

The little clay bird

Stretch. Squash. Knead, pummel, smack. The muscles work hard on the potter's back. All his weight, all his strength is channelled with precision into capturing in clay his perfect mind's eye's vision.

His head bends in tilted focus, his foot pedals on; the wheel is spinning, something is about to be born. Out of formless, shapeless earth first he raises it quite tall, then there's pressure from above and it's back compact and small.

His hands are gnarled but firmly strong, his fingers reach out delicately long. They curve and caress as they glide over grey with well practised mastery mixed with hint of play.

Slip splashes on and grooves spin round, what brand new creation is about to be found?

Hour after hour and day after day, the mesmerising man brings life out of clay. His gallery is filled with a massive range of lines but each one is marked as his, bears a hint of comparable design. They stack up, they pile up, quite a staggering collection, but take even just one in hand and you'll see the care and attention... that's been poured out from potter's heart and down through potter's fingers to create a unique work of art and beauty that wonderfully lingers.

It's like watching alchemy standing here as inanimate takes on potter's meaning and speaks through its shape a purpose of its creator's conceiving. Almost hypnotising watching him work on and on, humming all the while he sculpts some half-familiar song.

But we have not come here just to marvel at the potter's famed technique – we are here for even more than that – we are here to speak... with, well to listen at least to a reflection of his glory... for we are here to hear the little clay bird's story.

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Gasp. Cry. Squeak, splutter... *me*. Imagine you are that something new that suddenly comes to be. What would it be like to be at one with all clay – to feel nothing at all distinct for the whole of your day – and then suddenly, all a rush-ed-ly to be separated out in specific shape and to realise even as you are still being made... that you quite simply... *are*?

That is what happened to the little clay bird. That is how this story starts that simply must be heard.

At least unlike other vessels he didn't begin life dizzy for the potter's work on him was different and the wheel was hardly spinning. But even now he recalls it started with stretching sensations which he identified as pulling his head into being. The potter was not rough, his hands were kind though firm, but even so when you think of it, you find you want to squirm. To have your limbs created from you, each one by one, would surely not be a calming way to find yourself begun.

It's the kind of feeling that leaves a writer reeling because how can you even start to describe something so beyond your power to empathise? But still we have to try to find the right word to communicate the experience of the little clay bird.

Moulded perhaps? *Formed*? Or even *shaped*? What does it feel like while you're still being made? The little bird certainly did not enjoy the strange impressions but he told himself to conquer all the subsequent emotions – it was just a process that must soon come to completion – in no time at all he'd be a finished creation.

So as the potter's skilful fingers teased out wings from his back, the bird put mind over matter and concentrated on the facts. Not long now; soon now and he'd be off the wheel – not long now; soon now, they'd be no more sculpting to feel. To be displayed with all those finished, shining works of art, surely it was worth this uncomfortable beginning part?

And then came hope and wonder and excitement beyond belief, for all of a sudden the little clay bird had been given a little clay beak.

He wanted to use it to ask the potter to go more swiftly, to cry out "please potter, come on now, quickly!" He so wanted to be finished, to be on that shelf and displayed – to catch the eyes of passers by; to feel he'd made the grade.

But no such luck as the world went black and he was tumbled over himself and onto his back. What was this round him, covering him, holding him back? It felt like a damp cloth or a wet piece of sack.

The little clay bird shivered and shook inside and little slip tears streamed from his little clay eyes. Had the potter forgotten the work he had started? He felt so alone; so deeply broken hearted. He was too wet to dry out and be close to finished, his hopes for his future were now quite diminished. He *had* felt the potter had been pleased with his bird but now he wasn't quite sure he'd correctly heard what he had previously been sure had been sung all the time when he was busy being begun.

"Will I really sing? Will I really fly? Will I really be the apple of the potter's eye? I can't believe it here, alone in the dark. I don't even believe he *cares* for his art."

Next morning in the studio, the potter skipped in; he couldn't wait for the day's work to begin. He sat down and out of his shirt pocket – right by his heart – he took a little bundle and unwrapped its covering part.

He smiled as he looked at the little clay bird but the creature was relived to be turned around for he felt quite perturbed. But no fingers were stretching him and the cloth was history, perhaps after all he was closer to exhibition in perpetuity. And he could hear it again, quite clearly and distinctly – yes, the potter was singing the same promising ditty. He smiled inside and puffed out his breast – well as much as he could, he did his best!

Then no, ow, *OW!* What *was* that awful scraping? He wanted to take the potter to task, who did he think he was making?! If he was as adored as the potter had sung, why did it hurt so? Oh how it *stung!*

"Stop potter, *please* potter!" but no sound came from his beak, for he had no breath so he could not speak. And anyway, even if he could get himself heard, something in him knew it might be a bit absurd for a piece of clay – and a work of creation – to tell the potter how to do what was, after all, his vocation...

More slip tears squeezed from his little clay eyes as each tiny chisel caught him by surprise. Prodded and poked from every seeming direction, what had he done to deserve such destruction? "It hurts. It hurts." He was consumed with the pain. He wished he was back in the damp cloth again.

The potter paused, he felt every tear and he held the little clay bird very, very near. And he whispered so gently, "this won't take forever, but to fly you must have your beautiful feathers."

The bird gulped a little, there were so many more to carve, he didn't think the potter had even done quite half. But he consoled himself with focusing on the promise once more, after this stage, surely it would be time to soar. He scrunched his little clay eyes firmly, tightly shut. He was determined to focus on the feathers not the cuts.

It was not pleasant, was not fun, it was not even brief. So at the sound of the potter's knife setting down, he sighed in great relief.

But just as he was celebrating being passed feathers and anticipating drying out, his body again felt shock and his clay mind filled with doubt. For far from moisture evaporating off from little him, he was being doused in more cold water, he could feel wet seeping in!

He'd had enough. He couldn't take it. It really was too much. Now he was as wet as with the potter's first moulding touch. Why wasn't he being allowed to dry? Why wasn't he finished now? The potter smiled and promised more, but the bird didn't see how it could be true anymore.

His head drooped mournfully, his tail feather's dripped – you can hardly blame him for getting sick of it. So many of the potter's other wares seemed to have an easier fate, oh if only he had simply been designed to be a plate!

And when the damp cloth circled round him again, he didn't mind in the same way. After all he was already cold, he was already wet again.

This time the little bird didn't stay up grieving. He didn't waste his energy on trying to keep believing. He was just so tired now and so he simply embraced the rest, he didn't have it in him to go on hoping for the best. The slip tears fell again as he cried himself to sleep, he didn't think he was after all being made for keeps. Perhaps tomorrow the potter would simply remould him into mud and obliterate his memory with a single, strong thud. Part of him even wondered if it wouldn't be better – to be un-begun, unwound, undone – at least he couldn't get any wetter.

But the potter had again kept the little one close to heart, and if only our clay bird could have read this part...

For the potter was delighted with the bird's every feature, he sang every time he thought of his precious clay creature. He had such plans, he had such hopes, he had such a wondrous dream... he couldn't wait to show the bird exactly what he would mean. He treasured his work in progress and kept him securely safe, he was so proud of the little bird who had had to be so brave.

Out again on table now, unwrapped in gentle love, the little bird woke up to beaming smiles above. He had been remembered, he was dryer now, he almost felt able... but then he saw with fear he was back on the wheel's table. He cowered a little, he quaked inside, he *tried* to trust the making, but he was by now so terrified his clay feathers were shaking. He didn't even want to imagine what was coming next, he had given up expecting dryness, he felt that that was for the best.

But then the potter's clay-stained hands gathered him up and cradled him there. And he whispered, "what I am about to do, I promise is from care."

The bird loved the feel of the potter's hand but he still didn't halfway begin to understand. He knew more pain was coming and he didn't see why. Did the potter ever want to see him do anything but cry?

It was an almost out of body experience, the world seemed to grow brighter, for he was being tunnelled out – he was growing so much lighter. It felt as if his very core – what gave him all his substance – was being removed, what on earth could be the meaning? There would be so much less of him, so little left to give, how could he ever fly or sing? How could he even live?

But then it was done; he was still standing (though he was now largely hollow). Surely though, after all of this, *something* nice would follow?

The potter took a look at him and said “you’re almost finished dear heart – now we can begin the vital drying part’.

The bird felt weak but rejoiced at heart, for now he knew he would be called art. The potter was pleased, he was to be kept, presumably the drying could happen while he slept.

But he had not known that all his finishing hopes would come at such a cost. And at first when the furnace door shut he thought all must be lost. The temperature was so hot, he felt he would not bear it. His very being was changing again – he was becoming biscuit!

But it passed, it ended and when it was through, the bird felt remarkable, he felt brand new. “I’m dry, I’m dry, I’m finished, I’m made. Surely now I’ll be displayed?”

But our little bird never got to sit upon the shelf. He never got to live the dream he’d had for himself.

For the potter’s way was better, his purpose was sublime. Oh the bird was in for the *most amazing* time!

For you may have realised, may have sensed, the potter made the bird for himself, he had no intention of putting him on a shelf. His home was to continue to be next to the potter’s heart where the craftsman could always reach and find his special piece of art.

And to enjoy him, revel in him just as always had been conceived... for the bird did come to life when the potter breathed... down through his tail, vibrating his whole biology, then out through his beak translated into melody. The sweetest sound, destiny found; promise fulfilled calling out beautifully loud. Oh the bird and the potter were both so proud to become one through the song of maker’s breath through artwork’s chest and out into the world with the very best that clay could ever be.

The potter danced round the studio small and along the gallery and through the hall and out to the fields surrounding the place, all the while with a joy-filled face. For he loved the sound that he had found from the bird he had made from shapeless clay; why he could play with him all day – how he loved him, loved him, loved him!

The bird still thrills to feel of wind in his wings as the potter dances and he gets to sing. “I’m dry, I can fly, I carry the potter’s song. I was perfectly designed, I completely belong!” He chirrups, he whistles, he hums out with glee – “I love the potter and the potter loves me!”

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THE END.