



Marrakesh 18th March 2020: The One that Got Away

It came in a flash at the start of the tour:

The plane had just landed in the dark town
When out of the haze as our vision came clear
A picture emerged in the blink of an eye
Of something I knew I'd have to record;
Something as soon as a pause would allow
Unencumbered access to notebook and pen,
Before it dissolved in the train of events—
Something incongruous, a sleight of the mind,
A glance, perhaps, of some custom or lore
So small in its greatness as to constitute
A significant touchstone or augury,
Or the elusive sound of a long-lost chord,

A ghost on the edge of perdition,
This thought still persists like a fading dream,
Or the name of a star on the tip of the tongue,
With an aftertaste tingling with strangeness
Which nothing that followed could quite surpass:

The Berber script alongside the French,
So alien, as from light years away;
The man with goats' heads hung from his bike
Annoyed that our interest was piqued;
A stork feeding chicks on her huge Afro pile
Glimpsed through the ogive lighting a tomb;
The Dutch bar bikes in the workshop's front
Adapted as travelling teashops;
Casablanca's design as a spider's web
And the *mec* at its heart we invited for tea,
Who said the wealth he needed all lay in his mind
Before shamelessly begging for change;
Bougainvillea cascading down ochre walls
In colours not yet graced with names,
In generosity no man could bestow;

The cafe that barred us in case we were sick
But let us drink on the plantpots outside;
The girls in front of the warning signs
Selling henna pour *le COVID, garanti*;
The Granary scheduled as the next Meknes stop,
Whose door was shut in our faces
While contemptuous policemen gestured us home;
The blue-tape cobweb in the *Pharmacie*
Hung with signs of *Gardez vos distances*.

And as we stare from the hotel window,
This comfortable gaol singing with birds
Each trapped like us in a fancy cage,
Considering if ever we'll again see home,
I wonder if the image so easily lost,
Through its absence rather than meaning,
Were not an omen of something to come;
Or something already arrived.