

Bottle Shaped Vase—artist unknown

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There was this place and that, here and there. Both were home, each in its own way. My childhood comes back to me as a series of black and white photographs, moments suspended in time in the interstices of memory. Not quite. Better to describe these images to you as sepia tones, faded through the years but still so embedded in a particular place, either here or there. I grew up between Nashville and Tehran; the people, the language, the rhythm of life in these two seemingly disparate places came together to shape my way of being in this world.

Think of it this way: if my childhood memories were an object, they might resemble this very old bottle from the collection of the Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery. The decoration on each side is different, but together they make sense, as though they are depicting two scenes that tell a story. It's a beautiful and yet utilitarian vessel. Its slight imperfections created by human foibles add to its character. The bottle's body is round, shaped like a globe—that object that represents the earth, our collective home.

The museum label reads “artist unknown.” I wonder if this piece of stoneware was made in a remote village workshop, its kilns surrounded by stacks of firewood conspicuous across a rural landscape. Was it made by a group of craftsmen working collectively? Perhaps one artist prepared the clay, another worked the clay into its form, another fired the piece in the kiln, still another dipped it into white slip and then brushed it with a translucent glaze, and finally another artist painted its delicate designs. Or was the vessel made entirely by one artist, working in a solitary workshop?

I imagine the hands working the clay all those years ago, shaping it into this perfectly rounded object. From a small slab of clay, they would have carefully fashioned a foot, attaching it firmly to the bottom of the bottle so it can stand on a shelf or a table. At the top of the vessel, they added a single spout, a slender neck topped with a rimmed lip. It's a bit askew, but still functional for pouring water or perhaps even wine. And on each side, positioned in perfect symmetry, they crafted two handles. So the bottle can be lifted to one's lips for taking a sip or held to pour drink into a cup. And then the magical alchemy of firing the glazed stoneware in a kiln created its surface, a reflective off-white tone with chimeric bits of rust color coming through. Like the sepia tones of my childhood memories.

I wonder about the homes in which this stoneware vessel was used. Was it a special object used for ceremonies brought out for honored guests, or was it an ordinary household vessel used every day? I think of the journey it took from place to place, from here to there, until all these years later it finally arrived in Nashville. I think about the conservator who carefully prepared it for storage in the museum, about the curator who selected it to be included in this exhibition. So many hands have held this bottle, played a part in its story. And yet it has remained intact,

the same as it was when it was created by the “unknown artist” so long ago in that far away place.

The bottle brings to mind two sepia toned snapshots in my memory. Here: a grassy hill so vast that when I came upon it as a small child it seemed to stretch endlessly. There: two weeping willows on either side of a creek their branches bending towards the water. I looked it up, that distance. It turns out the location of those trees in Iran and that hill in the US are about 6800 miles apart. But for me, they are woven together in my childhood memories. Both were spots I’d go to on my bike to sit and read books, sometimes for hours on end. Back to that ceramic vessel, on which the unknown artist painted two scenes in delicate free flowing lines of blue.

On one side the artist painted a bent weeping willow with its flowing branches against the sky.

a dove was nipping seeds,
a weeping willow was dancing,
a sparrow was building a nest,
the sun was watching.

- Fereydoun Moshiri (born in Tehran, 1926)

On the other side they painted wild grass growing along a craggy hill.

Supper was at six and was over by half past. There was still daylight, shining softly and with a tarnish, like the lining of a shell, and the carbon lamps lifted at the corners were on in the light, and the locusts were started, and the fireflies were out, and a few frogs were flopping in the dewy grass, by the time the fathers and the children came out.

- James Agee (born in Tennessee, 1909)

Where is this place that the weeping willow and the grassy hill meet? It’s a feeling within me, a sense I carry. Call it the past. Call it belonging. Call it home.