

PAVEMENT SAW PRESS: The Man Po (Issue 8)
A PARTIAL INTERVIEW WITH SIMON PERCHIK

The remainder of this interview, conducted by Susan Tepper, appears in SALT HILL (#13) from Syracuse University.

SUSAN TEPPER: I'm going to test this recorder for a moment: testing one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

SIMON PERCHIK: It would be like a Woody Allen movie if we forgot to turn it on. (laughter)

TEPPER: I'd commit suicide, I really would. So let's see, okay, Si, you work from photographs you find in books.

PERCHIK: Yes. Mention Hamlet's Mill, it is unquestionably the best book ever. Then there's Hero With a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell, there's Frazer's Golden Bough, it's a gold mine. I've read Hamlet's Mill six times over. Sometimes I'll use a book on science. From the book I steal one idea after another, and tie it up with the image I got from the photograph as the core to start the poem. That image may last in the poem, it may not. But that's how it goes. The whole time I'm writing I'm listening through my walkman to Beethoven, Mahler, Mozart, whatever comes over the classical station. Mozart is just great; and Mahler; Mahler will wipe you out. The only time I'm not listening to music is when I'm reading the myth so I can concentrate, and not be distracted by the music. The music influences me, though I cannot say how it influences me except to say it's not as lonely when I'm listening to music, I like the company of music. Without the music, I think I would be lost, I wouldn't be able to get through it. The music is very valuable to me.

TEPPER: Do you have a writing schedule?

PERCHIK: Susan, when I was writing The Family of Man, using the 482 photographs from that book, I was writing seven days a week, 365 days a year. It took eight years to finish. Working this way that I do -- it's brutal, brutal. Now I work three to four hours a day, it's all you can really do.

TEPPER: Eight years to finish the book!

PERCHIK: Yeah. After I finish one I take these long walks.

TEPPER: When did The Family of Man come out?

PERCHIK: It's not out yet. Some of the poems from FOM came out in several books, such as the chapbooks John Pierce did, Snowcat Poems, and individual poems have appeared in magazines. (Editors' Note: The Family of Man, a nearly 600 page book, is due out from Pavement Saw Press in late 2003).

TEPPER: From your first book I Counted Only April did you work from photographs?

PERCHIK: No, no, I worked from images but not photographs. But I started with photographs early, a guy who clipped me onto that was a photographer, a very good photographer named Larance Schustack. I told him I'd write to his photographs, but what his photographs have in, I'd leave out, so mine will be absolutely incoherent. We'll try it, I said. So we did about six or so, and a magazine called The Outsider, a guy named John Webb, he printed a couple in his magazine. Then he writes back one day: I got a grant, we'll do a book. So I run over to Larry and tell him: Larry, we got a book, we got a book! And Larry wants to know: Well how much am I getting paid? -- Perchik, you're a lawyer you've got money, I only get money off my photographs, how much am I getting paid? I said: Larry, we don't know if the book will sell, we're lucky we're gonna get it out. Then it's yah-yah-yah. So I say to Larry: Here's the number, you call him. And the guy from the magazine calls me back and says he can't work with my partner so forget it. So that ended that.

TEPPER: Oh!

PERCHIK: But then I got the idea -- well now I'll write to photographs but I won't leave out, so it's incoherent. So I re-wrote those poems when I knew they weren't going to appear with the photographs. And a few of them were published in poetry magazines. And from that experience I got the idea of working from photographs because I've always needed an image to lock onto. I have to see it, and then I connect to what I see. These photographers see things you will never in your lifetime see. Use them -- take their photograph as your image. What do you have to see it for? And I have to

tell you, the photographs in the FOM, they'll wipe you out -- you'll never see those images in a million years!

TEPPER: About the abstraction part of your process. You start with the photograph, you do some prose writing describing what you see in the photo, then you go to your mythology or science book and do some reading there, then you go back and start working poetically?

PERCHIK: I read until I get an idea. Then I start the poem. First I get a little of what I think I would want to surface somewhere and then I abstract that particular thing. To abstract, you have to have something to abstract.

TEPPER: How do you know how far to take the abstraction? In other words, how do you know when the poem is finished?

PERCHIK: When I'm sick of it! (laughter) That's easy -- out!

TEPPER: It's a gut feeling you get then.

PERCHIK: Yeah. It's done. It's like a mother with a teenager, a parent with a teenager. Okay, you're done, kid -- out! (more laughter). You get a feeling you can't do anything more with it. For better or worse, it's done. I try to reach the reader subconsciously, without telling them. For instance, I want them to feel sad without telling them to feel sad. So the last stage of the poem is where I start to abstract.

TEPPER: Your poems are filled with commonplace images.

PERCHIK: I see apples, I see rocks, I see sand. There's a lot of rocks in cemeteries, so rocks is a big thing. Then I'm out there at the docks getting all this suntan, and there's a big stone jetty out there. All these things are locked into me and come out in the work. I don't write about a wagon with five wheels, I don't like that kind of thing.

TEPPER: Can you explain your use of the you in the poems.

PERCHIK: I use the you meaning the I or another you or the reader, so the you in the poem could be anything. But there is a point where the you has to jump into that poem, just as you are diving into water. Once I can get the

reader in, myself in, whoever's in the poem, then it takes on a different complexion.

There is a point where I say: Five lines -- nobody's here! And somebody's got to get into it. And I suck in the reader, myself, to get into that poem. Once somebody's in there, the complexion of the poem turns a little bit too, and you can get a little wilder. 'Cause you're inside already. If that makes any sense.

TEPPER: Yes, it does. And in your poems I always have the sense that you've stepped into another world, that you've stepped past that wall into what people call the other side, yet always keeping the attachment to this side. Bringing it back and forth in the poem. We're here now, but then we're not here but over there, then we're back here.

PERCHIK: I agree with you. If you don't do that then you're not in the area of poetry, you're in the area of prose -- you might as well read Robert W. Service. If I don't do that then you'll know where you are. I don't want the reader to know exactly where they are. I don't try for that type of structure.

TEPPER: Backing up a bit, when you studied poetry at NYU were you part of the circle of Beat Poets?

PERCHIK: No. I wasn't doing much writing in those days, maybe one or two poems a year. I was headed for law school. But one of the guys I hung out with was Paul Blackburn. He taught me something, though, that I have to give him credit for -- the leaps. Maybe that's what you were talking about -- this back and forth and shaking the reader up. He taught me to make the leap and the reader will make the jump. Pick the words where the reader will jump where you want them to jump. Paul's work does the same thing.

TEPPER: Was he established at that point?

PERCHIK: No, we were all getting nowhere. The only guy in that group that amounted to something early -- he's dead now -- was this crazy guy named Alfred Chester. But he was probably the best writer I'll know. He wrote prose, but beautiful, beautiful. He has this one book Jamie Is My Heart's Desire about a guy who gets a job at a funeral parlor. He writes very very well, but toward the end I think he went looney. He went to live in Morocco then they threw him out. You see, Susan, I played it safe, maybe too safe. I said: I need a family, I need a job, I need this, I need that; unless

I'm going to become a teacher. And you don't know that you're going to become a teacher just by writing poems. It so happened that Paul got a job teaching. But you don't know that when you start out. But if you're a lawyer you've got a certificate, you've got a job. As long as you behave yourself, you can make a living. In the sixties I started to write again, but that was over the summer when I had off from work, about ten poems a summer. But when I retired in 1980, that's when I really started and everything exploded.

TEPPER: Your first book I Counted Only April came out in 1964. How did you find a publisher?

PERCHIK: As a matter of fact I had dinner with him last night -- Jim Weil. He's a very nice guy, we're better friends now than when he was my publisher! (laughs) At that time he ran a magazine called Elizabeth, and I had sent them a few poems, and he took a few then asked would I like to have a chapbook out. And then he did six books. Three of them were done by Mardersteig who is probably the best printer in the world. It's a joy to hold those books. He was an Italian printer from Verona. Very beautiful books, hand-printed, great paper. So that's how I got published there. Almost all my books have been through contacts at magazines. The only book that didn't come through a magazine was The Selected. I can't get into the big presses, so I figure if I'm going to do anything, the small magazine is where it's at.

TEPPER: Do you think the business is changing, in the sense that so many more people are writing today than ever before?

PERCHIK: It is tough. If you start saying you're not going to write unless you get published, you're finished. If you're lucky, you catch somebody in the right mood -- receptive, fine. But whenever I get an envelope back I actually expect a rejection. There are magazines who've published my work that I can no longer get into. There are no guarantees. It's nice that I'm published, I don't discount that. But I have to be honest, even if I weren't -- I was writing when I wasn't getting published! To the beginning writer I'd like to say that you shouldn't place too much emphasis on an acceptance. Beginning writers should find other reasons for writing -- an exorcism, or saying what you want to say in a socially acceptable way. If you lock yourself into the need for acclaim, the need for publication, no good can come of it. Real writers -- there's no need to tell them this, because he or she is going to write anyway.

TEPPER: Good points. Let me ask you about influences, have any of the early metaphysical poets such as John Donne or George Herbert influenced your work?

PERCHIK: John Donne, obviously. But John Donne is the kind of guy you read at a funeral. John Donne knows how to reach people at a time of mourning -- his No Man is an Island, you read that at a funeral, you'll cry even if you don't know the person who died. The problem with his poetry, though, for me, is that I don't like the poem that tells me something. I like the spooky kind, if you could call it that, where I don't know what's happening. So the poets who influenced me the most are Neruda, and guy named Aleixandre, though you've got to watch who's translating him. And Baudelaire. Baudelaire was strong.

TEPPER: Do you see any of those in your own work?

PERCHIK: I don't want the reader to be able to explicate anything from my work, I want you to say: I don't know what this is, I just feel different and I don't even know how I feel, just different.

TEPPER: That is what happens.

PERCHIK: Yeah? Okay. Because I think that's where the power is. You listen to Mahler, you feel differently. And you can't say: he's doing this, he's doing that. If the reader is bewildered, made to feel tense, upset -- whatever -- and no way of knowing why -- that's what I'm trying to do.

TEPPER: You mentioned reading John Donne at a funeral, and death seems to be a major theme in your own work with titles such as Letters to the Dead and Touching the Headstone.

PERCHIK: (laughs) No matter how a poem starts out it ends in a cemetery. Love and death. Loneliness, despair, fear. What else is there to write about?

TEPPER: What are The Autochthon Poems, what does that word mean?

PERCHIK: I have no idea. (he laughs) I sent a copy of the book to the editor of the Massachusetts Review, and he wrote back: I'm looking forward to reading the poems and pronouncing the title! Here's what happened. As

you see, I don't even title the poems. Or, even the books. All of the books have been named by the publishers, as far back as the first book (I Counted Only April). Wait! Mr. Lucky may have been mine, we had a crazy cat named Mr. Lucky. Neurotic! That was Mr. Lucky. Oh, and Snowcat.

TEPPER: The Snowcat Poems were after the Robert Frank photographs?

PERCHIK: Yes. Snowcat was my son's dog and Mr. Lucky was the cat. I don't really care about the titles. I use asterisks.

TEPPER: Do people get confused by the asterisks?

PERCHIK: Editors will ask if it's a series. The editor from the New Yorker, she said on the phone: We have to name it something, we'll name it the first line. Okay.

TEPPER: Do you remember your poems?

PERCHIK: I forget immediately what I wrote -- I have to make room for more! I think I've trained my brain to just forget what I wrote. If you look, you'll see that some lines reappear.

TEPPER: What I saw repeat itself was: You know the sound.

PERCHIK: You know the sound repeats itself? There you go! Susan, I only read them over when I absolutely have to read them, and even then I don't want to.

TEPPER: I love your poems, I read them every day, they're like Bible reading for me. And I don't read the Bible.

PERCHIK: Thank you. But I don't want to see these poems again. When I had to proofread for Hands Collected, the poems that gave me the most trouble were the Gandolf Poems. They were a terrible thing for me to read, just tough to read. It was the period when I was writing those poems, and they were different from the others. The others I could get through. So, when you say do I read them again -- for me, that's looking for trouble. I don't want to see them again, I don't want to proofread them again, I don't want to have anything to do with them again.

TEPPER: Is that why you don't give many readings?

PERCHIK: Well I don't give readings 'cause I like to think the poems are getting more and more abstract. Not surreal, abstract. I have something real and I abstract it, so that hopefully it will mean more to the reader. To listen to it, you're not going to get any of that. If you're reading it, you can come back to it.

TEPPER: When you read the two poems during your TV interview, my husband, who at that time was unfamiliar with your work, well he was completely bowled over.

PERCHIK: Yeah? I guess I'm a failure, I like to feel that they're abstract so that you can't get them.

TEPPER: It's not so much that you get them -- as you get into them. Into the sense of them. And it's very very pleasant. What about someone else reading your work aloud?

PERCHIK: That would be perfect, I'd love that. Some actor, he or she could read them -- they could read a phone book and it would sound great.

TEPPER: Would you come and listen?

PERCHIK: That would be interesting, I never thought of that. That would be almost schizophrenic, I'd be listening to somebody else read it like it was somebody else.

TEPPER: For a poet who is published as frequently as you are, you're probably the only one who doesn't give readings. (both laugh) Shifting gears, during WW2 you were a pilot and your poems are filled with planes, cockpits, birds, the sky and sun.

PERCHIK: Why bother to write if you're not writing about your life? To purge, or find out about yourself. Whether it's poetry or prose, anything -- even painting. To find out about yourself. You may not be happy with that information, but there it is. When I'm finished writing I feel that something is there that wasn't there before and I feel better. A kind of exorcism. And it may be the same poem over and over, a different way. Every poem I'm

writing I think is about death -- dealing with death, trying to be more comfortable with death -- may be taking place in each of the poems.

TEPPER: Yet your poems are all so utterly different.

PERCHIK: Well I'm glad to hear you say that because I didn't think so.

TEPPER: They are. But you don't read them, so how would you know?
(hilarious laughter)

PERCHIK: Very good!

TEPPER: In Touching the Headstone you have a correction insert tucked into the cover accusing the dybbuks of mischief.

PERCHIK: Yeah, yeah! It's about typos. The dybbuks are imaginary gremlins or fairies that do mischief in stories. Ever read Singer, Isaac Singer? Whenever something goes wrong you blame it on dybbuks. What happened was, in the first part of the book I put the colon to abut these two nouns, and the two nouns have something to do with each other. By not saying that so and so is like so and so, I can make a connection that's a little further out. Then if the reader doesn't get it, I've minimized my risk. But if I put the colon with the two nouns, the reader may think: Hey, there's some connection here. And the reader may think they got it by him or herself. Which makes them feel good. But in the meantime I'm trying to control it, by putting the two together, and alerting the reader that there is a connection, and deal with it the way you want. But if I put the colon in the regular place, they'll think it's just a colon and they'll just keep reading on. When it's unusual -- it could be any form of punctuation -- I could put an exclamation point, anything -- but I picked the colon because a colon also affects the rhythm, there's more of a kinetic rhythm to it, instead of stopping and going on, you're going on till you hit a wall then you're going on. I want the reader to stop, make some kind of connection, even if it's not the one I intended, maybe they'll make something. So I'll get a little mileage out of the poem. Two words and maybe I'll get a little mileage -- not like prose where you've got pages and pages to deal with things. I've only got a few words, so I put those words together separated by a displaced colon. Halfway through the book (Headstone) the computer shifted the colon to the other side!

TEPPER: Your poems are very economical but also very lush. Length-wise, a lot of them seem to fall into the same...

PERCHIK: Like a gasp of breath, one long breath -- for tension. I try to keep the tension so that it holds together. That's how I move one thing into another. Even though I'm bouncing the reader all over the place there is, hopefully, that tension. I also use the dash for tension so that you don't rest. Tension is very important to me, I want it to come out without resting. From beginning to end.

TEPPER: Do you consider yourself a mystical person?

PERCHIK: No... no... Mystical? I never thought of that. If I was mystical the grounding would be out of the picture. If you're mystical, you're off somewhere without touching down. I like to feel that even though I go off, like a dancer -- a dancer touches down on the stage now and then, you can't be up in the air all the time. And mysticism -- I always figure these guys are all phonies who bullshit up on the mountain. Whatever they're talking about. I don't want to be in that group. I like to feel that there is some reality, but I don't want to give a reality that you're sure of, I want you to think that that's a possible reality, something that is possible. Though it's not explicit. So I don't think mysticism would fit in with what I do. But, as they say, the writer is the last to know!

TEPPER: How does time figure in?

PERCHIK: Time? Well I read a lot of science books, I read Steven Hawking's A Brief History of Time. So I would read something on time, and of course you're preoccupied with time because every second you're closer to the finish line, when you're going to croak. Of course you're aware you're going to croak, so time is always present. This linear progression of time.

TEPPER: I don't sense time in your poems, I sense timelessness.

PERCHIK: Okay. This sense of time, this linear progression toward death, how it gets in the poem or doesn't get in the poem that's another story, but I'm aware of death coming up. Very

much aware. A lot of death in the poems. Time has to do with that because there's nothing that's going to change that arrow going one way. It's not coming back.

TEPPER: Is death the meat of the poems?

PERCHIK: The meat of the poems would be death. Death is in there all the time. As for time as a structure, I don't think the poems have that, I don't try for that. Mine just begins and ends. I think I could switch the last to the front, and the front to the bottom and it would still make no difference. I think that could happen.

TEPPER: In other words you could switch the structure and it would still work.

PERCHIK: Easy. It wouldn't matter. Some poets are writing so tight that you take one word out, a preposition out, you'd feel the words would spring off the page! With mine I think you could juxtapose everything and nothing would happen.

TEPPER: That's interesting. In your essay Magic, Illusion & Other Realities you state: "Poetry is ignited, brought to life by haunting, evasive, ambiguous, contradictory propositions." Does this claim directly relate to your life?

PERCHIK: To my life?! No...my life is very controlled. I was a lawyer and you can't be off in ga-ga land, you can't be contradictory when you make an argument, you can't be off the wall. My real life? No. Poetry is a different story, poetry is not real life. It's an art form and people read it and feel one way or another. In my real life, if I go to the A&P to buy something, I have to go to the shelf and take a quart of milk, I have to know what I'm doing. The real world has nothing to do with the art.

TEPPER: So you actually see your life as kind of split?

PERCHIK: Oh, yeah. How could I have made a living if I was in dreamland? When I'm working on a poem, I go down under. But when it's over I've got to come up for air. Even now that I'm retired I'm still looking around me, dealing with this problem, that problem. The real world is not abstract, it's real. You have to deal with it.

TEPPER: I read about a poet who actually has handlers, like movie stars do, people who move her from point A to point B.

PERCHIK: (hilarious laughter) Like movie stars! I can see it with movie stars 'cause they're busy running around all the time, but a poet?

TEPPER: Apparently she's so insulated from the world, and lives in this little cocoon, and people bring her food, and she just writes her poems. Reminds me a little of Emily Dickinson up there in that room. Not much of a real life.

PERCHIK: When I talk in my poems -- whatever I say in my poems is from real life. There may be people like you say who are in this Ivory Tower or dream world but it's not me. When I stop writing, I'm back dealing with everyday affairs. Nobody's bringing me food (he laughs) nobody's paying the mortgage, nobody's doing this, doing that. I don't know how you can write without the real world, the real world has to enter your work. I think the real world is in my writing. When I talk about a toaster in a poem it's a real toaster -- every day I make toast. Nobody's making toast for me. I know what a toaster looks like, I know what burnt toast looks like -- if I'm in this dream world, what's going to feed me? I mean, what's going to feed the work? I'd have no grief, I'd have no joy, I'd have no this, no that. It's artificial if I'm in a room and people are doing things for me. It's not the real world. Life is one pain in the ass after another, one problem after another. And that's what you deal with. Maybe if somebody were feeding me and bringing me things I wouldn't have to write! (he laughs)

TEPPER: I think you'd still be writing. But maybe you'd dry up, as you say.

PERCHIK: Yeah. In the beginning I was writing about the children, I was writing about law, all my writing certainly was about the real world. And even the photographs, the photographs are the real world. These are scenes that exist. They're not pleasant, all of them -- most of them are not.

TEPPER: Birds appear frequently in your work.

PERCHIK: A lot of birds, aerial images. I'm aware of them. It's interesting, I wasn't conscious of the word hands appearing so frequently until a book came out and a reviewer wanted to know: what's this thing with hands? And I said: "What? I didn't even know it was in there, I didn't even know I use hands!" (laughter) But like I said to you earlier, the writer is the last to know.

TEPPER: Any last thoughts?

PERCHIK: I think poetry has to separate from prose. Ninety-nine percent of what you're reading as poetry today is just chopped up lines of prose -- lecturing you, telling you something, all narrative. There's a place for narrative poetry. That narrative poetry should be broken off into prose and called something else. But certainly not poetry. There has to be a division between prose and poetry. They're two separate art forms. When you write prose, the person who reads it is being told something, beautifully, but there is a feeling that you know what's going on, and that carries the story. Nobody can beat the prose of, let's say, Dostoevsky -- some of the great writers of prose, you can't touch them. But there is another art form and it's different from prose and that's poetry. And you have to allow poetry to grow in a different arena. It has nothing to do with narrative. People say there has to be a place for narrative poetry. I say there doesn't have to be a place for narrative poetry, narrative poetry should go over into the prose camp, and just be beautiful prose -- you don't have to chop up the lines. Write it in paragraph form, as it belongs, and don't pass it off as poetry just because there's a lot of white space on the two sides of the page. Poetry, on the other hand, should go further and further into the abstract mode. Because that's where the power is. Just like painting has gone off to the abstract. I don't like the word surrealism for poetry because I feel that words carry some bit of meaning, and surrealism is not going to do it. It can do it with painting, maybe, but abstraction is a better word for where poetry, I think, should go.