

# Vessels

Contributed by Daniel Raeburn

Irene Raeburn: born December 28, 2004; died December 24, 2004

On our third date, Rebekah gave me one of her bowls. We sat at my kitchen table, her bowl between us, while she told me how she'd made it. She explained that a potter needs to throw the same pot over and over until the shape of the vessel becomes second nature, until she can form it so fluently that even her slipups grow spontaneous and confident. I turned Rebekah's bowl in my hands as she pointed out the accidents that had occurred during its creation. On the wheel, the lip of the pot had relaxed from a strict circle to a more comfortable roundness. Inside the kiln, the iron glaze on a neighboring pot had vaporized, ghosting its ruddy afterimage like a blush across the bowl's glossy cheek. These imperfections were what Rebekah cherished. Mistakes made the clay human.

Rebekah had innumerable freckles, small, weathered hands, and dirty overalls. A year or so later, at that same kitchen table, I asked her to marry me. She said yes, and in no time she was pregnant. After a few months, just as she was growing heavy, our baby died. We never found out why. Miscarriages are usually for the best - that's what everyone said, and that's what we said, too.

In the spring of 2004, five months after the miscarriage, Rebekah was pregnant again. One hot summer morning, there was pain, blood, and a grim drive beside a blue Lake Michigan to the emergency room, but this time our baby persevered. At twenty weeks, an ultrasound revealed that our survivor was a girl and in good health. As proof, the technicians gave us a black-and-white image of her suspended in limbo. She looked like an alien glimpsed through a telescope, a white dwarf forming in a distant galaxy.

Her name came to me in the night as I was falling asleep, her hands and feet drumming against Rebekah's belly and my palms. Good night, Irene, I thought, I'll see you in my dreams. I didn't know anything about this song other than the chorus, which haunted me just as a song is intended to. Irene Raeburn: Rebekah liked the sound of it, and so the name stuck. I did see Irene in my dreams. She appeared as she had in the ultrasound, a cloud growing in the warm, humid air beneath our blankets.

After a Christmas party, when she was more than eight months along, Rebekah had to sit down. She felt dizzy and queasy, but she took a startled pleasure in caressing her visibly thrumming belly.

"Irene's kicking like crazy," she said. "She's never kicked this hard. Never."

"Any day now," I said, "any day." I wound my scarf around my neck and shrugged into my coat, offered Rebekah my hand.

Three days later, Rebekah called me at home from our midwife's office. I raised the phone to my ear, heard a silence that I sensed was Rebekah's, and felt anguish tremble like electricity. I knew immediately that Irene was dead. When Rebekah at last uttered my name, the crack in her voice confirmed it.

A quiet African man piloted me in his yellow taxi toward our midwife's office. His radio emitted news of a tsunami that had

just struck Asia, India, then Africa, killing so many thousands that the authorities would never be able to count all the dead. Lake Shore Drive slipped past. Chicago's concrete sky weighed on the frozen lake and the stone and the steel downtown, where families from around the planet had gathered to photograph themselves shopping and ice-skating beneath trees whose bare stalks branched like capillaries for giant brains that had gone missing.

At the office, the receptionist regarded me gravely, then showed me to where Rebekah was waiting. Rebekah's pants were unzipped. She'd been running from room to room, from test to test, carrying her parka and holding up her pants. She took me into her arms and held me as though I were her child.

Our midwife told us that we could cut Rebekah open, extract the body, and be done. A Caesarean, cheap and fast. But she asked Rebekah to consider going through childbirth. Doing so would give her slightly better odds of success in any future pregnancy. Of course, she warned, a hormonally induced delivery would require a day or two or three of labor. Eventually, Rebekah said, "O.K." Her assent sounded miniscule, as though spoken by a girl.

We drove to the hospital and checked into the maternity ward. Rebekah and I worried that we did not belong with the normal parents, but the head resident assured us that stillbirth was birth and that we were parents. "But what you're going through sucks," she said. "It just sucks."

Our room came with a candy-colored baby blanket and a matching beanie. I told the nurse who injected Rebekah with hormones that we wouldn't be needing the clothes. "They're for the photos," she said I stared at her. She knew what our situation was. "We won't be needing photos," I said. She removed the clothes, but after dark she returned them. She set them on a table in the far corner of the room and petted them, as though putting them down for the night. She whispered, "In case you change your mind."

In the middle of the night, voices murmured through one wall, growing louder and more rushed until a baby cried out, clear and angry, accompanied by cheers. Rebekah rustled, then shifted. She was just a shadow. So was I.

In the morning, a social worker sat beside us. She had to verify that we were certain about the photographs. "I know this sounds weird," she said, "but parents in your situation who decline the photographs often return, begging us to please let them see a photo of their child. Don't you at least want the option to see photos - not now, but someday?"

"No," I said. Rebekah shook her head, and I signed papers promising not to sue anyone. The social worker asked if there was anything else we wanted to talk about, anything at all. I told her about the cry in the middle of the night. "That must have been hard," she said.

Rebekah didn't say anything. "Yeah," I said, "but it was also kind of life-affirming." It wasn't, but I knew that I'd have to see it as such - not now, but someday.

The social worker left her business card and a pamphlet she called "literature," which featured a Teddy bear dressed in overalls. A butterfly had alighted on the Teddy bear's nose, forcing him to cross his eyes and smile. "When Hello Means Goodbye," the title read. Inside was a collection of advice and verse that was written by other bereaved parents and untouched by affectation or talent. Rebekah dropped the booklet onto the nightstand, but I found succor in every artless word.

The booklet also presented a series of black-and-white photographs of a woman propped up in a hospital bed, holding

an inert baby while her husband stood by. None of these stills dared to show the baby's face.

In the afternoon, we were visited by Rebekah's best friend and Rebekah's sister. When they arrived, I was sitting beside Rebekah's bed, wearing a new sweater and reading aloud from a magazine while we waited for the labor to intensify. We appeared perfectly normal. Realizing that there was nothing they could do, our loved ones cried.

Then they sat with us as we drank tea from paper cups. Our midwife put on a cardigan and joined us. Night was falling outside, but nobody stood to turn on a light. In the room, a spell was falling and none of us dared to dispel it.

We told our own birth stories. I stood to tell mine. My brother and I were delivered by a doctor who did not know, in the pre-ultrasound nineteen-sixties, that my mother was carrying twins. When he broke the news to my father, the doctor, a Japanese man, was ashamed, "So sorry," he said, bowing. "You have not one but two healthy boys." He bowed lower. "I only charge you for one."

As I bowed, all the women laughed.

Rebekah's labor grew heavy. Soon all she could do was breathe in and out. She sat still, physically in this world but attuning to the next one, the one that would deliver Irene. Our friend cried again as she said goodbye. Rebekah's sister said that she ought to be going and left. Then she returned. "I want to stay," she said. "I need you to stay," I said. She sat with me as Rebekah was increasingly possessed by her labor and by the strength she summoned to bear it.

Blood sloshed out of her and dripped onto the floor. The midwife pressed warm towels against Rebekah's genitals in an attempt to stop them from tearing. I took hold of one of Rebekah's lags, her sister took the other, and our midwife bent between, ready to catch the emerging corpse.

Someone once said that William Carlos Williams was sitting by the bed of one of his patients when she died. He turned to look out the window and saw a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside white chickens. I saw a salt-stained sidewalk under the funnel of a street lamp, a beige plastic armrest beside a blue blanket, my left foot in a black boot slipping in my wife's red blood.

Irene was in the breech position and she came forth rump first. Our midwife said, "Push," and Rebekah pushed, and pushed again, pushed so mightily that at the apex of her effort the red hole in the center of Irene's exposed butt opened and a black turd slithered out.

Rebekah expelled Irene in a final burst, and I watched the prunelike baby, embalmed in gore and ichor, flop into the hands of the midwife. The nurse snipped the bobbing umbilical cord and whisked the body out of sight.

I bent down to Rebekah and whispered into her ear that she'd committed the bravest act I had ever witnessed. Rebekah tried to make a noise or nod but she was numb. She closed her eyes. Then I turned to face our baby.

The nurse had set Irene's collapsed body under a heat lamp so that it would stay warm to the touch. She asked if I wanted to cut the remaining tendril of umbilical cord. I did. The cord felt alive and muscular; it was like cutting through someone's finger.

Irene was red, yellow, and blue, as limp as if she'd been thrown against a wall. Her nose looked as though it had been driven back into her head; it was a raw, upturned pug.

"A beautiful girl," the nurse said, tenderly nudging Irene's pudenda with her finger. "With perfect little girl parts." She traced the inverted V of Irene's nose. "That's because she was breech," she said, "Coming out backward, babies always get their noses bent out of shape."

Irene had mooned us, shat at us, and now she'd got her nose bent out of shape. She even smelled like a sourpuss: slightly sulfurous and vinegary. She was a pickled imp, delivered at last from whatever it was that she had died fighting. I gathered my girl into my arms.

The nurse who'd induced Rebekah had tried to warn me. "The tone," she'd said. "After they've been dead for a few days, they don't have the tone. The tone is missing." What she meant was that my girl would feel lifeless. She had no blood pressure and so her face splayed flat in my hand, like a deliquescent tomato. I placed my thumbs above Irene's eyelids and eased them upward, intending to look into her eyes, but the milky, unfathomable slivers awed me and I stopped. The unknitted plates of her skull grated and clicked as I cupped my palm and rounded her face to its likeness, which I recognized. It was not like looking into a mirror. Facing a mirror you see merely your own countenance; facing your child you finally understand how everyone else has seen you.

When Rebekah opened her eyes, I handed her our child. She looked down at Irene's misshapen face. "Take her!" she cried. "Can you take her!" Rebekah's sister stepped in and scooped her up. I sat on the bed and ran my hands up and down Rebekah's hunched back as if to dampen her quaking. Her sister walked our baby around the room, rocking her and singing her assurances.

The afterbirth was causing problems. The placenta that Rebekah had been growing for eight months was supposed to slide out at the end of the umbilical cord like a veined lung, but it wasn't coming. It had somehow adhered itself to the uterus, possibly because of scarring from the summer's near-miscarriage. Our midwife tugged on the dangling end of the umbilical cord. The cord snapped. "That's not supposed to happen," our midwife said. "I mean, it happens, but it's rare." She called in the supervising doctor.

The doctor inserted her right arm into Rebekah up to the elbow. She braced herself and pulled. She exhaled, pulled harder. Rebekah's sister and I attempted to restrain Rebekah without slipping. I felt something inside her tear and the doctor slid back, holding a raw piece of the organ. She handed it to the nurse and reinserted her arm. She pulled until she again stood back, clutching another fistful. "I don't want you to have to leave this room and check into surgery," she said. "Not now, not after all that you've been through." She reinserted her shaking arm and pulled. As I held on to Rebekah, her rigidity absorbed my own trembling. This time I did not look at anything.

Finally, the doctor stepped back, her bloodied arm hanging at her side. "I think that's it," she said. She asked the midwife and the nurse to gather up the scraps of afterbirth and send them to the lab. Then a fever seized Rebekah, racked her, made her shiver so alarmingly that her sister and I gathered a mound of blankets and buried her beneath it. The nurse stuck more needles into her. Rebekah slipped into sleep, her eyelashes like a pair of parentheses that had toppled to the side, releasing whatever secret they'd contained.

It was late now and dark and I was left alone with my family. Rebekah's face floated like a freckled moon above the blankets that swaddled her. I marvelled at her, as if she were my child and I were seeing her for the first time. Across the room, Irene lay in the glow of the heat lamp.

The night nurse stepped in and told me that they were coming to take my baby away. Did I want to spend just a little more time with her?

"No," I said. "We've had our goodbye's."

In the middle of the night I startled awake. A voice had sung Irene's song to me, but with a twist. "Good night, Irene," it sang. "I'll see you, but only in my dreams." That's the chorus, I thought. Only in my dreams. Never in real life. By naming my daughter thoughtlessly, I had jinxed her. I had killed her.

I recalled the chorus radiating from a jukebox amid the smoky hubbub of a tavern, playing over the film credits scrolling down a blackened theatre screen, howled by a friend from college, a rocker named Zollo. Zollo, who had chronic throat problems, had once set a piano in the back yard at a party and croaked out "Good Night, Irene" as his final song. As he sang, I'd stood there with my beer and wondered, Where have I heard this song before?

Fifteen years in the future, that's where. I fell back asleep and dreamed of Rebekah sobbing. When I awoke in the dark, she was sobbing. I fell back asleep. At first light I woke again and felt a split second of equanimity, of tranquility, before I remembered that none of it had been a dream.

We'd heard a lot from parents about the agony of lying awake at night, tortured by their children's cries. Instead we were tortured by each other's.

Rebekah and I stepped into the shower, where I washed her body as gingerly as would a newlywed. The hospital served us milk and eggs. We drove home in heavy traffic beside the gray lake. I waited as Rebekah limped up the three flights of stairs to our apartment. In front of our door was a box, standing like a sentinel. We knew what was in the box, but I carried it inside and opened it anyway. Rebekah contemplated each hand-me-down jumper, each bib, each onesie, before folding it and tucking it into Irene's dresser, beside Irene's cradle and Irene's toys.

We climbed into bed and spooned together. Rebekah's breasts wept milk, so she bound them.

If Rebekah and I had lived two hundred years ago, when Illinois was still prairie, she would already have borne a dozen or more children. Those who survived would have lived to their mid-thirties, the age Rebekah is now, the age at which she, too, would probably have died, probably in childbirth. But at least she would have been able to bury Irene with her own two hands. She would have been able to advertise her mourning with a black veil or a rent garment, so that strangers would have known to oblige her; not to attempt to amuse her, or to ask after her children. Nobody would have told her that stillbirth was a tragedy, or that she should try to make art about it, because every woman back then had babies who died.

The telephone began to ring. Only the older friends and relatives thought to send their wishes and prayers in writing. Everyone else wanted to talk. They wanted to feel for themselves what it was like for us to have glimpsed at once both the birth end and the death end of this wormhole we call life.

Rebekah's aunts insisted on visiting. They wanted to cheer us up. They were more nervous than we were; they greeted us with loud, determined voices and dramatic, almost frantic gestures. One yanked open a bag of nacho chips so violently that the chips burst out and skittered across the kitchen floor. I followed the aunts into the living room.

The living room? What was that supposed to mean?

One aunt talked until the other picked up a sentence and ran with it, overwhelming the silence I held to with increasing conspicuousness. I excused myself, said that I had to make some phone calls. I went into my study and closed the door. The phone rang. It was my project manager at work. I told him that my daughter had been born dead and that he'd have to excuse me from everything, at least for now. All morning I answered calls from our friends. Upon hearing the news, one collapsed. Her cries seemed to be my own, amplified through another vessel. I assured her that Rebekah and I were doing O.K. and asked her not to worry about us. Consoling her took all my strength, but it was easier than being in the living room.

Another friend told me about his great-great-grandmother's diary. This woman had settled a home on the prairie, just like Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose work I'd procured for Irene's library. Reading the diary, my friend had been surprised by how common a certain sentence was: "Baby died," he said. "Baby died." Almost every year - the phrase was life a refrain.

As soon as Rebekah's aunts left, the fever that had seized her in the hospital returned. No more visitors, our midwife commanded. Strict bed rest. Rebekah's mother drove from Maine to help me watch over her daughter. On New Year's Eve, we sat on Rebekah's bed and served her steak and wine by candlelight. For several weeks, Rebekah's mother helped me with our shopping, cooking, and cleaning. She sewed new slipcovers for our furniture.

A couple of weeks into it, Rebekah broke down. "I have to start doing things for myself," she cried. "I am not a baby!"

She didn't want to go back to her old job. When she had recovered enough to walk around, she got dressed and rode a bus to the skyscrapers downtown, where she took a job managing an office whose employees knew nothing about her but her name.

The results of the autopsy came. Irene had died for no apparent reason.

We had to have one. We considered the fact that Irene had heard us argue. Perhaps our slam-bang shouting matches across the kitchen table had alerted our daughter at her gut level to be frightened of us.

Rebekah remembered having got drunk at a birthday party before discovering she was pregnant. She'd had high blood sugar and low blood sugar. Her thyroid gland had been out of whack.

Before Christmas, I'd heard an anecdote. Ernest Hemingway had once boasted that he could write a novel that was only six words long. Asked to prove it, he took a napkin and wrote, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." At the time, I'd repeated this anecdote gravely but wryly.

I fixated on the song. Twice it had come to me in the night, as unmediated as breathing, and I discovered why: the song is a traditional arrangement, meaning that no one knows where it came from; it exists in the air of our culture.

The very last words that I heard her say

Were "Please sing me one more song."

Irene, good night

Good night, Irene,

I'll see you in my dreams.

Last Saturday night I got married,

Me and my wife settled down.

Now me and my wife are parted,

I'm gonna take another stroll downtown.

Stop rambling, stop your gambling,

Stop staying out late at night.

Go home to your wife and family,

Sit down by the fireside bright.

I love Irene, God knows I do,

Love her 'til the seas run dry.

And if Irene turns her back on me,

I'll take morphine and die.

Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, is often given credit for writing this song, but he was merely the first to record it. According to legend, he heard it when he was in jail for attempted murder. When he got out, the song made him famous, and vice versa.

Rebekah and I tried to be strong for each other. But if I attempted to joke she saw me laughing when our only child was dead. If she wanted to visit a friend, I saw her abandoning me to my grief. By trying to be strong, we hurt each other, and by trying to be normal, we grew numb.

On a rainy Saturday, Rebekah and I walked to the Museum of Science and Industry to see an exhibit of human bodies that had been preserved in plastic and laid open for our viewing astonishment. Rebekah stayed in the exhibit hall twice as long as I. She made a side trip to see the museum's permanent collection of preserved babies. Fetuses, as people are always careful to say. On the walk home, Rebekah was calm, almost peaceful; it was as if those dead babies, folded in their jars, had reminded her that she was not alone.

After a month, we prepared for our first night out with other people - dinner at a friend's place. Our friend was eight

months pregnant. She and her husband had moved into a big old house, and a celebration was in order. As we neared their driveway, running late, Rebekah started crying. "I can't do it," she said. "I cant."

I pulled over while traffic whizzed by. For more than a month I'd been inundated by family. Family! I needed to see my friends.

Rebekah needed to be alone. So I drove her home. The only words she spoke on the way home were to the effect that she didn't want to bring her curse to bear upon our friends. When I cast doubt on this superstition, Rebekah refused to elaborate. "I just really hate myself right now," she said.

I wanted to argue with her, but I didn't know how. I dropped her off at the door and drove back to our friend's house, where, surrounded by boxes and empty rooms, I picked at a casserole under inadequate lighting and talked about anything but.

After Valentine's Day, Rebekah and I returned to the hospital to attend a meeting of people who had "experienced perinatal loss" - miscarriages, stillbirths, accidents, babies with deformities so monstrous that the parents had elected to pull the plug.

Under humming fluorescent lights was a conference table with coffee and untouched cookies, ringed by twenty or so frightened faces, one of which was flashing indignant looks and leaking angry tears. The woman said that she'd lost her girl and now everyone wanted her to pretend that her girl had never existed. The rest of the room seconded her complaint. We finished each other's sentences. At last we were among people who could understand us. Society was on trial and we were the jury.

Everyone outside the room seemed to think that having another child would somehow erase the loss of this one, that death was some kind of math problem to be overcome by procreation. Everyone was supportive, but they were all secretly hoping that "it" would get better, that "things" would go back to normal, as if normal were an option, as if normal even existed. If one more person encouraged us to put it - it! - behind us, we might just lose it.

I asked the room, "What do you say when people ask you if you have kids? If I say yes, they're going to ask about them. If I say no, I'm lying."

Nobody knew how to answer my question.

At some point, a Mexican woman began to speak through her translator while her husband kneaded her hand. She had been carrying twin boys, she explained. For five months everything was fine. Then the ultrasound revealed that the heart of one of the twins had stopped beating. He had died, except he didn't die. His brother's heart came to his rescue by pumping enough blood for both of them. His brother kept him alive. But that baby was going to die, too, because his heart couldn't take the strain. So this woman flew to see a specialist who could extract the doomed brother so that his savior might live. But something went wrong. The translation wasn't clear, but in the operating room both of her boys wound up dead.

"My heart," the dad said in English, "it has been cut."

I cried, not because I'm a twin, and not because I felt for these parents, though I did. I cried because I was hearing a story that was worse than mine. I cried with relief. I was still lucky. For the first time since Irene had died, I wasn't angry.

To claim Irene I drove to a place that called itself a home. There I paid a man who called himself a mortician to hand over paperwork, along with what he called cremains. The ashes were stored in a cardboard box laminated with faux wood grain, like the vinyl panelling that adorns family recreation rooms and the flanks of station wagons. Inside the tin was a plastic bag closed at the top with a twist tie from which dangled a dog tag: "MONTROSE CEMETERY 27683."

At home, I removed the baggie and threw out the box and the tin. I slipped the dog tag into an envelope along with the death certificate - there was by law no birth certificate - licked the envelope, and sealed it. After a moment of deliberation, I filed the envelope under "Medical Bills." After another moment of deliberation, I made a new file folder - "Irene Raeburn" - slid the envelope in there, and filed it after "Investments." Then I wept. That was my fatherhood.

Her ashes weren't like fire ashes. They were sandy, with tiny bits of bone not quite incinerated by the furnace, like the crumbled shells and coral that are along the seashore, marking the line where the tide retreated. There wasn't much: a handful or two, about what a family of four would shake out of their shoes after a Saturday at the beach.

Rebekah and I already knew which of her pots would hold the ashes. It was a squat vase that could hold only a single flower. Its small, circular foot swelled to a bulbous middle before contracting at the top to a nipple-like eye. The eye was so small you couldn't see inside it. You could put things in but they wouldn't easily come out. The urn resembled nothing so much as a top, spinning around on its point.

Rebekah had glazed it a glassy gray, like ice under an overcast sky. This glaze was webbed with nearly invisible cracks, like the fissures that knit the inside of an old and cherished tea mug. She'd spun the pot on its foot and slashed brushfuls of a darker gray glaze around the shoulder of the pot, and this darker glaze had insinuated itself into the network of minute cracks, forming veined crystals that bloomed like snowflakes from bruised winter clouds, spiralling in toward the eye of the urn. A few burnt streaks of carbon still adhered to the sides. This clay had also passed through a furnace.

I sifted the ash through a sieve into a mixing bowl. I rolled a sheet of paper into a cone, lodged the funnel into the pot's aperture, and poured in the fine ash. It hissed like sand from an hourglass. I took the larger, unsifted bits of Irene from the sieve and dropped them into the eye one piece at a time. When I came across a lump that was too large to fit I put it aside. I resolved to begin a second pile of these larger pieces, one I would return to later and - what? Crush with a hammer? But at the end of my sorting I was confronted by only the one lump. Upon studying it, I realized that it was a molten zipper pull. I debated keeping the relic, until Rebekah came home from work and reminded me that Irene had never been dressed in anything with a zipper. The zipper was from the body bag.

Although I will never forget seeing Irene, I have already forgotten what she looked like. I can no longer recall, exactly, her face. In the absence of the photographs, all that remains is the image from her final ultrasound. I have returned again and again to this image and peered into it. The phantom gathering of features is so cloudy that my daughter could be anyone.

Read Daniel Raeburn's follow-up essay from *The New Yorker* online, about the birth of his daughter Willa.

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