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Love is the Silence

Stuart Z. Perkoff

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Poems 1948-1974
edited by Paul Vangelisti

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This selection of Perkoff's poems is not meant to be definitive but, along with his *Alphabet Poems*, to constitute a significant presentation of his published work. Shortly before his death, Perkoff and I outlined the scope of this volume with the explicit purpose that this book and *Alphabet* would form his selected poems. It was understood that I would choose from published books, broadsides and magazines indicated by Perkoff. Unfortunately, his condition degenerated very quickly and, before I could return with a selection, Perkoff had died. In every sense of the word, this is a posthumous volume. No claim is made to the authority of the selection outside the editor's appreciation and understanding of the poet's work. Certainly, this is not an attempt to promulgate literary legends or to preserve the already worm-eaten corpse of Venice West and the beat generation. There are countless testimonies as to the number of "great poems" lost or misplaced during Perkoff's rather erratic career but I leave other, more interested and personally qualified parties to track this material down. Enough, I think, of Perkoff's talent was sacrificed to fantasy.

—Paul Vangelisti

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A Token

"Why don't you"
 she said
"write poems any more
"to me?"
 and indeed
why not?

neatly trimmed and limned and lined
have been
wheelbarrows as well as passions

 a communication
 across the room
 of a marriage

"good morning darling
"is there coffee
"I'm late for work
"did the kids
 eat lunch?"
 Well,
 did they?

What would it include?
a shout down the years of our mutual
enclosure.
the symbols of the loaf of bread

and
the
sharp
 knife

read many different ways.

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.

The suppliant comes,
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.

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.

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

Feasts of Death, Feasts of Love

I

1

down the Wolf River
backs to the sun thru water shallow & flat
beautiful girls & boys

the birds wing tip to tip
swinging thru & around
calling, calling

we carried city eyes
over the rushing water
the stunned vision of scene after changing
scene
expanding & including
as our shouts & grunts & songs
wailed outward

(I had to get out, once, & push the canoe from behind, my body from the ankles up was hot, sweaty, sun gleaming, my feet cool in the river, lifting & pushing the heavy canoe.

I thought the others wd get too far ahead, & we wd be lost, off in the Wisconsin woods, where there were neither Jews nor cities, a world hot & in winter my feet wd be like encased in the cement of the river, & the canoe wd never be pushed over the flat scrapey sand.)

the river movement
coiled around our eyes
the quiet sound of the breathing of work
set the beat
of our songs

2

The next year we took a different trip, out Lake
Tomahawk & an adjacent lake, I don't remember
which one. In that part of Wisconsin the lakes lay on
the land like a thousand eyes, peering into & thru
each other.

from lake to lake
between two mountains
all blue green quiet movement water
in the air & eye
the huge walls rising

a great grass field
covered the inlet
& the canoes went thru
as over land, it looked
so quiet
 rustling of grass
 the soft voices
 hot beautiful girls & boys
 hot beautiful summer day

II

1

wake up! to a morning
sun shining thru even newspaper
headlines
sun on
men in sand wading thru
blood

'Woe
 woe unto
 the bloody city of Litchfield'
 he cried
with his bare feet
in the gutters of blood

naked feet
naked legs
naked eyes

into the market place howling
along the streets howling
in the living room
 howling

the sun! shining shining
in our eyes

2

at the edge of the water
the glass house eye of God
embraced us, pure
in white

 clean after communal showers
& communal food

'Boruch ataw Adonai
Elohenu melech ha'olam
ha'motzi lechem
min ha'awritz'

reverberating thru the food
the eyes
the air out out into many rhythms
& tongues

sitting on the benches, bodies warm & throats filled with
joy & love

we offered worship
sitting warm, eyes & skin touching, love flowing
we offered worship

we sang
& spoke languages & poems
offered worship & love
mixing the birds of passion & the swords of God
in our beautiful young eyes

It wd always be dark by the time the services were over. & secure, in the glass house, lit by the God that shined all our faces, the burning candles of love in our bodies, sharing the glow outward to trees & wind. & the younger kids went to their cabin while the older ones had a dance, & carried on love affairs & intrigues & political arguments until 11:30, when the boys walked the joyous road back to their portion of the camp, singing & shouting, clean & alive.

By the time the Saturday morning services were over, we were so full & whole that anything was possible.

3. political song

the people circle the room
coming together

the blood circles the body
coming together

the earth circles the sun
coming together

hang on, man
as it
wobbles around

hand to hand
as it
wobbles around

o living communities
men & women who love & are loved
o living bodies
men & women who love & are loved
O loving cities
men & women who live & are lived

eat
drink
embrace
each
other
inner
face

III

1

I see clothes piled in great heaps
against gray sky
with the smoke & sun in the air
of human flesh
& in the pockets of those beasts
who wear my name
things of value jingle & clank
in those black pockets
teeth & eyes & skulls & skin
in those black pockets

there are bodies
naked
not talking of love

in their last waters
naked
not talking of love

naked hunger
naked hatred
naked minds

howling in the crowded boxcars
howling in the dark barracks
howling in the hot showers
howling & whimpering in the final chambers

silent in the furnaces

2

such visions
wove their shroudeyes
thru our songs

such knowledge
blackened the edge
of every flame

each kiss
bittered with the salt
of their blood

(Many summers later I hitchhiked over a thousand miles back to Wisconsin holy lakes, to speak anguish to a wise man, seeking comfort, seeking peace.

& we sat outside under a fat moon, at the edge of an open field of grass, scenes of love & myth echoing in my mind.

I asked him why the six million had died. I thought, somehow, this man, an Aronin, descendant of the first & holiest priests of Israel, humble seeker & generous fountain of love, wd have an insight, a knowledge, a hope.

God's plan? If there had not been such blood & terror on his mouth, he wd have laughed. & told me he had no answer, no peace. & told me of the many nites & days he had fasted & prayed.

& found nothing?

found only hope that came from the realisation of the cleansing & purification of pain.

Whose? I, so young, so bitter, so needing an answer, sd, whose? good for their souls? or ours! so bitter, so young, such needs.)

even now
it is difficult for me to fix in my eyes
the image of
the God/Priest
lifting sin from the souls of the people

my soul, my sin

clothing these six million in my sins
& thrusting them in their foreign wrappings
into the flaming mouths of agony

IV

when the sun dies
many other suns will still flame

all things contain the seeds
of their own completion
all seeds contain the things
of their own destruction

the sun
makes a morning
bright descending on hooded eyes

the sun's morning
floods into the sands of war

wake up
hang on

coming together
coming together
coming together

no travelers down this road

no travelers down this road
i wonder who's next
not to mention the birds! they're singing so loudly
goodbye, hello, whichever
is correct
i've misplaced my schedule
does the bus stop here?

brothers & sisters
husbands & wives
stunned & bewildered, stumbling
over anything

why are we crying? why?
& why are the birds so thunderous?
has someone got the time?

not only the names
have been lost
 (tho the names
 have been lost)
 even
the desire for the names
has been lost

if this is the wrong road
(surely this is the wrong road!)
which is the right one?
if this is not me
who am i?
am i you?

oudh

Kowboy Pomes

for John Thomas

one

given, even, the drive
is towards life, how
do they deal with it?

the cock, the
cunt hidden. nobody sucks anybody
off.

whatever they do in their private mouths
dont interest me.

they ride into town
the heads of their horses high
their faces brown & windcracked.
i am not interested in their hands.

everyone
has to come over the mountain, on
this side it's
no great thing.

but what do they say of
fucking? of me? you? & all
the rest /

churchbells
baseball

crapgames
wooden buildings & mud
streets frighten them

i say it like an old sounding /
who cant or wont chew
tobacco can hardly be expected to
suck a cunt, or to love
in any simple fashion

two

cant see it. getting
in them wagons with everything
walking the cattle gut-gaunted
kids & women, too, i hear

greed. greed.

hunger's

different.

flowers that sing & stones that
bud forth shoots?

hmph. crawl

over a thousand
mountains
they wont find no
true word

i asked a stranger on a
salt caked horse
& he sd: "never mind, y're
safe old
timer."

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. i
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.

four: peyote poem

no wonder those bones
white dry in the
 limitless
hot space
 lie there.

they get to.

five: the heroes

1.

face to face. is the gun
the poem?
is the sound the
poem, or the
echo?

face to
face.

 dancing in &
out of the four naked eyes
the whole thing jumbled, too fast for tally or
style

 the crumpled flesh, the birds that
hover for the invitation
of rot /

 something is
hidden, there, something
waits

2.

it is on consideration of time that
the past cannot blind
us, cannot bring the sweat
rigid on the body

as tho to say
there is now no sun
no dust
no street
no risk & need that dance in the shimmering air
no visions of distance & of
that face so close & deadly on our own

3.

i wd think to look
where the vultures look: at the
meat. the dead
flesh. the broken face that
stalked & stared & took careful
watch, &
fell

at what even now
in these narrowed rooms
raises the smell of blood
to the nostrils

six: pioneer wives

women, women
you can crack that
whip, snap yr man
into place, slap the tobacco
from his mouth
buy sheep, build churches, sneer
at whores, wear
too many
clothes, whatever you
want / uplift, culture, you can even
give the place

tone

it's an economic law
about who's got what who wants
how badly

you all look very dignified in
old photos.
yr power shows in yr faces & yr men
are tired.

did you know you wd become
great harridens
with huge hats?

& look,

you never even
wiggled, just looked
martyred while he
did it
& now yr land is rotten & yr blood
is thin
yr faces are hard on the
faces of yr breed

only where there is still
space, yr smell
dont remind us all we
are strangling.

seven: the buffalo

1.

as tho it all
swung on
the belly, the
gut being core &
pulse. the floor
of earth stinking
under its strange rug / rotting
flesh, stripped
naked.

man, who shivers & is mostly
hairless, wraps in such
skin.

yes, to be warm. not to say
it is good
to be warm, but
it is warm.

but wore no
mask with horns, drew no
stark pictures, begged no permission
for murder. was not brother
to the flesh stink, the slam
sharp hoof
against the ground.

after all, the
rails must be cleared, that's
money, the
crews must be
fed, that's
money.

the heroes must be given
their strut & lie, their
validity.

2.

so much flesh: man & jackal
greedy feeding
gutswelling glutting
snuffing snorting stuffing
faces into it

blood irrigates, grass
grows thick, cows
munch, the
rest is known

rot fertilizes, wheat
grows. steel
binds, the huge trains
bring touching
bring death
bring people
while he whose land it was
(must still

be)

is driven back by the stink
of decay. that was his
manna, those herds, those
shagged wise heads. meat his
unborn sons will cry for.
praying he has not committed
his gods to some evil thing
brooding over their own
deaths

his gods are warped
as his land is. the great
beasts his brothers his food
all bloat & belch & fat
& mean flesh of
furious futility

3.

what a gig that was. i dont know the wages, but each
morning into the unblooded sunlite white leather emblems
of virtue chewed soft by woman-tooth streaming straight
the wind. honor. carefully groomed, the beard, the mustache.

to bring in food. fresh meat running blood down work
& laugh twisted faces. as tho the whole thing swings on
the belly. & honor.

4.

we are a naked race
humans our skins unlovely & worth
little. makes good lampshades, is too thin
for practical purpose, so we steal
the skin & mount the great head & leave the flesh
behind. & hold our heads
high. we have pride.

they sought water, & so
moved. also the challenge of
horn to horn / those massive
heads clattered. as tho all swung on
power. & grass, who can
find it. grass which
the great beast clump munched
like the one beast it was

indian hunters, after prayer
& dance hid within
sacred skins. to see thru his eyes, crawl
to the core of his world

feed, sleep
nurse the young? what of those
transformed, who never
returned, moving over the rich
land, eating
grass, begetting
grass eaters?

weight & balance. the limits
long established.

5.

we put him on
money, stacked the money
into cities. now
we have america
& the buffalo
live fenced they are
innoculated & counted
each year there is an official
hunt & buffalo roast
appears in select
butcher cases

proving the
marketplace has memory &
honor, tradition selling the beast's
haunch & eye, his name, giving him stance with
superman & firecrackers

the gut primary
the ear anesthetized eyes
right! from metal
casts children
wd recognize him if his huge
head thrust thru electric doors
but he wd be sick as his
gods & brothers are, the buffalo
bird & buffalo flea
no longer with us or him. new
parasites, new relationships. no
space for him, anyway

even the coin he rides
so proud
dont buy much anymore.

venice, california, 1959/1960

Poem in My Thirtieth Summer

1.

i think others bleed to
feed my poems. christ may have
chosen, these seldom
know.

wounds / swallowed
into them, others
pain is what
i mean.

not to say no one
listens, that doesnt enter
it. ears & the tongue, the
breath, it is again
the flight of the bird, the whole
word. no. as the
attention turns
in, so might anything. the best
shown demands pity.

2.

i wont lick no sick
dont want to be leper-lover, dont want
to want it.

take yr hands off my
monster, he'll kill you, & i'll
laugh. the chimp
knows, ask
him if i hate. i do. & maybe
dig to see that blood.
nothing will grow, nothing
meet, no
touch. i havent choice.

3.

shd be obvious the birds
know what they have, laugh,
game.

can we know
& clumsy our loves to
each other?

the gull's morning is
real, up with the first lite, out
hungry, over the water, entering his
proper rhythm. yet i say
love. as tho to close
wounds, take blood taste from
the throat.

the body knows.
let the animal take
over. it is the single
voice, only, not
better or purer, not anything
but here. now. one man
saying one man's things

works clutter any street
no one tries to say
love
or touch
real
for good
reason

but what flows
my hand & draws blood, that
needs no sounding.

birds may
hurt with no
whimpers, but not men. no. i
cant do it.

4.

i move in
america, & still love
the tongue

surgeons were once
lowly, shops stank blood & piss.
who scrapes the bone of lie with dull & magic
knife now
differs but slightly.

walk close
to the ground. sing
close to the music. love
close to the body. that's all
i can say.

5.

any hand in any
life
destroys. the bird wing
tells me what i
am, that is to say, human.

the one

voice
is difficult enuf / here are
my own faces, here is
love. unspeakable. what but
the one man's
sound

isnt?

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 entirely. 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
charlie 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

In Memoriam, Gary Cooper

coop because i know you
dont care i'll tell you
all my poems
are movies america electric blink blink blink
flashing neon zeon flics flickering
heros heros heros big as the bond clothing people
on broadway or heads on rush
more

hey, coop! whoa! hey! shitkicking toe
no more.
dead.
great clumps of
hollywood burned the day you were
shot down by a warped orgone ray
yet old man reich died in federal jail for inventing
cancer but they wdnt have called
him in for you anyway cancer is sure
all american way to go coop
small consolation
doped up dieing while those ugly i mean to say
rich
houses under that
now dirty sign on that dirty brown hill: HOLLYWOOD
went to
flame
& you
just
went. toe digging dirty sly
eyeing jean arthur

dirty old man
jockstrap kept yr crotch flat
when the injuns were going to
burn you had you hanging

flat crotch hot katy jurade cdnt touch
yr lonely official tick tock cock at the
railroad train of terror

pure loo-

king cockless all
the way you

recognise me the director? my head turned
backwards legs tucked
tight into my feet? i dont know why
bother now y're dead
cancer eating your flesh like
a ranch breakfast flapjacks potatoes
bullets mimeographed scripts lots
of syrup eggs & no one puts
anything
in the coffee

whoa hi ho
makes me so jolly not just
the houses
burning burning burning
but the way you cancered so softly into
(did you gulp 'yup' just one more time?)

being dead is a
laugh, a big, tough (i'm laffing)
cowboy (i'm
laffing) you know
cant
die in bed while hollywood burns.

you

come back spit the fires
dead swoop on all out
laws & horses while yodelling
the canterbury tales & i'll
give you a comeback
role in the 'kowboy pomes'

dont pay much, but
beats dieing.
maybe.
anyway, so
long, coop.
yup!

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.

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?

Stuart Z. Perkoff was born in St. Louis in 1930, and died in Los Angeles in 1974. His works include:

Suicide Room
(Jargon: Karlsruhe, 1956)

Poems from Prison
(Bowery Press: Denver, 1969)

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

Kowboy Pomes
(Croupier Press: Golden, Colorado, 1973)

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

Alphabet Poems
(Red Hill: Los Angeles & Fairfax, 1973)

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