MAURA HIGH

An Archaeology of Now and Then

EARLY MORNING

Little rabbit jawbone, three teeth,
where are your other bones?
Crumbled and dispersed under the shadow
of the olive tree in the shadow
of the hill, before the sun has crept
over the trenches and tumbled stones,
where the dirt is still cool and secret
and the battered wheelbarrows wait
alongside the tools and rubber buckets,
before the trucks have unsettled
the dust and broken the silence
which is not silence but the shrill
of crickets and the rustle and scrape
of grass stalks, leaves, blown against each other.
What will the stones say today?
Work, river, fire, wall . . .
Will the curve of the rim of a clay cup
remember the potter's thumb?

BEFORE NOON

The pick hoe sings tok, tok, clang, thunk,
knocking all day at the dry dirt,
loosening earth, rock, potsherds, root and bone:
who's there, who's there? Generations
of weather and seasons, fire and abandonment,
compacted like the leaves of a book
one can read backward from the spoil tip:
dirt and stone fly up
into the wheelbarrow, which jerks
back to the trench; where panful
by panful, soil is scattered and brushed and packed
into place, each sherd and stone eased back
where it will stay until the grass
seeks water again under the wall.

NOONTIME

Here's water, and olive pits,
and some crumbs from the plastic bag
for the earth, the ants, whatever
persists in this sun-scoured acropolis.
Over among the trees in the narrow gully
a couple of the Greek laborers
drink their coffee. Here and there
yawns and small talk in the scant shade.
If the dead came upon us now, in the ruins
of their burned village,
we would have no defense, no refuge.

AFTERNOON

After the catastrophe, we fled.
Had we failed to propitiate the gods?
Or does a rubble of curses, the wail
and howl of smashed pots and tiles
please them more than music,
more than the cries of a man and woman making love?
If you want to know how far the sea is,
ask the spear maker, ask the woman sorting greens;
how wide, ask the importer of fine pots, the shopkeeper
whose son left for America.
The song of the cicadas washes over us
like surf. Our terraces of beans and squash
have grown up to thistles and wild capers.
Bee-browse only—the same bees, thirsty for nectar.

BEAUTIFUL NIGHT

Sherds that never dreamt of being whole, dream.
First there was the order of clay:
which for the olive jar, which for the cup?
Then the matrix of dirt: each layer its own era.
Then sieves, plastic bags, labels, boxes,
a place on a shelf, in a bound book.
The difference between looking and seeing,
says the photographer, is memory:
as the lizard who lurks between the stones,
eyes half-open, remembers.
We see all the stars tonight. We see you,
asleep in your safe beds.

Azoria, Crete