The Gesture of Planting

A man visited a small museum in a small city in the hour just before closing, and he made his way to a small room full of statuary and hid inside a stone vase until the room fell quiet and the lights went out and he was certain that he was alone.

He climbed out of the vase and brushed himself off and unzipped the knapsack that he had sneaked into the room, and took out a large, heavy hammer.

The man moved methodically from stone bust to stone bust, first stretching or kneeling to whisper into its ear, and then looking into its eyes to make sure that it had heard him. He then lifted the hammer and brought it down over and over again until he had smashed the bust to powder. He was a strong man, but it took him all night to do this. By the morning the man was surrounded by small piles of stone, each holding a dusty secret, and he used the hammer to bar the door of the only entrance to the room and put his head down on the floor and went to sleep.

After some days of banging on the door, the tired people who worked at the small museum in the small city realized that the man would not come out until he was ready, and they stopped banging and began instead to pass him thin packets of thin foods.
and thin skins of water under the door. He always accepted the water, and he always refused the food. Weeks passed this way.

The man took only a sip or two from each water skin, and he moved from pile to pile giving the rest to his stony garden. Each day, he watered the stone, and watched, and waited, until one day he saw the first shoots begin to sprout from the rock. And he watered, and watched, and waited, as his plantings matured around him.

The first stone stalk that rose from the ground ended with a bud in the shape of a clenched fist. As the stone fist opened, he recognized the hand of his mother, and he grasped it, and then he turned to the second pile of stone. (Into the ears of this one, he had whispered a childhood nightmare: a house, and a bed, and abandonment.)

The second pile had grown into a bed of stony moss, tiny stalks ending in bits of blanket or foot or eyelash that together made the shape of a sleeping woman. He stroked her hard hair with the tip of his thumb, and turned to the third pile. (This one had listened as he whispered his fear that he did not know how to love.)

The next had grown into a tree that ended in a sheared stump set with precious stones in the shape of a place setting: one plate, and one fork, and one knife, and one glass of wine. He bent to touch his lips to the crystal edge of the glass, and he moved on. (These ears had heard him confess his fear that he would grow old alone.)

And on, and on, he spent an evening moving from plant to stony plant, tending and touching the garden of his fears—of his history, of himself—made manifest. When he had finished, he moved through the room once again. He plucked the first stone stalk, and took the hand in his mouth, and chewed it, and swallowed, and placed the empty stalk on the floor. He gnawed the parts of the sleeping woman from their mossy bed, and sucked the plate, fork, knife, and glass from their stony table. And on, and on, he savored each course of his meal until falling, sated, in a pile of rocky leaves and roots and branches, and closing his eyes, and falling asleep.
After days without contact, the tired people who worked at the small museum in the small city finally managed to break down the door to the room. When the dust cleared, they found the stone busts arranged just as they’d left them, but one had sprouted the man’s brown hair, and one stared out with his eyes, and one’s lips had turned to the man’s warm flesh. The man himself was nowhere to be found.