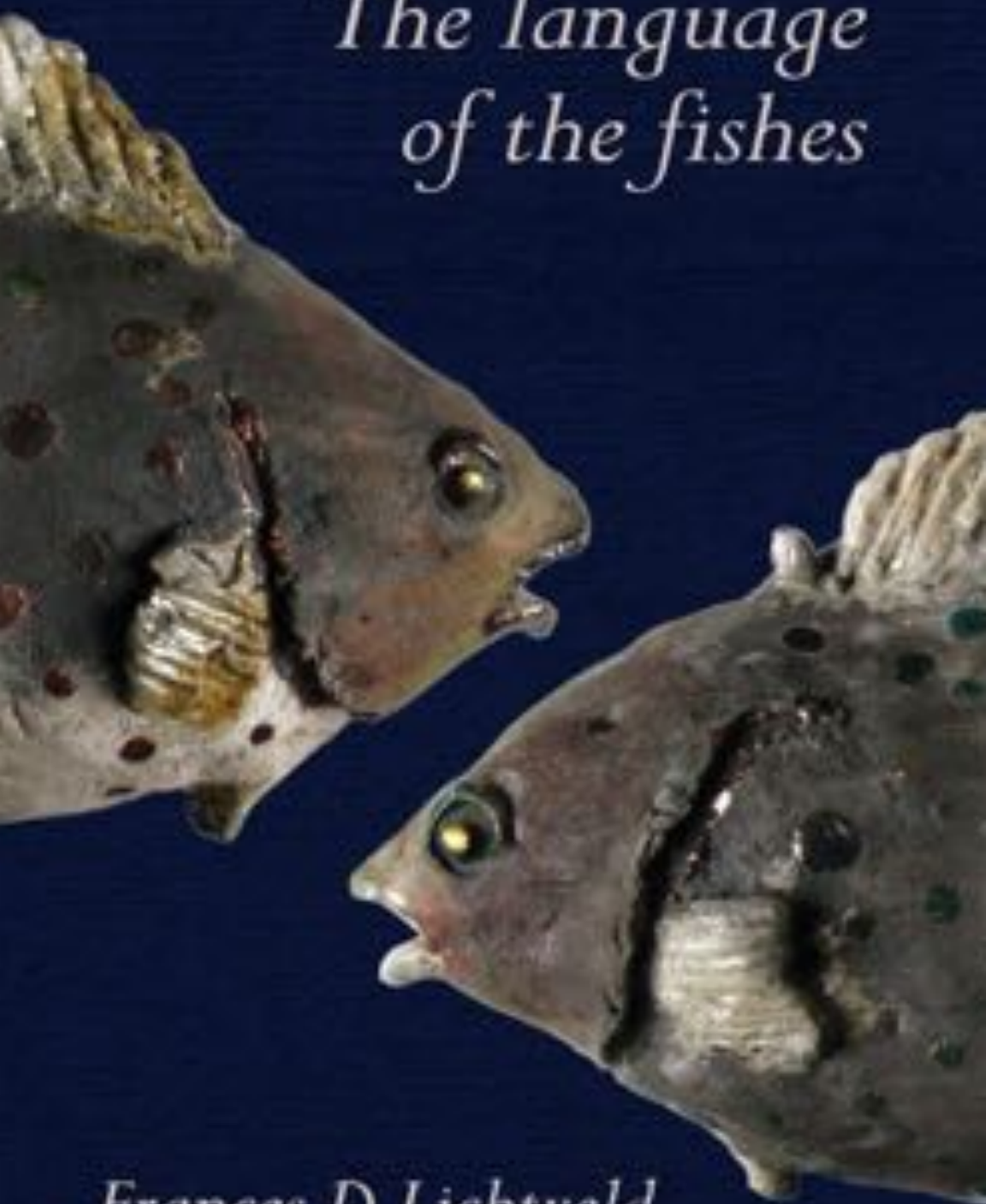


*The language
of the fishes*



Frances D Lichtveld

The language of the fishes

*An exploration of how the four elements are expressed
in ceramics, and their links to individuation.*



Frances D Lichtveld

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For my sons, Dugald and Gavin

&

For a Winged Horse I met on my Way



Introduction

The point can be reached where one can interrogate a heart by asking it to confess its enthusiasms inspired by the grandeur of the contemplated world...

Gaston Bachelard

While a number of ideas about the influence of my ceramic career on my life have been present for over twenty years, I first began to write down the technical aspects of my art. Writing does not come easily to me, at least not the kind of writing one would care to share with others. Having kept diaries and dream journals for a very long time it was easy to read and get reacquainted with them. To approach and become re-engaged with my solitary self, very present in the studio, proved a lot more complex because my diaries do not hint of that particular place within, although various dreams do. When I worked with clay I organised my studio to work on my own. Now I unravel that I was, unconsciously, gathering other kinds of information; this became clear in later dreams and contemplations on my life as a potter. My writing is about the necessary return to my studio, in spirit, in search of that unconsciously absorbed and imbedded input. Memories have their particular audacities, it took a lot of courage for me to follow them. The loss of the use of my right arm had put an end to my ceramic career. While outwardly I still kept on living in a meaningful way, I felt lost and wounded, that form of contemplative solitude I experienced in the studio was hard for me to find elsewhere. In the back of my mind there had been a second question: the correlation I felt existed between the

way I fired my high-fired reduction ceramics and individuation; would I be able to explain that? My interest lies in what actually occurs inside the kiln during the 10 hour process, not only in the final product. High-fired reduction stoneware with its clear presence and the use of the four elements, earth-water-fire-air, shows a simpler approach than alchemical texts. It is practical and demonstrates directly the results of the mixing of the four elements.

“Reduction” in this case means the reducing of the air element to the gas-flames in the latter stages of the firing, aiming towards the melting of the glazes.

This reduction produces a sulphuric atmosphere in a kiln with a living flame within; it pulls the impurities in the clay out of the body to the surface. Within the chaos of the firing there is a world of transformation. A similar battle took place in my life, and the way I dealt with it was to read my own firing charts, plotting where I was in the cycle; this gave me some guidance.

My observations are of my work as a studio potter, I am in no way referring to other potters, ceramic history or systems, ceramics in general or anyone else’s ways of working or firing kilns.





Earth, clay: the universal resource	page 6
Water, river, boats, fish, tears	page 18
Fire, agent of change and fusion	page 30
Air, invisible force, inspiration	page 38
Quintessence	page 46
References	page 70





Earth

*...a symbol is never "explained" once and for all,
but must be deciphered over and over again, just as a
musical score is never deciphered once and for all,
but calls for an ever new execution.*

Henri Corbin

In search of symbols

I'm dead. I see myself lying there, quite tidy, not a mess, not looking like a corpse at all. I'm lying on the grass; the grass is still growing and taking up all the space up to the walls. The large quadrangle around me is impressive, a centred enclosed space; as I am dead, hovering over the buildings high up, I do not feel imprisoned, although my body is. I see the entire space; I see that it has windows on the ground floor, first floor and has a triangular roof. "They", the scientists from this old university are interested in my heart, they want to cut it out. Not because they are interested in my heart as an organ, they "want to cut it open and see what symbols are in there."

My attention in this dream is on my body, quietly lying there, not bothered it seems. When I wake I am undisturbed by this dream

death, curious as I am to know myself what my heart content can be. Will there be symbols I do not know about yet? Have my scrutinies not been sufficient? More importantly: who or what do the two scientists represent? Sometime later one possible meaning surfaced when I came across a previous dream: *I had writing I hoped to do, including symbols, already in my hand. A male figure came to investigate. He was suspicious of my writing, did not want me to write, showed a threatening attitude.*

Perhaps the scientists in this present dream resemble two opposing structures: one actively wanting to promote symbols, bring them to light, even share them. The other, regressive, wanting to cut them out, banish them and leave them unexplored. As a method of protection no doubt.

Clay, earth, earthiness, the life giving source

During my working years as a potter, I never asked myself what I was creating in a symbolic sense. I was a potter and my work had its own life; I made the pots, never questioning why I put a particular mark or design on the surface of the clay, leaving traces on an inanimate object or why I used particular glazes or left areas unglazed. Looking with hindsight at the symbols in my work, I am astonished that I did not question myself, as part of my destiny was sealed in my clay-work. Time for reflection was not available then. When I was in my studio I worked carried by the intimate space. I felt most collected and myself at the wheel, and it was difficult to express this in the outer world. Doing does not need to be described - it just is. As I entered the studio and changed my clothes to overalls, shoes and a scarf, my entire being took on a transformation.

In an overview of my ceramic career one of my first realisations was that clay is in general a bit of a Cinderella figure. Pots and potters are often mentioned, but what about clay,

the pure receptive substance? And what about the difference in earthenware and stoneware? If man was created out of earthenware, as our cultural myths suggest, then stoneware takes on a different meaning. My fascination with that difference even turned up in one of my dreams long ago, where, at a conference, I was trying to explain this essential difference to others, as I often had to do in real life. Earthenware matures at a relatively low kiln-firing temperature, below 1000°C. The body remains porous and brittle; a glaze is used to deal with this porosity. In the past these low-fired glazes often contained lead as a flux, as lead lowers the melting point. Lead however is toxic. Stoneware, being fired at 1280°C or more, has no need of lead as both clay body and glazes both contain enough fluxes from oxides in the clay and also in glaze materials.

Clay is a maternal substance and in the process of working on the wheel, a woman would become aware of the “pregnancy” of certain shapes, and clay’s continuous fecundity. To create anything, clay is needed, for moulding and also as the root of any contemplation. Clay work is charged with imprints of body and soul.

The only way I can make clear the huge importance of clay, is to describe how my work centred me. Working with clay and firing the kiln for well over 36 years changed me and, more importantly, instructed me; not only in my daily tasks as a potter but also in my dream world. And when this making stopped, I began to need that knowledge to guide myself, taking bearings from my many firing charts, a system I knew so well. I felt like a mariner, guiding my boat by the stars. I would like to grasp this meaning without the support of the physical event in the studio and transmute the external events into a symbolic history. What ceramics opened up for me was an endless journey, the mystery of never knowing where it would lead me, often my hands just

took over, pots dripping off my finger tips. Hand-building was also instant although I had no preconceived designs ready.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

Rumi

Training

When we moved from Holland to Edinburgh my sister suggested that I take up ceramics. In my training in Amsterdam it had not been on offer, neither had it occurred to me as a career choice. She reminded me of a forgotten hidden pleasure: in Suriname, where we were born; we had lived for a while on a large plantation by a wide amber-coloured river. During the siesta, while our Dutch mother was asleep, the two of us would sneak out to the river. We ran through the plantation of small palm trees on our bare feet, wanting to be there for the low tide. To go there was dangerous and strictly forbidden as the tide was temperamental. We, however were born by this river; we trusted in our father's magical tale that the red howler-monkeys always begin to howl when the tide is rising, we believed they would warn us. The moment we climbed down onto the riverbed our bare feet were instantly sucked into the clay and held, a peculiar concentrating sensation.

This sensation still registers when I walk barefoot on a wet sandy beach. Was it this dragging my feet down into the riverbed which infused me with the magical properties of clay? The top layer of the clay was grey and soft, but when we dug underneath, it was tough and solid and somewhat yellow. I was having my first lessons in the potential of clay. The soft top-layer I fantasize about now, is washed into the river from the Amazon, whose outlets stream north-east past the coast of Suriname, filling rivers along the coast with silt. Using sticks, leaves, dry crab claws

and anything else lying about useful as a tool, we made pots, animals, fantasy objects. As we worked many water creatures scuffled round about us, in and out of little holes, looking for a meal. The beauty was that the sun and the breeze instantly dried our work as we placed them on the riverbank. We could not however, take them back to the house, that would have shown our disobedience. At night, hidden in an awkward place outside, the rain returned the clay objects back to their original state.

When I walked into the large ceramic department in the Edinburgh College of Art, I was met with the sight of many wheels, dust, clay, kilns, people working. Perhaps it was the fungus-smelling clay, the damp, the heat in the studio reminding me of tropical heat and the wide river; it gripped me, I instantly fell in love and this love has never left me. Not that I took to the wheel with ease: the kick-wheel and working on it, had to be mastered. Clay needs time in preparation: kneading, resting. One of my teachers instructed me on the raising of clay upwards in a session of four-handed throwing. We made a wide pot so two left hands could be inside, two right hands outside; he was standing opposite me, I was sitting at the wheel, kicking.

I understood then that it was necessary to grip the clay and slowly distribute it by moving upwards in a spiral as the wheel goes round. I was initially apprehensive of ripping the clay, which was wet and slippery; some force was needed to control the wet mass and applying this force was new to me. Opening up of a primal lump of clay often evoked for me opening up to something beyond, an unknown form. To acquire a skill like throwing on the wheel needs not only rhythm but solving the problem of centering - opening up and concluding the shape. Pots, when made on the wheel, are shaped from the inside. Hand

and eye coordination is essential. Initially I left my finger marks on the pots until I realised this suited only a few glazes, other glazes lay best on a smooth surface.

Your hand opens and closes, opens and closes.

*If it were always a fist or always stretched open,
you would be paralyzed.*

*Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expand,
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated
as birdwings.*

Rumi

A year later in the USA, I was attending the Boston Fine Art School. By then I had mastered the wheel and was physically a lot stronger. The teaching in this school was different; the instructor had spent time in Japan and was methodical and strict. We had, for instance, to weigh the clay, make six balls of the same weight and make cylinders of a specific height and dimension. The teacher would come around with a wire stretched tight between both his hands, cut open one of the clay balls to see how well it was kneaded, to inspect if there were any air bubbles or lumps in it. He then sliced a cylinder in half to check if the wall was evenly distributed and if the base carried a sufficient amount of clay to accommodate tooling the foot, when the pot was leather hard. At the time I found this unnerving because he brought to his task a sense of pleasure. This action, slicing through a pot to see the cross-section and viewing of the interior space became for me later on, a practical and a symbolic gesture which I employed in both my studio and my personal vision of life's events. I was also fortunate that I could work with an older, experienced potter in the holidays while in the USA. He initiated me in the art of high-fired reduction ware, as, at the Art School, the students were not

allowed to fire the kilns. He taught me the intricate details of the gas kiln and how to keep a chart. He was an admirable man with an Oriental view on the approach to his craft; he instilled in me a respect for the kiln, not only because firing a gas kiln to 1280°C is dangerous work, but also because there is a mystery going on inside.

My own studio in Edinburgh

At first, after my marriage and two babies, my ceramic production was limited. When my children were a bit older I managed to buy a dilapidated coach house in the old part of the city of Edinburgh, a space which had gone from horse-drawn vehicles to modern cars. In the 1920s it had been converted into a garage for three cars. Wedged between two other old converted coach-houses in a lane, there was no through traffic and it was quiet. On one side of my building was a working garage, only for servicing cars; on my other side was a garage for parking. A working-man's lane, it suited me. It was perfect for a studio with its high pitched roof, high enough to accommodate a mezzanine floor in half of the space. The other half housed the chimney and the kiln. The kiln and some equipment I had been able to buy with the help of a grant, given by the Crafts Council after I had showed them my previous work. It took time to completely rebuild the space and to eradicate the dry-rot.

My Japanese electric wheel was upstairs; glazing equipment, materials, kiln and exhibition space downstairs. Standing on the short staircase, I was enchanted that I could survey my territory. I was mistress of all I could see. Only one smallish window to the outside world existed, in the huge double garage doors made of Scottish pine. Other windows were all in the pitched roof or in the back, a skylight. It is only when you have your own studio that the true, learning process starts, not just in technical

matters, but in unconscious development. When I was asked where my ideas came from I had to admit I did not know, the work was internally generated and I muttered “thank you” when ideas came. Ideas came like a flux, like the low tide and high tide; when one set of work was finished, the next batch of ideas were there.

My initial “beautiful pots” period during which I acquired many technical skills, laid a solid foundation for my work. I call this phase beautiful because I felt enamoured with the beauty of the threefold process of making, glazing and firing, the variations and potentials of the glazes. The fourth part, the exhibiting and selling, came next. I would have been happy to keep many pieces; the practical fact was that I had to pay for the upkeep of the studio. Learning to deal with sales, galleries, exhibitions, the world of money in relation to my work, was not easy for me. I did not feel the invisible force which propelled my work had anything to do with the outside world. Yet it had to be done, as was the part-time teaching ceramics in a boys’ upper-school, to supplement my income. Certainly, I enjoyed the compliments and admiration for my work, but these were for finished products while the next series of pots had already announced themselves, wanting me to move to a new dimension. While making the pots, the rest of me was experiencing my place of origin, the river. Perhaps there were ancestors who were potters.

What in me responds to a formless mass of clay?

My mother when quite old and not keen at all on this career path I had chosen, pointed it out to me. Looking at me in my dusty studio, spattered with clay, she said : “Do you make any money?” “Not much”, I replied. “Then why do you do this?” When I failed to give an answer for some time, she said with some despair in

her voice: "I suppose you can't help yourself." With relief that she had at last understood, I replied: "That's it, that is right, I just cannot help but do this work." How could I express better that it was a question of being aware of a fascination that drives you on?

The need to continuously form vessels or sculptural handmade pieces, was ever present and not all the tasks in the studio are pleasant. It is often thought that a potter spends time only "creating". There are many other repetitive tasks to be done, such as reconstituting all the clay leftovers or pots rejected before bisque firing. Mixing glazes, cleaning, ordering materials, coping with galleries and sales - it sometimes seemed a repeat of what I was doing at home, keeping a household with children.

My potter's wheel had come from Japan, where they had designed small electric wheels for the factories. Mine had come from Japan with me via the USA. It was a sheer joy and the only machine in my life that never went wrong. It could turn both ways, and I could stand up to make a tall pot. I could enlarge the wheel surface by using a wooden board that fitted around the wheel-head. My wheel was *the* joy in my life; even now in my latter years I dream of my wheel. Lately it was being transported, in a dream, to a different location by one of my father's freighters. Of course the wheel symbol now carries a different magic.

It was not only my wheel which brought me in contact with Japan. A famous potter, Shoji Hamada, one of Japan's national treasures, came to Edinburgh in the 1970s to give a lecture and show a short film about his potter's village in Japan. He was an immaculately dressed man, who brought his wife, dressed in a grey kimono. He spoke of his life of clay, close to the earth and things of the earth. "*The practice of making hundreds of shapes in order to make one good shape: it is not technical, it is spiritual.*"

After he gave a talk and showed his impressive film, a young man, dressed in hippy style clothes of the day, got up and asked why in Japan art was so harmonious while in the Western world it was not, what was the mystery of the East? The inscrutable potter was silent; it was hard to imagine whether it was his faltering English that was the problem or the question itself. After a while he replied: *“There is no mystery in the East. When you make 100 tea-bowls one week, the next week you make 200, the next week 400 and so on, then, when you keep working making more and more, one day the tea-bowl will be born and not made.”* This remark took centre stage in my working life.

In my studio I used four types of clay: a very fine grey stoneware, a very coarse red-brown clay, porcelain (infrequently) and a special raku-clay for the odd times I did raku-firings with friends. There were three kinds of reconstituting bins, one for the fine clay, one for the rough and one for everything else - this included pots not deemed good enough to be fired, these often had engobes or iron or other pigments on them. Reconstituted clay is fascinating because, due to the mixture, the base colour of the clay is unknown and therefore, what the effect of the clay body will be on the glazes can only be guessed. Porcelain clay is expensive and precious; everything, wheel, tools, tables had to be cleaned before it could be used, it is easily contaminated. Although it is beautiful, I much preferred the stoneware with its impurities which enhanced the glazes during the firing; it added that element of the unknown. Porcelain to me often looked like white clay with a coat of glaze on, while stoneware fused, through its impurities, with the glaze coating. Both clay and glaze materials contain silica, a glass compound. It is the silica that gives stoneware its strength. The best of all in use is very old clay. When a bag of clay which has green fungus on it is opened, you

know it will feel like silk, once wedged and on the wheel. Some old clay is often added to a newly mixed batch, to speed up the disintegrating process.

My tools were a mixed bunch. Some had been made for me from bamboo; other metal ones I bought. I had cut or carved several myself delicately to obtain special effects. Tools are very personal and most private. To reach out to the low table on the left of the wheel for a particular tool becomes as familiar as reaching for your toothbrush, half asleep in the morning. To the right of my wheel was a bowl of water and various sponges. Against the wall, under a sky-light window, I had put a tall arched mirror that had come from a large mahogany wardrobe. It was there to check the shape of the pots: as it stood on the floor, it showed all of the wheel and revealed adjustments that needed to be made to the shape of a pot. To get a globular fat belly on a pot, I needed to see it from little distance, not hang over it.

In tooling the pots, the mirror was also a necessary aid. By turning the pots upside down onto the wheel-head the pot takes on a different dimension. The relationship between the foot, its height and width to the form is most important as how it stands up and accentuates its image. These matters are all a question of intimate taste.

This looking and reflecting on an other angle, as if in the mirror, became a habit that has persisted until now.







Water

*The fish are mute...one once thought. Who knows?
But in the end, is there not a place, where one, what for
fish would be language, without them speaks?*

R.M. Rilke

Fish arrived quietly as a decorative pattern on my ceramics, a bit like my own entrance into the realm of clay: sideways like a crab. One day I needed to decorate 16 small side-plates I had made for my own household. As these were to be glazed white, I wanted a design to stand out and fish sprang to life. Having made a drawing then a template, I cut out 16 paper fishes and pressed them into the damp clay. Eight swam to the right, eight to the left. For me it has always been necessary that the design is part of the clay body. The clay body needs to have an influence on the decoration and glazes. I am not a painter and I do not like my designs painted on top of a glazed surface. This system, cutting paper, worked for me, softly carving out a space for the fish. After the clay had dried and shrunk a fraction, I painted wax around the paper fishes and pulled the paper off. Then the fish were painted with colouring oxides and engobes. When bisque-fired the colours were embedded in the clay and showed themselves from underneath the transparent, wet looking glaze when fired. Looking at these first fish now, they appear stiff, not wiggly and moving as fish could be and as they later became. It took time and many fish dreams before they became lively.

D.W.Winnicott remarks in his paper *On Communication*: “...in artists of all kinds I think one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found.”

The many subsequent fish in my work only spoke in a symbolic language, a dialogue with an existence I am exploring now. It is hard to know whether the dreams came first or the making of the fish. The ceramic fish arrived from an inner pressure I was not aware of consciously, and this is symbolised by my fish-dreams. Their light and beauty shows a search for clarity, yet in dreams their negative side could equally be apparent. I took them out of the water, and placed them on a recognisable clay surface; a surface that was itself imbued with water symbolism. Two slippery, wet masses coming together to face a firing process.

While travelling, I am catching the right train. Quietly sitting in the wooden compartment with a sliding door, an invisible someone comes in, suddenly pushes a circular object into the palm of my left hand. It burns my hand and smells of scorched flesh, strong pressure, it feels very deep but it does not go through the bones. This circular object must be 3cm wide. It smells strange, but it actually does not hurt me.

Then, just as suddenly, in a flash, I am clearly swimming with fishes, deep down below. The water is a bit hazy. The fish come to see me and to smell the inside of my hand. This experience is absolutely wonderful especially because one tropical, multicoloured fish circles around me. This fish guides me and we swim together down to a corner where more fish are. I offer these fish my hand, I stroke them.

Perhaps the fish were an echo also of my playmates when I was a child in Suriname, where I was born. The children with whom I ran around in the palm gardens called me “Kutai-eye” because one of my eyes was not straight, floating outwards some of the time. They never knew exactly, at what I was looking. It was not a great compliment, for the Kutai is a tropical fish with bulging eyes on top of their head. They like to come to the surface for food, skimming over the mud. They have one great advantage over other fish: their eyes are split and this enables them to look above and below the waterline at the same time and so are open all the time. While viewing the surface they can keep an eye on the dangers of the depths. Kutai (Anablebs) are therefore called: “the four-eyed fishes”. They give birth to live young.

My father’s remarks added to this manner of looking. When he took us for a walk into the jungle to search for orchids, carrying a gun and a machete, he told us children: “You have to develop a sense of having not only eyes in front, but in your back and on top of your head; snakes hang off the trees, poisonous spiders jump, every creature watches the others to detect if there is danger.” As we once or twice did encounter a threatening situation, we learned to be aware of the creatures you could not instantly see or hear, and also to sense what is not instantly visible.

After a while the fish theme in my work expanded and became freer, the fish appeared on larger plates, plant pots, jugs. Due to turmoil in my life the theme about nets was added. Pressing real nets into the clay was exciting: after I pulled the netting out, I filled in the grooves with iron oxide to make them stand out when fired. I felt that I was trapped and trying to escape, exactly what I was wanting to escape from was not totally clear at first. New work began to express this: one day I made a fish entirely

on its own, hand-built. It was made in such a way it could hang on the wall and appeared to be swimming off. I was excited: the fish had become independent, they no longer needed an object to rely on. They were surviving on their own. They showed me my direction: a tug to reality. These new fish took over their own development: at first they swam on their own. Soon pilot-fish came to join them, being part of them. Other companions came also, water snakes, or other small fishes popped out their fins. Later human-like figures began to peep out of their fins, or their body itself became a pattern of netting. Eventually, the last one I made was carrying a pot with a gold rim in its fin. Where was it going and what was it looking for?

During that same period my marriage broke up and my sons went away to university. The fish remained present both in my dreams and in my work. A woman came to see me in my studio, who had just come home from living in the Caribbean and was opening a seafood restaurant. She asked me to make several shoals of fish to hang on the walls. Another commission came for a wall full of a variety of fish, to hang on the wall in a house in the Bahamas, and swim into the outdoor patio. I flew out to Nassau to hang them.

The fish and I were on the move, going places. It was a curious experience to take to the air with a suitcase full of ceramic fishes. A hugely enjoyable one.

A period of five years then began during which several close friends died and also my parents in Holland. There was never time to mourn losses, for as soon as I caught my breath another catastrophe came my way. This was also the time however when the next major, missing piece arrived, a prompting: a wooden river boat came into my life.

At an exhibition of Oriental pieces I found a boat, a boat reminiscent of my childhood in Suriname. This one was a wooden Thai river boat just over four metres long. It came with a paddle and a bamboo cradle for it to stand on. I bought the boat.

I felt that something had been returned to me I had forgotten about, the joy of travelling in my childhood, the essence of travelling, what travelling was about: exploration and expansion, fun and fear, recognition and amazement. The possibility of staying afloat combined with the fragility one felt when water became restless, dangerous and threatened to take control. We had been on boats going down rapids. Having a boat meant you could leave.... and return.

My father had been director of a shipping company which sent freighters along the coast of South America; many ferries and smaller vessels also, going into the interior with passengers and supplies; roads in those days were not there in abundance. From an early age I heard speak of flooding rivers or dry riverbeds, difficulties during the rainy season and the dry season.

To me, being allowed to go with my father to the docks was an enormous treat; the freighters, the smells of rope and tar, the world of packaging, transferring crates and bales of materials, and people, constant movement of men working. There were also visits to his office with its maps, showing routes and other interesting, navigational objects. As a child it appeared to me that he was master of the only way in and out of the mysterious interior lands, which was jungle.

Occasionally going on holiday inland, we travelled in a convoy of wooden river boats, very like the one I bought, only stronger and better made. We travelled to the coast, over rivers and creeks. At the beach, where we camped, we lived in open huts with palm leaf roofs, sleeping in hammocks. The beach was edged closely by the jungle and at night a watchman sat by a fire

to keep animals away who smelled the water and food we had taken with us. During the day my father took us to see the giant turtles who came onto the shore to lay their leathery eggs. This travelling with many helpers and native guides came flooding back to me when I saw this Thai river-boat. There were so many occasions we travelled by boat. We had also travelled to Europe several times by boat, this journey at the time took three or four weeks. Boats and rivers had been in my awareness even before I could walk, as children we were taken out to the park by the river practically every afternoon. By the age of two we had been to Europe and back to South America on a ship. According to my family I learned to walk on this voyage.

Having this boat in my life, like a rediscovered cradle, brought a new depth into my work. First I made some sketches and photos, then I began to hand-built clay boats. The first one I filled with images from a dream, a dream about travelling. Where would it take me?

On the outside of the boat is an eye, not a name. Hanging in front over the edge are two birds who have come down to assist with directions; their open beaks hanging over the edge, looking forward, spying what is ahead. Behind them is a large net, draped over a seat, one part falling out over the edge. A small fish is sitting on top of the net, looking at the water with longing. A very small tortoise is on the seat behind. In the back of the boat is a grey, cracked pot, a broken vas, its circular collar is alright, but the crack had been flattened and folded over. Sitting draped over the edge way in the back is a small snake, his tail in his mouth. Making clay boats seemed a privileged way to travel.

The clay boat with dreams was followed by a series of other boats. Some displayed my sisters and myself, swaddled in lace;

lace as questioning the beauty, but also the constrictions, of our upbringing and the many upheavals: constant changes of houses and countries we had experienced as children. Changes of schools, language, culture.

The last two boats in this series I made carried three undamaged pots each. One pot was black with a white glaze inside, the next one was white with a red glaze inside and the third was red with gold lustre inside. By then I knew about alchemy, not only from the alchemy in the studio firing the kiln, but from reading about it.

The Thai boat had other functions apart from being inspiration for my clay work. If we had a celebration at home, we filled it with plants and flowers. During Christmas we filled it with presents and glitter. Occasionally everyday items were kept in it. I put large paper fish in it. I instructed my sons that I wished to be cremated in or with my boat so we could keep travelling together. Its presence in my life is a pure delight. Like the fish it carries everything to do with any form of water. Rivers, rapids, lakes, many water symbols are present in my dreams, as a helpful force or an obstructing one.

Making pots begins with clay and water; the clay has to have the correct amount of water to obtain plasticity. Clay is made wet when work on the wheel begins. If the pot is good it will be semi-dried, tooled, decorated, or not; then put aside to let the water evaporate. If rejected, it returns to the scrap-clay bin with water to be reconstituted. When bisque fired, glazes are weighed, dry mixed and then water added to give the correct consistency. The bisque pot, still porous, sucks up the glaze, water then evaporates and the dry glaze is left. The cycles are one of water absorption and evaporation. Like the work itself, absorbing the flow of imagination and letting it go, slowly, with the assistance

of airflow. Essential as water is, it can also destroy if moisture is left in the pots while firing, it can blow up a ceramic pot.

My very first dream about fish was not about fish but a mermaid:

I find myself swimming underwater, soft blue and clear, into a grotto. To my left is a smaller grotto; in it, sitting on a rock sticking out the water, is a young mermaid with long hair. There was an older mermaid behind me, I could not see her. The young mermaid was singing and I was glad because that was a form of communication, the older one however, could not communicate. Her song moved me and I wanted to give her something, a necklace, pearls perhaps, but that did not seem the right thing, pearls came from her world. Then I thought of large, bright pink plastic beads and I considered that solution.

All of a sudden I was out of the grotto and plunged even deeper down into a murkier world. There I found, sitting on the bottom of the ocean, a little black iron stove, an old fashioned one with little legs and a glass fronted door. There was something inside and a deep voice instructed me to find this object; the stove however had an asbestos lining and that was not to be loosened or disturbed, if I did, I would be dead. I wondered what the object could be...and opened the door, my hand reached...

It is now over 25 years ago I had this dream and it is as clear within me as when I woke to write it down that night. To have a mermaid as interpreter in the underwater world is helpful, although she could not speak she made me feel my presence had meaning. Her singing gave me a sense of confidence, while the older mermaid seemed stifled behind me. The expanse of the grotto was immense and irregular, the smaller grotto however

was more like an enclosed circular space, intimate.

It spoke of a two handed challenge, dealing with the lure of the mermaid singing and the dangers of reaching for a mysterious, unknown object and possibly being killed in the process. The warning in the second part was quite clear, even if I was not consciously aware at the time that I was embarking on an underwater journey. The dream seemed prophetic.

While the Athanor's presence in alchemy was known to me, I had no personal experience of stoves of this kind. The Athanor is an alchemist's oven, in an attempt to make gold.

My kiln was a large square black metal box, with a white, thick lining of Kao-wool (a material used for insulation), the fire was red and I used gold lustre for accentuating parts of my ceramic ware. Here was a whiff of alchemy.

My life at the time was too busy and complex to delve deeply into this dream, although, whenever I was firing my kiln, I felt the dream presence: the warning about the asbestos.

Water can mean tears, dissolving, translucence, reflection; it promotes growth in the earth. In the studio it aids the clay in becoming receptive, giving it the right plasticity. It also causes decomposition when the clay becomes too hard.

As for the fishes, my fish dreams and the ceramic fishes eventually swam together and wove themselves into a numinous pattern.











Fire

*Flee the struggle with men to discover pure struggle:
the struggle with the elements.*

Gaston Bachelard

Only when you own your first kiln and are all alone firing it, do you truly learn about the ceramic firing process. This demands concentration and intense alertness. Fire and air combined have an aggressive masculine nature, the opposite to earth and water; fire suggests the possibility of change and transformation. It is energetic and demands precision and attention. A bisque-firing precedes a glaze firing, it only requires to go up to 980°C, the atmosphere inside of the kiln remains clear. Although as much moisture as possible is driven out of the ware the day before a bisque, by having the kiln on a low flame and the door even a fraction open, the day of the bisque firing begins slowly. On the whole there are items of different thicknesses in the kiln. There might not only be superfine bowls or plates made of the finest stoneware, but also a hand-built pot or sculptural piece made out of coarse clay. Hand built pieces have sections with uneven thicknesses and if the temperature goes up too quickly, these uneven sections cannot excrete their moisture fast enough and an explosion occurs, splitting these joints apart. To every potter this is a frightening sound that makes their heart race. One item may be exploding, but the possibility is there that items nearby are also shattered. In bisque firings items can be closely packed

together, even inside one another. If an explosion occurs, the question is then: shall I stop, cool down the kiln, open it to see what has occurred, or proceed? No rules are available; only knowledge of the ware inside the kiln can dictate what the best way is to proceed. After the bisque firing is done and has cooled, the next stage of glazing the pots can begin. While learning how my kiln worked best, I also learned how the glazes reacted to my method of firing. Some compounds do not tolerate each other and bubbling or boiling effects can appear. Sometimes the glaze-formula or the firing cycle needed a slight adjustment. Other times it was the position of a pot the kiln; some reacted better to being in a hot-spot on the top shelf, others to being down below where the temperature was a little cooler.

At art college we had studied the chemistry of glazes, although this is not a totally exact science as the firing method and even the weather can have a bearing on the outcome of the glaze-surface. I learned to play with empirical formulae. What I most treasured about my glazes and this method of firing was the confrontation with the unknown. Glaze compounds come in dry form, the ingredients need to be most carefully weighed out; a miniscule amount of cobalt or iron oxide can change the colour. When glaze is weighed, water is added and the glaze is sifted. The pots, being still porous after being fired to 980°C, are dipped in the glaze, or glaze is poured over them. Brushing glaze on is also possible if you require an uneven colour, and where two glazes meet, a third colour appears. Occasionally this third colour can also be a disaster, or a unique surprise. Opposite possibilities are ever present. Partial glazing is possible by painting wax on the bisque ware. Hot wax is used to coat the base of every pot; if this is not meticulously done, the glaze will melt onto the kiln shelf, and the pot has to be broken off the shelf after the firing,

both pot and shelf are ruined. I had a propane gas kiln which was temperamental.

When stacking the kiln begins, time is left for moisture, sucked up by the porous bisque ware, to evaporate. A powdery surface then remains and the ware must be handled with delicacy or the glaze might rub off and, when melting, show uneven spots. In their unfired, glazed state, pots look dry, powdery, unattractive, not unlike a grub waiting for its metamorphosis, to become a butterfly in the firing.

I see a large square box, reminiscent of the size and shape of my square kiln. It is however on its own, hovering in the air. No building, no base, no doors, no chimney; just a recognisable shape because it does have the black metal surround; inside that the thick white lining of kao-wool. The entire space is filled with soft red small flames, gentle licking flames. The image is beautiful, quiet and somehow reassuring...Colours: black, white, red.

I feel this dream indicated the alchemical order of: nigredo, albedo, and rubedo, the first three stages of the alchemical process: the blackening, the whitening and the reddening. To find them appearing together in my kiln, separated from the reality of the studio, was a new image. It reminded me of the separation of the fishes from the actual containers, the ceramic pots. The kiln had become an image on its own, away from its functional aspect.

In a glaze-firing the pots must not touch each other, and filling the kiln is an exact job. The flames must be able to travel through the kiln unimpeded. The height and placing of the kiln shelves must be taken into account. It is, for instance, not a good idea

to have many shallow shelves near the top, as heat tends to hang around at the top of the kiln, leaving the base cooler. In this case the firing will be uneven and sometimes even hard to conclude as the ware on the top shelves could over-fire, causing the glazes to run, while the ware on the lower shelves might be under-fired, the glaze has then not totally melted.

My method of glaze-firing was for high-fired reduction stoneware, although porcelain was sometimes included. "Reduction" in this sense means a reduction of oxygen to the flames during the higher stages of the firing, after a temperature of 1000°C has been reached.

Once the temperature has reached 1000°C in a glaze firing, a relationship begins with chaos. This consists of cutting down the oxygen flow to the flames, a reduction. The flames inside become "dirty" and "sulphuric", a choking smell comes out into the studio and the windows, doors, have to be wide open. These fumes are toxic. This process is repeated at various times, the unruly fire needs to become cunning. This reduction pulls the impurities to the surface of the clay-body, for instance iron oxide or cobalt. The difficulty is that during these periods of reduction the temperature in the kiln will not rise, the sulphur behaves like an autonomous reality. Stagnation occurs. In order to keep the temperature rising, there has to be alternating periods of reduction and oxidation; this means letting air into the kiln and the burner, and not restricting the outflow. It is this balancing of this cycle of the oxidation and reduction that brings about the quality of the glaze surfaces. The rise of temperature in the kiln during these phases becomes slower and slower, and I often wondered if it would ever get to the required temperature; after eight or nine hours the situation became tense. Once the kiln has reached 1280°C and has been put out, the kiln is sealed up as best as possible, so that no cold outside air can come in.

I kept a chart of every firing and I soon learned that part of the kiln that was outside my reach and control had a major influence on the firing: the chimney. Depending on the weather, the chimney could pull the heat up or dampen it down. If the wind was blowing down, it could be slow, or it could be sucking out the heat. From inside my studio, I was the technician and controller of these turbulent forces; outside the building, I was at the mercy of the elements. No firing was ever the same because the stacking of the kiln was always different and so was the weather. The puzzle was never solved; it forced me into acceptance that, whatever I did, the air-element had a say in the matter.

This is humbling. I frequently wondered at the easy time potters who use electric kilns have. They do not have a struggle with the elements, but then, in my opinion, they do not get the beauty and surprises this battle brings either. It often happened that a piece of work which I thought would be exceptional came out the firing looking very ordinary, while a simple pot had metamorphosed into an exquisite object. This was not my doing; it was the position in the kiln and the elements that combined to make this happen. There is knowledge of glazes, oxides and lustres and what they might bring about but it always remained a mystery as to what the joining of the elements would create.

The silence after the sound of the roaring kiln over 10 or more hours is pregnant; an intimation that an unseen task had been achieved. That a transformation inside had occurred was only noticeable by the intensity of the glow of the melting glass surfaces through the opening of the spyhole. Such a glow eyes cannot endure.

Both the kiln and I then sighed with relief, the kiln in its full firing mode had appeared like it might take off, vibrating like

a rocket. When the burner was turned off it settled back on its base, and my entire body relaxed. After a few minutes I ran around the kiln, shutting every opening or crack in the kiln to safeguard the heat.

A kiln must cool down slowly for in this part of the process the colour in the glazes develop, and the ware soaks in the heat. Should the temperature drop too quickly, crazing or other surface damage might occur. The cooling time for my kiln was at least 16 or 18 hours, and even then the door could only be opened slightly. It really took 24 hours before the ware was cooled off properly.

Bisque and glaze-firing were followed by a third: a lustre-firing. The days after a glaze firing there was a serene air about, a feeling of contentment. Now attention could be given on which details of the ceramic ware needed to be emphasised. Often that decision had already been taken at the stage of conception of the pots or fishes. The eyes of the fishes especially became golden. Many other details were enhanced by mother of pearl, other lustre colours, silver or bronze. Adding these modest metallic details delighted me. They are part of “that whiff of alchemy” and are related to dreams of eroded rock and ore. Lustre firings did not take long, carried out with a pure flame, fire and air mixing in harmony.

Occasionally I would leave my solitary studio to join others outdoors for a raku-firing. We built a brick kiln and stoked it with wood. First the pots were bisque-fired in the studio and covered with raku glazes; then they were taken outdoors and put, with long-handled tongs, carefully into the hot kiln chamber (950°C). In five or ten minutes when glazes were melted, the pots were immediately taken out and placed into a bin full of combustible materials; seaweed, sawdust, straw, wood-shavings,

all of which gave different results. During this flaming, placing a lid on the bin excluded oxygen, creating a reducing atmosphere. When the flames died down, the pots were plunged into cold water. The glaze effects were often stunning (raku means *joy* in Japanese). However, the pots suffered a high mortality rate; a quarter of them did not survive this process of extremes.

Working with the kiln has left an everlasting impression on my psyche. A fire that creates can also destroy, it focuses one on birth and death. It contains a hint of the diabolical, stark in contrast to the initial creating of ceramics: the soft, malleable quality of clay and water.







Air

The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents.

R.W. Emerson

When entering my studio the first awareness was of a cool space, like entering a cave. Not cold as if it was winter time, more because the building was old and behind the back wall was a garden, reaching halfway up the wall, the building being on a slope. Once inside, the large space appears to be a container in its own right. When I bought the building, slate butts to put horse saddles on, were still sticking out of the walls as it was an old coach-house. The building had been standing empty for years, or used as a garage to park cars. The original owner had also used it as a photographic studio, a space to repair all manner of items, from bicycles to gramophones to wooden implements. There was an enormous metal drill which demanded attention. Attached to it was a box with all sizes of drill heads. It was a significant piece of machinery from the industrial revolution. Old glass bottles with glass stoppers with gold and white labels suggested alchemy; indeed a relative of the original owner one day came to visit and told me of the many hobbies (one being photography) his uncle practised in this space. He told me his

uncle would have been delighted that an artist had moved in. Initially the coach-house was in bad repair and it took me a year to have the dry-rot eradicated and bring it to a standard where it could be used as a studio.

Over the years, musty clay smells added to this feeling of a hidden cave. During and after firings the atmosphere changed, the door and windows had to be open to ventilate the poisonous sulphur fumes permeating all around, and the extreme heat drove off the image of a cave. Coming back into the studio the day after a firing was like entering a cosy cottage with a roaring blaze in the fireplace. The air was warm and soft, the opposite of working time; all this added to the exhilaration of what was to happen next: opening the kiln door just a fraction to let out more heat and peep inside. The ceramics instantly made a pinging sound, like glass bells, while glazes settled into their new mode.

Opening the kiln after a glaze firing was for me, as for all potters working with a living flame, intensely exiting because of that unknown factor. What had the irrational nature of the airflow, the fire in the kiln and the weather brought about? How had it transformed the ceramics? It felt again and again as if a myth of creation had repeated itself.

My first conscious awareness of the importance to me, physically, of the cutting off of the oxygen in the kiln during a firing came while I was proceeding with a glaze firing; I noticed that I myself was getting breathless and gasping for air. It was during that time I began making notes about the firing in relation to my emotional state. Air gives an irrational feeling, the unseen, fertilising, flowing from outside and influencing the inside of the kiln.

While I held this idea for years, it did not become significant enough to register and write about until my life had fallen apart.

At that point I began to wonder if, like in the firing, this “cutting off of air” was comparable to parts of my life being cut away and the consequence was that I felt like I could not breathe, reeling from shock after shock. Air, or oxygen, inside the kiln not only feeds the flames, it guides the flame through the kiln. The fire-mouth was located at the base of my kiln, where fire and air mix. The force of the gas burner slowly intensifies, sucking in air, steering the flame upwards in between the shelves; when the flames hit the roof of the kiln they return back down through the shelves with the pots, down to where the exit is located and where they can escape up the chimney. This is a down-draft system, and the interaction was between the force of the flame and the volume of air. The alternating marriage of fire and air and reduction of air completed this crucial process. Every page of my firing charts has a note about the season and the weather conditions. My last glaze-firings of a year were often in the first weeks of December, and never in January or February because the intense cold had a too dampening effect on the chimney.

My relationship with the kiln was one of awe. I tolerated few people around when I was firing, especially after 1000°C when the true drama began to manipulate the reduction/oxidation cycle. The kiln had to be watched all the time; it became like a smoking dragon, noisy and dangerous. The kiln door had two spy-holes in it; one located somewhat near the top and one near the base. Although the kiln had a rod with an electric wire connected, sticking from outside into the kiln wall to read the temperature, these devices cannot be trusted. The spy-holes are there to be able to look into the kiln to read the three pyrometric cones. These are small, tall, triangles made to melt at various degrees during the firing. It is essential to know exactly what was happening inside so one set of cones is placed on a shelf near

the top spy-hole and the second on a lower shelf near the bottom clearly visible.

The skill lay in forcing the fire to circulate in such a way that the top and the bottom heat of the kiln ended up melting the glazes at the same time. To manipulate the flames the input and withdrawal of oxygen is used. The air element becomes a mediator and a guide of the flames. When too much air was let into the kiln, heat quickly disappeared through the chimney located at the base of the kiln where the exit was located. If too much oxygen was withdrawn, the flame can become so sulphuric that it damaged the ware.

If every firing was the same it would be possible to have a plan to work with. But nothing in ceramic firing of this kind is ever the same and constant attention has to be given to finding different routes to accommodate the dance of the flames. Perhaps potters become a little like mercurial spirits themselves, forever finding ways to make possible the partnership of these two elements, air and fire, both transformative like animated spirits.

.....to secure and test the sympathy between the invisible and the visible, the spiritual and the sensible, that sympathy which Jalaluddin Rumi was to designate by the Persian term: "ham-dami", blowing together.....

Henri Corbin

Spy-holes are potent symbols in my work. Being round, they are still within a square firebrick built into the door. To open or close, there is a bung: a square handled piece of fire-brick with a round shaped protruding end. This fits inside the spy-hole.

It is necessary to often look into the kiln when firing, to see if the top and bottom are equal in colour, a red colour. After many firings you learn to read the variations of red colours

appearing inside the kiln, at first a soft red appears on the upper part, slowly increasing. If the red colour at the base does not keep pace, there has to be a constant adjusting, an attempt to pull the heat down and make the temperature somewhat equal. Potters learn to read the colour red in their kilns, a balancing instinct. Once the temperature went above 1000 degrees, the air and the flames in my kiln began to roar. The spy-hole always held attraction for me, although once or twice my hair was singed by placing my face too close and burning my hair when I took the bung out.

The spy-holes recently began to appear in my dreams:

I am looking at the sky, it is coming down low and hanging over me, grey and hazy. In the sky is a spy-hole, it is shimmering in the darkness around me. I am curious and move underneath to get a better look, lifting my face up. A stern voice behind me instantly warns me to move away, not to put my face or eyes directly underneath this hole. Whatever falls or comes out might hurt me. But I am to watch just standing beside it.

This dream suggested to me a change of direction: from the horizontal plane to the vertical. My focus had possibly been on a rational plane and this dream and a second one of identical nature, gave a suggestion to move to a more necessary, symbolic plane. Air is akin to inspiration, so clearly demonstrated by these symbols returning to inform me; much like other ceramic related dreams about my wheel, the firing-cycle or the recycling buckets. A third spy-hole dream came, the symbol now earthbound. Their effect on me was one of intense, breath-taking curiosity.

I arrive at a house, my hostess, expecting me, lets me in. A few minutes later she tells me someone is at the door for me. When I go towards the front door I see there is a rectangular spy hole in it. I see through the glass who has come and open the door: it is my (inner) analyst, beaming at me, she hands me a bunch of red roses, wrapped in white paper.

The presence and behaviour of the air element reminds me of my first experiences of learning how to throw on the wheel: the four-handed teaching. After many years when pots, on some days were born and not made, there was a feeling of four hands working on the wheel: two were mine and two belonged to the invisible force which propels creative work.









Quintessence

Man cannot directly grasp a question asked from him from outside (that would be pure speculation); he grasps it through his response, and this response is his being, his very own mode of being, as he wills it and assumes it (just as the tropism of the heliotrope expresses that flower's very own being).

Henri Corbin

Early in my ceramic career my attention was drawn to the firing cycle in the kiln, to the fact that it had meaning, not only as knowledge about glazes and firing temperatures to fire the kiln, but to me personally. I have to speak of my own experience because there is no other way to reach my goal. I remain watchful constantly, trying to catch myself in those unguarded moments when I am not concealing, or pushing away those subjects that don't seem to "fit" in the usual pattern; the usual pattern has become avoidance of pain of the loss of my work. Somehow I have to re-assemble my studio to make it new-born in a different way.

My goal however is shifting all the time, like in a ceramic firing where the temperature fluctuates and the colliding elements bring matter together of an unexpected kind. When I began the writing of *Quintessence* most of it was assembled in my head and in notes and all was well; yet it changed because I changed during

my writing. At first I did not believe it, nor could I or would I go along with the new expressions of these changes. I would like to understand the invisible matters through the analogy of the visible ones: my ceramic work. With my insight into the four elements and my dreams I shall attempt to shape my writing and how it changed. A time gap exists between my writing of the first four sections of my book and my writing now.

.....an old man grabs me quite forcefully by the elbow and pushes me to the front of a slightly raised platform towards a small crowd of people. While he pushes me he says intently and insistently: "tell them what you told me!" His emphasis is on "them" and with his free arm he makes a gesture towards the small crowd. Somehow I cannot refuse and say: "it is like I have just woken up....." He grips my elbow even tighter and gives me another push: "and also?" he growls. I hesitate and mumble something quickly under my breath.....

This old man, who looks a bit like a wild scientist or alchemist with his longish grey hair sticking out, is dressed in strange clothes. With him is his wife; she is small, plump and reddish in the face. She was behind us, I did not see her at first. Her clothes are weird too. I realise I have often seen them serving in a vegetable shop, but I did not know they were magical.



Over the many years I came to know the workings of the kiln and the process of firing intimately, I wondered if its significance was not applicable to me, my searches and development; could my own system not assist me? It took time before I truly could begin

the work of comparing the individuation cycle with the firing cycle; this because I experienced a long spell of upheaval, trauma and eventually the loss of the studio; due to damage in my neck from bending over the wheel, my right arm went lame. Neither medical nor historical data delivered results in understanding why or how this happened.

At first I did not know where to begin my search; that I had already carved out a path I was not yet consciously aware of. This path was there in a ceramic form: stoneware. What I needed to learn was to read the cipher, smell the fragrance, look for the traces I had left in my work. I had a question and it needed to be answered. The old structure of who I was had to be broken up, to extract essence from it, a task that took a lot longer than I had anticipated.

Richard Sennett coins a helpful phrase, “domain shift”:

Perhaps the metamorphosis that most challenges the maker consciously to maintain form is the “domain shift”. This phrase refers to how a tool initially used for one purpose can be applied to another task, or how the principle guiding one practice can be applied to quite another activity.

The new “tool” I am using is words, and the method I am using is the same as I employed in the studio. For earth I will use my practical knowledge of my craft: the wheelwork, glazing and the firing. For water I will use my dreams. For fire I will use my ceramics around me, also all my know-how in other craft skills and other arts, these give energy and sparkle. For air I will use my entire life and travels as inspiration, explorations of spiritual insights, even an unearthly perspective.

My desire to move from an idea of what my work had been about, to a vision about it, to write about it, remained, in spite

of the original challenge: the possible touching the asbestos layer and the figure in dreams who objected to me writing. This idea, to write anyway, followed me around in dreams and outer events, prompting me to search again. Can there be some expression of predestination in art-work?



I see a large pool; from where I am, higher up, it looks oval but is possibly round.

There is a man in this pool up to his waist in what appears to be water, wading about it slowly. His top half is naked, his head bent down concentrating on the surface in the soft hazy light. I ask him what he is doing; he replies that he is skimming "essence" off the surface and putting it into a container somewhat resembling an old lamp. The pool makes this essence. The liquid in the pool is like a marinade, but not boiling or bubbling, yet I can see it is alive. He adds that he will seal the jar with fat. The pool also provides the fat, he says, and he points to the small, occasional blobs on the surface and gathers those to seal the jar.



After some time and several detours I found myself at a gathering in the mountains in Switzerland where a seminar was given on art. Being intrigued and recognising I wanted to talk to someone with both knowledge of art and individuation, I arranged to visit the speaker in Zurich. I had no idea who he was, I did not investigate; the most important link to me was that his interest lay in art. When I entered his work room, I

put a stack of photographs of my work on the floor between us, and, in order to point out and explain these more easily, I myself sat on the floor. My spontaneity indicated to me that I felt safe because it was an old habit I had employed in my studio. Whenever I had worked for some months and was about to have an exhibition, I cleared the floor and put all (perhaps one hundred or more, small and large) pots on the floor in a circle. I then sat in the centre, intensely enjoying the richness of clay, glazes, shapes, texture and decoration, simplicity or complexity.

My aim was to sort out which pots related to other pots, by shape, glaze, colour, motif. Sculptural pieces could mix with bowls if they were made from the same rough clay and left unglazed for instance. It always astonished me how totally different subjects could combine while they had not been made at the same time or even been in the same firing. These repeated ritual sittings before exhibitions had been the most intensely joyous moments in my working life, absorbed and totally present, enclosed in a sea of my work.

It needed to be because the next part consisted of having to let go of work I had so intimately been involved with for months. Some pieces I just could not part with, there was too much of me in them. All these thoughts welled up in me as I sat on the floor among the photos of my work in Zurich.

At first, my eagerness to look at the unexplored symbols in my work was exclusively centred around the fishes, not only my ceramic fishes, but the fishes in my dreams. The fish dreams were never the same, the variety showed their fecundity. The curious fact was that, although the trauma of my right arm going lame had put a definite end to my career as a potter, the fish dreams kept visiting me and formed a mysterious link and support. The fishes did not want to be exiled, they kept suggesting

movement. Having lived through the blossoming period in my studio, could they possibly bring about a new flow of ideas?



When I began designing fish and creating many pots with fish designs, my feelings were mostly embedded in my encounters with the tropical fish in clear waters around the island of Curacao. We were sent there when I was not yet five years old, travelling unaccompanied on one of my father's boats. It had been an escape and liberation from the convent boarding school in Suriname my two older sisters and I had been put in temporarily, because of my parents' marriage upheaval; not that we knew about that or were ever given an explanation of this event.

The nuns were awful; dressed in full black habits with black veils, they resembled smelly black-clothed scarecrows with very white faces. There is nothing positive to be said about most of them. They made us say extra prayers for my mother, who in their eyes was a bad woman because she wore trousers and red lipstick. One of the prayers they made up for us especially, contained a line about our mother having "snake-shit" on her lips.

Our mother was in fact a particularly beautiful woman. Having not much to do in a small colonial town, Paramaribo, in the 1940s and with a lot of domestic help, she had joined the Land-Army, was made an officer and taught other women to drive army vehicles. To the nuns that must have been sacrilegious. They were envious of her and we were punished for it. They took away our European toys, replacing them with rubbish; they sewed frills of paper or ugly material on the hem of our dresses, finding them too short.

They hounded my middle sister because she dared cry out that she wanted her mother. Sleeping in a tiny cubicle beside hers (we three had slept together in a large nursery room at home) and listening to the nuns castigating and ridiculing her, I became very quiet and often did not speak at all. My older sister told us later that all this effort was to teach us humility. Did we even know the word humility? In my generous moments I see them as sad products of their era; in my angry reminiscences I feel full of fury. Only one nun only stood out and I am grateful to her. She ran the crafts classes and by being with her I discovered that my hands could make practically everything I was shown how to make.

When we were taken out of the convent and sent to our grandmother on the island of Curacao by ship, it felt like an escape. The island was almost flat and lacked the lush tropical vegetation of the mainland; cacti grew in abundance. The sky, however, appeared endless and like a half sphere, the light was magical because of the reflection of the ocean water around.

The freedom and clearness of being near, and often in the sea-water around the island must have made a deep impact on me. In my ceramic work this luminescent light came to inhabit my choice of glazes.



In Zurich, discussing the nets and fish on some of my large plates, I explained the fish were trying to flee from the net, flee from being caught, wanting liberty, like I had sought freedom to be myself. The reply that came startled me: "Perhaps I had been trying to catch the fish?"

Suddenly I found myself in an upside-down world, a belief I

held for so long, fell apart and from there many old convictions and tightly held opinions had to be severed, modified or scrapped altogether. My ceramics took on a new life in a different form and so did their expression in my contemplations; with that came the opportunity for my soul to return once more to the studio and the work I so loved and had lost. Over time my studio was reborn in a new way.

The fishes carried an intentionality and meaningfulness to my spirit. The emphasis on beauty and the light-giving properties of the glazes was perhaps the origin of their appearance in my work. Having never discussed my fish-dreams before, I wondered if they would disappear when spoken about; to the contrary, more came to enlighten me at night. The fish were not the sole theme in my work; there were also boats, hands, butterflies, abstract images and so on. One series I also enjoyed making were the jars with lids that were heads of bird-like spirits. They all seemed to be part players in my own being, off-shoots of my psyche. The knack of designing new projects has not left me. There is no doubt, however, that the fish nudged me to move into a new dimension, both historical and timeless. A livelier connection to my inner world appeared slowly over time, a world I had been aiming for but had been uncomfortable throwing myself into without a guide. Several unusual experiences of an ineffable nature had come my way over the years; I had not been able to find a way to incorporate them other than acknowledge them.

That I was introverted and attracted to those areas I knew, but to see hints of this inclination appear in an outer form was a different matter. Possibly the awe I felt for the firing process became the forerunner of some mystical type of experience. Being perishable had been in the forefront of my mind so many times when I was faced with my kiln roaring at me as I tried to push it to the required temperature.







Craftwork establishes a realm of skill and knowledge perhaps beyond human verbal capacities to explain; it taxes the powers of the most professional writer to describe precisely how to tie a slipknot. Here is perhaps the fundamental human limit: language is not an adequate "mirror-tool" for the physical movements of the human body.

Richard Sennett

Writing is not a comfortable space for me to wander into: words do not come easily to me. There appears to be a tension between the different kinds of languages, verbal and physical. The co-existence of two trends: the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found (D.W. Winnecott) is ever present in me. My voice had been in my hands, my clay work; without my work communicating was harder. Mostly I had felt like I was shape-shifting between my two roles, as a potter and as the person I was outside the studio. The contacts with galleries, teaching, exhibitions, commissions, selling, my family life and socialising had acted as a bridge between these two worlds. When my studio disappeared, I felt soulless and drifted from one country to another, like the handless maiden I had become.

I travelled, searching all over the world for sounds, fragrances, touches, colours, textures, images, shapes, landscapes to bring me back into contact with my clay, a continuous avoidance of the sense of loss. Yet this travelling was marvellous and exciting also, and opened up many other worlds to me, with other craftsmen in other fields.

In the Ulu Cami mosque in Bursa, Turkey, I was overcome with amazement at the monumental calligraphy. This was

writing on an epic scale. I could not read it and yet, the quiet artwork and the skill flooded into me and spoke to me. In contrast to that internal experience there is my favourite street in Istanbul, behind the souk. It was a narrow street, now gone, where only craftsmen worked, carpet makers, metal workers, leather makers, dyers, weavers, silk makers; everyone had their wares on elevated stands in front of their workshops. The shades of colour were greater than the rainbow, showing in rough and smooth textures. The sounds of wooden hammers beating, metal clanking, water dripping, flutes playing, tea-drinking, people shouting out their wares, was pure magic. The atmosphere was one of the world of the craftsmen, the smells were ones of raw materials of every possible kind and... sweat. This was the street I would have wanted to have my pottery in, I told my travelling companions, in the centre of this creative functioning chaos.



When I travelled to Zurich to further my discussions with the analyst, my interest primarily lay in the fish-symbolism of my work, but I soon found myself discussing my fascination in the connection I felt existed between individuation and the firing cycle. My unspoken aim was to put myself in my kiln to be fired, so to say. What better space to resemble an enclosed kiln than the temenos of the analytical space? Having had my share of betrayals in my life, I felt awkward about revealing myself, as an artist, a person; I wondered if I had I enough belief in my future self as one who could sit out such a gruelling firing. The intensity and torture the pots endured while being fired was well known to me.

I came to know about the theme of individuation because of the Jungian studies I attended at university evening classes and by extensive reading. To a potter alchemy is no stranger and I enjoy the rich pictorial images. What binds individuation and the firing-cycle together, what are the bonds that unite the ceramic and the human story? This is represented by my knowledge of the four elements and the influence they have on each other: producing a transformation and my insight of how that transformation occurs.

I had already come to understand that reductive therapy would never go further and to me it was like the glaze-firing up to 1000°C (earthenware) you get heat, but it does not bind the clay and glaze elements together. In alchemical terms: the prima materia does not turn into a lapis. Fire is ambivalent and yet communicates inspiration of a higher order.

In high-fired ceramics, transformation of the glazes only occurs after the hectic, chaotic, sulphuric reduction/oxidation firing cycle, during the battle with the kiln to take it up to the required 1280°C in such a way that the glazes melt and fuse with the clay.

Other potters, glass-blowers, metal-workers, all who fire their kiln at high temperatures with a living flame have an idea about standing near the intensity, heat, sweat, and sometimes for me, fear of the power of flames. The latter stages of the firing are a battle to keep control, to attain the correct temperature: above and below, inner and outer. Holding on to my knowledge of the firing-chart, I felt driven to find a unity beyond the contradictions within myself, to consciously shift shapes, images and symbols about. Many contradictions had to be shed, an exhausting and painful process, during which I had some unsettling experiences.

One of these was a confrontation with my own mortality when in hospital. Even though I am the age at which one needs to look

at mortality, the actual living reality is a shock to emotions, body and spirit.

Pottery is an art which begins with a physicality, enters the body and remains there. Years of harmony and the rhythm of throwing on the wheel had to be put aside. Having thrown myself into my own firing, there was no going back. It is impossible to begin and then stop, for then the unconscious development has taken on a life of its own and demands to continue.



On some occasions I glibly felt I had enough insight into the fire-cycle to manage, mostly on my own as I was in Zurich only a few times a year. Events occurred in my life causing to happen what happened inside the kiln: bringing mayhem, raising the top temperature and leaving the base, my life, cool and cold. Dreams were often of assistance, showing a path to consider, or the juncture I was at; this allowed me to plot where I was on my firing-chart. At times my dreams could be frightening. A natural rhythm and interplay resulted between my unconscious, dreams, synchronicities and real life. Sometimes when I woke, having had a dream, it appeared as if I were forming the same relationship with my dreams as I had with my clay: I could feel their quality in my finger-tips.

I learned to observe in life where I was in the firing cycle and I saw that putting in more fuel (energy, conscious interference) could have a detrimental effect, as just as too much reduction inside a ceramic firing could harm the glazes, or final outcome. On the other hand, letting in more oxygen (clearness and inspiration) was needed to "hang in there" and work through

liminal and threshold experiences.

Often smelling the toxic sulphuric fumes coming from the kiln in the studio, I had given thought to what was happening: the pulling-out of impurities from the body of the clay to the surface where it influenced the glaze, enhancing it. The pulling-out of my own impurities was a hard task, and not a day has gone by in this latter stage of my life that I have not been deeply grateful for my knowledge of the ceramic process. Some rupturing external events could not always be explained in a rational way, just the same way as pots exploded occasionally during bisque firing or a glaze which had always been smooth, came out the glaze firing with crazing or cracking, for unexplainable reasons.

My ambivalence with words, spoken or written was one of the impurities I had to confront, if I was ever going to be able to share with others what had been such richness in my life. The dream in which a menacing figure shows his disapproval of my writing had appeared in a variety of forms. On the opposite end there was the song of the mermaid; how could I write that down? An attempt to do so had already been made once in clay-form when I made a large bowl with music lines and a clef. Instead of music notes it had small hands, outlined in gold.



I felt compelled to write when a real event took place: I lost my suitcase in Zurich airport. This event really shook me but it also inspired me because the suitcase contained a very special ceramic item: a large fish head. Showing photographs had been fine to point out the depth and range of my work. What it did not supply was texture, colour, tactile quality, dimension. To demonstrate these I took the fish-head and some other small

pieces to Zurich. I was throwing myself into an unknown region. There were two reasons for my researches: why I had so many fish dreams even after I stopped making clay fishes; secondly the fact that I had not been able to overcome the loss of my work and the space that had been my studio - my entire being and soul seemed buried there and hence I could not write about it.

At first count I had found 44 fish related dreams in my old journals; by the time I began my intensified searches I had many more. It looked like the fish were encouraging me to keep going and to connect with nothing less than the deepest layers. This fish head I lost was a potent one and had been the head of a very large ceramic fish, made out of coarse clay. The body part had blown up during a bisque firing possibly owing to moisture still trapped in the connecting layers. Mostly, if a piece of work broke in the bisque-firing, I did not bother to glaze-fire it. With this fish head it had been different: the head contained such a presence that I glaze-fired it anyway and kept it with me. Perhaps this fish-head contains an immortal power and spirit, it has a compelling presence; it could be the guide to the many other fish dreams. Although partly destroyed, it shows initiation into a new phase. While many varied texts exist on the meaning of the fish-symbol, it is essential for me to find my own perspective and not fall into some obvious rational explanation. To follow the migration of my fishes is absolutely necessary; only by following their track do they become an affirmation.



To overcome my shyness and apprehension about talking about my work and my studio, I took pictures, small pots and collages to Zurich so I was able to approach returning to the studio by

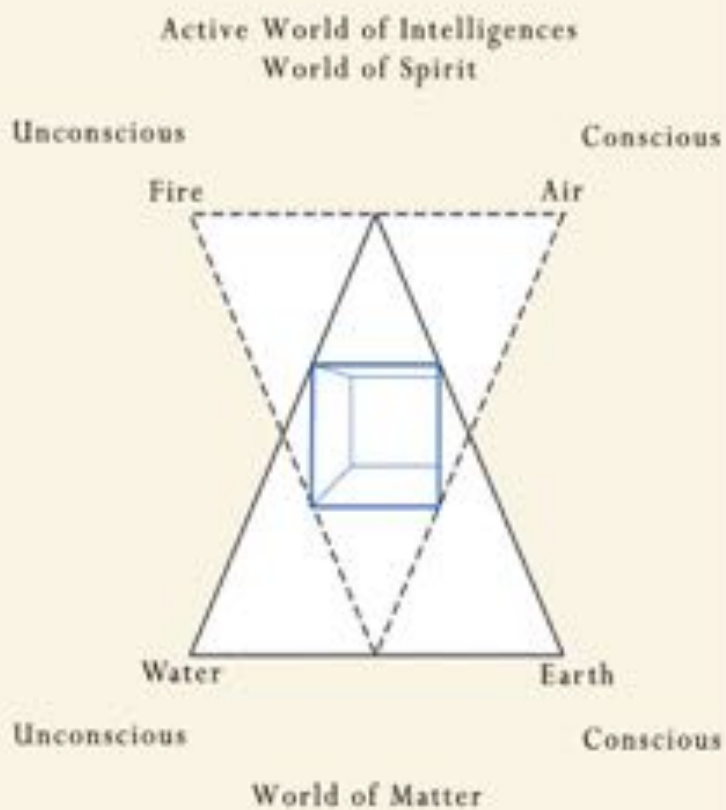
describing the objects.

My preference was to talk about the objects: it was hard for me to share my insights and deeper meanings, I had never before let anyone near my interior studio. Yet it became clear to me that I could not do this new kind of firing of myself, alone. It needed another to help manage this human firing process: the same way the air element eases and conducts the flow of the flames through the kiln during the firing.

Just how close the correlation is between reduction firing and individuation became even more obvious when I fell into a period of complete standstill. Nothing I attempted in any area worked out: this was the world of stagnation. This world manifested itself both physically and emotionally. In Buddhism it would be called "the world of Maya": a world in itself devoid of meaning, but a world absolutely necessary for the creation of meaning.

Nothing I touched worked out, and I was confronted by ever more profound paradoxes. On this occasion I was most reminded of the "soaking of the glazes in heat and stillness after the end of the firing", to let colours develop. It struck me that this was again so like the firing and that I had not, personally, reached this stage before; therefore I had not immediately recognised it. Knowing that after the lengthy cooling phase came the opening of the kiln door and its surprises, both good and disappointing, made this phase bearable.





Ceramic firing-graphs are complex to read if you are not familiar with the system, so over time I attempted to design other kinds of charts. In order to make it clear what I mean about the correlations between individuation and the firing-cycle, I developed several ways of portraying this. None were clear enough. I kept puzzling and one night, I woke with a dream-drawing. I hastily sketched it in a booklet and went back to sleep. Fortunately in the morning there was sufficient to make a proper drawing; to me it explains how the four elements mingle, come together in the kiln, just as individuation holds the opposites in balance. Both can be seen in the image of the cube. My kiln was a cube; the development of the Self can equally take place in a cube-like container.

First I was delighted, then surprised and puzzled by this chart. Turning this over for some time I understood that there had been dreams about architecture and architects, and many other dreams had shown constructions of one kind or another, an ordering principle. It also reminded me of drawings and collages I had made of the kiln, always portraying it as a black box with white lining and red inside. This drawing is so simple, it can be read on several levels; it is a gift I can look at again and again, seeing it in different lights. It also fulfils my need to express the magic which can occur in art: the sympathy between the invisible and the visible.

For me the four elements describe how it was possible for me to remain on track, using my firing-chart as a guide, arriving at the writing of quintessence.



When I began my searches and writing I felt a gap existed between the detailed technical knowledge of my art and the knowledge of my emotional/symbolic self in relation to my work.

In the period my arm went lame and I became incapable of working, a fear emerged about the kiln and the firing process. I refused to accept this and projected my fear on the age and state of the kiln and lack of certainty as to how it would behave during the firing. To solve this I got rid of the kiln and ordered a new one. Surely a new container for the fire would make my arm better. The kiln construction firm took its time, fortunately, and after many months I learned my arm would never get strong enough to work on the level I had done all those years. I cancelled the order. The horror of having to deal with the aftermath was intense; yet even then I felt it possibly had a meaning although I could see nothing but loss and deprivation of my studio and the clay.

To try to locate a new container was the right inclination. Eventually I found it in a surprising place: a temenos I had to travel to, across a stretch of water. For me this travelling enhanced the work and belonged so very much in my whole life's journey with its continuous travelling and wanderings towards new spaces and places, both inner and outer.

Now I feel that the kiln I had to concentrate on and fire was within myself. No expectations exist as to the outcome of my writing, one of the products of firing myself. I have never before succeeded in writing more than six pages about my studio and my career, then all evaporated in a haze of grief. A vague notion of how I would feel after I had written something which held together is present; similar to the vague notion of how a glaze surface would turn out after a firing. I do consider that, exactly like the ceramic-firing, the influence of forces I did not know

about, did not control: the weather, the air element, would have an impact on me. My own process and the firing process are, to me, so similar; my own transformation is equally a surprise, a new colour has appeared owing to the chaos and the mixing of all the elements over time. The pots show their changes in glaze colour on the outside and inside. Mine remain inside.



In the past a scientist studying the properties of clay, wrote about a shard of a stoneware pot. Having placed this shard under a very strong microscope to study its structure, he found that the silica beads in the glaze on the inside were fused with the silica beads inside the clay wall; this fusing of the silica beads continued into the outer glaze layer. The strength of stoneware consists of these silica beads-strings connecting inner and outer via the original clay wall. It is a connecting principle, like a necklace. Perhaps the kind of necklace I was considering to give to the mermaid in my very first fish dream long ago.

In high-fired ceramic terms this is what my individuation is about: being aware of the string of silica beads within, connecting inner and outer by way of a core of clay: stoneware.





During the days my arm was already causing me problems and while working for an exhibition, I made this pot holding up a smaller one. It was fired in, what turned out to be one of the last two kiln firings I did in my studio. The theme of hands holding a container I had used before, these were of my own hands drawn directly onto a just made lidded jar. This pot echoes that theme yet surpasses it by having a pair of hands growing out of the container itself. By lifting the tiny pot above the rim it suggests that this small pot both precedes the container and transcends it. It is being lifted to a new dimension, containing a hidden content which can only be embodied in that form.



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An exploration of how the four
elements are expressed in ceramics,
and their links to individuation.