



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2008

Article 11

---

1-1-2008

## Antique Porcelain

Evan M. Crowder

Gettysburg College, crowev01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2008

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Crowder, Evan M. (2015) "Antique Porcelain," *The Mercury*: Year 2008, Article 11.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2008/iss1/11>

This open access nonfiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Antique Porcelain

**Keywords**

creative writing, non-fiction

**Author Bio**

Evan Crowder is a Renaissance man; a self-unemployed storyteller, dreamer (until it died), laissez-faire pupil, perspiring writer, corrections officer of humanity and journeyman jackass of all trades, preferring to divide his time equally amongst his vices. A determined follower of feline polo, Evan has had great success on the back of Hodge, his prize Calico. When not competing, he enjoys cooking ethnic food, reading physically deformed 18th century authors and drinking gin while writing non-fiction stories.

## Antique Porcelain

The prisoners sat on railroad ties that enclosed the gravel parking lot with cigarettes in their mouths, clapping their hands. An unfired cherub head danced in Troy's white-washed hand that waited out of view behind his back. I whipped the bat around my self, the head hanging in the air, just in time to shatter it. I was heating up, or so Troy said, producing another head from the bucket.

My grandmother owned Terra Cotta Creations, a pottery factory, which employed thirty-two prisoners on work release from the Ozark Correctional Center in Forland, Missouri. For nine hours a day, the inmates would create cherubs, flower pots, nativity scenes, garden trinkets and table top fountains from molds filled with liquid clay. Each man had a specific task, from taking seams off of unfired figurines with vinegar, to dipping cherubs into a thin white wash, to installing water pumps in specifically cut holes. Relieved by the jovial attitude of the convicts, the monotony of the work was overbearing, particularly to a young boy.

I imagined her accosting him for touching me, telling him to keep his hands off of her white grandson.

My mother worked as a secretary in the factory's office, and each day after school, I would play there until each man handed me his time card to punch at six. The prisoners liked having me around. Many of them had children that they could only see for an hour a week, which gave me thirty-two self-sworn godfathers. During their cigarette breaks, we would go to the scrap heap where all of the unfired broken figures were thrown. Convicted criminals became first-graders with me as we threw cherub heads against cinder-block walls for fifteen minutes.

One of these inmates was Troy. He dipped figures in a thin paint, which would force the clay to take on the look of porcelain. He had a wide Afro, anchored with a sweatband, which topped a pencil thin moustache that curved out of the way of his glistening teeth when he smiled. His right hand was antique porcelain, his left was weathered and firm. As he dipped his bare hand into the paint, Troy would tell me stories, like the one about Fudgey. They were mostly about the other prisoners.

Fudgey had robbed a candy shop, or so Troy told me. I am sure he was hesitant to explain the concept of jailhouse homosexuality to the grandson of their boss, so, at the age of six, I was under the impression that the maternal black man who packed boxes in the front of the factory had mistakenly burglarized a sweet shop after having fallen on hard times.

"Chief over there, he once killed a man for a steak dinner," he said, pointing the white hand across the factory at the tall, olive-skinned man who painted fountains.

"Really?"

"Sure, I mean I guess so. That's what I heard him say."

"Wow."

"Yeah, it's somethin' else." I asked Troy dozens of times what he was in prison for. He never told me.

"Don't play with the darkies," Grandma said. Anita was an imposing woman. She stood nearly six feet tall; her chin dotted with scraggly black hairs sat atop a frame more powerful than many of her employees.

"With who?"

"The darkies. You can play with the other ones, just not the darkies."

"Why not?"

"Because they might try to trick you."

"But how? They're nice."

"They just will."

I had never before thought of any of the prisoners as being different because of what color their skin was. Anita, like my grandfather Bill, grew up in the Ozarks during the Depression. Not only were they poor, they were tempered in the unique kiln that only the collision of southern racism and bible-belt ideals could provide. This does nothing to excuse them, but now, it provides me with an explanation. I had known them to be racist, but never had Anita tried to keep me away from someone unlike her. (Bill, on the other hand, was more overt. I remember a time when a salesman in a shoe store refused to bargain with Bill, despite his claim that he wasn't black, but other customers could be.)

I was too young at the age of six to really doubt or oppose the ideals of our family figurehead. At the time, she was the woman who arrived unexpectedly on summer nights to take me to the ice cream stand. Her only grandchild, I was spoiled accordingly. An even greater love than my ignorant endorsement of her ignorance was her love for me. I was, as she said, life's greatest gift.

I never stayed away from anyone in the factory. I was more careful when Anita could see me, but I still gave coloring book pages from school to Fudgey, I still heard Troy's stories and still smashed cherub heads during smoke breaks.

Anita bought a German Shepherd to leave at the factory after someone pried the back door open one night and stole a shelf full of statues. She named the dog Terra Cotta, and called it T.C. (She was not particularly creative with pet names; she had a dog named Scummy, one named Muffin, and one named simply Pug, after its breed.) T.C. was a mutt; the blended colors of his fur and shape resembled a Labrador more than his Shepherd face and erect ears would reveal. During the day, T.C. was tied to the leg of a tractor-trailer, filled with clay, next to the rusted dumpster and the truck ramp outside of the factory.

I played in the truck ramp in the spring when it filled with water. The frog eggs that were laid there would turn into tadpoles that I could catch in plastic cups. With each new day there would be more tadpoles; when they became the tiny frogs that would hop up the ramp, I would catch dozens of them, putting them into a small aquarium I kept for this purpose. T.C. would wait at the edge of the ramp, barking, waiting for me to come back up. He was a loving dog, and habitually jumped up on me so he could lick my face.

One afternoon, after collecting tadpoles, I brought a handful of milk bones out to the trailer where T.C. was tied. I gave him the treats, and as he grew

ever more excited, he ran around me in circles, entangling my feet in his chain. I had bent down to unwrap my ankles from the chain when T.C jumped on me from behind.

I fell to the gravel, and felt the chain wrap around my neck from behind. T.C quickly came around to lick my face and I started to choke, his chain growing tighter around my neck. I tried to call for help, but my voice was a faint version of what it once was. I gasped for air while the clouds stood still above me. I set my hands to the galvanized chain—I was not as strong as the dog that was unknowingly killing me. T.C started to bark and as I started to feel weaker, I could hardly make any noise. I fell onto my back, the world growing ever dimmer. I could feel the push of the gravel parking lot against my back and the saliva on my face. The dog's face swirled in my ever-darkening vision; the sharp sound of his warm tongue slapping against my cheek rang in my ears while energy seeped from my body into the earth.

I started to black out. I could faintly see the corrugated metal door at one end of the truck ramp fly upwards and five black prisoners, one of them Troy, rushing out.

"Jesus Christ, the boss lady's grandson!" I could feel hands beneath the chain, the gentle strength lifting the links from my throat. Air crashed into my lungs while I lay in Troy's arms, a sea of hands patting me on the back. He carried me to the office, where my mother and Anita tended to my tear-streaked, swollen face.

Anita went into the factory to find out who had saved me earlier in the afternoon. I sat in her office, watching her through the large glass windows as she marched through the factory. I saw her disappear out of sight as she walked deeper into the metal building, toward the scraping department, which sat at the end of the truck ramp. She walked with Bob Morland, one of her friends, who served as the factory's head security guard. He followed her because in the scraping department, men used sharp metal tools to file away seams imparted by the mold.

When she came back into view, Bob had his arm around her. I had stopped crying and was able to see her clearly as she stopped in front of Troy's station. I could see her lips moving as Troy put down a wet cherub. I could not hear what she was saying, but I imagined. I imagined her accosting him for touching me, telling him to keep his hands off of her white grandson. The tableau paused, and Troy stood up.

I saw his antique hand and his own hand extend outwards, around Anita. She stood in his embrace for only a brief moment before he released her, returning to his work. Anita said nothing and walked away.

The next day, she bought them all pizza. She sat at a card table in the break room in the factory, sharing food with the five. In that brief moment, I thought Anita would be different. Matching ivory tooth with ivory tooth, Anita acted like herself among people unlike herself; something I can never remember seeing again.

As I stood next to the time clock that night, all of the prisoners had something to say as they handed me their card. Many of them told me how brave I was, others how strong. Chief merely nodded and winked.

Troy had his yellow time card in his porcelain hand at the end of the line.

"You're finally grown up now," he told me.

"I'm still only in first grade."

"I know, that doesn't mean you're not grown up."

"I'm trying."

Troy laughed at me. "I bet you are."

I punched his card, and he put it back in his slot. Turning to leave, Troy draped his jacket over his thin, prison issue t-shirt. "You always want to know why I'm in. You're grown now, so I guess I can tell you."

"Really?" A torrent of excitement poured through my body as Troy smiled back at me.

"Sure. I tried to rob a gas station, but the cops showed up before I could get away. I got seven years; worst mistake of my life. You know why?"

"No."

"My little girl will be ten when I get out of here."

"That's not too old, you're probably forty-five Troy. You're old."

Spreading his lips wide, he let out a small giggle. "Yeah, I am. But I hate knowing something could happen to her like what happened to you, and I wouldn't be able to do a thing about it."