

No Land in Sight, Charles Simic (Borzoi Books/Alfred A. Knopp)

I always think of Charles Wright, Mark Strand and Charles Simic as an American trinity of poetry. Although their work is very different from each other, and Strand died in 2014, they knew each other and occasionally addressed each other in their work. Wright and Strand shared a concern with – for want of a better term – the spiritual, addressed mostly through poems concerned with memory, life, death and loss; but Simic's work seemed very different.

Born in Yugoslavia, Simic moved to the USA at the age of 16, and has been publishing books since 1967, mostly poetry but also a memoir and translations of other writers' work. For a while his poetry seemed rooted in a kind of surrealism, juxtaposing things that have some sense of disconnect between them and offering a new way of seeing situations or events, sometimes by use of a strange point-of-view or tone, personification or an approximation to magic realism.

Elements of this still inform some of the poems in *No Land in Sight*. 'The Mystery' moves from 'mutts barking in unison' to burglary and murder, disquiet at the noise, to 'a star calling it quits /After millions of years', taking 'a long dive out of sight.' whilst 'Come Spring' quickly and unexpectedly moves from 'the birdie in a tree' to the return of the 'wicked back from hell', accompanied by Satan. I'm not sure how literally to take this poem's warning about how they are 'think[ing] up new evils' or the fact that Satan's 'guile has no equal'.

Many more of the poems here are strange snapshots, isolated events or moments, presumably designed to surprise us or make us think. Here is a complete poem:

COULD THAT BE ME?

An alarm clock
With no hands
Ticking loudly
On the town dump.

Errr, yes? It is only with some reluctance and a sense of desperation I can force myself to make associations with extra time, unwanted time, wasted time, the nature of time, the relationship of humanity, machines and measured time. Mostly I shrug, as I do with the book's brief opening poem, which for me is a real squib:

FATE

Everyone's blind date.

Hmmm. I'm sorry but this is pseudo-profundity, a kind of (non-)riddle, a metaphor pretending to be a poem. It might have been something to work up to a

poem, a starting point or notebook jotting, but not a whole three-word poem.

The majority of poems here rely on the supposed weight of words like stars, light, graves, night, and love acting on the reader, but it often doesn't work. Take this poem about washing hanging on the line:

WINDY DAY

Two pairs of underwear,
One white and the other pink,
Flew up and down
On the laundry line,
Telling the whole world
They are madly in love.

Are the two pairs of underwear in love? Are they speaking? Or is there a casual connection between neighbouring washing and their owners? Maybe the narrator know something we don't know? (Perhaps he could share that?) Does pink and white imply heterosexual norms or gendered clothing? Again, it's a squib I'd like to see developed rather than simply written down as an image plus 'poetic' interpretation. (I'd also like to know why each line of Simic's is capitalised, something I always question my students about. Mostly it's because they haven't looked at the preferences of their word processing software.)

I hate to be so negative, but this is a disappointing and slight volume from a poet I have previously admired and whose work I have very much enjoyed. What I am about to quote, the closing lines of 'My Doubles', a 13-line poem which – without using the term – is about doppelgängers or possibly past versions of ourselves, seems appropriate as a way of understanding what it feels like to try and engage with this new work:

As for me, the last time someone saw me,
I was reading the Bible on the subway,
Shaking my head and chuckling to myself.

I can't help but feel like a passenger on that train, wondering what the chap opposite is laughing about, or in this case what the author thinks he is saying, or is trying to achieve in these poems. Simic is adrift and, as the last two lines of the book announce, 'There is no / Land in sight'. No poems either.

Rupert Loydell