Phoenix

The Death and Rebirth of a Wood Fired Kiln

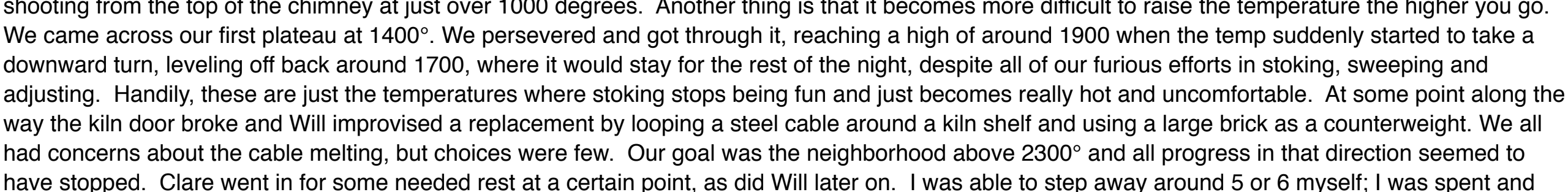
by Alex Lebedev

My part of this story began in the fall of 2019 when I first met my friend Will Talbot of Bell Hill Pottery. I had been potting for nearly two years and firing all of my work in oxidation at cone 6 in electric kilns. For some time I'd been chasing the dragon of achieving novel and aesthetically interesting surfaces in my work, amassing a collection of chemicals to mix up a great variety of glazes and playing with different combinations and applications of the above with the aim of creating beautiful, organic and varied finishes on my pots. While I was indeed very happy with [most of] the results I was getting, I still had an itch that I could not yet scratch. I was in awe of the effects possible with atmospheric firings (wood, salt, soda) where the vapors create glaze on their own and reduction environments where the loss of oxygen can completely change the colors of chemical components and trap carbon in glaze surfaces, creating wonderful mottled patterns. Under good circumstances, pots fired in these conditions can tell a story of the firing with their deposits and flash marks tracing the path of the flame. I desperately wanted a piece of that action.

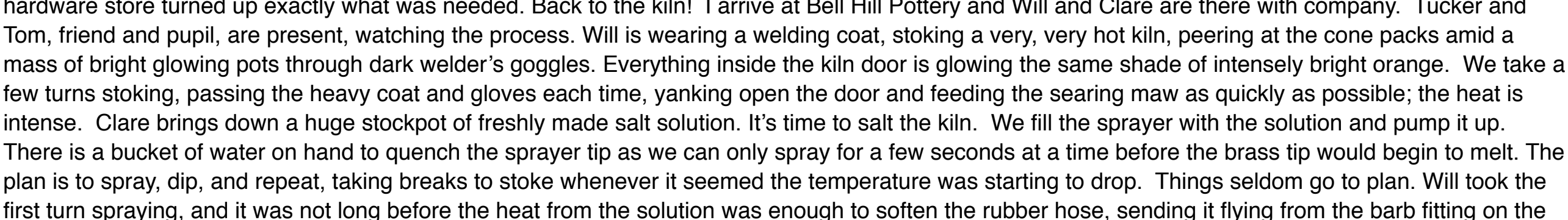
I was very fortunate when my path crossed with Will's and we were introduced. I was eager to participate in a wood firing for the total experience and offered my full effort to assist in firing his small anagama kiln. We appeared to share a similar aesthetic towards pottery and Will seemed pleased to have the help. The firing was to happen shortly after we met, but I was able to pick up some high fire stoneware and porcelain and hustled to knock out a few pots just in time for Will to graciously bisque fire them for me the evening before the kiln was to be loaded. I came by the next day with a few jars of glaze and slip I hastily mixed up, some brushes and a sprayer. There was not much time so I just put a little of this and that on here and there as artfully as I could in the moment. I knew the atmosphere would do a lot for the pots, but I wanted to see what some glaze might do too. I wadded the pots and handed them over to Will, who'd loaded most of the kiln already. (wadding are small bits of refractory material used to separate pots from the kiln shelves or other pots, so things don't fuse together) Later that afternoon we blessed the kiln with a small toast of sake and began the firing.

Cone pack, wadding drying on a bat and pots at the ready

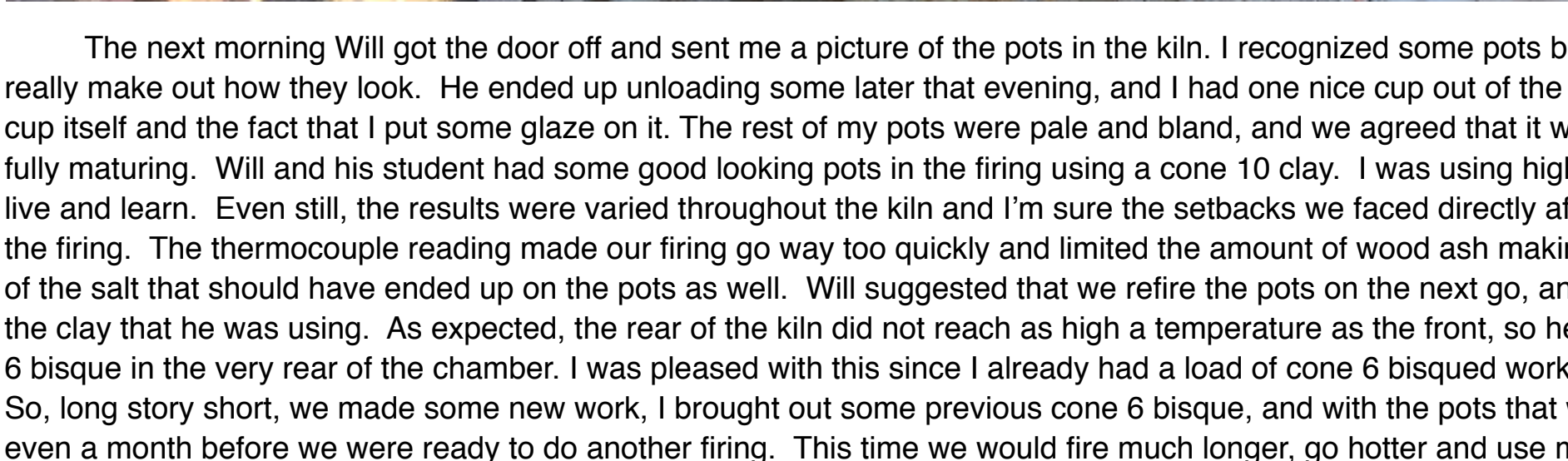
The early stage of the firing was very pleasant. We had a little table and some chairs, a few stacks of wood and a pyrometer sitting nearby. We'd take turns stoking, opening the small kiln door and feeding logs to the firebox at the kiln's front while we stared at the pyrometer, watching the numbers climb reassuringly. There was plenty of time to shoot the breeze and play with Olive, a completely awesome dog. There was a lump of clay at hand and we crafted some "Kiln Gods" and sat them at the top of the kiln's arch. I made an otter with a fish; Will made a bust of a unicorn sporting a monocle, and brought out a couple more that had survived a previous firing from here or there. Occasionally we would have to sweep some ashes from under the firebox grating through the air intake when it would get blocked up. We used a long piece of rebar with a bent end which was forged using the kiln's heat to get the steel glowing red hot. Clare, Will's partner and a potter as well joined us later in the evening once she'd gotten off work. Everything was going pretty smoothly; we stoked and swept and the temperature continued to rise. As it got hotter a few things started happening. Notably a great big jet flame starts shooting from the top of the chimney at over 1000 degrees. Another thing is that it becomes more difficult to raise the temperature the higher you go. We came across our first plateau at 1400°. We persevered and got through it, reaching a high of around 1900 when the temp suddenly started to take a downward turn, leveling off back around 1700, where it would stay for the rest of the night, despite all of our furious efforts in stoking, sweeping and adjusting. Handily, these are just the temperatures where stoking stops being fun and just becomes really hot and uncomfortable. At some point along the way the kiln door broke and Will improvised a replacement by looping a steel cable around a kiln shelf and using a large brick as a counterweight. We all had concerns about the cable melting, but choices were few. Our goal was the neighborhood above 2300° and all progress in that direction seemed to have stopped. Clare went in for some needed rest at a certain point, as did Will later on. I was able to step away around 5 or 6 myself; I was spent and parts of the soles of my sneakers had melted from the ash. I passed out in my bed immediately.



A text comes in at 8:30am with news from the last few hours: Cone 9 is down and 10 is on it's way - It would seem the pyrometer was delivering a false reading! Apparently our furious efforts to raise the pyrometer reading were in fact actually furiously firing the kiln. We had not used a lot of wood to get to this point, so it was time to slow way down. Also, this was going to be a salt firing, and it turned out that we were lacking a sprayer with a metal extension for spraying the salt solution, so we needed one of those. I immediately checked online with the usual suspects but I wasn't convinced they had what we needed, so I tried hooking up a water pump to a garden hose and metal wand. It worked, but barely. Thankfully a last minute check of the local hardware store turned up exactly what was needed. Back to the kiln! I arrive at Bell Hill Pottery and Will and Clare are there with company. Tucker and Tom, friend and pupil, are present, watching the process. Will is wearing a welding coat, stoking a very, very hot kiln, peering at the cone packs amid a mass of bright glowing pots through dark welder's goggles. Everything inside the kiln door is glowing the same shade of intensely bright orange. We take a few turns stoking, passing the heavy coat and gloves each time, yanking open the door and feeding the searing maw as quickly as possible; the heat is intense. Clare brings down a huge stockpot of freshly made salt solution. It's time to salt the kiln. We fill the sprayer with the solution and pump it up. There is a bucket of water on hand to quench the sprayer tip as we can only spray for a few seconds at a time before the brass tip would begin to melt. The plan is to spray, dip, and repeat, taking breaks to stoke whenever it seemed the temperature was starting to drop. Things seldom go to plan. Will took the first turn spraying, and it was not long before the heat from the solution was enough to soften the rubber hose, sending it flying from the barb fitting on the spray tank and spraying a tankload of saltwater all over the place. We were not equipped in the moment for a proper fix, so the whole process now required the addition of one's hand clamping the hot slippery hose against the tank as well as possible, while pumping, spraying, and operating the kiln door. It was decided to remove the spray tip and shoot straight from the tube to try to get it out quicker. I took the second shift spraying and finished the remaining solution. The firing was done. I left both tired and excited about the pottery to come out of the kiln.



The next morning Will got the door off and sent me a picture of the pots in the kiln. I recognized some pots but it's a little dark and it's hard for me to really make out how they look. He ended up unloading some later that evening, and I had one nice cup out of the bunch, mainly due to the shape of the cup itself and the fact that I put some glaze on it. The rest of my pots were pale and bland, and we agreed that it was most likely due to my clay body not fully maturing. Will and his student had some good looking pots in the firing using a cone 10 clay. I was using high fire clay that was rated for cone 10+, so live and learn. Even still, the results were varied throughout the kiln and I'm sure the setbacks we faced directly affected the finish of many of the pots in the firing. The thermocouple reading made our firing go way too quickly and limited the amount of wood ash making it's way to the pots, and we lost a lot of the salt that should have ended up on the pots as well. Will suggested that we refire the pots on the next go, and I agreed that I should switch over to the clay that he was using. As expected, the rear of the kiln did not reach as high a temperature as the front, so he suggested that we could try some cone 6 bisque in the very rear of the chamber. I was pleased with this since I already had a load of cone 6 bisqued work that I hadn't gotten around to glazing. So, long story short, we made some new work, I brought out some previous cone 6 bisque, and with the pots that would benefit from a refire it was not even a month before we were ready to do another firing. This time we would fire much longer, go hotter and use more "juice."



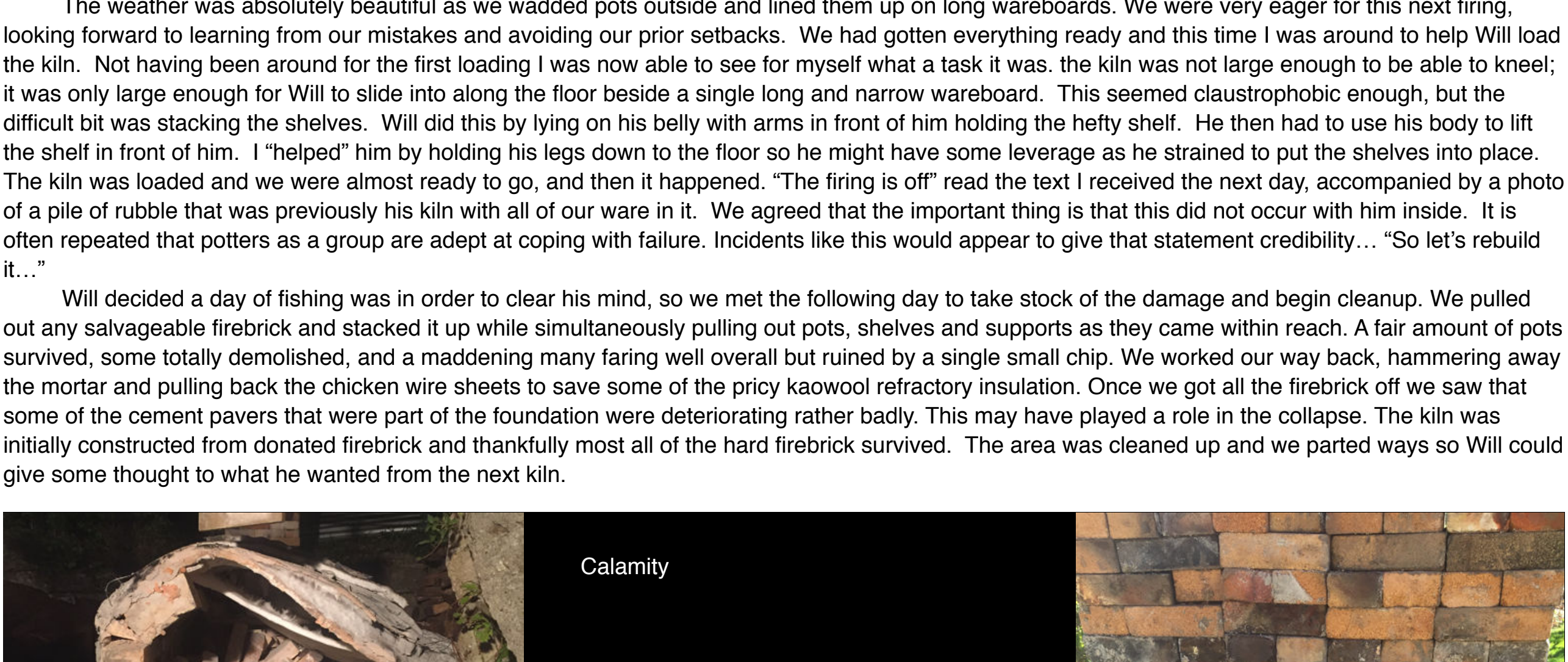
1 Front wall is down

2 The fired pots

3 My one nice cup

The weather was absolutely beautiful as we wadded pots outside and lined them up on long wareboards. We were very eager for this next firing, looking forward to learning from our mistakes and avoiding our prior setbacks. We had gotten everything ready and this time I was around to help Will load the kiln. Not having been around for the first loading I was now able to see for myself what a task it was. the kiln was not large enough to be able to kneel; it was only large enough for Will to slide into along the floor beside a single long and narrow wareboard. This seemed claustrophobic enough, but the difficult bit was stacking the shelves. Will did this by lying on his belly with arms in front of him holding the hefty shelf. He then had to use his body to lift the shelf in front of him. I "helped" him by holding his legs down to the floor so he might have some leverage as he strained to put the shelves into place. The kiln was loaded and we were almost ready to go, and then it happened. "The firing is off" read the text I received the next day, accompanied by a photo of a pile of rubble that was previously his kiln with all of our ware in it. We agreed that the important thing is that this did not occur with him inside. It is often repeated that potters as a group are adept at coping with failure. Incidents like this would appear to give that statement credibility… "So let's rebuild it…"

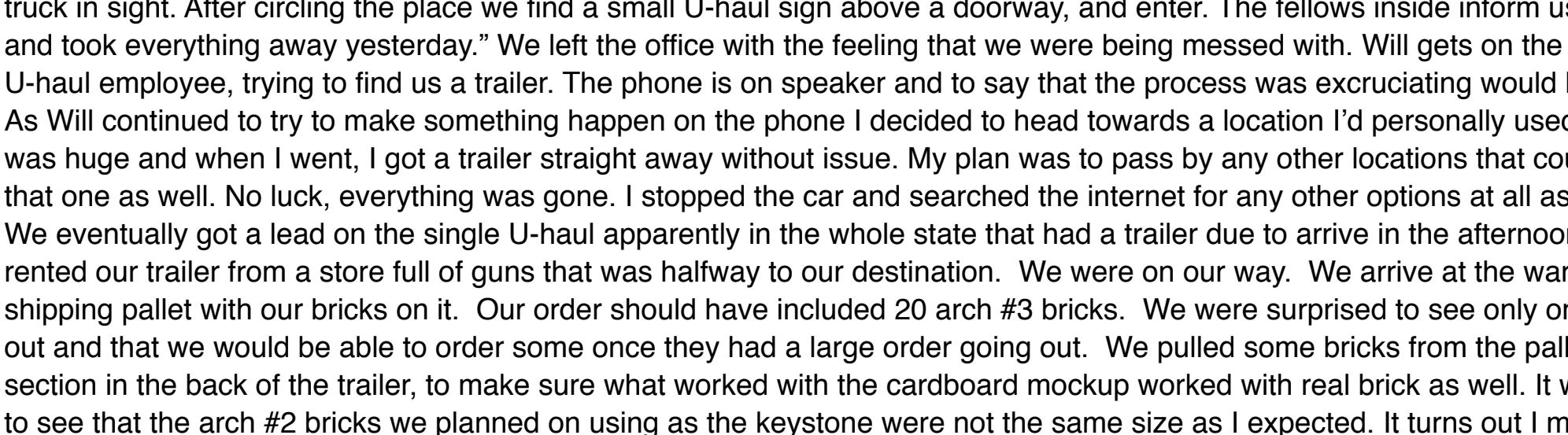
Will decided a day of fishing was in order to clear his mind, so we met the following day to take stock of the damage and begin cleanup. We pulled out any salvageable firebrick and stacked it up while simultaneously pulling out pots, shelves and supports as they came within reach. A fair amount of pots survived, some totally demolished, and a maddening many faring well overall but ruined by a single small chip. We worked our way back, hammering away the mortar and pulling back the chicken wire sheets to save some of the pricy kaowool refractory insulation. Once we got all the firebrick off we saw that some of the cement pavers that were part of the foundation were deteriorating rather badly. This may have played a role in the collapse. The kiln was initially constructed from donated firebrick and thankfully most all of the hard firebrick survived. The area was cleaned up and we parted ways so Will could give some thought to what he wanted from the next kiln.



Calamity

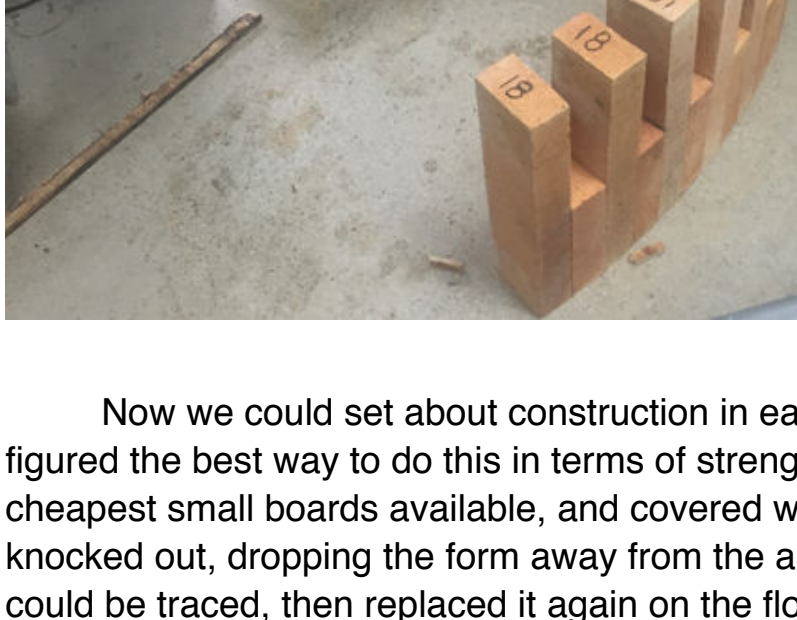
Bricks

After some time he shared a kiln design with me and told me it was the direction he want to take, with the caveat that there were things that he wanted to change. It was a fairly narrow kiln with straight walls topped with a catenary style arch. We discussed the design, changes, additional features and strategies for a bit but between other firings Will was involved with and bouts of inclement weather we were held up from actually getting started. This ended up being a blessing. As time passed we were able to give it more thought and continued changing the planned dimensions and features of the kiln until we both arrived at the conclusion that we just needed to design a really good arch and that everything else would fall into place. I looked into the various shapes of firebrick the supplier offered, and made stacks of each brick profile from cardboard, as precisely as I possibly could. I brought them over to the pottery and we laid them out on the floor, mocking up a full sized cross section of a true catenary arch that was wide enough to accommodate multiple levels of shelving with some breathing room, and tall enough to be able to load comfortably. We decided on an overall length, divisible by brick length, that would give us the chamber and firebox sizes we needed and we called in the order for pickup. By our calculations, it would be about two tons of brick we'd be moving, so the plan was to get a U-haul trailer and use my Jeep to tow it. Plans.



Making "bricks", and making an arch

We meet in the morning and head out to the local U-haul. Arriving at the address brought us to a strange complex of warehouse buildings without a truck in sight. After circling the place we find a small U-haul sign above a doorway, and enter. The fellows inside inform us that U-haul is gone. "They came and took everything away yesterday." We left the office with the feeling that we were being messed with. Will gets on the phone in the parking lot with a U-haul employee, trying to find us a trailer. The phone is on speaker and to say that the process was excruciating would be the understatement of the year. As Will continued to try to make something happen on the phone I decided to head towards a location I'd personally used a couple of years ago. The place was huge and when I went, I got a trailer straight away without issue. My plan was to pass by any other locations that could be considered "on the way" to that one as well. No luck, everything was gone. I stopped the car and searched the internet for any other options at all as Will continued to work the phone. We eventually got a lead on the single U-haul apparently in the whole state that had a trailer due to arrive in the afternoon. Thus, hours later we finally rented our trailer from a store full of guns that was halfway to our destination. We were on our way. We arrive at the warehouse and there was a large shipping pallet with our bricks on it. Our order should have included 20 arch #3 bricks. We were surprised to see only one. We were told that they were out and that we would be able to order some once they had a large order going out. We pulled some bricks from the pallet and started assembling an arch section in the back of the trailer, to make sure what worked with the cardboard mockup worked with real brick as well. It was then that I was also surprised to see that the arch #2 bricks we planned on using as the keystone were not the size I expected. It turns out I misread a fraction from the extremely small and pixellated image showing the product dimensions. We took the brick since it was mainly what we needed most of, hundreds of Arch #1. We decided that we would return the few #2s if we could not use them or cut them and left knowing we would not be able to build for a while. We had a nervous drive back; my jeep did not go, stop, turn, or do anything the same with two tons and then some behind it. (we ended up with a considerably larger trailer than planned) The upside was being able to stop at the lumber yard on the way and fit all the boards and sheets we would need to construct the arch along with the cinderblocks we'd need to remake the foundation. We arrived at the pottery and with Clare's help moved all that brick across the property over to the kiln site, stacked it neatly and went all the way back to return the trailer with Olive along for the ride. Our day was done. We got together the following day and of course the first thing we did was to pull out some bricks and see what we needed to do with the arch. We had 10 #2s of a different size then expected, and a single #3 to work with and we started rearranging things and ended up with an even more appealing arch than the previous. #3 was the keystone, as it always should have been, and now our design had quite a few more #2s and far less #1s. At least the #2s were available. We planned on returning a bunch of 1s, getting a bunch more 2s, and figuring out what to do about the 3s later. A friend of Will's was building a similar kiln and he had a brick saw. We thought that if we couldn't get our hands on some 3s, then we'd cut them ourselves.

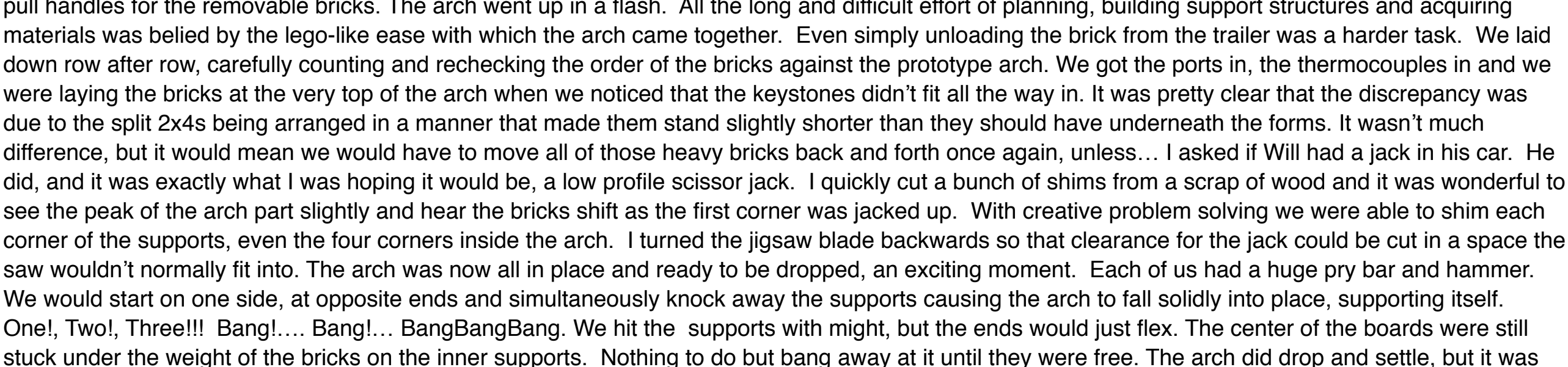


Arch Version 2.0

Now we could set about construction in earnest. The idea was to create a form to build the arch over that could be removed non-destructively. I figured the best way to do this in terms of strength and economy was with particleboard sections strung together with furring strips, which are the very cheapest small boards available, and covered with a thin sheet of masonite. These would be slightly raised above the floor, sitting on 2x4s which could be knocked out, dropping the form away from the arch so it can be slid out. We rebuilt the arch of bricks on top of the particleboard sheet so the inside curve could be traced, then replaced it again on the floor so that it could be used to check fit on the parts we were cutting. I took the traced curve and redrew it to compensate for the thickness of the masonite and cut out slots where the furring strips would sit. Making all these cuts freehand with a jigsaw doesn't give great precision, so there was a lot of adjustment to the curve and the slots so that everything would fit as well as possible. When the first section felt right enough I laid it over another sheet and used it as a stencil with spray paint to get the shape onto the next section, then cut and adjusted that, and so on until we had four finished sections. We then assembled the furring strip beams and finally covered everything with masonite. I had the idea to rip the supporting 2x4s in half lengthwise, as I thought it would help a lot when it was time to knock them out. Our forms were ready and waiting for us to get all the necessary brick together. In the meantime we got to putting down the foundation and the kiln floor / firebox grating.

Form becomes reality / Foundation, floor and firebox grating

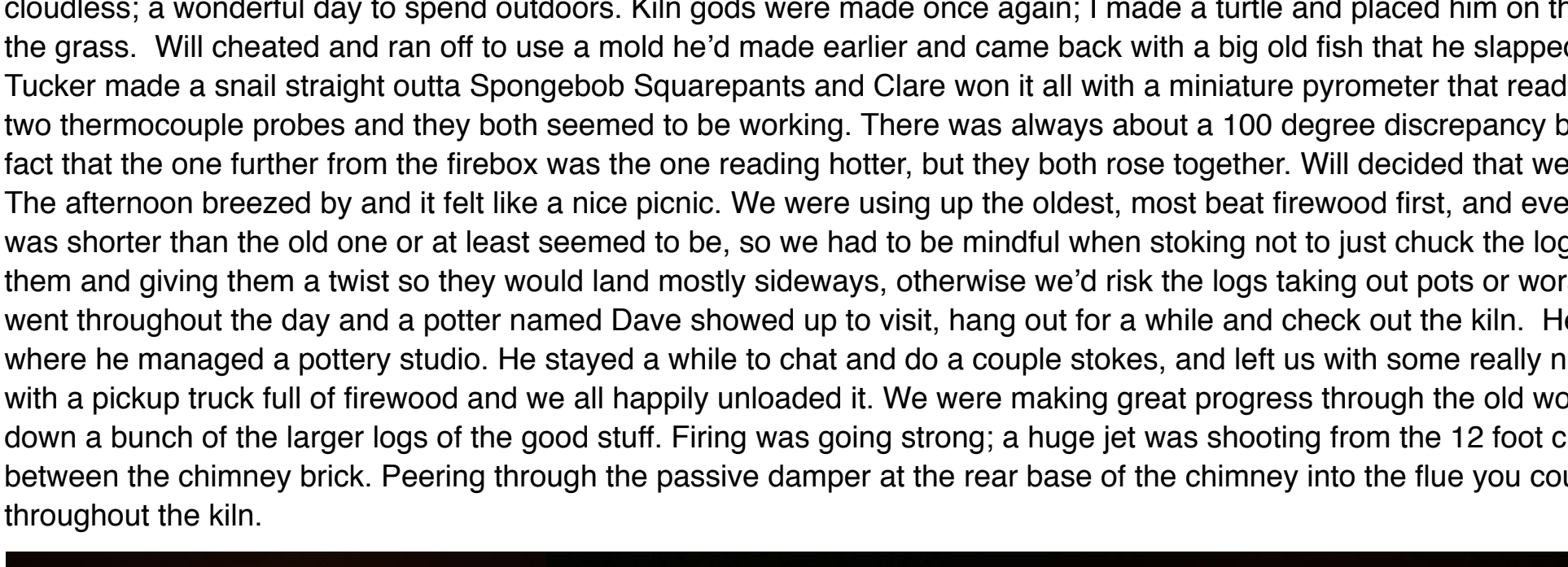
The holidays had passed and it was nearing mid January when I hear from Will that he's ready to resume work. His buddy had lent him the brick saw, and on top of that gave us the #3 bricks we so desperately needed! We finally had everything we needed to build the arch and I'd brought a grinder fitted with a diamond wheel and a hammer drill with some masonry bits and a handful of other things I thought could be useful to us. Unfortunately it was brutally cold, with a high of 20°. We went out and set the two forms out on the kiln floor, rechecked our measurements and alignments, then propped them up onto the 2x4 supports. We started by finding two of the old arch bricks and seeing if we'd be able to bore a hole all the way through the brick for the thermocouple probes with the equipment we had on hand. The previous kiln had had the probes going through soft brick, so we had no idea if this would work. Fortune smiled as the bit worked through the brick without complaint, and again when I was able to align the hole coming from the other side, making a neat bore in both bricks. Enthused, we got the brick cutter going to cut a few bricks to prepare for the assembly. To stagger the bricks in the arch we would need to cut a single brick in half for every other row. The brick cutter tore through the bricks and we got started stacking the arch alternating the beautiful new arch bricks with the least crusty of the old straight bricks. The grinder was on hand for the many bricks that needed a little touch to fit right. Will had the brilliant idea to have the kiln function as a gas kiln as well, so we picked locations for the burners and those bricks were shaved down with the grinder so they fit just loosely enough to be able to be pulled out. We did the same for four injection ports about the kiln arch, and I had the idea to fit small hooks as pull handles for the removable bricks. The arch went up in a flash. All the long and difficult effort of planning, building support structures and acquiring materials was belied by the lego-like ease with which the arch came together. Even simply unloading the brick from the trailer was a harder task. We laid down row after row, carefully counting and rechecking the order of the bricks against the prototype arch. We got the ports in, the thermocouples in and we were laying the bricks at the very top of the arch when we noticed that the keystones didn't fit all the way in. It was pretty clear that the discrepancy was due to the split 2x4s being arranged in a manner that made them stand slightly shorter than they should have underneath the forms. It wasn't much difference, but it would mean we would have to move all of those heavy bricks back and forth once again, unless… I asked if Will had a jack in his car. He did, and it was exactly what I was hoping it would be, a low profile scissor jack. I quickly cut a bunch of shims from a scrap of wood and it was wonderful to see the peak of the arch part slightly and hear the bricks shift as the first corner was jacked up. With creative problem solving we were able to shim each corner of the supports, even the four corners inside the arch. I turned the jigsaw blade backwards so that clearance for the jack could be cut in a space the saw wouldn't normally fit into. The arch was now all in place and ready to be dropped, an exciting moment. Each of us had a huge pry bar and hammer. We would start on one side, at opposite ends and simultaneously knock away the supports causing the arch to fall solidly into place, supporting itself. One!, Two!, Three!!! Bang!…. Bang!… BangBangBang. We hit the supports with might, but the ends would just flex. The center of the boards were still stuck under the weight of the bricks on the inner supports. Nothing to do but bang away at it until they were free. The arch did drop and settle, but it was not as instant nor dramatic as we'd hoped. We did the same for the other side and were able to remove our forms from a glorious arch. Using the best of the remaining old brick, we built steps up the floor inside the arch to create an incline and put up the back wall with a flue, cutting bricks as needed. We called it a day and would wrap things up tomorrow. We returned to an equally frigid day, but this time it was snowing on us as we built the front wall of the kiln with an air intake and two holes for cleaning under the grating. It would have to come down again to load the kiln, but those bricks needed to be reserved for that role. The brick cutter had completely frozen over with a block of solid ice in the pan and the saw's irrigation system completely inoperable. Once we were able to free the slide from the rails enough to move, Will rigged a garden hose to his sink to spray the blade as we got back to cuttin'. We started on the chimney. It went up quickly at first and we made an opening in the side where we would use an old kiln shelf as a damper. The pace slowed a bit near the end as we were forced to do some heavy grinding on the gnarliest and crustiest of the old brick and scour the grounds for any stray firebrick we could find. (quite a few, it turned out) We also had a few old arch bricks left over, and found that they were totally usable for the chimney if stacked opposite each other. Having exhausted all of the materials, the kiln was essentially complete save for a few final touches. We would pick up again once the weather started looking up.



Building on the form | Finished arch | Injection port | All together

About a week later I get a text with a photo of the chimney heightened by bricks found in a barn, a month after that a photo of a pile of bricks unearthed after moving a woodpile. Will decided to take down the chimney and rebuilt it using 2 less bricks per layer, attaining a height of 12 feet. The week after that on March 2nd is a pic of the arch covered with kaowool and refractory mortar along with an invitation to come up and start loading.

I make it up there on Thursday the 5th. Will had already started loading as usual, and there are a few small things left to do to fully prepare for the firing. I had been making a bunch of work at the Educational Alliance studio with clay bodies rated for cone 6-10, and had brought a few boxes of this bisque ware up to the pottery a couple of weeks ago. I arrive and we cut a few more bricks to improve the spacing between the grating bars, then I open up the boxes and start wadding some pots. I brought along the glazes that I'd mixed for our first firing and Will shared some titanium slip he'd just prepared and was enthusiastic about. He had a job to attend to so I stayed to wad some of my work and load it into the kiln until the cold and hunger got to me. I'd gotten a good amount of stuff loaded and I needed to leave some space for Tom who was coming by the next day to drop off his work. Will found a steel hoist with two pulleys and a ratcheting winch that looked as if were made to fit this kiln. We dismantled the rusted pulleys and cleaned and lubricated them so they'd spin again and built a door for the kiln made of a large square of hard brick fitted with a handle and steel cable, wrapped in a layer of kaowool. We opted to ditch the winch for being slow to operate and fit a counterweight to the door instead. We redid the wiring for the two thermocouple leads, the face of the kiln was bricked up and all crevices were sealed with clay. Everything was in place to begin the firing on Sunday morning, taking advantage of a brief window of hopeful weather.

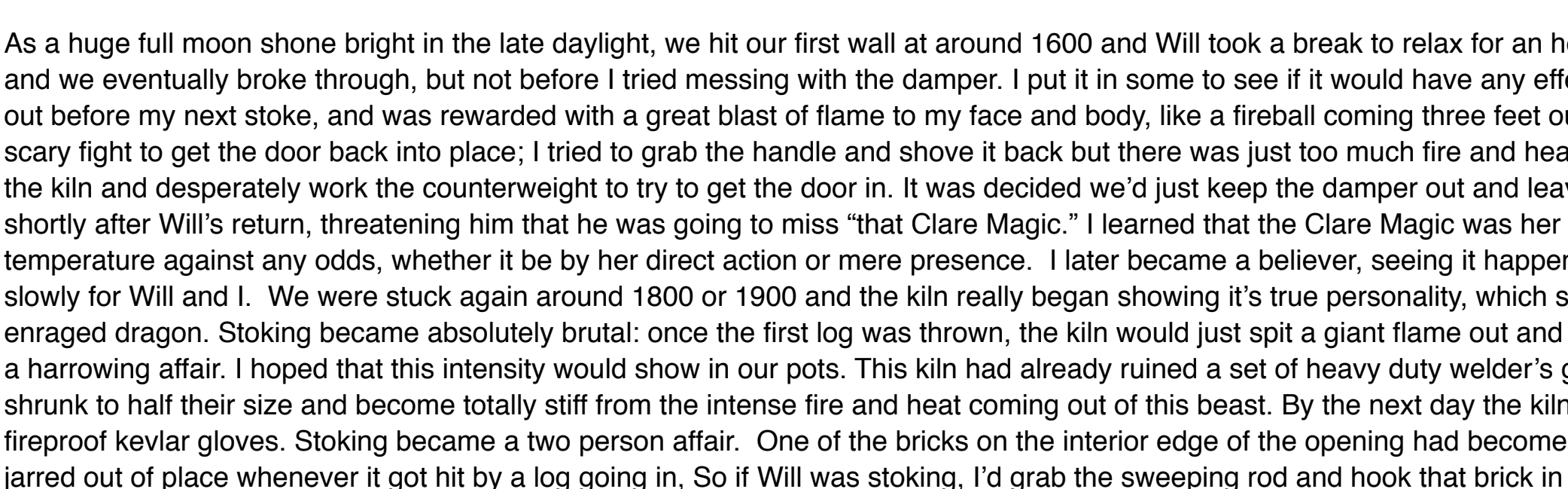


1 Fully Loaded

2 Sealed and ready

3 Look at that chimney!

Will got the kiln going around 8 in the morning and I arrived in the afternoon. Tucker showed up just after me; he'd come by to hang out. Clare, Will and Olive were all just cooling out by the table near the kiln or on a blanket on the grass nearby. I brought a bottle of Dassai to toast the kiln, and also because I enjoy sake. I poured out a little cup and set it atop the arch, and we all had a little bit of sake and some tea as well. It was a fine day, sunny and cloudless; a wonderful day to spend outdoors. Kiln gods were made once again; I made a turtle and placed him on the arch atop a piece of bark I spied in the grass. Will cheated and ran off to use a mold he'd made earlier and came back with a big old fish that he slapped up in the corner of the front wall. Tucker made a snail straight outta Spongebob Squarepants and Clare won it all with a miniature pyrometer that read 2400 in the display. This time we had two thermocouple probes and they both seemed to be working. There was always about a 100 degree discrepancy between the two, made strange by the fact that the one further from the firebox was the one reading hotter, but they both rose together. Will decided that we should just watch the lower number. The afternoon breezed by and it felt like a nice picnic. We were using up the oldest, most beat firewood first, and everything was easy. The new firebox was shorter than the old one or at least seemed to be, so we had to be mindful when stoking not to just chuck the logs in, but to take some care in placing them and giving them a twist so they would land mostly sideways, otherwise we'd risk the logs taking out pots or worse, a shelf post. Tucker came and went throughout the day and a potter named Dave showed up to visit, hang out for a while and check out the kiln. He'd come from about 2 hours away, where he managed a pottery studio. He stayed a while to chat and do a couple stokes, and left us with some really nice vegan chili. A friendly guy came by with a pickup truck full of firewood and we all happily unloaded it. We were making great progress through the old woodpile, so I took a chainsaw and cut down a bunch of the larger logs of the good stuff. Firing was going strong; a huge jet was shooting from the 12 foot chimney, illuminating all the gaps between the chimney brick. Peering through the passive damper at the rear base of the chimney into the flue you could see nothing but a great solid flame throughout the kiln.



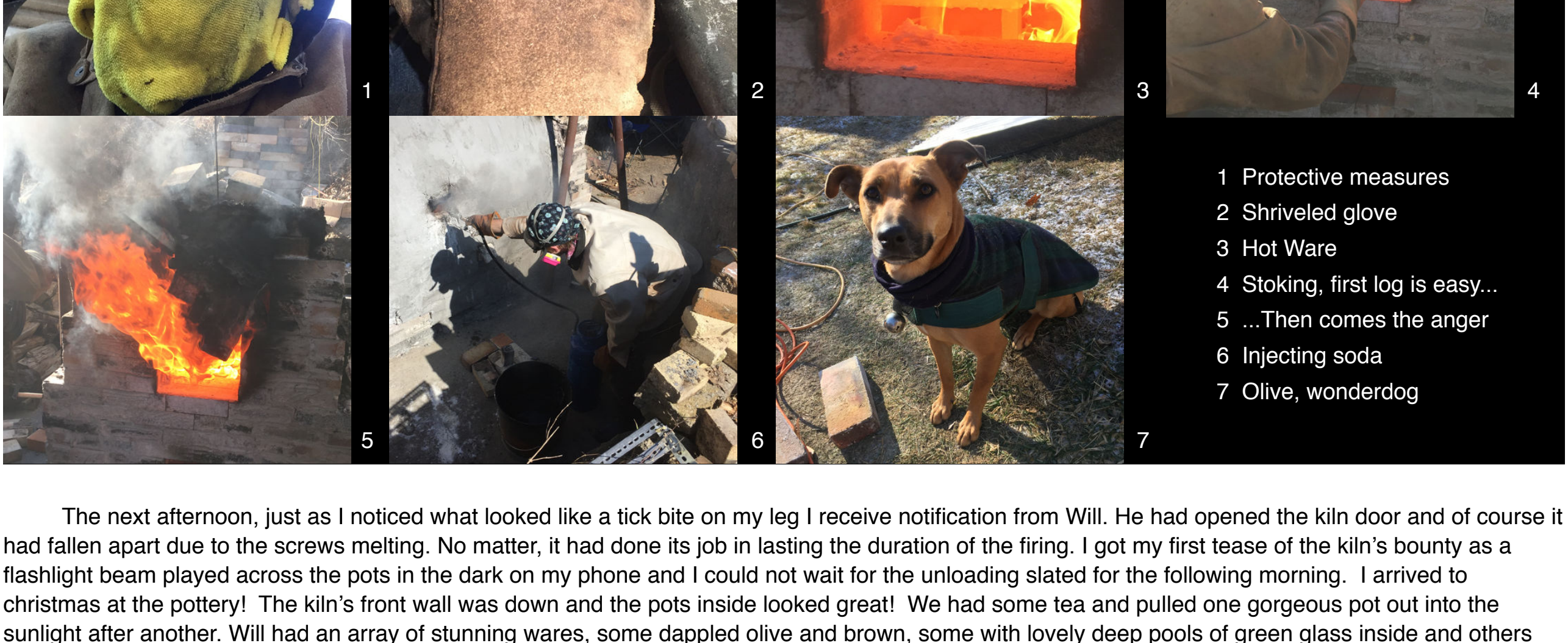
Left to right:

Firebox Vents

Chimney Jet

View to the Flue

As a huge full moon shone bright in the late daylight, we hit our first wall at around 1600 and Will took a break to relax for an hour or so. Clare and I stoked and we eventually broke through, but not before I tried messing with the damper. I put it in some to see if it would have any effect, but I didn't pull it back out before my next stoke, and was rewarded with a great blast of flame to my face and body, like a fireball coming three feet out of the opening! It was a scary fight to get the door back into place; I tried to grab the handle and shove it back but there was just too much fire and heat. I had to jump to the side of the kiln and desperately work the counterweight to try to get the door in. It was decided we'd just keep the damper out and leave it alone. Clare took off shortly after Will's return, threatening him that he was going to miss "that Clare Magic." I learned that the Clare Magic was her ability to raise the kiln temperature against any odds, whether it be by her direct action or mere presence. I later became a believer, seeing it happen myself. It was going, but slowly for Will and I. We were stuck again around 1800 or 1900 and the kiln really began showing it's true personality, which seemed to me one of an enraged dragon. Stoking became absolutely brutal: once the first log was thrown, the kiln would just spit a giant flame out and getting the next logs in was a harrowing affair. I hoped that this intensity would show in our pots. This kiln had already ruined a set of heavy duty welder's gloves. The fingers had shrunk to half their size and become totally stiff from the intense fire and heat coming out of this beast. By the next day the kiln would also claim Will's new fireproof kevlar gloves. Stoking became a two person affair. One of the bricks on the interior edge of the opening had become a bit loose and would get jarred out of place whenever it got hit by a log going in, So if Will was stoking, I'd grab the sweeping rod and hook that brick in so it wouldn't come loose. I could also use the rod to knock in any logs that got caught in the opening, which they often did since it was so harsh to get close to the kiln. The rod was also useful in nudging the closing door. The kaowool was starting to deteriorate and flames would lick out around the sides and corners of the closed door until we nudged it sealed. It became so hot that I needed to put all kinds of stuff on my face to be able to bear it. I had a hoodie over a beanie, sunglasses, a respirator and a rag over the respirator tucked under the glasses to cover any remaining exposed areas. Once my face was taken care of, my legs were getting burned through my worn jeans and I had to resort to wearing a towel around my waist when stoking. At 5:30am I finally got a chance to take a disco nap. I could have killed for a fresh pair of socks. I come back out 45 minutes later to check in and I'm offered another hour of rest which I happily take. Back again, the sun is coming up and not much has changed at all, and Clare is on the job giving Will a break until she needs to leave for work. We handily nudge past 2000° just before she takes off. After her departure the temperature sinks below 2K again and we spend the rest of the morning fighting the kiln back from its dip into the 1800s. We eventually cross 2000 again and continue to slowly climb. By 2:30 cone 9 was already down for some time and 10 is well on its way. Will has just returned with a solution of 8 lbs soda that he'll be spraying into the kiln. I was happy to leave the spraying to him since I was unable to pick up vapor cartridges for my respirator; all that stuff had been cleaned out of the shops thanks to coronavirus. The metal handles on the two rearmost ports had melted. I lifted the kaowool flap covering one and just watched as a bright silver bead ran quickly down the side of the mortar leaving a small rivulet behind, looking just like molten solder. Luckily the screws were intact and we were able to use pliers to extract the port bricks. The spraying went far better this time around. Will had invested in a spray tank of a quality far superior to the one we used prior and the only issue was the solution gumming up every so often while we halted spraying to stoke and get the temps up again. Once the spraying was complete we were left to continue stoking this angry and terrifying kiln, same as we had been all night, morning and day. Tucker showed up again that afternoon to hang and Clare eventually returned from work. Cone 10 finally dropped at around 5:30 and we were beat; Will made the call that we'd done enough. We packed the firebox with a large amount of wood and sealed off all the kiln's intakes and dampers and left it to do it's thing, 32 hours after we'd started.



1 Protective measures
2 Shriveled glove
3 Hot Ware
4 Stoking, first log is easy...
5 ...Then comes the anger
6 Injecting soda
7 Olive, wonderdog

The next afternoon, just as I noticed what looked like a tick bite on my leg I receive notification from Will. He had opened the kiln door and of course it had fallen apart due to the screws melting. No matter, it had done its job in lasting the duration of the firing. I got my first tease of the kiln's bounty as a flashlight beam played across the pots in the dark on my phone and I could not wait for the unloading slated for the following morning. I arrived to christmas at the pottery! The kiln's front wall was down and the pots inside looked great! We had some tea and pulled one gorgeous pot out into the sunlight after another. Will had an array of stunning wares, some dappled olive and brown, some with lovely deep pools of green glass inside and others with titanium flashing slip lending rich warm tones with slight hints of bright orange. My pots were mostly from darker clay bodies and did some interesting things, some with surfaces that shone almost like chrome, others with glassy green areas fading into satiny bronze patches, accented with marks I'd made beforehand. One chawan I'd glazed came out with an intense burst of minty green down one side and many were just brown and beautiful with subtle dappling and nuance from ash deposits. The shining guts of the kiln were now strewn all across the table and lawn and we knew we had succeeded.

Check out Will Talbot and myself on Instagram for more:
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