Past-Lives Therapy

By Charles Simic

They explained to me the bloody bandages
    On the floor in the maternity ward in Rochester, N.Y.,
    Cured the backache I acquired bowing to my old master,
    Made me stop putting thumbtacks round my bed.

They showed me an officer on horseback,
    Waving a saber next to a burning farmhouse
    And a barefoot woman in a nightgown,
    Throwing stones after him and calling him Lucifer.

I was a straw-headed boy in patched overalls.
    Come dark a chicken would roost in my hair.
    Some even laid eggs as I played my ukulele
    And my mother and father crossed themselves.

Next, I saw myself inside an abandoned gas station
    Constructing a spaceship out of a coffin,
    Red traffic cone, cement mixer and ear warmers,
    When a church lady fainted seeing me in my underwear.

Some days, however, they opened door after door,
    Always to a different room, and could not find me.
    There'd be only a small squeak now and then,
    As if a miner's canary got caught in a mousetrap.

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