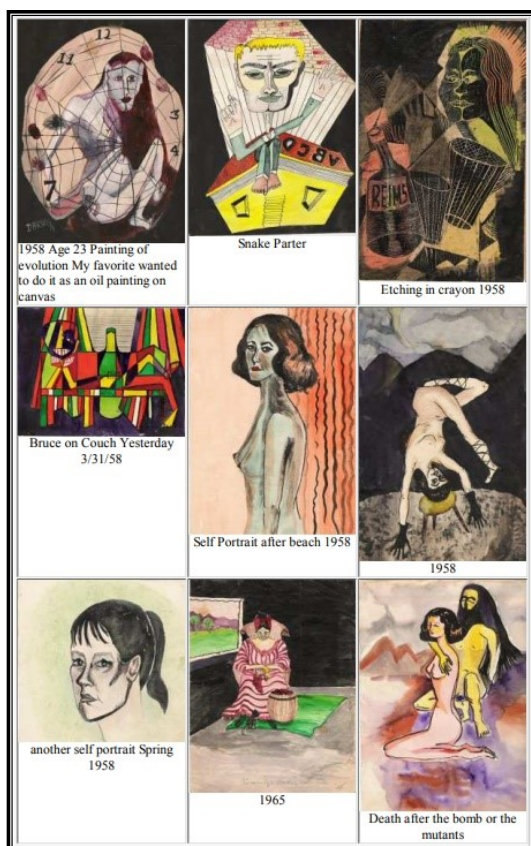


## HOMELESS IN PARADISE

January 16, 2015

### Column #12



### THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF A BEATNIK POET-PAINTER WHO MASQUERADED AS SUSANINA OF VENICE WEST

By Wanda Sue Parrott

**RECENTLY**, I got an e-mail about homelessness at Venice Beach from a 1952 Monrovia-Arcadia-Duarte High School classmate. The *Care2 Causes* story, dated December 10, 2014, by Crystal Sheppard, said, “Venice Beach, California is the stuff of legends and fantasy.” *Right!*

The report described Venice as “the home of an increasingly large transient population” that. . . has resulted in a de-facto homeless encampment.” *What?*

The sender, Frank Ross “Buzzy” Jerome, former dean at Santa Monica College, is now retired near the Venice Boardwalk where homelessness is as old as Paradise is legendary. *I know. I vanished from there without leaving a clue.*

In summer 1959, trying to choose my path of life, I mingled with the Venice venue’s vagabonds and vagrants. As the pseudo beachfront poet and painter “Susanina of Venice West,” I learned to go nude in private. I also wore a fake hip-long braid, homemade wooden sandals, and clothesline belt in public.

Susanina learned to play bongo drums and a few chords on an acoustic guitar as she recited undisciplined ramble-rants in poetry readings at candlelit coffee houses. Leaders of the generation had inherited the awesome, awful A-Bomb and, knowing any moment might be their last on earth, were grasping for freedom while they could. At 23, I joined them as a disciple.

We were called Beatniks, whether clean-cut like me, or scruffy and full of free-flowing stream-of-consciousness and sidewalk urine, or suffering malaise from lice, malnutrition, and postwar PTSD, addiction, and mental problems like paranoia and schizophrenia.

The Venice in the article was almost the same Venice I had known: *Its boardwalk is a circus-like environment with a parade of characters. For more than two miles you can walk and be entertained by street performers, stop to have your fortune told, buy food or fare (some less than legal) from the various street vendors, all while trying to avoid getting run over by the skateboarders, bicyclists and scantily-clad rollerbladers.*

Some things have changed: The Gas House was our main attraction on the boardwalk then called the strand. Cheap tenements housed low-income elderly who outnumbered the 200 or so transients camping along the beachfront.

In 1959, most homeless were men on skid row in downtown. Today, 56,000 men, women, children and pets are homeless throughout Los Angeles, or about twenty times more than the 2013 Homeless Census counted in Monterey County.

How new is homelessness, transience, or whatever name America's non-mainstream houseless population is or will be called? It is rooted in ancient history! Think of the Bedouins of the middle east, traveling Gypsies of Europe, and Native Americans of the U.S. who only lost their freedom to roam in 1890. During the Middle Ages, bands of roving minstrels traveled throughout Europe, as did Shakespearean players, who entertained while also carrying news from place to place.

I believe Society needs the alternative path for those who are seeking the way home for themselves. The danger such alternative routes pose for a nation occurs when Robert Frost's Road Less Traveled becomes a lane leading to a mainstream refugee camp.

For seekers like me, the Beatniks' bible, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, helped me choose the mainstream. I got dressed, replaced my paint brush with a camera, and became a photojournalist. All that remains of my summer as a Beatnik is summarized in my poem that first appeared in the Summer 2000 edition of *Hodgepodge Literary Journal*.

Happy travels to all!

### Death of a Beatnik Poet, 1959

Summertime poets haunted the Gas House  
along the strand in Venice West,  
seeking... like what?

She, a junior on semester break,  
rope-belted, sandaled, strings-of-seaweed hair,  
beating bongos, chanting stream-of-consciousness  
soliloquies about a new race after the bomb,  
and going with the flow,  
and why fools make earthquakes,  
seeking a major to declare,  
or screw it all... just let it all hang out...  
hit the road, Jack... Kerouac...  
I, you, he, she, we, you, it, they...  
conjugated and translated like, man,  
like new men,  
transitive and intransitive verbs...  
translated and truncated...  
were there  
among creosote-scented tenements  
crusting with salt, exuding attar of sea air,  
smoking, toking, poking, joking, croaking.

Now rollerbladers skate along the shore  
where Beatniks' pads were home to poets  
whose tamed-rat pets wantonly wandered wild,  
like languishing lovers along naked arms  
of black-and-white pairs performing

scrunched behind battered guitars  
facing each other nearly nude  
in an iron lion-clawed tub in the Gas House  
where gawkers could gaze by poking coins  
through rusty, twisted wires of a Victorian cage  
in which canaries had trilled joyously  
before the atom was split.

When weather turned foul and cash was spare,  
they ate their pets... plenty to spare.  
Roaches were there. Did anyone care?  
Fools flocked to stare. Yes, she was there.

They beat the Bomb by being beat  
in Venice Beach on Beatnik Street.  
Poems unrhymed, nickled and dimed,  
not much to eat on Beatnik Street.

Short summers pass; hers was a gas.  
She bongued into her pentametry,  
Gave up the Beat, majored in poetry.  
And though new generations take her place,  
None else will wear that unique face.

The girl of Venice West died without shame.  
I killed her.  
Susanina was our name.

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