

Stone Mother Tongue

Annamaria Weldon

Annamaria Weldon was born in Malta and emigrated to Western Australia in 1984. She has been awarded artist residencies with Symbiotica at the University of Western Australia (2009) and St James Cavalier in Malta (2016), and has undertaken many field trips for research. Her publications include *Ropes of Sand* (Associated News Malta, 1984), *The Roof Milkiers* (Sunline Press, 2008), and *The Lake's Apprentice* (UWA Publishing, 2014). Annamaria was awarded the inaugural 2011 Nature Conservancy Australia Essay Prize, the 2010 Tom Collins Poetry Prize, and was shortlisted in the Australian Book Review's Peter Porter Poetry Prize in 2012. Her writing centres around place and displacement.

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Malta was ancient and incredible, older than Greece, filled with bleak and terrible temples where people no one knew anything about had worshipped gods no one could imagine. Malta was ancient, and inexplicable ...

Randolph Stow
The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea
Australia 1965

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Fondazzjoni Kreattiva – Spazju Kreattiv
St James Cavalier, Valletta



to the ancestors

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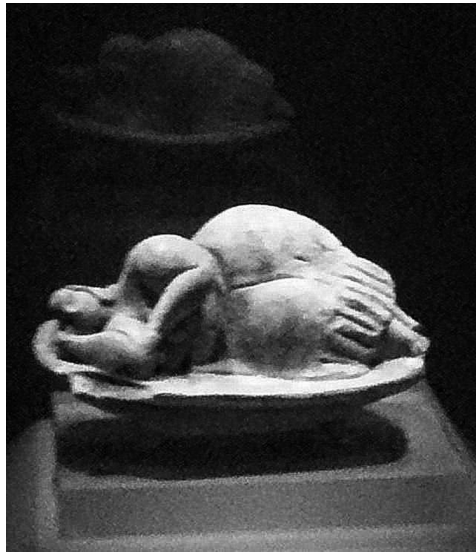
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The Sleeping Woman Statue, found buried at the Hypogeum

PROLOGUE

Incoming

My birthplace is an archipelago so small
that flying south across the Mediterranean
between Africa and Sicily, you'd miss it

unless I told you *look, there!* And lying ahead
would be a slight blemish on the sea's glaze
a scabbish crust on water's rippling skin;

half close your eyes against the rising sun, from this
altitude and angle of descent, its outlines
would be vague as shadows cast by small clouds:

four low-lying islands clinging to the sky-blue
shimmering below us. Dry land, reverse-mirage
without streams or lakes, tenuous as sandbanks

over which great waves might break abruptly,
seamlessly submerging her hills.

*

Home is the absence of sweetwater: carob groves
between shadowless fields, a small mosaic
of brown and matte stripped of tall trees,

low mounds and valleys, half-buried under buildings
of bleached limestone, quarried and farmed since pre-history.
Its bare contours are a bronzed, recumbent goddess

all primordial creases and folds, her clefts and cleaves
cupping villages and hamlets. Thick flanked
and squat, dwellings with arched cloisters, flat roofs.

Castles, coastal lookouts and cathedrals tower
over them; colonnaded palaces, built for perpetuity
by Grand Inquisitors, buckle in summer heat

shallow *terra rossa* tillage splits on terraced hills
where vines of swollen grapes climb rubble-walls.

*

In winter courtyards rain is hoarded in wells
blood oranges darken while the stucco statues
of martyred saints look down from their grottos.

On the piazzas, by virtue of grateful villagers
spared from plague, carved rats gnaw at votive statues.
Afloat in the bays a thousand eyes are weeping

on fishing-boat prows painted in memory of
Horus, talismans restored each season by men
with faith in old gods, although the island

was Holy Rome's prize anchorage, besieged
by infidel sailors until St John's pious knights
raised seawalls around her port cities.

Bastions of massive limestone prised from bedrock,
the weathered blocks stacked like gold cheeses curing.

As we fly lower to land, you can see that where
their pitted crust is broken, the quarried heart is
soft and crumbling. Wild caper bushes have taken

root between the stones and festoon streets
tinged amber where, moving in swarms,
back-bent as bees, the islanders come into view.

Crouched like *Harruba*, those hardy carob trees
leaning against the ages, they do not look up.
History's survivors have heard it all before

the sound of invasion that some call arrival.
