

Sauve's "The Blue Jar"-inspired story writing exercise – 300 word min, revised from journal entry slightly as I typed it up. Jan 17, 2017.

Black Cross

Death came swiftly and mercifully to the matriarch, as is Catholic custom for a life well lived, a compassionate heart, and being Roman (or two steps closer to God than mere mortals). As is Italian custom, mourners surrounded her bedside in shrouded whisper, wafting in and out of the room with the draft. The mirrors and windows covered, so a soul knew its way up, undistracted. While she lay, observed and bereaved, her only grandchild, Columbina, could be found in her studio, trapping a soul of her own within the palms of her hands, sculpting a bust of her grandmother, who had once been married to the brother-in-law of the Doge, but who had been forgotten in widowhood. Columbina would sit with her grandmother in the solitude of the lamplight, the speckles of marble dust glistening on her shoulders like _____, the woman's reflection mirrored on the façade of the black cross which adorned Columbina's neck.

Aloneness had always been her companion, though she never felt its presence quite as acutely as she does now. Now that it is just her father and herself left of the family line, a family line of past distinction and present insignificance. She rubbed the cross, solid onyx, no veining, glassy polished surface, a pure black coat, thick and stable, hearty, just like the woman for whom it had been carved – her grandmother - who had left it to her, but who would be buried with it in a few days. Her fingerprints marred the surface – she hated that. She was neither a fidgeter, nor obsessively tidy, yet up she went to her room to polish it straightaway anyway. Hanging by her bedside now, it twinkled in its blackness, a paradox of beauty and strength. Only a few days of its luck left to be cast her way, and then chance would have to be of her own making.

To gain access to the master's workshop to the Academy, she knew it was not only about her technique but also about her anatomical accuracy – often how women were dismissed – not just less capable, but less intelligent too. She had to complete her sculpture, and it had to be worthy of exhibition and scrutiny. Trained by and apprentice to her father, who had been a master mason most of his life, she was raised by sandpaper hands. She knew their gentleness, she herself a walking contradiction, hands worn by art, roughened by work, cut by stone, yet, with a passion for creating beauty from desolation, teasing femininity from blocks of rock. Her mother died giving birth to her. A cross to bear all her life, a void her grandmother tried but could not fill. Possessing few charms, an unfortunate dowry, and a father of strict principles, blinded by adoration, she was destined to a life of spinsterhood. She would choose career over marriage, art over children. Passion over stability. No matter how much faith one has, one cannot contradict one's character. And so, she had no choice.

Her lover was a well-known sculptor whose oft-commissioned works dotted the city's wealthiest homes. At the suggestion that she study at the Academy, he said "A woman's hands are not made to do a man's work – a woman is blind to the form in the stone. She can no sooner see it to carve it, than a donkey can make it downhill before its cart". She replied "but surely only a female eye can see beyond the form to its essence. The intuition of potential. And surely technique can be learned by anyone with hands, big or small." Frustrated she appealed "All I

have that is mine are my hands. You know as well as I that marble is the lion of the stone kingdom, and to tame that lion with my bare hands is to control fate, is to show that even small fingers can tell a story in stone.” She felt the weight of the cross on her chest, pressing its heat, etching itself on her heart. She knew desertion well. It was a path that led only one way, away from her. There was light only at the other end, where she was never welcome. She lived as a dove in a cave, sooted and trapped. Flight potential veiled. That cross an albatross of the nameless, titleless, penniless, and gendered. The body lay in a box. Silent. Sleeping the eternal sleep. One by one, her treasured items were returned to her. Around her grandmother’s speckled hands, Columbina finally laid down her cross. Its blackness shining back at, her, like a crow cackling and mocking, their hands intertwined. And she whispered, “time is the panacea of.....

Columbina (Columbine) a flower meaning courage, love and desertion – doves, rejection, eagle)