

KURT SOLMSEN

Yellow Boat at Rocky Bay, 2023
Oil on canvas, 34 x 38 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SUZANNE ZIPPERER

Beyond the Ice

Gene Benton lived an ordinary life. He was spared childhood trauma, being raised one of three by sober parents. He had no stories of misadventures as a teen or war as a young man. Married once and forever to a woman who forgave him his faults as he forgave hers. Neither of his girls caused problems as teens and both grew to use their abilities as adults. Gene slipped comfortably into retirement just as his lifelong employer moved operations but left his pension intact. Contentment and gratitude were his most familiar feelings.

So, it was unnerving that anything out of the ordinary, anything unusual or abnormal, even extraordinary, would trouble him at this point in his life.

Gene sat in the sunroom looking out the wall of windows toward the sun rising on Lake Michigan. It was mid-October and the last golden leaves were falling from the birch trees that framed his view of the water just a gentle slope away. He had not yet turned on the heat, enjoying the coolness of autumn after a summer that had been unusually hot and humid for northeastern Wisconsin. The steam from his coffee cup clouded his reading glasses, which perched on the tip of his nose. He looked above them out to the horizon.

The lake was calm this morning, just beginning to lose the night gray and reflect the dusty blue of the sky. The water and sky melded in a pale mist along the horizon. Then a sliver of red sun peaked out, spreading the splendid colors that made it worthwhile to rise early and wait patiently.

What was that? Just to the south was a long, dark cigar shape about a fourth the size of the rising sun, also just on the horizon. A cargo ship? Fishing boat? So far away, like a stick floating on a pond. Gene watched it, knowing that at this distance movement would be undetectable. Then the sun popped farther up and the yellow brightness turned the sky blue, which in turn colored the water all the way to the soft waves lapping the sand.

Gene had become a creature of habit in his retirement. Although his intent was to rise with the sun and jog down the quiet lakeshore drive before his neighbors, most of whom were still working, rose, the reality was that even though he told his doctor he exercised three times a week, his morning was a slow start. Leaving his wife, Sandra, soundly sleeping in her own room, he made a single cup of coffee in the Keurig, added the half-and-half he wasn't

supposed to have, and sat in the sunroom. First, he watched the sunrise, then he paged through the *New York Times*, avoiding the news on the war in Ukraine, migrants drowning in the Mediterranean, declines in the stock market, and COVID deaths in China. That left the travel section, arts and culture, sports, and modern life; plenty to keep him abreast of changes in the world and provide a topic of conversation for when Sandra joined him at eight o'clock.

Thus, the next morning was the same. Coffee in hand, Gene looked out at the massive expanse of again calm water. This day, rows of clouds presented the sky as a furrowed field. Those closest to the sun reflected its bright orange, transitioning to even-spaced rows of magenta undersides and purple tops farther out. Altocumulus clouds, he had learned. Midlevel. And there, once again, was the dark form on the horizon. It appeared a bit closer, a tiny bit. Gene reached into the storage under the side table and pulled out the binoculars, adjusting them to fit his eyes and turning the lens to focus first on the sun, then on the object. Yes, it was closer. There was a bit of horizon just above it, so it must have moved. Another few minutes and the sun turned yellow, the clouds white with gray undersides and bright-blue sky between. The object disappeared.

The third morning the lake heaved gray waves onto the beach just beyond the low-growing common juniper and grasses holding sand in place. The sun could not be seen beneath the gray canopy; even the horizon was not a clear separation from the sky above. Yet there was the object just to the south of where the sun would be, a very distinct black shape on gray water. Gene noted the precise time and wrote a Facebook post on the pages of several local groups that he knew had members with knowledge of the traffic on the lake using the small port. By evening, several people had replied giving possibilities, but no definite answer. No ship would be in the same position, or even near it, three days in a row. And that far out would be too far to see the few commercial fishing boats that still trawled the region. One person suggested it was the sun somehow reflecting on the water at a certain angle; but there had been no sun this morning. One asked if Gene could photograph it, but it was too far away for his phone camera.

After a week with the object farther and farther from the horizon and now about a quarter of the way to shore, Gene woke Sandra and forced her to come look. He

handed her a cup of coffee and sat her in the chair next to his. She saw nothing. He gave her the binoculars, focused on the object, and she still saw nothing. Grudgingly, she set them down on the table, left her coffee next to them, and went back to bed.

Their two girls, the eldest with family in tow, came at Thanksgiving. Although Gene asked each of them to get up and see the object, which at this time was far closer to shore than the horizon, they noted that this was a holiday for them and sleeping in was much needed. Then Grandpa was asked to entertain the little one in the morning as he was up early.

Gene heard the baby cry about six thirty the next morning. He quietly lifted her from the pack n play in the spare room where the family slept and found a diaper and wipes in the backpack left in the living room. Tender memories of his own girls who just yesterday were tiny made him grateful that he had a few days with them all together.

The sunroom was still dark and a bit chilly, but he sat cuddling the little girl, who had settled back to sleep, both wrapped in a blanket. Dawn broke an hour later with the sun a white disk muffled in the gray. Nimbostratus clouds, Gene recalled, indicating snow on the way. The familiar object was just where Gene expected.

Gene had queried twice more in social media groups and still gotten no answers to what it might be. He had asked the neighbors, most of whom said they were too busy getting out of the house in the morning to look. When he asked them to do so, they followed up that they hadn't seen anything. A few times he ventured out into the yard and down to the beach to see the object from different angles, thinking perhaps it was something with his windows or indeed the angle of the sun on the water. No, it was still there, getting closer and bigger as the days wore on. Frustrated that he was still unable to get a clear photo to show people, he gave up trying. Sandra told him to shut up about it already, as he was indeed beginning to sound like a nutcase. His younger daughter elbowed her mom, whispering that she could have said it nicely.

On Sunday, the kids were scheduled to leave. Gene heard the baby cry and did not rise to attend to her. Ten minutes later, he met his son-in-law soothing the baby in the sunroom.

"Good morning, Aarush," Gene greeted him. "Sorry I didn't get up."

"Oh, no, no. That is fine. Actually, I was just enjoying the sun coming up," Aarush responded with the generosity of spirit that drew people to him. "It's beautiful, this lake. Such a nice home you have here."

The November gray had lifted and a very light covering of snow twinkled on the branches of the evergreens along the side of the yard. The sun shone bright in a blue sky. It had been just below freezing for a week, but the winds had kept the water moving with only a bit of ice covering the sand with sparkling shards. It was indeed beautiful, made even more so in contrast to the dullness of previous days.

"Does it ever freeze all the way out?" Aarush asked.

"Never. Ninety percent, but never all the way," Gene answered. "In a few weeks there will be large chunks of ice along the shore." He pulled a throw around his shoulders and sat. "The ice forms when it is calm, like today. It can get six feet or more deep. Then the wind changes. It gets rough, and waves break up the ice. It'll pile up here on the shore. Big chunks, as big as a car. Sometimes ice goes out as far as you can see, but not all the way. If you fly over in January, it's impressive. Superior, that lake freezes over. Not Michigan."

"I can imagine it is something to see from the air," Aarush responded.

Gene saw the object out there bobbing up and down on the water. It had come quite a bit closer overnight and was now beginning to take shape. He reached for the binoculars and held them to his eyes. Sails. There were sails. It was a schooner. A schooner like he saw in pictures and as historic replicas that would never sail in November. No crew today would know how to manage November gales.

Although it was clearly visible to the naked eye, Gene handed Aarush the binoculars and told him where to look.

"No. I don't see it." The younger man looked quizzically at Gene, who became obviously frustrated pointing out where it was and how clearly he could see it and now adding that it was a sailboat. "I keep trying to get pictures of it but can't." There was panic in Gene's voice.

Aarush had heard Gene talk of the object at dinner when they first arrived and be dismissed by Sandra. He liked his father-in-law but didn't know him very well, so

he took a while to respond, waiting for Gene to calm, then spoke as gently as he could.

"Gene. I believe that you see something, but I don't see it." Aarush paused. "I don't know how to say this, but there are neurological issues that can cause hallucinations. Like Parkinson's, for example." Aarush glanced at his father-in-law and then down at the baby, not soliciting a response.

Gene paused a long time, then took a deep breath. "Thank you, Aarush. I was thinking of that as well. It is a bit frightening. And I have made a doctor's appointment for assessment." His voiced quivered out of frustration. He stopped to compose himself. "But I did my research. I only see this one object. I have been seeing it for nearly a month now. It has moved closer consistently, and now I see it is a ship. It doesn't match a neurological hallucination."

Aarush looked at Gene and nodded in agreement, showing concern and recognizing Gene's self-assessment. Gene stood up and left the room, coming back with two cups of steaming coffee, setting one on the end table next to Aarush. Both men stared at the water.

"There are thousands of shipwrecks out there." Gene seemed to be changing the subject. "This area right here from Port Washington up past Two Rivers has thirty-five of them. Protected. A marine sanctuary. They're considered graveyards." Gene hesitated again, not sure how much he should share. His wife and daughters already thought he was losing it, but he trusted Aarush, who didn't seem to be dismissing him. "Schooners carried immigrants from out east. Cargo, too, of course. But there were no rosters. No record of who died." He lifted the binoculars to his eyes and watched the ship bobbing gently on the still water. "My cousin told me there was a great-uncle who they knew left Buffalo but never met relatives in Milwaukee. Maybe he went down, or maybe he decided to dump his family, or maybe he was murdered for the money he carried. Who knows." The baby began to nuzzle and Aarush stood from the chair, pulling the blanket back from her face and greeting her with a smile and kiss to the forehead. He stood rocking back and forth.

"Aarush, you are Hindu, right?"

"By heritage but not practice. I know about as much of Hinduism as American Christians know of Christianity." Aarush shrugged. "Some of the readings, major deities, stories."

“Well, Hinduism has planes of existence, right?”

“Yes. The multiverse scientists are now calling it.” Aarush sat back down with the baby on his lap, also now looking out to the lake. “Matches ancient philosophy. There’s an article in *Forbes* online. Strange place to read about it. Nothing new under the sun, as they say.”

“Can you see into other planes? Am I maybe seeing . . .” Gene hesitated again.

“A ghost ship?” Aarush finished his sentence and shrugged, indicating it might be possible. “I’m not a philosopher, but Hinduism does talk of beings in different planes. They have thirty different levels of spiritual development. Then there is the occult, which claims to cross the planes. I think that’s a Western idea.”

Aarush turned to look at Gene. “I’m a doctor. I am supposed to only assess what is evidence-based. But I’ve seen things that I can only say do not make sense in my medical world.” His voice was sincere and sympathetic. “They are truly miracles. Especially in pediatrics. I hear Catholics talk of guardian angels. And I will tell you, and my colleagues would say I am mad, but I have seen one.”

Gene locked eyes with his son-in-law and nodded, thinking with great appreciation that his daughter had made a good choice.

“There are things we can’t explain. Yes, and maybe ghost ships crossing into our plane.” Aarush paused for some time. “Are you frightened by the ship?”

“No,” Gene answered. “Not at all. I’m frightened that I see it and no one else does.” Then he whispered to himself, “Maybe it’s coming for me.”

Gene’s daughter then walked in looking for the baby. Gene stood up and whispered in Aarush’s ear that he would appreciate not having their conversation shared. Aarush nodded but answered softly that Gene should call him after he saw the doctor.

Each day of December, the ship moved closer to shore and the ice grew out to meet it. Gene wondered what would happen when the two met. Would the ship turn around and head back to the horizon? Would it crash up against the ice? And now it wasn’t there just in the early morning as it had been but remained throughout the day, fading into the gray of night. At least there were no lights aboard, Gene thought, then he wondered if ghosts needed lights.

The third week of December temperatures dropped to below zero. The wind came out of the northeast and roiled the water until huge chunks of ice cracked apart and were pushed by twelve-foot waves onto each other along the beach. December 21, the wind that Gene had heard change directions about midnight had died down. The sun came up bright orange, then turned yellow and the sky blue. There where the water was still open sat the schooner, its sails down, bobbing in the calm waters.

Gene sipped his coffee and calmly watched, now seeing clearly without binoculars, as sails were raised one by one until two large squares, white as the surrounding ice, rose up, followed by a triangular sail to the fore. So beautiful. Gene thought to get a picture and decided it wasn’t worth his frustration.

Then, as he watched, two figures appeared on the ice. Hats pulled down hard on their heads and long tattered coats flapping from their determined stride, they came toward the house.

Gene stood, knowing he was going with them.

Suzanne Zipperer has always been a writer between community work, raising children, making a living, being a friend, and all the other excuses she uses to avoid writing. Zipperer lives in northeastern Wisconsin on her family farm. She doesn’t farm; it’s more work than writing. She has published many pieces of nonfiction, a couple of poems, and several short stories linked from her Facebook page. Her story “Shaken” was short-listed for Wisconsin People & Ideas fiction contest. After a nearly twenty-year hiatus from fiction, Zipperer revisited her novel, “How We Got Here,” and is looking for a publisher. This story is from a collection she is working on about older men.

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Yellow Boat at 8AM, 2022

Oil on canvas, 12 x 14 in.



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