

# Words Between Earth and Water

a selection of poems  
by Simon Perchik

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## Biography & Acknowledgements

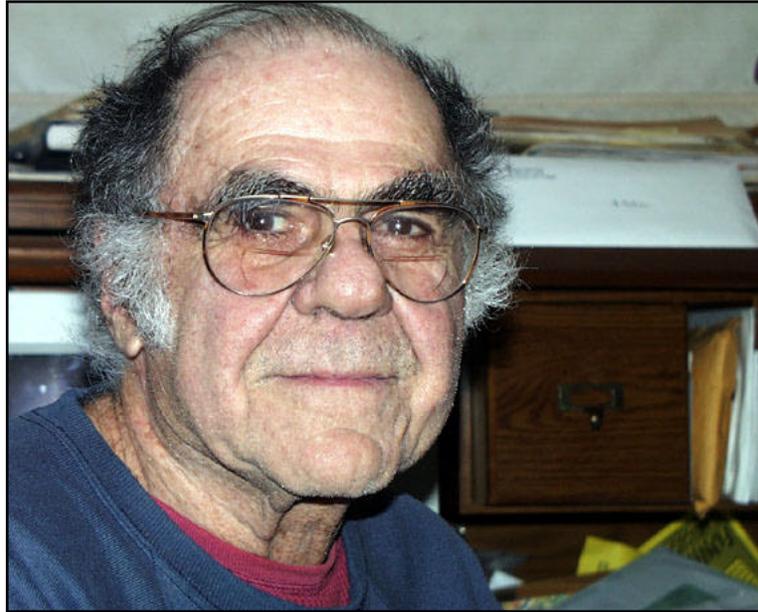


photo by Rossetti Perchik

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](http://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.

••