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Clay, or How to Shape Perfection

I.

It begins, as all things do, in the dark. In the damp, the tremulous womb of stillness, the moisture-laden night thick and heavy without its stars. Things happen in the dark—mildew grows, silence ferments—but the main thing that happens is the waiting.

The sky cracks. Light pours in, cold and surgical and reverent, the first taste of that which will be known well: the breaking. The breaking of a day, and of other things besides.

The hands follow. Make their hesitant way through the air. Set light fingers on wet earth. From the morass they carve a lump, an imperfect promise, an unformed heart bleeding itself back into its beginnings.

(No one said creation wasn't messy.)

II.

One of the questions a human child is perhaps exasperatingly fond of asking is that most dreaded of queries: "But why?"

It is, admittedly, a useful phrase. Humans in general have been using it for millennia. It has been applied to an infinite range of situations, from a philosophical pondering of the color of the sky to a mundane request to take out the trash. As to one of the greater and more inexplicable of these—why, or indeed how, humans came to be—an impressive variety of people have reached a similar conjecture over the years.

Humans, as many people and cultures will tell you, were made from clay. The exact circumstances surrounding this event are still up for debate. Perhaps some deity or other decided to experiment, or selected the medium with an artist's care, or simply reached for whatever was at hand. The details notwithstanding, it is a testament to our lasting connection to the earth that we as a species identify with it so strongly. And well we should. The earth to us is shelter and sustenance, permanence and possibility, solidity and constant change. In a way it is, and always has been, life itself.

And yet we who were born from the earth love, ever so much, to gaze up at the stars.

III.

There is always a beginning before the beginning, a backstory, a Before. So perhaps we should start elsewhere, with a girl.

She needs a name, I suppose, something more than a pronoun and a description. Let us call her M. Do with that what you will: an M for mystery or for magic, for that annoying kid you knew from your middle school English class or that friend of a friend you always wanted to know better.

So. We could start with M's beginning: a bundle of squinting black eyes and sparse dark hair, a hint of a nose and mouth, chubby hands clutching gracefully at nothing. Lungs testing their strength in the sterile air. The doctor takes her measurements before she is released from the hospital, and smiles. "A perfect girl," the doctor says.

(Is she, though?)

(And in any case, well. Hers is not a perfect world.)

IV.

In mathematics, M—like most letters, English and otherwise—is a variable. A replacement; something to stand for something else. The steepness of a straight line extending outwards in both directions, toward an infinity it will never reach. A constant of change.

We call this girl "M" for a reason: this is not her story. Here, she is but a creator, a dreamer, a pair of hands. This is not the story of *her* creation.

So let us start again with the darkness, the light, the clay waiting in its bag. Fermenting, the way ideas do, in the quiet.

Meanwhile, M starts her clay classes without ever touching a piece of clay. They begin by looking at photos and posing according to the directions of their classmates, trying to capture an emotion in a static gesture. For M, they tell her to turn her shoulders, raise her chin, rest her hand on her hip. Her eyes narrow infinitesimally at the corners. She curls her upper lip slightly and does her best not to laugh (it would ruin the pose).

She tries to feel something, anything, in the way she positions her body. Something cold and judging, closed-off, restrained. Secure only in insecurity. Like holding her own set of standards close to her chest, where they can hide her inner flaws.

The word, she finds out, is “jealousy.”

V.

The next class, they pose again. This time the positions are for the reference photos they will use in their sculpting. When it's M's turn, she thinks of her last dance class, when she had asked her teacher for advice. (She calls it dance, anyways, though it's not like any other dance class she's taken. It's a way of interpreting music and words in movement. For her, movement is easier captured in a moment—a phrase, a streak of charcoal, a photograph—than formed from her own living body. She's too much of a perfectionist to do what can't be redone. But she tries, at least. Perfectionist, like I said.)

“Perhaps an ‘ah’ sound,” her dance teacher had said. She had lifted her arms above her head, mirroring her teacher's movement, in a suggestion of an inverted A. Too large a gesture, perhaps. But for her clay sculpture, she had been told to make an outward gesture. She tucks the idea away, somewhere in a dark, quiet pocket of her mind, to develop in peace.

And here she is, raising her arms up and out again, one leg behind her to continue the lines of motion. She lifts her head and gaze as well, stares at the space between her outstretched hands. The pose is a question, a supplication, a reaching out toward the sky in the hopes that something—or someone—will answer.

VI.

And finally, *finally*, they begin to work on the clay itself.

Slabs are retrieved from the dark cupboards where they had been stored. M peels away the layers of plastic to reveal the beige-gray clay beneath, quiet and solid and unassuming. Out comes the wire, with the wooden handles on either end. It slides easily through the clay, like a silver shape through water, and yet it takes a last burst of strength to wrench it cleanly through the center. She takes her slab back to her desk and lays it down with weary fingers.

M had learned, years ago, to respect the artist's medium. Clay, like many things, has a soul. Her teacher speaks of this, in reassuring her class that they may not end up creating what

they set out to do. Her teacher tells them of trying to shape a face from the clay, fighting with it, and finally coming to terms with it and letting it be what it wanted to be. In the end, the clay was not a young person as her teacher had intended, but an aged, clear-eyed woman with a face full of lines.

M knows this. There is a spirit in clay: a shy creature, easily scared, who must be coaxed out with deliberate slowness and care. One does not strike the clay, her past teacher had said. One does not pummel it, or hit it, or drop it upon the table. Such actions frighten the clay. A terrified piece, frozen in shock, does not want to be worked.

But here she is, standing with her newly-cut slab in her hands, and—per her current teacher’s instructions—she slams the piece down on the table. Again and again, pulling it toward her even as it falls. A linear motion, to shape the slab into a taller, longer block. *Here we begin anew*, she thinks. *Here we start again*.

VII.

M lowers her piece of clay onto a stand, a pole through the middle to keep it in place. Tugs her sleeves higher up her forearms, drags a hand across her forehead. Finds a tool in the box and starts in on shaping the clay.

First, the lines that mark the proportions of the body in horizontal streaks. M looks at the diagram she’s given, smiles faintly. On most people, apparently, the arms hang so that the fingertips reach halfway down the calves. Hers go nearly to the knees. She doesn’t mind, not really; she supposes it makes her seem graceful, or some such thing. But it’s a reminder, nonetheless, that she’s not exactly normal.

She draws the wooden tip across the surface, delineating the head and shoulders, knees and torso. She begins to form the head and shoulders, leaving only stubs for where the arms will later attach. She divides the legs, and as the weeks go on, she works them over and over: the positions, the proportions, defining the knees and the muscle. She rounds the straighter leg first, the one that will hold the weight of the body, and pulls the other one back. It is a process of continual adjustment—she will think that the position is right, and make the contours to her satisfaction, only to realize that the proportions aren’t precisely what they should be. She pulls the excess clay away and back, smoothing it into a space behind one leg. Over time it builds up, a mountain of curiously rounded texture rising behind her figure. She takes off all the extra clay

during one period, and then has to add it back to cover the exposed support and make sure the piece is strong enough. She tries to put back that original texture of rounded, flattened teardrops, but it ends up being something sharper, rougher, stranger.

VIII.

The clay clings to your skin. It makes a home for itself in the space beneath your fingernails and the creases in your palm. It crusts off-white on the fabric of your clothes and marks the stretch of your forehead with streaks, claims you as its own.

They say, all the old stories, that everything we know began with a being and a handful of earth. That we were formed from the ground we walk upon. That we will return, one day, like the salmon to the site of its hatching. The earth is round, they say. The world is cyclical.

And now you pry the clay from beneath your fingernails, wipe the earth from your face, wash your hands again and again as if that act alone can protect you from everything in the world. What happens, if you are a salmon, when the rivers are dammed? What happens when there is nowhere left to go but the cold and hungry sea?

What happens if we decide that we are not salmon at all, but butterflies, casting off each layer of our past in a crumple of winter leaf?

What if we are birds, born to free ourselves from the nest we once called home?

IX.

At the end of every class, M covers her piece with a wet rag and with layers of plastic so it doesn't dry out in the intervening days. She—M has decided that the figure is a *she*, though in the subtle, unobtrusive way of her dove-colored skin—spends the time tucked away on a shelf, watching and waiting. Strange, armless ghost-statue that she is, shrouded from head to foot in rag and plastic.

Every class, M frees her from her layers and sets to work. She does the arms last. Shapes them on their own, then attaches them and coaxes them into place. They are raised high above awkwardly rounded shoulders, and in their soft working-clay state they sag downwards in defeat. M adds supports of clay beneath, connected to the figure's sides. More shaping, details of the wrist, the muscle. She pulls the extra clay down and away again, leaves the prints of her fingers like feathers in the clay. The figure is not smooth corners and water-sleek skin. She is not a

creature of the water. She is freeing herself from stone, gathering what weighs her down and weaving it into wings.

She is rough around the edges, and one of her arms is a little lower than the other, and she keeps her head tilted up toward the sky.

X.

On the second-to-last day, M picks up the wire again. Her clay is no longer a formless, featureless slab, but a sort of being, unfinished though she may be.

M marks the clay again, vertical lines this time, slashes against skin. She lifts the figure off the rod, sets her on the table. Then she takes the wire and slices the figure in half.

One clean cut, somewhere across the torso, angled to avoid the arms and their supports. The figure looks delicate without her legs, reaching out, her face still blank and unfinished. M lays her on a sponge to keep her from flattening on the table. M takes up her tools and carves the figure out from the outside in, leaving a wall of half an inch thick and hollowing out the rest. There are easier spots, and there are tougher corners, up in the shoulders and the supports for the arms, where she can barely reach. When she hefts the pieces, they are so much lighter in her hands, having shed the mountains of shavings that pile up around her.

(All this, this emptying and mutilation, so that a tiny pocket of air somewhere within the clay would not tear her apart from inside when she is fired.)

XI.

At last, M puts the figure back together again. She has to hollow her out more, now, and make some adjustments, because the weight of those outstretched arms and their supports is enough to make the figure tip forward like a bird too eager to plummet from her nest. Her hands are not question marks, after all, but exclamations. Not an entreaty, but a declaration. If she is a sound, she is an A; but if she is a word, she is *triumph*.

Eventually, she finds some sort of equilibrium, and *triumph* can finally stand.

(There is a story M hears every year, of a knight and a princess and a dreaded dragon that must be conquered. She lifts a tool like it is a sword and glances up at the sky. *Forge me with fire*, she thinks. What is forged from fire does not bend, does not flow, does not fall.)

(What is forged from fire stands on its own.)

M cleans and puts away her tools, wipes down the table, and sends the figure off to the kiln.

XII.

M takes the figure down from the shelf after it has been returned. The flames that fired it set in stone the rough, unfinished texture of its skin and the whorls of clay she wishes weren't something other than what she had wanted them to be. The head is smooth and featureless and raised to the sky. M turns her over to see the cracks tendrilling across the surface. Even newly forged, she is breaking, already, inside.

She brings her home and sets her on her dresser and calls her, in her heart, perfectly beautiful.