

A large, ornate, black decorative flourish that frames the title and author's name. It has a central peak and two large, rounded loops on either side.

A THOUSAND VESSELS

POEMS

*Tania Runyan*



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Cover Image: iStockphoto  
Cover Design: Andrew Craft

USA ISBN-13: 978-1-60226-009-2  
USA ISBN-10: 1-60226-009-5  
Printed in the United States of America  
First Edition: 2011

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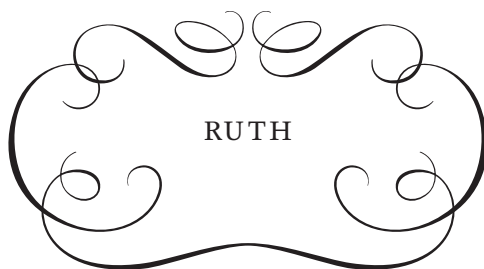
*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Runyan, Tania.  
*A thousand vessels : poems / Tania Runyan.*  
p. cm.  
ISBN-13: 978-1-60226-009-2 (pbk.)  
ISBN-10: 1-60226-009-5 (pbk.)  
I. Title.  
PS3618.U5668T46 2011  
811'.6--dc23

2011035220

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P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
Y 16 15 14 13 12 11



# *Ruth Speaks to Naomi*

*“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.  
Your people will be my people and your God my God.”*  
—Ruth 1:16

Really, there is not much to love  
in this world. Maybe sparrows,  
children laughing in the morning.

But—your God forgive me—  
if I knew I had to sleep forever tonight,  
my tired heart would survive it.

We are widows now, the shriveled leaves  
that blow along the rooftops.  
We are worth nothing

but the measure of loneliness  
we can remove from each other.  
Of course I must follow you,

Naomi, from Moab to Bethlehem,  
to the musty corner of our home,  
where we will boil the grain and sweep the dirt,

comb each other’s hair in the evening  
and feel the coarse curls fall  
between our fingers.

## *Strange Land*

At nineteen, I convinced myself of imminent death.  
I was ripe for tragedy, draped in the future  
and beautiful long hair. So when I got lost on a hike  
and stumbled to a creek of wild foxglove,  
I thought, of course the rangers will find my body  
in this paradise of leafy shadows,  
bees turning in the flowers like amber stones.

I tried to pray, waiting for the bear to rumble  
through the branches, the earthquake to dislodge boulders  
on my neck. An hour passed. Insects ascended my sandals.  
The foxglove blazed and pitched with no notice of me.  
I might as well give up, I thought, and crawl  
into these spotted throats to either drown in sweetness  
or be flung out by the winds. Just keep walking  
into whatever strange land God lays before me  
to gather his blessings like petals and stones,  
fallen dragonflies shimmering in the mud.

## *Boaz Watches Ruth in the Fields*

There is something holy in the way  
she bends to the ground  
and lifts each stalk like a child.

Her hair sweeps the soil,  
trapping chaff in its curls.  
How her fingers pierce the fields

like rays of light! I believe  
she would glean here forever.  
Even at sundown,

as the harvesters slump  
beneath the sheaves on their backs,  
she steps lightly to our meal

of roasted grain. She sighs deeply  
with each bite, as if the barley  
were part of her body,

finally reunited with its home  
of sweet earth and sunlight,  
ready to smolder and burst into the sky.

## *Honeymooning in Monterey Bay*

I imagined we'd never leave our room  
at the Sandpiper Inn, our bodies separating  
only for refills of Chardonnay and massage oil.

But we wandered Cannery Row, snapping pictures  
of fat sea lions, smokestacks, my arm around  
Steinbeck's shoulders. We entered the aquarium,  
expecting long bodies gliding in circles  
in massive tanks, water exploding  
from blow holes, but found only fiberglass  
dolphins and orcas hanging above us,  
and tide pool after tide pool of sea anemones.  
We didn't bother letting them suck our fingers.  
A tank of sardines glimmered like a foil sheet,  
ten thousand pivoting in the same direction.  
Where was the great white, barracuda,  
tentacles of a giant squid curling on the glass?  
Deflated puffer fish lurked in a kelp forest.  
Even the otters slept, dozens of untouched oysters  
sinking to the floor.

I said we should go, remembering my lingerie,  
but you strayed to a long counter of microscopes  
and motioned me over, your arm brushing my breast  
as you pointed to the sign: "Radiolarian Protozoa."  
We took turns behind the lens, the skeletons  
forming a latticework of cones and spheres,  
silica arrows weaving through the openings,  
holding the bodies together for good.

# *The Threshing Floor*

*“Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes.  
Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know  
you are there. . . . Go and uncover his feet and lie down.  
He will tell you what to do.”*  
—Ruth 3:2-4, Naomi to Ruth

She stirs in the heat of the harvest dawn,  
lost in a dream of blue linen and myrrh.  
Chaff sticks to her hair like moth wings.  
Goat hooves shuffle the hay.

His feet poke out from the blanket,  
heels cracked open like the Moab desert,  
thickets of white hair curling on his toes.  
She has just stopped missing her husband’s feet,

the lean, brown knuckles that pressed against her  
for seven years. She has begun to wake  
each morning and stretch her limbs  
like a great cedar tree, the warm sorrows

of widowhood surging through her body.  
Now Boaz will take her in marriage,  
and their feet will be one. For many thousand nights  
her toes will wedge inside his knee

as she shifts and turns for comfort.  
His calluses will whisper on her skin  
from stars to dawn. His nails will cut.  
She will never be alone.