

## Sills

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# Sills

SELECTED POEMS 1960–1999

MICHAEL O'BRIEN



CAMBRIDGE

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*to Stuart Miller*



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Sills



## The Falls

Nerves, those fine pianos,  
plaintive as the applause of palms;  
under the rain the green goes dark,  
muted, difficult as desire.

The nights are white pages, the feelings accidental.  
In the dream the river runs over stone  
to the falls where a girl lies on her side  
under the moving water. I see her clearly  
through the moving water which descends the stair  
to the pool below, whose floor you touch  
before you let the water  
bear you back to the air.

## The Room

The cover put aside in the morning's heat  
the bed is white, newly made, the sheet turned back  
so that it holds the way it left my hand as  
if a drapery had fallen from the frame.  
The room is so beautiful, it is as if  
I were not here, the flowering, after the  
rain, the unseen grace of that which dumbly holds.  
The only sound outside the open window  
is an air conditioner. The fountain was  
turned on once in the spring, never since. Only  
one lamp is on, and in its light the objects  
which support my life have a repose which we  
may never know. The light falls half the length of  
the wall, now cool, and above the bed there is  
a Flemish nativity in a gold frame.

## Summer

Another time this rain would scour  
the punished head, and the body thicken  
in the inclement element:  
today we turn our faces to it.

Dull slate walks, silted with the dust  
cars lifted from the road,  
lie wet, deep blue under the rain.

The corn grows up to the river's edge.  
We lie beside it,  
forgetting which is the water, which the shore.

## During Sickness

Vigils: a glass of water  
beaded at the rim.

A day, unemphatic,

imposed on the carpet through drawn blinds.

The room is its negative image:

a furnished mirror, a vacant eye.

# Persephone

a face bruised by sleep  
a season where you reign among shadows

## Sunday

The wind pressed against the glass.  
The light upon the page was morning.

I went outside. The tide  
carried the river back where it came from.

Across the island, another shore.  
The shards are broken. They will not join.

Meeting of rivers troubles the water.  
It does not know which way to turn.

Here the river has two currents,  
one the tide's share, one that waits.

Evening resolves them. They flow south.  
The moon touches the river's mouth.

## Window

paper wilts in the moist air,  
intentions blur, it is hard to touch—  
whole days without speech.

rain flattens the exhausted flowers.  
summer's machinery labors, incessant.  
our bodies are close, without appetite.

the glasses sweat, the drinks are stale,  
the weathervane does not move;  
at windows, what savor?

from memory, conjecture,  
love poems, reading Ovid  
all night, the sweet flesh, the harbor

dictionaries, many cigarettes.  
the nights are cellars.  
we lay without sleeping.

lamps, patience.  
*We could not tell our pleasures apart*  
sleep at dawn.

## Waking

Birds are breaking rocks in the airshaft.  
They cry in harness, lifting the day.

Across the street  
the buildings take up their space.

Surface is meeting: but here?  
this poetry of minerals?

A fan labors.  
A bearing destroys itself.

The cosmologies have gone to sleep.  
Form is the place where we lay,

all that arrogance of flesh:  
the hand finds no entrance.

An empty abundance  
falls like stone.

the child's secret, who you sit down next to,  
candle-flame, meal, confidence,  
dawn from the other side, mailbox, river,  
confusion, to be a man, to be a woman,  
to deform the image, lies, health, fragility,  
frigidity, to be embarrassed, brandy,  
drafts, the files in their rows, news,  
phone, shower, birth, the chiseled air,  
money, camera, grief, signature,  
Sharon, constellation, attention,  
jukebox, waiting, "to cure ourselves of our images

from mayday to solstice, parades  
weddings equivocal as a leaf in paradise  
harpsichords falling out of windows  
a chorus, a curtain of brick in the grass  
generals sailing the anvil of graduation  
thesaurus of platitude & disaster  
potatoes mumbling down the stairs to the cellar  
where the elegies are hung out to dry like photographs  
Joe on the train  
& the fountains are exhausted  
& the light is folded & put away  
& a woman brushes her hair aside with her hand as she turns on the pillow

## Skin

Moving on the unstable surface  
Wind ripples the cloth, the lake  
A green world goes under  
We turn on the day, plunge at night  
Our flesh silvered over  
The moon's pastoral, mirror  
Gives back ourselves, only ourselves  
Summer's multiplied entities  
Converge in a narrow place

The swimmer exceeds his element  
The children exceed their ground  
The limits of the page are the limits of the world

Under the sun the pigeons arc  
Print their shadows on the green  
A darker green  
Texture of summer in the long grass, effaced  
The wind's passage, the carved stone  
Effaced  
The flawed glass, the river: iron  
The pricks turn to ash  
The room  
The center of the page

Craving an image  
I go to the window  
A washed morning  
Chimney, three gulls

Turning . . .

Hands touching her throat  
Breasts cradled in her arms

The tongue goes back again and again  
To the place where the cup is bruised  
Until one day you break the cup

All afternoon

The grain of the table washed by the sun  
Prior would sit, coffee before him  
Smoke lifting from his hand, held in amber  
Urging the virtues of potentiality:

“Why multiply entities?”

The older part of the cemetery is overgrown  
The stones fade, bleached by the sun  
I trace the names with my fingers

Against this parsimony I urge your body  
That page, its candor

## Crossing

the ship cradles me  
morning swings round  
horizon so close  
at the center  
the nubbin  
beaded with fog  
that I hold on to like a child



the gull's descent  
ends at the dome  
he does not move



the fog silvers the green  
the day is the moon's  
the willow's

## Another Sunday

a durable blanket  
covers the city

the dogs speak French  
we know the same number of words

Moira's toys  
are a doll & a school-satchel

in the café  
a disease of mirrors

he plays pinball  
& talks to his girl

is it winter coming, or spring  
the elegant cop salutes me

I read Eluard  
I think of you

the bus goes to the Pantheon  
the deaf speak French with their hands

## Postcard

Somewhere in the Hudson Valley  
a gull is looking at a cow.  
A sullen wetness smoulders.  
The silo would like to lie down.

Out of its kitchen, ethical as dough  
& simmering like The Original Amateur Hour  
spring's one-man-band  
lurches across the sodden, lion-colored turf.

## Jean Arp

folded in sleep a fruit ripens  
stone like a vessel of milk  
a shell for Venus

here women are vases  
the prow of a gesture  
whose shadow turns like a leaf



## Swan

Avon-on-Hudson, Babylon

camera/holding action/negative Shakespeare

“Maybe I’ll take up the saxophone”

“Maybe I’ll take up my bed & walk”

I come out, see my shadow, go back to sleep  
What does summer know?  
Odalisques without hands or feet  
“Lady, walk through that revolving door again”

“They may have been happy  
By the time I got there it was photographs”  
Casuist of pain, it is not good for you  
This bitter rosary  
& you smoke too much

In Ireland, in London, in Paris, in Brooklyn  
Thrift shops & women, dreams, twelve hours sleep  
At a time, all the time, Ruth away  
“You get bored when you can’t pay attention”  
My hat is out working. Health. Regards.

## For Ruth

In pyjamas, you're part of the Cultural Revolution  
In Texas, you listen & press flowers  
In borrowed cars, you continue your travels  
In the dream, you mourn, set apart  
In the kitchen, you wash lettuce, praising each leaf  
In winter, your nose is cold, like the babushka ladies  
Falling asleep, you shake yourself down  
In Salem, you take a nap on Kenny's couch, the hard sunlight falling on  
    your face through the curtained window  
In the chair, reading a mystery book, you invent money & a winter in  
    Venice  
In the window, you water your friends the plants  
In the airport, you wear your new hat & blushes  
In the mirror, you are a student  
Working, you take long lunches with a catalogue of friends, boozy  
    midtown, the artifacts of success  
In cabs, you kiss me, invariably  
In Japanese restaurants, you are a little girl & your mother gives you a  
    bowl of *miso* before you go off to school  
In your purse, a salad of banknotes  
In your clear eyes  
In your gullibility, "an early work of Mozart"  
In your anxiety, daytime TV  
In jeans, you wear your hair down & no blouse  
In phone conversations, falling asleep  
In the mailbox, your hideous postcards  
In the living-room, you & I, waltzing to Mahler  
In the morning, you drink tea & assemble the day  
In New York you walk to Peter's, determinedly (I watched from the bus)  
In London, you spill the broccoli & salvage it, brushing the green out of  
    your hair all evening  
In Paris, you send me pictures of unicorns  
In the market, you finger avocados