

## **Vessels**

*By Abigail Byrd*

I stand in the bathroom and glare at myself in the mirror, trying to wrap my mind around the horror before me. The single, yellowing lightbulb over the chipped sink is flickering with a cicada-like hum. I should have changed that bulb weeks ago, but oh well. I'm not sure that I would want to see myself in strong lighting anyway. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure I want to see myself ever again. I can't bring myself to look in my own eyes as I continue to lie to myself about what's just happened. I just keep glancing over my face, cringing at the deep purple bruise that's circling my right eye—a blossoming impression where he swung at me. It's throbbing, shooting dull pain into my head.

I probably deserve this, at the very least, considering what I did to him.

My clothes are stiff and dark with half-frozen blood. I peel the layers off and decode like the rings of an oak tree— one speckled, battered jacket; one slinky, gray sweater; one plain black tank top; and, finally, one nude, blood-soaked bra. I can't believe I spent forty bucks on a new bra, just to impress him. I could have worn a burlap sack and “impressed” that fucker. There's a rusty brown stain that covers my stomach, my arms, my pants. I unbutton them with stiff, scabbing fingers and slide them off, turning a little here and there, observing myself in the mirror. My skin looks foreign to me— an abstract watercolor painting, filled with pale, rusty blood; black, violet bruises; brown, harsh scraps down my sides. I look like I've been hit by a truck. I take hold of the peeling vinyl counter and gag, my head spinning.

I take a few breaths— wet, raspy little coughs— and grip the counter tighter, forcing myself to look into my own eyes. Brown, scared, wide— like a deer just before it's shot. My face is still masked in blood. It sticks to my eyebrows and clumps my black hair together, cakes and clots on

my cheeks like a cheap blush. My stomach clenches violently and I comb my fingers through my hair slowly, trying not to remember the look on his face.

Hot steam rolls off of the surface of the bathtub, mingling with the scent of St. Ives and metal pipes. I wriggle out of my underwear with near-surgical precision, avoiding the raw scratches that line my waist. I didn't know that humans could be so animal— all biting and scratching—but I guess anything is possible when your life is on the line.

The water is so hot that my toes burn and turn red the moment they break the surface. I ignore it and grip the edges of the tub, easing myself into the milky water. My hands are shaking so much that I almost crash in, but I manage to let myself sink in, drifting down, down, down until the water is barely centimeters below my nose. The blood mixes with the soapy water, swirling and spinning out in florets of gore. I dip my head back and soak my hair, scraping my fingers through the stiffened blood until it turns slimy and sticks to my fingers. I don't want to stay above the water.

I'm half-drowning in a tub of strawberry milk, but it reeks like rust and clovers.

I close my eyes, and all I can see is *him*. My chest feels tight; I can barely breathe as fear drips through me again. The date had been going so well, too. I remember how I thought he was charming when we met in Physics. We'd always catch each other's eyes across the room, and for weeks I'd tell myself that it was nothing more than a coincidence. I'd tell myself that he was just being polite when he smiled that smooth, crooked grin. Then he'd find me after class, smiling all over again. He'd ask me if I wanted to get coffee with him. "Not like usual coffee," he'd say. "I know a great place." His "great place" was a 1960's dive bar that served "the best cheese fries this side of the Rockies." They stayed open late for all of the suffering college students with a thirty-page thesis to finish. He did everything right. Picked me up at eight o'clock on the dot, opened the

door for me— ordered a beer, then another, then another as the night went on. I didn't think anything of it; he was built like a linebacker, and even my brother— wiry and thin as he is— can drink a six-pack on his own. I ordered a glass of chardonnay. Something about the way the dark fluid made the bottle glint in the low lighting made it look seductive and smooth. We sat and talked until time started to lose its grip on us. We could have been there for days and I wouldn't have cared.

He picked up the tab, tipped the barista/bartender, and then told me he had one more place he wanted to take me. I asked him where. He just winked and said it was someplace special. When we left the coffeehouse, the wind blowing in off of the coast was damp and chilly— October was steadily chipping away at the last of September's waning warmth. He draped his jacket over my shoulders, surrounding me in the overwhelming scent of cloves and vanilla. We walked down the sidewalk, following the slope of the earth as it dipped into downtown. He surprised me when he turned away from the main streets, towards the coast until the ocean came into sight, reflecting the city lights back in a soft, twinkling glow. We walked closer to the water until we reached a marina. Dozens of boats bobbed gently up and down, dinghies and yachts and fishers alike, all tied to long wooden piers.

He leaned against the railing, looking cool and handsome as the wind swept up his hair and he grinned at me with that crooked, white slash of a mouth.

“Aren't you gonna come closer?” he said and nodded backward, towards the bay. It was so quiet, I noticed. The sounds of the city had faded into the background, overrun by the gentle lapping of waves, the soft dinging of a buoy, and the occasional din of a ship tapping against the docks. I stepped closer, feeling my stomach twist up at the sight. It was so dark and cold, damp air

blowing in off the bay, spraying salt into the air. I breathed in deeply through my nose, letting the briny wind fill my lungs.

He ducked down and hung on the other side of the railing, a thin concrete sidewalk just a few feet below. “You wanna see something cool?” he asked and wriggled his eyebrows. Waiting for me to answer, he jumped off of the railing, landing on the sidewalk. “C’mon, it’s down here.”

I slid between the slick metal rails, landing on the sidewalk with a small crunch beneath my sneakers. He stayed a few steps ahead of me, grinning from ear to ear, beaconing me forward. The sidewalk slanted down, further and further until it was just a few feet above the surface of the water. He pointed down one of the docks. There, standing on a platform ten feet above the water stood a tiny shell of a shack. The windows were dark; the thick, wooden sides boasted more dark grime than I’d ever seen; the shabby tin room looked like it had been battered with a gold club. Yet there was something strangely enchanting about it.

“It used to be a guard shack, back when they first built the docks,” he said, shoving his hands into his pockets. He dropped his voice low. “Until a bloody murder took place one dark and stormy night. It’s abandoned now.” I felt my feet dragging me closer. I wanted to look inside. Up close, I could smell the fragrant mildew and something potently sour. “Some people say it’s haunted,” he teased. I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t help but smile. I kept staring in through the window, letting my hand sit on the icy, dirt-covered glass. He reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear gently. I felt something twitch inside of me like something warm was beginning to melt beneath my skin. Then he kissed me on the cheek. I opened my mouth— not sure what I was going to say, just surprised, I think— and suddenly he was much closer, trapping me between the house and his chest.

He kissed me on the mouth, pressing me against the wall. He kissed me hard, my head stuck between him and the sharp, splintering wood of the guardhouse. I tried to turn away from him but the wood grated into my scalp as I pressed farther and farther back. His hands were on my waist, gliding down and around my back and when I tried to grab him— when I tried to shove him off— he grabbed my arms, holding my wrists down. He pressed his chest against my chest, so close I could feel his heart beating just inside of his ribs.

My mind tingled. He just kept kissing me— huge, wet, sloppy kisses— all over my mouth and cheeks and neck. His grip loosened on my wrists.

I slapped him. My palm stung from the blow. I didn't know I could hit that hard. My whole body felt hot and shaky. His cheeks burned red, chest rising and falling heavily. Then he grabbed my arm and shoved me down. I hit the ground, feeling splinters jar into my palms. A whimper rose in my throat, but as it touched my lips it transformed and slinked back into my gut, transforming into a low, guttural snarl. I stumbled to my feet and he took me by the shoulders, pressing me up against the wall again.

My skin felt like it was on fire, so sharp and hot that I couldn't breathe. I felt like there was battery acid in my veins. He tore my jacket off of my shoulder, dragging kisses from my ear down my collar, gripping the hem of my sweater. I bit down hard on his hand and when he flinched back, I freed my other hand, bringing it forward faster than I thought I ever could. I grabbed his shirt and shoved him so hard he had to throw his arms out to keep from toppling over. The metallic taste of his blood filled my mouth. "That's enough," I growled. It didn't sound like my voice.

He looked at his hand and took half a step back, his eyes clearing up a little. Someone as small as me shouldn't have been able to throw him back like that. He must have seen the confusion in my eyes and decided he was still in control, and, in an instant, his face transformed in rage. He

took two fast, clumsy strides towards me. I grabbed him first, though, my body on autopilot. My fists curled against the front of his shirt and I shoved him against the wall, so hard that I heard something crack. Deep in my gut, I hoped that it was his skull.

I opened my mouth—to shout at him, I thought— and instead, a low, inhuman clicking rolled out of my throat, somewhere between a growl and a shriek. His eyes widened and that's when he really started fighting, swinging his fist, battering my back. He landed one clean punch in my right eye. I gritted my teeth and dropped him.

He slouched against the wall like the bag of horseshit that he was. He was shaking all over.

I try not to think about it as I hold my breath and sink under the surface of the bathwater, letting the flickering glow of the bathroom light permeate my eyelids so I'm surrounded in a swirling orange-pink. It's such a familiar sensation. If I try hard enough to forget where I am, I might think I'm seven again, closing my eyes against the sun as my brother and I hike into the woods. Maybe I'll be fourteen, shielding my eyes against a flashlight as he sneaks into my room late at night. Anything, anywhere, anytime but here.

The water closes in over my face and tickles my nostrils. My blood is still rushing in my ears, still pumping in my veins, illuminating my skin and carrying hot, red life all around me. One palm to another, toe to scalp, I can feel my heart beat, beat, beating. I'm still here, I think. Still breathing.

I'm trying not to think. Trying not to think at all, but it's all I can do, and with my eyes shut tight and the orange-pink light coming through my eyelids, all I can see is his face. I can still feel the cold, damp grit of the brick sidewalk beneath my fingertips as I stumbled onto all fours, scrambling away from him. I straightened up, leering at him, feeling something painful and fiery under my skin. He looked down at his hands. They were bleeding— broken glass littered the pier

and tiny, colorful shards stuck out of his palms like kaleidoscope knives, dripping blood down to the ends of his fingers. He stayed low, but I could hear his breathing deepen from the pain. The smell of copper pennies filled my nose. I felt like I'd swallowed acid. I saw him there but I felt nothing as the scorching feeling burned beneath my skin, but suddenly— like a bullet through my skull, filling my mind like poison— I think, no, *I know. I'm going to rip his tongue out.*

It hits me like heroine, makes me almost giddy. Intoxicated. It was all I could think, pounding against my brain like a hammer, that disgusting, languid tongue in his head. It needed to come out. I felt like my mind was no longer mine— I could feel myself, the voice in the back of my head, distant and violent. It screamed at me to act rational, but my body was no longer my own. Something about it felt nauseating and raw, but another part— one I didn't want to think about— licked her lips and said, *this is right.*

I took one step towards him.

I open my eyes and the bloody soap gives a dull sting, nothing compared to the rest of the night. Underwater, everything is stunted pink. My shoulders are scratched and bruised where he shoved me against the wall and beat against me as I held him down. The water bites into my skin and I count the seconds I've been holding my breath. Thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three... I sit up and take a deep breath, closing my eyes again. I curl my knees up to my chest, fighting back the moan that's rising in my throat. If Solomon hears, he'll come running. Eyes closed, I'm attacked by the memory of what my mother told me years ago, screaming her head off as two men in calm-toned, blue coats stuck a needle in her arm and drove her away.

She's not safe.

Kisa, Kisa, Kisa.... She's not—

I lean forward, curling over my knees, feeling the damp scabs on my back peel open with an exhilarating sting. I grab my feet and shake off the memory of the woman who called herself my mother for eight short years. *Kisa*. That's not my name. She was so far gone; she didn't even know who I was, screaming in her soaked Stepford dress, *Kisa, Kisa, Kisa...*

A chill runs down my spine, despite the steaming water. My skin is burning pink, but I pick up a bristly brush and start scrubbing. The prickling sting keeps me present, keeps me here in the bathroom, safe in my house, far away from the night that keeps threatening to leak through the walls. So I keep scrubbing, but my back is becoming stiff and I can't get too close to the scratches on my arms. Flecks of ruby-red remained sprinkled through the water, and I swing my hand through them, watching them swivel and twist to chase me. It's everywhere; stuck beneath my fingernails, slick beneath my eyes, a thin slime of it covering me all over.

My stomach growls and my eyes widen. Something cold overwhelms me— something in my gut. My heart beats a little faster, and the thought comes from nowhere. Another overwhelming urge that spits me out of my body like somebody else has taken control. Pressing my fingers to my mouth, I can taste the iron seep between the cracks in my lips and spread over my tongue. The chill turns into a hot shiver that runs down my back, all the way through my toes, and I close my eyes, trying to ignore it. *This is blood*, I think. *Not wine, blood.*

I want to gag. I feel tears burning just behind my eyes. Instead, I clench my eyes shut and suckle on the blood clotted under each nail. I almost forget the way I smiled when I shoved him against the brick sidewalk, the way his skin shredded against the pavement, cracked and stuck with gravel and garbage. I bite down on my fingers so hard that I draw my own blood.

I realize what I'm doing and almost scream. Scrubbing my hands so hard I think they're going to bleed even more, I feel myself snap back into my body. All of this fading in and out is exhausting me.

I grabbed him by the arm and slammed him against the ground. He was so much bigger than me. Admittedly, that's not saying much, considering that I practically disappear from sight if you angle me the right way. I shouldn't have been able to throw him around like that. A few moments before, I had barely been able to shove him away. I gripped the front of his shirt and picked him up, his legs dragging limply, only to throw him again like a bag of feathers. He rolled head over heels, down the dock, skidding on his back. We were in the shadow of the boats, and the streetlights couldn't reach us, but I could still see him in the glow of light glinting off of the water like fire. He scrambled to get away from me, but there was nowhere for him to go. Between me and the icy, black water, only one was certain to kill him. It wasn't the water.

I strode closer and planted my foot on his leg, so hard I can hear it snap. He screamed, finally, his breathing deepening. I could see him clearly, so close I could practically smell him. He held his leg, wailing, but it was just us and the water now. I bent down and grabbed his ankle, jerking him towards me so fast his head smacked against the dock.

I felt a cruel smile curl across my lips like poison ivy growing up my cheeks. I sidled him like the gymnastics beam that my grandmother made me climb every Saturday when I was young, with easy balance and smooth, gliding motions. I could feel his chest rising and falling beneath my pelvis. His wails dissolved into whimpers and he clenched his eyes shut, twisting his head away from me when I reached for his jaw—the same way that he did when he was kissing me. I gripped his jaw and jerked his face towards me. His eyes were full of tears. I traced their path with my fingers and leaned down to kiss him softly—he really had been such a nice young man. I felt

strangely lucid for a moment, and I grasped at straws, trying to remember why I was doing this. My body seemed to know, though, and I sank back into that hazy place, distant from my own body. I felt as if I were watching from a distance as I leaned away from the kiss and stuck my hand into his slack-jawed, open mouth, so fast that he choked. I dug my nails in and pulled. It was surprisingly easy.

His tongue in my hand, he choked and coughed, spraying blood all over my shirt. It wasn't quite what I wanted. He craned his head forward, trying to escape drowning in his own blood, but I placed my hand on his forehead and shoved backward with strength I didn't know I had. He twitched violently beneath me. He met my eyes, coughing— making this wet, popping gurgle—and I held him there until his eyes drifted forward and he looked up at the stars, eyes glazed over. He went slack beneath me as the last of the bloody bubbles popped in his throat. I dropped the tongue, still rabid, still seeking.

I gripped the collar of his shirt and jerked it open, popping the buttons off one by one, ripping his undershirt seam to seam until there was just his bare chest. Looking down at him, I could see that it probably wouldn't have worked out between us. There was a tiny spot of dark, tangled hair right in the middle of his chest. I hate hairy chests. Purple bruises were already blossoming under his skin, so many that there was a whole garden of broken bones just under the surface. I slid my hands down his chest, stopping on his stomach. He was still so warm. Somehow, his heart was still beating. Barely, just a vague, irregular flutter, but it was there, waning.

I dug my nails into the soft spot in his chest— right below his sternum— and pried the skin apart, like unwrapping a birthday present. I felt nothing but a thrill as his head rolled limply to the side, blood and spittle spilling out of the corner of his mouth. He was so warm, so warm, so warm... I shoved my arm deeper, blood gushing out of the wound. I felt it wash over my arms,

just as warm and thick as his jacket. His jacket. I had thought he was being sweet when he gave it to me. I hadn't realized he was keeping me close, claiming me.

I knitted my fingers together and reached in, feeling his ribcage crackle like tissue paper as I pried him open, wider and wider, breaking everything in my path. Then I saw it— exactly what I wanted. The heart— still and wet, no longer pumping blood through his busted veins.

I ran my fingers through his hair, all the way to the crook of his broken neck, and pulled his head forward, kissing him. A thank-you kiss.

I kissed him long and hard until I wasn't kissing him anymore, I was biting, and I bit down so hard that I felt the skin of his lips split and peel all the way down to his chin like a hangnail. It was like chewing gum. I kissed his naked teeth and took a bite out of his upper lip, gnawing on the grit of stubble and closing my eyes. I let the meat sit on my tongue. Somehow, with his teeth exposed like bloodstained bathroom tiles, his smile was even more charming. I leaned away and let my hands glide from the corners of his closed eyes, down his cheeks, over his sharp collarbones and back into the raw, ungodly maw of his open chest.

My hand fit around his heart the way I always imagined it would fit around the hand of someone I loved. My fingers, still raw from the brick, slid around it and found it surprisingly hot. I squeezed my fist and pulled, the arteries making wet, low popping noises as I pulled at them. It was surprisingly large— big enough to be cupped in both hands. I held it tightly, the way a child holds a glass cup, careful not to drop it. Blood spiraled down my wrists.

The far-away voice began to yell again, but I ignored her, sinking deeper into the haze. I brought the heart to my mouth and bit. It dripped down my chin like watermelon juice. I couldn't describe the taste if I tried— something strange and new and slick. It tingled my tongue like candy, tasted meaty, but unlike any other meat I'd ever had.

I ate the whole thing. My stomach felt warm and full, and I stood up, letting my arms fall to my sides. I took three long strides away from his body, slow heavy steps, letting the full, tired feeling wrap me up. There was blood all along the dock. I took one, two, three deep breaths and turned back to the body. He really wasn't as impressive as I had thought. I hooked my shoe under his back and roll him into the water. He sunk like he was made of lead, rolling in the water to give me one last, skinless smile before he sank out of sight.

The water was as black and glistening as tar, lapping quietly against the sides of the ships. I felt the urge to jump in, to dive to the bottom of the bay and curl up in the sand, undisturbed. Alone. Quiet. Everything was stunningly, startlingly quiet.

I gag again, sitting up in the tub and leaning over the edge to retch. Nothing comes up. I place my feet on edge of the tub and grip the edges, letting bloody water drip onto the floor. It glints and glides off of the glossy, erratic patches of gray scales that have cropped up all over my limbs. I don't know what's happening.

I feel like if I stay in this tub any longer I might lose my mind all over again. The bathwater is less pink, more of a burnt cherry, and it's long since grown lukewarm. I shiver and rinse off with the showerhead, throw a towel around my massacred body, and try to ignore the tinted, sticky bottom of the tub as something brushes past my foot. My stomach moans again.