

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.