

Touching the Headstone

Simon Perchik

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Proust wrote of "the social world being the realm of nullity," and so it is to Perchik as well. Born in Paterson, N.J., in 1923, Perchik is the author of more than a dozen books of poems; his preferred territory is the mystical netherworld of physical and psychological alienation ("could be the ice forgets / surfaces where I trace your lips / sip from the sharp stone")—symbolized by the cenotaph that provides the title—where acts of narrative cohesion and remembrance are nearly inutterable, a "hum struggling in armor." *Headstone*, then, recalls not only Charles Wright's "new geography, / Landscapes stilled and adumbrated, memory unratcheting," but his fantastical yet completely *compos mentis* imagery—"two lips would grow from your own / quietly into place / clot this darkness and crust"; "Each night these branches lift off / dragging a tree / that is not a scarecrow." This is certainly no derivative collection, but rather a unique meditation on the orogeny of a soul. Appropriately, nearly every poem is alternately peopled with rock, ice, hillsides, and waves, the recurrence of their metaphoric heft and mutability ("one stone / crack[s] open the sun, the others / full length, over you") forming a mantra which demands, and darkly celebrates, the realization of mortality (man as "a basket full of riversides") as a final step toward spiritual actualization (where "the Earth [is] open again and overflowing"). *Headstone* is an extraordinary modern-day adaptation of St. Gregory's dictum that contemplation of human weakness is the path to beatitude; in the words of Perchik, such is a bittersweet process of "light being born, already weeping / ... this bloodstained sand / ... made graceful / to welcome the lost."

—Ethan Paquin