

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.