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ATLANTA REVIEW

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ATLANTA REVIEW

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ATLANTA REVIEW

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Welcome to the *Atlanta Review*

"It is too late to be ambitious," Sir Thomas Browne wrote. His generation in the seventeenth century and ours in the twentieth have been destined to live in what he called "this setting part of time." In 1995, we have almost reached the year he foresaw as the end of the world. Yet America's poetry has never been more ambitious. In this issue we are privileged to publish many of the most distinguished voices in literature's continuing conversation.

The poems in this issue are remarkable individually and in concert. Their subjects take us from the Garden of Eden through earthly delight, conflict and false apocalypse, to a glimpse of the final reckoning and beyond. Their varied musics include sonnet, psalm, love song and epithalamion, hymnody and oratorio. In the background are shadows of World War II, whose anniversaries color this year, and of wars being waged in the world at this moment. In these sections also are personal wars, love, despair, triumph, guilt, fear–and loss, which here Josephine Jacobsen calls "the poet's mother lode."

The issue also features a revealing interview with the poet Charles Simic and a tale in the languages of math and human counterpoint.

Atlanta's first name was "Terminus." Railroads from across the country met here and then went out again in many directions. *Atlanta Review*, also, is meant to be a place where vital currents come together, form their own brief or lasting affiliations, and speak to a wide range of readers. Some of the words in the writings that follow have already lodged themselves permanently in our memories. We believe they will in yours, as well.

Memye Curtis Tucker
Editor, Volume II, Number 1

Santa Prassede, Rome

Here is the story
of a temporal sweetness
in the watery light

these windows
are small, the eyes frail
human organs they are sinners

in the presence
of brilliant forms
the vault hangs full

of faraway glory
while carnal tissue
fills up space

in the nave
O Byzantium
and the swaying graces

such light
comes in waves
and the tesserae wink

like golden grains
of sand O lord
they are full of love

the air is moist
and the man luminescent
his figure is large under the piers

and the blue
of the heavens,
the starlit parvis

and the cloudy stairs
as she drifts
through the light

to grasp his form
through columns of black
and oriental jasper

in the garden
of paradise the air
feels green their hands

sway like kelp
thin and helpless
O lord she says let us not stop

moving he is heavy
his face is full
like the moon

as the tide gathers
them in even the starfish
are singing.

Sidney Wade

Piazza di Spagna

Estragon says to Vladimir
(or vice versa) of happiness
recollected in distress: how
unpleasant that must be.

Ah Estragon, ah Vladimir,
discussing loss, the poet's
mother-lode. On the Spanish steps
chill fingers the bone.

As the sun drops and drops,
stare across at the small,
cold, invisible room
where loss has revelled;

where loss's aficionado
labored to grasp and hold
a green felicity,
Apollo's summer look.

Loss has its *son et lumière*
to show what it has got
and means to keep: a hundred poems,
bright blood, a girl.

Josephine Jacobsen

Rimini

Massive algal blooms have closed the beach
Where Katie Jarman, 7, rode a swing
In the bathtub water of the Adriatic,
At Rimini, Fellini's town, a memory,
Like the cold fish in gelatin with peas
We ate for dinner. ("Friday," it was explained.)

In his films set in a fictional Rimini,
Cinder blocks are reared on sand; the gray sea breaks
Off in the margins, softly. Our castle, too,
Is built on sand—on celluloid—
And does not wash away but washes out,
Pierced by projector light. Rimini—

We ate a crust of sun—no—pizza.
And drank the fizzy darkness—no—Coca Cola.
And darkened our Scots pallor on the beach, accosted
By watch and postcard vendors. We said, *"Va via!"*
And away they went. On our balcony railing,
Sea horses dried, left by the previous occupants.

Rimini. It seemed we had it to ourselves—
Donald and Bo Dee, Katie and Mark,
Walking out after dinner, young parents, young children.
But crowds filled the alley of outdoor restaurants.
Lanterns hung among leaves and the moon among clouds.
(We left the dry sea horses for somebody else.)

If memory were like film and its tricks,
Those people with our names would save us now.
Save Donald from estrangement. Save Bo Dee
Who can't remember that she ever was
In Italy or any place like that.
Save Mark and Katie who've become their parents.

Fellini's films show almost all that I watch for.
How warm the water was (and perilous now).
And our home movie shows a child on a swing
In the sea at Rimini, Fellini's town.
Silence writes the subtitles to our voices,
Telling the past, "*Va via!* Go away!"

Mark Jarman

Unholy Sonnet

Lord, spare me from the drowsiness that starts
Just as I put my finger on a word.
Erase the errands I think to do instead.
Don't let me leave my desk. Don't let me parse
The day into voluptuous repetitions,
The three square meals, the necessary chores,
The naps extending eros into boredom
(Those sexy daydreams I do nothing with.)
Lord, stop my hand when it begins to sketch
The intricate, useless doodle in the margin,
And bring it to my mouth to close the yawn
That ends the day before it even begins.
Make me equal to the task, and make the task
The goading preoccupation of a lifework.

Mark Jarman

Psalm: God of the Syllable

God of the Syllable
        God of the Word
God Who Speaks to Us
        God Who Is Dumb

The One God The Many
        God the Unnameable
God of the Human Face
        God of the Mask

God of the Gene Pool
        Microbe Mineral
God of the Sparrow's Fall
        God of the Spark

God of the Act of God
        Blameless Jealous
God of Surprises
        And Startling Joy

God Who Is Absent
        God Who Is Present
God Who Finds Us
        In Our Hiding Places

God Whom We Thank
        Whom We Forget to Thank
Father God Mother
        Inhuman Infant

Cosmic Chthonic
God of the Nucleus
Dead God Living God
Alpha God Zed

God Whom We Name
God Whom We Cannot Name
When We Open Our Mouths
With the Name God Word God

Mark Jarman

Winston Farm

The barn falls slowly but not under fire.
It gives itself up to a cargo
of toppled turrets, ladders supporting

the ruffled nests of wasps and grape
tendrils tangled as barbed wire.

A roof thatched with feathers would keep
out the rain better than this one.
With no one to save them, the walnuts lie

where they fell, bigger than musket balls
and pungent. The stable's still

standing. The bridles and bits dangle
in the stalls, over which someone
has printed the names Beauty, Lance,

like the dead at Gettysburg whose names
penciled on old planks saved

what was left of them under those shields
when the living went out to harvest
their dead on a morning like this one,

moving quietly over the cropped fields.

Nancy Willard

Two Propositions

occurred to me as I was falling asleep last night.
The first I've forgotten, and the second,
which had to do with the necessity

of death, and really felt quite comforting, depended
in some essential way upon the first.
After that I slept badly. Figures

from a novel kept appearing
inside the basketball game I'd watched earlier–
a few quarrelsome domestic scenes

played at one, then at the other end
of the court. It would come to nothing.
And perhaps, as I'd been reading,

our dreams aren't meant to make
any kind of sense, are only white noise
designed to keep our minds engaged

until we wake–no secrets
except the usual secrets. Which means
we could give up wondering

if there is some hidden weave to our lives,
which leads us to death, that second proposition,
the truth of which wholly depends

on the first, forgotten, unrecoverable idea.

Lawrence Raab

Blowing Up the Moon

Fantastic weather...no more typhoons,
no more cyclones, no more tornadoes!
–Professor Alexander Abian, explaining
the advantages of blowing up the moon

It's time, I said, to free ourselves
from the torments of the weather,
the tyranny of our useless neighbor.
Let the oceans rest for once.
A billion stars should be enough
for any couple of lovers.
It's time to find
a better object of desire.

And you agreed. Of course,
you said, a few will claim they've seen it
floating up behind some mountain,
shadowed with its human features.
And others will be haunted,
will demand their souvenirs–
pocked stones in airless cases,
pictures of a footprint, a jar of dust.

Let them have their gloomy museums,
I replied. No one will truly yearn
for the hurlyburly of our desperate century
when the years of tranquility arrive.

So we stared into the future
as if we were there.

I asked if you could believe
we had ever lived like that,
the way we lived under the sway of the moon.
We were so different then, you said.
It was another life.

Lawrence Raab

The Major Subjects

Death is easier than love.
And true feeling, as someone said,
leaves no memory. Or perhaps:
is only memory. Nevertheless,

of all the major subjects
death is the easiest. Consider
the sea cucumber: when attacked
it divides, sacrificing half

so that half won't get eaten.
But what if the half that knows
is the half that's been gobbled up,
leaving some poor dumb second self

out there alone, oblivious and tasty?
The natural world is always instructive.
Mysterious, as well. But difficult
to praise. Love, on the other hand,
is also difficult, the way it slides
into so many other subjects.
And what if true feeling is only
what we have chosen or found useful

to remember? Yes, death is easier.
As my mother used to say: You have to eat
a peck of dirt before you die.
Fellow poets, we must learn again

to copy from nature. All the rest
is self-indulgence and deceit.

Lawrence Raab

Bedazzled

A jewelled wasp stuns
A cockroach & plants an egg
Inside it. In no time, easy
As fear eating into someone,

The translucent larva grows
Beneath its host's burnished
Shell. The premature stinger
Waits like a bad idea, almost

Hidden. Summertime
Breathes on a thorny leaf.
Before the new wasp breaks
Free, they are one. No longer

Growing fat on death,
By tomorrow afternoon
It'll cling to a windowscreen
Like Satan's lost tiepin.

Yusef Komunyakaa

In a Whirlpool Spa at a Holiday Inn

In a whirlpool spa at a Holiday Inn,
with the bubbles siphoning and sighing,
I am alone until a man lowers himself
into the half shell.
He is wearing the male pelt of shyness
delicately
lowering himself
as if not to offend me.
And something is familiar,
something is coming upon me–I see
that this is the hotel impersonator.
Last night he was Elvis and tonight he will be Elvis again.
The bubbles of the whirlpool are siphoning and sighing,
and I am feeling quite light in the head, vaguely
carbonated–it is too intimate,
the pummeling of bubbles between us,
the heated luxuriant waters,
and yet one should not be alone in a whirlpool spa
(the threat of nausea, dizziness, fainting)
and so now I am safe with an Elvis impersonator,
the Las Vegas Elvis,
who is himself and then some,
and what spirit is rising within me in a glaze of jets,
the waters breaking into pixels.
I am with Elvis
in the frothing waves of history, here where
you can't be too dead for the American people.
Elvis's eyes are wet from the whirlpool,
wet as a weeping icon's.
It's the Holiday Inn, the holy days,
a spa for everyone and
Elvis Presley in it.
And there is no escaping Elvis for any of us
unless we actually are Elvis
who is dead, believe me, not on a walkabout
in Saginaw or Battle Creek
or rising on a winding velvet stair
above some headboard in Baltimore. But here
every night at the Holiday Inn
is a night of the living dead where
we live among tracings, shadows,
where we are doubled or nothing where
we must see each of us that we are porous, that
Elvis was the man, he suffered, he was there,
and his reproductive system functions forever
to deduce Elvises. Later
I will return to my room by the ice machine
all night dashing its beads into a bucket.
The King bathes with an ordinary woman.
We have soaked with Elvis
until I too am Elvis
and you are Elvis
and we are not–any of us–entirely mortal.

Lee Upton

Poem on an Accidental Xerox of Her Hand

for D.W.

Dermatoglyphics is the fancy name
for the gentle science of reading palms

or, for that matter, soles: anywhere
genetics takes its chances and leaves lines.

Fortune tellers make whole lives of such
cutaneous meanderings, of course,

taking the intersections of the world
as each presents itself, heart in hand.

I could have used some palmistry today:
A woman in Ohio, sending poems,

xeroxed not only the poet's finest frenzy,
but also, at the upper left, her hand.

That is the wondrous way the world may happen–
you start to do one thing and do another.

Up to now I haven't read the poem.
I've only sat here hoping to say sooth,

trying to glean a message from this map,
life line, love line, shape of her own sweet time.

La Ci Darem La Mano hums through my head.
For having seen their tracery in the air

five slender ministers practicing their Braille,
I swear by the metacarpal hills of fortune

I would have known these fingers anywhere.

John Stone

I Still Have Everything You Gave Me

It is dusty on the edges.

It is slightly rotten.

I guard it without thinking.

I focus on it once a year
when I shake it out in the wind.

I do not ache.

I would not trade.

Naomi Shihab Nye

Listening to Poetry in a Language I Do Not Understand

Here is a door
and a pipe the rain runs through.
A yellow flower
with twenty supple lips.

I like how you move your hands.
How the black T-shirt you have worn
for the last three days
drapes loosely
over baggy blue pants.
You stop so abruptly
I fell into the breath
of the person next to me.

We can look at this poem
from the high mountains
above the roof
or stand under it
where it casts a cool shadow.

Is this your family home?
Your grandfather's tiny buddha?

One word rolls across the room
and lodges under the slipper
of the man who has felt uncomfortable
all day.

Now he knows what to say.

Naomi Shihab Nye

Message

My son's best friend says that she'll speak to me instead.
He left her a message just a while ago. They've been
married since he was three and she four: she wore
her gauzy white gown and he, his bow-tie. I helped
find his dress shoes again and again. They chose
a ceremony by the chicken coop. I read Gibran.
A bumpy hug, instead of kiss. They wrapped
wire twists around each other's fingers.
"Which finger?" they asked. No one laughed.

But now they're eight and nine and she says,
"I'll be busy for the rest of the day. Tell him."
She has a friend over. But the last time
they played, I glimpsed her sober face...
dusky corners he didn't reach.
In the car he said glumly, "She wanted to watch TV."

Today the gap between her first sentence
and the next looms long, that pause when a screen
goes numb, one thing coming, one still lit.
Will they set up the tent? Tickle each other
with grasses again? He's perching hopeful
by my side. From across town, her voice rings in
thin but clear."I'll be busy, I think, for the rest of the year."

Naomi Shihab Nye

Hotel Room, 5:00 a.m.

Around me the sounds of rented space:
in the hall a key clicks
and voices explore the intimacy
of anonymous lives.
The clock radio on the bedside table,
set to someone else's schedule,
announces a change in the weather
while the heater hums on, not hopeful.
I see through the gauze curtains
the night lights of the city, offices
abandoned and silent, streets
wary and braced for surprise.
In this building, someone dreams
of a child four states away, a woman
waits for her lover on the phone
to his wife upstairs, a bellhop
sets down a man's luggage
outside the door next to mine,
not knowing what he toted
down the carpeted hall,
what outrageous joy
or grief may be contained
in such tight space.

Anita Skeen

Baptist Hymns

for Marcia, Marilyn, Nancy, Beth, Susan, and Eileen

They come to me at the oddest times,
tumbling out warm and electric
like the cotton socks and underwear.
A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify
when I let down the door of the dryer
or rolling in like a Friday night storm
as I stand looking across the lake.
All hail the power of Jesus' name
In my Friday night writers' group–
a Baptist, an Evangelical United Brethren,
two Methodists, an Episcopalian, a Catholic and a Jew,
all lapsed and relapsed–we are talking
about the houses we grew up in.
I mention the gospel music purring
inside the white plastic radio,
turned yellow and permanently tuned
to static, when someone across the room
breaks into *The Little Brown Church in the Vale,*
and before long we're all holding hands
and singing *Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam*
and *Bringing in the Sheaves.*
Except for our Catholic, who rises
to her feet, ceremonious and erect, and offers
Latin incantation that silences us all
in the middle of Verse Two, Repeat Refrain.
How mysterious those *a capella* words,
how seductive that ancient tongue.
This is what my mother, keeping watch
in the choir loft, was afraid I might hear.
Instead, I discovered the Pre-Raphaelite poets
and Matthew Arnold, though as I stand each year

before my class reciting *Dover Beach*, the sea
I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore
of those old songs may come crashing into the text:
It's Easter Sunday, I'm in grade three,
my new dress with its stiff with crinolines
makes me bob like a buoy and I glance down
to the page of my hymn book, though I never
need to look at the words, and squeezed
between my tenor father and off-key grandmother,
I join my eager monotone voice
with those rising around me, feeling the refuge
of song, *the power in the blood,*
and love lifting me,
(even me).

Anita Skeen

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 is nothing like it. However, I think there is a great difference between the two. Hopper composes deliberately; he has a scene which is almost a 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?

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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.

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CL: I think that I could take some of your poems and read them to this bright group of eighth graders and they would have that same immediate response they did to Dickinson's poem. Not that they would necessarily get all the complexities, but something would just grab hold

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.

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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 warmongers 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.

Capers Limehouse holds an M.F.A. from Georgia State University. Her work has appeared in *Poem* and is forthcoming in the *Greensboro Review.*

Megan Sexton is a doctoral candidate at Georgia State University. Her work has appeared in journals including *Calyx, Berkley Poetry Review,* and is forthcoming in *Willow Springs*. She plays drums for the Skylarks.

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

Penguin Races

Lining them up is difficult,
since they waddle absently
in several directions at once,
and refuse to face the right way.
Their slick feathers gleam in the sloped
cold glare. Their tiny heads
contain a helpless contempt

that with collective exertion
they could focus like a laser.
Finally they're all facing north.
But the bang of the starter pistol
scatters them in four dimensions.
Only one scoots toward the finish,
but he veers to the left to avoid

a random, useless victory.
The long Antarctic summer day
revolves like a wooden water-wheel.
As we sip from our flasks the penguins
gather to commiserate,
their hard eyes nailed so firmly
in their heads their gaze seems fixed,

but intelligent as X-rays;
so that seen from the air the flocks
clearly form great hieroglyphs
that shift in the eye the way speech
does in the ear, momentary
against the blue and green auroras
prancing on the ice-mirrored dark.

William Doreski

Basic Algebra

What does it matter if six is not seven?
Morning takes off its blindfold and the night
breaks into tiny roaches that scamper into
the crevices behind my refrigerator.
I refuse to pay such high prices for vegetables.
I don't feel any need to apologize for the number
of breaths I will take today. I have no
excuses for my age which has approached
the starting point of Zeno's paradox. Whenever
I see three at the supermarket, reaching
for more than he can hold, the legs and arms
of his clothes too short, he is distraught,
terribly distraught, that he is not eight.
Every number pretends to account
for more than itself. Therefore
the truth of every figure is a paradox.
Eight is the most sensual of numbers
writes Joachim of Avalon, platonic pimp
for the great Petrarch. When he pulls the chord,
the corporal at the howitzer has already
double checked his figures for elevation
though in the end he resorts to trial and error.
It was a mistake to keep this single knife in my heart
so long, but it is my knife, and my heart, too,
with its four distinct chambers. The only thing
that saves me is the certain fact that one is
not a number. It leans against the subway wall
afraid to go on. It listens to no one
and no one listens to it. I am going to
build a new nest for each of the birds in my throat.
For every kind thing you say, my father would
always tell me, a hundred kind things are
visited upon you. This is despite the fact
that someone somewhere is keeping
a second set of books about our lives.
Despite the number of howitzer shells

stockpiled inside our dreams.
None of this should enter our equation.
Maybe we should think of another number
besides ten which we can base our math upon.
Lately, despite the fact that some branches
refuse to offer a flower, despite the sky's
eating away at the horizon, I have been
thinking of eleven, which is also a lovely number.

Richard Jackson

You Can't Get the Facts Until You Get the Fiction

The fact is that the Death I put on in the morning is
the same Love I take off each night. The fact is
that my life slips out the back door just as I arrive.
Just now, just as I tell you this, while I am looking
for a little dignity under the open wound of the sky,
I am putting down the story of the two lovers killed
on a bridge outside Mostar. And the fact is love is
as extinct as those animals painted on cave walls
in Spain. The fact is, there is not a place on earth
that needs us. All our immortal themes are sitting
on the porch with woolen blankets over their knees.
But who wants to believe this? Instead, I am looking
for the right words as if they were hidden under
my doormat like keys. I would like to be able to report
that the 9 year old Rwandan girl did not hide under
her dead mother for hours. There are so many things
too horrible to say. And I would like to tell you
the eyes of the soldiers are sad, that despite all
this madness I can still kiss your soul, and yes,
you might say I was angry if it were not for the plain fact,
the indisputable fact, that I am filled with so much love,
so much irrational, foolish love, that I will not take
the pills or step off the bridge because of the single
fact of what you are about to say, some small act
of kindness from our wars, some simple gesture that fools me
into thinking we can still fall, in times like this, in love.

Richard Jackson

Seattle Merry-Go-Round

for Jennifer

Not what one would think, not the ready-made
comfort and stasis of endless whirling
seamlessly joined with dip and rise.
Not the cone-roofed, light-strung, callioped building
heard and sighted from a distance. No shrieking
children nor befuddled infants, not lovers with hands
goofily linked and rippling through
the down-up-down of adjacent horses–
lovers with groins triggered for the night
by the press of wooden backs, by the rhythmic
thrusts against gravity and air . . .

Rather, the silence and almost-stillness of repair:
one woman's fingers probing with the delicate
sanders and brushes, touring the many hand-carved horses,
the one-of-a-kinds of goat, lion, dragon, and deer.
This triple circle of frozen beasts,
more playful than generals or gods in stone,
dwarfs its block-wide park at the city's eye.
Once bright and exotic with colors and shades
the woman can name like family, the carousel
rests worn and chipped by weekend leisure,
by idle hands and feet which gripped and picked and roamed.
The creatures' flanks have suffered heels,
their ears fingers, their saddles knees,
so that now Seattle's homeless gather daily–
however short these several summer weeks–
to watch the giant toy rekindled by lavender,
mauve, umber, brash chromatic yellow,
pine green, pearl, unspellable fuchsia and puce.

If a derelict lifts a hand toward the empty
one-ride midway, might she find her shaky, leathery claw
deserving of compare with the artist's
precisely wired fingers and wrist?
Or is analogy yet another province

traveled only by the fed and settled,
the owners of protein and vitamin B?

The painter talks with every watcher,
her focus deepened by distractions
born of contact. Here is art and politics
wed, beauty and hunger benignly balanced:
her paints and wages are public funds,
yet none of the homeless have wished her gone.

The wealthy come as well, down from their towers
to lounge in the sun that is everyone's dessert,
to shut off their brains for a while,
perhaps to ratchet them far enough back to see
the simple, sacred coin in every child's palm–
boss-to-be with nose to the gleaming
windows of trinkets and sweets,
bum-to-be at his leaning, quavering shoulder.

Stephen Corey