

Laura Bernstein-Machlay

## Vessels

*Big Ones, Little Ones*

Because they hold stuff. Because sometimes they travel with stuff in their innards. What's not to celebrate? The unfortunate crewman in *Alien* made a fine vessel. A vessel riding inside a vessel, which is even better. Pots and vases, buildings and cities—Detroit is a leaky vessel, but a vessel all the same. Boulders are vessels containing the statues within. Clay, too, is a vessel. Waffles are vessels for syrup. There's tchotchke boxes—displayed in houses owned by very old women of every nation. Containing silver thimbles and children's spoons, ceramic cats at play, a single Eiffel Tower or Statue of Liberty salt shaker (her mate smashed to shards sometime in the long past), and so on. All worthy of framing and containing. As a child, I harangued my mother into buying me an old typesetter's box and filled it with smooth pebbles and lake glass, with shells and buttons. Because like old women, little girls adore little containers filled with little things. Dolls hiding in dolls hiding in dolls 'til the smallest—red pinprick for her mouth—wobbles like a beetle in Daughter-Celia's palm.

*Earth Arms*

Friend-Clara would argue that wine glasses make flawless vessels, so one autumn night when we were both 19, she brought me to the backyard of her Hamtramck flat and served me Jagermeister in the biggest Bordeaux glass I'd ever seen. And because Jagermeister raises ghosts in your peripheral vision, because it makes dust motes in the air burn like fireflies and comets drop like crows from the sky, we ended the night with Sisters of Mercy spinning on her turntable, droning out the back window, while Clara danced on the grass to *Alice*—that 80s kind of arm-over-arm dancing—all around me, and I flailed in the cool earth which held me in its arms like a puppy. So when I woke in Clara's bed sometime the next day, dirt was tattooed like stars onto my cheeks and forehead.

*Letter*

In college, I landed a class with LK as my teacher. LK, writer of sonnets, rumored to sleep with students. LK who bothered to correct my pronunciation of *patronizing*, who towered over me, a giant to my troll.

As per the syllabus, I wrote a quick note containing my hopes for the course—simple things really, to please and be pleasing—which I folded neatly into an envelope and left in his mailbox—

which makes me think about letter writing of all sorts, those word-ves-sels zinging through time and space. And who doesn't love receiving letters?

LK, apparently, since he returned it, in a private meeting in his office. *Tactless*, he said of my note. *What were you thinking?* He passed it to me, folded between two fingers like it was too much trouble to grip in his whole hand. *Reread it. You'll see your mistake*, he said. And while I huddled there snuffing in my uncomfortable chair, he leaned back, rolled his shoulders in satisfaction. *I realize I'm being hard on you, but I think you're the appropriate vessel for what I have to give you.*

And I guess he was right, because I'm still carrying it, what he had to give me, like a snail does its shell—along with a thousand other little shames I've collected over decades. Never mind I burned the letter, un-re-read, over the stove in my rented flat, singing my pointer finger—the blaming one—in the process. Never mind I dropped the course, that I refused to meet LK's eyes when we passed in the hallways, not even when he turned in my direction and grinned with all his teeth.

### *Everything That Matters*

I'm away for the weekend and Husband-Steven calls to say goodnight. Because I need to tell him everything that matters in order to make it real, I say, *I've finally decided to write about vessels.* And he laughs like a freight train, so Daughter-Celia in the background wants to know the joke. *I thought everything you write is about vessels*, he says.

### *Purses*

Currently my favorite vessels. When I have time, I like to go to the Coach store in the upscale mall near my mother's house and pet them for awhile, until the saleswomen start towards me with frowns riding their whole skins. What can I tell them? I like the leather, how it warms beneath my palms. I like purses with lots of pockets and I like to imagine filling them, the wallet here, cell phone there, lip gloss in that one, whatever book I'm currently reading tucked snug in this other. Everything I need to survive a broke-down car on the side of the highway, tow truck taking its good, sweet time. Rush hour traffic passing blithely, tired drivers aimed for home, for their families who love them, to their dogs who love them, or maybe just to silence which can be alright too. Note that purses are best

new, before they get cluttered with receipts and used Kleenex and butter-scotch wrappers. When they're half empty, waiting for what will come.

### *Doll*

The one Aunt Carol gave me, during her only visit from New York—before she moved on to France. The nesting doll painted garish with gypsy skirts and scarves, black hair like a storm cloud to her waist. How I held the doll's head so carefully in one hand, bottom half in the other. I pulled and twisted at the same time, and the two parts separated with a little squeak to reveal the new doll lurking underneath—identical twin, only smaller. Then the next doll, and the next. Secrets inside secrets. On that day in my father's apartment—back when I still saw him, when he still lived in Detroit—Carol gave me other tchotchkes as well, a little donkey whose head was attached by a string through the hollow neck so it swung side to side, pair of ivory dice, a single army soldier, gun in hand, which I put on my tongue to taste the metal tang, until my father noticed and shouted at me to stop.

### *Oven*

Here's how I remember Aunt Carol: soft girl's voice and pale hair, a neck like Audrey Hepburn's—just a tad too long—curving like a sapling. A few trinkets long disappeared. A doll holding other dolls, which I carried with me into adulthood.

One more time I spoke with her, when I traveled after college with my dramatic, shattered heart for company. Hopelessly lost in Brittany, I wanted to come to Paris, to crash on her floor and cry for a while, but she said no, so I let it go. A couple years later she stuck her head in the gas oven of her flat and breathed deep. Because of a man, they said, the ones who told me. A boy, really, who stopped loving her—*And at her age, too! She should have known better.* Because of being alone, because her perfect face was softening, and whenever she looked in the mirror she couldn't meet her own eyes. Because of these and all the reasons that women in little flats far from home want to disappear.

### *Lost*

When Daughter-Celia turned five, she brought the tiniest of Aunt Carol's nesting dolls—the one smaller than a ladybug—to kindergarten in a little mesh basket that snapped closed and hung from a chain at her neck. Something precious to care for, to ease her homesickness. Which she promptly lost. So I stalked that school room to room, searching for

the impossible, and ended the day sobbing on the shoulder of the hapless librarian, the one who'd been at her post for 50 years and kept a tchotchke box on her desk for the children to admire. Who patted my back like she would a dog and tried not to look at the clock. From then on I sent Celia to school with a kiss in her palm, folding her fingers one at a time over that kiss to lock it in place. *Until it sets*, I told her. *Like nail polish, only better. So it will last forever.*

### *She*

The starship Enterprise was a “She” to Jim Kirk who loved her, and in return she tenderly conveyed him conquest to conquest, from one blue bikini-space-bimbo to the next. When I mention this to Husband-Steven on the phone, he reminds me that the bimbos, too, were appropriate vessels for what Kirk had to give them. I tell Steven I’m not so sure, that I fear this writing devolving into that tired trope, woman’s body as vessel. Vessel for the male organ—*Call a dick a dick*, says Steven. Vessel for sperm, for babies—those little aliens poised to punch through and conquer the world. Vessels for patriarchal wisdom and expectations of all sorts, the promises and deceptions and shames we willingly slurp through the skin and make our own.

But, *I don't know*, I say. *Now it's gone all preachy. All male authority or female internality, or whatnot. Nobody wants to go there.* But Steven has long since hung up, so I conjure his evil shadow who appears before me in a puddle of red light, hooks his shadow-thumbs in his belt loops. *Here's the thing*, says Evil Shadow-Steven. *Men stick out. Women suck in. That's your basic truth, Babe. What the world is built on.*

*That's ridiculously Victorian*, I start to say when he cuts me off.

*Kirk's got his phaser. He can set it to stun or kill. The Enterprise has a viewing deck for everyone's comfort and convenience.*

*The Enterprise has torpedoes*, I'm quick to point out.

Shadow-Steven shrugs. *A technicality. Man's the monolith, woman's the cave.* He juts his hips a couple of times, scratches the braids in his new-grown beard. *Make it work for you.*

### *Squishies*

At age six, Daughter-Celia fell passionately in love with Squishies, those teensy, pliable plastic animals, those gumball machine favors coming each in its own vessel-egg. She collected a hundred, a thousand, their little bodies forever clogging our sinks and the vacuum. She constructed elaborate dwellings to contain them—my favorite, Squishy Hogwarts, which

survived nearly a year on her shelves while displaced books and tchotchkes toppled crazily in every corner of her room. How one day she returned from a playdate clutching a super-sized Squishy, a panda, I think, and with nail scissors, snipped it open between its back legs.

*Look*, says Celia to Steven and me, and holds up the panda. She squeezes it in her crab-apple fist and what should emerge but five little Squishies, lions and tigers and bear cubs and whatnot, red and purple and green, dandelion yellow, pink as bubblegum. Five bloodless births from this newly hollow vessel.

*Look*, says Daughter-Celia again. *Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it so very beautiful?*

**LAURA BERNSTEIN-MACHLAY** is an instructor of literature and creative writing at The College for Creative Studies in Detroit, MI where she lives. Her poems and creative nonfiction have appeared in many journals including *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The New Madrid*, *Concho River Review*, *Oyez*, *Redivider*, *Soundings East*, *Upstreet*, etc.