

INTO THE FIRE YOU GO: A TECHNICAL INTRODUCTION

by Dawn Marfil Burris



Dawn Marfil Burris is the author of Looking for Polaris: A Memoir of Losing and Finding, her first book. Some of her creative nonfiction pieces were included in Tomás, Vol. 2, Issue 1 and Tomás Vol 3, Issue 4. She was a fellow of the 3rd J. Elizalde Navarro National Workshop for Arts Criticism in 2011, UST Creative Writing Workshop in 2012, and 58th University of the Philippines National Writers' Workshop in 2019. She now lives in Virginia, USA, and is currently exploring the art of ceramics.

There was no project, no plans for a second book. In fact, I think the point of my life for the last two years was to figure out who I could be if I couldn't do what I had been doing for most of my adult life—teach and write.

When I got married in 2021, pandemic notwithstanding, I finally understood the dilemma of older Filipino women writers. How can I still find the time and space to write when I now must learn to share all the time and space with a husband? How can I still maintain who I am when parts of me were already changing? This predicament was exacerbated by the fact

that I married an American and moved to his country, therefore rendering everything about me and all that I had done in my life completely irrelevant.

Every Filipino who has moved to the United States knows this—we go back to zero. This might be a comforting thought for those who sought a better life outside the Philippines, but I was quite happy with mine in Manila. Except for this one tiny detail—I had no one to love who would love me in equal measure.

So, when I found that love, I did what all foolish women have done before me—I gave it all up to be with him. I regret nothing, of course.

And now, I had to rebuild.

I still hated all chores that had to do with cleaning, but I found that I quite liked doing laundry and was actually adept at folding clothes. I learned how to cook beyond the standard adobo and rice. I learned how to bake. I got back into yoga when all that cooking and baking went a little too well. I learned how to start flowers and herbs from seeds during spring but couldn't quite figure out how to keep them alive during the colder months. I learned how to share a desk and a closet. I learned how to feed a cat and clean her litter box. I tried to learn how to like country music. I learned how to adjust to the twelve-hour difference between Virginia and Manila. I studied to get a learner's permit for driving and failed the exam. I bemoaned the loss of jeepneys and tricycles, but I had no time to really dwell on it. I had to relearn how to write a resume and cover letter. I had to speak in English all the time now, too. I learned how to listen to the wind when autumn came, and I learned how to miss the sun in winter.

Through all of this, I couldn't really write. There was too much of life going on, and I couldn't sit still long enough to create something good. Besides, that was the old me. I doubted if anyone would even consider publishing me in the US, so maybe it was time to explore other ways to craft and shape things.

So, I learned pottery.

It was a quiet, solitary art. There was nothing else except clay, fire, water, air, and my imagination. And, of course, my hands.

I spent spring and summer immersed in clay, hand-building one thing after another. When autumn came, I looked at all the ceramic figures on my shelf. I saw an owl that reminded me of my best friend; a witch cat that was modeled after Spooky, our cat; and things made from one of my favorite books, *The Little Prince*, and an old familiar poem, “The Owl and the Pussycat.” Each figure was tied to a memory. I didn’t make some outlandish imagined creature and instead chose to create what I knew. Apparently, I did pottery in the same way I wrote.

For all my efforts to leave everything of me behind, some things managed to stay. I am still a writer. So, I found time to write.

“Into the Fire You Go” was a result of that.

This is a creative nonfiction piece that uses the structure of the process of pottery from greenware, bisque firing, to glaze firing in an effort to present the parallel narratives of my exploration of the world of ceramics and the transformation of my solitary life in Manila to married life in Virginia, USA.

This piece is also a chance to create a crossover between creative nonfiction and hand-building in pottery. My practice in both crafts shows a longing for structure and the inescapable matter of memory.

It also shows a deviation from my previous works that rested greatly on metaphors of space—stars, moons, planets, and black holes. With this, I switched to the four elements of air, water, fire, and earth.

INTO THE FIRE YOU GO

I. Greenware

The trouble with centering is that I can never hold my arms and hands steady enough to force the ball of clay into a singular, even structure in the middle of the wheel.

I do well enough with wedging, as the act of smooshing a shapeless lump of clay and later slapping it to form a ball is vaguely similar to making pie dough. I have made blueberry pies, triple berry hand pies, apple pies, and even an imitation of the Filipino Red Ribbon chicken pie. So, when Kim Clarke, a ceramic artist from California with hippie blonde hair who taught at the Academy Center of the Arts in Lynchburg, told us to lift, press, and roll the clay on the table for her class on the basics of pottery in early May of 2022, I felt pretty optimistic about my chances of learning how to throw bowls, plates, mugs, and vases on the pottery wheel.

So, I wedged. My clay was solid, devoid of air bubbles that could make it explode in the kiln if latent moisture ever seeped into them. I slapped it onto the middle of the pottery wheel and smoothed down the sides with my wet hands to make sure it hugged the surface of the wheel flat.

It is when the wheel starts turning that my trouble begins.

Kim reassured us that all potters have their own way of centering and proceeded to show us several different ways. I struggled with all of them. This came as no surprise to me.

A month earlier, Bosco Bae, the mild-mannered ceramic artist-in-residence at the Academy Center of Arts, had shown us how to center for Pottery Night Out in mid-April. My right arm and hand, anchored on my thigh and on the splash pan, should push the clay, while my left hand on top bears down on it. Two forces – horizontal and vertical – ought to command

the clay to where it should be: the center. The turning of the wheel should get rid of protrusions and inconsistencies until the clay, as Bosco says in all his quiet intensity, “looks as if it isn’t moving at all.” Patiently, he guided every single one of us as we centered. Then he talked about its importance.

Before creating anything out of clay, the pottery wheel demands consistency in shape first. What happens on one side must happen on all sides; everything else, all manners of deviations and creations, should flow easier after that. When things aren’t centered, the side that sticks out catches on your fingers, resulting in a misshapen mess that can’t even be passed off as an artful accident. Or worse, the clay could simply fly off your wheel.

So, we center. But for some reason, my hands can never stay where they’re supposed to. It is the clay that puts me in my place. It rocks my arms and elbows in a rhythm that follows the clay’s dips and rises, refusing to conform to the shape of my unreliable hands.

Once, I said to hell with it and proceeded to dip a finger in the middle of the clay to create a cylinder to finally embark on the masterpiece of a ramen bowl in my head. I got as far as making a water pipe before it splattered all over my hands.

But Ben, my husband, has no trouble with centering at all.

He breezed through it on Pottery Night Out and went right on to making a plate while the rest of us struggled with our centers and semi-cylinders. He produced two things that night in April: a plate and a bowl. I made an ugly



Wheel-thrown bowls and plates, glazed in cone 10 by Ben Burris

oversized teacup that was the most angular rounded object I had ever seen. The only reason I was able to get that done was that Bosco had coaxed it a little bit more toward the center for me. The next time we saw projects, they would already be in their finished state – fired twice, colored glaze and all. It was too bad we couldn't be the ones to usher our pieces through the whole process ourselves. Pottery Night Out was designed to be just that, one night only.

It had been our attempt at a date night. With Ben's anxiety and agoraphobia, it was impossible for us to go on typical dates to restaurants and the movies. In fact, it was difficult for him to even leave the house at



Ben and Dawn at the May Carter Pottery Studio, Academy Center of the Arts, Lynchburg, VA

all when we first met in 2018. But the Academy Center of the Arts in Lynchburg, Virginia was a five-minute drive from our house and it had a calm, relaxed air about it that assured him he could step out of the class any time he needed to. We had been vaccinated three times by then and felt safe enough to venture out, especially with a mask policy in place. And with fewer than ten of us there, including the instructor, we were hopeful he could power through his social anxiety and make it through a three-hour pottery workshop.

Well, he did. And so much more. This is why we continue to study pottery well after Pottery Night Out, attending once-a-week classes all through spring, summer, and now through fall.

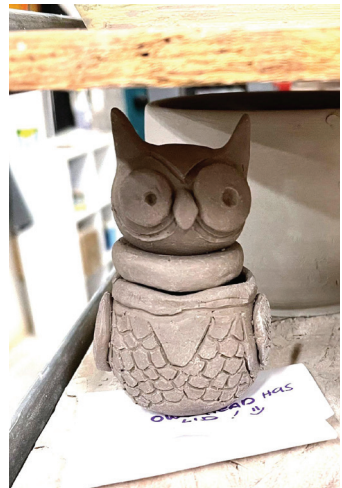
Watching Ben work with clay is like seeing Sisyphus unburden himself of that boulder. Instead of climbing up the hill with it in a thankless task, he takes that massive ball of nerves, uncertainty, fear, and self-doubt, throws it onto a wheel, and turns it into poetry in a manner that Horace would approve of: *dulce et utile*, beautiful and useful. So, something unfurls in him when he works with his hands. I see it when he hacks away at a wall in our house to build me a bookcase and a large desk made from scraps of old wooden floors. I see the same thing in him when he's at the wheel with a lump of clay. There is an innate intelligence in his hands that allows him to shape both wood and clay into whatever he asks them to be – a plate, pot, mug, bowl, flower vase, even a candle holder straight out of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Sometimes I like to imagine that when he's at the wheel, every single tragedy, all the turns in his life that drew him further and further away from who he could have been, simply fades away. He can just be himself, here and now, and he's okay. It's a fantasy I like to indulge in. One of the hardest things I have ever learned about loving someone with anxiety and bouts of depression is that nothing can fix it. Nothing – not pills, not therapy, not even my love – can fix it and make it go away completely. The most they can do is keep it at bay.

And with every turn of his wheel, Ben becomes Ben, uninterrupted, as his clay follows only the shape of his hands.

Meanwhile, I make owls by hand.

The first time I made a wonky owl, I thought of Pat, my perpetually stressed-out best friend back in Manila (who had once sent her boss pictures of angry owls when asked how her work was going), and Spooky, Ben's cantankerous 16-year-old black cat. Every



Stressed Owl (greenware, jewelry holder)
by Dawn

night, Spooky squeezes herself into the cave of Ben's arm and chest and stares lovingly at either Ben or the wall. On one autumn night in 2021, with her back to me as she stared at the wall, the little triangle of her ears that flanked the fluff on top of her head fascinated me because she looked like an owl. I reached out and gently traced the soft outline of Spooky's head and ears, and said, "Woot! Woot!"

I offered no explanation, of course. Ben, my husband of about eight months by then and wholly unprepared for my plethora of sound effects, laughed until he choked on his own breath as he struggled to find a reason for my sudden "Woot! Woot!" When I told him that's what an owl sounds like, he argued it was inaccurate. It remains a contentious topic in our house, but that was a good night.

So, when Kim, who was in the middle of making sunflowers, taught us the basics of hand-building with coils and pinch pots, I thought it would be a good idea to make a little owl.

I started with its rotund body, hollowing out a space no more than two fingers wide. I squeezed its walls to around a quarter of an inch in thickness and gently hit the bottom of it against the table to make sure the owl could stand on a flat surface. Next, I made its tiny wings by rolling two small balls of clay, flattening them, and cutting a teardrop shape with the pointed tip swooped out.

The whole process of hand-building seemed vaguely similar to making jimmy jam cookies for me, only this time, instead of using lemon custard or frosting to stick two pieces together, I had to use slip – a muddy combination of water and clay that acts like glue. Kim showed us how to make and use it.

To attach the wings to the body, I used a scoring tool that looked like a witch's miniature metal broom to scour the area of the owl's body where the wings would go and the part of the wings that would be attached

to it. I applied slip to both areas before pressing the wings to the owl's sides. It wouldn't be able to fly, but at least it could easily hold a pair of earrings and two rings inside it.

Then I carved little v's all over the owl's body for its feathers and moved on to make its head for the top cover. It was the part I was most excited about. I thought of Spooky's little triangle ears and spaced them just right on either side of the slightly squished burger bun shape that I had made for the owl's head. Then I thought of Pat's stressed-out owls and flattened two mismatched discs for eyes, one smaller and squintier than the other for an unhinged look. I topped it off with a diamond nose and gouged deep eyebags under its eyes, simultaneously thankful that Pat was no longer as sleepless as her owls since the pandemic had gotten rid of her six-hour commutes from her house to her work.

Carefully cradling it like a new hatchling, I brought my owl over to my shelf marked for greenware. Raw clay, newly formed from hands or the turn of the wheel, is called greenware and they are fragile, soluble things. Time and space have to do their thing to ensure they are bone dry before they are bisque-fired.

Giddy with my first creature, I looked at the twenty-five pounds of clay I had left and wondered what else I could do. As spring rolled into summer, I racked up a greenware menagerie on my shelf at the academy.

I made a mug with the Little Prince on it with his sad little planet with the 44 sunsets and his rose encased in glass. I made bookends designed



The Little Prince, His Rose, and the Planet of 44 Sunsets
(greenware, mug) by Dawn



The Owl and the Pussycat (greenware, bookends)
by Dawn

to be the owl and the pussycat who went to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat. I gave the cat its honey and the rings they got married with and placed a guitar on the owl's wings. "The Owl and The Pussycat," a poem by Edward Lear, was a declamation piece I had memorized for English class in grade school. Until now, I still pronounce the first four lines in the same way I was taught to, like a wildly rocking boat above the ocean waves. Then, out of three failed attempts at a flowerpot on the wheel, I made a witch cat and named it Spooky. I used the lumpiest

wedge of clay for the body, the flat one for the head, and the crooked one at the top to catch the wizard hat I made from a slab.

If I hadn't run out of space on my shelf, I could have easily hand-built a clay narrative of my entire life. So, I stopped.



Witch Spooky (greenware, stackable cups) by Dawn

But instead of sending them all into the kiln, I wrapped all my greenware in plastic, spritzing ever so often with water the thinner parts that were drying out faster. Conscious that moisture, burning at 100 degrees Celsius, could so very easily turn to steam and worm its way through air pockets I might have overlooked and explode in the kiln, I was careful to let them all dry slowly. I had no problem with waiting for

them to get bone dry; I could wait a little longer to see my menagerie in its final, mature form.

So, I waited. And waited.

But their wonky eyes staring down at me from my shelf made me feel a little guilty. It almost felt as if they were the ones waiting.

I just didn't want them to explode, that's all.

II. Bisque Firing

Ruefully, I sometimes attribute Ben's talent at the wheel to his male upper body strength. But I know that even if I did 50 pushups every day for an entire year, I still wouldn't have his capacity for steady stillness at the wheel. And I guess it also doesn't hurt that he had spent a significant amount of time in detention with his high school ceramics teacher.

My only other experience with clay was a one-day workshop with Mansy Abesamis in Sagada, Philippines, famous among mountain climbers for its peaks above a sea of clouds at dawn and also known among karaoke veterans as the place where broken hearts go. Maybe, once upon a broken heart, I had gone there, but by May of 2019, I was already 37 years old, and my heart was most definitely whole and less prone to breakage. In fact, it was so very full.

I had a home in my name at the midpoint between Manila and Quezon City. After moving in and out of 25 apartments in my entire lifetime, it was glorious to finally have a permanent address. I was a tenured university professor. I was halfway through a Ph.D. I had a small group of amazing and talented friends. I was published thrice and riding high on the second reprint of *Looking for Polaris*. I was in a sound and secure two-year relationship with Ben. Oh, and I had yoga, salad, and wine on weekends with Pat to make up for all the Jollibee, McDonald's, the Oomori with Ned, and Romantic Baboy

with Tin during the week! My life was mine and I had filled it with literature and love.

And yet something was still amiss. My hands were filled to the brim but they felt empty. Writing and literature may find form in print, but I couldn't hold them. Not really. Ben was flesh and blood, but he was 12 hours behind and continents away on the east coast of the United States. My hands itched to hold something more real, more concrete, more there, and I thought Mansy's pottery workshop in Sagada could give that to me.

It was 16 hours away from Manila by bus, and I had chosen to travel by night to sleep through the zigzag roads that hugged the mountain on one side and ignore the steep drop into the canyon that lay in wait on the other side. I woke up to a quiet, cold 22-degree Celsius sunrise in Sagada, a welcome change from the sweltering heat of 36-degree mornings in Manila that were rung in by a symphony of jeepneys, tricycles, cars, buses, and trucks.

After a breakfast of garlic rice, eggs, and longganisa, I spent the rest of the morning out on the porch behind Inandako's Bed and Breakfast. I had a book with me, Sandra Martz's *When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple*, but I couldn't take my eyes off the green and silver of the mountain range before me. It was the kind of beauty that quieted the sounds of the city that seemed to be a permanent trill in my head, but it wasn't something I could hold in my hand.

I've had enough of that, I thought. So, I waited for Mansy.

With her full bangs, elf-like features, and slender body in a simple shirt, jeans, and rubber slippers, Mansy took me on a short hike from the Sagada town proper to a long, wooden house that stretched along the side of the mountain. With its flat rooftop overran by moss, Sagada Pottery, which was run by Manang Siegrid, Manang Ardeth, and Mansy's mentor, Manang Tessie, looked like it was getting ready to disappear into the thick

forest of pine trees that towered above and behind it. From a corner of the roof, a soft column of smoke billowed and faded into the mist that settled in the wake of a drizzle. It seemed otherworldly to me, having known only the concrete and smog of the city for most of my life.

Mansy led me to the stone kiln while explaining that the only way they could tell if the temperature had gone high enough to turn bone-dry clay to bisqueware was to place small ceramic cones inside the kiln. Then, they would wait for the small, pointed tip of the cones to bend under the intense heat. Mansy let me peek into a tiny opening in the kiln and sure enough, there the cones were, midway through a curve from the constant, blistering heat.

Over a bottle of bugnay, a sweet fruity wine made from the deep red berries of the Mountain Province of the Philippines, Mansy taught me two things – how to build from a slab and how to pinch a pot. We stayed away from the wooden wheel because I was sure I didn't have the coordination to work the clay with my hands while my feet were in charge of turning the wheel.



Mansy Abesamis in Sagada, 2019



Sagada Pottery and Bugnay with Mansy, 2019

The gray clay was cool and clammy to the touch, but solid. I liked taking its heft and slamming it onto the table, the sound rattling the wooden surface before it was absorbed by the ground and the forest. Mansy then taught me how to wedge and shape the clay into a ball. She showed me how to press my thumb into the middle of that ball and pinch a wall of clay between my thumb and four other fingers. Slowly, I worked my way around the clay, widening the opening and stretching the walls without breaking it. I held it up to the light, then down to eye level, ensuring the rim was smooth and level. It was too big to be a mug and too small to be a bowl, but it was solid enough to hold a mini Nissin cup of seafood instant ramen and I was determined to make it perfect.

It was the walls that concerned me. So, some areas felt too thin, while others felt too thick. Mansy had warned me earlier that thin walls were prone to cracking in the kiln while thick walls prevented the clay from drying evenly, which could lead to an explosion. I asked Mansy if there was a way to make sure the walls were even.

By touch, she had answered simply. If it felt wrong, it was probably wrong. If it looked wrong, it was probably wrong. It was pretty much the same way I handled language when writing; if it sounded wrong, it was probably wrong.

So, I prodded, pinched, and smoothed the clay in the same way I revised my first drafts – obsessively. Mansy laughed and told me to relax a little bit. Clay was forgiving, and unlike language, it was the imperfections that lent it beauty.

I fell a little bit more in love with it because of that.

And so I let it go with a quick prayer to the pottery gods and moved on to pinch a smaller version of it the size of a teacup. After that, we went on to slab work, which felt a lot like origami but without the unbending rules of

geometry. The half-inch thick clay was paper and the breadth of the things you could do with it was as wide as your imagination. Or at least, the amount of time and clay you had at hand.

I made four small jewelry dishes, first in the basic oblong and rectangle shapes, and later, with more confidence, I moved on to a flower and a leaf design. There was still some clay left, but the rain and the night fell early on the mountain, so we had to pack up and head back down to Sagada town proper.

Mansy would take care of the rest. She would let my pieces dry for a few weeks before bisque-firing it to as high as 1,000 degrees Celsius, driving out moisture and turning clay into ceramic. Once out of the kiln, it would have been sintered – the process of transforming greenware into something harder, thicker, insoluble, more mature, and less fragile. It would become bisqueware, with a more porous surface that glazes can adhere to. Mansy would then dip them in the deep blue hue of the glaze that was processed from the soil in Sagada. They would have to go through a second firing before she could send them to me in Manila.

But before we finished off the bugnay and called it a day, Mansy asked me if I wanted to forage for a leaf or flower nearby to press onto the surface of the jewelry dishes I had made, or onto the two cups. She offered me various tools I could use to draw some sort of decoration on the pieces I had made. I refused both. For some reason, the thought of scouring the surfaces I had painstakingly smoothed out and flattened felt wrong.

Maybe one day I would do it, when I felt more adventurous. But right then, I felt content with what I had in my hands. They were solid. They were simple. They were alright. The most I could hope for was that they would survive the heat of the first firing and come out whole bisqueware without any lingering cracks.

Maybe this was what I had come to Sagada for: to learn contentment.

But months later, when I got my finished pieces, pottery taught me one last thing. Everything had survived the kiln, except for the first piece I worked on. The one I had spent so much time on, obsessing over getting just the right thickness of the walls, the one I felt I had perfected, was the very thing that exploded.

Clay may be more forgiving than language, but in the end, clay has a god and its name is fire.



Wishing Well (greenware, garden decoration) by Dawn

III. Glaze Firing

At summer's end, my greenware menagerie finally found their way to the fire. All of them survived and my two seasons' worth of lollygagging felt justified. I placed them all back on my shelf, safe, sound, and sintered.

I now had a ceramic menagerie, all waiting to be painted or glazed.

But instead of painting them, I ran a wire through my fresh bag of clay and cut out a chunk from it. I

slammed it over the linen-covered table over and over again, flattening it like a jiggly Japanese pancake. Then I ran it through the slab roller, which looks like a giant pasta maker, and used the new slab to make a prototype of a wishing well, so Ben could see what I was planning on asking him to do with the well we have out in the garden. It sorely needed a makeover. Then, I took

a small jar from Ben's greenware and asked him if I could put branches of jasmine on it and a small sparrow.

He didn't say no, but he did warn me about overcrowding my shelf with a bunch of unfinished bisqueware.

"Why won't you paint them with the underglaze?" Ben asked me, probably bewildered by my lack of enthusiasm for this process in pottery. Despite being good at two different types of this art, we had always been in step with each other. He made things by wheel while I did it by hand. He experimented with surfaces, textures, and forms, while I tried to see if I could make clay flowers in the same way I make ones from icing.

But as Ben moved on to glazing, dreaming up patterns and combinations of Joyce's White with Coco Purple, or Blue Spodumene with Strontium Turquoise, or finding a way to use the temperamental but brilliant Multi Blue that was prone to running too thick and fusing the bisqueware to the kiln, I simply continued to add to my ceramic menagerie.

As the sintered pieces on my shelf multiplied, I watched Ben devote himself to the glazes. I wondered how someone with anxiety could be so comfortable with a process that is mercurial at best.

At the back end of the pottery studio, above the tubs of glazes, there was a chart made of samples of all the possible combinations of the glazes. While it can be used as a guide, it wasn't a guarantee.

When the liquid glass inside a glaze burns inside the kiln during the second firing, its color is determined by so many variables like temperature, time, and texture. It's determined by the manner of application, the number of dips, the type of brush, the brushstroke, not to mention the million other combinations of one color's properties with another. Once the glaze's liquid glass runs through every single equation, it moves into the molecular gaps left

during the sintering process. When the heat abates, the liquid glass vitrifies. It turns hard, fusing to the surface of the bisqueware and creating a glass-like layer on top. In this form, it is now stronger than it ever was. It can hold water. But you won't know what color you'll get until it comes out of the kiln.

It terrified me how, after all that careful planning and attention to detail from greenware to bisqueware, anyone can just surrender it all to the fire, all for the sake of adding color.

In theory, underglazes should be easier than glazes. They work like crayons. They are the color that they are and don't change under fire. But I had never painted anything in my life, and I didn't want to touch my ceramic creatures with a paintbrush in an inept hand.

My wonky animals and other things were fine. They came through the fire very much intact, perfectly sintered to wholeness. Besides, the underglaze wouldn't really do anything to it, unlike glaze, which makes bisqueware impervious to time and water. Underglazes are merely decorative. Why would I make them go through another firing process, at the risk of an explosion, so that I could subject them to something I was absolutely unprepared for?

But one by one, Ben's glazed pieces came out of the kiln to an assortment of pleased sighs and frustrated grunts. He got a bowl in the color of terracotta pots and burnt caramel while the pot he glazed came out like a bowl of oatmeal and milk with a little bit of blueberry swirled in. He also got a bottleneck vase that came wrapped in an aurora borealis trapped beneath the earth's crust. Another bowl carried the cerulean sea at its widest and tapered off to a deep blue starry night towards the base.

I watched him take it all in, the horrid with the brilliant, the cracks and fused bottoms, all the happy accidents and plans that went awry. Nothing

dissuaded him. Not even himself and that little voice in his head that made him doubt and overthink every decision he made. In fact, he looked like he could throw and turn the wheel and glaze for a lifetime and never tire of it.



Jars, bottles, vases, goblet, and mug, glazed in cone 10 by Ben Burris

I knew that look.

Three years ago, at the close of 2019, over cups of hot chocolate and tea and under a blanket of softly falling snow, Ben handed me a ring and asked me if I could hold on to it forever. I said yes, of course. And when I did, I immediately felt the life I had so carefully constructed around me implode.

Clay has a god. Its name is fire, and it consumed my home, my tenureship, my wine and yoga with Pat, *Polaris*, Jollibee, Ned's Oomori, Tin's Romantic Baboy, and Manila.

But clay is forgiving, clay is resilient. And when I looked, plenty of clay was still left in the bag. I could start again. Wedge, then center. Give it time. Then, go through the fire.

I emerged intact.

And yet here I was creating a menagerie of ceramic blandness, afraid of a second firing because it feels safer to remain whole than to risk a splintering for a splash of color. As if I had never known how it is to give it all up to the fire just for a chance to drown in the yellow of roses that grow in our garden, the red of the cardinal in spring, the orange of Lynchburg's autumn, or the blue in Ben's eyes.

It didn't feel right. To rectify the situation, I sent a quick prayer to the fire gods and picked up a brush.



The Owl and the Pussycat, this time with color, by Dawn

