

Women and Stones

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Excerpt translated by Tess Lewis

Fragments

Pencil

A female body of white marble: arms missing, the head too perhaps, the breasts are there, are solid, over them: a robe draped in flowing folds. Michelangelo is said to have looked at a block of marble and seen the kind of form it contained, he just had to set it free. I wonder how much value there is in freedom when it comes from another's hands as I tap my hammer on the pointed chisel, which in turn digs into the alabaster. Tiny slivers of stone fly off, which I'll sweep up later, but not right now – now my muscles are tired. I say: *My arms are used to only holding a pencil*. And the sculptress teaching the course says: *Look at it this way – the chisel is a pencil that smashes things*.

Effort

On the second day, the assistant watched me for a while, then said: *You know, it's actually supposed be cathartic*. And until he left, I made an effort to use more force on the stone and still look relaxed. In fact, it wasn't the use of force that put me in a state of inner equilibrium, but the small pile of debris beneath my worktable: the crumbled residue of my decisions, rejection made visible.

Freedom

The wish to be a mountain: rough and resolute, formidable and forbearing, august and honest.

Abstraction

I didn't have to pay for the piece of alabaster I'm working on now. Anyway, *no one could have done anything with this*, the assistant said after examining it from every angle. It's elongated and gets very narrow in the middle, like an angular hourglass. *Just follow*

the stone, he said and set the tool down for me, *and never at a right angle*. Over time, smooth surfaces and rounded ones emerge, some gleaming, some matt. "Looks like a child," everyone says, without exception, when I show them a photograph of the object. I'm confident: the form is abstract.

Veins

As I finish the surface of the alabaster with damp, ever finer grained sandpaper until it becomes glassy and the veins emerge, I think of the kidney failure that occurred on both sides of my family in the mid-nineties. I don't know if was connected to the decade, I only know that I was shocked to see my grandparents' blood flowing through a box with slowly rotating propellers and especially: back into them. I assume that the blood of the alabaster's ancestors never had to be cleansed of the residue of keeping silent. I hope that this is what lends the stone an essential contentedness, even confidence at times.

Air

The sculptress teaching the course says: *my teacher advised me to sign only with my initials, in other words, to sign in a way in which it's not immediately clear that I'm a woman. At any rate – he was a giant. What he could do in a quarter of an hour would take me half a day. If you're that slow, you'll never be able to live from your work. Still, he refused to teach me how to work with compressed air – so I secretly took a compressor course. That's how it is. You need air to live*.

Type

We go for a drink after class: Ben, who's working on the largest stone and apparently has no other goal than to make it small; Kori, who's perfecting a round convoluted soapstone sculpture with needle rasps; and me. None of us says much because we're all exhausted, now and again we notice stone dust on our clothes, which we can brush away. Then we squeeze together to make room for others at our table. These people tell us about the restaurants they work in and one of them brings schnaps. They talk as if on fast-forward and bare their teeth when they laugh. They don't

mind that we only nod and knead the tension from our forearms. When Kori goes to the toilet, the cooks start negotiating over which one of them gets to go home with her. Their arguments over whose appearance is preferable, over past nights, and rules of precedence are conducted solely through glances. Ben and I get up and make a show of getting our jackets so that Kori won't have to return to the table. *Are you her type or what*, the cooks call after Ben.

have in mind while you're working is your work. You don't think anything other than: how can I get this surface really smooth?

Sketch for a myth about turning to stone

Settings: The garden of a house that's always cold inside. A national highway with weekend traffic.

Characters: A person who is always expanding and still mistrusts everyone. A relatively small person who says nothing but feels everything.

Props: A French dictionary. A tent. A freezer.

Safety

We walk Kori home and I tell her how I was once in the Rocky Mountains in early autumn and late in the afternoon, at a rest area. I'd eaten a sandwich and wanted to throw the wrapper away, but the garbage cans were sealed with bear-proof locks that I couldn't open. While shaking it, I wondered if there was something wrong with my hands, if maybe I was part bear and no one had noticed – except the garbage can: it had seen through me. In any case, I put the wrapper in my bag and took it with me with the comforting sense of being safe.

Thoughts

The sculptress also said: *When I went to the academy of arts in Paris, I introduced myself in César's class, but it was clear they didn't want me there. And I wasn't cool enough to think or say: I don't care, I have the same right to be here, in this class, as you do. Anyway, I left right away and went into the next studio, where they were all carving stone and were all intently focused. So I became a sculptress. Nonetheless, I don't think it was by chance. You either like sculpting or you don't, it's almost genetic. If you have a talent for it, it calms your thoughts. The only thing you can*