

Words Between Earth and Water

a selection of poems
by Simon Perchik

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Biography & Acknowledgements



photo by Rossetti Perchik

Simon Perchik, born 1923 in Paterson, NJ was a pilot during WWII and attended New York University (BA English, LLB Law) under the GI Bill. He practiced law from 1950 till his retirement in 1980. His poems have appeared in such literary journals as [Partisan Review](#) and [The New Yorker](#). Pavement Saw Press has scheduled publication of his 482-poem series from [The Family of Man](#) for Fall, 2003. He now lives with his wife Evelyn in East Hampton, NY.

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More of Simon's work can be found at his website: www.geocities.com/simonthepoet

First Lines

- 1 You whisper as if this dirt
- 2 How can it lose! this stairwell
- 3 You belittle the directions, this paint
- 4 As if this dirt still childlike
- 5 This twig could just as easily
- 6 And this stone turns its back
- 7 As if for the last time you let go
- 8 This school bus learned nothing about aging
- 9 This newspaper and each evening
- 10 You strap this watch in place
- 11 Before water was water it grieved
- 12 Another stomp though it's sunlight
- 13 The door knows why it opens
- 14 And though these stones all night
- 15 You bang the rim the way skies
- 16 Even with a fence the darkness
- 17 Under the bed it's tricky, the dust
- 18 Although the stove never moves
- 19 They wait for this match
- 20 Katherine is reading this
- 21 Once into the turn it spirals up
- 22 Though it's familiar this flower
- 23 Struggling against more turbulence
- 24 An everyday rain is not enough

dedicated to

Casey, Vaughn, Marieke and Katherine

You whisper as if this dirt
weighs nothing and underneath
the way darkness sifts for rain

once the Earth moves alongside
fondles each footstep
that is not evening

—in your low voice
an ancient sky is brought to life
as still more stars

holding on to one another
unable to crawl between
these two small stones kept together

for this hillside against your shoulder
and helpless to lift your face
in the same breath.

••

How can it lose! this stairwell
held gently the way each step
comes loose and your heart

reaches across, covers
the dirt, the flowers, the eyebrows
—it's snowing under her legs

that are not yet evening
held back as a banister
not meant to last, staggering

alongside her footsteps
that no longer have a mouth
somewhere to somewhere.

••

You belittle the directions, this paint
needs thinning—it's not safe
though for now you hold on more than ever

the way a flower inside another flower
spreads out when you add rainwater
as if this wall was still on fire

surrounding you, yelling at you to paint
with the window open, jump! the air
has nothing left, needs time, years

—the paint is new at this
can't dry by itself, half brush marks, half
motionless, already those exhausted stones

no longer overflowing near the dead
—the broken glass helps, emptiness helps
once on the ground and alongside your hands

remembers to enter this room back and forth
as if you were being watched, counted on
are sweeping it clean for later and later.

••

As if this dirt still childlike
was something new in the world
not yet the powerful side to side

and you could walk slowly uphill
the way each breeze is cradled asleep
—you wrap these stones with a mask

that is not a grave—closer and closer
they follow behind one another
tugging you somewhere that weighs

nothing—you don't plant anymore
though your arms move softly
as you wait for the stones

and whatever they can still lift
—every Spring is filled with dirt
and one hand already hillside

—even now you open your arms
and the emptiness, by instinct, sways
with her footsteps facing the others.

••

This twig could just as easily
be a hurricane, drained then swept away
though it must sense downhill

with dying wood —what you collect
you steady between two fingers
already sunlight and ashes

and any second now
this scrap left for dead
will split in half and disbelief

—a random snap
as if you had forgotten
to count backwards, not sure
once you reach the emptiness

it will still answer, tell you
how to follow behind
well after well, filled

with passageways and slowly
you take up the slack, the unfit
the shaky wearing out in a circle

half sunlight, half chasing off
the cold broken open, infected
with fires that never recover.

••

And this stone turns its back
the way streams even in snow
crush you under the descent

smelling from moonlight
and toward each other
though there's still some rain inside

all night flowing beneath your feet
as gravel and whispers
—with one sharp stone

you open your mouth as if she
is more thirsty than the others
and every path glows with ice

is singing that old love song
carried in your arms
clearing the way to her lips

and one by one each night
heavier, reaches up
for the darkness and go.

••

As if for the last time you let go
the way the sun looks back in sadness
and circling down —without a sound

you make a pile from the discarded
and with the warmth still in your hands
you stare at the sky without blinking

though what rises from the ground
is lifeless, sets out on the weaker side
as shadow :a shell kept empty for calm

for leaf by blinding leaf and this smoke
half there, half anchored against the rake
left to rust, no longer struggling

dragged under, exhausted and the light
wears away, becomes air again
holds your mouth open for dirt and gentleness.

••

This school bus learned nothing about aging
slows down in both directions at once
—stars never seen this early

stop then stop again the way hillsides
take their place behind folding doors
and funerals —you approach this step-by-step

and mothers waiting everywhere
as if once upon a time there was
an immense forest, an enormous lake

with water lilies that never die
—you almost hear what could be
birdcalls and for those few minutes

your breathing stops then yellows
though it's the moon holding you back
the dark sky in the roadway.

••

This newspaper and each evening
another gate is raised
spreads across some infield

miles from the game
—you reach for the ball
and without a sound the moon

goes wild in the dark
already rolling off the Earth
and in this still warm glove

the catch you read about
sitting in the stuffed chair
suddenly on its feet

torn open, blown forward
further and further
almost at the stadium

turning you page by page
into shoulders, into distances
into this invisible sunrise

everywhere at once —sleep now
is impossible, the floor too far
too restless even with the lights on.

••

You strap this watch in place
as if it inherited the wobble
that grew into sunlight

then darkness, then wear, then
you set the time years ahead
the way dirt still unravels

and between each finger
a slow, climbing turn remembers
the middle before it became

the sun —it's hopeless! the watch
trying to keep up
taking you by the hand

though you dig alongside
clearing the ground for later
for the footsteps already wagons

and you wait, humming
to the small circle passing by
tired and in your mouth.

••

Before water was water it grieved
word by word the way each woman
caresses her first child

though what you hear is its mist
washing over those breasts
as moonlight and riverbanks

no longer struggling —by instinct
your lips will claim the Earth
with the kiss that gives each birth

its scent and between your arms
clings with just its bones
—with each kiss you drink

then weep and the dirt already rain
helps you remember nothing else
between your thirst and breathing.

••

Another stomp though it's sunlight
dissolving into dirt the way all noise
wears out, limps and at your side

two radios, one covered with mud
the other bit by bit chips through
the small stones inside each ear

and in-between, who's alive? who's dead?
—who listens for that static
still on fire as this shovel

not yet exhausted, entangled
with weeds that can't take it anymore
break apart and the unbearable heat

from blossoms the sun empties into
as rain and more rain
till you splash in the sound

not yet your shadow
though one foot blackens first
dragging you under and inches apart.

••

The door knows why it opens
and still you're not used to it
could be a sound from the 40s

gutting this radio
the way all skies darken
fill with distances

—you listen for the slow turn
the Earth never forgot
though a hidden crack

keeps the room from exploding
and costs you nothing
has already started its climb

spreads out —with both arms
you begin to crawl
and not yet an old love song.

••

And though these stones all night
come from the same fountain
they still clear the sky

for hillsides and what overflows
they carry back as the distance
that takes forever to dry

—it must be raining inside
where every stone you hold
has slope to it, falls face up

the way once there were two skies
—that's right! two horizons
two mornings and the sun that's left

is still looking for the other
though in the darkness
you hear your arms folding

—even without wings the Earth
almost remembers growing huge
lit and this endless rain

has always depended on it, the rest
is lost, calling out from your hand
and even further off.

••

You bang the rim the way skies
loosen and this jar at last
starts to open, becomes a second sky

though under the lid her shoulders
wait for air, for the knock
with no horizon curling up on itself

as sunlight, half far off, half
circling down from her arms
end over end, reaching around

making room by holding your hand
—it's a harmless maneuver
counter clockwise so you never forget

exactly where the dirt was shattered
hid its fragrance and stars
one at a time taking forever.

••

Even with a fence the darkness
never heals, comes and goes
the way each star circles this gate

reclaims the Earth with a chain
half one by one, half
where all the dead clasp hands

and still this wound won't close
though you cover her cheeks
with dirt that must be carried

smells from rain and loneliness
before burning to the ground
and all these stars arm in arm

clinging to the same small stone
light-years away, crumbling
as if these scattered graves

closer and closer will suddenly return
made whole as the first sunrise
then leave without her or you.

••

Under the bed it's tricky, the dust
circles aimless, backward, forward
—a simple breath will pull one arm in

faster and faster till the floor
is exhausted, losing its balance
and curvature though the sky

still practices, reaching out
the way you stave off sleep
by folding and unfolding rags

over and over, collecting throwaways
as if once in the open it's easier, the dust
would take its place for later

—all it takes is the need not to rest
and though it drives everyone crazy
you have no choice, are racing against

a mop, neck and neck, bending in half
grabbing hold, unable to close
the slow, climbing turn in your arm.

••

Although the stove never moves
you add on the way roots
have learned to sleep

where it's warm —this kitchen
is still expanding, the pots
further apart with no end to it

can already set your hands
on fire —what you touch
are the stars pulling one wall

from the others, boiling
in a darkness that is not water
and slowly they reach the floor

the way light will lower its speed
pace itself so when it finally arrives
you hear nothing but its soft cry

no longer distances —what you extend
is the same heat your arms
are made from, wider and wider

held in place as if the sun
has forgotten how and withers
side by side, too cold, too small.

••

They wait for this match
to let them in all at once
—these stars need more time

smothered by how quiet the sun
waits in the darkness
this candle knows by heart

—it's your usual match, half wood
half some mountainside
breathing again and rock by rock

rescued by the simple flame
that looms over you as smoke
broken open for rain and falling back

—such is the need for a face
—the ground almost asleep
kept warm, expecting you.

••

Katherine is reading this
and in the slow rain between each word
she hears her lips closing in

the way a love note is folded
kept for years alone in a drawer
half wood, half as if its darkness

is after something else on the page
she can't remember touching before
vaguely, if someone older says so

though a star can be born and die
before its light reaches her eyes
holding on to these dim shapes

that have no sound yet—it's too soon
—she will forget how far and you
what she hears at every chance.

••

Once into the turn it spirals up
as if your lips are clouding over
breaking free from your face

the way the ground allows a hole
to rise, spills out its shadow
without any darkness

—it's just a donut, a trace
though the sugar too is cold
dangerous, flying up-side-down

sleepless and in the far off snow
that remembers you, reaches across
tries not to promise you anything.

••

Though it's familiar this flower
doesn't recognize the breeze
wriggling out the ground

as that distance without any footsteps
—its petals have no memory left
no scent that can expand into mist

prowling for more darkness
the way moonlight tries to remember
once passing through the Earth

on all fours, sniffing for stones
hidden from where your fingers
will clasp each other sideways

and the dirt still close by
—will smother all that happened
has no past, means nothing now.

••

Struggling against more turbulence
this broken concrete can't shut down
and cool --your shadow's too old

leans down and though the wall
falls closer and closer
it tries to rest your face

--a sleeping face
still circling where your forehead
mingles with rocks and weeds

--even your grave goes to pot
lets anyone point at it
as if sunlight could urge you

to spread out inside a sky
that has no days left, is lifted
face to face with the ground.

••

An everyday rain is not enough
but even so these strangers
walk past your grave

and below the black umbrellas
cling to each other
as that homeless cry

slowly closing around you
and though you can't hear it
the sky is already dark, sags

and under the small rocks
that come here empty handed
—such a rain loses count

is no longer in pieces
could comfort you
remember its darkness.

••