

Stuart Perkoff
Selected Poems



Stuart Perkoff

July 29, 1930 [St. Louis, Missouri] –

June 25, 1973 [Los Angeles, California]

Perkoff was born in St. Louis, the son of Ann and Nate Perkoff, and spent time in New York before settling in Venice Beach where he became a central figure in the Los Angeles Beat scene. He married Susan Blachard in 1949; they divorced a decade later. After another marriage, he married the poet Philomene Long with whom he stayed until his death. His first poetry collection, the chapbook *The Suicide Room*, appeared in 1956; he published over ten short books thereafter including *Kowboy Pomes* in 1973. He figures prominently in Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians* (1959), and in fact might be the only poet/artist of substance in that book. He was the only poet from Los Angeles (with the possible exception of Bruce Boyd) to appear in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. Perkoff also appeared in Jonas Mekas's film *Guns of the Trees* in 1961. A heroin addict, he was arrested on a drug charge in 1968 and released in 1971. He returned to Venice in 1973 and died of cancer in 1974. *Voices of the Lady: Collected Poems* was published by the National Poetry Foundation in 1998.

The Suicide Room. Jonathan Williams (Karlsruhe, Germany), 1956.

Poems from Prison. (Bowery Press: Denver, 1969)

Eat the Earth. Black Ace/Bowery (Denver, CO), 1971.

Kowboy Pomes. Croupier Press (Golden, CO), 1973.

Only Just Above the Ground. (The Smith/Special Issue: New York, 1973)

Alphabet. Red Hill (Los Angeles, CA), 1973.

Love Is the Silence: Poems 1948-1974. Edited by Paul Vangelisti, Red Hill (Los Angeles, CA), 1975.

Visions of the Tribe. Black Ace/Temple of Man (Los Angeles, CA), 1976.

How It Is Doing What I Do. Black Ace/Temple of Man (Los Angeles, CA), 1977.

Voices of the Lady: The Collected Poems. National Poetry Foundation (Orono, ME), 1998.

The Recluses

They paper the walls of their world
with their strange rhythms,
visions of this, their sighted dreams.
They have within their deepest eardooms
fragments of freshest wildness.

That of a woman
never feeling breastingly through their eyes,
they have no sin. But on their walls
of rhythmized visioned scenes
they often have lines about a mountain.

That black which is the greedy of the mind,
that reaches up and grasps from
the perceiving eye
all of the memoric stanzas brought on by the world
is their fine house .

They live there.
They have their own dark lines.
They are always

Inside

Pansies

—D. H. Lawrence titled one of his last books of poems “Pansies”, a deliberate corruption of the French “Pensees.”

Pansies means thoughts, a book of quick sharp poems.
Or else it means young homosexuals, painted brittle blond colors for their
lovers.

Didn't it use to mean a flower,
some sort of warm bright growing thing? I don't
even remember clearly what it looks like, but I always think of it
as having a face in the middle, and bright yellow
around itself, looking to the sun.

Well, the world changes around a flower, and now
in answer to its name the flower finds
a slender banned book,
and on the other hand the slender banned young men.
Book, flower, boys, all
with some sort of yellow around themselves,
looking for the sun.

The Suicide Room

I have within the head a room of death:
brown walls (the death of spring), a vague breath of
seasmell, a ring of knives of every kind
circling a centered mat.

The failing lives
to be accompanied by flat drums,
dovecooing horns, plucked strings.

he sits upon the mat. Attendants bring
paper and pen. He wills his philosophy
to the world and binds his eyes. And blind he dies.

The supplicant comes,

This is the room I go to when my mind
extends no further than its hidden doom.
I weld the music and the knives into
a power over deaths.

within this room when I have held power
for long enough to go beyond the point
beyond which one cannot possibly go.

I leave the dead

from Kowboy Poems

THREE: ORPHEUS

i rode into town
my voice & my horse & my legs
one melted thing

looking
for it, you cd say. dust in the nose
clogged runny eyes

i guess i smelled bad. i
stank. i smell bad now.
stink.

to sing & be
home, two things dont
seem to come together

no one had to say
anything. i just kept
moving, just keep moving

sometimes i think perhaps someone
will kill me.

i look as fierce as
cracked tongue
permits.

but it is the nature of
such places
not to be kind to
strange riders

once, tho, they broke
my guitar.
now i have a
jews harp.

Saturday Afternoon in the 1930's

to slip in while the usher is flashing his lite all thru the theatre & one of yr buddies got caught he's beginning to cry & will probably snitch. THEN TO WIN A PAIR OF ROLLER SKATES AT -THE POPEYE CLUB TICKET STUB #691-183. that same day. & even munching popcorn, tho i dont know where it came from.

or how bob (curley) steele's hat never came off but after a fight he'd run his never his never took those tite gloves off hand thru his hair. long & greasy. I always thot that he was wise to keep his hat on.

what do you call it? luck? or american magic? still, they closed one summer for repairs right at chapter nine of a buck rogers serial, & when they reopened in september they had a new serial entiely. they wdnt let my brother & me in in short pants one time. also once they threw me out for yelling too loudly for the hero.

to show all is not perfect.

but thru it all that hat stayed on that head: jump off an overhang, pull villain to the earth, bam! pow! the whole shot! roll in the dust, hat on head. swim in rivers, hat never comes off.

there's something special abt that kind of luck
that kind of world
too pure to be magic, & senseless, like so much of america

at least he didnt sing

it never bothered me, that strange american belief in its own purity. i was certainly not alone in my awareness that it was false.

flowers & revolutions grew in our ashpits. the adults of the world dont know how close they came in 1936 to losing the whole thing.

A Collage for Tristan Tzara

broken the
broken the
wood iron coal steel
an art gallery that sells collages in which there is a collage
with a photograph of an art gallery that sells
collages like the quaker oats man torn from a
newspaper

tzara i am building this collage
of actual things because i no longer know
what is a poem
& because you are tristan tzara

heroin, tzara
marijuana
dreams & fears in many colors, dont forget them

on my wall it says:

wyatt earp
john garfield
dr fu manchu
pooh the poet
dr doolittle
dashiell hammett
the land of oz
i j singer
erich von stroheim
charlie chan
orson welles
captain midnite
the shadow
ben turpin
bunuel
alex berkman
the man who invented heroin

charlie parker
thelonious sphere monk
henry fonda
raymond chandler
tennyson
yeats
eliot
chari ie brown
johnny mack brown
pound
john ford
wordsworth
sherlock holmes
jackson pollock
ma perkins
rembrandt
chaucer
raggedy ann
cocteau
dostoyevsky
edgar allen poe
michael gold
patchen
bob (curley) steele
robert creeley
kurt schwitters
 people i dig
 in no special order
 She knows them all

& it says:

“remove the shoes which clothe yr feet, & you
will find that the ground upon which you stand
even now is holy ground.”—buber

into the collage with them, tzara, along with

MAN COMMITS SUICIDE WHEN HE DISCOVERS WORD WILL
NOT DESTROY RIPPED RIPPED RIPPED ANYTHING CD HAVE BE
A BABY’S FOOT MAYBE OR ANGEL WING TEAR TORN SLASHED

along with /
piles of bones
theatre tickets

do you think you recognise this collage, tzara?
no. it is the similarity of all chaos.

let me put me into the collage
tzara. let me put you in it
also.

tzara, they are glueing us
down. tzara, we are hanging in
a gallery. tzara, a fat rich woman is buying
us. for her house.

how's that, eh, tzara? never can tell
which way a collage
will go

Letter to Jack Hirschman

jack, let's talk
abt
the streets, OK? where
it's all
happening, right?

what do we want from them? not
more blood, no graduate courses
in human capabilities. dachau
was the streets. how many more
such roads
must we travel?

let's insist on vision
i will accept nothing less than miracles
all men are unhappy
camus sd
& everyone dies. a street
all share

perhaps it is a matter
of language

the sage says: man
is the language of
god. what creature or monster
forms our world
in its mouth?

where we walk
we know the dangers. if
the choice is between the streets
& literature
there is no choice

maybe we shd be talking
abt "joy". is that what you mean

by “streets” jack?

Some Aspects of Prison

for Frank Rios

5) THE HUMAN FLOW

the people are here because the machine is hungry
tho they know no more of this than do their guardians
not knowing, they must, as tho they knew
survive. or not survive. it is known some survive

(perhaps all are not equally appetizing
where there are so many the machine need not be gluttonous,

the history of this crowd of food
is hidden
as are the histories of the priests, the words, the machine itself
but the machine has the solidity of its own structure
the continuity of their functioning contains the guardians
the humans in their rhythms feed, but do not remember

there is an immediate recognition of danger
no man knows, as he walks
who next will be stricken, blinded, maddened
minds are withered, bodies broken, souls plucked out
seemingly at malicious random

the disputes at this level
are not over names
but over theories of effective action

if seven left leg limpers
were spared under the half-moon
while sixty-one others were devoured
the left leg limpers acquire manna

there is a great body of such beliefs
all magical in intention

they permeate the herd like seasoning
& none are reliable. some survive.
cd he sing? more song appears. & then
the singers are taken

was he servile? the boots of the guardians
shine brite under the slobber tongues
then three out of four footsuckers are taken

was he repentant? comes forth numerous sinners, loudly wailing
&all the saved, the safe ones, are taken

most find they are forced to depend on
quick footwork, peripheral vision, alertness, an ear for the rhythms
they find little security. most of them, also
the machine eats

in all its history of unbroken feeding
no portion of that flow has discovered
& passed on any awareness
of what they bring to that machine
the humans in their rhythms feed, but do not remember

not knowing they are machine-food
they blame the priests & guardians
who, not knowing they are only machine-feeders no matter what they
name their rituals
blame the animals they herd

the machine knows no concern with definition
its only interest is that its needs be met
a constant flow of humans is ingested

Love is the Silence

love is the silence out of which
woman speaks. the female
country, the grieving country.

i stole

those images from a
wild girl's mouth. i am a
witch. i deal with
death. she sd. i
struggle against it.

the poem
is my struggle, i sd. a different
craft.

tho once i hungered
where the two crafts cross
to take within my hands
that power
& jet it
at will.

her lips moved in the dark room. blue with
kissing that cold thing. woman is
silence, she sd.
a different craft.

