

# Charles Simic grapples with an unexpected national title

by Michael Scharf Photograph by Peter Gregoire

# POET Considers

WHEN CHARLES SIMIC WAS NAMED the 15th U.S. Poet Laureate this past summer, he was, at nearly 70, an eminent American poet: the winner of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant and of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for his 1989 collection *The World Doesn't End* (Harvest). Still, he was surprised when the phone call came one morning to his New Hampshire home. “Early August, nothing is happening,” Simic (WSC '67) recounts in a cadence not unlike his verse. “In the boonies, every-

thing is very far away, and we just came home from the market. We're unloading a week's worth of groceries. The phone rings out of the blue—and they tell you.”

A sudden call where a mysterious “they” make a possibly life-changing pronouncement in the midst of a mundane task is characteristic of the “dark illuminations and acrid comedy,” as *New York Sun* critic Adam Kirsch has written, that won Simic national recognition. The call gave Simic pause not only because his ice cream

was melting. He has never been directly confrontational in the manner of Amiri Baraka, whose poem “Somebody Blew Up America” (2002) condemns a long list of “American terrorists,” or Allen Ginsberg, who asked outright “America when will you be angelic?” (in *America*, 1956) and referenced everyone from Walt Whitman to Richard Nixon. Yet Simic has, he says, “pretty much endorsed that sense of the poet who speaks truth to power.”

In “The Lights Are On Everywhere,”



POET LAUREATE CHARLES SIMIC, NOTED FOR HIS CUTTING WIT, VISITED FLORENCE PRIME MEATS IN THE VILLAGE DURING A RECENT TRIP TO HIS OLD NEIGHBORHOOD.

from his forthcoming collection *That Little Something* (Harcourt), he writes: *The Emperor must not be told night is coming. / His armies are chasing shadows, / Arresting whip-poor-wills and hermit thrushes / And setting towns and villages on fire. // In the capital, they go around confiscating / Clocks and watches, burning heretics / And painting the sunrise above the rooftops / So we can wish each other good morning.*

The poem addresses power indirectly—the capital and the rooftops could be anywhere—but such lines are typical of a career-long concern with the ways individuals get blown about by the currents of history. For a poet like Simic, an honor tied to one of the most muscular institutions on earth required that he think about the nature of the post, and what it would demand of him, and then call them back.

The Laureateship has always been something of an ambiguous post. It began in 1937 as “Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress”—when Robert Lowell (1947–48) and later Elizabeth Bishop (1949–50) held it—and supposed little official function. The current name was decreed by an act of Congress in 1985, possibly as a way of bringing the post into line with that of Britain, which has had a Laureate at least since Ben Jonson in 1616. But it wasn’t until Robert Pinsky’s unprecedented three consecutive one-year terms in the 1990s that the position gained prominence in the United States. Pinsky’s “Favorite Poem Project”—a book and video anthology of ordinary Americans selecting and reading their favorite poems—became synonymous with the post, and with the feel-good side of the Clinton administration. No Laureate since has really entered the national consciousness in the same way.

Those at the Library of Congress were quick to assure Simic that “it’s an honor, not a job,” and he has decided, like Laureates before him, to define his year in his own way. One of his goals is to endorse books that make finding and reading poetry easier, including *Poems of New York* (Everyman’s Library), a celebrated anthology of known and unknown poets from the 19th century to the present. Otherwise, the writer seems to have transferred his oblique

poetic approach to the Laureateship, which he sees as more about how one comports himself than any specific criticism or praise for the powers that be. “The thing about the role of the Poet Laureate so far, if you look back, is that everyone has behaved very well as a figure of integrity,” Simic says. “And right now we’re in a historical moment where there’s not much integrity around in government and other places.” Like his poetry, which is suggestive but doesn’t name names, Simic implies that his own manner of “speaking truth to power” might be challenge enough.

But it is also possible, looking at his life and work, to read Simic’s Laureateship symbolically as the Library of Congress’s way of endorsing a certain vision of

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America—one that celebrates heterogeneity and an open view on the world. As only the second Laureate not born in the United States, United Kingdom, or Canada, Simic’s tenure defies a time of closing borders. As he continues in “The Lights Are On Everywhere,” *The rooster brought in chains is crowing, / The flowers in the garden have been forced to stay open, / And still, dark stains spread over the palace floors / Which no amount of scrubbing will wipe away.*

Like Joseph Brodsky—the Russian-born Laureate who served in the early 1990s—Simic has witnessed “dark stains” firsthand. Born in 1938 in Belgrade, he arrived in the United States in 1954, at the age of 16, having emigrated with his parents and younger brother from a war-scarred homeland via Paris. While WWII and its aftermath play a mostly background role in his verse, he treats that period of his life directly in a 2000 memoir, *A Fly in the Soup* (University of Michigan Press), in which he writes, not without humor, of his family’s nightmarish experience during the bombing of Belgrade, of the murderous factions that followed in its wake, and of their displacement after the war.

Once in America, Simic spent a year in Queens before moving with his family to Chicago. After a brief time at the University of Chicago, he moved to Greenwich Village in 1958 with the idea of being an artist. Although Simic was accepted at Columbia University, he could not make tuition. Instead, he painted in his apartment while working at NYU Press. “I basically took care of the mailing list,” he says, but the simple job inaugurated a longer relationship with the university. He soon moved to the payroll office, and after a stint in the U.S. Army, returned to it and enrolled at NYU to complete his undergraduate degree in Russian literature. It was affordable, with his employee discount, and classes were just a couple doors down from his office.

By 1970, after stints in an early computer banking division and at *Aperture* magazine, Simic had published two books and married Helen Dubin, a clothing designer. They had no intention of leaving New York—until his work gained greater recognition and

invitations to teach at colleges and universities flooded in from across the country. “The idea of teaching had never crossed my mind, since I only have a B.A.,” He recalls. “But we had a kid, and life had become really complicated in the city. So we decided, ‘what the hell.’” After three years at California State University at Hayward, Simic took a job at the University of New Hampshire in 1973, where he’s now a professor emeritus. Accolades slowly built up, with the MacArthur fellowship—today worth \$500,000—coming in 1984. It was a breakthrough financially, and also in terms of notoriety.

While the Laureateship might be seen as the most prominent of accolades, a title effectively declaring the poet a national treasure, there’s no danger that the attention will affect the sense of place and perspective Simic developed as a boy in the tumultuous years following the war. As he writes in *A Fly in the Soup*—of his childhood self watching citizens of Paris with proper papers walk past his refugee family—“I knew something they didn’t, something hard to come by unless history gives you a good kick in the ass: how superfluous and insignificant in any grand scheme mere individuals are!” ■

# ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

(from *The Book of Gods and Devils*, 1990)

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

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

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

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

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

Upon a gloomy night with all our loving ardors on fire,  
We carried it down the long empty avenue,  
Each holding one sleeve.  
The heat was intolerable causing many terrifying human faces  
To come out of hiding.

In the Public Library Reading Room  
There was a single ceiling fan barely turning.  
I had the travels of Herman Melville to serve me as a pillow.  
I was on a ghost ship with its sails fully raised.  
I could see no land anywhere.  
The sea and its monsters could not cool me.

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

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

It wasn't even snowing! Everyone I met  
Wore a part of my destiny like a carnival mask.  
"I'm Bartleby the Scrivener," I told the Italian waiter.  
"Me, too" he replied.  
And I could see nothing but overflowing ashtrays  
The human-faced flies were busy examining.

# THAT LITTLE SOMETHING

(from *That Little Something*, 2008)

for Li-Young Lee

The likelihood of ever finding it is small.  
It's like being accosted by a woman  
And asked to help her look for a pearl  
She lost right here in the street.

She could be making it all up,  
Even her tears, you say to yourself,  
As you search under your feet,  
Thinking, Not in a million years.

It's one of those summer afternoons  
When one needs a good excuse  
To step out of a cool shade.  
In the meantime, what ever became of her?

And why, years later, do you still,  
Off and on, cast your eyes to the ground  
As you hurry to some appointment  
Where you are now certain to arrive late.

# BUTCHER SHOP

(from *Dismantling the Silence*, 1971)

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 a 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.