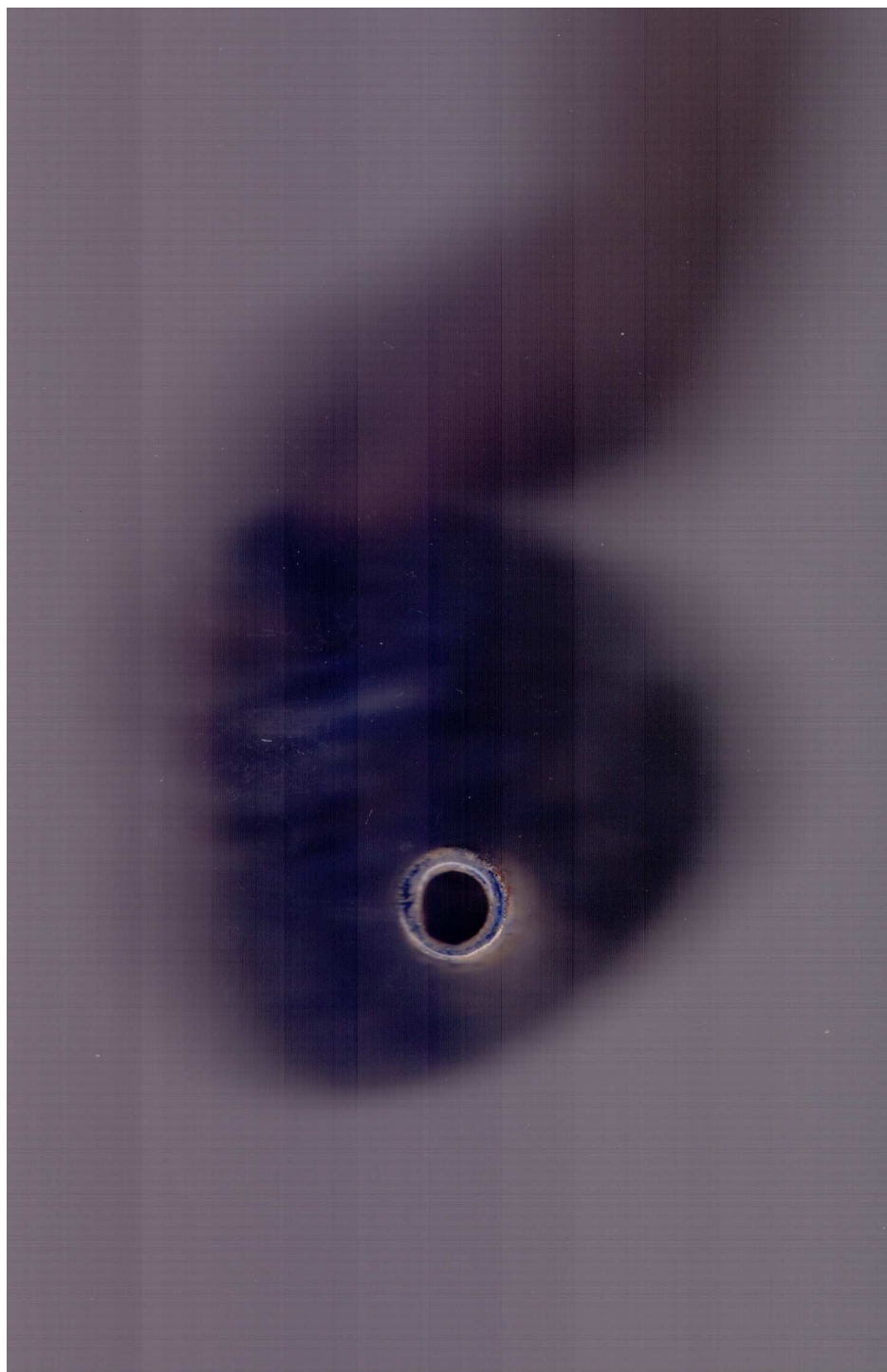


The Centre of The Known Universe

by Letty McHugh



In January 2019 I had an annual check-up with my neurologist "You seem to be doing really well" he said, in a tone of pleasant surprise " I think I am" I said and then he said "I'm so glad to hear that, you had a really hard time of it for a few years there" and I, the person who had many scary appointments with this doctor all through the hard time without crying burst into tears.

It's possible that the kindest thing you can do for a person having a hard time is to acknowledge out loud with words that they are having a hard time. Don't tell them how brave you think they are. Don't tell them how things could be worse. Don't tell them about how much better things will be on the other side.

If you want to be a true friend to a person in crisis you make them a cup of tea, you look them directly in the eye and you say "I know you are having a very hard time."

When I was diagnosed with MS I made a deal with the cosmos, I would make the best of living with an incurable illness, I would be the sort of invalid who could have 'She bore a long illness with grace and good humour' written as part of their elaborate Victorian epitaph and in return MS would not affect my hands or sight.

The hard time my neurologist was referring to in that appointment spanned the best part of three years. It started with a bang on the 27th December 2015 and fizzled out without any ceremony at the end of 2018. Like most real-life hard times it wasn't very interesting or remarkable, the only thing you really need to know about it for this story is this: I had a string of vicious MS relapses that affected my

hands and sight.

Next time I make a deal with the cosmos I'll make sure I get it in writing.

At the end of the, 'You seem to be doing well' embarrassing crying neurology appointment the doctor asked me if I had any questions, obviously I said no, obviously I had about 100. In my experience, there are always unspoken questions at the end of Doctors appointments. Mostly the sort of question Doctors can't answer. Am I going to be okay? For how long exactly? How do I know you're telling me the truth about everything? Why should I trust you? What brand of moisturiser do you use to get your hands so very, very soft? Do you secretly know the date of my death?

In that particular appointment, the lingering unspoken question was this: What am I supposed to do now? If this hard time is now over, how do I get my life back on track? I'd spent so much time and effort trying to get medication so I could get on with my life. All I wanted to do was write and make art and move back out from my parent's house. I sat in anonymous offices and held my ground in arguments with men who had known me for all of ten minutes about whether being unable to work counted as a 'Significant impact to my daily life'. In one memorable appointment a neurologist (not my current one) told me condescendingly "Some of these drugs can affect your ability to have children." to which I replied "I don't want /care if I can have children, I care if I can do the thing I spent seven years in specialist education training to do." (it's worth mentioning here that the medication I take to manage my MS has no known links with decreased fertility, in fact, none of the medications I was discussing with the doctor in that appointment do.)

I fought so hard to get to the other side of that hard time, and now here I was on the other side of it and I had absolutely no idea what to do.

When the hard time started it was just six weeks after my MA graduation and I felt I had so much momentum and promise. One of the first signs of that first relapse was this: I was in the middle of writing a funding application for this project I wanted to work on called Seaworthy Vessel when my left arm drifted away from the keyboard for a few seconds and then pinged back like the carriage of a typewriter. After that, deadlines were missed and commissions were cancelled. This is fine, I told myself, this is only going to last a few weeks. When I was starting to pick myself up again in the latter half of 2018 feeling a little dazed and battered I felt like I had no momentum at all. Artistically I was the Tin Man, all my creative joints needed oiling. I didn't know how to get going again.

The problem with lots of arts opportunities for emerging artists is their definition of 'emerging' is bound up with the number of years you've been out of Arts school, for many of the ones I read at that time this limit was one or two years. That's obviously a problem for people like me who's lives don't follow a perfectly straight line. I kept reading opportunity details with a mounting sense of panic. I was pretty sure I didn't have enough experience for anything not featuring the words 'recent' and 'graduate', I was pretty sure anyone selecting for them would take one look at my application see the three year black hole and throw it immediately in the bin. That winter I dusted off my Seaworthy Vessel application and sent it into this bursary specifically for emerging artists whose careers had been affected by disability or illness. It felt like the worlds longest shot. I kept telling my self that I was only doing this to practice writing applications. It felt so dangerous to hope.



This is the first thing I ever made on the wheel. I can't look at without thinking I wish it was better, I wish I'd photographed it better, I wish I was better at failing so I could show it to you without these caveats. Please turn this page quickly.

Reader, I got that bursary.

At first, there was nothing but joy. I actually jumped for joy when I read the acceptance email. After the first few days though some uglier feelings began to creep in.

There's this quote from Peter Pan "The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it." I'd love to tell you I remember it from some profound moment in my childhood but alas, I saw it the other day on a cup in the window of this super cheesy gift shop in Haworth, definitely a Live, Laugh, Love poster sort of establishment. The point is it's a good and relevant quote, I think it applies to a lot of other things, especially creative things. The point is that self-doubt is a very corrosive thing and in January 2019 boy did I doubt my ability to fly.

When I started work on my project I felt this huge pressure, like whatever I made next had to be amazing enough to eclipse the massive black hole in my creative history. The more I felt the pressure, the more I put off getting back to work, the more I felt the pressure. I was so afraid to fail. It was paralysing.

That's when I remembered this Tumblr post I read back in 2015 by author and illustrator Ursula Vernon, "Pottery, particularly wheel-throwing, is wonderful for this, incidentally. You fail over and over and you fail fast and you are creating quantity to lead to quality. You throw and throw and throw and things die on the wheel and things die when you take them off the wheel and things explode in the kiln and after you have made a dozen or two dozen or a thousand, none of them are precious any more. There is always more clay." So I read back over that post and I thought, okay, okay so I use some of my bursary money and I learn to

throw pots and I'll do a sort of exposure therapy thing with failure and then maybe I'll be able to write again.

In *Throwing Pots* Phil Rogers says "Every potter eventually wants to make a teapot. The teapot is arguably the ultimate challenge to the thrower; it combines three or four separately thrown elements that have to be combined to form a functional yet aesthetically pleasing whole" But I didn't want to get to teapots eventually, I wanted to get to them immediately.

There is this thing that happens to people with relapse remitting MS, (my brand of MS) some people call it false relapses, I don't really like that, it's where the body is under stress and old symptoms flare back up or worsen temporarily, like a ghost relapse. I get them sometimes, if I'm too hot, or I'm hungry, or sick, or stressed. Sometimes I lose the feeling in my hands or fingertips, sometimes I get this thing called crawling where it feels like I have spiders crawling on my arms and legs, most often I get a very fine tremor in my hands, it's particularly noticeable in my right thumb.

I'm not a fan of the ghost tremor. It looks minor, but I can feel it, and I didn't use to have one at all did I? I showed it to an MS nurse once, in the 'any other concerns' portion of my three monthly check-up, hospitals are always roasting hot so I could rely on the tremor to perform. "Oh I don't think you need to worry about that," she said breezily "I've seen surgeons with less steady hands." This did not make me feel less worried about my hands. It made me feel more worried about any future surgeries.

That nurse wasn't the only medical professional to dismiss the ghost





tremor. I've been told it's mild, insignificant, nothing to worry about. Intentionally or not, when a doctor tells you something is mild, insignificant, nothing to worry about what you hear is the thing isn't even real, why are you bothering me with it?

When you are throwing clay tiny movements in your hands' matter. There's this part called pulling up where you use your thumb and fingers to pull the clay upwards, it's the bit that first turns what you're working on from a lump of clay to something like a vessel. For weeks every time I did it about halfway up my right thumb would do this tiny, almost imperceptible wobble and the walls of my vessels would be all uneven, and nine times out of ten, they couldn't support their own weight.

It was frustrating obviously, but it was also weirdly validating. The clay didn't think my ghost tremor was minor, the clay thought my ghost tremor was major enough to dramatically fall apart.

"There's always a way around." My mum is constantly telling me this usually over a cup of tea while I cry in frustration over whatever problem I am currently convinced is utterly insurmountable. She said it to me after failed spelling tests, failed driving tests and rejected funding applications. She didn't need to tell me it on this occasion, she has already grafted it into my brain and it's a good join with deep scoring and plenty of slip.

With the help of some books and YouTube video's and the patient guidance of my tutor Sonje I figured out a slightly different way of holding my hands and the wonky body of my first imperfect teapot rose unsteadily from my wheel. I would go on to have many more problems with my throwing but just over ten weeks in here was my first major roadblock on my creative journey successfully navigated. I couldn't have been more proud, I felt like a real artist for the first time in a long time.

Here's a thing I learnt from my hard time: It costs you something when your life is reduced to illness and the administration of that illness. It's like slowly over time, you shrink to fit your new circumstance. It erodes you slowly, your ambitions, your confidence, sometimes it feels like your soul is getting smaller. Like the very essence of what you are fades a little bit with every episode of Homes Under the Hammer, you watch while you are waiting for detritus to stop floating across your vision and your hands to stop moving of their own accord.

In March 2016 I rushed from my routine eye test to A & E after the Optician saw 'Quite a lot of blood' inside my eye. The source? Most likely a rare symptom of MS where the immune system attacks the retina. At the hospital the ophthalmologist told me she could see 'A good deal of detritus' inside my eye' and it felt a bit like a personal attack. Here was further evidence of my reoccurring inability to just overcome MS with positive thinking and get my shit together, my shit was so far apart I couldn't even keep the insides of my eyes tidy. That's why it felt so much like magic when I cobbled my first teapot together from what is essentially just fancy mud. Here was physical evidence I was still capable of something. I was capable of making this. All the time I was feeling less and less like an artist, less and less like a person. This isn't a story, it's my real life, so it obviously wasn't as easy as sitting down at the wheel and going 'I remember who I am, I'm a person with ideas in my head and steel in my soul. Other things happened. I moved back out of my parent's house, I was accepted on to the Emergence bursary, I went to Norway and sat on the outside deck of a ferry and felt alive, alive, alive.

The other thing about this being real life was it didn't follow a tidy narrative arch. Sure, I had made one teapot, but I still had to make another, I still had that gnawing fear of failure. On top of that (probably because of that) I was dealing with another problem that I



couldn't even acknowledge out loud. I was crippled with writer's block. This had never happened to me before in my life. Before I could always sit down and write, I could always rely on my words.

I was putting a massive amount of pressure on myself and ever since I got the bursary people kept being nice to me, they kept saying good things about my work. Not people who had to either, I'm not talking about my Mum or my cat or my friends. Strangers, important people, people I wanted to impress kept sending me emails that said things like "Keep up the good work" or "I can't wait to see what you do in Norway" you know praise, encouragement (things I live for by the way) and I'd read them and think Oh shit. Oh Shit. OH SHIT. I'm a liar and a charlatan and a fraud, I've scammed my way on to this bursary and I'm never going to write anything worth reading again. I'm never going to make anything good again. I am going to have to give all this money back. You know. Classic negative thought spiral, not helped by my natural flair for the dramatic.

In May I went to Norway and saw and felt all these incredible things and then I got back and I was so afraid I wouldn't do the whole thing justice I couldn't write anything at all. I hid my laptop in a drawer so I wouldn't have to look at it. That sounds like a bad hiding place I know, but you don't know what else was in that drawer, my dishwasher warranty for example. My cat's microchip details. Things go in that drawer to die. Household items talk about it in hushed tones "Have you seen lint roller recently?" a glasses case might ask and my remote control will reply "Oh, didn't you hear? It got put in the drawer, you know the drawer with the receipts and last year's Christmas cards." Things go in that drawer and never see the light of day again.

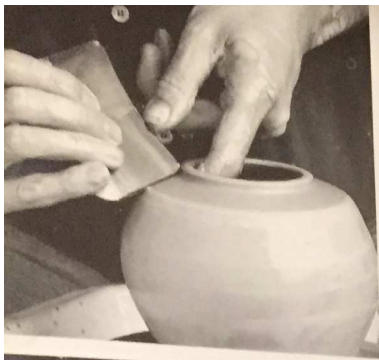
At this time ceramics became my forlorn hope. I would learn to throw but I would also overcome my crippling fear of failure and before I knew

what was happening I would be on the other side, I would be writing with ease and sipping tea from a cup I made myself. Only none of it was working. I couldn't write when I tried it felt almost painful. For the entire month of June everything I tried to throw died on the wheel. I kept trying to remind myself that the whole point of the exercise was to fail. I was supposed to be learning to fail wasn't I and then hoping that failure turned out to be a transferable skill. I tried to shrug and say 'There's always more clay' but inside I thought it doesn't matter how much clay there is in the world, I will never be able to turn it into a functional teapot, I will never be able to turn it into an unfunctional teapot.

The problem with the ceramics Sonje kept telling me was my centring. When you are throwing a pot you need to get the clay perfectly in the middle of the wheel through a mystical process known as centring. If you don't your pot will be wonky and uneven and significantly more likely to die on the wheel. "Get your centring sorted," Sonje said "and everything else will follow."

Centring was a particularly appropriate problem for me to have because I've never been able to do it in the rest of my life. I've tried mindfulness and meditation more than once after well-meaning recommendations. It's never worked for me. When you meditate you first have to centre yourself which as far as I can tell, is where you reach a place of calm beyond thinking. As though that's a thing it's even possible for a person to do. I can't even imagine a place beyond thought. The inside of my head sounds like this. I'm always thinking about something. Always, all the time, I have to listen to the radio in bed so I can stop thinking for long enough to fall asleep. The universe has no edge. I have no centre.

When I was diagnosed with MS I went to the posh tea stall on Bath market

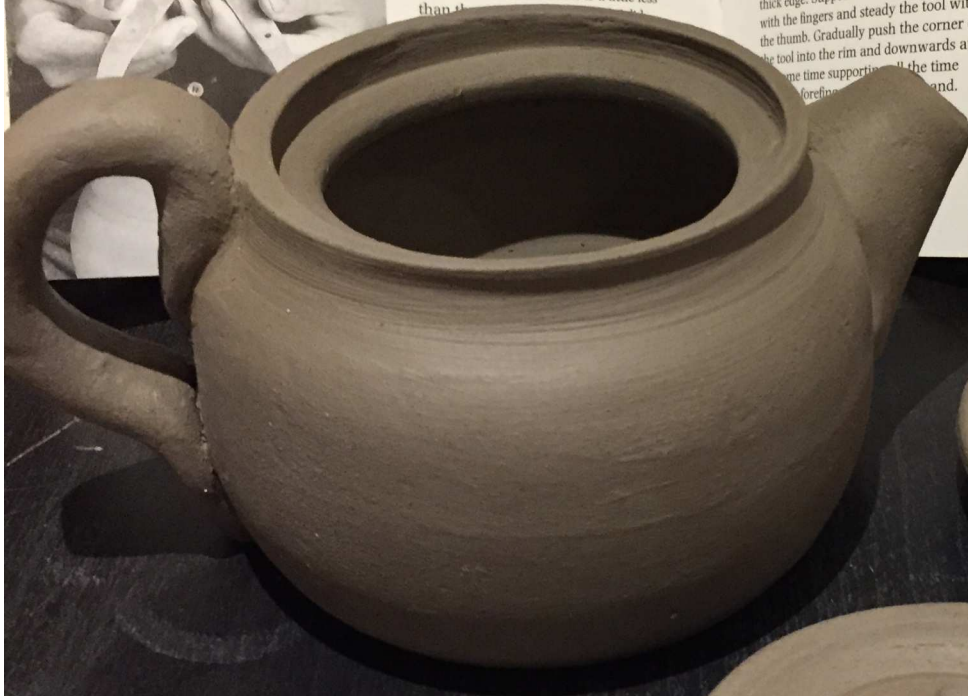


lastly, I can use the rib to smooth and flatten the shoulder which has the effect of sharpening the form and emphasising the point of change from body to shoulder.



Before I remove the pot from the wheel I need to *carefully* measure the opening so that I can make a well-fitting lid. As you can see in the photograph, the measurement that I take is a little less than the diameter of the opening.

Use your callipers to check the diameter of the 'doughnut' is somewhat near the diameter that you will eventually require. At this stage it need only be an approximate measurement from the middle of the thick edge to the same point on the opposite edge.



and bought about fifteen different types of herbal tea, an infuser and this cute little blue and white teapot. People kept telling me that herbal tea would be an excellent way to relax. I think this was supposed to go hand in hand with the meditation somehow. The teas were tasty but they didn't really help. I don't really think anybody really wants fruity tea in times of emotional crisis, you just want normal tea don't you, and someone to talk to you while you drink it. In trying times people are very quick to offer the completely useless advice: 'Herbal tea will help you relax' and very slow to say the potentially useful: 'It's completely understandable that you would be all over the place after the tectonic plates of your life have dramatically shifted, would you like me to make a cup of tea and then listen to you cry for the next hour?'"

In the first few weeks of July, I successfully made my second teapot, it doesn't look that much better than the first one, and if such a thing is possible it pours even worse. It's significantly lighter to lift though, (you need both hands on the first one even when empty) and the walls are more even. It was so hard-won though, every stage of making it felt impossible, it was hard in the way things can be hard when you are starting to know enough to understand the things you are doing wrong, but don't yet know enough to understand how to set them right. Once it was done I was embarrassingly proud of it. Sonje and I made a cup of tea in it to celebrate when I poured from the pot, scalding hot water spilt all over the worktop, there was more tea on the top than in the cups. I still felt wonderful.

When we ask someone to come and have a cup of tea with us we aren't really asking them for tea are we? We are asking them to talk to us. We are saying, do you want to come round to mine and spend some time with me? That's why adults who won't drink hot drinks throw us all off our game so much I think, what are we supposed to give them to give our time

together legitimacy? How do you spool the meeting out? With tea or even coffee, you have to wait for it to be cool enough to drink, that gives you more time to chat, and you have licence to keep your meeting going until the drink is cold. There's no theatre to a glass of orange squash is there? You can drink it in 30 seconds flat.

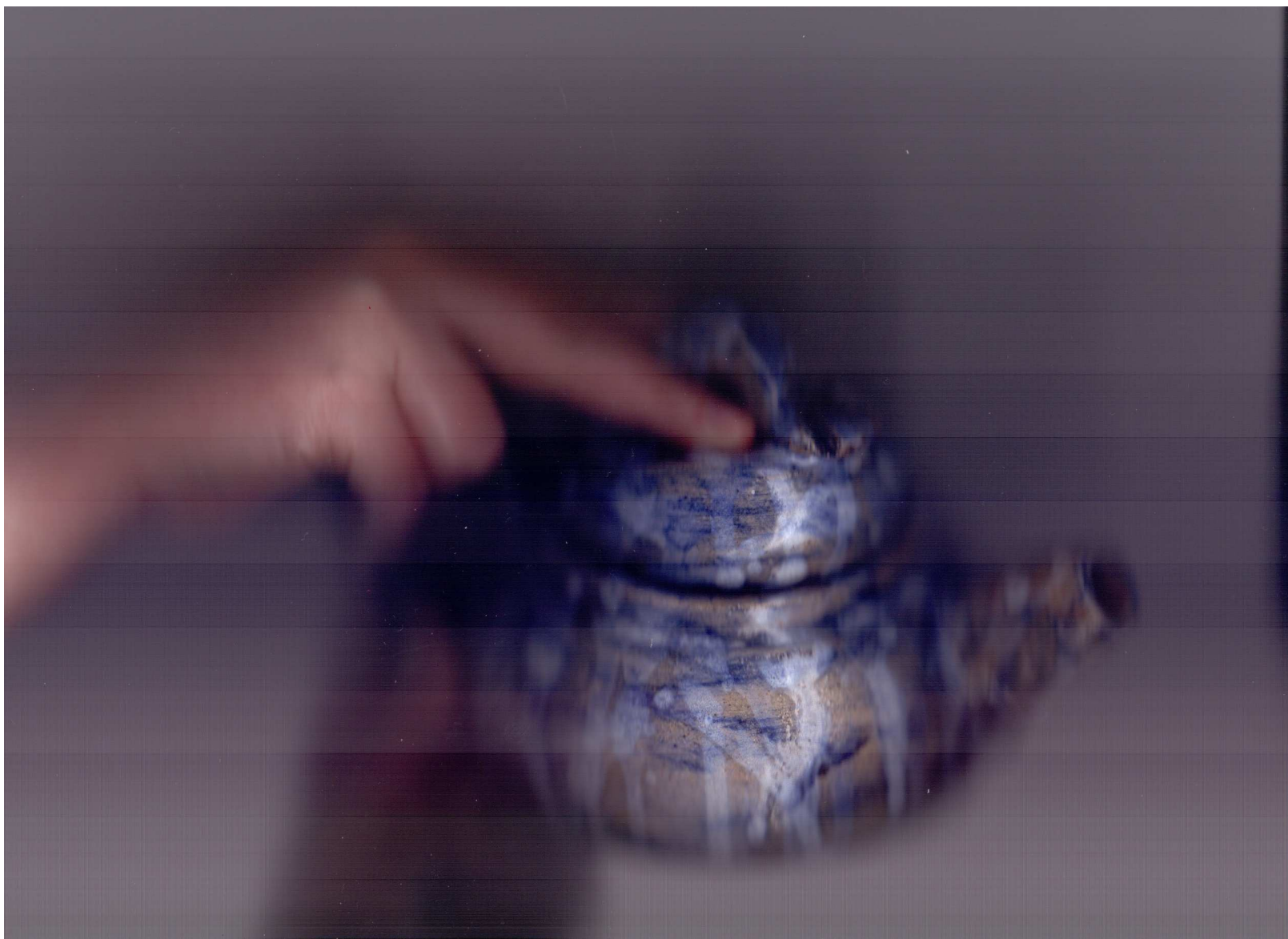
Even my two-year-old niece knows the importance of tea as a social ritual? "Cup a tea?" she asks when favoured guests enter the room. Then she'll bring you one of her little wooden cups, or if you're lucky, pour air straight into your mouth from the spout of the wooden teapot.

In my family I am notorious for nursing my cups of tea, I often end up with half a cup that's too cold to drink, but I never want the chatting to end, and once the tea is over there's a danger people will drift off to do other things. Teapots lend themselves to teas inherent subterfuge particularly well I think, because there's such wonderful ritual to serving tea on a tray, the milk, the clinking cups as you carry it into the room. The tea stays hot for ages, especially if you've got a cosy on it (which of course you have, you're civilised people aren't you?) if you feel like people are wandering off you can lure them back in with a second cup.

I think I was drawn to making teapots because I wanted to physicalise the role tea has played in my life. I wanted to evidence the community and companionship that's in a cup of tea. I wanted to make a version of the healing and emotional resilience I've so often found at the bottom of a cup of tea that I could hold in my hands and carry, like armour, into any of the hard times I might face in the future.

You can understand why I expected my progress to continue to be extremely gradual. Usually, I learn things about as fast as I drink a cup of tea. That's not how it went though. In early August I was blessed





by one of this century's few true miracles and overnight I learnt to throw. As you read this you are naturally suspicious, and I get why, we've discussed my tendency to exaggerate, we both know I'm not the most reliable narrator, but I promise you that's how it was. In June and July, I struggled. It was the tedious raw footage you'd cut together in a montage in the movie of my life. It was the bit where Frodo and Sam are walking into Mordor that you skip over when you reread The Lord of the Rings. Which is to say progress was slow and small victories were hard-won. My second teapot took me more than two months to finish, my third teapot took two weeks. Teapot three wasn't just faster than the first two, it's visibly better, so much jauntier than it's predecessors, round in the right places and whilst at the time of writing I haven't tested it (I'm still waiting on a glaze firing) I've got faith it's going to be a much better pourer.

After the teapot came four cups who, whilst not identical certainly share a family resemblance, you'd know at a glance they were cousins I think (two weeks to make) a milk jug, this other tiny cute jug that serves no purpose but I didn't have the heart to throw out (one week for the pair). A sugar basin, probably the nicest thing I've thrown with a lid that was quite tricky to throw that came out lovely all the same (fifteen minutes for the basin, half an hour for the lid). The whole tea set looks splendid. It's still a long way from perfect, but perfect is impossible whereas this tea set exists.

Almost eight years of living with an incurable illness has taught me to be very suspicious of anyone claiming the ability to cure me. People have come to me promising to cure my MS with live bee venom, veganism, the power of prayer, the teachings of numerous lifestyle gurus and yet-to-be-approved-in-the-UK-super-drugs that cost more money than I am ever likely to have access to. So I'm not going to tell you that learning to throw cured me of my fear of failure or my writers block but I will tell

you this: on the day I finished the jaunty teapot I came home and wrote the first draft of this essay in a single sitting and the words poured out of my brain like water from a well-thrown spout.





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