In our bicentennial year, Charles Simic and Mark Strand, two poets of kindred excellences and temperaments, published an anthology entitled *Another Republic* and devoted to seventeen European and Latin American poets whose work was (and still largely remains) outside the orbit and canon of this nation’s taste and habit of mind. The seventeen included Vasko Popa, Yannis Ritsos, Fernando Pessoa, Miroslav Holub, Zbigniew Herbert, Paul Celan, and Johannes Bobrowski, along with a few more familiar Nobel laureates—to–be. The editors lumped their poets into two general batches, the “mythological,” a group that included Henri Michaux, Francis Ponge, Julio Cortázar, Italo Calvino, and Octavio Paz, and another group, the “historical,” devoted to Yehudah Amichai, Paul Celan, Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, and Yannis Ritsos, while acknowledging that some of the poets fall between the two stools or partake of both categories while resisting identification with either one. They furthermore define the “mythological” strain by deriving it from sources in Surrealism.

Surrealism has never really enjoyed much favor in North America, a fact Octavio Paz has explained this way:

> The French tradition and the English tradition in this epoch are at opposite poles to each other. French poetry is more radical, more total. In an absolute and exemplary way it has assumed the heritage of European Romanticism, a romanticism which begins with William Blake and the German romantics like Novalis, and via Baudelaire and the Symbolists culminates in twentieth-century French poetry, notably Surrealism. It is a poetry where the world becomes writing and language becomes the double of the world.¹

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¹ Quoted by Paul Auster in the introduction to his *Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (1982), xxxi.
Furthermore, our sense of Surrealism, at least when it figures in poetry, is of something facile, lazy, and aimless except in its ambition to surprise by a violation of logic, taste, and rigor. Bad Surrealism can grow tiresome very easily, and one does not feel encouraged to continue reading a poem such as Charles Henri Ford’s “He Cut His Finger on Eternity,” which begins:

What grouchy war-tanks intend to shred
or crouch the road’s middle to stop my copy?
I’ll ride roughshod as an anniversary
down the great coiled gap of your ear.

If we have no good native Surrealists, we can at least boast of a few fine imported ones, of which Charles Simic is certainly one of the best. “Imported,” however, is the wrong term for someone who was a refugee, a DP (Displaced Person) who was born in Belgrade in 1938 and left when he was fifteen. The poetry Simic writes is not simply better than bad Surrealism; it is what we instantly recognize as a responsible mode of writing, a poetry that, for all its unexpected turns, startling juxtapositions, dream sequences, mysteries, will be found, upon careful consideration, to make a deep and striking kind of sense. It is utterly without Dali pretensions or Dada postures. It makes no appeal to the unconscious for the liberty to write nonsense. In Simic’s art especially we must attune our ear to a voice usually soft-spoken, often tender, not infrequently jolly, the sort of lover of food who has been instructed in starvation. No single poem of his can be said to represent the whole range of his gifts or the variety of his comic sense, so often tinged with grief or laced with that special brand of the sardonic, ironic humor characteristic of Corbière or Laforgue. Yet I think that in a poem of his called “Views from a Train” something essential of his poetic intelligence makes itself beautifully audible:

Then there’s aesthetic paradox
Which notes that someone else’s tragedy
Often strikes the casual viewer
With the feeling of happiness.

There was the sight of squatters’ shacks,
Naked children and lean dogs running
On what looked like a town dump,
The smallest one hopping after them on crutches.

All of a sudden we were in a tunnel.  
The wheels ground our thoughts,  
Back and forth as if they were gravel.  
Before long we found ourselves on a beach,  
The water blue, the sky cloudless.

Seaside villas, palm trees, white sand;  
A woman in a red bikini waved to us  
As if she knew each one of us  
Individually and was sorry to see us  
Heading so quickly into another tunnel.

This is neither simple allegory nor dream, but a fused vision embracing both. The first four lines initially seem to recall La Rochefoucauld’s bitter acknowledgement, “In the misfortunes of our best friends we often find something that is not displeasing.” But the poet gives depth to what passes in the Maxims for ruthless candor and lacerating exposure. The “aesthetic paradox” connects the brutal pleasure in another’s pain with Aristotle’s Poetics and the classic demonstration of how an audience, by a double act of identification and distancing, can find artistic and poetic pleasure in viewing deep torment and agony.

The next four lines seem to be offered as illustration to the generalization of the opening. They served to remind me precisely of a photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson in which a group of boys, viewed through a hole in a wall undoubtedly made by a bomb, appear to be taunting and attacking one of their number who is on crutches. The picture is titled simply Seville, 1933. It may well be quite unknown to the poet, but he is the survivor of bombings by the American Air Force, occupation by the Nazis, and further occupation by the Communists, in a war-ravaged and desperately poor country, so he knew, both from close up as well as distanced by time and travel, the situation depicted in the photograph.

“All of a sudden we were in a tunnel.” The lines that immediately follow blot out all the external world for a brief interval, as we return to our
inwardness, not only as we slip in and out of sleep but as our very thoughts negotiate between external and internal experience. The woman waves to us from a privileged setting of seaside villas with palms and white sand. Our view of her is as fleeting as was the view of the naked children and lean dogs. Tragedy, we are being reminded, is not a presentation of pure agony but of the change of state from good fortune to misfortune. The poem presents both in what seems like the wrong order. But the order doesn’t matter, since we are “heading so quickly into another tunnel.” It may be we ourselves who are the tragic figures in this poem, for we do nothing, we are simply passive viewers, while the children, the dogs, and the woman lead lives of which we catch only a glimpse. In the manner of other Simic poems, there are no neat and easy conclusions to be drawn, yet the poem is full of strange revelation, darkness and brilliance, sadness and luxury.

The luxury is, for the most part, a rare ingredient in Simic’s poetry, where it is more than likely to appear as some simple but satisfying food. What this poet is particularly gifted at revealing is the derivation of joys and pleasures from the most unlikely, and even forbidding, sources, as here in a poem called “Unmade Beds”:

They like shady rooms,
Peeling wallpaper,
Cracks on the ceiling,
Flies on the pillow.

If you are tempted to lie down,
Don’t be surprised,
You won’t mind the dirty sheets,
The rasp of rusty springs
As you make yourself comfy.
The room is a darkened movie theater
Where a grainy,
Black-and-white film is being shown.

A blur of disrobed bodies
In the moment of sweet indolence
That follows lovemaking,
When the meanest of hearts
Comes to believe
Happiness can last forever.

The last six lines compose a “sentence” without a main verb. It is purely descriptive, a blurred, grainy vision of a movie, itself a vision, of something fleeting that is nevertheless both wonderful and durable. Of course, being an old black-and-white film, this can be pure delusion, and not very persuasive at that. Is all our happiness mere delusion? Is that film like the shadow-play on the walls of Plato’s cave? And if it is no more, isn’t it still to be cherished, being all we have? If we find ourselves in a fleabag hotel room, is this an adequate symbol for our normal existence? Is it folly or heroism to be able to rise above the sordors of this world? The elements of Simic’s remarkable life, to which I will turn shortly, may suggest what answers he might give to such questions. Certainly that hotel room, soiled as it is, nevertheless is much to be preferred to Sartre’s in *Huis Clos*. Another poem, “Firecracker Time,” starts off with some of the same mixed ingredients:

I was drumming on my bald head with a pencil,
Making a list of my sins. Well, not exactly.
I was in bed smoking a cigar and studying
The news photo of a Jesus lookalike
Who won a pie-eating contest in Texas.

Is there some unsuspected dignity to this foolishness?
I inquired of the newly painted ceiling.

There are sixty-eight poems in *Night Picnic*, none of them long, most of them fitting on a single page. But it’s not easy to convey the fine variety this collection so generously presents. Here, for example, is a poem that itself revels in variety:

**The Altar**

The plastic statue of the Virgin
On top of a bedroom dresser
With a blackened mirror
From a bad-dream grooming salon.

Two pebbles from the grave of a rock star,
A small, grinning windup monkey,
A bronze Egyptian coin
And a red movie-ticket stub.

A splotch of sunlight on the framed
Communion photograph of a boy
With the eyes of someone
Who will drown in a lake real soon.

An altar dignifying the god of chance.
What is beautiful, it cautions,
Is found accidentally and not sought after.
What is beautiful is easily lost.

The heterogeneous simplicity of these assembled items brings to mind certain photographic interiors by Eugène Atget or Walker Evans, pictures full of deep feeling, eloquent of frugal and damaged lives that nevertheless cling to small tokens of hope. And I can think of no poem that so powerfully conveys the raging, frenzied lusting of pubescent boys as does “The Cemetery”:

Dark nights, there were lovers
To stake out among the tombstones.
If the moon slid out of the clouds,
We saw more while ducking out of sight,

A mound of dirt beside a dug grave.
Oh God! the mound cried out.
There were ghosts about
And rats feasting on the white cake
Someone had brought that day,

With flies unzipped we lay close,
Straining to hear the hot, muffled words
That came quicker and quicker,
Back then when we still could
Bite our tongues and draw blood.

Such a poem cannot fairly be labeled “Surrealist,” and yet it has about it a pungency of pain, fear, sex, and death blended into an extraordinary brew of life that is far from the literal world of commonplace experience. The distinct miscellaneousness that crops up in so many Simic poems does not lend itself to the confident summing-up that Emerson so cheerfully posits in “The American Scholar”:

What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body;—show me the ultimate reason of these matters;—show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; and the shop, the plough, and the ledger, referred to the like cause by which light undulates and poets sing;—and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber room, but has form and order; there is no trifle; there is no puzzle; but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.

While it is true that Simic lives, writes, and teaches in New Hampshire, he does not share the New England Transcendentalist’s serene assurance of ultimate coherence. It may be that the determining difference between the two poets is to be found in the fact that Simic’s childhood was spent in a war zone, a condition that tends to discourage an easy credence in universal laws. When Simic resorts to poetic apostrophe, which he permits himself to do only rarely, it is with abundant irony, as in “Book Lice,” which begins,

Dust-covered Gideon Bibles
In musty drawers of slummy motels,
Is what they love to dine on.
O eternities, moments divine!
Munching on pages edged in gold

—and which continues towards an anguished, grotesque, and altogether unforeseen ending. Simic’s hard-bitten distrust of the facile reconciliation of disparities is finely expressed in “Bible Lesson”:

There’s another, better world
Of divine love and benevolence,
A mere breath away
From this grubby vacant lot
With its exposed sewer pipe,
Rats hatching plots in broad daylight,
Young boys in leather jackets
Showing each other their knives.

“A necessary evil, my dear child,”
The old woman told me with a sigh,
Taking another sip of her sherry.
For birds warbling back and forth
In their gold cage in the parlor,
She had a teary-eyed reverence.
“Angelic,” she called them,
May she roast in a trash fire
The homeless warm their hands over,

While beyond the flimsiest partition
The blessed ones stroll in a garden,
Their voices tuned to a whisper
As they dab their eyes
With the hems of their white robes
And opine in their tactful way
On the news of long freight trains
Hauling men and women
Deeper into the century’s darkness.
And yet it strikes a reader with considerable force that the word *happiness* figures in Simic’s poems with uncommon and notable frequency—sometimes humbly, to be sure, as when he writes of “That mutt with ribs showing / . . . His tail on the verge of happiness”—but by my estimate more often and more unselfconsciously than in the work of any other poet I can think of. It is clearly a feeling about which he has much to say.

It has been a matter of some importance for a number of writers deliberately to deflect the public’s interest in their personal lives and to insist that it is only their work that really counts. They may claim that their work, carefully read, becomes self-portraiture; or that they have extinguished their personalities through their art, which has its own aesthetic interest wholly distinct from their personalities. Eliot forbade any biography to be written about him (a bidding that has been frequently disregarded); Auden requested that all his letters be burned (a wish that has not been widely honored).

This distinctive shyness is in part a way of pointing to, and affirming the significance of, the finished oeuvres, as contrasted, perhaps, with their as yet unfinished, and possibly disorderly, lives. For art can be polished to a fare-thee-well, while life is not always shapely or subject to complete control. To an intermediary who sought to arrange a newspaper interview with A. E. Housman, the poet responded,

Tell him that the wish to include a glimpse of my personality in a literary article is low, unworthy, and American. Tell him that some men are more interesting than their books but my book is more interesting than its man. Tell him that Frank Harris found me rude and Wilfrid Blunt found me dull. Tell him anything else that you think will put him off.

There have indeed been men whose lives eclipse the public’s interest in their works (Dylan Thomas, Byron, Wilde, Pound, Cellini), while there have indisputably also been those, like Wallace Stevens, whose lives have been comparatively colorless, or who, like Eliot and Auden, feel that their private lives are none of the public’s damn business.

Charles Simic is unusual in that the events of his life, both large and small, continue to interest him enormously without for a moment seeming to compete with the no less interesting but altogether different and
distinctive realm of his poems. He has previously published a number of memoirs under the titles *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth* (1990), *The Unemployed Fortune-Teller* (1994), and *Orphan Factory* (1997), all published by the University of Michigan Press. He has made use of details from these accounts, sometimes revising them slightly, in the course of composing *A Fly in the Soup*, an eloquent, candid, and touching account of the life he shared, off and on, with his parents in Yugoslavia and America, an account that is, by turns, deeply moving and hilarious.

There is very little posturing in these pages. Simic avoids all bids for sympathy, and is able, with remarkable courage, to present himself in moments of childhood heedlessness, in a critical and unfavorable light. Even before he got to the United States he acquired lifelong American tastes for jazz, films, and food, about which he can be enthusiastic:

> Some years back I found myself in Genoa at an elegant reception in Palazzo Doria talking with the Communist mayor. “I love American food,” he blurted out to me after I mentioned enjoying the local cuisine. I asked him what he had in mind. “I love potato chips,” he told me. I had to agree, potato chips were pretty good.

As an apt epigraph for this book, Simic quotes Raymond Chandler: “Don’t tell me the plot . . . I’m just a bit-player.” And given the violent international dimension of the tale he has to tell his choice of this quotation is self-effacing, witty, and characteristic of this book throughout, not least in its distinctive Americanness. It recalls not only *noir* fiction and film, but that special American film idiom in which the grandeur of Shakespearean vision, with all the world a stage, with one man in his time playing many parts, “his acts being seven ages,” are set aside and we have instead the Hollywood caste and cast system, with superstars and walk-ons, and with a high likelihood of a something less than conclusive plot.

When Charles Simic was three years old, in April 1941, the building across the street from where he lived was hit by a bomb at five in the morning:

> The number of dead for that day in April in what was called by the Germans “Operation Punishment” ranges between five thousand and seventeen thousand, the largest number of civilian deaths in a single
day in the first twenty months of war. The city was attacked by four hundred bombers and over two hundred fighter planes on a Palm Sunday when visitors from the countryside swelled the capital’s population.

Three years later, on Easter Sunday, April 16, 1944, “The British and the Americans started bombing Belgrade . . ., heavy bombers ‘conducting strikes against Luftwaffe and aviation targets’ with ‘approximately 397 tons of bombs.’”

By this time he was all of six. He recalls that

Belgrade was a city of the wounded. One saw people on crutches on every corner . . .

Once, chased by a friend, I rounded the corner of my street at top speed and collided with one of these invalids, spilling his soup on the sidewalk. I won’t forget the look he gave me. “Oh child,” he said softly. I was too stunned to speak. I didn’t even have the sense to pick up his crutch. I watched him do it himself with great difficulty . . .

Here’s another early memory: a baby carriage pushed by a hump-backed old woman, her son sitting in it, both legs amputated.

She was haggling with the greengrocer when the carriage got away from her. The street was steep, so it rolled downhill with the cripple waving his crutch as if urging it on faster and faster; his mother screaming for help, and everyone else was laughing as if they were watching a funny movie . . . Keystone cops about to go over a cliff . . .

They laughed because they knew it would end well in the movies. They were surprised when it didn’t in life.

What deeply impresses a reader of Simic’s memoirs is his strong hold on humanity, which is completely divorced from any taint of sentimen-
tality. Even as a child he had acquired an uncommon fortitude, humor, and balance. In the midst of chaos and calamity he is poised and good-natured and is able to find a redeeming comedy in the most unlikely places:

When my grandfather was dying from diabetes, when he had already one leg cut off at the knee and they were threatening to do the same to
the other, his old buddy Savo Lozanic used to pay him a visit every morning to keep him company. The two would reminisce about this and that and even have a few laughs.

One morning my grandmother had to leave him alone in the house, as she had to attend the funeral of a relative. That’s what gave him the idea. He hopped out of bed and into the kitchen, where he found candles and matches. He got back into the bed, somehow placed one candle above his head and the other at his feet, and lit them. Finally, he pulled the sheet over his face and began to wait.

When his friend knocked, there was no answer. The door being unlocked, he went in, calling out from time to time. The kitchen was empty. A fat gray cat slept on the dining room table. When he entered the bedroom and saw the bed with the sheet and lit candles, he let out a wail and then broke into sobs as he groped for a chair to sit down.

“Shut up, Savo,” my grandfather said sternly from under his sheet. “Can’t you see I’m just practicing.”

Simic writes well of his parents, though he shows a clear preference for his father. Both parents were cultivated, his mother having done graduate work in music in Paris, his father having become an engineer, and young Charles discovering serious reading—Dickens, Dostoevsky, Mann, Serbian ballads and folk poems—in their library when he was ten. His mother tended to look down upon her husband’s family as somewhat coarser and inferior to her own, and this, together with the fact that she was not a good cook, may have swayed her older son in his partiality. For young Simic, then and still, seemed to favor the more disreputable members of his family. Of one of his mother’s aunts, he writes,

Nana was the black sheep in the family. It was whispered that she cheated on her old husband, was spending his money recklessly, and used bad language. That’s what I loved about her. This elegant, good-looking woman would swear often and shamelessly.

He feels the same affection for a blacksmith great-grandfather:

I liked the stories about this great-grandfather of mine, one of them
especially! How he had not been paying taxes for some time and how one day the cops came in force to arrest him. He pleaded with them not to take him away and make his children orphans. He even had a suggestion. What if they were to give him a part-time job at the police station, make him a deputy or something, so he could earn some extra money and pay his taxes?

Well, the cops, being local fellows and knowing [this great-grandfather], took pity on him. At the police station the arrangements were made. He was issued a rifle and was even given a small advance on his pay for other purchases related to his new duties. There were tears of gratitude on his part, everyone was moved, and after many handshakes [he] left. He made his way straight to the tavern, where he stayed for three days raising hell. When he was thoroughly out of his mind, he made the waiters carry four tables outside at gunpoint. Then he ordered that the tables should be stacked one on top of the other, with a chair and a bottle of booze at the very top. There he climbed, drunk as he was. A crowd had gathered by then. There were Gypsies, too, fiddling and banging on their tambourines. When he started shooting his rifle and shouting that no Simic was ever going to be a stupid cop, the police showed up. They beat the daylights out of him and threw him in jail.

Like other kids his age, young Simic trafficked in gunpowder. This was obtained from unexploded shells, bullets lying about in the streets. The nose of the bullet was inserted into a kitchen spigot and pried away from the shell casing. The gunpowder was traded for valuables like comic books, toys, above all cans of food. Extraction of the gunpowder was obviously a delicate operation. “One day a kid on our block lost both his hands.” Yet in the midst of all this, the poet assures us, “I was happy,” and we believe him, even though we learn that his father was arrested by the Gestapo, released, and after making his way to Italy, rearrested by the German army, which accused him of being a spy. They put him in a prison in Milan, from which he was released by American forces. He subsequently made his way to the United States, his wife and two children following by graduated stages, stopping in Paris for about a year, where they lived frugally and were rarely able to eat at a restaurant. “We didn’t have much money,” observes Charles, now about fifteen, “and my mother was a type of person who didn’t care what she ate.”
It was a gloomy, damp, and lonely interval, during which he befriended a few boys his own age:

These French boys I hung around with were very nice. They came from poor families. Now that they were doing badly in school, they knew their lives would be hard. They had absolutely no illusions about that. In the meantime, they had the street smarts, the humor and appetite for adventure, that reminded me of the friends I had left behind in Belgrade

—and that remind the reader of the author himself. Although he has become a highly sophisticated and well-educated man, it is still these non- or anti-academic virtues that most please him, and please us in him.

What is important in this book is not its narrative thrust or chronological development. It reads like a child’s box of jumbled treasures, made the more wonderful by the oddness of their assortment. But since what is most important about Charles Simic is his poetry, I will home in now on what he has to say on this topic:

The book that made all the difference to my idea of poetry was an anthology of contemporary Latin American verse that I bought on Eighth Street. Published by New Directions in 1942 and long out of print by the time I bought my copy, it introduced me to the poems of Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Carrera Andrade, Drummond de Andrade, Nicholas Guillén, Vincente Huidobro, Jorge de Lima, César Vallejo, Octavio Paz, and so many others. After that anthology, the poetry I read in literary magazines struck me as pretty timid. Nowhere in the Sewanee Review or the Hudson Review could I find poems like “Biography for the Use of the Birds” or “Liturgy of My Legs” or this one by the Haitian poet Emile Roumer, “The Peasant Declares His Love”:

High-yellow of my heart, with breasts like tangerines, you taste better to me than eggplant stuffed with crabs, you are the tripe in my pepper pot, the dumpling in my peas, my tea of aromatic herbs. You’re the corned beef whose customhouse is my heart,
my mush with syrup that trickles down the throat.
You’re a steaming dish, mushroom cooked with rice,
crisp potato fried, and little fresh fish fried brown . . .
My hankering for love follows wherever you go.
Your bum is a gorgeous basket brimming with fruits and meats.

It is perfectly understandable that this poem should have met with
sympathy and delight in Simic. He will later tell us, “If I were to write
about the happiest days of my life, many of them would have to do with
food and wine and a table full of friends.” Lest anyone think this a trifling
matter, Simic will note, on the same page, “I have to admit, I remember
better what I’ve eaten than what I’ve thought. My memory is especially
vivid about those far-off days from 1944 to 1949 in Yugoslavia, when we
were mostly starving.”

Neither should we be surprised to find, in Night Picnic, this fine
poem:

**Sweet Tooth**

Take her to the pastry shop on Lexington.
Let her sample cream puffs at the counter,
The peach tarts on the street.
If topping or filling spurts down her chin,
Or even better, down her cleavage,
Lick it off before it dribbles down her dress.

With people going by, some pretending
Not to see you, while others stall,
Blinking as if the sun was in their eyes
Or they’ve left their glasses at home.

The uniformed schoolgirls, holding hands
In pairs, on their way to the park,
Are turning their heads, too, and so are
The red-faced men humping sides of beef
Out a freezer truck into a fancy butcher shop
While she continues to choke on an éclair,
Stopping momentarily with a mouthful
To wince at a brand-new stain on her skirt,
Which you've had no time to attend to,
Giving all your devotion to the one higher up.

“When I started writing poetry in 1955,” Simic tells us in The Unemployed Fortune-Teller, “all the girls I wanted to show my poems to were American. I was stuck. It was never possible for me to write in my native language.” And his beginnings as a poet were not always met with sympathy and understanding:

“You poems are just crazy images strung arbitrarily together,” my pals complained, and I’d argue back: “Haven’t you heard about surrealism and free association?” Bob Burleigh, my best friend, had a degree in English from the University of Chicago and possessed all the critical tools to do a close analysis of any poem. His verdict was: “Your poems don’t mean anything.”

“Another time,” he recalls,

I was drinking red wine, chain-smoking, and writing, long past midnight. Suddenly the poem took off, the words just flowing, in my head a merry-go-round of the most brilliant similes and metaphors. This is it! I was convinced there had never been such a moment of inspiration in the whole history of literature. I reread what I’d written and had to quit my desk and walk around the room, I got so excited. No sooner was I finished with one poem than I started another even more incredible one. Toward daybreak, paying no attention to my neighbor’s furious banging on the wall, I typed them out with my two fingers and finally passed out exhausted on the bed. In the morning I dragged myself to work, dead tired but happy.

When evening came, I sat down to savor what I wrote the night before, a glass of wine in my hand. The poems were terrible! Incoherent babble, surrealist drivel! How could I have written such crap? I was stunned, depressed, and totally confused.
He learns a lesson about his art while listening to the jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins:

It was great. The lesson I learned was: cultivate controlled anarchy. I found Rollins, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk far better models of what an artist could be than most poets. The same was true of the painters. Going to jazz clubs and galleries made me realize that there was a lot more poetry in America than one could find in the quarterlies.

And near the end of this lively and heartening book of memoirs, Simic is able to articulate his own artistic credo or *ars poetica*:

The task of poetry, perhaps, is to salvage a trace of the authentic from the wreckage of religious, philosophical, and political systems.

Next, one wants to write a poem so well crafted that it would do honor to the tradition of Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, to name only a few masters.

At the same time, one hopes to rewrite that tradition, subvert it, turn it upside down, and make some living space for oneself.

At the same time, one wants to entertain the reader with outrageous metaphors, flights of imagination, and heartbreaking pronouncements.

At the same time, one has, for the most part, no idea of what one is doing. Words make love on the page like flies in the summer heat, and the poem is as much the result of chance as it is of intention. Probably more so.

“The god of chance” of whom he has written—see “The Altar,” above—has looked with a very special favor upon Charles Simic, and he is fully aware of this, and manifestly grateful.