

## THE CITY OF ARCHES

**David Brooks**

We came upon the city of arches at nightfall, and yet - how can I explain it? - the night did not end there. The moon stood almost still in the sky, the stars almost idle in their courses, the balmy stillness of the place unvaried by anything but the gentlest desert breeze. And if at last we did find that the heavens had not entirely stopped, that the moon had, all that time, ascribed relentlessly its own great arc, we still, in that apparently unceasing dark, could not determine whether it had been days or weeks, or only hours that we spent there.

I have called it a city, but was it truly that? What is a city, after all? A people? Buildings? A complex of systems? The city of arches had each of these things and none, its inhabitants silent, spectral, if they were there at all, its systems evident to the discerning eye, if of kinds that eye could have had no way of understanding, its fantastic architecture fabulously incomplete yet, like a great, unroofed cathedral, also strangely whole, harmonious, assured, as if, given so many means of ingress, so many possibilities of passage, there could at last be no real reason for enclosure.

Perhaps, too, it is not true to say that it was a place of arches only, if by such one understands but the curved or pointed styles of the Moorish, the Gothic or the Romanesque, for here were also primitive triliths, ornate cupolas, the tall, blunt, capitalled columinations of the Doric, the Ionian, the Solomonian, here were cloisters, porticos and colonnades, columns, plinths and architraves in all their combinations. In short, arches and entranceways of every conceivable variety, in all possible dimensions, all materials known to artist or mason: small Plateresques beside great serpentines, vast arcs of steel or travertine above elegant structures of porphyry, chrysoprase, Istrian marble, intricate castings of bronze or gold flooded in moonlight, their every detail visible against the dark sky and the pale desert sand.

A bizarre miscegeny, a grotesque stew, a ridiculous, anachronistic conglomeration of styles and periods? So, almost certainly, we must have thought it had we not seen it for ourselves, yet here were premises of order, principles of balance unimagined. Placed at unexpected distances, arranged according to some secret key, mixtures once unthinkable became dramatic illustrations of a kind of harmony we could not have thought possible, the whole assisted by a quality of light, of air, which lent each form a luminosity such as some have claimed to see about the greatest works of art.

Nor were there here inanimate forms, lifeless constructions only. Repeatedly, as we wandered in awe from arch to arch, examining now the dentils of an Ionic facade, now the polished, concave sweep of a Theban apophyge, we would find a palm, an orange tree, a tiny olive grove, and in more than one place, from invisible fissures in an echinus or a

*cul de lampe*, tall, interlocking arches of water that disappeared almost instantly upon contact with the sandy floor.

Yet who had built this place, and why; who tended its trees, its fountains, or preserved its masterpieces in such immaculate condition, we could not determine. For almost certainly it was not uninhabited. Several times, as we roamed through its strange, protracted evening, each one of us thought that we glimpsed a cloaked, shadowy figure moving silently away some distance off, and at one time all three of us together, looking to where a kind of covered ambulatory led up along the spine of a great arched bridge, saw a group of three such figures looking back towards us, as if in ghostly echo of ourselves. And yet an echo, a projection of our own minds, I am sure that they were not. One of the most tantalizing, most disturbing things about the city of arches was the persistent sense of evanescence, the constant, uncanny feeling that someone had just slipped from view behind one of the columns, or turned the corner of a portico, and that one had been on the very verge of an encounter.

It was, at last, a feeling only. If there *were* people there, and we felt certain that there were, they left us as entirely to ourselves as we, *lost in our separate wonderings*, soon left each other. How long, for example, did I spend in uninterrupted contemplation of a huge portal of chrysoprase, *lost in its metopes and tryglyphs*, the subtle perfection of its astragals? How long did I spend attent upon the slender ogives, the roseate key, the flamboyant mouldings of a great Gothic vault? So intent, indeed, was our absorption that, afterward, we all were at a loss to say how else our time had passed. At some points, doubtless, we simply sat upon the sand and talked. At others, *lost in the silent hinterworlds* of stone cool to the touch, smelling seductively of earth or caves, I am not sure that we did not sleep, or at least dream of wandering in blossoming orchards, of treading again the airy balconies or flagstoned courtyards of our childhoods, of sunlight breaking into barns, of golden fishes darting amongst reeds, for surely a great part of the magic of this place was in the resonance it held, the desires and the memories it focused.

But could such summonings, such resonance have been the *true purpose of the city of arches*? *Why did it exist*? What was its function? A religious site? A place of worship? But of what? For whom? Was it not, perhaps, an open gallery, a great museum, built by some immensely wealthy, hugely eccentric emperor? Or a deserted pleasuredom, a *plaything of departed gods*? And was it not also, in some strange way, a place of deliberate emptiness, superbly apportioned, a site of endless, unimpeded issuings and invitations, a world of pure invention in abandoned celebration of the same? Every conceivable explanation passed amongst us, as many and as varied as the arches that inspired them, and yet, try as we might, we could not judge between them.

Nor, when we arrived back at our tethered animals, our stuffs piled undisturbed as we had left them, and realized that we had just completed our own unwitting arches of discovery, could we have stated precisely what it was that seemed so gently, yet so clearly to bid us

leave. The mind's surfeit, certainly, and a kind of unanswerable longing, an exhilarated weariness, but there was also, as we rode off under the great, diamond-studded vault of night toward what soon became the broad tiara of the sunrise, a vague, transcending presence, an immanence in the ghostly dunes, as if we were or had just been the eyes of someone not here themselves to see these things, emissaries of a mind somehow beyond or encompassing us, that had dreamt that place, and left it, and was now already dreaming another.