Pantalica

(for the archaeologists)

*o muove un canto in questa notte eterna.*
Salvatore Quasimodo, 'Insonnia: Necropoli di Pantalica’
[or inspires a song in this eternal night.]

The limestone’s thousand eyeholes watch where we go.
Mostly, we see nothing in them, unless, with luck,
in the sudden torchlight’s shock,
a bead, a shard, a tiny crumble of bones.
Deep in the cliff’s apartments things come apart.

Four thousand rock-cut tombs weather the centuries.
We’ll take the measure of them and draw to scale.
This art leaves nothing over,
but marks each gaping cave where a bone might lie loose in the grit—discard from the rat’s larder.

Like *this*—long pin, with a twist of DNA,a greeting flung, and met, three millennia later,tomb-raiders’ throwaway.
Our shy touching, clear as the ping of an ‘A’,finds a life long gone, once nerved and riddling.

*Old thing!* fellow-stuff – an x records where you lie.
Did you dream some night-long feast, a banquet-set?or else, if tired, a sleep
safe in the rock’s safe-keeping, sealed and stored?
Strange stories grow in the dark behind closed doors.

Here’s fennel, capers, thyme, the cliff’s footholds--fig, lentisk, pistachio in the lap of the valley.
Beyond, the Anapo winds
twenty kilometres and more to the delta’s outflow.
Lives--our own, or theirs, in the rock’s old shadow.
Under the Banyan Tree, Palermo

(For Subha Mukherji)

A body cavity, dark memorial hall,
a troglodytic haunt under southern skies,
a vault in flagrant daylight, chamber of shades
earthed to the dark, fire-cover from the noonday sun--

this hulk of lumber’s hung with tufted ropes,
bell-pulls with tasselled sallies reaching down.

Who’ll ring? Come in. These fustian downpipes make
a curtain of living roots, a woody blind.

It might be Rapunzel’s hair, the Erl-King’s retreat,
or else a joke from Gaudí’s Parc de Guell.

These ropes and probes, like neural cables tied
in fascicles down the spine of an underworld,
fatten the walls of a hide that’s hollow at heart--
a dryad’s haunt, fantastic Gothic cupboard--

and make a fringe of markers, stiff yet alive,
a folly of tresses and trails, like wooden rain.

Imagine the stopped diapason of organ pipes--
in height, a church, but nosing underground

where history keeps its stuff in arid ruts:
a field of ash, long-buried, where the heretics died,
catechised by the flames of an auto-da-fé--
Spain’s imperial bonfire nourishing the waste.

We’re somewhere in Christian Europe at the end of the line.
Come in. Take heart. The dark might take you by surprise.

This living root-house henge must guard its keep,
remember lives extinguished far beneath,
and mark—cool cover, arbor and parasol--
our place, our past--a stake in this scorched earth.
Sicilian Road

An open runway tacks and plays for time.
Its cursive outline curves, then loops and veers
across the valley bottom, changing its mind
perhaps, turning aside -- there are heights to climb.

The hills above are black and secretive.
The road unravels a spoor, dangles a trail,
then takes the ground in its stride and picks, at last,
a path that starts to climb, barely at first,

rising on each stepped foot, aloof and clear
above this shaky land that cracks and gapes,
like something traced, free-hand, above the facts,
a phrase, spun out from air and fixed in place.

Imagine a river on stilts, bird-flight on steps,
a flow expressed in the poised footwork of a dance,
a flourish made by a fool who bows to a king,
mocking the grandeur there, yet gracing him.

It runs far up into dark primitive hills—
from here, a skater’s turn, a rope to the winds.
Imagine a wavelength braced, pinned on its way,
as if you dreamed a tune, and could make it stay.