

TURTLES, STUMPS, AND LUMPS OF CLAY

by Fred Taylor



Fred Taylor is a writer and teacher whose nature essays have appeared in a wide variety of literary and environmental publications. He teaches at Antioch New England and Vermont College, and writes from his home in Dummerston, Vermont. He can be reached at: r_taylor@antiochne.edu

*Sandra Streeeter. Untitled, 2006
Earthenware, ht. 10 in.*

In the garden behind my house is a slight rise in the ground, a reddish-brown mound where a mass of terracotta clay has slowly melted back into the earth. Once it was a sculpture of an “ancestor stump” that I brought home from the first Clay and Writing workshop that Alan Steinberg and I led together. I brought it home because I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I had carefully sculpted the shapes of the sturdy trunk, the roots merging with the ground, and the rough craggy stump-top. Then I used my fingernails to scrape long grooves into the surface, just like the ruts and scrapes of the original. By the end of the workshop, the form I had created became an obsession for me. Alan encouraged us to bring a form home with us and set it outside where the rains could return it to soil. That’s what I did, and there it sat. Every few days I would go out to look at it, and watch its angular, craggy shapes slowly smooth out and melt back into the earth.

As a writer exploring the interface of clay

work and the writing process, I have been trying to figure out the role this clay has come to play in relation to my writing. I’ve never been a person who was very skilled at making things with my hands. Always in the past, my attempts to sculpt something out of clay had resulted in rough, bumpy forms that I’d quickly relegate to the slip bucket. This, clearly, was a different experience. I had created this particular piece after going out into the woods, finding a stump that spoke to me, and then writing a dialogue with the spirit of the ancestor, who spoke these words:

We have watched you as a young man,
following your life’s golden dream,
Watched you hitting the trail to find
adventure.

We have watched you at dawn, singing
on mountaintops.

And look at you now – shame!

You wake every morning with your
head buzzing with worries and plans,
Instead of letting your heart open to

that golden dawn.
 Always on the phone or attending
 meetings,
 Trying desperately to speak a language
 that is not your own.
 We want more for you,
 We want you to remember us, your
 ancestors watching you,
 Calling to you from every breeze, and
 bird song, and call of the owl at mid-
 night.

This admonition burned its way into my psyche and has continued to resonate long afterwards, inspiring me to realign my life with that vision. But it was the sculpture itself that carried the energy of the experience. So what's going on here? Why has this clay figure exerted such a powerful force on me, and what does this have to do with my writing?

I'm intrigued with the notion that the clay adds something to the written word, helping us go deeper into the embodiment of experience. There's an ephemerality about my words, not unlike the ephemerality of my dreams. No matter how rich and powerful they may feel as they come into being, there comes a point when the words and images fade from the imagination. No matter how effectively I craft a piece of writing to evoke a stump or a bird or a waterfall, something vanishes when I close the notebook and I'm no longer able to see what I've created. But that stump had scratches that my fingernails had put into it, and the clay left its traces beneath those fingernails. Thoreau advises us to write words that "have earth clinging to them," but no matter how earthy my words, I still have to imagine the grit of the ground in my mind's eye. But when I create a piece of clay along with a piece of writing, it gives the heft of physicality to the experience, adding depth and dimension. The writing process uses a variety of techniques, such as simile and metaphor, to bring alive the object being evoked. But when I work in clay, I create a thing in itself, some actual stuff of the universe. Marion Woodman speaks of the "sacred sweetness of matter," a quality in the physical world that has the capacity to heal our spirits when we let ourselves touch and be touched by it. When I sink my hands into the clay, I touch that sweetness, and that quality ener-

gizes my spirit and infuses my words.

One of our favorite places to lead these workshops is Cape Cod, where the theme of nature presents itself not only in beaches and dunes, but also forests and swamps and creatures of land, sea, and sky. One day as we walked through the dunes, we encountered a hole in the ground surrounded by small delicate curls of broken shell, where it appeared that land turtle eggs had recently hatched out. Whipping out Mary Oliver's poem "The Turtle," we let her words plant the seed in our imaginations for the experience of "turtle." We could picture the turtle crawling across
 "the yellow sand,
 to dig with her ungainly feet
 a nest, and hunker there spewing
 her white eggs down
 into the darkness."

In clay, we create a tactile embodiment of our experience; with words, we go beyond the physical to the fundamental essence of the universe, where we can sense the unseen interconnections that lie beneath the surface. Words bring alive in our imaginations something that can't be seen, felt, or touched. Little did we know that day that on the way back we would encounter another hole, where baby snapping turtles, tiny discs the size of ginger snaps, would be crawling out into the light, shedding crumbs of sand as they edged up over the lip of the hole. We picked up the survivors in our hands and deposited them in the safety of a boggy pond, to rescue them from being crushed by the wheels of four-wheel drive vehicles heading to the beach.

After we returned to the studio, turtles began to emerge out of lumps of clay on everyone's clay board: one crawled out from under dunes that were smoothed by hand from a lump of clay; a second formed the base from which a clay hand reached for the sky, holding a bird on its fingertip; and another had its shell entangled in the roots of a clay tree. Each person's turtle was unique, an expression of his or her "dream" of turtle, the inner world evoked by this encounter with the outer. The excitement in the room was palpable as our eyes wandered from turtle to turtle, taking delight in what each of us was creating. Each gave form not only to the four-legged hard-shelled reptiles, but also to creatures that had crawled up from underneath,



out of the depths of the earth and our psyches, interwoven with sand and sea, root and tree, bird and fish. I imagine these forms became just as prized as my ancestor stump, and I know for a fact that at least some of them still stand in people's houses. For them, too, the experience of creating in clay gave outer form to the inner, made the experience of encountering the "sacred sweetness of matter," and the healing that it brings, more tangible.

So what about the words? The forms we create in clay, however much we may be fascinated and obsessed by them, remain mute. Like dreams, they emerge from the depths of our psyches, carrying energy that has not yet found a way to be articulated. When we write, we discover meanings we have squeezed and sculpted into the clay with our hands, felt but not understood until we find words for them. It's the words that give voice to those meanings. So I go back to my journal, write a dialogue with the ancestor stump, and listen for what it says; or write a poem to the turtle, and feel the many meanings of turtle begin to move inside me, crawling up into the light of day.

*Alan Steinberg. Offering Bowl, 2003.
Stoneware, 21 x 21 x 9 in.
Photograph by Mark Corliss.*