

# **Charles Simic**

(1938 – 2023)

## **Butcher Shop (1967)**

Sometimes walking late at night  
I stop before a closed butcher shop.  
There is a single light in the store  
Like the light in which the convict digs his tunnel.  
An apron hangs on the hook:  
The blood on it smeared into a map  
Of the great continents of blood,  
The great rivers and oceans of blood.  
There are knives that glitter like altars  
In a dark church  
Where they bring the cripple and the imbecile  
To be healed.  
There's wooden block where bones are broken,  
Scraped clean--a river dried to its bed  
Where I am fed,  
Where deep in the night I hear a voice.

## **Watermelons (1974)**

Green Buddhas  
On the fruit stand.  
We eat the smile  
And spit out the teeth.

## **Eyes Fastened with Pins (1977)**

How much death works,  
No one knows what a long  
Day he puts in. The little  
Wife always alone  
Ironing death's laundry.  
The beautiful daughters  
Setting death's supper table.  
The neighbors playing  
Pinochle in the backyard  
Or just sitting on the steps  
Drinking beer. Death,  
Meanwhile, in a strange  
Part of town looking for

Someone with a bad cough,  
But the address somehow wrong,  
Even death can't figure it out  
Among all the locked doors...  
And the rain beginning to fall.  
Long windy night ahead.  
Death with not even a newspaper  
To cover his head, not even  
A dime to call the one pining away,  
Undressing slowly, sleepily,  
And stretching naked  
On death's side of the bed.

### **The Big War (1990)**

We played war during the war,  
Margaret. Toy soldiers were in big demand,  
The kind made from clay.  
The lead ones they melted into bullets, I suppose.

You never saw anything as beautiful  
As those clay regiments! I used to lie on the floor  
For hours staring them in the eye.  
I remember them staring back at me in wonder.

How strange they must have felt  
Standing stiffly at attention  
Before a large, incomprehending creature  
With a moustache made of milk.

In time they broke, or I broke them on purpose.  
There was wire inside their limbs,  
Inside their chests, but nothing in the heads!  
Margaret, I made sure.

Nothing at all in the heads ...  
Just an arm, now and then, an officer's arm,  
Wielding a saber from a crack  
In my deaf grandmother's kitchen floor.

### **Two Dogs (1990)**

*for Charles and Holly*

An old dog afraid of his own shadow  
In some Southern town.

The story told me by a woman going blind,  
One fine summer evening  
As shadows were creeping  
Out of the New Hampshire woods,  
A long street with just a worried dog  
And a couple of dusty chickens,  
And all the sun beating down  
In that nameless Southern town.

It made me remember the Germans marching  
Past our house in 1944.  
The way everybody stood on the sidewalk  
Watching them out of the corner of the eye,  
The earth trembling, death going by ...  
A little white dog ran into the street  
And got entangled with the soldiers' feet.  
A kick made him fly as if he had wings.  
That's what I keep seeing!  
Night coming down. A dog with wings.

### **The City (1992)**

At least one crucified at every corner.  
The eyes of a mystic, madman, murderer.  
They know it's truly for nothing.  
The eyes do. All the martyr's sufferings  
On parade. Exalted mother of us all  
Tending her bundles on the sidewalk,  
Speaking to each as if it were a holy child.

There were many who saw none of this.  
A couple lingered on kissing lustily  
Right where someone lay under a newspaper.  
His bloody feet, swollen twice their size,  
Jutted out into the cold of the day,  
Grim proofs of a new doctrine.

I tell you, I was afraid. A man screamed  
And continued walking as if nothing had happened.  
Everyone whose eyes I sought avoided mine.  
Was I beginning to resemble him a little?  
I had no answer to any of these questions.  
Neither did the crucified on the next corner.

## **Clouds Gathering (1992)**

It seemed the kind of life we wanted.  
Wild strawberries and cream in the morning.  
Sunlight in every room.  
The two of us walking by the sea naked.

Some evenings, however, we found ourselves  
Unsure of what comes next.  
Like tragic actors in a theater on fire,  
With birds circling over our heads,  
The dark pines strangely still,  
Each rock we stepped on bloodied by the sunset.

We were back on our terrace sipping wine.  
Why always this hint of an unhappy ending?  
Clouds of almost human appearance  
Gathering on the horizon, but the rest lovely  
With the air so mild and the sea untroubled.

The night suddenly upon us, a starless night.  
You lighting a candle, carrying it naked  
Into our bedroom and blowing it out quickly.  
The dark pines and grasses strangely still.

## **Paradise Motel (1994)**

Millions were dead; everybody was innocent.  
I stayed in my room. The President  
Spoke of war as of a magic love potion.  
My eyes were opened in astonishment.  
In a mirror my face appeared to me  
Like a twice-canceled postage stamp.

I lived well, but life was awful.  
There were so many soldiers that day,  
So many refugees crowding the roads.  
Naturally, they all vanished  
With a touch of the hand.  
History licked the corners of its bloody mouth.

On the pay channel, a man and a woman  
Were trading hungry kisses and tearing off  
Each other's clothes while I looked on  
With the sound off and the room dark  
Except for the screen where the color

Had too much red in it, too much pink.

### **Café Paradiso (1995)**

My soup thickened with pounded young almonds  
My blend of winter greens.  
Dearest tagliatelle with mushrooms, fennel, anchovies,  
Tomatoes and vermouth sauce.

Beloved monkfish braised with onions, capers  
And green olives.  
Give me your tongue tasting of white beans and garlic,  
Sexy little assortment of formaggi and frutta!

I want to drown with you in red wine like a pear,  
Then sleep in a macédoine of wild berries and cream.

### **Cameo Appearance (1996)**

I had a small, nonspeaking part  
In a bloody epic. I was one of the  
Bombed and fleeing humanity.  
In the distance the great leader  
Crowed like a rooster from a balcony,  
Or was it a great actor  
Impersonating the great leader?  
That's me there, I said to the kiddies.  
I'm squeezed between the man  
With two bandaged hands raised  
And the old woman with her mouth open  
As if she were showing us a tooth

That hurts badly. The hundred times  
I rewound the tape, not once  
Could they catch sight of me  
In that huge gray crowd,  
That was like any other gray crowd.

Trot off to bed, I said finally.  
I know I was there. One take  
Is all they had time for.  
We ran, and the planes grazed our hair,  
And then they were no more  
As we stood dazed in the burning city,  
But, of course, they didn't film that.

## **Late September (2003)**

The mail truck goes down the coast  
Carrying a single letter.  
At the end of a long pier  
The bored seagull lifts a leg now and then  
And forgets to put it down.  
There is a menace in the air  
Of tragedies in the making.

Last night you thought you heard television  
In the house next door.  
You were sure it was some new  
Horror they were reporting,  
So you went out to find out.  
Barefoot, wearing just shorts.  
It was only the sea sounding weary  
After so many lifetimes  
Of pretending to be rushing off somewhere  
And never getting anywhere.

This morning, it felt like Sunday.  
The heavens did their part  
By casting no shadow along the boardwalk  
Or the row of vacant cottages,  
Among them a small church  
With a dozen gray tombstones huddled close  
As if they, too, had the shivers.

## **To the One Tunneling (2003)**

Penitentiaries secured for the night,  
Thousands lying awake in them,  
As we too lie awake, love  
Straining to hear beyond the quiet.  
The blurry whiteness at the ceiling  
Of our darkened room like a sheet  
Thrown over a body in the ice-cold morgue.

Do you hear the one tunneling?  
So faint a sound he makes  
It could be your heartbeat or mine  
In this wall we lean our heads against.  
With our eyes now tightly shut  
As if a jailer had stopped to peek  
Through the small crack in our door.

## **My Noiseless Entourage (2005)**

We were never formally introduced.  
I had no idea of their number.  
It was like a discreet entourage.  
Of homegrown angels and demons  
All of whom I had met before  
And had since largely forgotten.

In time of danger, they made themselves scarce.  
Where did they all vanish to?  
I asked some felon one night  
While he held a knife to my throat,  
But he was spooked too,  
Letting me go without a word.

It was disconcerting, downright frightening  
To be reminded of one's solitude,  
Like opening a children's book –  
With nothing better to do – reading about stars,  
How can they afford to spend centuries  
Traveling our way on a glint of light.

## **The Absentee Landlord (2005)**

Surely he could make it easier  
When it comes to inquiries  
As to his whereabouts.  
Rein in our foolish speculations,  
Silence our voices raised in anger,

And not leave us alone  
With that curious feeling  
We sometimes have  
Of there being a higher purpose  
To our residing here  
Where nothing works  
And everything needs fixing.

The least he could do is put up a sign:  
AWAY ON BUSINESS  
So we could see it,  
In the graveyard where he collects the rent  
Or in the night sky  
Where we address our complaints to him.

## **Used Book Store (2005)**

Lovers hold hands in never-opened novels.  
The page with a recipe for cucumber soup is missing.  
A dead man writes of his happy childhood on a farm,  
Of riding in a balloon over Lake Erie.

A sudden draft shuts his book in my hand,  
While a philosopher asks how is it possible  
To maintain the theologically orthodox doctrine  
Of eternal punishment of the damned?

Let's see. There may be sand among the pages  
Of a travel guide to Egypt or even a dead flea  
That once bit the ass of the mysterious Abigail  
Who scribbled her name teasingly with an eye pencil.

## **Shading Exercise (2005)**

This street could use a bit of shade  
And the same goes for that small boy  
Playing alone in the sun,  
A shadow to dart after him like a black kitten.

His parents sit in a room with shades drawn.  
The stairs to the cellar  
Are hardly used any more  
Except for an occasional prowler.

Like a troop of traveling actors dressed to play *Hamlet*,  
The evening shadows come,  
They spend their days hidden in the trees  
Outside the old courthouse.

Now comes the hard part:  
What to do with the stones in the graveyard?  
The sun doesn't care for ambiguities,  
But I do. I open my door and let them in.

## **To Dreams (2005)**

I'm still living at all the old addresses,  
Wearing dark glasses even indoors,  
On the hush-hush sharing my bed  
With phantoms, visiting the kitchen



After midnight to check the faucet.  
I'm late for school, and when I get there  
No one seems to recognize me.  
I sit disowned, sequestered and withdrawn.

These small shops open only at night  
Where I make my unobtrusive purchases,  
These back-door movie houses in seedy neighborhoods  
Still showing grainy films of my life.

The hero always full of extravagant hope  
Losing it all in the end? – whatever it was –  
Then walking out into the cold, disbelieving light  
Waiting close-lipped at the exit.

### **The Lovers (2008)**

In the woods, one fair Sunday,  
When we were children,  
We came upon a couple lying on the ground.

Hand in hand, ourselves afraid  
Of losing our way, we saw  
What we first thought was a patch of snow,

The two clutching each other naked  
On the bare ground, the wind  
Gusting in the new leaves over them

As we stole by, never to find out  
Who they were, never to mention it afterwards  
To each other, or to anyone else.

### **The Sparrow (2010)**

Regarding the current wars,  
I heard them say on TV  
That they will last forever  
Since our enemies are many,

There'll be plenty of business  
For those making bombs,  
Uniforms and hospital beds,  
And, of course, coffins.

Sparrow, hopping in the yard,

If our president is right,  
You and I may be on crutches  
Next time you pay us a visit.

### **Nothing Else (2011)**

Friends of the small hours of the night:  
Stub of a pencil, small notebook,  
Reading lamp on the table,  
Making me welcome in your circle of light.

I care little the house is dark and cold  
With you sharing my absorption  
In this book in which now and then a sentence  
Is worth repeating again in a whisper.

Without you, there'd be only my pale face  
Reflected in the black windowpane,  
And the bare trees and deep snow  
Waiting for me out there in the dark.

### **Today's Menu (2012)**

*Poem*

All we got, mister,  
Is an empty bowl and a spoon  
For you to slurp  
Great mouthfuls of nothing,

And make it sound like  
A thick, dark soup you're eating,  
Steaming hot  
Out of the empty bowl.

### **As You Come Over the Hill (2013)**

You'll see cows grazing in a field  
And perhaps a chicken or a turtle  
Crossing the road in their sweet time,  
And a small lake where a boy once  
Threw a girl in who couldn't swim,

And many large maple and oak trees  
Offering ample shade to lie in,  
Their branches to hang yourself from,

Should you so desire,  
Some lazy afternoon or evening

When something tells the birds to hush,  
And the one streetlight in the village  
To keep a few moths company  
And the large old house put up for sale  
With some of its windows broken.

### **Eternities (2013)**

A child lifted in his mother's arms to see a parade  
And that old man throwing bread crumbs  
To the pigeons crowding around him in the park,  
Could they be the very same person?

The blind woman who knows the answer recalls  
Seeing a ship as big as a city block  
All lit up in the night sail past their kitchen window  
On its way to the dark and stormy Atlantic.

### **Description (2015)**

It was like a teetering house of cards,  
A contortionist strumming a ukulele,  
A gorilla raging in someone's attic,  
A car graveyard frantic to get back  
On the interstate highway in a tornado,  
Tolstoy's beard in his mad old age,  
General Custer's stuffed horse...  
What was? I ask myself and have no idea,  
But it'll come to me one of these days.

### **The White Labyrinth (2015)**

There is one waiting for you,  
On every blank sheet of paper.  
So, beware of the monster  
Guarding it who'll be invisible  
As he comes charging at you,  
Armed as you are only with a pen.  
And watch out for that girl  
Who'll come to your aid  
With her quick mind and a ball of thread,

And lead you by the nose  
Out of one maze into another.

### **In the Snow (2017)**

Tracks of someone lost,  
Bleakly preoccupied,  
Meandering blindly  
In these here woods,

Licking his wounds  
And crunching the snow  
As he trudges on,  
Bereft and baffled,

In mounting terror  
With no way out,  
Jinxed at every turn,  
A mystery to himself.

### **At Tender Mercy (2017)**

O lone streetlight,  
Trying to shed  
What light you can  
On a spider repairing his web  
This autumn night,  
Stay with me,  
As I push further and further  
Into the dark.