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Life Becomes a Habit

by Penny Jones

It takes seventeen steps to reach the studio from the kitchen door. He can make the journey in ten seconds if it is raining and the paving stones are not slippery, or in twenty minutes if he stops to attend to a plant in the yard or to consider an unusual shadow cast by a flash of sunlight that could inspire a new shape or pattern. At the threshold he turns the handle as he has done for the past thirty years and steps into the familiar space where, whatever the season, there is a fine haze of white dust. This hardly perceptible cloud and the smell of damp are at once ordinary and filled with possibility.

He picks up the clay prepared the previous evening to test the weight and consistency. Once he would have prepared it himself but now with assistants to help he has only to knead it, turning the shell shaped mass to a count of seventy five. Except he long ago stopped counting. The rhythm and the texture tell him when the clay is ready. During this interlude he contemplates the morning's work: thirty cups or bowls for an order, or a series of vase shapes that will test the flow of a new glaze over curves and angles.

Seated at the wheel, once powered by his right leg, now electric; the bend of his back, the turn of his trunk, the slight pressure of his foot on the pedal and the firm pressure of his hands round the first ball of clay, trigger his vision and he sees the piece he will make.

Three moves as the clay runs through his hands and the ball is centred, irregularities felt and subtly raised to the top of the cone. Two moves open the shape and from this point the material will be fashioned uniquely, its final form clear in his mind's eye. He coaxes the clay's shape and thickness with the slightest touch, in or out, up or down, his body shifting slightly to enable the hands to work together, opening out, collaring in. His hands are his only tool, each responding to the other, reciprocal and relaxed.

Artistry is acquired only when life becomes a habit of practice and reflection he tells his assistants.