The Boy and the Artist

by Zak Heimerl

The Boy

Barefoot and muddy, I dip the worn stick into the puddle, making what I call a gather. The stick itself is just that – a stick. Mud-caked with brown stains that highlight the lines and swirls that were left by the wood grain, it has been worn smooth from many hours of play. A solitary child, I find my own ways of keeping busy, falling into worlds of my own making, places that are fantastical and amazing, places that make me feel happy.

Set below the road above, the parking lot I play in is more of a courtyard. Mainly unpaved, its dirt is packed hard and smooth. With a steep hill at the edge of the lot, on one side it leads up to Canyon Road, and on the other side there is a horseshoe of mud-brick, adobe buildings. The lot was like the base of an earthen bowl, hard and baked dry.

Within this earthen bowl was my father’s glassblowing studio, a potter’s studio, and my mother’s gallery that displayed all their work. Sitting below the wide-open desert skies in this dirt lot, I squat, swirling my dirty stick through the shallow puddle. All around me, everything is brown, the plants all crunchy. All the other puddles in the lot have already dried up, leaving the ground cracked and curled.

The Artist

Dipping the long iron pipe into the vat of molten glass, a vat he calls the furnace, like Prometheus, he steals the fire. He calls it a gather. Much like a cotton candy vendor, he swirls the tip of the long iron pipe just over the surface of the viscous liquid. Tacky and gooey, the glass, this moving and changing thing, grasps onto the end of the pipe. Like a fisherman who has just seized upon a prize catch, he pulls out a wobbly lump of squishy glass.

Central to the process of his craft, his art, is a beast of a machine called a furnace. A hulk of a mechanism, it has one goal — to melt glass. Rivaling a car engine in power and sheer ferocity, it is coarse and unforgiving. When you open the furnace, the heat slams you, flying at you like a wild fire shooting down a narrow mountain valley. Holding a rippling pool of molten glass that radiates a deep and intense orange glow, the furnace holds a vigorous and turbulent mixture of molten glass and flaming gas that boils and roils inside a large ceramic melting pot. I like to imagine that the pot is like the center of the earth, churning with liquid rock, with lava. In this pot, rising and falling, bubbling, and gurgling, the glass begins its dance.
To have a puddle to play in is a great luxury. As I splash in it and swirl my stick through it, the water splashes and swirls. I dig my toes in the bottom of the puddle as deep as I can, feeling the cool touch of fresh mud between each toe. With my toes stretching deep like roots, I stir the water and carefully spin the stick in my hand, maintaining a perpetual rotation, just like him. As I spin, I think to myself, I gather. As I spin, the stick kicks up flumes of dirty water that cascade in a beautiful dance. Shades of brown mix within the water. Sandy hues mingle and flirt with each other. Chestnut swirls into deep chocolate bands, until the whole mix churns into a deep, uniform brown.

Once I’m satisfied that I’ve gathered enough, like a fisherman who has seized upon a prize catch, I pull the stick out of the water. As I pull it up, I crane my body backwards to compensate for the large, wobbly glob that I have just gathered. I try to keep it on the stick, but it bobs this way and that. But I follow it, and dance with it, continuing to spin it, just like him, while the water flies off of it in streams that spiral into the air.

Once I get control over the wobbly beast, I put my lips around the stick and blow. Pulling my mouth away, I make a fttt sound and place my thumb over the space where I blew. As I do this, I continue to spin the stick, dipping it back into the water occasionally, doing just what he did as I watched.

He pulls out this glass that bends and moves and dances at the end of his pipe like a fresh water salmon caught at the end of a line, gleaming in the sunlight, beads of water clinging to its scales, refracting light. He leans back, holding the pipe at a sharp angle, craning the pipe upwards and downwards, left and right, wrestling with heat, with gravity, with this dancing creature, this thing, pliable and moldable, this thing that seems to have a mind and conscious of its own, this thing that wants to drip and ooze and morph, this thing that wants and desires. He dances with it, spinning it, turning it, until they have created something together.

As I watch him, he always works with an intense passion. But he does it in a calm and steady way, like an old man doing tai chi early in the morning. The heat of the swirling glass stings his eyes. It toasts the skin on his cheeks and knuckles. It blackens his hands and builds rough callous. He sometimes suffers from burns, or he gets shattered glass in his face, but his love and passion take him through all of these pains.

To dance, to move with the glass, this thing that is so dangerous, yet so beautiful, inert yet somehow alive, primal, somehow made him complete. To blend colors in layers, to spin it out thin, or stretch it out long, to wrestle with it, dance with it, for him, this was bliss. And I could see that as I watched.