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## *Tumult* by Pierre Reverdy

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Dan Bellm  
Tumult

Pierre Reverdy  
Tumulte

The mob descended faster, shouting. They all came from the background, from behind the trees, from behind the wood of the frame, of the house. Each white face had an animated look—and the weightiest words effaced themselves in their wake. At a sound from the darkest corner everything stopped, everyone stopped, even the one whose eyes were turned toward the wall. And then, because of the wind, the flowers on the wallpaper and the fabrics moved.

## Commentary

The poetry of Pierre Reverdy—particularly the poems in prose from the 1910s and 1920s that brought him wide recognition, such as *Les ardoises du toit* (*Roof Slates*) and *Étoiles peintes* (*Painted Stars*)—are famously elliptical, atmospheric, seductive, and strange. Living and writing at the center of Parisian culture, closely associated with Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Gris, and Dérain, all of whom illustrated one or more of his books, Reverdy has been called a Cubist or a Surrealist poet, and while indeed he often seemed to use words as paint, he scoffed at such categories and continues to transcend them.

Kenneth Rexroth, his pioneering translator, called Reverdy's style "the conscious, deliberate dissociation and recombination of elements into a new artistic entity made self-sufficient by its rigorous architecture ... Poetry such as this attempts not just a new syntax of the word. Its revolution is aimed at the syntax of the mind itself" (*Pierre Reverdy: Selected Poems*, New Directions, 1969: vi–vii). Reverdy was treating surface meaning and point of view in much the same way that Gris or Braque worked with geometric planes and perspective. The setting and tone of his work are often equally paradoxical: closed spaces suggesting the infinite, portrayed with a disoriented calm. The mind of the poems is caught up in its own space-time geometry, and the reader, as often as not, is left on a slippery surface, horizontal one moment and vertical the next. Tone is all-important, and my challenge and pleasure has been to attempt to catch that tone in English, allowing Reverdy's poems to remain as beautifully peculiar as they are.

In "Tumult," from *Painted Stars* (1921), we have a mob of some kind appearing from behind a wooden house—but at the same time, it's emerging from the background of a scene in a wooden frame. Even the mob's animation is only an appearance, a look; words are effaced; one person in the crowd is singled out without explanation; all motion comes to a stop except for what we'd most expect to be motionless, the "still life" (*nature morte*) of flowers on wall-paper and tapestry. In translating this piece, I've stayed as close as I could to the rhythm of Reverdy's sentences, the simplicity of his diction, the strangeness of his painted scene.