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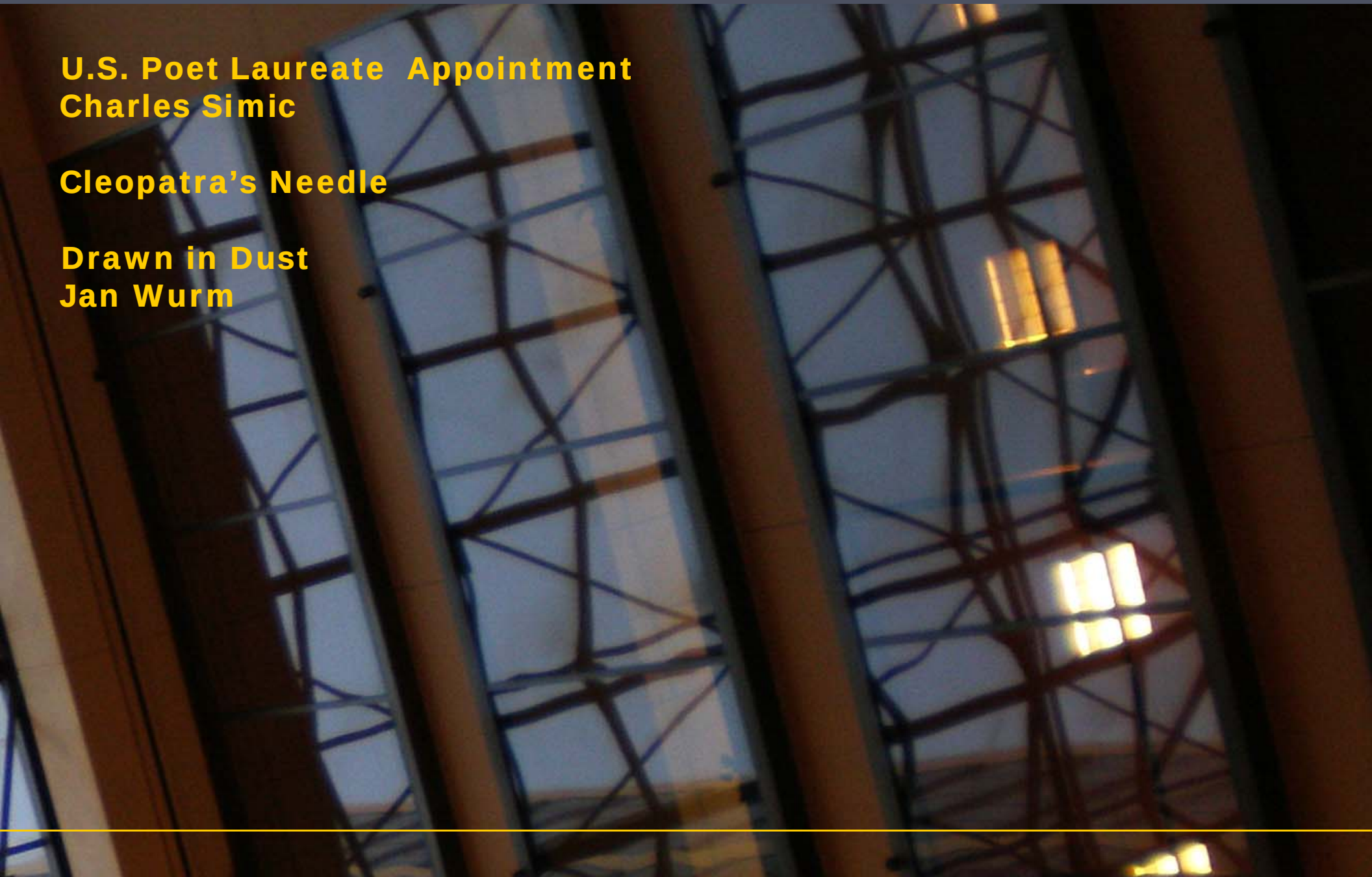

U.S. Poet Laureate Appointment
Charles Simic

Cleopatra's Needle

Drawn in Dust
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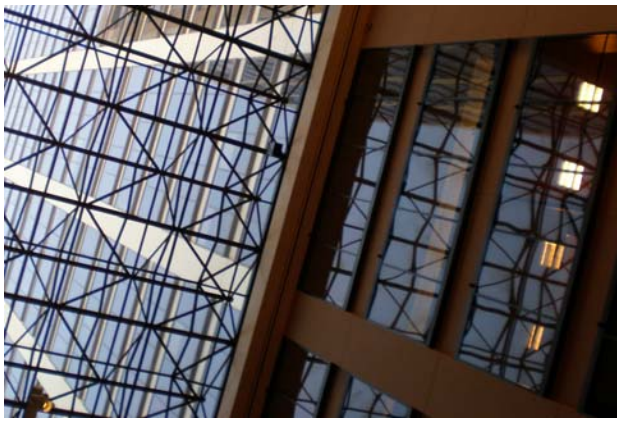
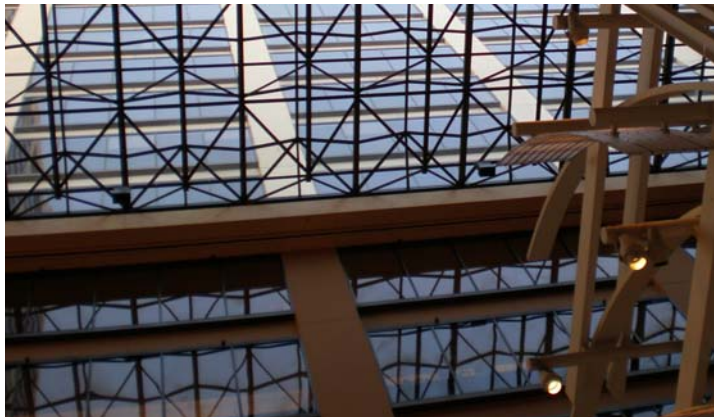

FEATURES

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Charles Simic. *Printed with permission from Philip Simic © 2007.*

Charles Simic Appointed Poet Laureate

Librarian of Congress James H. Billington announced the appointment of Charles Simic to be the Library's 15th Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry on August 2, 2007.

Simic will commence his duties in the fall, opening the Library's annual literary series on Oct. 18 with a reading of his work. He succeeds Donald Hall as Poet Laureate and joins a long line of distinguished poets who have served in the position, including most recently Ted Kooser, Louise Glück, Billy Collins, Stanley Kunitz, Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass and Rita Dove. The laureate generally serves a one- or two-year term.

On making the appointment, Billington said, "The range of Charles Simic's imagination is evident in his stunning and unusual imagery. He handles language with the skill of a master craftsman, yet his poems are easily accessible, often meditative and surprising. He has given us a rich body of highly organized poetry with shades of darkness and flashes of ironic humor."

Charles Simic was born in Yugoslavia on May 9, 1938. His childhood was complicated by the events of World War II. He moved to Paris with his mother when he was 15; a year later, they joined his father in New York and then moved to Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago, where he graduated from the same high school as Ernest Hemingway. Simic attended the University of Chicago, working nights in an office at the *Chicago Sun Times*, but was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1961 and served until 1963. He earned his bachelor's degree from New York University in 1966. From 1966 to 1974 he wrote and translated poetry, and worked as an editorial assistant for *Aperture*, a photography magazine. He married fashion designer Helen Dubin in 1964. They have two children. He has been a U.S. citizen for 36 years and lives in Strafford, N.H.

Simic is the author of 18 books of poetry. He is also an essayist, translator, editor and professor emeritus of creative writing and literature at the University of New Hampshire, where he taught for 34 years. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1990 for his book of prose poems *The World Doesn't End* (1989). His 1996 collection, *Walking the Black Cat*, was a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry. In 2005 he won the Griffin Prize for *Selected Poems: 1963-2003*.

Simic's first collection, "What the Grass Says," (1967) was noted for its surrealist poems. Throughout his career, he has been regarded for his short, clear poems in which the words are distilled and precise. His poem "Stone" often appears in anthologies. It begins "Go inside a stone / That would be my way. / Let somebody else become a dove / Or gnash with a tiger's tooth. / I am happy to be a stone ..."

Simic will publish a new book of poetry, *That Little Something*, in February 2008. His most recent poetry volume is *My Noiseless Entourage* (2005). In her review in *Booklist*, Janet St. John wrote, "Simic's gift is his ability to unite the real with the abstract in poems that lend themselves to numerous interpretations, much like dreams. Whether using the metaphor of a dog for the self, or speaking to sunlight, Simic, original and engaging, keeps us on our toes, guessing, questioning, and looking at the world in a new way." In another critique of "My Noiseless Entourage," Benjamin Paloff wrote in the *Boston Review* that Simic's "predilection for brief, unembellished utterances lends an air of honesty and authority to otherwise perplexing or outrageous scenes."

Among his earlier books, "Jackstraws" (1999) was named a Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times*. "Classic Ballroom Dances" won the 1980 di Castagnola Award and the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award, and "Charon's Cosmology" was a National Book Award for Poetry finalist in 1978. Simic held a MacArthur Fellowship from 1984-1989, and has also held fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He has received the Edgar Allan Poe Award, the PEN Translation Prize and awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2000. On August 2, 2007, the same day he was appointed Poet Laureate, Simic received the $100,000 Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets for "outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry."

About the Laureateship

The Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress serves as the nation's official lightning rod for the poetic impulse of Americans. During his or her term, the Poet Laureate seeks to raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry.

The Poet Laureate is appointed annually by the Librarian of Congress and serves from October to May. In making the appointment, the Librarian consults with former appointees, the current Laureate and distinguished poetry critics. The position has existed under two separate titles: from 1937 to 1986 as "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress" and from 1986 forward as "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry." The name was changed by an act of Congress in 1985.

The Laureate receives a $35,000 annual stipend funded by a gift from Archer M. Huntington. The Library keeps to a minimum the specific duties in order to afford incumbents maximum freedom to work on their own projects while at the Library. The Laureate gives an annual lecture and reading of his or her poetry and usually introduces poets in the Library's annual poetry series, the oldest in the Washington area, and among the oldest in the United States. This annual series of public poetry and fiction readings, lectures, symposia, and occasional dramatic performances began in the 1940s. Collectively the Laureates have brought more than 2,000 poets and authors to the Library to read for the Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature.

Each Laureate brings a different emphasis to the position. Joseph Brodsky initiated the idea of providing poetry in airports, supermarkets and hotel rooms. Maxine Kumin started a popular series of poetry workshops for women at the Library of Congress. Gwendolyn Brooks met with elementary school students to encourage them to write poetry. Rita Dove brought

together writers to explore the African diaspora through the eyes of its artists. She also championed children's poetry and jazz with poetry events. Robert Hass organized the "Watershed" conference that brought together noted novelists, poets and storytellers to talk about writing, nature and community.

To learn more about the history of the poetry consultantship at the Library of Congress, refer to William McGuire's Poetry's Catbird Seat: The Consultantship in Poetry in the English Language at the Library of Congress, 1937-1987 (Washington: Library of Congress, 1988. LC Call No.: Z733.U6M38 1988).

Cleopatra's Needle
Central Park, New York City

The oldest man-made object in Central Park is Cleopatra's Needle, an obelisk located directly behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on East Side drive at 81st Street. Nicknamed Cleopatra's Needle soon after its installation, the obelisk has nothing to do with Cleopatra, the legendary Queen of the Nile. Thutmosis III, an Egyptian pharaoh who ruled from 1479-1425 B.C., ordered obelisks made to celebrate his thirtieth year of reign. Central Park's Cleopatra's Needle is one, another stands on the bank of the Thames in London. Made from the quarries at Aswan, the pink granite monoliths once stood on either side of the portals to the Temple of the Sun in the sacred city of Heliopolis on the Nile River.

The obelisks remained in Heliopolis until the Romans, under Emperor Augustus, floated them down the Nile to Alexandria around 12 B.C. They were placed in front of the Caesarium, the temple dedicated to Julius Caesar, where they remained until the late 19th century. By then, the lower corners of the stones had been broken off, so the Romans had bronze supports in the form of sea crabs placed under them. Two of the original crabs are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the other two were stolen in Egypt.

The obelisks are sixty-nine feet high from base to tip, and weigh between

193 and 200 tons. The base and steps, which were added in Alexandria, are 27 feet high and weigh over 50 tons.

The Khedive of Egypt, who governed as a viceroy of the Sultan of Turkey between 1879 and 1914 offered the obelisk to the U.S. as a token of good faith to help stimulate economic relations between the two countries. The London obelisk was raised in 1879, and the New York City stone shaft arrived in New York some two years later.

Its trip from Egypt to New York was a complicated engineering feat. The delicate moving process required laborers to inch the monument on parallel beams, aided by roll boxes and a pile-driver engine. It took nineteen days to cross the 86th Street transverse road, and another twenty days to move it from Fifth Avenue to its resting place on Greywacke Knoll due to a winter blizzard. Overall, it took one hundred and twelve days from the time the Obelisk touched the banks of the Hudson River until it reached Central Park. A huge crowd stood in the snow to watch the turning of the obelisk upright on January 22, 1881. As reported in the *New York World*, "Bonfires had been built on each side and the scene was most picturesque as the huge mass of

220 tons swung majestically from the horizontal to the vertical position."

The base of the Obelisk is supported at each corner by replicas of bronze sea crabs crafted by Roman artisans, each weighing approximately nine hundred pounds. The original crabs are on display in the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum. Jacob Wrey Mould (1825-1886), the designer behind many of Central Park's most famous structures, created the decorative fence. The plaques that translate the hieroglyphics were donated by the famous filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille (1881-1959), who fondly remembered playing in the area as a boy. A recently restored plaza surrounding the Obelisk has benches positioned to invite a closer look at the monument's hieroglyphic inscriptions.

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Drawn in Dust

Jan Wurm

The unstretched canvas presents an image unfurled, a moment glimpsed between having and losing, being and transformation.

A thematic arc of service begins with a child spoon-fed by his mother, passes through to the feeding of the wedding cake. Along the way there are the points of personal tending as a man is catered to by sommelier and attendant waiter and a woman, with her drug of choice, is coifed and manicured. (page 9)

Focusing on the transformative process in another set of drawings, the young soldier is shown taking leave of his parents and his life in the embrace of family. How war itself transforms young men into soldiers and then into warriors is the exploration of these unraveling fragments. The induction is the beginning of a process of the loss of the individual. The tour of duty then alters the young man as soldier and when viewed in homecoming the physical loss makes visible the interior damage. The sweeping suite forms an arc of deforming change. (page 10)

Although this work falls outside the realm of traditional form, it is the tradition of the triptych upon which many of these drawings forge their meaning. The triptych has a force and power imbued with meaning from centuries of use. Employed by religious art, the very character of the form holds a set of spiritual demands and responses. Here the triptych is used for the re-iteration of an image of loss and suffering. The Pieta is shown three times. In each strip of canvas she ages: from young mother and baby, to woman with young child, and, ultimately, as old mother losing a soldier. Structured with the woman alone with body bag in the center, the central panel has the coldest chill of loss, barely a whisper of color, the mother herself nearly lost. (page 11)

Hanging from pushpins the pieces ripple and undulate. They might be thought of as pages on a calendar chronicling daily activities and the passage of time. There is a freedom in focusing on the immediate, a liberation from preciousness which comes from abandoning the stretcher bar. The loose, swingy lines and attenuated forms reaching and stretching out to every corner bring amusement or consternation, energy or agitation. There is nothing smooth or orderly about them. Bumpy, lumpy, wiggly and squiggly, these drawings assert themselves just as quickly as they threaten to disappear. Unframed, irregular areas of chalky gesso feel like fresco fragments. Charcoal, conti and oil pastels render the most tenuous of forms. This is a visual presence which is like a stain, a mere visual echo.

In a more light-hearted group of drawings, women in posed repose bake themselves while men sprawl or eat with abandon. Filtering life at the beach through memory, old towels - outgrown or worn through - are re-united with their playmates. The cocktail waitress in the casino emerges from the pile of green felt. These minimalist drawings remain focused on the gesture, body language, and social implications of the interactions of people. Beyond portraiture, visual wanderings seek to distill imagery to an abstract system which might convey elements of power, tension, and resolution. (pages 12 and 13)

As divergent as this imagery might seem, the looseness of the sheet of cloth, the scrawl of the drawn line interrupted by fold or furrow, and the luminous expanse of open space allow these pieces to claim a next act. These drawings all partake of the pregnant pause and open possibility as the subjects verge on becoming.