

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.

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” 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

