



Fulper Vase, Black Flambe over Copper
Dust (16.5" x 6"), circa 1915

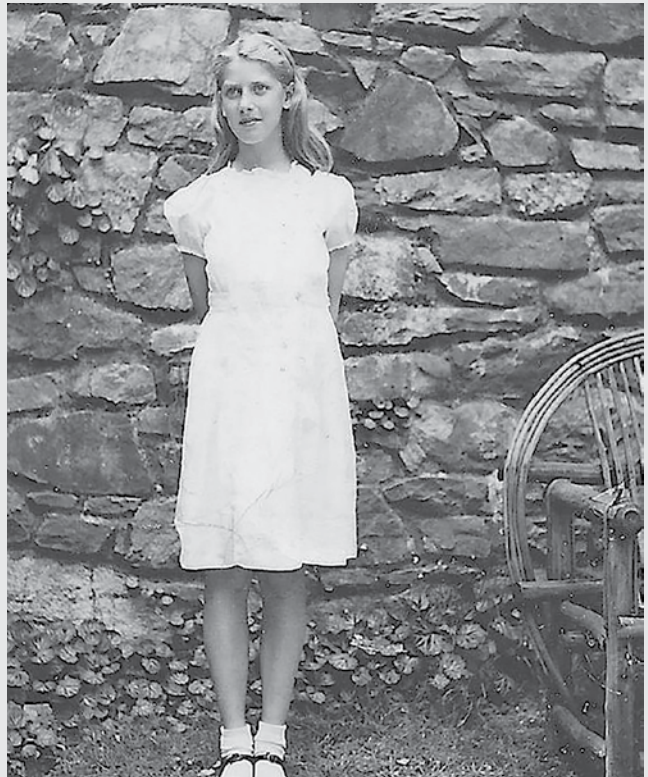
Tall

by Anne Fulper

I had a favorite vase growing up. Or, at least I should have had a favorite vase growing up, in case I get asked about it on some talk show. “Well, Terry, I’d have to say the tall, brown and gold vase that was in our living room always spoke to me. I’m an “Autumn” you see, so I probably responded viscerally to its chocolaty, coppery, tawny... Terry.” Plus, when I walk the red carpet at the awards night for pottery-based memoirs, my gown will be the very embodiment of this vase. As the adoring crowds admire the mink-like, but totally faux, serrated cape, cascading over butterscotch, dupioni silk panels of peacock iridescence licking the sumptuous skirt, its wide tapered hem, stud-ded with duchess sequins of hand-painted gold leaf, I will reflect on the genesis of the vase that inspired it over a century ago.

The form was one of dozens that had been slip cast from a mold, part of a line-up of indistinct, beige clay monoliths, standing for several days with its many cousins until bone dry. In the glazing room, it is plunged up to its shoulders in a crystalline glaze called Copper Dust, which at this point looks like old pancake batter. The top third is then dunked into another hideous mixture called Black Flambé. After this, it is coal fired in a protective box called a saggar at over 2000 degrees. As things start to heat up inside, the black molecules flow down to meet the gold molecules and engage in their strange alchemy dance, which becomes more intense and transformative as the kiln cools down and crystallization speeds up. Days later, it is ready to be opened and emptied. Each pot emerges unique, different from its neighbor. Some are lost to breakage, some will be given away or destroyed, the rest will be sent off to stores and showrooms around the U.S., Europe and South America.

This vase was part of my grandparents’ personal collection. At first glance it looks relatively somber, but on closer examination you can see flame-like gold tones with blue lowlights, setting off an explosion of tiny copper snowflakes. It is exquisite and, like much of the pottery, has a masculine quality in its bold, simple shape and subtle coloration, like an Armani suit. But its height and the way it tapers at the base means it could easily topple. So, it was kept - tall, and monk-like, lurking on a recessed window sill, with enough picture frames and books arranged in front of it, to keep it safe.



Agnes Fulper age 13

When you are tall and made of fired earth, great care is taken in your handling and placement. When you are tall and made of flesh and blood, fragility is not really part of the equation. It is assumed you are tough and durable and probably bossy, and if you fall over, you will just get up and keep going. There ended up being just two of us in the family who sprouted up well beyond the norm; Aggie and me, the bookends of four sisters. From my vantage point as the youngest, I watched the oldest struggle against the cute, kittenish image of femininity in the 1950s. “You’re built like a man”, my father would tell her. “You big ox”, our live-in housekeeper, cat-called from the kitchen.

“I wish I were little, with skinny legs and great big breasts”, Aggie sighed. “Wouldn’t you worry about falling over?” I reasoned, looking up at her broad angular shoulders, framing an unobtrusive bosom. She was slim and tall and if it had been 30 years later, would have been enviably described as fit and modelesque. But alas, she was growing up in one of the worst times for her body type, when women wanted to look like Sandra Dee or Elizabeth Taylor or Marilyn. I, on the other hand, was happy to surpass medium height Rada at 13, and then tallish Julie at 16. But I started to despair when I kept on growing, and feared that I might end up like Alice in Wonderland with her head through the roof and arms out the windows, towering over everyone, then perhaps toppling like an overgrown weed. We’d heard tales of my mother’s sister, our aunt Gerarda - 6 ft if she was a day and dead at 25.

Rosalie, the author of the “You Big Ox” epithet, lived with us until I was about 6. A New Jersey farm girl, she’d had some “emotional problems”, according to my mother, and had even been hospitalized a couple of times. Yet I adored her with doglike devotion, often mistaking her for my own mother, in times of stress like Catholic kindergarten, or tuna and cornflake casserole.

I suppose Rosalie was drawn to me because who doesn’t love the baby, and maybe to Rada as to another misfit spirit. Julie had been the youngest at one point with a headful of curls, so she got the requisite love and affection. But for some mysterious reason, she hated our Agnes, chasing her



Left: Alice, illustration by John Tenniel. Right: Alice in Wonderland, film by Disney.

around the house with the knife she’d been using to cut up a chicken, demanding she eat the cold oatmeal for dinner that she hadn’t finished at breakfast. As this happened before I was born, I guess “Rowie”, as we called her, was cured by the time she got to me, because I trusted her implicitly - this ally, who’d so mistreated my sister. When I heard about it later, I tried to diminish the abuse by claiming that, “well, didn’t we all suffer equally with the infamous Rosalie hair-do?”; a rather Dickensian experience as I recalled.

Standing over the sink, a clammy towel wrapped around your neck to the point of strangulation and fastened with a lock-jaw-inducing, rusted safety pin, which could, at any second, spring open and puncture some vital artery, your head is unceremoniously dunked under the faucet, receiving a small bruise on the forehead (“Thunk, ow!”) on the way down.

The water temperature is adjusted according to the level and tone of your screams, as you are scrubbed and throttled with Castile Soap’s “Yes-More-Tears-You-Big-Baby” shampoo. The limp, defeated hair is then twirled and flattened with little crucifixes of bobby pins that are nailed abruptly into your scalp as you are pushed along like so many doll’s heads on a conveyor belt, to make way for the next victim. As I lay drying on a damp pillow through a prickly, sleepless night, I awoke to an unflattering result, the imprint of

an escaped bobby pin seared into my cheek like a scar, and no hope of redemption.

I realize now of course that a group lament for unnaturally curly, startled-bird hair is no match for one-on-one terror and force feeding. But as the oldest and tallest, she was assigned a kind of maternal position among the four of us and I guess was just expected to take it. I've seen parents who try and groom their oldest or male child by making them suffer in a man-up, you can take it, all lads together kind of way. The theory is this tough love will give them the mettle to lead when they are called upon for the investiture of power. On his deathbed, my father really only wanted to see Agnes - his first born - the namesake of his wife, the heir to his real estate kingdom. I never questioned this. As a small child my big sister was the golden-haired angel of my parent's world - I've seen the endless, studio quality photographs, but wasn't around to witness when the doting shifted, nurturing attention sloughed off to pool around whomever was the most demanding at the time.

It takes nothing to smash a piece of pottery. It takes a lot more to break a human. If you were to roll off the top of a piano and fall onto the floor below, you'd survive with minimum damage. With care and luck, a human can live well beyond the prescribed three score and ten before she gradually or immediately, returns to dust.

The breaking point for ceramics, however, is much sooner. With care and luck, my tall vase could go 1000 years, 2000 years. Why not? A low fired clay Venus figurine found almost intact in 1925 is estimated to be around 30,000 years old - 30,000!! The Venus Dolni Vestonice. She's little, with not skinny legs, but great big breasts - almost my sister's wished for figure. And we'd all wished for different figures at one time or another. Overhearing us, our dad, who'd lived through 2 world wars and the great depression, would say, "Be grateful you have legs!". One moment, you're having a decent childhood, winning field day races with those long legs. Then suddenly boys

come into the picture and they're all shorter than you and even though part of you likes that, you've learned your man is supposed to be taller. One afternoon, in the middle of middle school, we were changing out of our gym clothes in the lady's locker room and my best friend, Punky, announced, "I'm glad I'm short because I can dance with the tall boys and the short boys." Sadly, I knew she was right and my posture suffered as I developed creative ways to look smaller in group photos and perfected my blasé, crossed-arm slouch against the wall at school dances. Then 10 years later, Diane Keaton fell in love with the pocket-sized director of Annie Hall, and a whole world opened up to me. I went through a slew of short boyfriends. During my growth spurts, though, I was lucky to be cosseted behind a fortress of sisters. But who was there to shield the first born?

Aggie lives alone, 2000 miles away from us. Has geographical distance become the pro-



While waiting for Rada; Julia, Agnes, Anne, 1959

tective layer around her? When she comes to visit, she is a large presence, blurting out opinions, demanding more olives in her martini, and San Pellegrino to wash down her meds, turning pill-taking into a sparkling moment.

We resist strangling her because she maintains the fierce loyalty and admiration for us that was forged in those early years as our protector. She is outraged when we can't get the things, she thinks we so justly deserve, no matter how improbable; Julie and I could get rich and famous by going into show business with our slightly quavery but mostly on key voices and great white girl dance moves (we are in our seventies and eighties). My daughter's erotic play about lesbian werewolves in the underworld will end up on Broadway with just a little tweaking. We've been trained to look heavenward when she makes these pronouncements. Today, though, I think the cock-eyed optimist should be added to the endangered species list, along with the Giant Ibis or the Pygmy Owl, turning cynicism to possibility. Maybe that's what lasts for thousands of years, long after we all turn to dust.

As the interview winds down, I lean into the microphone and say in a slightly reprimanding voice, "Now, Terry, you cannot ask me which was my favorite sister - two of them are still alive and I already feel bad about singling out that tall vase. Imagine what my other pottery must be thinking!" Then I add, my tone conciliatory, "But fortunately, I don't think those vases listen to your show."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Fulper grew up on the Delaware Canal in Bucks County, PA, in a home dotted with ceramics from her grandfather's Flemington, NJ pottery. Fulper is included in the permanent collection of major U.S. museums, with one of the largest collections at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Having never known, their "Master Craftsman" grandfather, Anne and her sisters were thrilled to find six notebooks, hidden under the eaves in the attic of the family home, written in their grandfather's large, fluid scrawl. Here were the secret formulas for the glazes that made Fulper Pottery unique. As a way of connecting to a vanished past and because they knew the look of those glazes down to their bones, they turned those handwritten recipes into the Fulper Tile Company (1985-2000)

The collection of essays, *Shards*, is synthesized from her trifecta of personal experience:

- Writing and performing scathing satire in NYC with *The Sleazebuckets* and *Noh Radio*.
- Working with the chemistry of the glazes at *Fulper Tile*.
- A childhood growing up surrounded by vases, ewers, jugs, planters, lamps, powder boxes, perfume burners, bookends, candlesticks, flower frogs, ashtrays and crocks.

Now these pieces of pottery launch 15 memoir vignettes about a mid-20th century American family whose forbears owned a pottery in New Jersey. Anne takes the pot off the pedestal and tells the tale behind it. In addition to *Shards*, she writes creative non-fiction and, as all essays are written with an ear to performing aloud, most are accompanied by audio.

Follow her at <https://annefulper.com/>

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