

SWEEPER AT HIS DOOR

SEBASTIAN REICHMANN

**TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
BY JAMES BROOK**

**PRE-FACE BY
JEROME ROTHENBERG**

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PRE-FACE

I see you better than you do
because I'm foreign.
– Alice Notley

If there is a Romanian diaspora – & there is – then Sebastian Reichmann is among its leading poets &, like others before him, ready to be a player on a worldwide stage. The predecessors of course are awesome: Tristan Tzara in the days of Dada, Paul Celan & Gherasim Luca, Eugene Ionesco, Isidore Isou, Mircea Eliade, even (nearer home) our bon ami Andrei Codrescu. All of them began in Romania & all, moving out from there, changed languages but kept the native accent in how they spoke the words they wrote. That much is the mark par excellence of the “nomadic poet” for whom – Pierre Joris has told us – “there is no at-home-ness ... but only an ever more displaced drifting ... ‘on the way’ [unterwegs] as Celan puts it.” Or still more tellingly: “The NOET [nomadic poet] learns & then writes in foreign languages (real or made-up ones) in order to come to the realization that all languages are foreign.”

For Reichmann the path to other-ness began in post-World War II Bucharest and took him from there to later residence in Paris. Israel was another stop along the way, as was – for periods up to a year & more – America. As with others of his time, his moves were conditioned by the loss of possibilities in the native place & language and by the desire, then sensed, to work without constraints, at the furthest limits of his powers. The exile to France was also to a place of exile in the “other” language. Thus the tension was played out in the very body of the poem – not as theme so much as skin or substance.

This is quintessential twentieth century – a time of renewed wanderings but also, as he words it, “the season of authorized murder.” As a matter of biography – cultural, political – the thread runs from war & holocaust (before his birth) to cold war & repression (in his growing years) to the later time of crossing borders – “a departure,” he writes, “from the compulsory Paradise in search of the problematics of hell.” It is a search too – & again he is aware of it – for a “post-totalitarian synthesis,” where

history & personal history come together. While rarely overt, as another kind of (message) poetry might be, it permeates the work to become what he describes as his “particular weaving of elements of memory, history and myth.” That “weaving,” if its terms sound familiar here in U.S.A., is not at all in Pound’s or Olson’s mode, for the deeper histories – the ancient matters – lie just outside or well below the surface of these poems, so that everything here exists in the immediate present – or just before.

For the rest, it is enough to read the poems – in James Brook’s cool & sure translations –& to keep a sense throughout of all their underlying tensions, both those which can be translated and those locked into Reichmann’s adopted & nomadic language. The synthesis – of a language-centered surreality with the awareness of a man in motion through real worlds, real times – is both precise & striking. And it is this synthesis which prepares him for what the new century – like the old one – so much needs: the ability to see what is there in front of us but also what lies hidden where appearances no longer are sufficient in themselves.

Jerome Rothenberg
Encinitas, California
July 2000

YOU PUT YOURSELF IN DANGER OF THE NIGHT

last line of a recitative listened to with one ear
glimpse of the wanderer by the wanderer
door secretly left ajar

you are immobile abstracted impalpable
but you keep an eye out
for the stranger who cloaks herself in her verse

yes there is a stranger in each line
which you alone have heard
in the empty dining room
one stranger in the middle of the night
and another at the break of day

the poem endures the whole night long
is made to endure in your place
if you are absent it goes on
you can make the night end
only by listening to the stranger
who speaks in your mother tongue
without your being able to understand her

BURNING THE SIGNS OF A MAN IN A HURRY

the departure in front of the same hotel
as the arrival

the woman who waited for me seven years ago
wanted to take revenge
on her brother who died in Paris
after amassing a considerable fortune

the woman who accompanies me today
cries instead of asking me to stay
she asks me to burn in my yard
objects that the Chinese have the custom
of burning after the death of someone close

what I understand by her gesture
is that I'm wrong to leave this place
the only place where I could find a yard
to burn the signs of the man in a hurry
a Chinese or an Other let's say
in the ten years since I saw
New York for the first time and could find no peace
till I went back again

the man in a hurry to return
thought about setting things straight
fled in advance as yet unaware
that things were just happening

and that his journey crystallized on the hills
of San Francisco one evening in November 1982
before he attended that play on apartheid
in which a white man and a black man were born of the same mother
was nothing more than the premonition of a still-distant future
on the giant screen of his permanent private movie theater
until then faces had to succeed faces

without glaring contradiction
while emphasizing certain features and erasing others
but above all
it was still necessary to extirpate the fear of spells

ICY OCCASIONS

The hail in May on a road in Israel
that leads to the southernmost point of the country
is taken for an unusual event
while the sea-cats displayed to the tourists
—above sea level—
in pools constructed for this effect
don't disturb in the least our absent-minded waiting
for rare and fugitive signs of life

this bar in the Place de Bastille has a reputation too shady
for the celebration of a touchy friend's new book
this feeling raises in an untimely fashion
each person's level of complaint
so that at the same moment another friend
felt insulted by my overly familiar remarks

the wrapping paper carefully preserved
in a hidden nook full of handy things
prevents our passing with glad heart through
the dead seasons when there are no celebrations
it might be used again but without
our being there and knowing how to fold it without mistake

**BEFORE THE ADVANCING CART
FOR LUBA**

Rue Olivier-de-Serres inexact copy
of a valley where the missing suddenly appear
 broken footbridge
over the convention of the homonymous street

the revived corner of Rue de Miromesnil
 and Rue La Boétie
where I learned to recognize the signs of the domain
that belongs to me without my having
to make it known to the substitutes
under the impatient assaults of what is predictable in their lives
it all belongs to you who haunt Rue des Martyrs
at your side the messenger who advances
under his star that prefigures
the human combinations known only to him

you haunt Rue des Martyrs and Rue Lafayette
not on a day of those encounters where you make yourself invisible
to those who pass for what they haven't known how to be
who crop up at the corners of very real squares

while taking on the features of fallen messengers

Rue du 4 Septembre we blaze a trail
in the dark heart of a promised encounter
with that country frightening and close
that casts its sticky nets toward us

in the presence of those who ran into us without seeing us
to freeze in the very place where we
had recognized them—
perpetual motion that immobilizes—

the mist of conversations evaporates
with those who dine with me
who answer my letters of fatigue and remorse
all those whom I never encounter by chance
when I cross the triumphant bridges
linking with light the divided cities
or the night with you when we groped along
down the same path
in the opposite direction
all those whom I never encounter without the escort
of cut-off heads
that retain their fur caps with ears
tied behind their necks
when they return to the fashionable cafés
to demand without useless introduction
a strong drink to put things back in perspective

in the presence of those who surround us without any uniform
but that which we ourselves have lent them
for a few days or a few years
when we had gone departed with no forwarding
address displaced persons as if we were redecorating
after moving to a temporary apartment
for tardy surveyors of single-parent lots
in the presence of those who look at us without warning
who signal us when it is already too late
to respond with a part of our bodies prearranged
for this effect
who lie in wait for our desertions on the field of honor
from orthopedic mother tongues
in the presence of all those who surround us without receiving
any salary
other than our gratitude
for not being in their place
we come back armed with an old-fashioned can-opener
and an old-fashioned corkscrew the last traces of a

heritage wasted up and down a pale continent
the last cans and last bottles
arranged in perfect order separated from us
by a curtain a veil that hides nothing
in the shops belonging to the Cause that
watches over us as soon as we discover ourselves to be
vulnerable so it must be noted
that fear takes hold of us without warning
only by opening its yellow eye
immersed in the ambient brine
as soon as the streets line up and superimpose themselves
at right angles as here and there and so forth
to infinity

SWEEPER AT HIS DOOR

I.

We must have the same attitude toward words
as that of a fly-hunter
using as the absolute weapon
all the other words
already trapped by the sticky paper
or buzzing for a little while longer
above the most commonly hidden
material

II.

We must attend to what the glue catches
and see that the flies fall
above the hand that writes
beneath the skin of the bear
happy for just a little longer
in its sold-off forest
brought right here as an offering

III.

We must untiringly return
to the head of stone prepared just for this
as a prelude to the whole body
hidden sprawled across the path—
tired warrior or exhausted tempter—
before the ultimate apparition
this black woman
sweeping in front of her door

IV.

We must attend to what the jungle conserves
its temples buried up to the neck
immersed since the first day
beneath the strata of ash
of the wives burnt alive
temples returned to the groundwater
guardians of darkness—
sheltered from the hazards
of helping hands
and feats of strength—bright spots

V.

We must without delay recognize
in the head of the temple
taken out of the water
the signal for the opening of a new season
of manhunting
recognize the hooks of blood
that hold together the clothes of the officiating priest
in the water that separates head and body
we must wash away the forgotten blood
of crimes committed in our name
during our repeated absences
we must no longer forget
the blood spilled by others
—in my name—
thus speaks the head of the temple
brought out of the water
to give the signal for the opening

THE UNCLASSIFIABLES

In the street those who saw the flames
engulf the triple body of the prison
didn't believe it

After licking the curves of the stone
the tongue of fire lashed out
toward the heights

No revolution came to warn us
of the approaching end of fear
of the instantaneous spreading of the fire
in the narrow hallway
where the well-informed trainers had
killed in advance their favorite wildcats
and waited now for the fire
to procure them a supplementary ration
of unhappiness

The traps thus destroyed like
drawers emptied into the mass
grave where victims and executioners
came to meet

The feet of the colossus that was consumed by the flames
were the last to disappear
their decision to endure was weak
the fire in the shape of the worm Ouroboros
had also aspired too avidly to the heights

In the street those who weren't blind
didn't believe what they saw
the painting already tarnished before being framed

In the street there was nothing but mirrors
and eyes turned up
no trace of the fire that had invited us

MOTHER COUNTRY

this took place in 1948
a year when the young Czechoslovakian writers not yet
brought into step
believed firmly in the triangle country-mother-poetry
there was only the voice on the radio to reassure them
and the loved ones in a hurry to make them abandon
right away the cheap apartment of the gate-crasher
and the well-chosen word-play to render forgotten
the intoxicating scarf glimpsed on a street in Edinburgh
where people took their own wine to a restaurant
just as they did in the real war

some could not forget
neither the offering-poems on the benches of the suburban trains
or the metro Sunday mornings at the same station
where they got off year after year
of finicky work
nor the eternal pullover whose grayness
was the proof in this world that poetry knew how to transgress
the choppiness of the seasons passed in inhospitality
nor the wind in the streets of London or Toronto
nor the suffocation in the woods of Chapultepec

1948—a year when the Congress of Young Writers
in Prague had not yet been
brought into step but had
energetically condemned Ivan Blatny's
nonreturn from London
the nonreturn of the beloved poet to his public
before he knew which relatives to turn to
Nezval or his father according to confirmed rumors
but who could his mother be
among all those immobile people mouths of fire
of unsuspected bunkers

I salute you Ivan Blatny!
and I admire your courage!
throughout your life against the phantoms
of the old country
where the mothers always cry too late
for the wars that they incite

RUSSIAN CHRISTMAS, RUE DARU

everyone wears a second piece of clothing
to refract the heat of separate bodies
the first piece of clothing concentrates the colors
forbidden elsewhere in similar places
the white makes it last longer
the orange and the red blaze
in the melting-pot where the bodies seem to be swallowed up
the incense smoke doubles in intensity
our gazes cross like ping-pong balls
hammer a table on the point of burning
we enter and leave without letup
the others embrace for the first dance of the year
the candles raise this pyramid placed over the void

MYTHICAL BORROWING

He runs away after hearing a few words
in his borrowed language
repeated in a litany near a yacht
insatiable litany of a language
comfortably installed above the masts

takes refuge in the wealth of words from another language
no longer maternal
is accompanied by a god who devours his children
and by the huntress who keeps her prey alive
long after it's been put to death
by the fireworks produced by entirely
personal means

the rules of exchange are learned in suffering
as if one took part in the birth
of a jealous father riddled with arrows
whose sickened gaze
decides as many pauses and breaks
as it does returns

¡PARA HOY!

From the moment of departure He who took the bus
from Los Angeles to Colorado knew
that he would take the return bus the very same day
and that his right index finger pointed at
the invisible blackboard would
protect him as well as his plastic
bags crammed with notebooks and
brochures from schools ready
to welcome him just as he was
dirty stuffed with fast food ugly
but with a mind increasingly in a state
of alert to the slightest change
of schedule

He who believed he had missed his return flight
to Paris could not know
that he was fated to return on
the same flight
one day later due to circumstances
beyond his control

He who had written about the Navajo
wore a white patch over his left eye
he removed it without reason as soon as his companion
wandered off to avoid hearing the buzzing
of the swarm of aficionados from California
in their revitalized self-hatred
in the entourage of the patriarch An old fart

The total lunar eclipse is set for today
much too early or much too late
but first of all for today the moon
a hundred-peseta coin that's grown too fast

that strides over the line of dolls
on the roofs of the most beautiful plaza in Spain

Also set for today is the shameful
heroism of the pilot who saves
only half his passengers
the pilot himself will save his skin
only after just managing
to avoid the bus
boarded in Los Angeles for Colorado

DICTIONARY OF THE FOREST

What does one call a clearing
that isn't a clearing?
Where the children of the area cut up
trees to make toys
that won't last a week?
Why the cracks in the wooden
volume destined for a cushy life?
The frozen rivulets on the paths
know just one response—which they
share with the frost concentrated
on the oak leaves brought back home
and with me too as I piss
on the trees' reassuring moss—very “Old
England”—the detour through the ephemeral
interior is as good as the outdoors
the disused animal traps
that before our eyes turn once again
into innocent hiding places—last
refuge of the fear of self

EAST OR WEST?

Mr. Stillheart knows just one doctor
he doesn't see him for his little troubles
but only for his moments of great doubt
Thus on this ship that's been crossing the Ocean
for several days under which the years of waiting
sleep with their colorless substance
it's time to learn from the very mouth
of the guide where you're heading
Mr. Falkenflug agrees with his friend
that they should ask who goes East who goes West
Well then there's the doctor who hesitates
before the map unfolded
as if he were at the dissection table
looking at a freshly dismembered cadaver
he wonders if his left hand coincides with the deadman's left
and his right hand with the deadman's right

THE GIRL AND THE WOLFHOUND

Even in entering the courtyards of the buildings
close to the façades left intact
you didn't feel anything
under the total anesthesia of this Easter Monday
you meet again at the same moment
in no matter which bordertown of the old Empire
whose name has been distorted
from one generation to the next
by virtue of the most local of traditions
eggs in aspic pyramids of tin cans
threadbare traditions
of repeating hangings
you no longer even notice the odor of the cadavers
piled in the back rooms of restaurants
that display views of Danzig in 1907
in their windows peaceful shot
on a riverbank
nonchalance hidden in the depths of the heart
total anesthesia of this Easter Monday

girls seated beside their puppies
in the subway as if nothing had ever
happened

you would have liked to feel at least
the habitual hatred of a Sunday morning
or the lassitude of an Ash Wednesday
but the leaden emptiness of this Easter Monday
tormented us
while the little girls with their red ringlets
and the wolfhounds
admired the giant egg
made of asbestos and black ceramic

erected on the curb
in front of the famous restaurant with the same name
despite its owners' escape to New York
on the eve of war

Berlin, April 1993

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sebastian Reichmann was born in Romania in 1947, near the border with the former Soviet Union. Beginning in 1966, his poems were published in major literary journals, thanks to an ephemeral and deceptive liberalization on the rise to power of Nicolae Ceausescu. Reichmann's first book, *Geraldine* (1969), provoked the Communist dailies to exhort the country's publishers—likewise controlled by the Communist Party—to no longer publish this author, denounced as “cosmopolitan,” “surrealist,” and “hermetic.” Since these qualifiers meant that the targeted writer would be marginalized, Reichmann soon began planning to go into exile in France—and to write in French.

Meanwhile, in 1967 he met the great surrealist poet, Gellu Naum, who had been almost completely banned from publication for twenty years and whose first book of poems written just after the 1947 Communist seizure of power (*Athamor*) would not be published till 1968. The encounter was decisive for Reichmann, who already had had occasion to familiarize himself with the work of the principal surrealist poets.

After leaving Romania with a visa for Israel, Reichmann began his Parisian adventure in 1973. At first publishing in literary journals, in 1975 he definitively gave up writing in Romanian; his first book written in French, *Pour un Complot Mystique* [For a Mystical Conspiracy] appeared in 1982. This book continued his investigation of history and personal memory, in the wake of his voluntary departure from the compulsory Paradise in search of the problematics of Hell.

Following several brief trips and one long stay in the United States, Reichmann published *Audience Captive* [Captive Audience] (1988), a book inspired in part by his experiences in America. A poem from this book—“Vieux Jeux & Nouveaux Jouets” [Old Games & New Toys]—was published in Romania three weeks after the fall of the dictatorship. The title of this poem, written some years before, proved prophetic for the situation in Romania in the months and years that followed. *Umbletul Sopîrlei* [The Walk of the Lizard], poems from the period 1966–1972, was recently published in Romania. In 1995 Reichmann and Luba Jurgenson, his wife, translated Naum's autobiographical “novel,” *Zenobia*, into French (English translation by James Brook and Sasha Vlad (Northwestern Univ. Press 1995)).

Sebastian Reichmann's *Balayeur Devant sa Porte* [Sweeper at His Door] represents the beginning of a tentative, posttotalitarian synthesis of the two halves of his life as a poet. Selections have appeared in *Talisman*, *Poesie*, *Poesie 95*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Two Lines* and *Herzattacke*.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

James Brook is a poet, translator, and editor living in San Francisco. His poems, translations, and essays have appeared in *Blind Date*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *City Lights Review*, *Gare du Nord*, *Pharos*, *Two Lines*, *Science as Culture*, and elsewhere. He is the principal editor of two anthologies, *Resisting the Virtual Life* and *Reclaiming San Francisco*. His translations include works by Guy Debord, Alberto Savinio, Victor Serge, Benjamin Péret, and Henri Michaux. He has translated two books by Gellu Naum, *Zenobia* (with Sasha Vlad) (Northwestern Univ. Press, 1995) and *My Tired Father* (Green Integer, 1999).