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Short Piece

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What chance does the self-portrait have in the heyday of the selfie? – To be pinned down to our faces, as surely as an insect spread-eagled on the board before the cruel peer of a biology student, and as helpless, is now our life-sentence. The self-portrait dares us by assuming the shape of objects – natural, symmetrical or incongruous – as projections of that self. One can live through a life-sentence. The self-portrait is a risk-all venture: nothing short of a hanging job.

What if a pair of shoes were my self's reflection on the mud-mirror of this earth? – Charles Simic, the Yugoslav-American Pulitzer Prize winning poet, who just turned 92 (on 9th May), wrote in his poem "My Shoes",

Shoes, secret face of my inner life:

Two gaping toothless mouths,

Two partly decomposed animal skins

Smelling of mice nests.

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toil in the tread of a migrant worker stares with eyes glazed as death. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of his slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the railway tracks swept by a fever wind. On the leather lies the dampness and the unmoved redness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the paths that lead home, as evening falls. In the shoes vibrate the silent call for succour, the quietness of a disquiet that none would listen to that call. An unexplained self-refusal – that does not stir anymore – in the fallow desolation of the summer field and railway track. A single shoe, out of a pair, now ballast between the cement sky and apathy.

On the morning of the 8th of May, 2020, a train bore down through the fog of tiredness and ripped apart the presence of 16 migrant workers from the face of the earth in Maharashtra.

Television is so relentlessly brutal. And we want more of it. The crumpled clothes, the stray sandal, the uneaten bread, all starkly panned by the cameras, and the now-dry leaven of hungry saliva imagined in harrowing retrospect.

I might well be describing the scene there or that of Vincent Van Gogh's portrait of "A Pair of Shoes" (1886), a self-portrait from a painter who never mastered the conventional portrait and had to seek other avenues. – Charles Simic himself, on whom the playful alliteration of the line, "boldly by battery besieged Belgrade", sat morosely, knew as a child brought up in war-torn Europe that old, threadbare shoes were more than mice's nests. Familiar with walking from death, with death, and ultimately, towards death again, Simic saw derelict shoes as dearth. – The true penury of total recollection, a wanton bankruptcy no one wants to inherit, except poetry perhaps, is what Simic and Van Gogh volunteered for.

Those shoes, Van Gogh's shoes, peasant shoes, workers' shoes, were Simic's shoes. He wrote in "My Shoes":

What use are books to me

When in you it is possible to read

The Gospel of my life on earth

And still beyond, of things to come?

These sandals, these shoes, that are pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread in Van Gogh's painting become in Simic's poem the altar for a new religion. The unbroken bread, the body of the saviour, the Eucharist burning on railway tracks. Prophetic, Simic's shoes!

The wordless joy of having once more withstood want before the morning train. The trembling before the impending childbed of the railway track and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. Simic's poetry pours out through the holes in shoes and sandals that no one can darn.

He ends his poem by affirming the status of those shoes as his self-portrait, a portrait that is also about the futility in his voice: the futility of trying to render as sound the silence of hunger, the stare of suffering, the sigh of neglect.

Ascetic and maternal, you endure:

Kin to oxen, to Saints, to condemned men,

With your mute patience, forming

The only true likeness of myself.

A tribute to a poet whose shoes we cannot take off, try as hard as we might, as Shakespeare's King Lear. Sandals and shoes with the splatter of memory, like blood, becoming rust, or dust in the high sun, are still Simic's shoes: orphans of memory.

References

Simic, Charles. "My Shoes" in Charles Simic: Selected Early Poems (New York: George Braziller, 2000), 37.