



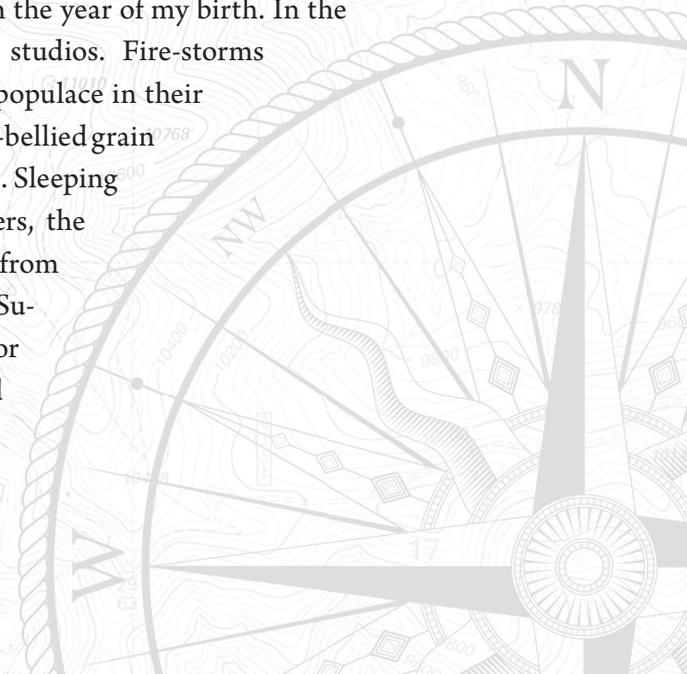
PALERMO DEATHTRIP

Iain Sinclair

Dead already and dead again.

– Jack Kerouac

The shadows of war planes printing across bare, bone-dry fields. Another invasion fleet in a cloudless sky-ocean. Sandcastles and defensive mounds floating free like barrage balloons. From Africa and the scattered islands, they find their justification in the aerial devastation that travelled the other way, south, with iron crosses on the wings. A golden gerfalcon on a Norman battle standard. Flickering newsreels swamped by martial music and the choke of strident propagandist voices. In the year of my birth. In the safety of windowless studios. Fire-storms against Templars and populace in their cool burrows. In round-bellied grain cellars. And catacombs. Sleeping on platforms of sleepers, the folded dead hidden from sunlight. A harvest of Superfortress bombs for the port, the occupied city. Icarus reflexes in



a leather helmet. From this lung-pinching height the landscape is a map of mortality. Gold pillars and tributes to a water clock in the interior dazzle of the Palatine Chapel.



1985. Mid-channel on his 54-mile odyssey, Nicky Farrugia, shaven head butting in phallic frenzy, swims from Sicily to the island of Gozo; to be hauled ashore, an acclaimed hero, by the grid of the salt pans. Water polo for the Sirens. A man disguised in sexual orientation. Fireworks, hard pink cakes. Thirty hours and twenty minutes in a metal cage. Arriving, as light fades, on a Mediterranean Sunday. Calypso in a cave. That mazy passage out of time and into myth. Some of them in cliff crannies are scratching at parchment. Electing books worthy of drowning. Nicky's salt-stiff tongue fills his mouth with crystals. The sea around him is on fire. The naked woman in the painting crests the ruffled surface, showing him how it should be managed. Like crawling out of a swan's nest, slippery with remembered pleasures. The reek of doused candlefat, guano in red-tile gutters. Ancient sea things fixed, still breathing, in limestone. Nicky rises and falls between the fingerprint contours of a painted ocean with its gemstone islands. The double page map from *Book of Roger* by al-Idrisi. Heavenly blue on reed paper. Muslim theology made tender by the stern benevolence of Christian kings. Extinguished stars in the infinity of space. There are fish that flare unseen in fathomless depths.



She picks her way, with graceful discrimination, down steps cut into the rock below the hollow shell of a Roman temple. A fake.

A folly. A strong woman of the north in snowy wrap. Acolytes in white suits and dark glasses. Made darker with aircraft paint. Blinding them from the forbidden sight as a Homeric sun rises, in cloud-piercing searchlight beams, over the blue mountains. Across the harbour. As the fishing boats putputput out to sea. Hefty handmaidens attend, catching the towelling wrap as the presence honours the gentle wash of petrol-slicked water against the privileged steps. A shivering palm tree perched on its ledge is the X-ray of a straw bear about to dive. Crumpled waiters are laying freshly ironed white cloths on breakfast tables, set at a discrete distance one from another, on the terrace. It is Greta Garbo. While she was still Garbo. While the hotel sustained its aura as the private villa of a very rich man and his celebrated wife. The illegitimate photographer secures his shot. The Maltese waiter secures his pocket-bulging bribe, his Sicilian beak. The framing is austere. The naked swimmer emerging, arms raised to receive the spread of the upheld garment. Management asserts the right. A voyeur's heavy album on the polished desk in a locked office. Superstar gods and goddesses bent to the collector's whim. Fornicating across Second Empire furniture. Bored actors trapped in those terrible times of self-impersonation – hollow, hollow, hollow – at the bar, stepping from the limousine, in the bedroom. A photographer is a disposable asset. His Cyclops stare. His darkroom alchemy. A body in a bag. Wrapped in newspaper. Centrifugal displacement. Bombed car burning in quarry. Suspended investigation. Found floating. Sleeping with the fishes. Eyeless in Gozo.



This is the place, but not the story. So many lines of flight. The journalist. The poet. The tenured academic who says that

he interprets and also performs, as he follows the steps of the dance. A winter package. Low season. Change at Rome. Drop off the two American priests in designer black, texting ahead, securing Vatican transport. Follow the market. The writer is coming to Palermo to unpick the threads. Lucky Luciano and Joe Bananas, 1957, securing a conference room in the Grand Hotel et des Palmes, to set out a business plan: assassination, people trafficking, narco architecture, meatballs, movie deals. Sigmund Freud, on sabbatical, in a lesser establishment, haunting the gilt and alabaster of antique shops, thefts from archaeological sites, construction sites – and seeing Oedipus, with bleeding eyes, in the dust of a white road. The journalist is here for “an associational tracking of some layers and patterns of vertiginous jostle-spin through history”. Or he will respect the oracle of place and kill himself. This story is about death, cameras, crosses and confessions. It is about the dead preying upon us. And the reflex gestures we make to keep them mute. To burn the milk of their eyes. The scribbler blows out his match. He puts his pistol on the table and starts to type.



Palermo. 10.30am. Friday, December 11, 2015. I’m not easy with this commission, he says. I have a sense of what it might cost, that old familiar business of staring into the abyss and having the abyss stare right back. Most of my travels, over the years, have been pedestrian, tramping the neural pathways and motorway fringes of London.

If the poet Raymond Roussel voyaged far and wide – Europe, Egypt, India, China, Japan, America, anywhere to drain the curse of inherited wealth – he was fastidious in his avoidance of

mere detail. Local particulars remained local. And as welcome on the ivory page as a blood-inflated malarial swamp fly. Or a handprint in liquid dung. Touring in his *roulotte*, a vehicle like a customised hearse or land yacht, the great solipsist kept the blinds drawn while he stitched an occulted poetry into defenceless notebooks. He imagined machines as fantastic as anything in Jules Verne, but avoided the vulgarity of documentary reportage. Evidence was anathema. He was much photographed, but those images are performances. Roussel could and did invent camera-pens and other cannibalistic devices, but he was wise enough never to use them. (He’d done all that as a 12-year-old child when he received a camera as a gift, and committed a few portraits of family and friends as a way of disposing of them, making them collectable.) The poet understood the necessity for servants. As chauffeurs, procurers and loggers of chemical intake. He knew that Palermo was a good place to close the final parenthesis, without the requirement of inspecting a cellar of monkish husks, overgrown bluebottles in dry sacks, the meat overcoats of former humans who won’t be using their cloakroom tickets. A cloister of mummified Capuchin friars.

I need images, the journalist said. Without them, I wouldn’t trust my experience of what’s required to shape a narrative. *I don’t trust my memory*. In writing, we make new memories, improved memories. We cheat the death of time by re-living, repeating, cutting all the clutter. Or not *all* the clutter, because once the first sentence is on the page, the voices start up, the insect chorus clamouring for attention. Every book I have written, he said, is also a book of erased photographs. Snapshots are the only annotations I can usefully draw on. My notebook scribbles are unintelligible, more about making a mark, like the rubbing of a notable brick wall, than retrieving information. I might assemble hundreds of

pages of journal entries, quotations, cuttings, diagrams and storyboards. And never consult them. But I do return, taking a breather between sections, to the leatherette photo albums. *What is the attraction?* Without pictures, it is just noise.

A diary of sixty images covers Palermo. I'm well aware that photography is collaboration. A neurosis flattered by recent technology. The madness now is a compulsion to catch everything, to foreground the *me*, or the absence of a valid self outside the captured version, the spectral transfer instantly broadcast to other electronic devices. The internet is essentially vampiric, it fishes for unanchored souls. And its hunger can never be satisfied.

On board the Alitalia flight, in a twilight of shared viruses and safety semaphore signalling the reverse message – *you might all die and there's nothing anybody can do* – we witness evolution in progress: thumbs are growing, becoming prehensile, more like bent cocks than digits, as they stroke and probe across the softly yielding skin of iPads and iPhones. These shrivelled movies, icons of urgency, broadcast acts that were once private: scarlet dresses that scream for attention, amateurs who know just how to pose by thrusting out a leg. The glowing devices illuminate the gloom like an aisle of blue candles. As never satisfied thumbs scroll and enlarge in an orgy of restlessness.

Committing any image is a theft against the integrity of appearance. Like looking at the lines of propped up dead in a catacomb, there is a cost, a service charge: *they look back*. The vision is the vision witnessed by an unacknowledged presence standing *right behind you*. It's relatively harmless to dissolve, as I do, into taxonomies of sunrise, postcard epiphanies across the harbour, as captured through strategically opened wooden shutters. But if I make a portrait of a bulbous armchair, in diamond pattern red-orange, wedged into the corner of the room against

the *belle époque* floral tracery of the brocade wall-coverings, or a light bowl like a suspended soup tureen, I am projecting a lie. The objects no longer speak for themselves. They are suborned.

I am thinking, by way of the spidery penumbra around the heavy shoulders of the chair, about Roussel, his suite at the Grande Albergo e delle Palme. I remember the festering wound to his left wrist, inflicted in the bath, the feeble slashes at his throat, and how the heavy ennui of the bedroom was not heavy enough. Those mirrors! We are told that Roussel tried to bribe his companion Charlotte Dufrène – and Orlando, the hotel valet – to put him out of his misery. That's what servants are for: to measure out the barbiturates, the nightly ration of euphoria. Before a hallucinated drive around the back streets of Palermo with a chauffeur who disappears into the dawn, when his employer's body is discovered, sprawled across a mattress on the floor. An overdose is not an overdose, it's the right amount. It gets the job done. Like a hanged man, hooded and bound, Roussel climaxed in transit.

Hungry spores hibernating in velvet curtains and damask sheets, in body perfumes soaked into fat armchairs, couldn't help themselves now. They spoke of Oscar Wilde and all his sad hotels. A last quip: "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go."

NO FOTO NO FILM, it says on the wall of the Palermo catacombs. No film, no photo. No story.

Somnambulists who will never wake again are massed in underworld galleries like workhouse donkeys waiting for a dole of gruel. And the champagne decadents in their claustrophobic suites are waiting too. The ones who, terrified of falling into the bottomless pit, curl up on the marble floor like premature effigies.

"I dreamt I was supping with the dead", Wilde is reported to have told his twin watchers, Reggie Turner and Robbie Ross.

After a mocking rosary had been pressed into the playwright's cold white hand, Ross asked Maurice Gilbert to take a flash portrait of the corpse. This was the final indignity. Light scalding blank eyes. Chemicals fixing death. Dead words are now quotations printed on vellum.

The portrait of Roussel and his hired beard, Dufrière, owned by the poet John Ashbery, has a slash, like one of the suicide's wild razor strokes, separating man and woman. When Ashbery tracked down the elderly Dufrière, living in retirement in Brussels – an episode that concludes *The Vorrh*, a fiercely possessed novel by B. Catling – the last witness to the events in Palermo tears the photograph into two parts. She gave away Roussel, whose books she neither understood nor admired in ignorance. She kept her own portion. Perhaps she liked the hat. It sits like a sheep's head with the ears still attached. Or, as Catling has it, "the neck of a dead, inverted swan".

Mount Etna was throwing out flames, the first spectacular lightshow in twenty years. Roussel's overdose followed a major firework display in Palermo, with drums and crowds; a double celebration, the festival of Santa Rosalia and a decree by Italy's new warrior-lord, Benito Mussolini, for the populace to salute the successful transatlantic hop by General Italo Balbo and his squadron of flying boats. The minatory shadows of Regia Aeronautica aircraft, over Atlantic waves, were a premonition of more sinister engagements alongside the Condor Legion in Spain. And the raining of bombs, unopposed, on Ethiopia.



The giant set of prints by the photographer Ian Wilkinson would not be slipping through any floorboards. This folder of rigorously

composed images of the Capuchin catacombs with their strange black fruit disturbed me, even when the prints were hidden away in the clutter of a room beneath the desk where I was writing. That was my commission.

Wilkinson had a studio, presses humming, close to a gallery in an English market town. He was very good at what he did, working with artists of the calibre of Paula Rego, Paolozzi and Elizabeth Frink. When I met him, among the chemicals, machines, proofs and trials of a first-floor atelier, he moved easily, rested comfortably, and looked as if he belonged in his environment. The prints derived from obsessive returns to the Palermo catacombs were his secret. He had the modesty of a maker who recognises no obligation to explain his practice. Wilkinson mastered the technicalities of what he was required to do, but there was this other thing, the mammal's spinal dream.

With the prints laid out on a bench like a mortuary slab, I handle them with some reluctance. Conversation overrides close inspection. This is not the moment for ekphrasis, breaking down the elements of the compositions into art-historic references, seeking sources, mapping the madness. I am wary of letting out pre-fictional connections, muffling the piercing shrieks of the originals. Better to let the artist tell his own stories. The corpses yap in an unknown language that sounds like Latin.

There are two journeys: the underworld of the Capuchin catacombs and the flat fields of Northamptonshire. Wilkinson comes to Palermo. He encounters Fabrizio, the genial doorkeeper, who relieves the questing artist of a bundle of euros and allows him to spend time alone in the catacomb corridors, tempting the mummified tenants to stain the purity of his digital screen. The printmaker is an entomologist of fluttering shadows: moth-lace and straw breath in subtle darkness. Images are grounded in

velvety black, a perpetual night. Priests howl. Bone is pumice. Hands are empty gloves. A child's flesh is cruelly preserved in waxy curd. There is a danger that the watching dead will become mere décor, flattered, arranged, made into theatre; a last supper at which nobody gets to taste a crumb. They have already eaten their own flesh. The rags of their clothes are more comfortable in their pantomime narrative.

The catholic pilgrimage, the cellar with its respite from a merciless sun, plays against a miracle of crows and hedgehoppers, starlings, thrushes, delicate bones in delicate cages. That was the other walk. Wilkinson came across a deserted farmhouse and a crumbling chimneybreast stuffed with birds. The creatures of the air will enter a dialogue with the mummies in their alcoves. It seemed as if the gaping mouths of the preserved monks, toothless or wrecked, were releasing flocks.

"The project came about primarily because of two dreams and two coincidences," Wilkinson said. "I suffered a lot with nightmares as a child. I was walking down a corridor and at the end were more corridors with people talking to each other, talking about me. I was lying in bed and a black bird flew on to a window ledge. I thought it was checking me out, as to whether I was ready to cross over."

The Capuchin catacombs, accessed with no prior knowledge or expectation, brought back the corridor of that childhood dream. The strangers were still talking – with the voices of birds. Roberto Bolaño writes about the late Joan Vollmer, shot by William Burroughs in Mexico City: "She chain-smokes invisible cigarettes. She tells me that her cigarettes are a strange brand: some make her speak in the first person and others in the third person, in that choked and spasmodically seismic language that is the International Language of the Dead... a language of tremor-like cadences."

The catacomb prints have that tremor. You can *hear* them and feel them touching you. But you have to speak 'bird' to understand what they are saying. Birds are immortal souls. The mummies are empty envelopes, stuffed with straw, stitched from cured bacon.

"It wasn't terror I experienced," Wilkinson reported. "It was a revelation and comforting."

Lucia Impelluso in *Nature and Its Symbols* (2004) tells us that "birds, like butterflies, more generally represented the human soul as it abandons the body at the moment of death." But they can also be interpreted as bringers of bad luck, harpies, creatures that tear and devour human flesh.

When I gave myself up to the index of these necrophile prints, I began to see them as a book of secular saints, existing outside theology, outside time. The mummy shells had not been sanctified for miracles performed during their earthly lives, they were conduits for future miracles. Oracular and blasphemous. Mute but talking in bird code.

"The crow," Robert Graves tells us in *The White Goddess*, "was a bird much consulted by augurs." Graves associates the crow with Bran the Crow-god: "but crow, raven, scald-crow and other large black carrion birds are not always differentiated in early times." Crows have picked out the eyes of the witnessing dead, making battlefield corpses into leather. Into the kind of cloaks studio photographers used to mask their cameras. The Capuchin mummies are not there to be inspected by congeries of awed and shuffling tourists, they are recording instruments, sucking up breath, glistening with borrowed sweat, avid for language. The hung mummies are meat cameras. *And they are looking right back at the thing that is looking at them.*

With the discovery of a labyrinth of underground burials in Rome in 1578, mountains of early Christian bones were disin-

tered; bones that could be an insanitary nuisance or a resource. The mercantile wing of the Catholic church, with its well-honed predatory instincts, its relic franchise, its travel bureau for guaranteed safe passage to the next world, business class to heaven, recognised a golden opportunity. German churches and religious houses needed a USP, a cash magnet attraction for pilgrims. They needed miracle-working arrangements of bones. And there were plenty on offer in Italy. Decorated in gold thread and pearls, nun-worked lace and fine cambric, spattered with emeralds and rubies, these manufactured replacements for the idolatrous effigies destroyed during the Protestant Reformation were known as *Katakombenbeiligen*. Or 'catacomb saints'. Certificates of fraudulent authenticity were purchased. Protestant carriers had no qualms – for a price – about transporting the ossuary bags across the Alps.

New beings emerged from the slumber of sandstone shelves into the light of display in cathedrals and restored churches. Veiled, with lips rouged, wigged in silvery strands, the skeletal saints 'rescued' from the dignity of death were paraded in travesty. Their invented biographies were surrealist hypotheses for a theme park theology. Paul Koudounaris in *Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures & Spectacular Saints from the Catacombs* (2013) points out that German saints frequently became books. Engravings were printed as 'souvenirs of translation'. Images "would have been touched to the relic in order to transfer some of its power". Then texts were commissioned "to reinforce the role the newly arrived relic would play in the lives of the faithful." The book of the catacomb saint carried the potency of new myth back out into the world.

Now I understood something of my part in this dubious enterprise. "The skeleton could settle into its new role of patron and protector of the community." And, sprawled in a rattan chair on

my balcony overlooking the harbour, I could freeze the trajectory of the silver bullet aimed at my temple until the words ran out.



I met the photographer Mimi Mollica in Hackney Wick. In the lull of the last years before the great Olympic enclosures. Mimi had the habit of hanging huge prints in the window of his first-floor studio: challenging faces of West Africa, Romania, Brazil, Pakistan. And Palermo. Born in the Sicilian city-port, Mimi was a world traveller. Living so intimately with death, he had no need to record the catacombs. The scenes he confronted in the narrow streets of Palermo referenced that intimacy.

When I left him, Mimi presented me with a book of photographs called *Untoccodikalsa*. On the endpaper he drew a serpentine map of his life: Palermo to Brixton, Tunisia to Hackney, and Palermo again. Stick figures in the tarantella of death's festival. The husks of the catacombs were given balance by the men Mimi photographed, eating and drinking at their tables on the streets above them.

The writer Robin Cook, rebranded as 'Derek Raymond' after a stint in the French vineyards, took mortality as his abiding theme. "The General Contract", he called it. Interviewed at the City Airport in Silvertown in 1992, he said: "You can't keep the dead out... They come anyway. They rest on your shoulder, whatever you're doing, they weigh *nothing*... Death lasts much longer than life...The living say, 'It's bad news to be wanted by the dead.' But I don't think so. No, I don't think so."

Cook's favourite quote was from the Brian De Palma remake of *Scarface*. He watched the VHS thirteen times. Al Pacino saying "Every day above ground is a good day."

Mimi's drinkers, substantial males in sleeveless shirts, white vests, religious medallions, joshing around the café table, are materially above ground, but they are also the ferrymen, the facilitators. They are dipped in death and it shows in their cold eyes. They are Palermo Mafiosi, foot soldiers of the Kalsa district. They are gregarious and competitive boozers of small beer. They carve pig cheeks with big knives. Mimi is an implicated witness, a master of the choreography of risk: the drunk man singing or threatening with upraised ham-hock arms, the silver-haired onlooker clutching his balls. Made men suck and swallow the fruits of the sea in a belch of entitlement. They mime contract killings with outstretched fingers. They kill time with greasy playing cards: between markets, between collections. The *pizzo*, the beak. Between assignments. On an exposed thigh, the tattoo of a gun is shown to the photographer. A boast. A warning. Recreational Mafiosi smoke like prisoners. They have bracelets like manacles, watches as heavy as police tags. They are garrotted in thick gold necklaces.



Coming to Palermo, I wanted to pay my respects to B. Catling's novel, *The Vorrh*. And to investigate the role that Raymond Roussel and *Impressions of Africa* paid in the composition of a fabulation that seemed to arrive fully formed out of nowhere. Out of the insect-heavy darkness of a reimagined equatorial night. Out of smeared train windows.

Roussel's craft – shipwrecked on an alien shore – begins with a pun, the first sentence that finds resolution in its mirror image. It is called his *procédé poétique*. "I was led," he wrote, "to take a random phrase from which I would derive images by distorting

it, a little as one might develop images while devising a rebus." A shipwreck is always a good beginning, a good point of departure – though now undone, horribly, by the weight of migrants risking everything on that voyage into Italy, the Greek islands, Malta. Out of Africa, Syria, Afghanistan. The unanswered outpouring of the collateral damage of oil wars. The photograph is a dead infant washed ashore. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is about the magic of renouncing magic, not drawing down lightning strokes to animate gibbet pickings, a midden of broken phrases. It's about flight and song and the kind of otherworldly monsters we ordinary folk, compressing them into respectable dullness, fail to notice. Or to mate with. To our advantage.

Catling notices. Roussel's Egyptian travel journals give nothing away. *Impressions of Africa* is a series of photographs not taken and line drawings found rather than made: the impressions are inky transfers, hints, suggestions. Roussel's fastidiously conceived vanity chapbooks are available for years beyond his death in Palermo.

The poet travels with his mother and with Charlotte Dufrène, the *maitresse de convenance* paid by his mother: a monthly salary and a flat in the 8th *arrondissement*. He leaves, in cavernous hotel suites, first-class railway carriages, cabins, the sickly perfume of an *impression*: that he would like to absorb. The intangible essence of these women. He dresses Charlotte but does not touch her; fresh white gloves for every appearance, every operation, every ride. Dufrène reports that when she had been written into a new outfit of Roussel's devising, the poet shrunk back into the corner of the car, with the horror of brushing against her person, ruining the *impression* he had created.

I've no idea when Roussel became a significant figure for Catling. Alan Moore, in his generous introduction to *The Vorrh*,

positioning it as “easily the current century’s first landmark work of fantasy”, makes no mention of the French poet. But he does, consciously or unconsciously, use the phrase “corseted and hidebound” to describe the genre he sees Catling invading and reviving. *Corseted*. We jump at once to the opening of *Impressions of Africa*, to the sculpture of a slave constructed by Norbert Montalescot and his sister Louise, at the order of the African king, Talou VII. Mark Ford in *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* tells us that “the statue is fashioned out of black corset whalebones and is fixed to a trolley – also of corset whalebones – whose wheels rest on two red, gelatinous rails moulded out of prepared calves’ lights.” Roussel’s excruciatingly laboured texts have been said, by several commentators, to have an addictive bite. They are coded – with the codes leading nowhere but into further, more complex equations. Leaving manuscripts on the shelf, or locked away in a trunk buried in a warehouse depository, only increases the power of the thing that is unread. Swallowing the light, rather than dissipating it in universal acclaim and unwonted commentary.

Like Roussel, Catling visited North Africa, without reaching the equatorial sump, his Edenic forest or heart of darkness. He was in company with the painter David Russell (a Rousselian near-homonym): friend, patron, mentor. It is easy to image Russell suggesting or confirming an interest, as they travelled, in *Impressions of Africa*. But whatever the original infection, Catling produced a typescript in 1973, forty years before the publication of his novel, a sheaf of poems. He gave it a handwritten title: *The Vorrh*. When Robert de Montesquiou (the supposed inspiration for Proust’s Baron de Charlus and Huysmans’s Des Esseintes) composed his own roman à clef, *La Trépidation*, he called the caricature of Roussel: “Russell”. Catling makes his Russell the co-dedicatée of *The Vorrh*.

David, old Etonian alchemist-painter, publisher of private editions, pornographic pop-up fantasies, is thanked for providing “compass, map, and machete”. And insisting on the expedition that became, after decades in slumbering suspension, the dangerous book.

Voyaging once more, now in collaboration with the filmmaker Tony Grisoni, Catling arrived in Palermo. The two men had the intention of visiting the Capuchin catacombs, looking into the eye sockets of the dead, and coming out with material for an art installation. Grisoni, covertly or otherwise, would capture the faces, while Catling mediated the script, the voices of the unknown others. A task for which he had demonstrated a particular skill: giving himself up to channelled possession. Beyond the pinch of cured flesh and the overlapping narratives of dust tongues, there was the unspoken ambition to enjoy some good Sicilian cooking, wine, cigars. The aboveground sensory pleasures of sunlight and kitchens. There might be time for a cocktail in the Grand Hotel and a sclerotic lift attendant to show them to Room 224, Roussel’s fatal suite. His exit cubicle.

The mummies, in their distinctions of caste and profession, staring out, propped against the walls like prisoners of the Inquisition waiting to be summoned, stayed resolutely silent. Catling was good at knowing when it was better to hold his tongue. The Grisoni carousel of images played on two monitor screens: severed heads in goldfish bowls. The pocket camera, an eavesdropper of no discrimination, had picked up the chatter of the other catacomb visitors: whispers, jokes, asides. Voices of the city filtered from the street above. And that is what they ran when a new audience, an art audience, came to witness the spectacle in Oxford.

Palermo was an opportunity for Catling to inspect the Grand Hotel et des Palmes, as it now calls itself, in Via Roma;

Roussel's Grande Albergo e delle Palme. The Via Wagner, at the back of the hotel, was named in honour of the composer, after he had taken a suite while he worked on *Parsifal*. Wagner has a role to play in Roussel's *Locus Solus*. It was rumoured that a tunnel ran from the basement of the hotel to the Anglican church on the other side of the street. The original building was called the Palazzo Ingham, the residence of a prominent English family.

The Grand Hotel provided the setting for the Prologue to *The Vorrh*. As I discovered, when I came to Palermo to set the experience of being exposed to Ian Wilkinson's prints against the evidence of the actual catacombs, the hotel had declined from its status as private Palazzo, wintering retreat for the wealthy, suitable theatre for voluntary euthanasia, to a high-ceilinged reception area for coach parties and business groups with laminated badges searching out the right salon with the hard chairs and whiteboard.

I tried a few of the corridors, but the ghosts had decamped. A sunken bar that suggested the waiting room in a crematorium did its best to invoke the atmosphere of happier days with offers of 'Cocktail Hemingway' and the reproduction of a painting of the grizzled author propped in a brown armchair while crushing a small white dog in the circle of his locked hands. The background is a psychedelic swirl like the cross section of a heavy drinker's wet brain. Perhaps the cocktails in this padded chamber are dedicated to celebrity suicides: hemlock Manhattans for sucklers of shotguns. Cushions are indented with absent bodies.

Why did Roussel choose Palermo? He arranged his affairs in Paris with his man of business, Eugène Leiris, father of Michel (the friend and champion of Francis Bacon). It can't have been for the catacombs. Roussel had a morbid dislike of tunnels. Mark Ford says that they "caused him extreme anguish" and

that he avoided travelling by night "for fear of entering one unawares". How he even noticed such things is unclear, with the curtains drawn in his *roulotte*. Roussel's drugged attention was fixed on his work, the endless sifting and revising, or the re-reading of Jules Verne and Pierre Loti. His travels were their travels, composed and completed before he left Paris. All that was required was a set of portrait photographs in immaculate costumes with Basque beret, fez or sailor suit.

Charlotte Dufrène took charge of the medicine cabinet. When supplies of barbiturates ran low, she was sent back to Paris to replenish the Soneryl, Roussel's euphoric of choice. Hopped but corpse-like, the neurasthenic dandy who was readying himself for Switzerland (the cure), took his final drive with the chauffeur who would disappear before police enquiries into the suicide were completed. The Grande Albergo was conveniently located for the port, the cruise ships, sailor boys in tight white trousers and dockside hustlers. And if they motored through the four quarters of the city, out to the mountains, the coast road to Mondello, there is no record of a halt at the Capuchin monastery. It would have been tautologous.

Before he left Paris for the last time, Roussel made a significant purchase: a burial site in Père Lachaise. He avoided the family plot in Neuilly and bought an entire catacomb with thirty-two divisions. Returned from Sicily, he was the only occupant.

They refused to become his paid assassins. Or did they? The attendants, courtiers, procurers, connections. Catling has Roussel, naked and shrivelled, thin as a photographic negative, posing in front of a long mirror in a room of "vicious light". Everything that occurred was at his instigation. Now there is a comic other, a phantom double, confronting him on the far side of the ice pond of the mirror. "There were no facts to grip and

the fictions were worn out.” What happens next is a posthumous dream, a dream that is not his own. *The Vorrh* is the posthumous dream of Raymond Roussel. A somatic topography on the far side of an overdose. But it is much more than that, Roussel is a closed system. Catling’s trick was to let his machines write their own stories, like the needle scratching away on the revolving disk of the lighthouse at Trinity Buoy Wharf all those years ago. Roussel is a puppet within the fractal museum of *The Vorrh*, one of his own manikins or reanimated human shells; a mouth-stitched master of ceremonies for Catling’s Cabaret Melancholique.

Other figures emerge from the limbo of their post-historic slumbers. Among them the damaged photographer Eadweard Muybridge. Death and the camera join the dance. In retirement, the old man arranges the slaughter of a white horse in a specially constructed barn. He wants to witness the world-tearing flash of the instant of extinguished electro-chemical existence. “Muybridge... busied himself with the cameras, collecting their precious thoughts and taking them away, to be unlocked next door in his night-black chapel of chemicals... He had been at the pinnacle of his life’s achievement when he decided to chase another quality in his work: an elusive ghost that permeated everything he photographed. It had led him into deep speculation and personal violation, but still he could not put it aside.”



The journalist booked in to the wrong Grand Hotel. Palermo didn’t do minor key, all the hotels were grand. Grand Hotel et des Palmes trades on ‘faded elegance’ and phantoms detached from their shadows leaving no mark on the pre-auction furniture. Roussel’s suicide is a specialist attraction for poets and thesis

compilers. Grand Hotel Wagner is a “faux-classical monolith, suffocating under heavy wood and gold” in homage to the *Parisifal* composer. Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa, constructed in a former monastery, is “an efficient yet anodyne palazzo restoration”.

There are so many decaying palaces. The writer found himself, by the most fortunate of mistakes, in the Grand Hotel Villa Igiea at Acquisanta, an art nouveau mausoleum of considerable charm in a setting so perfect that it was difficult to make any movement beyond the balcony. All this, with upgrade to top floor, perched under blue heaven, harbour view, wooden shutters and original tapestry wall coverings, came, with flights to and from London, for the price of a one-night stopover in a Premier Inn off the Peterborough ring road.

The hotel was the former residence of the Florio family, who made their fortune from wine and tuna. From the balcony, before dawn, the torpid journalist watched searchlight beams break cloud cover like a biblical sign. Open fishing boats were picking their way around the moored yachts and cruisers. If he had stayed at the Villa Igiea to attempt a connection with Roussel and his bitter conclusion, seeing the reflection in the long mirror with its heavy gilded frame (like a late Bacon), he made the right decision.

Villa Igiea was gussied into an operatic *belle époque* set by the architect and designer Ernesto Basile, who was commissioned by Ignazio Florio to convert the cod-gothic heap with its Walter Scott towers and crenellation into a rival to Grand Hotel et des Palmes. Roussel’s terminus had been transformed by Ernesto Ragusa in 1874, its luxurious reputation attracting Wagner, Liszt and Renoir. After his 1904 success at Villa Igiea, Basile was invited, in 1907, to work the same magic on Grand Hotel et des Palmes. And so, instead of the tunnel linking hotel

and Anglican church, the corridors along which Roussel was supported after yet another smacked ride through the twilight labyrinth seemed to extend to this other Basile makeover, the Marienbad spaces of Villa Igiea. Corridors were endstopped by gigantic mirrors. Every crawl between art nouveau screens, lamp-holders, polished chessboard marble, was an advance on the spectre, the awful double waiting in the frame of the glass. The portrait of death in a dickey bow.

Roussel didn't need to inspect the detritus of the Capuchin catacombs, in his fiction he had already invented methods for bringing the dead back, for reanimating shells of former humans in a simulacrum of life. All those monks on hooks in the subterranean cloakroom are waiting to be scripted by a poet with Roussel's bizarre gifts – and available fortune. The Frenchman tested the language formulae to tap what Grevel Lindrop called “the sleepless memory of the new dead”. The shared memory of plants, insects, stones, ancestors, stars. Snow. Sand. Cold semen drying on slate. Death was advancing fast. It was waiting in the suite of a grand hotel. It was waiting in Palermo.

“The hand of death modelled him speedily, soon made his head a skull,” Iris Murdoch wrote in *The Black Prince*. “He did not try to write.” Death was a release from the obligation to write. Release from the hideous conviction of his own genius, his fate, when the young poet, at the age of seventeen, was possessed “by a fever of work”. He saw rays of light streaming from pages he had defaced with images of crowds and factories, fire and smoke. “These terrible compositional tasks,” Mark Ford wrote, “seem to prefigure the unstoppable logorrhoea... Equally prescient is the complaint that no one will understand his writings.”

In *Locus Solus*, published in 1914, Roussel presents a scholar of private means, Martial Canterel, who conducts a group of

acquaintances around the park of “his beautiful villa at Montmorancy”. The park is gallery, museum, laboratory, philosophical conceit. At the start of the First War, Roussel is bringing back the dead: twitched meat, soulless as cakewalking zombies. Hypnotised sleepwalkers in bone masks. “When Canterel saw what excellent reflexes he obtained with Danton's facial nerves, immobilized by death for over a century, he conceived the hope of producing a complete illusion of life by working with recent corpses protected by intense cold from the slightest corruption.”

He succeeded in his blasphemy. “The illusion of life was absolute: mobility of expression, the continual working of the lungs, speech, various actions, walking – nothing was missing.” But it remained *an illusion*. Negatives printed into mechanistic performance by doses of the chemical *resurrectine*. Roussel's iced stiffis are nudged towards a temporary status as freakish exhibits. The catacomb larvae of Palermo, generations of Capuchin friars, wrapped in sheets and lowered into a pit, a large cistern under the altar of St Anne, are dried out, drained, stuffed with straw. From the mound of bones, when excavations began in 1599, forty-five corpses are found to be intact, heaped on top of one another in a ghastly Abu Ghraib pyramid. The miracle demands some form of display, and so the cloister of dim corridors is created.

Roussel insisted that a glass panel, a kind of portrait frame, be set in his mother's coffin, to maintain contact until the last possible moment. In the instructions he left with Eugène Leiris, before he departed for Palermo, the neurasthenic author authorised a long incision being made in the vein of his wrist, so that there could be no risk of a Poe-influenced premature burial. The crude excavations of his own flesh, undertaken in the bathroom of his suite at the Grand Hotel, are like a rehearsal for the ritual he has already laid down. You can never trust the servants when

they are not properly supervised. The dead poet was embalmed, a technique in which the Capuchins had become masters. Before he was shipped back to Paris and the solitude of his private catacomb.



On the reception desk, when the journalist makes his tour of the deserted hotel, is a lush volume celebrating visitors to the dream hotel, the new royalty of movie stars, actors on location, spillage from the Palermo Film Festival. Sophia Loren with De Sica. Greta Garbo going into the sea from the rocks below the fake temple. Gloria Swanson, the revenant's revenant, former mistress to Joe Kennedy, now accompanied by Paul Newman and Gore Vidal. This way, ladies, for the ballroom of the dead. Burt Lancaster, unlikely Sicilian aristocrat, slips away from Visconti, to drink at the hotel bar with Alain Delon. Kirk Douglas (the last old-Hollywood Russian cowboy standing) escorts Irene Papas. Onassis, in trademark bat-clamp shades, affronted by daylight. Hilary Clinton and her hairdresser. The Blairs, between villas, with their pirate patron, Berlusconi. Actors all in the great game. Take your places, ladies and gentlemen. *Faites vos jeux*.

The car is ready. The journalist's first excursion is to the Capuchin catacombs. The taxi, powered by the spirit of Roussel, cruises the docks and the back streets. It turns right off Via Cappuccini, towards the site of the convent that must once have been on the outskirts of town. Towards the entrance to the underworld. The road is busy, the car is penned against an overflowing stall of fruit and vegetables. The man Fabrizio is waiting in his office.

The entrance fee is so reasonable that the writer suspects there must be a catch. Two euros to set off down the tunnel. Two

hundred euros if you elect to take a photograph. He doesn't. The act would be a gross trespass, on what is here, and on the portfolio already achieved by Ian Wilkinson. The sooty, *edible* darkness of his prints. The chimney of birds he has dropped into this bone pit like a funnel for colonic irrigation. The writer hears their brittle chatter as he passes down the steps and along the lugubrious passage to the catacombs.

No other living creature in the place. No *visible* creature. We have trained ourselves not to see. They are with us always, the *others*, as Robin Cook knew. As we drop our guard, tire of the grind, they touch our shoulders. There must have been spiders, dust-excreting insects. But, mercifully, no tour guides, no camera flashes to activate the silent screams of blackened gumless mouths. The rictal chorus of still hungry incisors.

The promenade around the rectangle of the catacomb is slow and steady, shockingly calm. The vertical dead are so many oversized crows. Voices from the street above ventriloquise the gaping mouths. The husks are not separate from the old world, from the city. The writer hears a woman call out "Carmela". And he thinks he hears the leathery creak of the vulture necks of the mummified friars as they turn to locate the source of the sound. The interruption of their special silence. Their *nested* contemplation of mortality.

The Capuchin friars came to this part of Palermo in 1534, establishing themselves in the church of Santa Maria della Pace. It was part of the belief of the time that burial within a sacred building was the smoothest transit lounge for heaven, a ticket of privilege avoiding mobs of the unwashed and plague-ridden. But lay burial was discouraged – up to the point where the economic advantage of selling limited real estate in the afterlife became obvious.

Dead friars were sheet-wrapped and lowered into a communal cistern, a dry well of dark body liquors. The excavations begun in 1599, to construct an underground cemetery, revealed an interlocked stack of corpses: “whole bodies with flexible and fresh flesh, as though the men of faith had been dead for merely a few hours”. To make the miracle into a marketable installation, a provocation for pilgrims, the shells of the persevered friars, three-dimensional prints of themselves, were arranged in rows. Some of the monks wear their names on cards like ambushed Mexican bandits or early settlers of the American West who posed for postmortem portraits in strategically tipped coffins.

Before 1670 there were few lay burials. But the pressure of demand – financial, political – began to be felt. The rich and important citizens of Palermo wanted to be preserved like game, dressed for celestial transfer as they had been in life. In 1783 the right to catacomb internment, as part of the Capuchin exhibition, was conceded. There was a candle tax, an obligation to perform certain rites for the souls of the dead. Families made regular visits, to dress and undress their ancestors, to maintain respectability. Natural mummification gave way to the processes of science: draining rooms, removal of brain and entrails, curing, vinegar rubs, stuffing with straw.

No fresh bodies were accepted after 1880. Two exceptions were made: Giovanni Paterniti, the vice-consul of the United States of America, in 1911, and Rosalia Lombardo, a two-year-old child who was embalmed in 1920. Rosalia now rests as the final exhibit and the most disturbing. She is bedded in a display case, waxy, suspended, red gold hair damp with the sweat of fever and tied with a yellow silk bow. On the crumpled cerements over her chest a devotional image has been laid, a sentimental cameo in a snowstorm of spores. The nostrils have been plugged with

some white substance, but the sticky eyelids seem to be open, lifeless, but staring out.

There is a glass floor over a beach of memorial stones. The morbidly inclined writer cannot hear his own footfall. The husks, pressed so closely together, a mute jury from the past, absorb sound. There is a division between the bone armatures shrink-wrapped in tanned leather and the clothes that cover them. Clothes age. Clothes have a date and a time. The husks are timeless. They are anaesthetised, waiting on judgement, hands roped. The challenge for the writer is to capture the sense of being suspended between these drained representations, mummified Xeroxes of departed souls, and the reservoir of prints that Wilkinson has made for his catacomb theatre. His animating device is the introduction of English birds. Birds as the missing voices. Birds plucking at straw as the mummies come apart, abdicating their grisly parody of life. The photographer’s eye focuses on texture: fraying rope, embroidered silk, rusting key. The roughness of bone as it turns to coral. Any hope of light takes the form of a white feather floating on an unsourced current of warm air. Cobwebs. Stitches. A wine stain of dead hair. Beaks. Wings like the exposed ribs of cat umbrellas.

The writer begins to understand the courage it demands to make an image. Photography is a mortal risk. Beyond the spoiled ghost of Roussel, mesmerised by his Grand Hotel mirror, Catling summons Eadweard Muybridge, the man who tried to break the stream of time into a legible sequence of single frames. Imprisoned within the complex currents of *The Vorrh*, Muybridge is “a hollow man”. He is both photographer and photograph. The perfect model for any attempt to register the catacomb prisoners. We, the pilgrims, are the light the dead drink. The sound that troubles their stopped memory.

Death and the camera. Death *is* a camera. Catling presents Muybridge (whose paint-smearred books of naked acrobats and blind animals lay on the floor of Francis Bacon's Kensington studio) as a bladder: "a camera without an aperture". Passing alone down the avenue of grinning Capuchin skulls, stuffed friars, uniformed corpses, mummies in mourning rags, the journalist convinces himself that these *things* are cameras, hungry for whatever wafers of light he transports from the upper world. They suck. They absorb. The slender images of passing visitors feed the synapses, creating false or borrowed memory cards. When the intruders depart, skulls croak like stretched birds.

The friars, the lawyers, the catacomb saints of Palermo are so many wet prints drying on hooks. Huge hands have atrophied. Straw bursts from the sliced sternum. The mummies are Eliot's "Hollow Men". Wilkinson recognised them as scarecrows. The sacks of avian skeletons, sculpted by natural process, rescued from their English chimneypiece, voice the tiled avenues of Sicilian dead. Those who are ambitious to scare crows must first attract them. "Sightless," Eliot said, "unless the eyes reappear as the perpetual star."



The garden of remembrance is immaculately kept. White angels guard white tombs in which the dead are laid out, facing the glittering belt of stars. Naked saints on their plinths, near the cathedral, closer to the centre of Palermo, were not so fortunate. Shocked nuns struck off their noses, in lieu of exposed dangly parts they were ashamed to touch. Processing down the cypress avenues, breathing deep to expel the dust, it was hard

for the writer to shake off the imprint of the shelves of skulls and half-skulls, the disarticulated jawbones. They invoked contemporary atrocity photographs, massacre reports from Rwanda, Cambodia, Second War Poland and Russia: the universal concentration camp. Multiplying horrors of a digital world feeding on an eschatology of woodcuts from the dark ages.

The bereaved tended small gardens within the grave plots, memory allotments. Among the grey and white blocks, beds of pink and red flowers, uncloying scents. Some of the sepulchres were as large as temples, an unoccupied suburb waiting for the next volcanic eruption. There were memorials to victims of the Mafia. PIO LA TORRE COMUNISTA. ASSASSINATO DALLA MAFIA. But the detail that pricked the journalist's attention was the way that so many of the headstones were implanted with photographic portraits of the deceased. The chosen badge of a living moment imposed on the plurality of death. Oval portraits glinted in the sunlight like proud brooches. Like snails fed on light.

At the sharp angle between two walls of family photographs, a woman in a red wig is making a call on her mobile phone. She has arrived at the optimum position for contacting her lost ones. The *L* of the wall is one of the missing letters dividing *Roussel* from Russell. Oh yes, they talk back: the departed husbands, sisters, children. The fire-wigged woman gestures in exasperation. Death has done nothing to smooth away old faults. Stripped of her hair-hat, this widow in her smart black coat would call up the naked skull of the wife in the tableau of the married couple, down below in the catacombs. The ones leaning together, with empty sockets and two teeth between them, arguing for eternity. And becoming a popular postcard on the carousel beside Fabrizio's office. *Marito e Moglie. Mann und Frau.*

A circuit of the tombs, inspecting every stone, resting on a stone bench in the cypress avenue, does not reveal the journalist's name on any of the memorials. No oval portrait. Not yet. He puts a small cigar in his mouth, but does not light it. To hold the hour, he takes out a slim book. "My work took me to Sicily... I've been there. There is nothing more to see, there's nothing more to investigate, nothing. There's nothing in Sicily to investigate." *Silence*. "I had a great crew in Sicily. A marvellous cameraman. We took a pretty austere look at the women in black. The little old women in black." *Silence*.

Two postcards, then, and no photographs. The double page map. The ceramic dish or shield with *triskeles*, three legs on a pin running their mad circuit. Freud incubating his cancerous jaw. Roussel nursing his last dose. Luciano offering a Judas kiss. A city spoiled by history. A monkish walker returned from the mainland to found a refuge for the dispossessed. It is time for the writer to align himself at the quadrivium where they bury suicides, skulls lopped off as trophies, stakes through the heart. *Il Teatro del Sorte*, the Theatre of the Sun. The four quarters of the city. It is time to walk.



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He is working on *The Last London*, the endgame of a long sequence that includes *Lud Heat* (1975), *Downriver* (1991), *Lights out for the Territory* (1997), *London Orbital* (2002) and *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire* (2009).