

Selected Poems
Jack Troy

The Wind in the Jug

(For the Abolitionist Potters of Chester County, Pennsylvania)

Bluebird potters, they called you,
your kiln-smoke grafting winter on to spring.
You had the power to call birds north
with a gallon crock, rung by your knuckle,
toning the fire-birthered heat to the breeze,
that clear note drifting south
below the Mason-Dixon line.

Your county's hills enclose me here
the way that sleepers' knees push up green quilts.
In this fieldstone cellar-hole, open to March's sky,
I find your stoneware jug, tamped in a niche

Many of these poems were included in the Imagined Discovery Exhibition, Juniata College Museum of Art, November 19, 2004 – February 26, 2005. They were read on November 19, 2005, at the opening of the exhibition.

one hundred fifty years ago.
Blue-gray clay hide restrains the bulbous dark inside.
I sniff the vinegared past, tip to my ear this conch,
this echo-holder, stamped by a whorl at the handle's base.
I read you by your thumbprint, potter.
Mahlon Brosius, John Vickers, I hear you in there.
My breath across the jug-mouth rumbles.
Sound spills from this clay chrysalis
like that of distant tumbrels, or your wagons
mounded high with straw-packed mugs and porringers.
Slaves – runaways – were the heart of your cargo.
Scheming their freedom, you trundled them north,
Quaker to Quaker, binding the law's weak wrists
with your compassion.

Within these cellar walls I'm centered,
like a man who wakes up in a bowl.
This stony jug's the gift of time, and flesh, and fire.
Its hand-fixed form now shapes the wind
these bluebirds ride and liven with their song.
Hold back here, jug, the earth from closing down.

(Jack Troy, from *Calling the Planet Home*, 2003)

Throwing

(To the memory of Jim Kietzman, 1928-1963)

A month or more I must have simply watched
what he did with his hands
while we talked:
lumpen earthflesh forming and reforming.
Six months after witching me the spell, he died.

Some mornings, waking,
I'm not sure it wasn't something I dreamed,
that synapse of his hands on mine.
I can't assume my flesh on earth's
can coax a vessel into being.

Then the day's first try:
I nudge the lump,
a bowl's fresh history opens out.
The same old hands are up to it again.

(Jack Troy, from *Calling the Planet Home*, 2003)

Containment

I have picked up, moved, shaped,
and lightened myself of many tons of clay,
and those tons lifted, moved, and shaped me,
delivering me to this living-space
I wake and move about in,
space perhaps equal to that I have opened and enclosed
in plate, cup, bowl, jug, jar.
I am thankful no one ever
led me to the pit I'd help to make in earth,
or showed me all the clay at once.
I'm grateful no one ever said, "There.
That heap's about a hundred fifty tons.
Go make yourself a life.
And oh, yes, here's a drum of ink.
See what you can do with that."
I wouldn't have known where to begin.

(Jack Troy, from *Calling the Planet Home*, 2003)

Once it Was a Secret

I had a student whose clothes seemed always
to have come from someone not his size.
His shirts and his priorities were never tucked in place.
In the cellar of a brick farmhouse
he showed me how to process color slide film.
We heated water on a woodstove,
then he kept the crocks precisely warm

by wrapping them in blankets.
Later, he held the strip of images between us and the light.
Beaver dams in fog. Late afternoon at Dolly Sods.
He wanted to know the smells of the place,
and whether any sounds were being made there
when I used the camera.
Then suddenly he said:
One evening after supper my father helped me pinpoint something.
He told me I was conceived under a lilac bush
in the middle of May
Mother tipped her head back and laughed:
There had been wine punch,
and the last guest's car was barely out the lane!

(Jack Troy, from *Calling the Planet Home*, 2003)

Conversions (for my students)

This winter the birds ate nearly sixty pounds of suet.
Most days at noon I watched them peck
and then convert a phantom steer's insides
to flight, to feathered warmth
a winter's night could not snuff out.
Then I drove to class and showed you
how to shape energy with a potter's wheel.
Torquing our planet's flesh, lump after lump,
into cups and bowls by the dozens,
we gave them once and forever,
form, color, fire-memory.
Can you feel in a teacup's heat
that friction of change?
The combustion of one thing becoming another?

(Jack Troy, from *Calling the Planet Home*, 2003)

Poem for Leah

“The artist loves the things that haunt him.” Willa Cather

What wakes me at 2:30, after four hours' sleep?
Not a sound, but this jagged image, like an infection,
the one Leah gave me in class,
not from touching, but from telling.
What she'd touched was clay, cream-cheese white,
and made a life-size face, ghastly-goofy, tongue
parting lips, an index finger thrust
into an eye. And lacerations, as if
from shrapnel sunk out of sight.
Is it a he? Is it a she? Is it an Iraqi?
Or your older sister's prom date off to war?

Mostly, it's the week's emotional paycheck
I get for teaching art, the wake-up,
the reason our tiny class gathers
by the windows on the studio's east side,
our respective lunches discreetly disassembling
within us.

I ask her what I want to ask everyone
who's picked fruit from originality's tree
and holds it out to show:
“Where did this come from?”
Shy Leah looks shyly toward the glaze buckets
as if what she has made has come from plastic pails.
Then she tells Karen and Lynn and me
about the CD she's seen over fall break
and the image that's horrified her.
Nothing like what's shown on tv about the war –
a leg. A leg standing with the foot still in its shoe,
and tendons draping the knee like fringe, she tells us;
now it's framed in the night-black window
beyond my bed, waiting for the experience
to rewind, for the launcher to suck grenade
back through the sweet stink of its flare,

rejoining its pin, and unflexing the marksman's
trigger-finger. Waiting. We are all waiting.

Waiting for what is human to resume:
for the former prom date to whistle
and fold for the last time his immaculate flak-jacket,
arriving home on his unamputated leg,
or the Iraqi merchant to open his shop
and kick a little stone away, with his.

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