Sulina's Voice

Anneleen Van Offel

An extract pp 100-116

Original title De stem van Sulina
Publisher De Arbeiderspers, 2024
Translation Dutch into English
Translator Fiona Graham

In Willendorf, in the Wachau region, a statue of a naked woman gazes out over the water. As though to emphasize the proportions of her thighs and belly, her skinny arms lie folded over her heavy breasts and her slender shoulders are pulled back, while her head, encircled by seven bands, has a slight forward tilt. Creases in the crooks of her arms, delicately chiselled fingers. She was dug up a hundred and twenty years ago, when the railway line between Krems and Grein was being built: the original, eleven centimetres long and thirty thousand years old, is carved from a type of stone not found in Lower Austria, indicating that someone carried her an impressively long distance. Her legs taper and she lacks feet. She may have been designed to be carried around or to be placed upright in the ground.

The enlarged version has a curious effect on perspective: rather than our looking down at her, she now stares out over our heads towards the Danube, which has flowed imperturbably through the fluvial lowlands for tens of thousands of years. We are an irrelevance, vanishing in the space between her and the river. Time folds up like a concertina, a mere sigh separates her from us: picture the scene without cars, without houses, and look at the water. A sub-Arctic climate with coniferous forests, populated by Arctic foxes, bison, bears and mammoths, and by people whose migrations were determined by the course of the river, who lived by the cycle of the seasons and the grace of the climate. What lies beneath our feet, what conceptual world disappeared all those tens of thousands of years ago?

Over the last century, hundreds of figurines have been recovered from sediment and caves across a region extending all the way from south-western Europe to Lake Baikal, as well as from the Zagros Mountains of Iraq, Turkey, and ancient Mehrgarh in today's Pakistan. Carved out of animal bones, soft limestone or ivory, or formed from clay and baked, they bear traces of red ochre, and the vast majority have prominent female sexual characteristics. Some figurines have a linea nigra, a dark line running from the navel to the pubis that mostly appears in the second trimester of pregnancy, while others display creases at womb level or pendulous breasts. Five hundred kilometres upstream, not far from the Danube, the oldest representation of a human being ever found was recovered from a cave: the Venus of Hohle Fels, a woman whose vulva is dilated as if she is about to give birth. Her whole body is breast, belly, vulva: she clasps her distended belly, a stance that ripples on from woman to woman, part of the same water surface.

Not only are their feet non-existent and their legs stunted, but their faces are missing too. They have no nose, no mouth, no eyes; they are not depictions of individual women, but embodiments of a concept. Each face is a screen reflecting the beholder's narrative. They speak an indecipherable language preserved for aeons in the soil, a language that has disintegrated into disjointed sounds:

potsherds, earthenware. It is not possible to ascribe a single meaning to such figurines wherever they occur in the world, given the absence of documentary sources. They are an unwritten narrative.

And yet many have tried. One such was the Lithuanian archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, also travelling along the course of the Danube towards Vienna, in the summer of 1944. A twenty-three-year-old woman on a horse-drawn cart, with her baby on one arm and her master's thesis in the other. Yesterday I revisited the documentary about her on YouTube. I couldn't pause the image of the young woman and her family on the cart at quite the right moment, so the following frame kept showing through – the one with Marija Gimbutas at the end of her life, when she had become one of the twentieth century's most controversial scholars, both fêted and vilified for having written a new origin story for Europe. She was looking back as an older woman, with the image of her family in flight still superimposed upon her face, the pram upside down on the cart, with its wheels in the air.

She was pursued not by floods but by the Second World War, and already had a long journey behind her, an escape over the River Nemunas. Behind her lay the academic life so recently built, her study in Vilnius where she wrote her master's thesis about burial rites in prehistoric Lithuania, rocking her new-born daughter with the other hand. Without realising it, she thereby embodied what was later to become the core of her work – the eternal circle of life and death.

After the war, having rebuilt her career in the United States, she occupied a unique niche as an archaeologist who also had a linguistic background. She read primary sources in thirteen languages and used her knowledge of folklore, ethnology and mythology to discern links between various archaeological sites in Europe, focusing particularly on the female figurines and curious inscriptions on pottery found there. She carried out pioneering work at various sites in south-eastern Europe, in a field that had hitherto attracted little attention among scholars. She watched over these sites with an eagle eye, determined to piece together the puzzle. Gimbutas was convinced that lab analyses could not tell the whole story, had no qualms about drawing on her vast ethnological expertise, constantly reviewed her own conclusions, and took a passionate interest in digs across the region. All this aroused suspicion in the academic world.

What she described was spectacular. The land beneath the industrial cities of south-eastern Europe preserved the traces of an epoch that outlasted any realm, an era free of war or distinctions of rank, neither patriarchal nor matriarchal, centring on fertility, death and rebirth. A flourishing civilisation covering the central area of the Danube basin, between the Dniester and modern-day Greece, with a common language and culture. Gimbutas interpreted the figurines as portrayals of goddesses embodying unity with nature who were central for millennia to the way we thought and shaped society. The earth was both lawgiver – one that could not be deceived – and religious power. A religion in which the body was the holy scripture. A fluid text of milk, tears, water.

She wrote an appealing narrative of the ancient voices concealed in the soil of Europe, the songs that permeate the land. Many saw in her work the physical evidence of a better world. If it lay hidden beneath our feet, it was within reach.

And once more I stretch out the concertina of time, trying to imagine a society in which power was a function not of domination, but rather of something emanating from within, a transformative impulse. A society that followed the seasons, in which God was not a father but a mother, not above us but with us, and where a mother's body was not required to look as if it had never given birth. A society not built for just one sex, following cycles of life, death and rebirth, like the female body, which resembles water in its tidal character. *Mater, mother, mud, Mutter, madre, materia*, the material substance of our planet, the Mother is the Earth itself: it cannot be mere coincidence, wrote the American essayist and feminist Adrienne Rich, that the name 'Mother Earth' has sentimental overtones in our time.

A wind blows through the grass, as if imbuing it with new breath.

Leaning against the plinth on which the Venus of Willendorf stands, I gaze at the Danube. It's not hard to imagine the stone growing soft and warm, yielding under my weight, or the sudden sensation of an ancient hand touching my head, while a conversation that I am too small to comprehend continues above me.

The narrative has everything, including a dramatic turning point: a dust cloud on the horizon, pounding hoofs, the dazzling gleam of axes, and male hands which grab women from the ground, send the peaceful civilisation up in flames and conquer Old Europe with overwhelming force. Warriors straight from the Russian steppes, murdering, raping and laying the foundations of our Western civilisation, with their androcentric social structure and alienation from the natural world. The characters in this narrative are gender stereotypes; like all stories, this one is easier to tell in terms of contrasting opposites. The caring woman, the mother bearing new life, biologically predestined to form a link with the elements, versus the violent man, exploiter and destroyer.

Marija Gimbutas was convinced that each excavation brought her greater understanding of a long-vanished world, and although there was academic opposition from the outset, the zeitgeist seemed to be in her favour. These were the feminist 1970s. She was revered by ecofeminists and artists who came to worship Gimbutas herself as a mother goddess: she, too, was locked into a narrative. What this warm, motherly old woman showed us was not just the past, but, above all, how our future might look.

But her work drew sharp criticism from her fellow archaeologists for its far-reaching conclusions. Although she challenged the dominant narrative, she did so in a way that was also authoritarian. And the secrets of prehistoric Europe remained locked in the soil forever, for want of written sources.

What happened from the 1990s on is every scholar's nightmare. The academic world ignored Gimbutas's work, it went out of print, and virtually no references were made to it. Others simplified and hijacked her ideas, projecting their own views onto them. Critiques were often emotive; many articles were not only spiteful and aggressive in tone, but also *ad feminam*, insinuating that her perceptions were fogged by the menopause and the empty nest syndrome. Not one of the male scholars who articulated similar theories or laid the foundations for her research was attacked as virulently as Gimbutas.

If this had any impact on her, she gave no sign of it. She continued to defend her work and to write books until she was bested by lymph node cancer. The elderly woman afforded glimpses of the young woman on the cart: she was the girl who hid her husband and two Jewish women during the German occupation of Lithuania, the young mother travelling to Vienna on false papers, with a new-born baby. She was the woman who sold encyclopaedias to make ends meet, who worked at night and who, as a woman, was denied entry to the library, until she finally received the offer from UCLA that saved her. Little could shake her. Marija Gimbutas knew the laws of death and rebirth.

That is how I see her: sitting abandoned in time, her hands buried in the sand. She alone hears the song, or thinks she hears it. Around her, all is silent.

Death and rebirth. Thanks to various breakthroughs in the potential of DNA analysis, evidence emerged some years ago to indicate that large groups of Indo-European tribespeople did indeed migrate to Europe – just as Gimbutas had written – where they outnumbered local communities. They felled forests on a massive scale so that their livestock could graze on pastureland. This transformed the landscape, which came to resemble the steppes they had left behind, enabling them to use the land for economic ends. The indigenous population was supplanted within a few generations.

Much of Gimbutas's theory is now accepted even by her former critics; in fact, more and more

anthropologists believe that Neolithic Europe did indeed have a sophisticated cult of deities, with goddesses foremost among them. Yet we should be careful when we are tempted to attribute to these deities a significance ascribed in modern times, or to interpret a single catastrophic event as a discrete tipping point towards the present patriarchal structure of our society.

Our narrative of Europe's origin myth is based only on the things that have physically survived from ancient times, such as splinters of bone and potsherds, and how we fit them together reflects both our contemporary reference points, fears, ideas and desires, and gender norms which, anthropologists now agree, were more complex in prehistoric times than we might imagine; new research shows that hundreds of warrior tombs once attributed to men are actually the resting places of women. It seems unlikely that this is a story of gentle, passive women living in a natural paradise, versus bloodthirsty men. Besides, that narrative occurs in a political context which frames men from other parts of the world as a threat, conflating culture and race: it is a grisly, dramatic story of violence and domination by alien peoples. Ironically, the theory that we ourselves are descended from ferocious warriors is mainly shared proudly in far-right circles.

The story of the opposing powers, the resistance that must also have existed, as well as the fact that communities tend to experiment with new societal forms; the possibility that the Neolithic tribes were beset by climate change and diseases, and might already have been decimated; the thousand-year time scale, meaning that power relations could already have shifted before the arrival of the peoples of the steppe, and the exact nature of those power relations; how people experienced religion, the significance of the figurines – all of these are secrets which the statuettes will keep forever. There is no straight line leading back into the past: it meanders, and it is a line we draw ourselves, with a wavering hand.

Evening falls. We park on the verge in front of a sawmill. I fry a few mushrooms, pour a jarful of pasta sauce over them, and cook penne. The variation in our evening meals comes down to daily choices between cherry tomatoes and mushrooms, between tomato sauce with basil or tomato sauce arrabiata-style, and between penne, farfalle and spaghetti. That's the full extent of our creativity in a kitchenette without a fridge or working surface and with only two gas burners.

Before we go to sleep, I curl up against Leon's body: he shields and cocoons me, laying a hand on my belly. This is the moment when we have conversations free of daytime interruptions, facing the same way in the dark. This trip is a farewell journey, says Leon, a farewell to the two of us, which gives me a jolt; I've long since left the two of us behind, there are already three as far as I'm concerned. I close my eyes while he strokes my belly, feeling the warmth of his hand on my skin, and while I fall asleep I feel him gently disengaging from me, shifting over to his own patch. The old goddesses step out of the dark and glide into my dreams, they are formless, consisting only of voices; it is the trees, the rocks and the river itself that whisper to me, and in my dream I understand exactly what they are saying, even though I have no words for it; it is knowledge that melts away as soon as the early morning sunlight falls into the van.

The goddesses I surround myself with are those of ancient Greek and Roman myth. In my life, their stories are never far away. They are the mothers Gaia, Demeter and Leto – it seems the latter's name, significantly, means *the invisible one* – and the free-spirited virginal hunter Artemis. Zeus, the male chief deity, is always nearby: the goddesses are married off and raped, and they are closest to nature when transformed into animals, mostly through another deity's nefarious scheming or when they are accidentally destroying the earth in a fit of fury. Though they belong to a patriarchal world, they have not relinquished their power. They are angry, vengeful, manipulative; they utter death-dealing curses, yet also celebrate, feel desire, hunt, protect, have a sense of justice; they are much like humans. What they signify is subject to caprice and change; there is not just one story to tell about them; they are complex characters.

And it is Artemis, above all, who battles against the old world. She rises from the river and reclaims her body. On the sandy banks, she steps over what's left of Actaeon the hunter and vanishes into the forest, where her spirit remains, a fount of female energy that stands for independence and liberty. As the patron goddess of childbirth, she can be heard in the shrieks of women in labour, and at the same time she represents the wilderness: she is a bridge between humankind and nature.

I wash in cold water, standing beside the washing bowl while Leon looks on. I already have a bump, which is more pronounced in the evening than in the morning. This bulge is something I'm not yet accustomed to, and sometimes I get a shock when I look down. My memory is out of sync with my body, believing it knows the way blindfold, how my body has developed since puberty. Now it's as if I rise with a new body each morning. One woman after another unfolds within me.

Slipping outside, I nip over to the sawmill, where I ask the man starting up his computer behind the counter where the toilet is. In a nanosecond – in which I see the hint of a refusal flit over his face – I lay my hand beneath my navel so as to look slightly more pregnant. A brief nod towards a door behind him: I must remember this trick.

A copse peters out at a bend in the river. As the banks are flooded, the narrow footpath now leads straight to the water's edge. We park the van beside the path, as close to the water as possible, fling the doors wide open and set up our picnic table and camping chairs outside. I take a photo which I share on my social media with a quote from Claudio Magris, *What is certain is that the river goes downhill, like him who follows it*, well aware of the image I'm conveying. Passers-by peek curiously into the van, raising a hand in greeting. I see myself through their eyes: *#vanlife*, a rose-tinted lifestyle, a simplicity we've chosen ourselves, in harmony with the elements, though I can also see that our white van is spoiling the view of the river.

Instead of driving on to Vienna, we linger at this spot beside the Danube. I search for words to describe it but none come, my mind is the cloudless blue sky of a sunny summer's day. We nod off in the afternoon and decide to stay on in the evening and overnight.

The freedom to choose where to go, and when. The privilege of leaving home for a while because you can always return. You can hanker after a simpler life because you have clutter you can declutter. A cosily heated house is a comfortable place where you can dream about life in a tent. And yet I can feel a sense of serenity and freedom come over me that I haven't experienced for a long time. The water has a calming effect, as if uncoupled from the river that pursues its course as it has since time immemorial: a signpost, an escape route.

If only we could just stay here. A simple life within a few square metres. Watch the sun go down from the river bank, then get the van ready for the night. Maybe the desire to live in a tiny house is essentially nostalgia for an unspoilt natural world that's lost forever. A mirage which contrasts with a society in overdrive – a contrast that needs to be stepped up constantly if it is still to serve its purpose.

We carry in the picnic table and the folding chairs, clear up our rubbish and slam the doors shut. But we're enclosed inside a van at a spot where it's out of place. There's more rain during the night. I dream that the river is lapping at our wheels, until the van is surrounded by water, a latter-day ark with only two people on board, and a pale patch where a dead deer once hung.

***

Her skin is grainy, creamy yellow, pockmarked. She bathes in a velvety red glow reminiscent of the ochre that must once have covered her. Minute yet mighty, perched on a delicate black plinth in the Venus Cabinet at Vienna's Museum of Natural History. We are eye to eye here, far away from the river, disconnected from the environment in which she was found. I linger with her for a long time: the Venus of Willendorf, a woman from a world in which the invisible occupied an important place.

The sandy yellow of the oolite she is made of makes her appear newly scooped up from the soil, as though the very earth has taken on a female form.

I lay my hand on my belly, and while gazing at her I feel myself, too, become heavier, as the cabinet disappears, the museum around it and even the city, dissolving into a timeless space, while I, like the Venus, develop breasts heavy with the promise of milk. Gradually my pelvis tilts, my centre of gravity shifts and my back becomes hollow, while my abdomen swells, becoming plumper and plumper; suddenly my navel has vanished and my belly is smooth for an instant, until my navel turns inside out as if someone had poked a finger into it from the inside, indicating the point where I myself was once linked to my mother. And then I feel an unmistakable tremor, first in a single spot, just under a rib, and then again; I have the sense that I am carrying *something*; *tell me, who are you*, I ask; never before have I experienced such self-abandonment to something unknown. I stroke the place where the ripple occurs, a ripple that swells and which I can now feel in two places at once, as it suddenly acquires a body with reference points on my belly – here a tiny foot, there a head. A rising movement inside me, the baby is growing upwards, pressing on my organs so hard that I'm increasingly out of breath.

And as the intemporal space around me also creeps under my skin, I begin to waver, become untethered, entering a liminal area of consciousness. I grow soft, lose hours to sleep during the day, and when I discover the first stretch marks I realise my body will never be the same again, that from now on I'll have to read myself between the lines. That makes me cry.

Looking down, I am nothing but roundness: I no longer have legs. Someone could pick me up, carry me for miles, pass me on to another woman, who will pass me on to another woman, and so on, until I am finally set down carelessly on the ground, after which no one else picks me up. The river envelops me in ooze, withdraws, envelops me again, layer upon layer through the ages; I sink deep into the earth, until the excavators come and I am reborn; someone puts me under a glass cover on a black plinth in a museum, in a velvety red glow reminiscent of the ochre that once covered me.

I see myself reflected in the glass case. My bump isn't an obstacle at this stage, but a nascent bulge, elegant. I'm not yet shut away behind glass, confined to an image we have of motherhood; I can walk away from her, leave the cabinet behind, walk out of the museum and disappear into the city. But I sense how the narrative has already wormed its way into my mind, the ineradicable narrative of the birth deadline, the fear that physical fatigue will hoarsen my language, just as old age erodes a voice.

Leon appears in the doorway. Time to go, he says, we'll have to get a move on if you still want to look at that statue in the Stadtpark. The floods have nearly caught up with us, it would be better to avoid the small loop where the Danube crosses over into Slovakia and drive straight on to Hungary.

I gaze at the writer for another moment, and she gazes back: we are the product of each other's imagination, and we are inhabited by other women too. They speak, sing, tell stories, tempt, call down curses. Some have a name, are built of blood and bones; some have been fashioned by narratives and others out of river mud; some once vanished into the earth, while others re-emerged from it; they are carved from marble or limestone, like the woman on a fountain in the middle of the Stadtpark, who I'm about to walk over to visit.

She stands metres above the ground, on a rectangular pillar surrounded by four basins, one on each side, with gargoyles above each basin, yet someone has managed to paint the Danube Maiden's lips red. The folds of her robe, which she's holding up casually as if to emphasize the nakedness of her breasts, contain two fishes. Like the young girl in Donaueschingen, she gazes into the distance, towards the Black Sea. Here, she has developed into a young woman, her body following the curve of the branch of the river that runs through the city, far from its main course. A movement that sends us

back to the van, along the Danube Canal to the outskirts of the city, where we cross over the main artery of the Danube.

But we get out again briefly at a bend where trucks turn on the industrial estate at Albern harbour. A narrow path runs down through scrub to a small lawn at a lower level. The little Graveyard of Nameless People is surrounded by trees clustered together for mutual support. This is the world's only cemetery for the victims of a river. The frequent floods of past centuries washed up corpses on this spot. Desperate people who had gone down into the water of their own accord, which debarred them from burial on Catholic land, labourers killed during the harbour's construction, but also an eleven-year-old boy whose grave bears the legend *drowned by the hand of an unknown person*. People whose bodies had lain in the water for months before they were washed up on land were buried here, people without a name, without relations.

Every year, on the Sunday following All Saints Day, a band of fishermen from the Albern neighbourhood still launch a raft laden with flowers and lighted candles. With a symbolic epitaph – *for the victims of the Danube* – and a plea in three languages to push the raft back out into the river should it get snarled up in the reeds.

Translator's note

'*What is certain is that the river goes downhill, like him who follows it*' is a quotation from Claudio Magris's *Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea* (Chapter 2, 'The Universal Danube of Engineer Neweklowsky; section 29, 'The Blue Inn Waltz', p. 123, in the Harvill Press paperback edition, first published in 1999). The translator is Patrick Creagh.