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I. The Hanoi

Two important elements needed to get into a Moscow restaurant are a love of fiction and a flair for story-telling. Entrance is gained through the swapping of tales.

Outside the Hanoi, a Vietnamese restaurant at the edge of town, it was the usual forbidding scene: a crowd of people in various stages of inebriation, clustered around the locked restaurant door. At rare intervals, the door would be unlocked a crack and a ripple would run through the crowd as the doorman would be assaulted with reasons, fictive or real, why each petitioner should be allowed in. The less ambitious members of the crowd contented themselves with thrusting ruble notes into his hand, in hopes of simply obtaining a bottle. The doorman held his ground, pointing repeatedly to the sign "Today we are catering for a closed party" permanently nailed to the doorframe above his head. Further discouragement was a lit sign saying "No Empty Seats."

I gradually worked my way up towards the front of the crowd and waited for the next chance. Finally the door opened to let a couple out, and the bargaining began again. I caught the doorman by the sleeve, "I must speak with the administrator, but not about eating here tonight." He reluctantly let me in, while insisting I leave Volodya as hostage out in the crowd. The administrator, standing at the door of the half-empty dining hall, explained that there were no seats. I explained that it was my husband's birthday, our anniversary, our last evening in Moscow, and that all our friends in New York City had praised his restaurant. He gave a brief wave of the hand, as if to say, "That's sufficient, you can stop now..." and promised to let us both in. Under his stern supervision, I picked Volodya out of the crowd ("the tall one with the moustache and the grin"), and we were permitted to enter the restaurant. And so the transaction of stories was complete: I had accepted the fiction that the restaurant was reserved for a closed party and that there were no seats left. The administrator accepted the fiction that it was my husband's birthday. As mutually respected experts in the rich tradition of oral literature, we parted ways, he to smoke, we to eat dinner.

Inside the Hanoi, the waiters were dressed in sequin-edged Russian peasant blouses. The walls were hung with what looked like South American wool rugs,

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but the menu was a careful selection of Eastern cuisine: potato salad, borshcht, pickles, and beef stroganoff. We were seated opposite a sullen couple who acknowledged neither us nor each other. Their main concern was that the ashtray be discernably closer to their side of the table than to ours. Once that power relationship was firmly established, they turned their attention to the bottle of sweet champagne and milk chocolate they had ordered. The milk chocolate was carefully unwrapped, divided between them, broken into chunks, and dropped into the glasses of sweet champagne.

I lamented to Volodya that, during my early visits to this country in the sixties and seventies, Russian hospitality and curiosity would eventually have guaranteed that we be treated with what is still for me characteristic Russian expansiveness—introductions, conversation, toasts, confessions, advice on everything from foreign policy to one's reproductive obligations, more toasts. Volodya, still a little under the weather from a banquet commemorating the tenth anniversary of Mikhail Bakhtin's death, said he was unsure how much more hospitality he could survive. At that banquet, given by the literary executors and a Moscow artist, he had been treated to a considerable amount of birch-flavored vodka - budding twig still in the bottle - made by an elderly, bearded descendent of Leo Tolstoy. Himself a deeply religious man who was fasting and therefore could not drink liquor, this grandson was both eloquent in his toasts to Volodya and demonic in his hospitality. I, blessedly seated at the other end of the table among confirmed teetotalers, had managed without interference on white wine and mineral water.

Meanwhile, back at the Hanoi, the band had gone on break and informal singing had begun. It was March 9th, the day after International Women's Day, and my half of the world was still basking in the warmth of gender validation. The official Women's Day is usually celebrated at home, but the day after is often an unofficial public celebration. Around the corner from our table, where I could not see them, was a table of women only beginning to have fun. I left Volodya alone for a moment to go see what the women looked like. At their table sat a dozen women and two men, all in their late fifties. As I stood at the corner listening to them singing, one particularly exuberant woman gestured wildly to me. She sat me down next to her, put her arm around me, put a plate full of food in front of me, poured out a glass of sweet champagne, and insisted that I join in the singing. I smiled, swayed back and forth with them, tried not to look tense, and, when the song ended, proposed a toast to the women present. It turned out they had a song about that as well. As that song ended and the next one began, I treated the table to a bottle of wine, and explained that my husband was waiting. One of the men rose to the occasion: he wanted to know my husband's name and what he looked like.

The next thing I knew, a bewildered Volodya was being led to an empty chair, given dinner, champagne, and told to sing as well. To my enormous relief, he knew a great many of the songs, war-time and post-war Russian songs he had heard as a child growing up in an emigre family. Inevitably, between songs—in which birch trees, red kerchiefs, and vigilance figured prominently—it came out that we were Americans and that they were from

the Defense Ministry. Retreat was out of the question; we had already committed ourselves to enjoying the evening. Gradually, other tables began to be pulled into our mood as well. Requests for songs and bottles of champagne were sent over. One table challenged our table to a singing duel. As in some pasta advertisement, our entire half of the restaurant suddenly joined in one particular sentimental song about bidding farewell on a bridge. Volodya was by now completely swept away from me into this ethnic--to me, always alien--world, singing, swaying, his head being carressed by an ample brunette to his left. At a particularly poignant moment in one song, a customer from the other side of the restaurant rose from his seat, napkin in hand, arms outstretched, face in tears, and, like a tenor in an Italian opera, began to take center stage. A heavy-set woman in a full-length dress came from his table as well and started the piercing, rhythmic whistle that accompanies peasant dancing in the countryside. Everyone bailed out of their seats and set to dancing. The Hanoi was transformed suddenly into a village, men slapping their thighs, chests, and heels, women turning their palms back and forth in a gesture of kittenish flirtation. The mood spiralled to a fevered pitch, until the woman in the long dress sat backwards through a plate-glass window at the other end of the hall. That quieted things down for a while. The songs turned back to the themes of love and loss. As the youngest couple present, we were toasted and serenaded. A member of the kitchen staff came out from the back and settled in the lap of one of the women customers, singing, rocking, sniffing. Suddenly I wanted to go home. We thanked our hosts, pledged peace and friendship, exchanged cigarette packages, and, in relief, got out the door.

Outside, peaceably smoking and talking beside a paddy wagon, parked up on the sidewalk beside the restaurant door, were four policemen, waiting around in case things got too colorful. I suppose if I were David Shipler or Kevin Klose, this mention of the paddy wagon would be followed by musings on the theme of Russian peasant anarchy and state authoritarianism, a dichotomy ingrained in Russian cultural consciousness from Ivan the Terrible's days to Stalin's and beyond. Instead, I want to talk about something else. It seems to me in the times I have been here that Russians' love of celebrating, their expansiveness, curiosity, and hospitality have not diminished; they have simply moved outside the mainstream of downtown life, where they had been most easily accessible to foreigners. Acquaintances have long complained that the "good old restaurants"--the National, the Prague, the Aragvi--have become too expensive, impossible to get into, and flooded with wealthy, Western tour groups. The lone American in downtown Moscow is no longer inevitably invited to join a banquet of Russians in the National. Russian public celebrating takes place more and more frequently in the gastronomic outposts. The long Georgian table in the Aragvi, set with a bottle of champagne, wine, and vodka for each person, is not any more a sign of a raucous, volatile evening; it is a sign that an American delegation is in town. An hour's ride away, however, Russian merry-makers are alive and, if not well, then at least enjoying their own over-indulgence.

II. Chernenko's Death and Hopes for Change

Chernenko died on Sunday, March 10th, just as Muscovites were recovering from several days of celebrating the one-day holiday, International Women's Day. The first I knew of it was on Monday afternoon, March 11th, as I rounded a corner in the Intourist Hotel, where I was making arrangements for Peter Martin's Moscow visit. All the employees were crowded around the television set in the foreigners' hard-currency bar, their eyes fixed on Chernenko's televised portrait. When the announcement had been read through for the first of many times that day, the barman mumbled to his boss, "Let's break out the whiskey. Do we get to go home?" His humor was quickly stifled by a look from the older man, and both casually scanned the crowd for anyone who might have caught this moment of levity.

As people drifted away, I approached the barman. I had never been in Moscow when a head-of-state died, but knew from events surrounding Ustinov's death that the downtown area would soon be blocked off to all but official vehicles, and the hotels would soon have a distinct change of clientele. "What does this mean?" I asked him, "Will the stores be closed down tomorrow?" I had visions in particular of the grocery stores already flooded with Muscovites more practiced than I in matters of state funerals, stocking up on root vegetables until the official period of mourning had passed. He looked at me blankly, "Why?"

In fact, throughout the city, very little marked the change of power from the older generation to the younger one. By the time I had left the hotel, flags with black borders or trimmed with black ribbons were being hung up; the Lenin Mausoleum was wrapped in a wide band of black bunting; and—a sure indicator that things are getting serious in the higher reaches of power—busloads of babushki, armed with twig brooms, were arriving at Red Square to sweep up the entire territory. The rest of us were herded back onto the sidewalks, and metal barriers were put up to keep back the crowds. All theatre and cinema performances for Monday evening were cancelled, just as they had been on the day that Ustinov's death was announced, but friends who worked in the theatre and circus had regular rehearsals.

Volodya, as usual, knew about the event long before most of us. Travelling into the city early in the morning while I was still asleep, he passed whole convoys of trucks, some bearing enormous wreaths, some bearing troops, who apparently had been moving into the city since sunrise. No other announcement needed to be made, and no other explanation was possible.

Experienced Muscovites knew immediately when they got up to switch on the morning radio program "Once Again, It's Twenty-Five Past" ("Opiat' dvadtsat' piat'"), broadcast daily at 7:25 to provide its listeners with jokes, stories, and anecdotes as they are getting ready for work. One friend, a typist, recounted how her seven-year-old daughter had turned on the radio, heard the sombre music, and called, "Listen, mama! Chernenko has died!"

In the days that followed, the mood in the city was subdued but matter-of-fact. The death had long been expected: black humorists, playing off the

well-known Soviet slogan "The Five-Year-Plan in Four Years!" ("Piat' v chetyre goda!"), referred to the deaths of Brezhnev, Andropov, Ustinov, and Chernenko as "The Five-Year-Plan in Four Biers" (the closest I can get towards salvaging the Russian "Piat' v chetyre groba"). Despite Muscovites' delight in rumor-mongering, most assumed that Gorbachev would be chosen as the new General-Secretary. "We figure we've tormented your heads-of-state long enough," one taxi driver told me, as Margaret Thatcher, George Bush, and other foreign leaders were arriving, "This time we're going to choose a younger one." Asked what changes he personally would introduce, were he to be released from his duties as a taxi-driver and promoted to General-Secretary, the driver echoed an opinion I had heard again and again, though rarely as harshly. "I'd take the people by the throat and make them work. We have an old joke: the government pretends it's paying us, and we pretend we're working. I'd triple the salaries, but make people work for the money they get, even if it took cruelty to make them work. There is no need to fear cruelty; without cruelty, progress doesn't exist. Every healthy nation has a streak of cruelty to it. Andropov was good because he insisted that the people work. Gorbachev is Andropov's man; if he's any good, he'll make us work."

While most guessed correctly that Gorbachev would emerge as leader, each Muscovite had in mind his or her own Gorbachev, for whom an agenda of hopes had long been drawn up. Thus, for this taxi-driver, Gorbachev is hoped to be a new Andropov, with an admixture of Stalin; for a liberal agronomist acquaintance, he is the harbinger of gradual de-collectivization--among collective farm workers there is even talk of being permitted to own a horse; for members of the intellectual community, he is the young, cultured graduate of Moscow State University, and his ascendancy is their best hope for changes in cultural policy, for the publication of works that have long sat in the desk drawer, and for the re-publication of works re-consigned to that drawer. Unlike the taxi-driver, they hope that Gorbachev will not turn out to be a new Andropov, whom many of them saw as moving towards a regimentation of artistic production as a corollary to other forms of work discipline.

The Moscow intelligentsia's wish list is the product of twenty years of post-Thaw frustrations, felt all the more keenly as they watched the emigration of the most innovative writers, artists, and composers to the West in the eleven-year period between Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979). While it is a distortion to suggest that emigration is the secret ambition of every Moscow intelligent, the halt to emigration inevitably forced the intellectual community to shift its attention from external to internal possibilities for change, namely a second Thaw in cultural policy from the top down. Within that community, the nature of the hopes, even in their most modest forms, vary. The limited publication of Velemir Khlebnikov's, or even Vladislav Khodasevich's poetry, or of Vladimir Nabokov's Luzhin's Defense is talked about at the Gor'kii Institute of World Literature and at Moscow State University. Liberal writers, young and old, hope for the appearance of a collection of stories by Evgenii Popov, of Evgenii Rein's second volume, and, of course, of their own unpublished work. Those associated with the theatre hope for a re-staging of Trifonov's House on the

Embankment or Bulgakov's Master and Margarita at the Taganka Theatre¹; others are hopeful of official acceptance of Liudmila Petrushevskaja's many unpublished and unstaged plays. At the time of this writing, Petrushevskaja's two-act play, "Three Girls in Blue" ("Tri devushki v golubom") has just been permitted an unannounced, unadvertised trial premiere at the Leninist Komsomol Theatre. According to Soviet drama scholar Alma Law, the play has been held up in rehearsals since at least 1982.² The play, a harsh depiction of the daily life of a single mother, on "vacation" despite her sick child and ailing mother, is unusually articulate about the toll of impoverishment in every sense of the word: economic, psychic, and cultural. While the combination of black humor and realistic scenes of the heroine's brutalized existence has drawn considerable criticism from some quarters—why no heroics? no uplifting scenes? no "events"?—it has recently found some formidable supporters, including the Director of the Leninist Komsomol Theatre, Mark Zakharov, and drama critic T. Khlopiankina.³

Volodya and I, having been given tickets to a performance of Three Girls by Petrushevskaja, were both struck by the audience's enthusiastic response to a play so out of keeping with contemporary dramatic categories (see Newsletter #3). "Not everyone was enthusiastic," cautioned the playwright's husband, Boris, "there was a lot of discomfort down in the front rows." That March 18th performance was the last for the present, as the troupe is now on tour. It is hoped that, with its return in late April, the play will be given official, announced status.

And so, given all these plans and expectations from various sectors, it is clear that Gorbachev has his work cut out for him—by others. Any hope for rapid change presupposes a strong, individual leadership not characteristic of the government here. What is admired most about Gorbachev is his modesty. The transition to power was, to many Muscovites, blessedly lacking in the kind of pomp and aggrandisement of the late Brezhnev era. At the same time, however, the appearance of Gorbachev's picture on the first page of every newspaper in the country, with Chernenko's ceremonial, black-bordered photograph only on the second page, suggests a confidence of leadership that many take as a positive sign. "Modesty is the key," insisted one friend, a literary theorist, "he can get away with a lot, introduce all kinds of ideas, as long as he looks self-effacing as he does it."

¹ For a useful, if schematic overview of recent developments in Moscow theatre, see "'Halleluja der Liebe, Halleluja'—in Moskau," Der Spiegel, 43, 1984, pp. 182-189.

² Alma Law, "Sowjetisches Theatre: Spielzeit 1982/83," Osteuropa, April 1984, pp. 237-245.

³ Mark Zakharov, "Zerkalo dushi," Pravda, 10 March 1985; T. Khlopiankina, "Tri sestry v golubom," Literaturnaia gazeta, 14 March 1985, p. 16.

III. Evgenii Rein

A poet whose work has aroused much discussion here is Evgenii Rein (born 1936), a Leningrad writer, translator, and film scenarist. Although Rein has actively produced poetry for thirty-five years, his work has appeared only in scattered literary journals and newspapers. Praised by Iosif Brodskii as the best living Russian poet, he first came to the attention of the wider reading public in the West when his verses, written between 1959 and 1978, were included in the unofficial almanac Metropol (Metropol').⁴ Toward the end of 1984, his first book, Names of Bridges (Imena mostov) finally appeared. This occasioned a celebratory poetry reading, which Volodya and I attended in late November, one of the rare public appearances by Rein. What follows here is a description of the reading and a discussion of his work.

The poetry reading was officially billed as the second meeting of the literary club Autograph-84, headed by journalist Feliks Medvedev. As with many artistic events around the city, the reading was neither open nor closed to the public. It was by invitation only, invitation being defined by the vagaries of personal acquaintance and Moscow word-of-mouth. Volodya and I managed to get our invitations by a circuitous set of connections involving a group of young poets, and somehow involving Evgenii Rein's mother, from whom one of the writers received tickets seconds before the reading began.

The reading was held to celebrate the appearance of first books by Rein and Marina Kudimova, both of whom had published for many years in journals, but never had managed to convince a Soviet publisher to produce a separate volume. Both poets had long been encouraged by the older poet Evgenii Evtushenko, and their eventual success in publishing their volumes undoubtedly was due in some measure to his support and influence in the publishing world. Marina Kudimova's List of Reasons (Perechen' prichin, Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1982) preceded Evgenii Rein's Names of Bridges by over a year and a half; it was clear during the reading that the majority of the audience was made up of Rein's readers. While they listened politely to Kudimova's work--subdued, ironic poems about everyday life in her native city, Tambov--they had quite evidently come to hear Rein.

The reading was held in the House of Medical Workers on Herzen Street, a large hall that had previously served as an anatomy theatre during the day. The practice of alternating poetry in the evenings with corpses in the daytime was done away with several years ago, and the hall is now used only for artistic performances.

The evening began with introductions by Feliks Medvedev and Evgenii Evtushenko, who spoke briefly about the work of each poet, as well as of

⁴ Metropol': literaturnyi al'manakh. Ed. V. Aksenov, et al. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979).

⁵ Imena mostov (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1984).

Kudimova's film debut as the rural schoolteacher in his new film Kindergarten (Detskii sad). Rein had in fact not yet arrived at the reading; he was expected in momentarily from Georgia. A titter ran through the crowd as this fact was mentioned; both Rein and the entire republic of Georgia are renowned for their love of inebriated celebrating. The combination of Rein and Georgia promised a rewarding public spectacle.

Alas for poor Kudimova, Rein arrived in the middle of her reading, settled into an empty chair on stage, and began to act outrageously. He waved and gestured at friends in the audience, leafed through sheaves of poems, made notes, ate, drank brown liquid (tea? cognac?) from a thermos, tore up notes, searched around in his luggage for odd possessions. At one point he seemed to be writing material for the evening's reading. Finally, to everyone's relief, he was allowed to get up and read.

A swarthy, heavy-set man with bushy eyebrows, a manner of cultivated eccentricity, and a much discussed history of philandering and colorful marriages ("more Moscow homes are closed to Evgenii Rein than to anyone in the city," one friend remarked), he wandered up to the microphone and began to read from Names of Bridges. His voice, deep and resounding as if it came from the bottom of a mine shaft, needed no microphone. With the onstage amplification, it was overwhelming.

To my surprise, he read a number of poems from the unofficial almanac Metropol, which had caused an enormous scandal when it appeared in January, 1979. I later discovered, upon obtaining a copy of Rein's book, that ten of the twenty-two poems by Rein included in Metropol had been included among the seventy-seven poems in the Soviet Names of Bridges.

Gradually, the strain of the trip, and the stress of public performance began to show in Rein's voice and manner. After about twenty minutes of reading, he was stopped by Evtushenko, who sat him down and took over the reading. Despite my initial reaction of distaste for this decision on Evtushenko's part, I had to admit that the latter poet, however egocentric he might be, clearly loved Rein's poems and knew them well, capturing Rein's whimsical humor and ironic melancholy. Eventually, Rein, rested, came back to the microphone and completed the reading.

Poetry, it turned out, was only the first half of the evening. The second was apparently a typical Russian phenomenon, although by all accounts a poor example of it. Immediately following Rein's recital, the audience was invited, encouraged, and scolded into coming up on stage to give their opinions of the strengths and weaknesses of the poets' works. At first, only the professionals rose to the occasion: a literary critic and a journalist, the latter with a terrible stutter, came up and praised the poets. The journalist, in praising Kudimova's sensitivity to the beauty of her native Tambov, launched enthusiastically into his own recitation of his own poetry about the beauty of his own native region. He was listened to with amused tolerance by the Moscow intelligentsia present. Next onto the stage came a distraught young man with long, dishevelled hair, a shiny sports jacket and his arms wrapped around his body as if he were in a

straightjacket. He began to berate the poets for their insensitivity to language and lack of rhythm. He, too, felt moved to substantiate his opinion by recitation. He turned to Kudimova, chanting Kipling's poem about marching through Africa, to show how she should be writing. "Sorry," she snapped, "I've never been to Africa, or I'd write like that, too." Rein listened to his shortcomings with a sardonic smile, once spreading his palms apologetically. The audience was really beginning to enjoy itself. It settled in, waiting for the next madman.

Evtushenko, however, was not enjoying himself. Recapturing the microphone, he upbraided the audience for their passivity. It used to be, he scolded, in the fifties that you listeners cared about poetry. We—the poets—went from one factory to the next, giving more readings in a year than there were days, and wherever we went people clamored for the microphone to berate, praise, make suggestions, recite from memory their favorite poems. You loved poetry then in a way you have forgotten. We have heard from the specialists—a literary critic, a journalist, fine. But what about the people themselves? Here we are in the House of Medical Workers, but have we heard from them? Has poetry become merely a spectator sport?

The audience shifted uneasily, and finally one elderly, stocky woman got to her feet. She was dressed in a white medical robe and wore valenki, peasant felt boots with rubber galoshes. She climbed the stage stairs and approached the microphone. She praised each of the poets in turn, noting her favorite poems read that evening. She identified herself as a surgeon and an amateur poet, and ended her speech by reciting her own poems, again on the theme of Russian nature. The audience was politely amused.

Evtushenko wrapped up the evening. Afterwards, in conversation with me, he castigated the entire evening: Rein read badly, the audiences have become jaded, the people have forgotten their love of poetry. In the West, I offered him, no one would have gotten up on stage at all. Yes, he replied, the West...

As the hall emptied out, a group of us, including my writer friends and Rein went in search of someplace to talk and relax. The Writers Union was closing for the night, so we ended up in the apartment of a woman poet, who hastily provided us with shashlik while Rein read some ghastly, recently composed verses about the return of Svetlana Allilueva. Clearly, by now he had drunk too much, read too much, and slept too little. The whole room breathed a sigh of relief when he went to lie down in the next room and was not heard from again.

It is evident even from a cursory reading of Rein's verse that he allies himself with the tradition of Leningrad poets, from his contemporary Aleksandr Kushner or his younger friend Iosif Brodskii to the older Leningrad poets Vadim Shefner and Osip Mandelstam. Many of Rein's poems are set in that city itself: "The first-floor window above the Neva...", "The Lieutenant Schmidt Bridge," "Catherine Square," "Bol'shaia Pod'ia-cheskaia Street in Petersburg." Rein writes in the tradition of contemplative

or meditative verse, which claims as its nineteenth-century antecedents the poetry of Baratynskii and Tiutchev. Meditative lyrics have long been associated in the twentieth century with Leningrad, Mandelstam unquestionably marking its apogee; nevertheless, a number of contemporary Moscow poets, including Evgenii Vinokurov, Konstantin Vanshenkin, and Arsenii Tarkovskii, father of the recently emigrated film director Andrei Tarkovskii, are also representative of this strain of poetry.

And yet, classifications of this sort are deceptive. While sharing with Vinokurov, Kushner, and others a reflective tendency, a lack of interest in political themes, and an ability to perceive the details of everyday life through a filter that intensifies their emotional significance, Rein is at his most typical a self-parodist, a self-conscious poseur, whose gestic declamations are, one suspects, as confusing at times to himself as they are to his public. The line between lament and posturing is intentionally blurred in his verses; he is a prisoner—although a willing, calculating prisoner—of his own poetic masks. His humor stems from his own awareness that he is at the end of a long line of Leningrad—more accurate, perhaps, to their spirit, St. Petersburg—poets, a line that has expended its best efforts in melancholia and nostalgia. His greatest strength as a poet is his ability to play against that tradition, to call into question the relevance of poetic loftiness in an age of smokestacks, communal kitchens, cigarette butts, and plywood walls.

Unlike Tarkovskii or Shefner, Rein has no interest in the distant past or in the vast sweep of human history. He is not, like Tarkovskii, the poetic mediator between centuries and cultures. His nostalgia does not move, as with Shefner, for example, from a World War Two bunker to the days of Nestor, eleventh-century hagiologist. Rein's is a nostalgia for the immediate, autobiographical past, or even, to borrow a line from Voznesenskii, a nostalgia for the present, already imbued with a sense of loss.

Rein shares with Brodskii, the Leningrad poet now living in the United States, a common sense of rootlessness; but while Brodskii is, to quote ⁶ Edward J. Brown, quintessentially the poet of exile, Rein is a transient. His lyric hero does not live anywhere; rather, he stays in kommunalki (communal apartments), rundown provincial hotels, and in the homes of past, present, and potential lovers. Even when he happens to find spacious quarters by Soviet standards, his existence there is precarious:

Behind Herzen Street, I lived - paying no rent,
In three rooms, a cold August in Moscow - alone.
The landlord sucked out what he could, repaired nothing,
Then took off for India on a medical campaign.⁷
"On A Theme By Polonskii"

⁶ Russian Literature Since the Revolution, revised and enlarged edition, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 356.

⁷ Imena mostov, p. 51. Translation mine. Henceforth, all quotations marked IM are from the Soviet edition Imena mostov (Names of Bridges) and are translated by me. All quotations marked M are from the English translation of the U.S. publication Metropol (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982) and are translated by H. William Tjalsma.

In that old apartment where I lived so long ago,
I was destined to spend three weeks.
Among the reflections of its muddy, incomprehensible paintings,
Between the broken cupids, I lived there alone.

"Ballad of a Night Phonecall," 33, (IM)

Even on a larger scale, his poems bespeak transience. Their titles are a catalogue of places he has briefly been: "Alma-Ata," "Once in Tallin," "Tarusa," "Tbilisi in January," "Around Pskov," "The Sea of Japan," "In a strange, provincial town..." Others are more straightforward in their symbols of transience: "At the Port," "Flights cancelled. Winter, the airport is packed...", "Morning Coffee at the Batumi Seaport Station," "Quarantine" ("In that year of 1960, an unclean train carried me..."). This transience bears an element of poignancy precisely because it coexists with a strong sense of place; there is virtually no poem in which Rein does not describe in precise detail his physical surroundings. His poems are usually firmly situated in specific urban settings. Although his primary theme is his own internal state of being, the landmarks that guide the poet to a precise understanding of that state exist in the external, spatial universe.

Equally important to the poet's emotional orientation is a specific designation of time, sometimes precise to the point of obsession:

Twice in ten years. On the same day.
The sixth of May, it was Sunday.

"Twice in Ten Years...", 80, (M)

More often, the poet simply situates his emotional state in the first quatrain by reference to a particular season: predictably, autumn and winter dominate his psychic landscape. Just as the space that the poet occupies exists on the fringes of society—kommunalki, not apartments; other people's homes, not his own—the moments of time that enter his poems are often also on the edge, at a point of change or transition: "30 December," "30 September," "31 December," "First of June."

The theme of spatial and temporal transience is echoed in the poet's depiction of love and friendships. Rein's many poems on love present a lyric hero who is, if bumbling, nevertheless inexplicably successful. His success, however, is defined in terms of sexual conquest. After the initial encounter, the hero is set adrift again in a confusion of bathos, desire, and instinctive flight. The poem "Quarantine," here in a translation by H. William Tjalsma, characterizes this conflict between loneliness and the desire to be alone. The poet arrives in Tashkent, only to find himself in quarantine. He kills time, waiting for the curtailment to be lifted, and finally, out of boredom, searches out company. What he finds is described in a parody of the Romantic contrast of the dark and fair beauties:

...And then I rapped on the door of two girls in the end room—
Demonism and paradise. The demon was just Nina, the angel—Angelina.
They had tea brewing on the hotplate—and plenty of wine;

Two weeks of quarantine and it was heartfelt picture--
 Angelina or Nina looking me straight in the face.
 Oh, the brunette and the blond, the lab technician and the botanist,
 The one from Leningrad, the other from Kostroma.
 A cigarette, sweater, Petrograd moll,
 While the other--whatever ya need--as she said herself.
 Oh, how I loved them both and squeezed and kissed
 Those strong, salt-stained hands, blew
 the last of my money on port wine and drank the nights away
 to the radiola; we danced a bit. Nina or Angelina?
 Angelina or Nina? Dark white concern, pale black love!
 The one tilted her head, the other was higher than flight--
 Nina or Angelina? Angelina! The blood cools.
 I love you, I love you, I never saw you again.
 Two weeks flew past and the suitcases were packed again.
 But my sorrow is immortal. I loved you, I really did.
 What if the empty net of space has gotten threadbare at the edges.
 Never again, oh Lord! Not in a single hotel of the world,
 Not in the capital's Astoria or Monaco's casino
 Shall I see you again. It'll never be again!
 Something will happen, I'm awaiting a sign. But for now, it's all
 the same to me.

"Quarantine," 78-79, (M)

Throughout Rein's poems, the hero is brought again and again in this manner to a confrontation with emotional failure. It is not for nothing that one reviewer calls his work "the confession of a loser"⁸; Rein's sense of loss is always present:

...Do not cry, I cannot stand
 your tears. You are simply my life
 and not a woman
 sometimes called by that name.

"Hurriedly, hurriedly...", 76, (IM)

It'd be easy to remember you, my beauty?
 How you'd gaze half-awake, smoothing your hair over your temples,
 Arranging a reddish lock. I'd like to know
 What all of this was called?

.....
 It'd be easy to remember. But then I can't!
 There where the islands thrust up on the big bank,
 Beyond the empty stadium, storing up sobs,
 I stand like a mastadon, forgetful of itself.

"Krestovsky Prospect," 74, (M)

Comfort is found only among other transients and social casualties. In his long poem "Once in Sokol'niki," alternately entitled "The Monastery" in

⁸ Evgenii Evtushenko, "Gorbushka piroga," Literaturnaia Rossiia, No. 31, 3 August 1984.

Metropol, the poet lists with affection the fellow inhabitants of his communal house, a former monastery: the "crafty invalid" Adamov, Georgii Odintsov, a defrocked priest, and the waitress Zoya with her mulatto twins. Among these people, living on the edge of society, the poet finds "sympathy and camaraderie" (M, 65).

Ultimately, Rein is at his strongest as a poet when he abandons the themes of love and love lost, which always have a histrionic ring to them, and concentrates on character portrayal. One of my favorite poems of this type is "The Neighbor Kotov," a depiction of the speaker's communal apartment neighbor, drawn with amused affection, curiosity, and repulsion:

The Neighbor Kotov

In a communal apartment lived a neighbor, Kotov,
A deft man, missing a finger.
The room on the left he got through a law-suit.
He sued, the other man died, and Kotov remained.

Every evening in the kitchen he publicly washed his feet
And interpreted communiques from the evening edition of Izvestiia.
And those who were boiling, laundering, listening, many
Put questions to Kotov—Kotov knew everything.

Sometimes he got drunk. Always in isolation and then clambered around.
It was audible, awful his clambering around somewhere at night.
He would get out strange and solitary vases,
Sang limericks, crushed the shards with blue swords on them.

He would sit on the balcony and, smiling, cursing,
Would smoke and toss ashes down on the heads of passers-by.
Didn't get letters, feared telegrams and receipts
And nailed up—A.M. KOTOV—his separate mailbox.

I moved in the summer. If anyone were to stop me and say,
"Hey, remember Kotov? It turns out he's a murderer
Or a thief..." I would believe it. I've contracted
A dark trace of hostility. There is no way to defend Kotov.

Behind the plywood wall he remained horribly alien.
What was he hiding? And how could you come to his defense?
By the way, once I saw the wild birds on Kotov's balcony
Drinking from the finest Saxon china.

(IM, 11-12)

Since it is impossible to get a sense of the original verse from vers libre translations, I would like to describe briefly the formal aspects of Rein's poetry. Most typically, his poems are between sixteen and twenty-four lines, divided into quatrains. While he frequently writes in four- or five-footed iambs, his real skill lies in his use of trinary metres,

primarily amphibrachs and anapests. His poetry equally exploits all-masculine, all-feminine, and alternating end rhymes, sometimes with extraordinary and subtle ingenuity, as in the poem "The crows' cawing above the boulevard..." (IM, 45-46) or "In the Park" (IM, 62). Verses are composed of short sentences, often a single line in length; enjambment is consistently avoided. In keeping with the reflective, inner-directed themes of his work, the narrative or descriptive line is often interrupted by rhetorical questions, by exclamations, or remarks, which form a running present-day commentary on events of the past. This shift from past to present and again to past represents the formal and thematic core of his work. And yet Rein is not master of these chronological shifts. His shuttling between past and present, past and future, is one symptom of his powerlessness to understand and explain his entangled existence, a powerlessness that permeates much of his work:

A communal house like that one, you won't find nowadays.
 Why I moved, I won't begin to explain.

 And some Latin liar said that people were wolves.
 They are not wolves. But what are they? I don't understand, god knows.
 "Once in Sokol'niki," (IM, 62-63)

And on the corner where Ogarev Street comes out onto Herzen,
 I'm ready to declare the eternal wrongs done me:
 how years have vanished without a trace; it's time we knew what honor is,
 but whether we shall meet again--god knows, god knows, god knows.
 "On a Theme By Polonskii," (IM, 51)

The sunset over the wide river
 And the city on the far side
 Are filled with a kind of life
 That I cannot explain.

"The Lieutenant Schmidt Bridge," (IM, 4)

As with much that is published in this country, Rein's work exists in several variants. Verses that appear in Metropol appeared in a different version in the Soviet edition Names of Bridges:

I went out into the winter forest, walked a mile,
 and then a damned TU flew overhead.
 "Flights cancelled...", (M, 70)

I went out into the winter forest, walked a mile.
 And then an all-powerful TU flew overhead.
 "Flights cancelled...", (IM, 37)

A description of the cloak-room attendant at the Priboi Publishing House also varies between U.S. and Soviet editions:

...He had seen Sholokhov
And knew Pasternak; he had been given a drink
From Nobel money and had handed Yuri Olesha
His galoshes...


"The Monastery," (M, 65)

...He had seen Sholokhov
And knew Pasternak; he had been given a drink
From huge honoraria, and had handed Yuri Olesha
His galoshes...

"Once in Sokol'niki," (IM, 63)

Among the poems in Names of Bridges that do not appear in Metropol, additional lines written in by hand by Rein himself are copied and recopied by those determined enough to obtain the book: the poem "Letter to Kamchatka," (IM, 49), for example, originally dedicated to Iosif Brodskii, indicated only by the initials I.B., was printed in Names of Bridges without that dedication. Even Metropol varies in places from the author's own handwritten variants. In his description of the communal house in "The Monastery"/"Once in Sokol'niki" Rein includes the handwritten line, "In the entire place, I was the only Jew," left out of both Soviet and U.S. versions.

Whether or not one agrees with Brodskii's assessment of Rein as the best living Russian poet (my impulse is to object, but I cannot provide an alternative), he is clearly a talented writer. His work suffers from a sense of insularity, of being impacted both thematically and formally. Had his work enjoyed active publication over the last thirty-five years, the pervasive sense of reproducibility, of stultified development might have been replaced by greater variety or even by a more ambitious effort than the six-quatrain verse. This, however, is only speculation. A second manuscript, entitled The Fulcrum (Tochka opory), is currently under consideration by his publishers. He remains an enigmatic and, despite his age, a promising figure on an otherwise dreary poetic landscape. He is a member of no poetic "mafia," but a genuine, if self-conscious eccentric: at his recent fiftieth birthday party, he shamefacedly admitted to all of us assembled that he was in fact only forty-nine, but had needed a reason to bring us all together. It was only months later that I realized he had misled us twice; Evgenii Rein was born 29 December 1936.



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