

In a Mist

Also by Geoffrey O'Brien

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In a Mist

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To Flaminia

I

In Memory of Oppen

“The solitary are obsessed”

1

a plain kitchen
table, his face
tilted downward

with eyes closed
as if to listen in
on what he would say next –

“insufficient care
for the meaning of words” –
painful to think so –

or, of prepositions
“they’re hell on wheels” –
waterfront apartments

emptied of everything
but what they did not
in the first place contain –

to inhabit
a continual erosion
of what is there

2

not that he did
not want to speak
the words aloud

but it made him
uneasy – to mistake
happenstance for the real,

if the heart should startle
at a tone of voice –
special pleading –

preferred
to remove himself
from the utterance,

a weathered
free-standing hulk
taking its own place

3

to wake up
in the middle
of a chilly afternoon

to the presence
of words – hull,
pavements, gull –

a gray world
saved
in time for autumn,

the stairwell
winding down
toward late light –

empty, flat,
alien – a generation
fills the air

with their living absence
in each worn handle,
each cracked brick –

ghost words –
more solid
than anything –

come carrying
fifty years
into the stone yard

4

all that time
they had been in apartments
and cars,

the sun had moved
across the room,
night dropped down,

a foot touched
the bare floor –
key grinding in lock –

under a spell
until it said so:
wake –

when you get back
to where you were
before you were going there –

to find a postcard
undelivered – “man,
read this book”

April

for Robert O'Brien (1941-2009)

1

There was a driveway
In afternoon light
Behind blinds

I did not know where,
Or if that was light
Of California or Chicago,

Only that I wanted
To be anywhere else

2

I could not bear
To have him see
I could not bear

To see
He could not bear
To see

3

Head flung back
Neck twisted sideways
Jaw tilted agape

The eyes rolled up
In their sockets
In astonishment

You are already stone
And will soon
Be flame

4

“Everything palpitates
And I begin to live”

The song of Lakmé
The immortal soprano

Condemned to flames
In tropical green stage setting

5

There was a world
In which everything was horrible

Faces turned away
Forever in hatred or disgust

Like the political radio
Murmuring poison

In the unattended
Hospice room

Doing the opposite
Of what the Virgin does

When she pleads for souls

6

Skull
Now untuned

Scraped of its images
Of leeches

Or famished soldiers
On scorched plain –

No fanfare
Or enumerated droplet of music

Most alive
When it pretends to die

Like Petrouchka,
Or Nevsky's warriors

That a mezzo
Searches for by torchlight

7

If I were to translate
This poem into
Your language,

The only
You were fluent in,
It would have to say

“Mahler Ravel
Puccini Britten
Sullivan Gershwin

Copland Bernstein
Bach Hindemith
Weill Strauss Stravinsky

Debussy Verdi
Poulenc Walton Orff
Prokofiev Wagner”

8

It all exists
In time

Except
For music

In which
Time exists

9

The glance
Does not persist

Beyond those
Who exchange it

And if they do not exchange it

Has not even the chance
Not to persist