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1992



*Charles Simic, Editor*  
*David Lehman, Series Editor*

COLLIER BOOKS  
MACMILLAN PUBLISHING COMPANY  
NEW YORK

MAXWELL MACMILLAN CANADA  
TORONTO

MAXWELL MACMILLAN INTERNATIONAL  
NEW YORK • OXFORD • SINGAPORE • SYDNEY

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Collier Books  
Macmillan Publishing Company  
866 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10022

Maxwell Macmillan Canada, Inc.  
1200 Eglinton Avenue East  
Suite 200  
Don Mills, Ontario M3C 3N1

*Macmillan Publishing Company is part  
of the Maxwell Communication Group of Companies.*

ISBN 0-02-069845-3  
ISSN 0-1040-5763

*The series editor wishes to express his heartfelt thanks to Kate Fox Reynolds, his assistant; to Glen Hartley and Lynn Chu, his agents; and to Erika Goldman, Sharon Dynak, and Charles Flowers of the Macmillan Publishing Company.*

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*For details, contact:  
Special Sales Director  
Macmillan Publishing Company  
866 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10022*

*First Collier Books Edition 1992*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

*Printed in the United States of America*

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John Ashbery, editor, *The Best American Poetry 1988*

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Jorie Graham, editor, *The Best American Poetry 1990*

Mark Strand, editor, *The Best American Poetry 1991*

David Lehman was born in New York City in 1948. He is the author of two collections of poetry, *An Alternative to Speech* (1986) and *Operation Memory* (1990), both from Princeton University Press. His other books include *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (Poseidon Press, 1991) and *The Perfect Murder* (The Free Press, 1989). *The Line Forms Here*, a gathering of his writings on poetry, was recently published by the University of Michigan Press. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and was selected as a recipient of a 1991 Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest Writer’s Award. He lives in Ithaca, New York.

# FOREWORD

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*by David Lehman*



I remember when the Carter Administration invited several hundred poets to the White House for a celebration of American poetry. There was a reception, handshakes with the president, the pop of flashbulbs. Concurrent poetry readings in various White House rooms capped off the festivities. In each room a few poets had been asked to read. The rest of the poets, the ones who hadn't been asked to read, could attend the reading of their choice. A year later, Jimmy Carter lost the presidency.

I used to think that this incident was a parable for poetry in our time. It seemed to make the point that poets were the only real audience poetry had and that they were implicitly in different camps, having to contend with one another for what little audience there was. I no longer feel so defeatist about poetry's prospects. I believe that American poetry has a true readership beyond its own practitioners and that furthermore it would be impertinent to behave as though this readership were necessarily restricted to an academic ghetto. This is not to deny the existence of a problem but to suggest that perhaps the problem has been ill defined. It is not that American poetry lacks distinction or variety or potential readers; it is that the task of reaching this readership requires a plan as imaginative in its way as the verse on the pages of the books that publishers continue to publish, with reluctance in some cases and with something like ardor in others.

The question of poetry and its audience—with the implicit nagging undertone that maybe poetry doesn't have readers because it doesn't deserve them—has certainly become a hot item in the popular press. Every couple of years an article in a national magazine arouses a good deal of comment by alleging that poetry is dead

or by countering this claim with a list of helpful suggestions for improving poetry's public image. In May 1991 Dana Gioia asked readers of the *Atlantic Monthly*, "Can Poetry Matter?" (Gioia recommended that poets recite other poets' works at public readings.) Joseph Brodsky, the nation's new poet laureate, fired off "An Immodest Proposal" in *The New Republic* on Veteran's Day. (Brodsky proposed that an anthology of American poetry be found beside the Bible and the telephone directory in every hotel room across the land.) At Columbia University, three eminent critics pondered "An Audience for Poetry?" with its pointed question mark, while a panel of five poets convened at Adelphi University to discuss "Is Poetry a Dying Art?" On the latter occasion, the moderator ruefully recalled that his title echoed that of Edmund Wilson's famous essay, "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" Wilson published his piece in 1928. Many noble technicians of verse have written since then, and many more will survive the articles and symposia of today, which may even have a salutary effect if they remind people that poetry is, for some of us, a burning issue. Still, all this talk does lead one to wonder whether Oscar Wilde was wrong to suppose that it is easier to do a thing than to talk about it.

The best anthologies are the ones that live up to their names. Each of the five distinguished poets who have served as editors of *The Best American Poetry*—John Ashbery, Donald Hall, Jorie Graham, Mark Strand, and this year Charles Simic—has insisted on excellence as the paramount criterion in the selection process. Each has undertaken the task in an ecumenical spirit. The editors work under few constraints. The poems—never more than seventy-five or fewer than sixty—must come from periodicals published in the previous calendar year. Translations are ineligible, but there are otherwise no deliberate exclusions, and the results can't help reflecting the admirable diversity and abundance of American poetry.

It has been a pleasure working with Charles Simic on *The Best American Poetry 1992*. A marvelous poet writing at the height of his powers, Mr. Simic is also an accomplished essayist, and at the time he and I were collaborating on this project he was working on a monograph about Joseph Cornell—a telling choice, for a Simic poem and a Cornell box illustrate similar principles of juxtaposition and surprise. Both are hospitable to all manner of object and event,



and the same may be said about the makeup of this anthology. *The Best American Poetry 1992* includes a "Midwestern Villanelle" and a "Saga" built on sonnet variations, a poem for the New Year and another for All Hallows' Eve, a poem about the jazz trumpeter and singer Chet Baker and one about the fate of eyeglasses in Auschwitz. There is a prose poem by the author of the nation's number-one nonfiction bestseller and a meditation on the color green by a nineteen-year-old writer living in Vancouver. More than half of the poets in *The Best American Poetry 1992* have not previously appeared in the series. Over three dozen magazines are represented (and numerous others were consulted). Seven titles came from *The New Yorker*, topping the list, and it was a banner year also for *The Paris Review* and *Ploughshares* (six titles each) and for those stalwart campus quarterlies, *The Iowa Review* (five), *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Field* (four each). The settings range from a women's jail in Rome to the back rooms of a fast-food joint in downtown Milwaukee. And then there are the poems that unabashedly declare their subjects in their titles, such as "Nostalgia" and "Sex," which seem to be our idiomatic equivalents for what T. S. Eliot called "memory and desire."

No critic will ever have the effect on our poets that certain of their grade school teachers had—the ones often credited by the poets themselves for their lifelong devotion to the art. But criticism done right, not vindictively or meanly but with generosity and amplitude, with a respect for the reader's intelligence and the writer's intentions, can help teach us *how* as well as *what* to read, by example rather than by precept. There is no substitute for the sort of poetry criticism that we have so little of at the present time. The contributors' notes in this book—many of which include the poet's comments on his or her poem—are meant not in place of interpretive criticism but as a way of assisting such an effort, and as a bonus for the reader.

From the start, the editors and publishers of *The Best American Poetry* have gone on the assumption that readers equal to the best poetry of the day do exist and will stand up and be counted. It pleases me to report that this seemingly quixotic article of faith has turned out to be a simple statement of fact.

Charles Simic was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1938. With his family he emigrated to the United States at the age of sixteen. After attending Ernest Hemingway's alma mater in Oak Park, Illinois, he was drafted into the United States Army and served in West Germany and France before continuing his education at New York University. He has written fourteen books of poems, including *Classic Ballroom Dances* (Braziller, 1980), *Selected Poems: 1963–1983* (Braziller, 1985), and *The Book of Gods and Devils* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990). *The World Doesn't End* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), a collection of his prose poems, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1990. Mr. Simic has published numerous translations of Yugoslav poetry as well as two books in the University of Michigan Press's Poets on Poetry series. He is married, has two children, and teaches at the University of New Hampshire.

# INTRODUCTION

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by Charles Simic



*"I say the word or two that has to be  
said . . . and remind every man and woman  
of something."*

—WALT WHITMAN

Thirty years ago in New York City I used to stay up late almost every night listening to Jean Shepherd's rambling soliloquies on the radio. He had a show with a lot of interesting talk and a little music. One night he told a lengthy story, that I still remember, about the sacred ritual of some Amazon tribe. It went roughly like this:

Once every seven years, the members of this remote tribe would dig a deep hole in the jungle and lower their finest flute player into it. He would be given no food, only a little water and no way of climbing out. After this was done, the other members of the tribe would bid him good-bye, never to return. Seven days later, the flute player, sitting cross-legged on the bottom of his hole, would begin to play. Of course, the tribesmen could not hear him, only the gods could, and that was the point.

According to Shepherd, who was not above putting on his audience of insomniacs, an anthropologist had hidden himself during the ritual and recorded the man playing the flute. Tonight Shepherd was going to play that very tape.

I was spooked. Here was a man, soon to die, already dizzy with hunger and despair, summoning whatever strength and belief in gods he had. A New World Orpheus, it occurred to me.

Shepherd went on talking until finally, in the wee-hour silence of the night and my shabby room on East Thirteenth Street, the faint sound of the otherworldly flute was heard: its solitary, infi-

nately sad squeak with the raspy breath of the living human being still audible in it from time to time, making the best of his predicament. I didn't care then nor do I care now whether Shepherd made up the whole story. We are all at the bottom of our own private pits, even here in New York.

All the arts are about the impossible human predicament. That's their fatal attraction. "Words fail me," poets often say. Every poem is an act of desperation or, if you prefer, a throw of dice. God is the ideal audience, especially if you can't sleep or if you're in a hole in the Amazon. If he's absent, so much the worse.

The poet sits before a blank piece of paper with a need to say many things in the small space of the poem. The world is huge, the poet is alone, and the poem is just a bit of language, a few scratchings of a pen surrounded by the silence of the night.

It could be that the poet wishes to tell you about his or her life. A few images of some fleeting moment when one was happy or exceptionally lucid. The secret wish of poetry is to stop time. The poet wants to retrieve a face, a mood, a cloud in the sky, a tree in the wind, and take a kind of mental photograph of that moment in which you as a reader recognize yourself. Poems are other people's snapshots in which we recognize ourselves.

Next, the poet is driven by the desire to tell the truth. "How is truth to be said?" asks Gwendolyn Brooks. Truth matters. Getting it right matters. The realists advise: open your eyes and look. People of imagination warn: close your eyes to see better. There's truth with eyes open and there's truth with eyes closed and they often do not recognize each other on the street.

Next, one wishes to say something about the age in which one lives. Every age has its injustices and immense sufferings, and ours is scarcely an exception. There's the history of human vileness to contend with and there are fresh instances every day to think about. One can think about it all one wants, but making sense of it is another matter. We live in a time in which there are hundreds of ways of explaining the world. Everything, from every variety of religion to every species of scientism, is believed. 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 poet is merely the bemused spectator. The poem is as much the result of chance as of intention. Probably more so.

At the same time, one hopes to be read and loved in China in a thousand years the same way the ancient Chinese poets are loved and read in our own day, and so forth.

This is a small order from a large menu requiring one of those many-armed Indian divinities to serve as a waiter.

One great defect of poetry, or one of its sublime attractions—depending on your view—is that it wants to include everything. In the cold light of reason, poetry is impossible to write.

Of course, there would be no anthology of best poems if the impossible did not happen occasionally. Authentic poems get written, and that's the best-kept secret in any age. In the history of the world the poet is ever present, invisible and often inaudible. Just when everything else seems to be going to hell in America, poetry is doing fine. The predictions of its demise, about which we read often, are plain wrong, just as most of the intellectual prophecies in our century have been wrong. Poetry proves again and again that any single overall theory of anything doesn't work. Poetry is always the cat concert under the window of the room in which the official version of reality is being written. The academic critics write, for instance, that poetry is the instrument of the ideology of the ruling class and that everything is political. The tormentors of Anna Akhmatova are their patron saints. But what if poets are not crazy? What if they convey the feel of a historical period better than anybody else? Obviously, poetry engages something essential and overlooked in human beings and it is this ineffable quality that has

always ensured its longevity. "To glimpse the essential . . . stay flat on your back all day, and moan," says E. M. Cioran. There's more than that to poetry, of course, but that's a beginning.

Lyric poets perpetuate the oldest values on earth. They assert the individual's experience against that of the tribe. Emerson claimed that to be a genius meant "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men." Lyric poetry since the Greeks has always assumed something like that, but American poetry since Whitman and Emerson has made it its main conviction. Everything in the world, profane or sacred, needs to be reexamined repeatedly in the light of one's own experience.

Here, now, I, amazed to find myself living my life . . . The American poet is a modern citizen of a democracy who lacks any clear, historical, religious or philosophical foundation. Sneering Marxists used to characterize such statements as "typical bourgeois individualism." "They adore the smell of their own shit," a fellow I used to know said about poets. He was a Maoist, and the idea of each human being finding his or her own truth was incomprehensible to him. Still, this is what Robert Frost, Charles Olson, and even Elizabeth Bishop had in mind. They were realists who had not yet decided what reality is. Their poetry defends the sanctity of that pursuit in which reality and identity are forever being rediscovered.

It's not imagination or ideas that our poets primarily trust, but examples, narratives of specific experiences. There's more than a little of the Puritan diarist still left in our poets. Like their ancestors, they worry about the state of their inner lives between entries about the weather. The problem of identity is ever present as is the nagging suspicion that one's existence lacks meaning. The working premise, nevertheless, is that each self, even in its most private concerns, is representative, that the "aesthetic problem," as John Ashbery has said, is a "microcosm of all human problems," that the poem is a place where the "I" of the poet, by a kind of visionary alchemy, becomes a mirror for all of us.

"America is not finished, perhaps never will be," Whitman said. Our poetry is the dramatic knowledge of that state. Its heresy is that it takes a part of the truth for the whole truth and makes it a "temporary stay against confusion," in Robert Frost's famous

formulation. In physics it is the infinitely small that contradicts the general law, and the same is true of our poetry at its best. What we love in it is its democracy of values, its variety, its recklessness, its individualism and its freedom. There's nothing more American and more hopeful than our poetry.

*"one dark, still Sunday"*

—H. D. THOREAU

The black dog on the chain wags his tail as I walk by. The house and the barn of his master are sagging, as if about to collapse with the weight of the sky. On my neighbor's porch and in his yard, there are old cars, stoves, refrigerators, washing machines and dryers that he keeps carting back from the town dump for some unclear and still undecided future use. All of it is broken, rusty, partly dismantled and scattered about, except for the new-looking and incongruous plaster statue of the Virgin with eyes lowered as if embarrassed to be there. Past his house, there's a spectacular winter sunset over the lake, the kind one used to see in paintings sold in back of discount department stores. As for the flute player, I remember reading that in the distant Southwest there are ancient matchstick figures on the walls of desert caves and that some of them are playing the flute. In New Hampshire, where I am now, there's only this dark house, the ghostly statue, the silence of the woods and the cold winter night falling down in a big hurry.

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