Charles Simic, ‘White’

*Harvard Review*, 13 (1997), 115-

/115/

I

Out of poverty

To begin again

With the taste of silence

On my tongue

Say a word,

Then listen to it fray

Thread by thread,

In the fading,

The already vanishing

Evening light.

/116/

So clear, it’s obscure

The sense of existing

In this very moment,

Cheek by jowl with

My shadow on the wall,

Watching and listening,

With its gallows-like

Contorted neck

Bloodied by the sunset,

To my own heart beat.

/117/

This is breath, only breath.

Think it over, friend.

A shit-house fly weighs

Twice as much.

But when I tell the world so,

I’m less by a breath.

The struck match flares up

And nods in agreement

Before the dark claps it

With its heavy hands.

/118/

As strange as a shepherd

In the Arctic Circle.

Someone like Bo-peep.

All her sheep are white

And she can’t get any sleep

Over lost sheep,

And she’s got a flute

Which cries Bo-peep,

Which says, poor girl,

Take care of your sheep.

/119/

On a late afternoon of snow,

In a small unlit grocery store

Where a door has just opened

With a long, painful squeak,

A small boy carries a piece of paper

Between his thumb and forefinger

To the squint-eyed old woman

Bending low over the counter.

It’s that paper I’m remembering,

And the quiet and the shadows.

/120/

You’re not what you seem to be.

I’m not what I seem to be.

It’s as if we were the unknowing

Inmates of someone’s shadowbox,

And the curtain was our breath

And so were the stage sets

Which were like the world we know,

His gloves gray as the sky

While he holds us up by our feet

Swaying over the earth to and fro.

/121/

We need a marrying preacher.

Some crow, praise be,

By the side of the road

With a sun-reddened beak

Studying a wind-leafed

Black book

All of whose pages are gold-edged

And blank,

As we wait, with frost thickening

On our eyelashes.

/122/

The sky of the desert,

The heavens of the crucified.

The great white sky

Of the visionaries.

Its one lone, ghost-like

Buzzard hovering,

Writing the long century’s

Obituary column

Over the white city,

The city of our white nights.

/123/

Mother gives me to the morning

On the threshold.

I have the steam of my breath

As my bride.

The snow on my shoes

Are the hems of her wedding dress,

My love always a step ahead,

Always a blur,

A white-out

In the raging, dream-like storm.

/124/

As if I shut my eyes

In order to peek

At the world unobserved,

And saw

The nameless

In its glory.

And knew no way

To speak of it,

And did, nevertheless,

And then said something else.

/125/

II

What are you up to smart-ass?

I turn on my tongue’s skewer.

What do you baste yourself with?

I spit bile laced with blood.

Do you sprinkle pepper and salt?

I bite words as they come into my mouth.

And how will you know you’re done?

My eyes will burn till I see clear.

What will you carve yourself with?

I’ll let my tongue by the knife.

/126/

In the inky forest,
In its maziest,

Murkiest scribble
Of words

And wordless cries,
I went for a glimpse

Of the blossomlike
White erasure

Over a huge,
Furiously crossed-out something.

/127/

I can’t say I’m much of a cook,

If my heart is in the fire with the onions.

I can’t say I’m much of a hero,

If the weight of my head has me pinned down.

I can’t say I’m the boss here,

If the flies hang their hats in my mouth.

I can’t say I got the smarts,

If I wait for the evening star to answer me.

Nor can I call myself good-for-nothing.

Thanks to me the worms will have their feast.

/128/

One has to make do.

Make ends meet,

Odds and ends.

Make no bones about it.

Make a stab in the dark.

Make the hair curl.

Make a door-to-nowhere.

Make a megaphone with my hands,

And call and make do

With the silence answering.

/129/

Then all’s well and white

Even at midnight.

The highways are snowbound.

The forest paths are hushed.

The power lines are fallen.

The windows are dark.

Nothing but star-light

And the snow’s dim light

And the wind wildly

Preaching in the pines.

/130/

In an unknown year

Of an all-evil century,

On a day of frost and biting wind,

A tiny old woman,

One foot in the grace,

Met a boy playing hooky.

She offered him a sugar cube

In a hand so wizened

His tongue twisted into a noose

Saying thanks.

/131/

Do you take this line

Stretching to infinity?

I take this white paper

Lying still before me.

Do you take this ring

That has no known circumference?

I take this breath

Slipping in and out of it.

Then you may kiss the dot

Where your pencil fell on its lead.

/132/

Had to get through me

On its long trek

To and from nowhere.

Woe to every heartbeat

That stood in its way,

Woe to every thought…

Time’s white ants,

The rustle of their feet.

Gravedigger ants.

Village idiot ants.

/133/

I haven’t ventured far.

Five fingers crumpled up

Over the blank page

As if over a love letter,

Do you hear the white night

Touching down?

I hear the ear-trumpets

The holy escutcheons

Turning golden

In the dying light.

/134/

Psst. The white hair

Fallen from my head

On the writing paper

Momentarily unidentified.

I had to bend down low

And put my eye next to it

To make sure,

Then nudge it, ever-so-slowly

With the long tip of my pen

Over the edge of the table.

/135/

Peekaboo, a bird called out. She knew.