

Visionary Sceptic:  
An Interview with Charles Simic  
*Capers Limehouse and Megan Sexton*

Charles Simic was born in Yugoslavia in 1938 and immigrated to the United States in 1954. He is the author of twelve books, receiving the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1990 for *The World Doesn't End*. His recent works include *A Wedding in Hell*, *Frightening Toys*, and *The Unemployed Fortune Teller: Essays and Memoirs*. Other honors include an Ingram Merrill Fellowship and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. He is currently Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire.

**MS:** You seem to have an artist's sense of composition along the lines of Edward Hopper and Joseph Cornell, and what I'm interested in is how you share their sympathy with the particular. You appear to rely more on this than on a strict literary narrative. Does this make any sense to you? Do you do this consciously?

**SIMIC:** Well I think in both cases, it's the image. I mean they both have incredible images that one remembers. From Hopper you go away remembering *Nighthawks* and one of those lonely women in hotel rooms. Of course, all the images of Cornell are memorable too. There's nothing like it. However, I think there is a great difference between the two. Hopper composes deliberately; he has a scene which is almost still life in that the people in his portraits are part of their surroundings. The interior is as important as the figure in the interior. If there is a suitcase and a bed in a hotel room and a crummy stained wall, all this is sort of equal, and that is what is disturbing about those images.

But the thing with Cornell is that he arrived at his images through chance operations. He is someone who found an object and put it in an empty box, and then he waited three years until something else seemed to fit in the same box. So he had no idea precisely what was going to emerge. He would do a series, for instance, and call the series "hotels," different kinds of imaginary hotels. Essentially, he arrives at the image through accidents. So it seems to me that they are very different artists, yet I like them both. I'm closer to Cornell because I don't think I compose in the way that Hopper did. But at the same time, I like very much what Hopper does—this sense of the equivalency between objects,

surroundings, and the human beings.

**MS:** And the urban landscape as well?

**SIMIC:** The urban landscape is Hopper's view of America: warehouses, crummy parts of town, red bricks, anonymous seedy rooms, porches. I love his view of the industrial America.

**CL:** In a funny way there's almost a romantic quality to it, or an anti-romantic quality.

**SIMIC:** I think probably both, because it's so strange that it should be romantic. It seems now that it was romantic, although this is a very harsh reality that he is presenting. We have a kind of nostalgia for that America, so I guess that makes it romantic.

**CL:** I guess I was thinking more of Wordsworth's observation of the particular in which the person in the landscape is not any more important than the ruins of Tintern Abbey. That the relationship with the landscape seems similar, even though Hopper's is an urban landscape.

**SIMIC:** Well, psychologically it's fascinating because if you look at most portraits, you basically remember the expression of the person, or if there is a nude, you look at the body and so forth. But with Hopper it's all this other stuff, where they are. The interior makes all the difference. The fact that he abolishes the importance of, or rather lessens the importance of the figure is what haunts us afterward—you think about this room as much as you think about the figure, whose face, if you remember, is usually averted. You see someone who is lost. These are really portraits of American solitude. A huge country with huge cities, and yet so many lone figures, so much solitude.

**MS:** There's also that element of voyeurism on Hopper's part.

**SIMIC:** Right. Light also plays the role of a voyeur. It's either dusk or early morning; there is very little light. Those are the hours that are troubling for the soul.

**CL:** Transitional periods.

**MS:** Your poem "The Little Pins of Memory" comes to mind, and the way you describe the shop window.

**SIMIC:** I must have written a lot of poems about shop windows. Shop windows have for me that kind of quality that Hopper has—to walk out onto an empty street or avenue in New York or any big city, is to

experience what Hopper saw.

**CL:** I've always been fascinated with shop windows in little stores, in back alleys. Places where time froze in 1850, and you don't know what they were trying to say in the beginning, but that's not what they're saying now.

**SIMIC:** There is something incredible about those places. Cornell loved them too. The whole idea of boxes. But I think maybe we're coming close to the whole question, you asked such a hard question. The juxtaposition of ordinary things and human beings in that kind of a window, in that kind of a display, framed, and somehow through their proximity transformed, takes you into the heart of mystery. Of course, artists like Hopper and Cornell give you these things without any comment. They don't say, "This is the message." They know that the image is powerful enough.

**CL:** Is that the connection that we're sensing in your poetry? That the image is just there, juxtaposed with other images, and yet it's very powerful.

**SIMIC:** That's my painterly impulse because I started as a painter. I painted between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six intensely, much more so than I was writing poetry, and so I leave things unsaid. I'm reticent. Once I have a good image, it seems silly to me to make a commentary.

**CL:** I was just wondering if maybe you trust the image *more* in a way, that someone coming from a verbal background doesn't quite trust the image.

**SIMIC:** I would say that is probably the inevitable result. I used to love still lifes. A terrifically talented 20th-century painter, Morandi, just painted bottles and ceramic objects all his life. He painted the same kind of arrangement for fifty years. I always admired single-minded efforts like that.

**CL:** To go into the object over and over again.

**SIMIC:** Right.

**MS:** Speaking of going into objects, how about Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, which I'm sure you've read.

**SIMIC:** That was one of the books that was a big discovery for not just me but a whole bunch of people I knew. I don't know when the first

Beacon Press edition came out. I still have the book in hard cover. I don't know when this was, the late fifties or sixties?

**MS:** The Beacon edition came out in 1969.

**SIMIC:** When it came out, everybody kind of, well not everybody, but I know Bly and James Wright were reading it, and I was reading it. It was sort of an astonishing book because it is the most elaborate description of what the poetic image does. It all seemed so right and so true. What an inspired reader of poetry he is, Bachelard. What a love for every image, every poem. He just made us think of the image differently. Jim Tate, Strand, everybody I knew back then was reading that book. It was a book that confirmed what you already intuited. Yes, that was one book that said it was okay to have poems made up of images only.

That was a time when there was a sort of movement, which was called deep image poetry. I know how it came about but it sort of means nothing, like language poetry, deep image poetry, all these meaningless appellations. Usually if you had poems with images and someone was reviewing your book, they'd say, "This is only image. Where's the message, where's the moral?"

**CL:** Or even, where's the intellectual content?

**SIMIC:** Right. So once you read Bachelard, we said, "Aha! The Frenchie knows."

**MS:** Also, I think that his concept of miniature is very freeing for poets who feel like they have to deal with the grand scale, and then suddenly you realize that you can write a poem about a postage stamp.

**SIMIC:** That's true, the notion of less is more. The dichotomy, the idea that a little miniature of an image can release enormous forces. I remember lines that he quotes in that book, and I haven't reread that book in many years, but there is a line he quotes from some poet. He says something like "the odor, the smell of silence is so old." Little things like that, you can't get them out of your mind. So, yes, that was really very, very important, and I think an article could be written on the influence of Bachelard on a number of American poets of my generation, even the older generation, although I don't think they took to him quite the way we did.

**CL:** While you were talking, I was thinking of Emerson's essay "The Poet" and the effect that it had on Whitman and Dickinson. It was like

somebody had opened a locked door, and they walked through for the first time.

**SIMIC:** You always need someone to give you a license to do what you already feel you should be doing. Bly was the main theoretician of the group that I gravitated towards, the so-called deep image poets. James Wright and Merwin were also using the image. There were a lot of people—Kinnell, John Haines, and so forth. There were articles in Bly's magazines *The Fifties* and *The Sixties*, but Bly had a kind of moralistic explanation of the image. He would always say that we Americans are afraid of the unconscious, and the unconscious image is good; the rational image is bad because the rational mind is the business mind.

**CL:** You're even picking up the tone of his voice.

**SIMIC:** Well, it always struck me even when I was eighteen as being a little simple. Bachelard has a much more sophisticated and interesting poetic idea about the strength of the image, which is not just the strength of the poetic image, it's the strength of the image in painting, and in the movies.

**CL:** Is there music that has had a similar significance for your work?

**SIMIC:** Music is obviously very important, since I'm a lyric poet. There is the music of verse, as we know. When you write a lyric poem, paring it down and tuning it up, then you feel like singing; it's on the verge of song. The music of verse is not quite the same thing as the music that we are talking about. For me, jazz and blues, also classical music—I can't really say that one kind of music would be an influence on my poetry. The other night, I had this conversation with Elizabeth Hartwick, who kept telling me that Cal Lowell couldn't carry a tune and would embarrass her when she went down to Kentucky to visit her folk. Apparently, they would go to church and Lowell would try to sing a hymn along with the family and the whole congregation would turn around. But in a way, it's a different kind of music we're talking about.

**CL:** So it's more the idea of music or the body of music as opposed to a particular kind of music.

**SIMIC:** I think for me, specifically, music has to do with economy. Music is time: notes placed in time. When you're listening to somebody play Spanish guitar or blues guitar, chords and notes are followed by breaks and silences—there is a sense of form. In a good little song or tune you know where you begin and where you end, repetition, return and so forth. Then there is the other kind of music that is also extremely

important, the kind Pound told us about, the one we learn by reading a lot of poetry.

I remember periods when I would read nothing but Elizabethan lyrics, and my ear was just full of those sounds. I would feel like I ought to be writing in Elizabethan English. If you read a poet who has his own music for a long time, say if you read Dickinson, after a while, you want to put dashes everywhere. Music is probably the most instinctive, the most instinctual side of poetry. It has to do with your sense of time, emotion, subjectivity. It's very hard to objectify, to say, how did listening to Lester Young or Ben Webster influence me? I cannot possibly begin to reply.

**CL:** Donald Hall talks in terms of heartbeat and almost bodily rhythm.

**SIMIC:** Right. I think it is true. Also, you know great music has a purity. It's probably as close as we get to perfection. Listen to a Mozart piano sonata or Beethoven or whatever else you listen to. Even a folk song, a terrific folk song is an amazing thing. That model of perfection is very important. I remember years ago, when I was kind of lost, so to speak. Every once in a while one loses that sense of form and pace, and just by accident I turned on the radio and heard Bach, and right away I got it back. Aha! Here's the focus. That's the way you go.

**CL:** Talking about music and lyric and form in poetry, I was very moved by the prose poems in *The World Doesn't End*, and I was wondering how you came to be willing to use that very open form, which seems different from a lot of your other poetry.

**SIMIC:** Well it is. There was a time when everybody wrote prose poems, when I was young. Everybody I knew wrote prose poems. Michael Benedict was somebody I knew then who put together an anthology of prose poetry. But I never did.

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The lyric is really circular. The lyric backs up onto itself. You finish reading a short poem, and you want to go back to the beginning. Even a good haiku makes you reread it. What happens in a good prose poem, and I'm thinking of some great examples from the past like Rimbaud's "Illuminations," is that somehow these two things, the anecdote—the story—and the lyric come together. Again, here is something one could not write a prescription for. What happens is, I think, that the prose poem gives more weight to images than prose would. It seems to be moving forward, but it really is setting up all these phrases or symbols or images which will force the reader to go back and reread it. It's not an easy thing to describe.

**CL:** As you were talking, I was thinking again about your willingness to trust the image. It seems to come back to you.

**SIMIC:** And also there are other kinds of things that the prose poem incorporates, like the joke, the funny story, the journal entry. Those are also narratives. There are a number of different kinds. . . .

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**CL:** They're not accidents.

**SIMIC:** Right.

**CL:** It's almost like you were drawn to it because it wasn't possible, and you've talked about that in other places.

**SIMIC:** Right. You can't know until you try it.

**CL:** When I read your poems I have this sense over and over again that in some way they are immediately accessible, yet I'm not sure that I would want to write an academic paper on them, because I'm not sure how I would paraphrase them.

**MS:** That's an evil word.

**CL:** It seems almost like the surface is translucent, that there is light coming back and forth but nothing that you could write down absolutely. Does that make any sense?

**SIMIC:** Well yes. Tell you I never seek ambiguity. I have a tremendous faith in the reader's kindness, and I don't want to abuse that kindness. I also have great faith in the reader's imagination. I feel I don't have to spell it out. If the image, the result, the final effect of all the images of the poem—if the reader, a kind reader, is unable to penetrate to another level, I think it is the fault of the poem. There is something wrong with the poem. My hope is that at some point, he'll sit up in bed in the middle of the night and he'll say "Aha!"

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**CL:** I just read the poem you mentioned to a group of eighth graders.

**SIMIC:** And what did they say?

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of them.

You call Dickinson a visionary skeptic. I often notice resemblances to her work in your poems, both in their appearance on the page and in their intense juxtaposition of images and images of statement. Do you ever think of yourself as a visionary skeptic?

**SIMIC:** I really must say this is the first time I admitted this. I wasn't conscious to what degree Dickinson influenced me or how much I subscribe to her method. I don't know how to answer the question about the visionary skeptic, but I am happy to call myself one from now on. Her whole relationship to God: she believed in God, and then she didn't believe in God. She never made up her mind. She probably didn't believe in anything at the end, and that's why she hid herself in that room. She was probably terrified that her family would discover the writing of this great blasphemer.

**MS:** And she was a woman at that.

**SIMIC:** And a blasphemer; it doesn't get any worse than that. To me this makes absolute sense: I'm sort of in the same boat. Even if God does not exist I have plenty to ask him.

**CL:** You still have to argue with him.

**SIMIC:** It's much closer to home than reading Baudelaire or reading Yeats, whose symbology, after all, is based on symbols and contexts that are not American. Now that I live in New England, I'm beginning to see "New Englandly."

**CL:** Are you going to become a New England monk like she was a New England nun?

**SIMIC:** I'm tempted. I just came back from a trip, and I was thinking I should never leave this place.

**CL:** I wonder sometimes if it's the winters.

**MS:** A certain slant of light.

**CL:** Or just not being able to get out of the house.

**SIMIC:** That poem, "A Certain Slant of Light," that's a Simic poem. That to me is as great a poem as I can imagine writing. The kind of shiver and chill which that poem provokes in a reader, this is what I am after.

**CL:** Do you see a change in American poetry? In your book of collected prose, *Uncertain Certainties*, you talked in the seventies about poetry



being stuck.

**SIMIC:** I probably would answer the question differently now because I don't remember what I had in mind.

**CL:** What you talked about was American poetry still looking for a necessary vision, a vision that would drive it. That was connected in my mind—I don't think it was a connection you made—with the whole idea of Emerson and Dickinson and the American poet.

**SIMIC:** I think what you're saying is true. I probably felt then much more part of a generation of poets. If one feels part of a generation, one feels obligated to find a way, to find a program—we're marching together. But now I would hesitate to generalize. It seems to me that any time one generalizes about the poetry scene, one inevitably sees trends that lead nowhere. You look at the scene and everyone seems stuck because one forgets that poetry in any age is made by absolute individuals, who do not resemble one another. They are just simply there somewhere. Generalizations about poetry, which one cannot avoid, lead to "workshop poems."

**MS:** And "McPoems."

**SIMIC:** Right. But in a way, these statements say nothing. They describe the mediocrity of the age. And every age has plenty of mediocre writing. Literature, in any nation, in any culture, at any moment is mostly forgettable. So I don't know where American poetry is now. It seems still stuck, but I think this is the result of what I just described. At the same time, putting together an anthology, *Best American Poetry*, I found many really fine poems, and more than a few genuine poets. American poetry has some very strong poets. It's not just my view; Europeans think the same thing.

**CL:** Are there people who come to mind particularly?

**SIMIC:** The list is huge. Looking at *Best American Poetry*, beyond the obvious people, there's a woman named Lucie Brock Broido, and a fellow called Billy Collins, who is terrific. I highly recommend him. Stephen Dunn, who is well known. Alice Fulton is fine and so is Marilyn Hacker. I went to school with Marilyn Hacker; haven't seen her since then, but once we shared a poetry prize as undergraduates. There is a poet who just died last year, Linda Hall, whose work I really liked. She died in a car accident, and there is a posthumous collection coming out. Linda Hall was incredibly good. Lee Young Li is terrific. These are people I included. There's a black poet called Thylias Moss;

she's terrific. There are plenty of other names.

**CL:** So there is good work going on.

**SIMIC:** There is really good work, and I don't think this is just some kind of illusion that I have, because I also read European poetry and I know that this work really stands out. The Germans and the French and everybody else, whoever is out there, wouldn't mind having some of these poets.

**CL:** They may not be willing to admit it.

**SIMIC:** No no. I've been in Europe a lot because my books are published there, and they'll tell you how we Americans have many good poets. People know this. The only people who don't know that we have a lot of good poets are our academics. Down in Patagonia, they know. The young poets in Patagonia know the young poets to read are American poets. It used to be you read French poets; the French poetry was the most avant garde. Spanish and South American poetry was incredible too. But the young poets from Japan to Patagonia, who are always looking for the most interesting literature out there because they want to impress their contemporaries—you know, change your style—right now it is American poetry. American poetry is what they read.

**MS:** Did you see that article in the *New York Times Magazine* about two weeks ago? How did you feel about your classification as a stone/bone poet?

**SIMIC:** It wasn't the stone/bone poets, it was the magical realists. But they should have put me in the stone/bone category.

**MS:** Sorry, maybe that's why I thought they had.

**SIMIC:** They goofed. The article was so full of errors. I mean, what do you think of an article announcing that the three most handsome poets in America are all over sixty years old, and the three best-looking ladies are no spring chickens either.

**MS:** And who voted, that's what I want to know.

**SIMIC:** That was one of those *People* magazine-type articles.

**CL:** There are lots of good poets. Do you think there is that sense of a vision? I think of Dickinson as visionary.



**SIMIC:** The issue is interesting. America is a God-crazy country. We are a religious nation. Many parts of our nation practice a kind of theology that is so visionary. We really believe in miracles in a way I think nobody else believes in miracles. Our strongest literary tradition, the transcendentalist tradition, is basically a tradition that says that the end result of living a certain way or being close to nature and regarding yourself in a certain way is that you're going to get a vision. You're going to transcend this and have a sense of the unity, of the oneness of everything.

We are incredibly tempted by that. It's a problem. It's a problem because very often you read poets who are not so good, even good poets, for example someone like Theodore Roethke, who felt obliged to end most of his major poems, longer poems, with a great vision: I believe, I see, I'm one with the blade of grass. That's a terrible obligation. You don't have this obligation if you're in Paris or Berlin or Moscow.

**CL:** Sort of the Emersonian burden.

**SIMIC:** It's the Emersonian burden plus religious impulse that is around us, so one has to be a visionary skeptic because it's hard to deny that need, that reality. On the other hand, one shouldn't just fall for the rhetoric. The kind of poem where if the fellow goes into nature or goes fishing or hunting and spends some time outdoors, you know he's going to have some kind of a vision.

**CL:** Its sort of formulaic now. If there's a bear, you know God is there somewhere.

**SIMIC:** Sure. You need higher values, of course. You need to go beyond the self. We don't have a sense of community that's particularly strong. We can't sing "America the Beautiful."

**MS:** Most people don't know the words.

**SIMIC:** What do you praise? Do you praise your cities? Who do you praise? What do you praise? This is an issue, not just for our poetry, but for our fiction too. We don't trust the cities; we don't trust our communities. We trust nature.

**CL:** In the attempt to find a vision, we fall into formula.

**SIMIC:** Right.

**MS:** Certain contemporary poets, such as the Irish poet Eavan Boland, demand an ethical relationship between the poet and the image. Several

of your recent poems, including "Paper Dolls Cut Out of a Newspaper," "Dark Screen TV," and "Reading History," appear to deal with the poet's relationship to human suffering and evil in the world. Are poets accountable? And if so, how?

**SIMIC:** I would say that poets are accountable to their own conscience and their own heart. Dickinson said nothing about the Civil War in her poems, and we could complain about that "little miss spoiled rotten, sitting there worrying about God," while funerals of local boys went on in the church across the street. One could go on about that. I think it depends on the poet. I could say that poets have to pay attention to the world they live in. On the other hand, I know there have been great poets in the world who have not paid attention.

**MS:** I guess I'm thinking about this on more of an individual basis. She had an ethical sense about her work. Even though she wasn't dealing with the Civil War and the politics of the nation, she was dealing with the politics of herself and her position in society.

**SIMIC:** I can only speak for myself. I would never pass judgement on other poets or insist or generalize from my own concerns. Obviously, in my own case, the world and its horrors bug me. They have always been present in my work. I cannot sleep well at night when I read something or see something. I know that as we speak there are terrible things going on in various parts of the world, and remembering that simultaneity, that we are contemporaries with horrors, with all sorts of things which we are not responsible for, is a terrible kind of knowledge. Now that's why I'm a visionary skeptic. I could never abandon myself to some experience of beautiful nature or sunset, because I know over that hill there are three skinheads beating someone up in some abandoned parking lot. So there is this other side, which is pretty horrible.

**MS:** So you believe that ultimately the poet has a responsibility to himself?

**SIMIC:** Yes. I believe that is what the poet has. That's what I believe. Other poets will see it differently. In the first part of the century, especially in Russia, in China, there were many declarations, conferences, and proclamations on what the poet should do. How the poet should be socially responsible. There are masses of oppressed workers, et cetera, and we have responsibilities. Until the day Communism collapsed, they proclaimed these things. Ninety-nine percent of what they wrote was trash, propaganda. Anyone claiming poetry should do

this or poetry should do that is saying nothing. It's up to the poets themselves, if they have a conscience, to do something. Then, of course, you can't really judge from outside.

**MS:** So do you think poetry can do anything to impede suffering or make a difference in the outside world?

**SIMIC:** I don't think poetry can really stop these things, because the people who are doing it don't read poetry. Even those who read are not to be trusted. In Yugoslavia, in Bosnia, some of the leading war-mongers are poets. It's not as if all poets are pacifists. If you look at the first part of the century, many of the modernist poets became fascists. And the poets that were Communists didn't mind if their colleagues or whomever else were being sent off to prison camps. So virtue and poetry are not synonymous.

**CL:** I think it was Robert Frost who said, "Don't trust me, trust the poetry."

**SIMIC:** That's a very sensible thing to say.

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## Official Inquiry Among the Grains of Sand

You're wholly anonymous.  
You believe yourself living incognito  
In the rear of a weed-choked,  
Rat-infested  
Long vacant seaside villa.  
A gray gull,  
Most likely the chief snoop  
Of a previously unknown  
Secret government agency,  
Is tiptoeing around importantly.

Aha! At the intersection of  
Visible-Invisible,  
Past the lost dog hair,  
Past the solitary sugar crumb:  
There! With your pants down!  
Clutching your mouth in horror!  
Without a shadow of a doubt  
The indistinguishable you!

*Charles Simic*