

THE TERRA COTTA POT

Chavawn Kelley

The terra cotta pot was a large one, and it had been expensive, decorated as it was with swags and garlands suggesting antiquity around its rim. Angela had barely managed to pull it from the trunk of her car and half roll and half drag it through the gate and along the path to the back. She knew that once planted with purple asters and silver artemesia, she wouldn't be able to move it, and she wanted the pot to sit at the edge of the terrace beside shasta daisies and yellow coreopsis, exuberant flowers that would soften its formality.

At the bottom of any pot, she placed a potshard to slow the drain of water through the hole. Thus, Angela began the potting ritual by placing a shard at the bottom of this new pot with the thick bas-relief rim. As she scooped trowelfulls of dirt in, she studied the rim more closely. The design was stranger and more ornate than she had noticed behind the nursery greenhouse. Perhaps the sunlight had lent it flatness, while here in the scattered shade of red maple and post oak its depth and intricacy were revealed.

She saw a child in red boots (red, of course, since this was a terra cotta pot) after a particularly violent rainstorm, digging in the mud of the road in front of the house where she had lived when she was five. The sky was dark and the child, Angela herself, was shaping mud pies with excited fingers. The mud felt cool and soothing, the perfect proportions of rain and earth. The quivering of the mud pie was right as a heartbeat.

The rim of the terra-cotta pot, it seemed, was not merely festooned and decorous but carried a full record, a Bayeux Tapestry, a set of hieroglyphics. Angela—still young—in the dimly lit feed store, the air filtering through particles of straw and coal fines, faraway field soil, and the breaking down of mountains on other continents. Atop wooden bins of grass seed, oats, millet and barley, a monkey crouched. Its hands could have been tiny replicas of her own. It reached out, and with head turned to the side, asked “who?” through lips round and pale as its eyes were round and black. “Who?”

These revelations, though alarming, were as seductive and mysterious as encountering lost scrolls in a cave in the Judean desert. There on the rim, the scene of a kiss behind a low-slung red brick school in light that flared from a slipping sun. On her knees she moved around the pot to see herself presenting a birthday cake to a man, her Bill, who she lived with, while

two small children looked on. She recognized his favorite frosting and the cosmos and nasturtiums of her garden pressed into its swirls. Children? Yes, it seemed there would be.

A hairline fracture in the pot ran through a crashed and crumpled car, a stepped-on origami sculpture. Flecks of mica in the fired clay reflected off the broken windshield. She had recognized the wrinkles in the monkey's finger joints, but the figures visible through the side windows remained blessedly obscured. The smell of spreading anti-freeze and gasoline registered within her sinuses. Angela, with quickened concern, quit tarrying over scenes. A flooded river and panicky dairy cattle were the last suggestion made by the pot before she raised it and slammed it into the flagstones, her strength inexplicable.

With a broom from the potting shed, she swept, swept, swept the pieces of the huge, huge, beautiful terra-cotta pot. If her planting had begun ritualistically, she acted now automatically. With gulping breaths, she dug and buried the shards, all but one, behind the tall hollyhocks and delphiniums growing by the tall back fence. Surely, their roots would hold the terra cotta deep under the soil until the seasons erased, or made real, her prematurely recorded history.

When Angela went next to plant the asters and artemesias in a smaller, plainer pot, one with every surface smooth, she placed the remaining shard from the larger pot over the drainage hole. Only she would know of the broken scrap of terra cotta beneath the coming blooms of autumn, its bas relief depicting a mound of mud from an unpaved lane thirty years ago. She would plant this shard and continue her gardening until the end of summer. Then she would start again in the spring. Bill's tires sounded on the gravel drive around front. He honked his horn. It had been a beautiful pot.