

## E. A. MARKHAM

### The Long Road to Barnes & Noble, Booksellers

#### I

I copy this in a fair hand  
no longer like a prescription for those who know  
the code, or a diary of someone cheating on a partner;  
and try again to arrange the lines in BEFORE &  
AFTER an event the world knows about.

BEFORE is to be forensic agent of your luggage;  
so much paper soiled in scribble, markings  
open to interpretation: they will sniff these symbols.  
Is disquisition on the thoughts of the SECOND MURDERER  
in *Richard III* to go unchallenged through US customs?  
(A uniform, a gun, a dog.) So, in the spirit of self-censorship  
change SECOND MURDERER to *SM* and hope to raise  
a prurient eyebrow. That, and much more under BEFORE.

And yes, far away the poor eat less than we do.  
Near home someone is blaming his mother for all this.  
Over here, the theater opposite advertises *Hedda Gabler*.  
So, if aims still fail to fit their outcomes, outrage  
and relief not quite in sync, no one knowing what is changed,

I play my part balancing feet in each worn argument  
and stay trapped uptown, a voyeur far from carnage;  
and avoid, in penance, visit to a favourite bookstore.

## II

At small ceremonies of friendliness and bafflement where we eat  
the servers pour water enough to slake a desert, ice left  
in each glass like a guilty tip.

AFTER, in an affordable hotel the television brings us Sunday morning  
pictures of how the world looks. A man with a preacherly roll  
of fat at the back of his neck giggers about the stage, microphone  
in hand, his jacket screaming. The sermon might be  
that whatever happens in the world, the comic  
is black: his “Oh oh oh ya ya ya ya ya ya” parody  
of grief, “The Lord is with me, the Lord is with me  
A gatta get outa here, A gatta get outa here,” won’t drown  
the terrorist’s simple text: “The time for fun and waste is over.”

In time Peshawar drops into your line of poetry  
bringing your reference up to date. Statistics of the Arab world  
cascade like free offers in the supermarket, and make you wary.  
Not apocalyptic text, not the supposed gulf where gulfs matter  
but something surer to provoke vertigo. Average age in Pakistan  
and Saudi: 19 years—Second Year students at university.  
Jordan and Syria are still in the First Year. The Yemeni at 15  
is at school. Though the Maghreb—there’s a word—and Egypt  
can, at 22+, be invited out to dinner without fear of arrest, where are  
the bourgeoisifying middle ages? You get my meaning  
from someone in lived-in Britain, average age, 38.

## III

And so I head for the Village and get lost in tacky  
 Asia, new Americans selling trinkets, huddled  
 between landmarks not yet theirs: the Bookstore  
 is a man across the street selling newspapers.

But there it is, green and old-gold liveried as if proudly  
 bowing you in. Upper floors rustbrick and tasteful  
 as if sheltering the family: will children of off-Broadway  
 hawkers find it? The upstairs café for browsing  
 helps reshape this trip. Here, with a bowl of soup  
 you flick through the e.e. cummings someone left you  
 and relive meeting-places of long ago, Penny Universities where a Dryden  
 came in person, Addison rhymed with Steele, and the Astors and the Vanderbilts  
 (Oh, my patient house-slaves, I'll tell your story, too)—Astors  
 and Vanderbilts who lived here, conjured the shades  
 of Dr. Johnson and Hogarth and Davey Garrick over dinner.

And yes, weeks on, something proud of its disfigurement  
 Lower Manhattan smells of burning dust and metal, Third World  
 chic—like the other half, living a life. At night, near  
 where we lodge, a man, dressed like a commissioner  
 sings and dances in the doorway. Again, a man looking  
 like Donald Rumsfeld sings  
 and dances in a doorway. High above the street,  
 like a Health Warning, *Hedda Gabler* is on offer.