

## DICKINSON'S GRANDCHILDREN



*Charles Simic*

To get a true sense of what American poetry is, one has to read an awful of it. I did in 1992 when I edited *The Best American Poetry* anthology. I began pessimistically, but after reading hundreds of literary magazines, big and small during the course of a year, I found enough good poems, poems eminently worth reading. As you'd expect, there was plenty of awful to mediocre verse, but that's not unusual of any literature in any given period.

A more interesting issue is how to characterize this poetry? Is there such a thing as a typical American poem in 1990s? Yes, there is and it can be described this way: the voice is personal, the mode is narrative and the literary school it pledges allegiance to is realism. Retelling of something that happened to oneself is almost invariably the subject. Imagination and its various products; figures of speech, baroque diction, irony and wit are employed—if at all—very cautiously. Most younger American poets today subscribe to a kind of solipsism. The belief that Emerson, Whitman, Frost, Williams, Pound and even Lowell held in their different ways, that America itself is our true subject, seems to be on the way out for the time being. There are so many of Emily Dickinson's children and grandchildren now, one has to remind oneself that even in mid 1950s, when I started out as a poet, she was hardly read.

## GIVING THE DAY ITS DUE



*Samuel Menashe*

Of late, that old man's expression "in my day" surfaces when I look back at my life. In my day I knew of no poetry workshop except for one in Iowa—not that I ever thought of attending it. After World War II I was in Paris under the G.I. Bill. I had been an infantryman in France, Belgium—the Battle of the Bulge—and Germany. At twenty-

two I had a glamorous image of myself as a writer. Since I was fluent in French and Spanish, I would be a foreign correspondent, but at the Paris office of *The New York Herald Tribune*, I was told that hundreds knew these languages. Serbo-Croatian was needed.

I never expected to meet a poet, let alone become one. Poets were dead immortals, some of whose poems I knew by heart. I was writing short stories evoking my childhood or the War. One night in February 1949, I woke up in the middle of the night and there was the first line of a poem, entirely unforeseen. If someone had told me when I went to bed that night that this would happen, I would not have believed it. It was not that I did not “give myself permission” to be a poet—to use a phrase now prevalent. I just did not aspire to that exalted state. Moreover, how can one *decide* to be a poet? Here is my first poem, never published:

All my life when I woke up at night  
There was darkness in a room  
And quickly I must sleep...  
Now I have found a bed beneath a window—  
No purpose in this place—  
By an unpatterned hazard of neglect, and yes  
In its crossing of my ordinary fate  
It is among stars that I awake

In 1950 I presented a thesis at the Sorbonne called *Un essai sur l'expérience poétique (étude introspective)*. By poetic experience, I meant that awareness which is the source of poetry. I had been a biochemistry major before enlisting. Although I was well read for my age, the only literary influences on my work so far as I can tell were the short poems of Wm Blake and the English translation of the Hebrew Bible. “The still small voice” of Elijah was my article of faith.

Upon my return from France, I looked into little and literary magazines, but I found nothing in them that corresponded to what I was doing. Although a few poems were accepted—the first by *The Yale Review* I could not find a publisher for a book. Kathleen Raine came to mind because she is a Blake scholar. Thanks to her, my first book was published in London in 1961. She wrote the Foreword. Despite favorable reviews by Donald Davie, P. N. Furbank and others, I still could not find a publisher in New York, my native city, until 1971. October House was a small firm, few people knew the name. In London I was published by the famous Victor Gollancz Ltd.

Those who approve of my poems call them economical or concise; the others dismiss them as slight. When the Beat poets “made the scene”,

I heard the pious platitude that it was good for poetry, but it was not favorable to what I was doing. If confessional poetry was to the fore, I had nothing to offer its devotees. The only award or grant ever given to me was for a war story I wrote when I was thirty. Nevertheless, how many poets still alive were praised by Austin Clarke in *The Irish Times* (1961), where Derek Mahon reviewed my poems in 1987? My good fortune in England and Ireland seems miraculous to me. Although I was published by Penguin UK in 1996, I could not find a publisher in New York for my next book. I suppose I fulfill “no man is a prophet” to the end of my days.

When I read a good short story I feel like an addict must feel when he gets a fix, but my poems do not tell stories, nor are they confessional. I never wrote a sonnet, yet in a way the poems are formal and they rhyme—a texture woven in and out of the lines. Rhyme seems natural to me. There is a lot of rhyme, unnoticed, in ordinary speech. Since most contemporary poetry does not rhyme, I cite Robert Frost in my defense. “Trying to write poetry without rhyme is like trying to play tennis without a net.” For me rhyme in poetry corresponds to melody in music.

At my age, more than ever, one thinks of death. Of course, as a survivor of an infantry company, I was marked by death for life when I was nineteen. In the first years after the war, I thought each day was the last day. I was amazed at the aplomb of those who spoke of what they would do next summer. Later each day was the only day. Usually, I could give the day its due, live in the present, but I had no foresight for a future. Perhaps, it is why I am still in the flat to which I moved when I was thirty-one years old:

#### AT A STANDSTILL

That statue, that cast  
Of my solitude  
Has found its niche  
In this kitchen  
Where I do not eat  
Where the bathtub stands  
Upon cat feet  
I did not advance  
I cannot retreat