

WHITE GROUND

By Popi Aroniada

Anestis opened the door, the dawn generously offered him fulfilment with the sounds of birds, the smells of the wet earth, the salty notes that were coming wave-by-wave, while a south wind was playing around in land and sea. He felt full as his eyes embraced the giant infinity, focusing on the beauty of the whole world, his olive grove. He had the wisdom to dream of the future with no surprises, these centuries-old trunks, an army of strength and stability, offered him the confidence of the earth, without ever making him haughty and lost in the open field of chaos. A pleasant warmth came to him as he sipped a few sips of steaming coffee, biting a slice of kneaded bread sprinkled with amber oil and oregano, as the dawn breeze was quite cool. Shortly thereafter he went to the basement, which was divided into two spaces, to the left there were oil tanks, some wine barrels and the shelves contained massive amounts of glass jars of all sizes, all that could be preserved from last spring and the end of summer was here, spoon sweets, liqueurs, compotes, pickles, honey and tomato sauces, all from his mother's hands, in small quantities now, but giving a sense of assurance and adequacy to their household. He took the pickaxe and the hoe from the other half of the room, where he had all kinds of tools lined up, put them on his shoulders to open pits for planting new olive trees, while whistling musical memories. These were musical memories he had from his travels in the Mediterranean ports, when he decided to embark at the age of twenty-five after the betrayal of Myrsini, the great love of his - short until that moment - life. The world that surrounded him was not enough for him, it choked him, her absence wasn't tolerable, she, as an infidel, accepted to marry another man and leave the island, he thought he would strike a blow with a magic wand and he would meet a fairy tale world. However, as he conquered with his eyes and senses every harbour, every state, he acquired smells, sounds and inadvertently compared them to the place he left behind, his home. The differences were not great, there were familiar seas, landscapes, only the languages changed and sometimes the customs and traditions, until he returned and rooted on his island, he felt for his homeland and its saltiness, he also admitted that he had lost her for good. He had grown older, he was turning grey, but he had acquired a point of reference and this was no other than his land,

his olive grove, which was a rational perception of the flow of time, the past and the future.

So, having an open mind, when he learned that a large piece of land was for sale, which was a root at the church of St. Thomas, he bargained a bit and took it, loved it from the first moment, put a fence around it, cleared the field around it and talked to it, sang to it, having sat down on the bench of the church, gazing at a piece of sea that was extending in the horizon. The day and the glittering sun greeted the start of work, he had created in his daily life a set of details that gave him safety and faith. He loaded the tools into the pickup truck and headed for his new acquisition, he would create his own olive grove, his own work of art, his reference to the passage through life. For Anestis, it was not just a field, it was a creation, he had studied every detail of the point where each sapling would be planted, looking at the perspective they would create depending on the point of observation, he had to leave room to apply the new techniques of fruit collection nets. He was also interested in the image of his field at the courtyard of St. Thomas, he wanted visitors to see a beautiful silver-grey carpet, he had even studied the pruning he would make along the way so that his olive grove would be the most beautiful of the island.

So, with this enthusiasm, he began digging pits at the points that had lime-marked. He was gathering his mental forces in the centre of the pit, lifting the pickaxe and it was sinking into the earth, revealing something new each time, another colour of the soil, a stone, wild roots, a worm, his mind had never stood in such details, it was like he was coming out of some sort of long-term blindness and the reality of the world was thrown at him, thousands of elements in constant change were engaging in a dialogue without a beginning and an ending. He continued his work without taking notice of any fatigue, he continued the curved paths of the pickaxe over his head, with the mind concentrated on the target and his firm arm controlling the force required to make the incision in the pit proportional, until the left tip of the metal gave a different sound to its stone encounters, something white was scratched at its tip. He knelt on the freshly-dug soil, touched the finding with his fingertips at the wounded white spot, the reality was hidden between delusion and the deceived eye or some important finding. He began to dig anxiously over the object, now indifferent to the roundness of the trough that he was ruining, now he was only interested in the discovery, perhaps of the utmost importance, perhaps a mere piece of marble. We do not control the process, it usually controls us, but it

doesn't make us doubt our apparent sovereignty. Anestis, sweaty in his agony, grasped the hoe this time and slowly and kindly, moving carefully around the object, removed the soil both with the hoe and the shovel, lost and completely devoted to his work. He briefly raised his head to take a breath, looking at himself only through the majesty of nature and the nature of the force he had never bent, realizing the forces that govern his being and the satisfaction they offer. He kneeled again, now moving away the soil with his hands left-right, until he reached the back of the head of a relatively small statue, standing upright on the ground, was it whole or there was only one head? He felt his mind numb, his mind plunged into a thousand things at the same time, his clarity left him, he was full of emotions. This possibility never came to his mind. A price, a dilemma, an uproar, led him to St. Thomas's bench, lighting a cigarette, unconsciously asking for help to find the right way to respond, though still in the beginning, while being upset he was looking for the simple happiness of peace, but on the other hand his curiosity was burning him on the inside. It was from the few moments in his life that he was in need of a man of confidence, to share the burden, he needed his father, who had been buried in the cemetery of St. Nicholas for years, he needed his wisdom, he had to take responsibility for his decisions with a free and sober mind. Suddenly, somewhat relieved without any due cause, he ran and jumped into the pit, with a small mattock and his bare hands and continued the work of revelation, as perfect silence was laying inside him, for an unknown number of minutes, perhaps hours, when he finally managed to depose the finding on his dirty feet, like a baby that was just born with an uncut umbilical cord. He sat on the fresh soil in the pit and began, with his hands, to remove the soil from where he could. So, subtle female facial features began to appear and then a beautifully chiselled half-naked body on a square base, of a total height of about fifty or sixty centimetres appeared. The left hand, broken at the height of the wrist, from the posture of the body seemed to hold something, something to offer, but it was missing, like much of the support base. The other hand was positioned beneath the base of the well-shaped chest, gently covered with a mantle of intricate folds, broken in the finish just above the knee, as a crack, with soil embedded, hurt her delicate neck, as if someone wanted to behead her and regretted it. Tears began to run uncontrollably, he was wiping his eyes with the upside of the palm without counting the dirt that was everywhere, he had become one with it, holding her tightly in his arms to hold all the beauty of the unknown

mistress who had suddenly entered in his life. An innermost void was created, he was automatically judging and being judged, for the unknown of the next moment, for the terrible shortcomings of this world, for the changes that arrived irreversibly in his life.

With his mind blurred, he went into the car, took a sack that was thrown into the trolley, jumped back into the pit, put the statue in the sack, carefully placed it in front of the passenger's seat and moved towards the tin warehouses. He grabbed a large metal bucket, filled it with water and carried it inside the warehouse. Then, he carefully lifted the sack with its precious content, locked the door from the inside and began to wash the girl gently, until her whiteness and uniqueness cut his breath. With the water running from her body, as if pulling her out of the baptismal font, he lifted her onto the wooden bench. He approached, they came face to face, the fundamental logic and good taste of his existence were overwhelmed, the freedom and soberness of his thought, his intelligence, did not deserve a dime in front of the splendour of her art and beauty. He was afraid that he would lose his mind because of the tension, as the thoughts succeeded one another, he couldn't understand what the particular moment of his quiet life had brought him, was it a gift or a curse? However, what was prevalent in his mind was, 'What are we doing now?' He decided to leave the statue in the warehouses and leave, to get some air, to think clearly, but he had to hide it first. He held it tight in his arms, opened the hold and placed it on the barley, placing blank sacks on it. Then, he closed the hold and placed a few oil containers on its lid. Coming out, he locked both locks, trembling, feeling sneaky threats and eyes hidden behind the bushes watching him, until the need for rational thought and calmness prevailed.

Entering the house with his clothes dirty, upset as he was, he faced his mother's restless eyes, waiting to meet his own and trying to understand what brought him into this situation, but the wisdom of years prevailed and she didn't say anything. She set the table for him to eat, told him that she kept hot water for him to be washed and that she would be in the living room, waiting for him there, if he wanted to share what tormented him, so as to relieve him. He ate unconsciously, because he actually found that he was hungry, he hadn't eaten anything since the morning when he ate the slice of bread with oil and coffee and he drank a glass of wine, as he used to or perhaps two were needed this day. Then he went into the bathroom, pouring a lot of hot water on him to relax. He did not go into the living

room at all, but ended his mother's waiting with a hurried, 'Goodnight,' before he entered the room, slipped into the fragrant bed and stared at the ceiling. Through the light of the street lamp, he could see the lady of earth, she was in his memory in every detail, her beauty was remarkable and a smile formed on his lips, for the first time, at the end of the day. No one knows how long that sweet feeling lasted, when did he fall asleep? He woke up soaked in sweat, due to the sound of a blackbird sitting in a branch outside the window and, while trying to distinguish the nightmare from reality, he realized it was the morning of the next day. He also realized that, among other things, he had to travel to Sicily for a few days for the exhibition of olive oil, for which he had declared participation. He found, based on yesterday's finding, that it was time to penetrate his consciousness, to come out of the prolonged nirvana of his simplistic and quiet life of thirty-five years, since it had never been substantially disturbed and now an unknown ego was being ejected from within, inviting him to get to know it. His mind was on fire, he grabbed a chair, stepped on it and kept touching the hold trying to locate the box. Due to anxiety and distress, he could only hear his faint breath, he was listening as it was very loud, as if coming out of his depths and as if he had just discovered it. He pulled out a lot of things and finally found her, pulled her out and left her box burst onto the floor, creating dust. He opened it quickly, a lot of memories fluttered in front of him, such as the tallyman who was trying to convince his father by spreading the debt books on the table and he would sign for the instalments.

'My dear, Anestis, will you read this form me? Or do I throw my sweat for nothing?'

'Yes, father, I'll read it," he said, at the age of ten.

He brought the box to his room and started from the letter S, statues, in case he could understand the period of origin of his own. Without much help from the encyclopaedia, he went back to the warehouse, grabbed it with both hands and put it on the bench. He felt that he had just lost his blindness, his heart tore, his imagination came to life, he touched her marble face gently, he continued wandering all over her body, the cold feeling of the marble had disappeared, a shamefully intoxicating reflection of a flawless skin took its place, considering as past all the pillars that supported his days, pillars that had just broken. He held the statue so tight that his hands ached, he was about to throw it to the floor with force, screaming uncontrollably: 'Why have you come into my life, what will I do with you now, sell you

and become rich? Should I hand you over and lose my property? Or keep you forever as my beloved? I'm sure you're a goddess, but which one? Show me your strength, speak, say something', as he burst into sobs, like those lonely ones, which are expressed when in great pain. Less innocent now, he put the statue back in the hold, secured it and moved on to the field to continue work, unleashing all the mental pressure by tearing the land with the pickaxe, digging all the holes for the planting of new trees in the land that he worshiped as a child, the same land that now tries to test him.

As a sweet colour was falling to her profile, from the sunset and the reflection of light in the dyed brown buildings of Syracuse, her delicate features and wavy hair that kindly surrounded her face, reminded him of her. Her, who shook his life and now lies face down in the barley, inside the hold. She was a quiet, smiling girl, on the same mission, from the first moment he noticed her and now this profile was going through him, he slightly moved her left and right to admire her from all angles, saving this image of her into his memory. At the end of the first day at the expo, he didn't waste any time and asked her for a walk at the sea that uniquely touches this city passing through the alleys and baroque squares. She eagerly accepted. During the course of the night, he was discreetly approaching her face to see that she was real, he wanted to touch her, to be convinced that she was not made of marble, just as beautiful. The long-shut-down cinema machine turned on again and, in the sail of his life, a beautiful, erotic piece began, the protagonists were endowed with much in common, with everything they needed for their film to have a happy ending. Anestis regained within himself the respect of the power of events and reality, he made sure that his interior was cleansed of all the illusions and conflicts within him in order to live, fall in love with a flesh-and-bone woman, but the lady of the earth was always among them. Fortunately, the dice was cast for him, the encounters with his girlfriend were explosive, because beyond all pleasures, there was mutual attraction, understanding and the same strong love for their land, sea and home.

One dawn, as he was waking up from crazy dreams, he decided to go to the warehouse. It had been long since the day he returned from the trip and he hadn't paid her a visit. The sun had risen for good, but the warehouse remained dark, he lit the large flashlight, dug her up from the barley and set her against him on the bench. It was as if a smile appeared on her lips, her colour was as if alive, her look was as if complaining, then he gently touched her without feeling the cold marble, he touched

her face, her chest and it was as if he felt a contraction, he put the flashlight straight on her face and it was as if she had tears. He grabbed her and threw her forcefully on the cement, the old crack opened and her head rolled over, he grabbed her from the corner of the warehouse and, as if possessed, broke her to pieces. A premeditated crime, he was screaming in mute, his eyes were full in tears, his mouth was dry, his heart was ready to break. He turned the statue to pieces, then put these pieces into the grinder and it all became coarse sand. He knelt, gathered, in sobs, every little crumb in a bucket, held it tight in his arms, entered the pickup truck and went to scatter the sand, one handful at a time, around the roots of each newly planted olive tree.