

Red Sky Café

GEOFFREY O'BRIEN was born in New York City. His poetry has been collected previously in *A Book of Maps*, *The Hudson Mystery*, *Floating City*, and *A View of Buildings and Water*. He is also the author of a number of prose works including *Dream Time: Chapters from the Sixties*, *The Phantom Empire*, *The Browser's Ecstasy*, and *Sonata for Jukebox*. He is editor-in-chief of *The Library of America*.

Also by Geoffrey O'Brien

Poetry

A View of Buildings and Water (2002)

Floating City: Selected Poems 1978–1995 (1996)

The Hudson Mystery (1994)

A Book Of Maps (1989)

Prose

Sonata for Jukebox: Pop Music, Memory, and the Imagined Life (2004)

The Browser's Ecstasy: A Meditation on Reading (2003)

Bardic Deadlines: Reviewing Poetry, 1984–95 (1999)

The Times Square Story (1998)

The Phantom Empire: Movies in the Mind of the 20th Century (1995)

Dream Time: Chapters from the Sixties (1988)

Hardboiled America: Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir (1981)

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GEOFFREY O'BRIEN



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This book is for Henry Flesh

Contents

PART I

At the Bottom of the Island	3
The Dice Players	5
From an Old Engraving	8
La Mentouse	10
Aubade	12
Aubade 2	13
Techniques of Mass Persuasion	14

PART II

Prospectus	17
Funerary Parade	23
From the Old Age of Perseus	26
Intercept	33
Choral Fragments	40

PART III

Poem-Cards for the Red Sky Café	45
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PART IV

A Set of Postcards	55
Roof Garden	55
Youth Culture	56
Children's Games I	57
Children's Games II	58
Black Mirror	59
The Bus	60
Liner Note	61
Insomnia	62

Little Opera	63
Standards	64
Up In the Old Loft	65
Guys	66
The Payback	67
House Detective	68

PART V

Letty Lane's Wedding Day	71
Girls on Probation	73
Apartment 33	74
Jungle Moon Men	75
Robinson's Nephew	76
Landscape: "The Forest"	77
Impressions: 1929	78
The Platform Sutra of Betty Grable	81

PART VI

Ground Speech (after Fritz Lang)	87
Four Reels, Believed Lost	89
The Green Lady	90
A Song Strung Out At Its Limit	91
A Coda	92

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Part I

At the Bottom of the Island

Consider how much it resembles
something you might hold in your hand,
the fantastic miniature theater

whose hand-carved ferries and barges
move whimsically from island to island,
whose bridges go in and out of sight

as the mist shifts, and in whose windows
and along whose serpentine walkways
the residents describe patterns

only slightly more predictable
than the exquisite maneuvers of the water craft—
the scene held as snugly in the eye

as a cloud formation in a drop of dew—
and then consider that it is you
who are the thing held in the hand,

a painted toy capable
for a moment of providing delight
before being dropped on the rug

as a more alluring brightness or rumble
beckons from the room beyond
to what immense distracted child?

The Dice Players

for Wendy Mark

A player will take a train halfway across a continent,
go without sleep and suffer Asiatic winds through cracked windows
if only he can arrive just at sunset in the newly sprung up town
where on a certain crooked street there is an obscure doorway
that the hesitant gait and averted eyes of his brother gamblers
guide him toward more surely than any street sign. Like foreign

laborers

specially imported for a task almost impossible to explain

to people outside the industry, the player and his anonymous
companions

guard a silence often mistaken for listlessness. Under banks of red
lamps

and between velvet hangings he will proceed toward the back room
where his fate is translated into numbers. In the center of a dark glow
stirred by clacks and murmurs there occurs a falling away
of all that cannot be counted. They have a term—"smoke"—
for what others might call "the rest of the world" and which for them

is simply what drifts off. Here are the precincts where out of blankness
a three or a seven starts up like a furious god. In twisting arcs
the dice tumble over themselves as if to imitate the convolutions
by which a world might be created. And he, who watches and counts,
is himself that world, transformed with each fresh random

recombination

into a quantity unstable—in the next instant it will be added to
or subtracted from—but quivering in the intensity of its momentary
life.

It would be dreadful to think, if there were time in the middle of this
fever

to think, that no number has inherent value. Its worth is determined
only by what rolls out alongside it. A number merely plays at identity
or location or permanence, and its cleverest trick is to reverse its
nature—

to become the one less rather than the one more—before the dice
have even stopped spinning. The horror of the masquerade
is bliss to him who lost in play contemplates the bubble empires

that rise and fall within a minute. There is such beauty
in the abysses that open without warning, like a flute note breaking in
where a pause was expected. The player is so deep in his game
that the numbers have altogether disappeared. In place of numbers
there are clouds, shells, rings. On a white beach a perfect egg
waits for the beginning of time. He rolls and the penumbra of a planet
forces its way between spirals that resemble the spokes of bicycles

moving at high speed toward an empty yellowish splash
that might be the stretch of sand where he can hold up to the light
the unquantifiable trinkets. Here where there are no numbers
anywhere—

blotches uncountable because they have no edges, colors radiating
endlessly from a center too remote to be measurable—the dice
will nevertheless continue to roll. It was for this that the wrist moved,
to reveal a pattern like cracked lava forms, striated and already
eroding.

It will hardly matter to him that when light breaks through the
windows—
the attendants having opened the curtains as a signal
that another night has ended—he will stand up from the table
with empty pockets and glide from among his companions,
nodding like one ghost to another. If he were to whisper that the only
number
after all is zero, how could he be certain what language to say it in?
The only number is red. The only number is blue.

From an Old Engraving

It is a crowd
every soul of which
imagines he knows

where he is going,
near enough to
peer over a neighbor's

shoulder, close enough
to smell the fires
where the implements

are heating; every soul
presses to find a space
unclaimed by any other,

as if the whole scene—
the wagon packed
with prisoners, the canopy

fluttering over the platform
where the last stroke
will fall, the cluster

of half-sloshed soldiers
guarding the perimeter—
were staged for the benefit

of each pampered
spectator imagining
himself blessed

in his momentary
vantage, free from harm
or restraint, pushing forward

toward where the crowd
parts, just wide enough
to enjoy the show.

La Menteuse

If her story is true, the adored brother
is his sister's seducer, and the chaste housewife
a secret orgiast. The dearest friends

hold parties for the sole purpose of abusing
the one who is absent. The meditative poet
spends private hours taking sexual advantage

of mentally ill students. It is so much easier
to fancy she has invented a new kind of lie,
an art of undermining (patiently and in secret)

by means which (for structural reasons
she slyly anticipated) can never be revealed.
"To make perceptible to another

that by which I am haunted": this credo
she makes impossible to realize
by imparting what can be neither

investigated nor entirely disbelieved.
To seek independent verification
would mean admitting you found plausible,

at least momentarily, an anecdote so scabrous
and so at odds with ordinary appearance
that no real friend could have abided it.

Merely to repeat it would be a shameful admission,
as if to hear a lie were a crime as great
as to have lied in the first place. Greater,