

## KAREN VON FELTEN

*Flooded, 2006*  
Oil on Linen, 72 x 42 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## GWEN STRAUSS

### The Reef

**W**alker takes another sight and plots it on the chart. The sum log was clogged for hours with bits of kelp and seaweed, and so he worries about his dead reckoning. He shakes his head, and just that small gesture is enough to get Nina's insecurity churning.

"Do you know where we are?" she asks with her strained voice of fear.

He wishes he did not feel annoyed, but he can't comfort her. "Do we ever really know where we are," he asks. Then he softens because he doesn't want her to be scared either. "It's okay; we'll find Mexico." He kisses her on the forehead. "You can't really miss it."

He goes below and gets his guitar. He's been reading Alan Watts, about being in the moment, trying to stay present. It's easy when he plays music. He's not very good. He only knows a few songs and few chords. But it doesn't matter. Nina will make them some dinner. She's better when he plays music and she's busy below in the cabin.

"Beef with barley?" Nina calls up to him.

He starts singing a new song. The words are: "My baby's doin' the beef with barley blues."

He can see her from where he sits in the cockpit. She pours the can into their saucepan, which has an oily residue on it from being cleaned in seawater. She primes the stove with alcohol. And he can smell it burning off. The stove is a small, single-burner, gimbaled kerosene tank with a cooking ring above it. The tank has to be pumped up by hand to pressurize the kerosene. And the alcohol has to warm up the nozzle before you open it so that the kerosene will light in a vapor. You have to watch the blue flame of the alcohol burning down and then just at the right moment open the kerosene valve. The ring ignites perfectly like a sudden blue bloom.

"You want toast?" she asks.

"My baby's askin' me 'bout toast," he sings.

"It's all mashed," she yells up to Walker. "Okay?" She shows him the mashed bag of bread, holding it up in the companionway so that he can see what she's talking about.

"Got mashed toast and beef with barley blues." He loudly thumps on the guitar chords and feels it: that brief moment of elation when everything is poised just right.

They sit with bowls between their knees. The toast tastes of kerosene, but it's alright when Walker dunks it in