



Marrakesh's Djema'a el-Fna by James McBey

Silence
primordial
irreducible:
Islam is listening.
Footsteps like
notes on the solid
dusty earth.

Skirting the pools of the 'Id the day it rained: the girls raised their arms to heaven, steeped the folds of their dresses, their loosened hair, was water from heaven after seven months, holy water.

People brush by, avoid touching, eye contact only. A bicycle bell breaks the aural emptiness, the warning of the boy with no brakes, chorus of appeal from the destitute, sitting in a row under the arch of withered palms crowned by a colour photo of the King.

Silence, and the high cracked walls, a fissure giving a

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glimpse of the rich man's garden: a paradise of flowers, water babbling through a narrow conduit – praises to God – a mowed lawn.

The Book of Recitation is on the lips of the children, the rod of the *fqiḥ* has come down hard on the soles of their feet. Through the opening into the alley you hear them droning the verses – explosive shrillings controlled by the voice of the patriarch, bearded and often austere.

Silence again skirting the Madrasa. If you want to visit it you bang the bronze hand on the cedar door three times, the old grey-faced man comes to let you in. Hallo! You don't recognize me, come in, yes I do. His gold teeth in the dusky entrance, he waves you gracefully towards the marble courtyard, you're a frequent visitor, the knocker again out in the alley, stroll round by yourself, I'm going to let the Japanese in.

Or else you forge straight ahead and come unawares into another quarter, the city a juxtaposition of villages, a rough rural city, there's the mountains, red earth and shale: you see the snow from the opening onto the little square where the Black man is brewing tea and smoking, barely hidden.

Bluish smoke against the distant snow, seen through a gap in the mud-brick walls, melted like sugar in the downpour, a bitter scent in the dry air, harsh taste in the throat – to heal the heaviness of time: it can do that – the golden grass, and the grammar lacking a present tense helps, the present tense is in the laughter, the ripple of laughter.

The streets are wider here, bordered by vacant lots, a kitchen garden, you think you're leaving the city. You're in the centre, at the hub, it's said the streets in this city are like the spokes of a wheel, the hub is off-centre, chaotic, nothing warns the senses, though the ear might at times catch the source of the silence, that no word can name. Listen, yes, listen... Islam is on the watch!

This quarter like all the others has its own sound – muffled, shifting, interspersed with lapses and recoils; a sudden burst combines voices and blows; sometimes with a slow ebb, a better link with the mounting silence than a definite and

obvious break, discloses the simple absence of noise. Presence is this primordial silence, from a mute and monotonous voice. Silence of unisons, who will tell your terror?

It's very quiet, this quarter, a residential kind of quiet, donkeys sleep in the shade, no booths, no workshops. The street curves, forks. Where is the sun in this blank sky? In which direction? If you find your way back to the square where the Black hardly hides, you'll be able to see the snow again and get your bearings. The street forks, it's an alley with blue doors, no more cobbles, just earth, ruts and pools of water from the 'Id, a black-eyed girl in a black veil lingers, what is the Christian, the Nazarene devil, doing here?

The alley is narrow, there's no room for two people to pass, a sudden bend opens onto a kind of market: the stalls stand face to face, protected by a trellis of palms; an ancient taxi, faded fawn in colour, clatters through the little tunnel, pursued by barefoot urchins. No mountains visible where, according to vaguely remembered changes of direction, they ought to be, only the white corner of a minaret next to a high pink wall: on its highest point a sumptuous stork's nest. The stork stands looking down at what you can't see in the courtyard patio on the other side of the pink wall. Secrets kept in the middle of square caskets open to the sky, you'd have to be a bird to steal them.

In the middle under orange, mulberry and olive trees, near a blue-tiled fountain, midway between arcades and similarly secret rooms hidden behind rayon curtains and doll's-house windows of red, green and blue panes.

Intimacies shut away within these blank walls, any interaction with the teeming street undermined by the little doors which are never opened, only half-opened, and by heavy locks. Stolen glimpses of a yellow passage, a cowshed, a fountain, all as if speeded up by a magic lantern. A burgher's mansion, once you've crossed the muddy threshold, may be a privileged garden at the end of a blind alley, where a landlord lays down the law for a group of miserable hovels let out at extortionate rents.

You know all this and look for a way out, to cut through

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the enigma of the mute presence, ear and eye lying in wait for you, not so much judging as evaluating you, measuring in inches your ability to win over the people of the Book – your ‘skillfulness’ if you prefer: this ancient, barbaric city, if you didn’t pepper your speech with French words you’d do so with some other Christian language, orthodox or not. You sense that people are mistrustful, and with reason; and that it’s not only of you.

(You freeze to death in the winter in these flimsy rain-traps, Roman cisterns with crumbling walls.)

From the end of the blind alley, you have to retrace your steps, run the gauntlet of the jeering, shouting urchins again, you should have listened to them before. Confluence, and there’s the stork once more, flapping its wings up on the wall while below hens about in the straw sullied with droppings.

Passing under the palm-tree awning again, between the scrawny dates and the conical heap of henna, the fly-covered offal stall and the boxes of spices, your eyes close in order to savour the shade, a taste of siesta and sleep, until a flood of blinding light without any visible source – withering, you almost said ‘impassable’ meaning by that that it was a matter of attrition and focus that your own cells absorb the light and assimilate it, this lavish, mote-laden, steady light.

A tailor’s shop on the left of a wider street, and a tooth-doctor’s sign: two blood-red gums punctured by ivory cubes to produce a presumably alluring grin. People are beginning to come out, crowded together, skillfully avoiding contact on the slippery cobbles, paying little heed in the hum of politenesses, and here’s the Black man again with his mint-tea kettle in the three-sided square – surely it isn’t him gone into another neighbourhood?

Has he seen you pass by again? You had better go sit down on his stool and have a drink; after a little while he’d discreetly slip you his pipe.

All of a sudden there’s a crush, and through it cyclists twist their paths with an exacting nonchalance; walking is endlessly arrested, bodies swerving, leaning back, totally withdrawing, youthful gazes scheming, now quizzical, now

ironic, subverting the gazes of those they encounter, various kinds of aggression, demanding: if you kept your eyes on the ground you'd sense the tales being told there. A slow-moving taxi cleaves the street which closes behind it, swallowed up, then expelled. Through its windows emerge four arms clad in thick striped flannel, their hands clutching the roof rack. Neat, unassuming colours suddenly pierced by a red like a clarion call. Amazed you perceive the colours of the Islamic Sunset, bright as the sea, a pale background of withered leaves.

(Monochrome markets of Persia, dark grey with shining brown spots...) Colours of fabrics, of glossy paints, of street signs, of murals in cafes. The walls themselves range through every hue from blackish brown to pink, ochre and dark red, depending on the sort of clay that's trampled and coffered in making them into pressed blocks. Here, exceptionally, a makeshift stretch of light-reflecting whitewash joins the two links of cob. A little further on, bits of broken glass stop anyone from scaling into the enclosure where mules and donkeys gather together, brought by tribesmen from both plains and mountains, their empty baskets awaiting their masters' purchases. Lanes branching out, brief blind alleys, the nets close in. The time of the distance covered, permeations by reflected, half-reflected upon comings and goings serving as proofs on logical games calculated on a geometrical plane whose slightest elevation of the angle of view would reveal at once the figures... All that's left is to find the breach, opening the maze to sandstorms.

The space within interiorizes the dizziness, inordinately diversified by a very rich variety of forms, fuzzing at each point as if they were personalities with changing whims, or sudden bids for freedom within constraint: the whole city is enclosed in lofty ramparts pierced by monumental gates, barriers which have been overcome only by the motor car and, that, remember for future reference, but recently. You can read the details in the guide books, take a tour by taxi round the outside, and stop in front of one of the gates, enter on foot, probe for a few yards, a maddening new space, already overcome by an overwhelming sense of confinement. Dread of the beyond in these little fairy-tale buildings, in the course of

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this endless wandering it changes into quietude, into a curious, enchanting, feeling of well-being, haunted by a recurrent childhood dream. So your stroll takes place in a major key, enchanted until you hear at last, in the distance, from underfoot, from subterranean hollows, the gaping sound of the mute voice that's been seeking you through alley after alley, calling your name. But you haven't yet recognized your name, throbbing this side of the brink.

Everything here calls out to you, alters the space between your words: a hand stencilled on a closed shutter, the oblique angle of two walls, the tilt of a head, the shrill of children's voices, the the easy swing of arms beside ramrod bodies. And the letters, the lovely letters, pencilled on whitewash, carved in stucco, or inlaid with gold in manuscripts: crazily swooping strokes, diacriticals baffling for a profane reading white and round against an infinity which doesn't tend to be seen.

This, too, delights as it disconcerts you: that anything can happen, at any time, at any point on the circle, much more likely than where you come from, that point of departure whose name you still can say, though, of course, not that of where you come from. For, there, it seems to you that a word, very important, easy to read, is going to be written on the dark yellow wall you're walking beside, before you reach the corner of the lane, and you stand back a little way so as to decipher it easily. But an old woman comes stooping round the corner, a baby tied to her back by two interlaced cloths. She stares at you, shuffles through the dust, looks silently up at you, and passes on. The sleeping, wrinkled, jolting child rocks in the sun.

You've walked round the corner without realizing it and come out into a wide street near a gate whose arch guards over the red shadow of a barrier. A strong odour of suint, dye and tannin, makes you look round, and you see men like fabulous demons up to their thighs in coloured fluid, trampling goatskins, intoxicated by fumes. As you hurry towards the gate you hastily think, "I'll come back here again and look again at that fig tree by the hut, and the penis of sand and whitewash

that marks the pale-topped gate-tower," as you hasten on blindly into the shade, made ruddy by the brick barriers.

There are three of them, in the shade under the massive square tower, forming tunnels in the tower. But it feels as if there are thirty and three before you glimpse light again in the curve of the outer arch, and you go round in one more half-circle, and stare in disbelief and see that the arch opens out onto the plain.