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Birdlife

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Birdlife

These gulls drifting on the sky
manoeuvre the Atlantic wind
with effortless displays
of arrogance, their savage grace
at home along an African coast
washed pale by winter sun.
This is their strip of power
their long domain of ocean and rock
stretching beyond history.
Their wars are pure and personal –
over a fish-head or a rock to roost
their triumphs swallowed by the wind as quick
as their rasping cry.
But these
pert sparrows darting between pots
have come with the Berbers. Plump parvenus
they scavenge the crevices of human life
in comfortable complicity. Not for them
a heroics of ocean sky and salt
or the wings of a gale. They scout
a hotel terrace, natter among themselves
compare their latest meals, measure the drift
of shadow across an afternoon and find
pleasure in being nondescript.

January 2001