

A Single Shard ... an excerpt

from Chapter One

Tree-ear made his way cautiously to his favorite spot, behind a pawlonia tree whose low branches kept him hidden from view. He peeped through the leaves and caught his breath in delight. Min was just beginning a new pot.

Min threw a mass of clay the size of a cabbage onto the center of the wheel. He picked it up and threw it again, threw it several times. After one last throw, he sat down and stared at the clay for a moment. Using his foot to spin the base of the wheel, he placed dampened hands on the sluggardly lump, and for the hundredth time, Tree-ear watched the miracle.

In only a few moments, the clay rose and fell, grew taller then rounded down, until it curved into perfect symmetry. The spinning slowed. The chant, too, died out and became a mutter of words that Tree-ear could not hear.

Min sat up straight. He crossed his arms and leaned back a little, as if to see the vase from a distance. Turning the wheel slowly with his knee, he inspected the graceful shape for invisible faults. Then, "Pah!" He shook his head and in a single motion of disgust, scooped up the clay and slapped it back onto the wheel, whereupon it collapsed into an oafish lump again, as if ashamed.

Tree-ear opened his mouth to let out his breath silently, only then realizing that he had been keeping it back. To his eyes, the vase had been perfect, its width half its height, its curves like those of a flower petal. Why, he wondered, had Min found it unworthy? What had he seen that so displeased him?

Min never failed to reject his first attempt. Then he would repeat the whole process. That day, Tree-ear was able to watch the clay rise and fall four times before Min was satisfied. Each of the four efforts had looked identical to Tree-ear, but something about the fourth pleased Min. He took a length of twine and slipped it deftly under the vase to release it from the wheel, then placed the vase carefully on a tray to dry.

As Tree-ear crept away, he counted the days on his fingers. He knew the potter's routine well; it would be many days before another "throwing" day.

