

Sleepless Nights of Poetry

An Interview With Charles Simic

By Ray González

Charles Simic's importance to American and world poetry is immeasurable. He is a writer who speaks with an imagination shaped by war, immigration, and survival. The strange scenes in his poems are built from an understanding of sadness that often leads to the richest moments of human triumph. The result is poetry unlike any other in modern literature, and writing that has influenced poets across the globe. Simic has published more than two dozen books of poetry, essays, and anthologies of world poetry. He has lived a life in the world of poetry that few others have been able to achieve. When he was awarded the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for a collection of prose poems, *The World Doesn't End*, he turned the literary establishment upside down. The cigar-smoking back rooms of poetry circles found it outrageous that a rebellious form like the prose poem had captured the highest prize in U.S. literature. Simic's editing of the groundbreaking anthology *Another Republic: 17 European and South American Writers* in 1971 was an attempt to bring a variety of world poetry in translation to American audiences. His personal essays on poetry and life in Eastern Europe and his hilarious takes on our culture's foibles are gathered in five books of nonfiction. His recently published memoir, *A Fly in the Soup*, is a moving, intimate account of his childhood in war-torn Yugoslavia and his harrowing journey with his mother and brother as they fled the horrors of World War II for the U.S. His other books of poetry include *Charon's Cosmology*, nominated for a National Book Award in 1977, and *Classic Ballroom Dances*, which won the 1980 di Castagnola Award and the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award. Simic has been honored with a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and awards from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has taught for more than 25 years at the University of New Hampshire. Critic Brian C. Avery sees Simic's writing as "primarily demonstrating this age of contradictions by signifying a loss of future-driven systems. But out of that loss, the poet finds the ability to remain calm, to experience and endure the impossible situation of this century."

This interview took place in October 2001, upon the release of *Night Picnic*. This new book is a tapestry of short poems whose images cast a spell upon the reader and illuminate the tenuous roots of a young and already lethal new millennium.

The Bloomsbury Review: *At the end of A Fly in the Soup you write: "That's what great poetry is. A superb serenity in the*

face of chaos. Wise enough to play the fool." In these dark times of chaos, war, and fear, where do the fools who write poetry fit in?

Charles Simic: Shitting in their pants together with everyone else.

TBR: *In your essay "Notes on Poetry and History," published 17 years ago, you wrote, "I worry that history is not the right word, that I am really describing the pressure of reality on the contemporary poet." Do you think American poetry might change because of September 11?*

CS: Yes, it's inevitable. Priorities change. It's hard to spend hours admiring oneself in the mirror when the building next door is going up in smoke. There was too much narcissism in our poetry and not enough awareness of the suffering that goes on in the world.

TBR: *Some critics say that poets should not respond to current events, believing that the poetry of objective, linguistic vacuums stays closer to the pulse of language than political writing does. In your essay "The Trouble With Poetry" you write: "Poets, as everybody knows, are champion liars. Every fool one of them believes in perjuring himself only to tell the truth." You have been tough on poets in essays you have written over the years.*

CS: Some poets will respond, the others will not. There's no rule here. Whitman wrote about the Civil War and Dickinson did not. They are both great poets. Lying is something

else. God forbid poets ever stop lying. How else can one make up good stories? What I'm talking about is imagination. It's that faculty that puts us in the shoes of other human beings. There's no truth without the imagination.

TBR: *During World War II, you fled Europe as a small boy with your family. Those memories have been some of the sources for your poetry over a lifetime. In A Fly in the Soup, you also write: "Consciousness as the light of clarity and history as the dark night of the soul." Soul is often taboo in American poetry. As a poet with a long writing, translating, and teaching career, do you feel like you fit in?*

CS: Is the soul taboo nowadays? I didn't realize it. It's not the word to overuse in poetry. I'm sure dogs have souls and a few humans here and there, but the rest of us? As for fitting in, I'd be surprised if I did. Conformity and the arts don't go together. Anyone who does anything independently or thinks on his own is regarded as an oddball. We are supposedly a country of individuals, while the truth is we are terrified of standing alone on any issue. I don't lose any sleep over not fitting in.

TBR: *A Fly in the Soup contains this statement: "It makes absolutely no difference whether gods or devils exist or not. The secret ambition of every true poem is to ask about them as it acknowledges their absences." Poets thrive in poetic absences, yet your work comes from a creator who is constantly confronting his gods and devils. Has it taken courage to be such a prolific writer who*

has gained critical acclaim on the way to a long body of work that is so different from other poetry?

CS: I don't know about courage. I'm still afraid of the dark and that's why I'm always mentioning gods or devils, trying to provoke them with some outrageous statement so they notice me and caution me about that chair I'm about to collide with. I don't care if they don't exist; they could still help a poor fellow like me. I mean to say, one deals with the world as one finds it, and gods and devils were already there when I was born.

TBR: It is hard for a poet to laugh at him- or herself, but your work includes a dark humor aimed at the "I" in the poems. I often sense the first-person speaker is always jumping around, restless, unable to contain himself within the short length of the pieces. "Grand Theatrics" and "The Number of Fools" from *Night Picnic*, your new collection, are examples. Do you ever slow down in your poetry?

CS: All roles human beings play are both tragic and comic. Our lives are equally sad and laughable. I have always been interested in different human types with their accompanying psychologies and beliefs. Poems like the ones you mention are like caricatures, quick sketches of a character in action, based on something overheard, seen, or imagined in the circumstances.

TBR: In books such as *Hotel Insomnia*, *A Wedding in Hell*, *The Book of Gods and Devils*, *Jackstraws*, and *Walking the Black Cat*, along with the new one, I hear a poet scrambling toward a dark salvation as he realizes he is growing older. There are humor, the weight of history, and the mysteries of poetic revelation in these books. Is there a certain path you can trace, looking back on many volumes filled with hundreds of short, intense lyrics?

CS: I don't have a clear sense of how I have changed over the years. I've been interested in many things and thought about them and changed my mind frequently, but how it all adds up is a mystery that I, luckily, don't have to solve. I'm not a believer in reductionist theories, so a single label doesn't appeal to me. It's the messiness of life with its contradictions that attracts me. It keeps me philosophically entertained in my sleepless nights.

TBR: Again, in "The Trouble With Poetry," you talk about brief poems and how "short, occasional poems have survived for thousands of years when epics and just about everything else have grown unreadable." What kind of discipline have you needed to

A PARTIAL LIST OF BOOKS BY CHARLES SIMIC

NONFICTION

A Fly in the Soup: Memoirs
(University of Michigan, 2000)

Orphan Factory: Essays and Memoirs
(University of Michigan, 1997)

The Uncertain Certainty: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry (University of Michigan, 1986)

Wonderful Words, Silent Truth: Essays on Poetry and a Memoir (University of Michigan, 1990)

POETRY

The Book of Gods and Devils (Harvest, 1990)

Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell
(Ecco Press, 1992)

Dismantling the Silence (Braziller, 1971)

Hotel Insomnia (Harcourt, 1992)

Jackstraws (Harcourt, 1999)

Night Picnic (Harcourt, 2001)

Selected Early Poems (Braziller, 1999)

Selected Poems 1963-1983:

Revised and Expanded (Braziller, 1990)

Unending Blues (Harvest, 1986)

Walking the Black Cat (Harcourt, 1996)

A Wedding in Hell (Harvest, 1994)

The World Doesn't End (Harvest, 1989)

TRANSLATION

Devil's Lunch: Selected Poems of Aleksandar Ristovic (Faber & Faber, 2000)

Homage to the Lame Wolf: Selected Poems of Vasko Popa (Oberlin College Press, 1987)

The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry (Graywolf Press, 1992)

keep writing so many short poems, and why have you stayed with the form for so long?

CS: Short poems are not written but found in longer poems. I've written many longer poems that were going nowhere until I realized there was another, much smaller poem in them and that it said all that needs to be said. I believe that in poetry, less is more. I'm astonished that so much can be said in so few words. That has never ceased to inspire me.

TBR: You were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The World Doesn't End*, a book of prose poems. Of course that fried the antiprose poem literary forces for a while. Now, everybody writes prose poems. Some critics claim the prose poem fits our media-driven sensibilities—a quick block of type on the page, then we move on. Is there a union between your short, lyrical stanzas and the prose poems you have written?

CS: Critics who say such things about the prose poem are too lazy to visit the library. They probably spend most of their time watching shopping channels on TV and think everyone else does it too. The prose poem has been around since the 1840s. There are different species in the history of modern

poetry, but at its very best it is capable of greatness.

TBR: You have translated European poets such as Vasko Popa, Aleksandar Ristovic, and others, and edited anthologies of translations like the legendary *Another Republic* and *The Horse Has Six Legs: Serbian Poetry*. There are many conflicting theories of translation and debates over how much freedom the translator should have in transforming poetry into a different language. Has your attempt to bring Eastern European poets to English readers been satisfying, frustrating, or an accepted part of your long commitment to poetry?

CS: A couple of truisms about translation are worth repeating: Translation is a labor of love. It is the closest possible reading of a poem. Translation is impossible; therefore every translator is in an ideal situation. My ambition has always been to stay as close to the original as I can. Despite all the odds against it, it happens. We know about the great poets of the world from translations, some of them so fine they make great poems in English.

TBR: In your introduction to *Devil's Lunch: Selected Poems of Aleksandar Ristovic*, you conclude that the poet is "like someone alone in a movie theater complaining about the projectionist,

and talking back to the silent film being shown on the screen.” If it comes down to image, your poems in *Night Picnic* visualize a voice still raging at the silent screen after decades of writing. What are the echoes from that voice you would like us to trust the most?

CS: It’s the voice that reminds you of your own humanity, of your own human solitude, of the poet in you, and makes you realize that a poem is a joint effort of the poet and the reader. If that voice is not your voice also, then there’s no poem, no poetry. I go inside myself to meet everybody else. That’s the hope, anyway. ■

GUEST EDITOR/INTERVIEWER: **Ray González** is the poetry editor of *The Bloomsbury Review*. His book of stories, *The Ghost of John Wayne* (University of Arizona, 2001) received a Western Heritage Award for The Best Book of Short Fiction from The Western Heritage Foundation. His essays and poetry have recently appeared in or are forthcoming in *The Norton Anthology of Nature Writing* (Norton, 2002), *Creative Non-fiction*, and *American Poetry Review*. His seventh book of poetry, *The Hawk Temple at Tierra Grande*, will appear from BOA Editions in May. He is associate professor of English at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.