

A View of Buildings and Water

GEOFFREY O'BRIEN was born in New York City. His poetry has been collected previously in *A Book of Maps*, *The Hudson Mystery*, and *Floating City: Selected Poems 1978–1995*. He is also the author of a number of prose works including *Hardboiled America*, *Dream Time: Chapters from the Sixties*, *The Phantom Empire*, *The Browser's Ecstasy*, and *Castaways of the Image Planet*. He is editor-in-chief of *The Library of America*.

A View of Buildings and Water

GEOFFREY O'BRIEN



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For Michael O'Brien

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Part I

For a Diva

You can be anything. Zenobia of Palmyra
startled awake in childhood by a bird
in her father's palace almost floats into the courtyard.
The cook whose boyfriend's been hauled to prison
for killing her mother writes letters never delivered
because the landlord wants to control her life, waits in the hall
to assault her when she comes back from shopping. The
bourgeois wife
sleeps with her husband's banker and having given birth
to a foundling who grows up to be a semiliterate stick-up artist
must finally recognize it's her own child who's stabbed her
from the mark on his wrist. The hermit lady in the hills
has dreams of fire. Between silver pools the pampered hostess
poses for her guests. In the most dimly-lit of after-hours dives
the disinherited kidnap victim sings bawdy laments.

The world is a mask. Lakes are moved from one place to another
and cars enter the city just as the shop lights go on
so that one form of glitter can lose itself in another.
How many years have you been looking out the window
practicing the expression, half of regret and half of cruelty,
that the others will notice when they come back from their
excursion
and walk into the sitting room unannounced? Nobody
recognizes
whose gesture yours most resembles. It takes years of language
study
to disguise so expertly a pattern of kinship. The tragedy of
waiting,
the tragedy of being bored, the tragedy of no longer knowing
how late the local train runs, these are things that can dissolve
as easily as dusk becomes twilight into the contrast
between the neglected lawn and the fountain that still waters it
at a point when even the servants have given up on appearances.

But to try on a new outfit: nothing can compare to it, the joy
of that first time. It's like destroying the world
so as to demonstrate that it was a window display
held over into the wrong season. Now the spring comes
and we can take our rings off, as if ornament after all
had never been more than an extension of nudity. The dance
pavilion
reaches its peak of attractiveness before anyone arrives. What
splendor
wastes away in the unexamined hours when the local dignitaries
are still sleeping, the crates not yet pried open, is a fit subject
for the wordless song that takes shape as your fingers
play over the keyboard, untutored but prescient.
That was when the house was really a house, or an anticipation
of the hour when it will be a house again. From the cold hills
must be where this breeze came from, only slightly tempered.

Because everything is malleable. You already knew that
from looking at the paints and powders on the dressing table
in the forbidden gallery. Robbers can hide behind curtains
with no more difficulty than a doctor writing a prescription
for a sleeping drug or a nursemaid exceeding her authority
by leaving the baby alone while she consorts with a corporal.
You didn't decide to forget your name any more than you
decided
that today would be a good day for taking the skiff out
to explore the lake's uninhabited shore and get a look at what's
left
of the burnt-out fortifications. To find yourself on the water at
noon
is like emerging from the coma after a carriage accident.
The sun blinds you to where you came from. Whose idea was it
to build the dock so far from the house that it would have
required a special trip
to see that the rope was dangling there as if deliberately
unfastened?

To be a foreigner in your own countryside, or to forget
where you buried the swaddling clothes that would clear up
once and for all the identity of your child's father, are
inconveniences
that not even a change of name can altogether resolve.
When shadows become complicated, deny everything.
There are always the mountains. If you insist on revenge
they will fail to understand, but you must insist anyway.
Just as no one can measure the delight of peeking
over your lover's shoulder at a gilt book of poems
retrieved from the ancestral library, no one can begin to imagine
how long it might take for the dispersal of the sunlight
you were reading by to register as not simply a betrayal of honor
but a theft of identity. When you come back you will stare at
them
until they feel themselves start to become invisible.

Voice Over

(ghost aria for Edmond O'Brien)

Suddenly it all started
to fall into place. It was like being
shaken out of a doped-up pipe dream
where everything looked like
some crazy modern painting,
the streets and faces twisted into the wrong ratio.
I was wide awake
and it felt like being wide awake
for the first time in my life,
only for me that was the same as being
in the middle of a nightmare.
But I felt a weird relief
even as I realized just how thoroughly I'd been had.
I could almost convince myself
that maybe now it was a new ball game,
maybe the tables were about to turn.
I was finally playing with a full deck
instead of the stack of jokers they'd handed me.
A frame-up: that's what it had been from the start,
and I was the sap it was made to order for.
It was a beaut, all right,
with me as the fall guy
wrapped up neatly and tied with pink ribbons.
They must have busted a gut laughing
while they watched me stroll into their trap.
The trail I thought I'd tumbled to
just on account of being such a sharpie
had been mapped out long before I turned the corner.
It might as well have been signposted
Suckers Enter Here, or maybe
Frame Job Next Right. I thought I'd written
the book on frame-ups, and here I turned out
to be the main character, Exhibit A
right in the center ring. It was a story line

constructed by a con guy with so many angles
he made Einstein look like a dummy.
I'd been on a losing streak since page one
and the last chapter was death. I'd been sweet-talked
straight into the slaughterhouse.
Every move I'd made
had been strictly according to plan—
their plan. They'd cased me so well
they knew just how I'd trip myself up.
Me, the wise guy,
the guy that was too smart and too tough
ever to fall for a set-up like that.
Sure, just like Adam
wouldn't ever have sold himself short
for a taste of homegrown apple. Just like Samson
was too cute an operator to let himself get taken
for the price of a cheap haircut.
It was the oldest game in the world,
played for the same old stakes,
a dame in mink with eyes a mile deep
and a bundle of money
that couldn't have been planted more obviously
if they'd labeled it Please Take Me.
I'd swallowed the bait
and now they had their hooks in so deep
I'd have to rip myself to shreds
if I ever wanted to break free of their racket.
And maybe that was the way it had to be.
Maybe this was the sucker they'd choke on.
They'd cut the cards,
now they could live with the shuffle.
It was downright comical if you thought about it.
We were all going to have a good laugh before we burned.
Say, if this is when we cash the chips
let's do it in style.
They'd get me, all right, I was gone,
I already knew that it was check-out time
in the luxury-class neon hotel

where nobody ever checks back in.

But for some customers the price is always higher
than they want to pay. This is hell, isn't it?

Hey buddy, they tell me in these parts

the coin of the realm

is a man's life and breath

and the spare change is his everlasting soul.

This is when I start to feel good.

The city dawn is barging into the side streets

and I'm starting to feel almost human again

when I think about how it will be

finally to call in every last IOU.

Virgilian Herb

(for Devin Dougherty)

The sun is fringed with heat loss.



It escapes from its canyon.



Black cities.
The well of forgetting.



The water has a shape
As it hurls itself down the terraced path.



Leafwork.
The terraced face
Gliding from the conical storehouse.



The dried ash
Traps light in its gutters.
Armies of clouds do ceremonial battle.



After the floods
The new growth
Forces a road through the highway.



The travelers who came from the Water City
Were the inventors of music.



A stringed instrument shaped like a bridge
Describes the hiding places
Where they burrow into the splices.



A rift carved in dirt.
The grooves where the pebbles almost touch
Deflect light
From the accidental tunnels.



Here a wall burned.



The wads of crushed sticks
Stand for what the dead remember.
The seams of vine leaves
Mimic the chapters of the lost book.



Here it taught
How the coast was rescued from downpour,
Here how the interpreter
Entered the body of a mite
And crept into the soil
To keep vigil at the root tips.



There were twelve books—
The Book of Oak, the Book of Cobweb,
The Book of Gum, the Book of Omen,
The Book of Sluice, the Book of Famine,
The Book of Bone, the Book of Smoke,
The Book of Bells, the Book of Footsteps,
The Book of Sandstone and the Book of Night—
Until they fell apart from disuse.



After language has been buried for a long time
Moss breaks out among the scratches.
In its moist tomb
The dead name sprouts.

Peninsula

In the ruins of Pyongyang
Leatherbound volumes

Of Voltaire and Diderot,
Printed in the eighteenth century,

Are passed from hand to hand
As textbooks for the open air schools

Where among rusted cans and hoarded bottle caps
Venerable half-blind teachers

Give vocabulary lessons. Here is the spine,
The mind, the eye. The cloth fiber of the pages

Endures well in the dry sunlight
Of the northern desert. The letters burn

Like little black stars
On a screen of sand. The diagram of reason,

Branching and skeletal, pokes out into cuplike appendages
Bearing the labels Justice and Growth and Energy.

Strong as preserved venom,
And as life-giving, the forms of the letters

Blink against the continental weather mass
And spell out absently the name of Mongolia.