one actually there to talk to he’s game. Shadows will do. Spectres out of the past. Gods or goddesses. Even people tempt him. Nameless or familiar. Look around, Simic suggests, for any half plausible prospect to rope in—even a reluctant reader—and you’re on your way. Who knows what you might hear, or think you hear. No need ever to be alone when you’re forever asking questions and never expecting answers. Grab and gab.

“The Invisible” is a long poem by Simic standards: thirteen stanzas of varying lengths, deployed in five sections. But it is, in every other respect, a characteristic Simic performance, a deft series of moves from the demotic and familiar to the elevated and philosophical. The mood, unmistakably Simic, is by turns wry and melancholy, mischievous and genial. Everywhere the poem is haunted by darkness and yet determined not to be undone, not even by the thought of “undertakers loading a coffin in their black wagon,” such tableaus in Simic a portent, to be sure, and yet also a piece of local color, no more or less charged than the sight of “little children holding hands” as they “cross the street” with their teacher, or the “Dressmaker pinning a red dress in a store window.” Simic’s menacing shadows, his allusions to that which is “never to return,” have a cumulative, gathering intensity, though his reader is never quite permitted to believe that there can be an end to the wary, bemused watchfulness of the poet-flaneur, making his “slow way” and sure to outwit whatever is “fated” or “falling.” Simic can be more brusque, more savage, more satirical, more overtly political than he is in “The Invisible,” but he is always reliably dour and whimsical. Companionable and wily.

In spite of its oddments and vagrancies, “The Invisible” is marked throughout by references to stories, snatches of unconsummated dialogue, apostrophes, strings of urgent, or idle, questions. Probing, challenging, fooling around, buttonholing, the poem is bent upon pulling us in, inviting us to share the “ambiguities” that amuse, frighten or enthrall the poet. Does it have a purpose? A subject? It would seem so. The shadows do after all signal a concern with com-
ings and goings, with leave takings and descents. The poem might well be called “When Darkness Falls.” Its opening line—“Don’t the shadows know something about it?”—would seem, unmistakably, to allude to death, the “very topic” Simic is willing to take on, though others would rather leave it alone, or actively flee from it. In class one day a student of mine said the poem was “death-haunted,” and that seemed fair, though I then said that Simic has his own way of being haunted, and that in his case being haunted is really just another way of striking up a conversation or finding his way back into the random beauties and pleasures of the world. Anything grim, really grim, in Simic’s poem, do you think? To which my student said she couldn’t make up her mind whether to feel grim or laugh out loud. Exactly, I replied. That’s just the way Simic always makes me feel. And usually I decide that it’s never a good idea, with such a writer, to try to resolve that ambivalence. Have it both ways. Why not? Who can doubt that Simic would approve. Nothing like a few shadows and the occasional thought of hell to banish complacency and turn you on to the things of this world, however dreary and perishable.

But then “The Invisible” does open up several related questions. Is the poet a believer? Does he want us to believe he believes? Does he have a genuine feeling for “that other world” where shadows go “Before hurrying back to us”? Or is “that other world” for Simic merely the vague, beckoning, mysteriously out of reach domain a guy like him “can’t even begin to imagine”? In which case call him a casual believer, an “as if” man who entertains ambiguities and dark thoughts principally to see what he can make of them, with no hope of being saved or moving beyond his own inveterate puzzlement. Puzzlement its own reward. Generator of quandaries and dramas. Esprit and witty turns of phrase. The thought of other worlds, afterlives, alternative realities merely a way of creating and sustaining supreme fictions—supreme in their improbable combination of “proper order” and spontaneous combustion.

As befits such a poet, Simic has a fondness for “message,” in spite of the fact that, like most poets worth attending to, he tends most often to deny or disparage message as the recourse of charlatans or ideologues. But then “message” in Simic is part of the apparatus of play. As with so much in this poet, he believes and doesn’t
believe in messages, summons the idea of message to tempt himself and his reader to invest in solutions or conclusions that can never be more than provisional, or spurious. Even death, in this sense, is a "message" not fit to believe in. Not with all one's heart. Not when you know that nothing can keep you from keeping on—talking, inventing, speculating, worrying a thought. Fear there is in Simic nevertheless. Fear that just possibly the shadows know something we really ought to take more seriously. Fear that the portents do in fact add up, the way they seem intermittently to do in "The Invisible," the random signs, "here and there," potentially taking dominion "everywhere," so that finally a "message" indisputable and irreversible may be gathering.

And what would that ostensive message say? Even to pose the question is to betray the essentially self-cancelling tenor of Simic's poem by suggesting that in fact it inspires us to invest in anything so dull and uninspired as finality and fatedness, when in truth it does nothing of the sort. It tempts. No doubt about that. And yet. And yet. Here, after all, is a poet who "just today" admires his own shadow and, making his "slow way," is alert to surprises and sudden departures. Who wonders what's behind unmarked doors and supposes that one may house a "detective agency / That'll find God for a small fee." God, for such a poet, a figure in a small joke. Like the "parish priest" who makes "promises" even as you register the fact that you may well "turn up in hell," no matter what promises were made. Or the "blind old man," also a figure in a small joke, who pays children to "tell him what number came up" when he rolls the dice, and wouldn't mind enlisting the services of "you, too, mister, / Should you happen to come along." That "you, too, mister" simultaneously aggressive and brotherly. No escaping a man who'll talk to anyone. Who'll go on asking not simply "everyone" but "you, mister." Now that you've come along.

Of course the final mischief in Simic's poem is set loose in the last stanza, where the crow is said to have been "a professor of philosophy / In previous life." "Must've been," Simic says. Must. Without a doubt. One of those "as if" certainties this poet routinely trades in, primed to relinquish or deny them—or simply to laugh with us at his own breezy way with fact and surmise. To laugh also
at his own reference to the "adoring students" of the crow cum philosophy professor whose characteristic stance is to look up "puzzled." Puzzlement the proper condition of philosophers and poets, especially those drawn to messages, saved from resolution by their addiction to sudden beauty and chance, to ambiguity and inspired conversation.
WINTER FLY

You ought to live in a palace like a king
And not shiver on my kitchen wall,
Have a bed and chair made to measure
And a radio playing the latest hits
The flies in Dakar and Rio are humming,
While servants serve you pastries
On plates bearing your coat of arms,
And your courtiers look to catch you
A lady companion from among the flies
Grooming themselves on a dead dog.
Scribbled in the Dark: Poems is only Simic’s latest collection, published in 2017, but I could have opened the book at random and alighted on just about any poem to explicate (from Latin explicat, “unfolded”) and to praise, so small and dense they are, such amalgams of pathos and irony.

So let’s pretend this poem is folded over three times, like a note passed in class—the classroom, and the humiliated child in it, being one of the figures of Scribbled in the Dark—and begin unfolding. In the first place, it is an apostrophe, addressing itself to one of the lowliest things in the world, and this it has in common with many Simic poems: a mood of singularity and loneliness, and stoic compassion. The speaker is trying to buck him up, the shivering fly, with this distracting fantasy, this fable of miniaturization or flea circus if you will. He is, perhaps, spinning a yarn. Or spinning a web. There is, after all, a merriness in the pun “And a radio playing the latest hits / The flies in Dakar and Rio are humming.” Maybe the poet is a silver-tongued spider, distracting the woozy fly while sewing him up in his shroud. With that last line, its shift from compassion to grotesquerie, and its gravid spondee, we are blindsided.

In the second place, it carries a little social commentary as an aside, an almost throwaway observation about the eternal parasitism of rulers. Vagrancy on a kitchen wall in winter is, in the cosmic order, the “nobler” fate, if that is some consolation. The hierarchy of king and courtier and servant never wholly vanished from our society, much less from our language, and the more I turn this over in my mind, the more I regard this poem as something King Lear might have uttered in Act III.

In the third unfolding, we see a reaching out to another famous fly—the one that Emily Dickinson heard. “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—.” There too “a King / Be witnessed in the Room.” There, the king is death itself, and a similar play on great and small is effected with the tiny fly occupying the same space as the Omnipotent. In Simic’s case, a fly heard a human buzzing when he died.
There are more unfoldings, infinitesimal unfoldings—isn’t the lady fly coming straight from Baudelaire’s “Une Charogne”? —Isn’t the fly a “scribbler,” as in Gjertrud Schnackenberg’s “a housefly’s panicked scribbling on the air” (“Signs”)? We could unfold and unfold this passed note and not reach its end, but that’s not an adequate last word on Simic’s poem—a poem which manages to be whole and satisfying formally while spiraling outward, ontologically, without end. No, what I want to say vis-a-vis Simic’s poems comes from D. H. Lawrence, who wrote in his sketches of the Etruscans:

It is all a question of sensitiveness. Brute force and overbearing may make a terrific effect. But in the end, that which lives lives by delicate sensitiveness. If it were a question of brute force, not a single human baby would survive for a fortnight. It is the grass of the field, most frail of all things, that supports all life all the time.

I might add that, elsewhere in *Scribbling in the Dark*, Simic writes: “A trembling roadside weed is Cassandra.”
Saw a toad
jump out of boiling water
Saw a chicken
dance on a hot plate
in a penny arcade
Saw Etruscans in a museum
flogging slaves
to the accompaniment
of pipes and flutes
Saw a palm tree
trying to outrun a hurricane
Saw sea waves
rush ashore
some angry
some afraid
of what they’ll find
Saw men and women
lose their heads
and search for them everywhere
Saw a feast laid out
on a long table
to which only crows came
Saw a dog go forth
barking like a prophet of old
Saw rats and mice
running terrified
through mazes
heralding
the evils to come
BLIND FATE

Grabbing someone in the street,
Letting another go scot free,
Like that crazy old woman
With something urgent to say
You couldn't make any sense of,
Who hooked you by the arm
Till you tore yourself from her,
Only to bump into a beggar
Scattering coins from his cup
And having to listen to him
Chew you out and put a curse on you
In front of all these people.
What comes next, you won't know.
Blind fate here runs the show.
ALL THE FOREIGN LANGUAGES

In the wind, the thorns speak
a raspy tongue,

different from the one
of the sunflowers
with teeth fallen in the dust,

or the one of the corn stalks.

The pines talk out loud
in the cemetery

and the locusts drill holes
in the high noon.

No one around.

Only the ghosts play
the smoke banjo.

Small lizards dart underfoot,
hide their sign language
in the grass.

The dry weeds
send a sweet scent,
end of summer fragrance.

They only need a spark
to crackle
the foreign language of fire.
Who’s speaking, please?
*It no longer matters.*

Who else knew?
*No one we trusted no one.*

Was the child small enough to fit in a cupboard?

One day before soldiers came,
the child sauvage arrived

from the blue horizon, hungry.
Did the child look foreign?

What does foreign look like to you?

How could a child travel alone?
Not the child but the wild apples in the fields along the lanes past our house were our business:

to collect them in season,
to make the tart sauce for pork in fall. Did you hide this child out of guilt?
The child was in danger
from us, unmoved,
gazing out our window.
Did you embellish this story?

3

Children harried, rounded up,
and worse, there, then,
as here, now?

Why not close the blinds
to the soaring poplars, their glossy
leaves and populated shadows?

We happened to be
looking hard and at last
saw that the child's
danger cracking ajar the door
we thought protected us
had let the light in.
ORIGIN OF SPEECH

Whippoorwill pierces the dusk.

A woman undrowns herself.

In the field, a man clothed in leaves comes to life.

Evening, unshod, 
leads the field, dragging a letter

hand-written in red.

(Listen, here come the hooves of a dream,
malaise of the red oak

she hears it climb in through the window)

In the village, the shops are broken.
She makes a wide porch tied like a rope
around her waist,

ties the broken shops around her blue and violet waist.

She makes a small wind tower, unfurls the bright unrest.

Unfurls her sound table.

Evening, unshaken and brazen,

rises, unwed,

into the field.

Singing voice tied like a rope to the dusk.
LOVE INSIDE THE SNOW GLOBE

Every day we drive
early to the airport
with a white chicken
in the back seat

It takes all day
to get there
I drop you off
and you fly somewhere
icy

On the way home
my brother drives
while I hold
the chicken
in the back seat

We wait all day
at the intersection
close to home

Intersect
says my brother
means to cut
asunder
cut off
one field from another

I hold the chicken
tight
I pluck her feathers
and paste them
all over myself

The chicken and I
are white carpet
and snow
we are two crystals
Catherine Pierce

WE LIVE IN THE MOST EXQUISITE TERRARIUM

The fresh macadam is glossed with rain
and from the roadside, garden zinnias shout

their unabashed reds and fuchsias.
In a department store, a man
deftly arranges lipsticks by gradations
of purple, Velvet Violet to Punch-

Drunk Plum. A college radio deejay
follows new folk with old punk;

she knows it’s important to keep
the airwaves sparking. This yard is soft

with Bermuda grass. This yard is coarse
with tall fescue. Look at our Climate

Controlled Storage Units. Look at
our socks rolled together in pairs.

Look at the emails we’ve crafted
in order to make someone think of us

once the lights go out. We curate
this place with such care. As if there’s

nothing outside its blue dome. Or
as if we get to stay in here forever.
ENOUGH

I got here through no talent of my own. 
I did not birth myself, or even will myself into being. One day I was a cluster of cells, 
one day I was a heart, one day I was a human in the world. Now what? Look at the luck I was given, born into a place with a hot yellow sun. Born with two nimble hands, a strong enough voice. 
If I’m not shouting down cruelty or at least singing all the time, what am I doing? 
If I’m not building a table or holding a child or slicing tomatoes warm from the garden I’ve weeded myself, what am I doing? 
I bought these electric blue flats. Suede. I did it because it made me feel a little happy, that small dopamine hit that comes from picturing yourself looking like someone someone wants to look at. But how absurd is that? How flimsy? I’ve never learned to change a tire. My music theory is abysmal. Sometimes I don’t realize it’s snowing until there’s already a dusting on the driveway, which is certainly close to excuseless. 
But I swear I’m mainly paying attention. I swear I’m grateful at least a dozen times a day. If I could cradle the earth in my hands for ten seconds, I would, just to show it how tenderly I could hold it, how I wouldn’t drop it, how I cherish it even as I’m turning in early instead of going out to see the Perseids. 
I’ve always loved a carnival. Is it enough to love a carnival? I could ride the teacups all day. That shriek that comes from spinning, the one that unfurls from somewhere deep below the throat like a bright streamer? It’s language. It translates into thank you.
POEM IN THE SHAPE OF AN EYE LOOKING UP

The moth wing is still under the table like a love
gone to die. I cannot hear the ocean
but I know, two miles away, it is falling down its stairs.
Royal blue dress caught on a long shadow.
It has the arms of a god trying
to be human. From my window
I watch all the things I want to show you,
light-breathing like a retina in its aqueous pocket,
a jellyfish on the sand. Our whole lives go through me
and I sing and sing with my long hair.
Poems are about love. All loves
are metrics of distance. What we want
sometimes arcs, blindly, toward us.
Every time I try to say you feel inside me like a huge wing
gliding underwater language comes out and falls
down the stairs.
I never wanted wings. I want you to rearrange me,
the moth blown into the cool suck
of the church doors, and still flying, wick to rafter
to Jesus’s eye, terrified
and looking toward the ceiling.
I half-want something to happen. I want it to begin
where it cannot stop beginning. The rocks on the shore
accept the ship, which begins a myth.
The lover turns his head in a room at dusk.
All the people who have ever seen an airplane
fall out of the sky, walking to work with their wide-open hearts.
DEAD RECKONING

A boy is a bomb
in the wrong hands.

Once they taught boys
how to take flight.

Some to shoot, some to sight,
and one to show them the way

hunched in a glass room
over the long dark curves

of breathless cold,
exploding boys.

Dead reckoning: a watch,
a map, a pencil, a view,

and all the boys
waiting for the drop.

Raised, bomb bay doors
are wings bleeding light.

Pressed between them
my boy balances

on a beam four feet high,
afraid he'll be loosed

howling to strike the earth,
no hands to hold him.
GEOGRAPHY LESSONS

Vomiting on highway shoulders
in eleven states, brought low because
my body does not know its own interior

I have felt time turn nimbus,
tender-cruel teacher and in its haze
tilted, I have learned a new terrain:

grass, defeated bitter gray
pocked by the mower's leavings
dandelion heads, blooming oil stains

cigarette stubs, mouthful-empty bottles
shadowed by a single red-tailed hawk
slung low and hungry against a white sky;

bees fondling Queen Anne's lace
as one slick-black beetle retreats
into the ground, glass-sparkled;

and everywhere, oh everywhere—
here, where a few deer graze under
some birches, gently unconcerned

here, where sun varnishes the road,
where the weeds waver in a gale
that tastes their rough persistence

—everywhere pity, boundless pity
for the body's disgrace, but still
no end to this way of marking the world.
I can’t stop—

Like a Band-Aid floating in a swimming pool—

 Skipping one flat stone after another across the surface of a pond—

 Ax head in a stump with a long handle in the air—

 The alcohol inside of sentences—

 Like a village with men approaching on horseback—

 Looking up from a laptop and finding it noon—

 The moment before collision—

 Never light this match—
LA CIENEGUILLA

Today no men shout from the cave and toss beer cans—meandering along the cliff face, you find a cluster of petroglyphs: in a procession, five humped back flute players, a dragonfly, turkey, star—or is it compass?—antelope, great blue heron with a fish in its beak.

A kestrel glides overhead; glancing below at a bare marsh, you notice a dessication to this site—when you pulled up to a gas pump on Sunday morning, a woman in a pickup raced alongside and demanded money, “I need a tank of gas to get to Phoenix, no, Las Vegas, Las Vegas—” and she leaned as if to raise a pistol to the open window. When you shook your head, she tore out of the station, careened down the road. Staring at a lightning petroglyph, you mark the zigzag beauty of danger, and how hunger animates our nights and days; you visualize corn planted in a sloping arroyo, green shoots rising after rain, and nod at the zigzag danger of beauty, then walk from this site, this point of no—and infinite—return.

Zodiacs drift, bump
we crane, ignore sought ice
sea a slipping sheet
4 - 8 AM with J on deck, wind in teeth. Nothing but numb faces for it. Later, meant to leave morning landing via Errera Channel but ice-blocked. So out again into Gerlache. So glassing again. Distant shimmer shimmers into storm petrels. Hundreds patter & skuas swoop above what’s invisible beneath mirror-calm. Forget the leopard seal asleep too far to really see. Just beyond squint-distance, squinting, a fin? Three, seven, ten erratic and slow. Fumble radio and for once time and weather agree: worth it. Ship slows, turns. Announcement wakes the decks to crowd. Minke cuts across steady, easy, then the orca turn toward us. The orca turn toward us. Come down alongside slow. O. Nothing like anything I’ve. Small, so small and chocolate milk brown and scarred and Eva you’d have loved to have—

travelers, arriving
met with every flag
our bodies can fly

Eva Saulitis, who died of cancer in 2016 at the age of 52, was a poet, essayist, and killer whale biologist who spent her life studying the mammal-eating Orca of Prince William Sound, an endeavor recorded in her book Into Great Silence: A Memory of Discovery and Loss Among Vanishing Orcas. She never visited Antarctica. She was a dear friend.
Betsy Sholl

MISERERE MEI, DEUS
Gregorio Allegri

I didn’t mean to find myself here,
where first the tenors lay a foundation,
then the sopranos raise up rafters
impossibly high, a cathedral built

by voice alone, where I didn’t mean
to be kneeling, to be lighting a candle,
and wondering how mercy got put in
a word that sounds more like misery—

a cathedral made of air, so my prayer
is like calling to the future before
it happens: Are you sure you want me
to step out like this, wearing my grief

like a second-hand coat, so much heavier
than it seemed when someone else wore it?
I didn’t mean to keep entering this music,
vault by vault, built by the sweet brevity

of those high boy voices breaking the heart,
till who wouldn’t cry out in surrender?
Naves and ruins, bodies turning air
into soul, space for grief and desire,

till here in this pre-dawn hour glowing
blue, my sorrow is gathered up into
the words of the psalm, as if they had stirred
my marrow, nudging until I’m willing

to toss myself like bones into the future’s
pot, willing to say, Yes, oh secret heart,
as the sky lightens, Yes, to the mercy
that only comes when misery cries out.
Cassandra Cleghorn

WORD OF THE DAY

My slept skin is all forensics open court for the dog who thrusts her nose in that mess of leftover love and waste I call my cucci because is there a better word in any tongue I push her away I want to be the one who does the smelling who parts her way into the scene who sheds this skin to take on another’s every morning people are feeling for the pulse are backing away from the innocent blanket as he moved toward me the paramedic said signs of lividity so as to state the time so as to shield me so as to say blue with the best word he knew that blood having stilled will fall as a solid falls bruising from within
as when with storm's first
hit what was landscape loses
color & form path cleared
to door is become a gen-
eralization so banked
& fleeced as to mock
this shovel's scrape
& grunt this scolded
skin within skin
a tautscape what
am I looking at now
one hour in where
did I lean & lift
& throw how
will he know
where to
knock
Mary Ann Samyn

SEVEN DEER ON A RIDGE

Right after, from the upper corner of the kitchen where I suppose he waited, it was as though

he called my name
or lifted my face as he had often done.

And I said what—. Just what— to my father. Then promised again: I would not give up.

* 

Vivid winter evening sky.
A man's blue. I know that because of him.

He's gone ahead—it wasn't what we wanted.
He loved me—despite how I failed him.

Surely, he will come back.
These deer, here for the moment, must mean that.
VISIONARY

Is this the way, at the end?
An arm up and— he’s not reaching for you.
The soul looking around, it seemed.

His chest had not moved that way before, the sound
in his body and then in mine, too,
filling the house and not stopping until it stopped.

I was doing my work when I came to my senses.
Did he want me with him? I tell myself so.
Remember whole years of my head on his knee—

I think now he might have stayed a little longer
just to see himself there, upon the bed.
Or when I said what? minutes later, in the kitchen,
to no one who pulled the string that lifted me—
It was, it goes without saying,
on that snowy evening, like nothing I’ve ever seen.
EACH NIGHT WE WANDERED

Father’s boots came from two different bodies his jacket had bullet holes in the back another over his heart

still warm he whispered poking a finger through I closed my eyes and it was dark I opened my eyes

and it was dark this went on and on and somewhere somehow someone was playing the piano

I thought now I am dreaming but Father heard too just black keys he said what else was left the radio

lost when the roof collapsed but still we heard static smoke worry clouds of ash but still the moon rose

each night we wandered sleeping a little in the fields a catnap Father said a rabbit’s rest but not the wet ditch

not the muddy furrows where old Schmidt the farmer lay stretched in the dirt eyes open mouth
bloody bible pages scattered
keep sleeping he whispered
did I say the radio was gone
Father kept it turned low

I tried to guess where
we wandered by the songs
the rain's strange music
kept playing all night.
UNTIL YOU NEVER

Backwards I would tell it
so the soldiers borrow the rope
from Jean’s neck to hang
the church bell so rocks fly
from windows sparkly bits
rising into frames so flames
turn into Schmidt’s barn

a crackling torch a glass bottle
drop into this soldier’s hands
I would tell it backwards
so the bleating sheep go quiet
the lightning-cracked sky
lightens in the west the sheep

wander backwards out
of the barn soldiers climb back
into their trucks their tanks
roll slowly out of sight rifles
suck up each bullet as they go

so Mother will appear here
beside me again I’ll drift
awake again she strokes my hair
sweet boy it was only

a dream she says a dream
you must wake up now it’s time
to turn on the light time to

get dressed eat dinner grow
smaller until you never have to

live through this.
SATELLITES

I see at last that if I don’t breathe, I breathe.
—pupil to F. M. Alexander

When the actor’s voice retreated, he stood before the mirror noting birdlike minutiae of his head and neck:

before opening his mouth to recite whether tis nobler in the mind, the jaw rolled forward like a drawer.

Flesh at the nape gathered in pleats, as if a hem preparing to be pinned, at the breath drawn before a whisper.

Maria tells me this as she presses the valley of my back to keep my walk from breaking into falls. After australopithecus, rising from our fists, could we end our argument with gravity?

Perhaps with time, I could become one of earth’s beloved satellites: kept close, but just outside the zone of true belonging. But for now, each step’s a bargain with my feet to take my weight. Maria says, let the ground touch you back.

Years later, her husband becomes one of those whose heart loses a bet just as the mulberries go sick-sweet in late June.

Her neighbors call to share their faith in popular mechanics: God behind the lock-rail,
butterfly-made hurricanes. Such drafty comfort, I think, is no place to sleep out a poor harvest.

From my new city where I ride the trains alone, bridges' gradual splendor always wrecking me,

I watch in the mirror of the moon as a face unfolds, tries to speak a sentence. No scenery, not even stars behind. The world seems to lose its voice: on a racetrack's polyurethane my limbs arrange themselves in the sign for mourning. Around me, runners' muscles knit, unknit. Watch the vertebrae that count themselves on waking. The pebbles of the wrist. The slow collagen hinges opening the wingspan, moving us across our only theater.
EVIDENCE OF THE MAKING PROCESS

At night my computer screen
   tries to imagine my brain
   on its way to sleep,

   turns the color of a polluted sky:
       washed in coffee,
       wrung out. Barely visible degree

between dusk and nightfall, between
       cause and correlation,
       sleep and medicated sleep, original

and faithful copy. An animal teaches
   its child to swim
   by writing the script for swimming

into its body before it is born,
        or an animal
        breaks a hole in the ice and gets in,

shivers, exaggerates the strokes.
        Rodin wanted you
        to see his fingerprints, the docent says,

evidence of the making process. Imagine
   the body in myth,
   later in bronze, a hull of sand. To glance

up and down the reach of its arms, rise
        where hamstring met haunch,
        its mineral caves, darted calves, and know

it has lost every place it’s been held.
        Negative of the self, its ghoul-eyed
        means of reproduction. Cast again and again
at great expense, then mounted in a sanctuary where documentary's the only prayer allowed. Take a photo every hour and the day will appear to pass, light will appear rose-gold and approach the gradient of sleep. Back in nature, I'm guided by what seems most out of place: blaze of cerulean, neon rash.

An animal's child looks up to its parent, who teaches it how to be exactly like an animal. All I have to look up to is wildness, which has shown a parent's disappointment by grounding me for life.

But even so, how quickly it seems a baby locks eyes with strangers across the fairgrounds. As if she recognizes the whole world's prints on her skin, and as if that means she can choose the hands that began and those that will finish.
Elton Glaser

HAVE A NICE DAY

Blue, blue, beyond the cloudlines
And the gold suffusions—
Has the world seen such a breaking day?

You can almost feel inside you
A warm seed asserting itself
Into blossom and fruit,

As if even the great courts of law
Must allow a doctrine
Of innocence by association.

In leather books and broken folklore,
You might find a few
Samples of the absent hereafter,

But not like those
The drifters and sybils know,
Blown this way and that

By a scatter of winds,
Gone like the castles and cathedrals
Into an ecstasy of ruin,

As close as anyone has come
To earthworms working the dirt,
Seaworms hollowing a hull.

A river's always arriving,
And the lakes are already here.
But the sea
Settles on its own turmoil,
In a lather that won't go away.
You've seen the white sails

Scud under a blue
Almost sublime, a blue
That blanches on the rise,

As if there were
A life after the afterlife,
Breathing on its own.
INORDINATE FONDNESS

for Marcus Byrne

*Between that disgust and this*

...  

*One feels the purifying change.*

—Wallace Stevens

The celestial navigation of the dung beetle in a six-legged scrabble-dance astraddle his sphere of horse manure

(300 degrees around to seal the Milky Way as a map inside his rice-grain-sized brain) need not unconcern us.

The dungball’s his cosmos: breeding ground, egg nest, all his eat and drink, his buriable terra firma.

Our loathing for his life-work is just as evolutionarily conditioned as his fierce, relentless backward hind leg shoving of the dung.

Whenever confusion besets him he clambers to the turd-top and agitates thorax and legs and hard luster malachite exoskeleton counterclockwise in a shimmer of mouthparts and antennae, taking the spectral gradient of the visible Milky Way
so he can read the most compass-straight path
to escape the furious marauding
competition at the dungpat
and bury in secret his future brood-ball.
The female rides on top,
clings to the sides when his mad
orientation dungdance rebegins.

To Johannesburg Planetarium researchers hauled
dung beetles fitted with tiny
cardboard almost-baseball-caps
to test their navigating
celestial under an ersatz firmament,
the white visors obscuring
their “dorsal visual fields” to blind
the beetles to the projected
haze of Milky Way. So followed a chaos
of disorientation, dance-whorl then whorl, and figure-eight-roll
nowhere when the galaxylight vanished and the straight
line of escape curled relentlessly backward
to just the origin-point of
shit-battle they meant to leave behind.

And what has a lifetime of study
of the natural world taught you
of its Creator?: Haldane answered
He seems, whoever He is, to have
an inordinate fondness

for beetles.
Four hundred thousand species of them, the largest
of orders, one of every four living creatures. Four quintillion
of them scurry someplace right now: eighty pounds
of beetle for every pound of human on earth.
I hold that terrestrial beetle mass in my mind sometimes. I am loath
to abhor
such fondness, not
inordinate so much as extravagant, wandering beyond, capacious enough to take in even this excrementitiousness. For yea, the earth is the Lord’s, and even

the masses of scarab-consumed-and-buried waste thereof.

Khepri, black dung-beetle-headed
dawn-god, He Who Has Come
into Being rolls

with his hind legs the sun from east to west, headshovels it deep into night’s moist-rich and self-resurrecting loam.

That the heart might not bear witness against the dead, the Egyptians gutted its spasm-chambers and refilled the chest with a jasper and gold scarab amulet, and let that dung beetle of jewels testify on its own terms of transmogrification of the scat

in our hearts when the final scale-weighing comes.

I have in nowise sinned, it perjures.
I have not known anything that should not be known.

I have kept the Milky Way’s sloshshine tight in my mind. Refused too to execrate anything that is
unabominable.

—Let my real heart feel that secretly celestial self-forgiveness.

Write me, scribe, on my epicardium, that triliteral hieroglyphic scarab

meaning to transfigure and self-become.

I would clamber atop my world and shell-glisten over its terrestrial miniglobe, its planetarium heavens-map under my chitin shell.

I would nourish myself on what’s mistaken for wasted, and feel—in a spectral radiance arriving over the dungpile—the odious, and its slow and self-decaying, fertilizing change.

I have not known enough inordinance.
O sing unto the Lord a new song.
In the Hall of the Two Truths, let my heart scarab bear a true testimony instead, saying: I have not finished trying to find ways to exalt the underfirmament and all it has laid waste. Do not yet let me perish. There is a further work of fondness to be done.
Elizabeth Lyons

AT THE LIBERTY DINER, I STOP READING LEAR

So should my thoughts be severed from my griefs
says Cordelia to the King as he begs her
to make a case. Love, and be silent.

All this an aside. Better silent.
And when I wasn’t, made to be that way,
so good in the kitchen I made

my own brain a beet. Took the peeler
and shaved it down until I was only
a heart of tender things.

The gun was just a warning I tell my friend
as we eat gumbo with good roux
in a Houston diner—didn’t I tell you?

Formica counter sticky with tea. These shrimp are fresh,
have some. I’m always feeding others. It’s a problem.
We need tough bread for this gumbo, the kind

with a good crust. And the king says to those
who hold the knife—use him well. That the using
is mercy. But I can’t get used to Texas, buy

sunglasses with lenses the size of child’s hands
to cover myself. I think
what a creature I’ve been for bread,

for a quiet spot in some kingdom.
LOVE LETTER FROM THE CASKET-MAKER

In Vegas, morticians fake-sleep bodies.
The news won’t say how we buy caskets,
though logic says there’s a warehouse

and before the warehouse, a pickup and a tree.
Before the tree, a field laid bare. At least,
long enough to make it good for planting.

Not a forest. A field.
Forests are for walking. And this—
this tree is work.

We grow things and cut them down.
Make boxes. Bury love in boxes.
We’re human I guess.

And even though we can turn bodies
into ash, give them back to oceans or earth,
pay strangers to freeze us,

hope one day to spark back to life,
there is something about wailing
next to a casket. Putting your hand to it.

Waiting for wood to warm up to a touch.
Who shapes with tongue and groove
anymore? I’m so rude with my hammer.

And pleasure, these days, is a grain
almost impossible to find or trace. I know my gifts.
Whatever shape your grief takes, I can build.
Sarah Maclay

BEFORE US

There is a mauve, photographic bowl of rain
—though some would say a cup
A sultry plague before the fandango of alleys
An armament / arm / armband tossed into the gray / the grim Corvette
at the rehearsal

of velour and anise / ankle / anklet
A muzzle of parched starlings sleeping like geckos / geishas / geese,
just lounging
after the Sabbath of compromised kilt / kin / kiln.
(I’m certain about the alleys and the alliances.
I’m certain of the colour, of the bowl.)
And did I mention that huddle of parrots? Yes. Five, green.
Clustered near the beige of the third-floor windows.

After the honcho / the hole, the whole damn holiday opens
and the dam spills into the castanets of the waiting hand.
And it’s here the maraca ticks like a rattlesnake on a short leash.
(I’m certain of the Geiger counter, the saber /
the stomping / the sticking.)
And the compensation—it’s worthwhile.
There’s a moan in the attic, and one in the basement,
A twisting / tweaking / twerking in the den.
(And, just in case, there’s a gag (agog) in the office—
where a gasping orifice opines.)
To be clear—did I say that the bowl is the size of a valley?
And did I mention this rush is the colour of mauve?
(As the rehearsal-velour deliquesces to velvet—
velvet dissolving into the smooth vernacular of fur . . . )
There’s a cat / a catch in the breath at the edge of the bed in the lush
hush of morning,
a slant / a slice / a sip of new light in the palms.
(I’m certain of the armature of nothing . . .
as I’m certain that the husk has cracked, its scraps concussed.)
There’s a flamenco that rustles the edges of rust and of dusk and of
morning,
that rattles the dust from the corridors of musk:
this is its cusp
(as the licorice Pernods, as socks bloom into paisley stockings,
as dawn’s viridian muddle of leaves becomes a nest of trust
and armbands / guns are garters—inveterate, seated deep,
I’m certain of the moaning, the anemone, the memory,
the tangle and the tango and the glow—
as I’m certain of the shade, throbbing blueberry-vermillion.
And of the green parrots, I am certain.
Certain.)

—after K. Fagan
Dennis Hinrichsen

[TRANCE STATE]

—expressway closed // I drive my mother to find the Skyway //
—the two shot // sad American poverty //
Gary // Indiana //
against the box of ashes she is now // as if she were some flash drive //
or canister of film // I could use to record the streets //
—each clipped shot out the window a tiering download //
—storefront // ruined block //
casino //
streetball / graffiti / steampunk //
—the industrial acres like a former promise // sorely blistered // rendered down to fuel //
as she was fuel //
—that's what the attendant called her //
before he pressed the button //
& the tray of her was belted in // trance state: fire //
her body bundled like a nun's // trance state: car //
shape of her riding that escalating burn //
—hands on the wheel //
—flesh & rust // radio playing // flashing city skyline //
—each still living breath of me // declaring now
[SWALLOW]

—I can't say what death will finally melt in me // but I know its isotope is medicine // raw sun banging a wall like a banjo // heart finning the murk // that ontological rush // just sleep // chimera with bad hair & a dented pillow // hard swallow // as if a rib were being ingested // or a small bird // & a stone
Morning mist rises from a pond like fine gray hair.

A deer watches from the forest's edge. Is it safe?

Ten years after the Holocaust, Tadeusz Rozewicz wrote:

Forget us
Forget our generation

I mention you, Tadeusz, only because this morning an anthology fell open to these lines.

The spine wanted me to read you. The cracked glue of the binding inspired me.

Chimneys with moist black flues and beating embers fill the forest.

Later one finds a few white logs. A smoky swirl of ravens.

You didn’t mean what you wrote. Few do.

You meant to say:

Remember us
Remember our generation

The mist is gone.
Jonathan Blunk

WHILE C. K. WILLIAMS READS TSVETAeva
“But which of her years were easy?”

the sun turns its back on the river
and the ferry makes one last crossing toward the light

dead snow stokes the cold
vineyards of Jersey

if memory serves, this pain
is called a premonition

this premonition is called
the Muse

Charlie turns from the podium
and hunches beneath a doorframe—

like Raftery heading west,
tired of singing to empty pockets
ROADKILL

truck-tire shavings
disguise a roadside crow

sing mockingbird, mockingbird,
crow

each bite I scratch
my consecration

this flesh my carrion Rimbaud
my cultivated lice sing

mockingbird, sing
crow
A piano falling through trees, I want

to hold back the broken notes, muzzle what’s coming—
Remember his voice?    Without static?

All the old houses come together,
all their conversations, and me

still listening from another room
HOSPITAL

To swim in a pond of milk,
to sink, an old coin,
to drink from a pond
of milk—this is the path

slow strokes in white darkness
not knowing up or down,
wake or sleep—

You in the middle
of the pond, lost
in swells of foam,

not even calling out,
who never
learned to swim
BOW DOWN

to the hospital bed, to the sleeper,
his mouth open wide

Bow to breath uneven,

to the deaf man on the curtain’s other side Bow

to a fear of tight blankets— pills, needles, blood,

buzzing ceiling, metallic glare Here in

this processing center,
clear fluids in plastic tubes—

Bow down to limbo’s white light, quiet feet

down the hall passing through
Christopher Howell

TO THE UNDINE CHILD

I sat down to tell you why
the wren hates the badger
but forgot you were no longer
here, wherever
here is—we simply climb witless
into its aching arms. I suppose
when you step each night
from the sea
the water god looks at his watch
and shakes his huge and stringy head.
I suppose you come back for a bit
of the birdsong breeze
brightening your skin again.

Maybe there’s a meadow somewhere
in your soul. But all day
driving words like nails, I don’t
know which door to open for you, which
path summons the miraculous
skylark of the drowned risen
incorruptible and shining like the horrible
horrible sea
from which I do not know how
to keep you.
Dennis Schmitz

THE THOUGHT-PROOF PARTS

When I used to run tired,
exhausting any role to get through

each segment of the Saturday
work-out—confusing the body,
counting off the wood-lot on County B,

losing count at scrub trees,
& under old oaks, the berry-canes

that grab nylon—I’d go on
assembling the little I knew
of deer as I ran, losing first, if I could,

the thought-proof parts.
I’d always turn back into myself

at the abandoned cabin—
gravel underfoot meant
I was at human ruins—the porch sliding

into an overgrown cellar-hole—
then I’d always have some fence

until I was released to follow a trickle,
a seasonal watercourse that would find
the river whose wind-polished

surface would shine in pieces through the trees.
Marianne Boruch

TO BE IN CONVERSATION, HE SAYS, WITH

Henry James, of course. I’m asked at dinner if I too

have read The Jolly Corner, the best, a marvel, no question.
Me, stunned by how many
stories I’m told that novelist wrote, including this
of the ridiculous title, Henry James not such a jolly guy
to my mind. But I get it’s a ghost tale.

I love this though. I love that the rug in this room
could be thought
in conversation with the floor and wall and window.
What about exhaustion, boots dragging in
their now-microscopic recall
of dog shit and sand from a beach.
I remind myself, not sadly: no beach around here
and besides, it’s winter.

In conversation. The back and forth between
stars and planets, Cassiopeia stuck crooked in her chair,
singing out her bad bones to the void.

Down where we are, who wouldn’t
want to be in conversation with the rare
salt-of-the-earth who trusts each day to keep on
okay enough to bear, or if not,
well, not...

And what would it mean to look
at a glass of wine as if
in conversation with grapes, rain, sun,
at least three languages
tangled up there, the sweat, the old relief
of lunch before the long afternoon wears out. Then it grows dark in those vineyards, and whatever’s sacred about worms and sparrows beds down too. And all talk stops.
O bad dream of email announcing straightaway another dream: *do not open this.*

I stayed back for a day thinking
*it fell across the screen like a veil.*

Because there is neither mercy nor justice, my friend’s cells go haywire in the pancreas sweeping the room of ordinary chit-chat.

*What can one say?* one says and says like

a circle, or a brick. Did I finally? Open, I mean.
I mean it can’t mean that.

Consider how even a lousy lowly virus spellbinds and draws in the body like

a shaman rearing up before fire as wolf and tooth, classic

cave drawings wheeling above into crooked constellations, someone at them once,

oblivious as hope upon hope, steady, wild to finish, stained by

hardcore mystery: *how to do this.*
A woman told me women most likely, new facts about the width of the bare-minimum hurried handprints there. Hand as stencil flat to the wall
to stop time, red ochre blown through
reed or bone. A blue mash too, I’m guessing.

Watch her grind the daylights out of
the weirdest looking roots, add

spit and fat and blood to make things stick.
How did we get here all the way

from the Ice Age, convinced
we’d never end. Do not and Open don’t belong

in the same sentence. Are words portals or
bent backs to carry outer space home,
a shroud that only gets heavier. It’s not right.
And so 21st century to say so.
I gathered everyone—
the wire-rimmed glasses
the yellow wallpaper and the linocut hanging on the wall
I said listen now
I’m telling you this because there’s no one else
I’m going away I’m disappearing faster and faster
people call it a journey to the land of silence

they listened none of them said a word
none advised me to take up a sport
none said put on a tie get down to earth
there was no heated discussion
only the four corpses
me with the wire-rimmed glasses on my nose
the yellow wallpaper
and the linocut hanging on the wall
he pounds his wing on the ground
I'm a carrier pigeon he says
I'm a carrier pigeon he repeats louder
does he want to scare me or what
luckily I have a fresh roll in my bag
I'll bribe him if I have to
I fix my tie it's better to be polite
a glass of water orders the carrier pigeon
why yes of course
I don't want any trouble I've got a large family
a glass of water a bandage for my wing
a mirror a bottle of cognac orders the carrier pigeon
fuck him I've got a large family
this shitty pigeon to hell with him
a mirror a bottle of cognac
an apartment in the center of Warsaw orders the carrier pigeon
what a story what a story
why yes of course sir right away
a plastic products factory and a gold mine orders the carrier pigeon
holy shit what's going on here
why yes of course sir right away
I'm as everyone knows I'm generally speaking a somebody says the
carrier pigeon
so I run and jump and run
I carry baskets bags boxes cartons
withdraw money so much to do so much
changes exchanges phone calls conversations
why yes sir right away right away right away
coffee today coffee tomorrow entertainment tomorrow too
chocolate tangerines some figs and raisins
why yes sir right away now this and that now him and her
but I can't always make it on time I fall behind
I'm neglecting my family nothing but complications but I must be quick
yes quick today silverware a glass of water a pound of coffee
and if anyone dares to insult my boss says anything winks or whispers
I’ll kick their ass so help me god right away right away
without him I’m a shadow a glass of water I’m coming I’m coming
if anyone dares to insult my boss

translated by Piotr Gwiazda
When we brought the anaconda home from the pet store things seemed to be okay. My sister insisted on carrying it around with her though she could barely walk the snake was so heavy. We were accustomed to that sort of extra load. Something a bit cool around the neck and the shoulders bowing down. I told her to put it back in the cage because we hadn’t named it yet and didn’t really know if it was a him or a her. She put a sock on the snake’s tail that night because she was certain it would get too cold in our house the heat hardly working and our father gone missing. The next morning the snake too was gone. There was no food in the house either and clearly the snake had rummaged through the cupboards. Had opened the fridge and drunk the milk. We saw beads of milk, and a ribbon of crumbs on the floor. Something we got used to hearing rustle around in the walls of the house all night long. It was like there was some extra muscle in our lives. One night my sister was giggling in her sleep and the snake was there around her middle pretending to tickle her. This is something that happens to girls. The thing wraps around you. You giggle. You forget.
My mother kept sparrows in the back of the drying yard out of sight along with underwear, t-shirts, jeans, blouses, little birds in her hands. I’d spy on her through a hole in the fence. Hold my breath so I wouldn’t spook her. It was like she had another family altogether. Mother cooing to them. Mother stroking their heads singing in that thready voice she had. She was trying at one point to make them do tricks. Like they were little dogs in the circus or something. Fly through the neck holes of t-shirts. Hang upside down on the line. Carry the clothes pins back to the clothes pin bag. This was her secret. The song she sang in the drying yard. The flicker of sparrow wings in and out of her fingers.

Always someone or other in the family keeping something—baby squirrels in a bedroom drawer, fawn in the basement. The squirrels grew up and took off. As did the fawn. As did the sparrows my mother kept. As did the drying yard and the laundry we hung there. As did my mother and the t-shirts we wore. You might think it sad that the drying yard was my mother’s only private place. I remember how she smelled when she came back in to the house. A certain glow on her face. She’d hum as she folded the clothes. At school, we’d find tiny feathers in our shirts and socks. Odd bits of something in every sandwich.
Peter Leight

NEW THIS SEASON

This season it’s Hula Daddy Kona,
I’m pulling apart my ribs to make some space,
slathering on a new cream, everybody says the soreness is going to disappear completely.
I’m thinking about some things I didn’t even know about before, like Sumatra peaberry and debt swaps,
and this amazing cross body bucket bag of pebbled leather with halo chain in optic white
I didn’t even care about last season.
I’m getting some exercise,
I don’t know if it’s aerobic,
I think it is isometric,
improving the tension—
I’ve already tossed the rubber gloves.
I’m putting on my new canary yellow top that brings to mind early warning
when the bubbles in my body line up in long linked columns running up to the surface,
breaking the way buds open up.
I’m not even touching the cheesy goldfish.
This season the light appears as if walking through a gate in the air, opening the gate and walking in,
radiating like a tube rather than a spot—
it’s the kind of openness I couldn’t have imagined last season.

This time I’m going to believe everything you tell me,
I’m not going to let it bother me.

We’re taking pictures of each other to see what we look like right now, at this moment,
it’s not the same as last season.

We need to know,
we have a lot of new ideas this season,

I mean there isn’t that much difference between an idea and everything else that is happening to you—

I’ve got an idea,
this time I’m going to tell you everything,
this time I’m listening to I could have another you in a minute,
and moving on,
and ooh, ooh moving violation,
as far as the incremental approach is concerned I don’t think it is comprehensive enough,
not this season.

I'm still young,

I tell myself I'm still young,

I remember being young—

when you're young there's time but you don't want to wait.

This time I'm not going to wait.
Sometimes I feel I’m one step away,
that it would be just that easy or close,
and I can’t decide if it’s a step toward or a step away from,
or if this means I’m lost or on tour.
Like how I feel watching visualizations of the universe.
From this speck out to some other speck
and then back, from blood to blood.
Fibrous universe in which my blood is busy
pouring juice, where the horror movie review
starts with a lesson in pacing
and then everything goes nuts. It’s a lament
about a man trapped in his own head, circling,
with pointed descriptions of his slowly mutating depression
being cushioned by swelling strings and a backing chorus
of deliberative “oohs” and “ahs.” Blood of my blood.
In the traditional tale of the babes in the wood,
the two children are abandoned in the wood, die there,
and are covered with leaves by robins. Dust of my dust.
Universe of tubes and wires adding a village
of friendly elves and a happy ending.
I keep seeing these DNA test commercials where some guy
thinks he’s Irish and his blood says otherwise.
His blood crying out in humiliation and melodrama:
“I could be anyone,” his blood says. “How do you
like yourself so far,” his blood continues
from behind a tree in the wood. My blood wants to hit
the stand up comedy circuit, it thinks it’s so funny,
though I tell it over and over it’s not funny.
It says, “Remember that time at your mother’s
funeral? She died of so many things, that statistically
the rest of the family gets to live forever.”
TWO GODS IN ASPIC

There are these two gods, Lefty and Sangria. They’ve been at it for years, and now it’s early summer or late spring, herbs already starting to poke through, trees suddenly everywhere. I’m still not sure precisely the complaint they have against each other. Something to do with 8th grade recess or just that to say there are two gods means they must be in opposition. And the movie plays in the background where the starlet is saying “what’s to become of me” and I remember that years after I die, after I decompose, there will be this small, ¼ inch titanium post lying there from some dental work I had a few years ago. It was an upper first premolar (I just looked it up on a Teeth in Humans chart), and the dentist—oral surgeon—drills a little too far, going into my nasal cavity. I laughed at the time, because I couldn’t feel anything but the whiff of air in my nose. I left with a prescription for antibiotics and antihistamine. Someone died this way once, Richard told me the other day. Perfectly healthy, and then boom, an infection from dental work. Like how Robin told me this morning that a boy died after being bitten by a mouse at Petco. Lefty and Sangria are standing over a glass ball or murky pool as a boy is reaching for a mouse or I’m laughing in the dental chair. There’s a debate going on that to us sounds like wind or machinery. Wind wins or machinery wins, and you walk out the front door one day. “Life’s just one thing after another, isn’t it?” the UPS driver says, handing you a package. The truck’s license plate reads LEFTY or SANGRIA, but you don’t notice, though you do catch the driver looking at you in the rear view mirror as the truck pulls away, and it sure looks like a wink. That’s friendly, you think, opening your door.
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CYNTHIA HOGUE’s new co-translated book by Nathalie Quintane, Joan Darc, is just out from La Presse, as are poems in Blackbird, Copper Nickel, Hotel America, and Plume. She directs the MFA program at Arizona State University.

CHRISTOPHER HOWELL’S eleventh poetry collection, Love’s Last Number,
was published by Milkweed Editions in 2017. He teaches in the MFA program at Eastern Washington University.

MARILYN JOHNSON studied with Charles Simic in the late seventies. Her poetry has appeared occasionally in *FIELD*. She has also written three books of non-fiction, including *The Dead Beat* (Harper Perennial, 2007).

EVE JONES is the author of *Bird in the Machine* (Turning Point, 2010). Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *AGNI*, *Blackbird*, *Diagram*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Vinyl*. She has taught in the Lindenwood University MFA program since 2007.

PETER LEIGHT lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. He has previously published poems in *Paris Review*, *AGNI*, *Antioch Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *FIELD*, *Raritan*, and other magazines.


ANNE MARIE MACARI is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Red Deer* (Persea, 2015).

SARAH MACLAY has published three books of poems, most recently *Music for the Black Room* (University of Tampa Press, 2011), as well as *The "She" Series* (2016), a collaboration with Holaday Mason.

ANGE MLINKO’s most recent volume is *Distant Mandate* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017). She teaches at the University of Florida.

CAROLYN OLIVER’s poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Greensboro Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *Tar River Poetry*, and elsewhere. A graduate of The Ohio State University and Boston University, she lives in Massachusetts. More of her writing can be found at carolynoliver.net.


CAROL POTTER is the winner of the 2014 *FIELD* Poetry Prize for *Some Slow Bees*. Her most recent publications include poems in *Bloodroot*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and *Roads Taken*, an anthology of contemporary Vermont poetry.

ANDREA READ’s poems have appeared most recently, or are forthcoming, in *Barrow Street*, *Copper Nickel*, *Plume*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.

BILL RECTOR is a physician who lives in Denver, and his work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Epiphany*, *Construction*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Hotel Amerika*, and elsewhere.

DAVID RIVARD’s most recent book, *Standoff*, received the 2017 PEN New England Award in Poetry. His five other books include *Otherwise Elsewhere*, *Sugartown*, and *Wise Poison*, winner of the James Laughlin Prize from the Academy of American Poets. He teaches at the University of New Hampshire.

MARY ANN SAMYN’s most recent collection is *Air, Light, Dust, Shadow, Distance*, winner of the 2017 42 Miles
Press Poetry Prize. She teaches in the MFA Program at West Virginia University.

DENNIS SCHMITZ’s most recent poetry collection is Animism (Oberlin College Press, 2014). He lives in Oakland, California.

CLAUDIA SEREA’s poems and translations have appeared in FIELD, New Letters, Prairie Schooner, and elsewhere. She is the author of four full-length collections, most recently Nothing Important Happened Today (Broadstone Books, 2016). More at twoxism.com.

BETSY SHOLL’s ninth book, House of Sparrows: New and Selected Poems, will be out in 2019 from the University of Wisconsin Press.

CHARLES SIMIC’s latest book of poetry, Come Closer and Listen, will be out next year.

ARTHUR SZE’s tenth book of poetry, Sight Lines, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press in early 2019. He was recently elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.


BRUCE WEIGL’s most recent book, The Abundance of Nothing, was one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 2013. Next fall BOA Editions will publish his newest collection, On the Shores of Welcome Home, winner of the Isabella Gardner Award. He recently finished a collection of short prose pieces called Among Elms, in Ambush.

CHARLES WRIGHT, author of over 20 books of poetry, was the fiftieth Poet Laureate of the United States (2014–2015).

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