

KAREN VON FELTEN

Flooded, 2006
Oil on Linen, 72 x 42 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

GWEN STRAUSS

The Reef

Walker 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

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the soup. They don't say much. The drama of the sea at dusk is enough. The sound of the boat sailing. He doesn't need to talk. He likes their silence and wishes Nina could be more at ease in it, too. Again he catches himself judging her, and he pushes it away. He looks at her neck, the dark curls that have fallen loose from her braids. He takes a breath and feels tenderness toward her, like coming home. *Steady as she goes*, he tells himself.

Walker eats quickly. He's hungry. He can always eat more, is always the one to finish everybody's leftovers. He tries to keep his hunger hidden. In control. But when he eats, he feels the suppressed hunger overtake him. The food during the voyage has deteriorated. Not exactly five-star.

Walker sets his empty bowl down and goes forward. He makes little adjustments to the sails. He notices some fraying of the lower hem of the jib from all the banging and slogging they did when becalmed. It will be something to repair when they get into port. Now the wind is picking up, the sails are working like good old faithful sled dogs. He is proud that they will cross oceans with just the wind.

Walker should have been born in the age of big ocean-going schooners and clippers. In those days he would have left Nina in port and gone out to sea. It was bad luck to bring a woman aboard ship. A woman was earth and roots and waiting. The sailor must fall over the edge of the horizon alone. Women used tricks to keep their men on land.

Sailors' wives put pots over cats to raise the wind and keep their husbands home.

But since Walker had to be born in this century, why wasn't he born to the wealthy yacht-owning set of Newport, Marblehead, or Annapolis? He can admit jealousy for the fancy sleek sailboats, summer regattas, transatlantic deliveries. And he has stolen those boats from time to time. Actually only borrowed them, for a day sail. Taken the boat out and brought it back to the mooring. He doesn't think of it as stealing, because the people who own those boats don't even know the value of what they have. They don't deserve them. Those people see their majestic boats as toys, hobbies, playthings. For Walker, the boat is everything.

Not having those advantages, he learned to sail from his father, the annual week-long trip down east in Maine, when they borrowed a boat from a college roommate of his father's. And later after his death, Walker perfected his sailing instincts on the Hudson River in a Hobie Cat owned by the neighborhood widow.

She let Walker use her boat whenever he wanted because it had been her husband's and she liked to see it sailing. Walker would stay out on the river all day, playing games with the wind and the hulls. Learning to maneuver sails like a bird's wings. He imagined the widow looking at the shape of it, far out on the water in the distance. He knew the real reason she let him use her boat. And just one time, when he came to shore and back to her house to give her the key to the storage shed where she kept the boat, he followed her inside, up the stairs to the master bedroom. He let her undress him and stroke his young body. But she didn't do more than that. Something stopped her. She only touched him with her hands, and when he came, because as a teenaged boy this kind of touching made him instantly aroused, she told him not to be ashamed. She said, "You are so beautiful." She talked about his grey-green eyes and his perfect youthful body. She stayed dressed. He didn't know what to do with her or with himself. And he didn't like the feeling of not knowing. He was trapped inside his head: should he stand up, get off the bed, get dressed, walk back home? So he lay there as she talked about her youth and beauty. He waited for her to tell him to go home. When he was finally able to leave, he felt a terrible sadness. Getting old seemed awful then. How the old carried on about all they regretted.

After that one time, he felt embarrassed for her; and she must have felt ashamed, because she never invited him in again—and for that, Walker was grateful. He would tell Nina, later, very little about the widow, but the one thing she had taught him was to live with no regrets.

The first time he took Nina sailing was on that small catamaran on the Hudson River. When the wind picked up and one hull lifted, he hiked far out over the water as a counterbalance. He explained to Nina about the center of gravity, about reading the water for gusts of wind, and how to position the sails to lift the hull. He loved how the body became part of the boat. He made Nina lean out over the water. One hull flying high in the air, the mast humming, and the boat moving at incredible speed.

"You hear that?" he asked her.

There was a high vibration sound as if a mysterious engine churned somewhere. "That's hull speed," he said. "That means everything is pushed to the limit. Perfect balance. As fast as she'll go. Feel it?"

"Yes," she said with her brilliant smile.

"That's us, Nina. That is our love," he said. "Hull speed."

Heading the boat up into the wind, into irons. He made the two hulls lay flat on the water, so that they could make love in the middle of the river where it was widest. He could see tiny cars and small houses lining the distant shores. He undressed Nina—first her shirt, kissing her breasts, then the rest. He covered her small body with his. He pressed her against the canvas trampoline of the boat with the open sky above his back. There was nothing sweeter than the feel of her cool skin against his. They made slow, careful love that lasted until the sky darkened and a breeze lifted.

Afterwards he put his heavy sweater on Nina because he saw her shiver. And he sailed in a T-shirt back to his childhood home because he felt invincible: the cold couldn't touch him. She sat between his legs where he could wrap his free arm around her, holding onto the tiller with the other hand. Smelling the top of her head. They were filled with pleasure, satiated. They didn't have to talk about it.

He wasn't used to talking. Most of his childhood had been solitary. Days on the river, hikes in the woods, sometimes recklessly climbing an icy rock face with no ropes

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and with no one around for miles. A few times he had lost a foothold, almost fallen, alone, and glimpsed at what it might be like to fail. But he pushed himself as far as possible. Once, about a month after his father had died, he climbed one of the towers of the Tappan Zee Bridge to the very top, where the red lights blinked warnings to low-flying planes. Wedged between steel iron bars like the branches of an enormous tree, he gazed down at the Hudson River heading to New York City and pouring itself out into the Atlantic Ocean. From that height, the surface shone as hard black glass, a deep wound in the earth that made a dark trail out. That trail was how he would leave home, by going out to sea.

Walker drew boats obsessively. Boats that he would one day build. He wanted to be self-sufficient. He dreamed of long sailing voyages. He would raise his children on boats. It would keep them pure. He would teach them to know sailing and the sea better than people and land. He believed he was destined for something great, epic in scale, something like the ocean.

They talked about what they would do when they got their boat. There was the problem of money. Walker dropped out of college to search for the boat and to earn the money. First he found the boat but he couldn't afford to buy her. And even if he could afford to buy *Papio*, they would need so much more: a compass, sextant, lots of new line, new anchor, anchor chain, an extra mainsail, water tanks, food and provisions, charts, star tables and other navigation equipment, and expensive tackle like shackles, new cleats, and foul-weather gear, and a dinghy or life

raft, a radio, fuel, paint, and varnish. He spent months adding up the figures, making long lists of the necessary equipment, and every time it came to the same impossible amount.

He would have to work on a cargo ship, going out for many months, maybe even a whole year. He could never make enough bussing tables at the Indian restaurant, where no one came so there were no tips. It could have taken five or six years to make the money that Nina's mother gave them with one scribbled check. Walker wanted more than anything to be self-sufficient, take nothing from anybody. But that summer he turned twenty-one and he also wanted his life to start.

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Sometimes the streets of Galveston would fill with sailors from a naval ship that was in port. Cadets in sailor uniforms like out of some musical with their white hats and funny bell-bottomed pants. On the weekends, they were drunk. Their cropped heads made them look even younger, raw, exposed. Made them look like they were about to cry. Walker would give Nina lists of things to do while he was at work. She'd have to find the visa department of some country, or a shop that sold a special water filter. Each errand seemed to balloon in importance, to take the entire day, or several days. She said each thing was a journey.

Back at the skiff, she'd load it with all the provisions. She'd board gently, careful not to tip it to one side. There was always a little bit of water in the bottom, enough to get her feet wet, or the hem of her skirt. She was always leaving from some dock or quayside that smelled of rotting fish, creosote, and sea air. Proud to be different, to be living on water.

On weekends they took their bag of laundry to the fancy marina. They would pay to have showers and wash their clothes and collect the mail. In the evening, holding hands, they would walk along the docks looking at the fancy expensive yachts, and Walker would criticize them. They had all the latest equipment, unlike *Papio*, but none of her salt. They were glorified Clorox bottles, he said. Their owners were mere landlubbers, armchair sailors.

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Before they left Galveston to sail to Mexico and the Yu-

catan, Nina's mother came to visit. Her marriage was falling apart. She said she had to see the boat, but really she needed a shoulder to cry on. She had remarried only six months after Nina's father died.

The neighbor, who drank too much.

They took her for a sail in the bay. Pollux got sick, as she always did at the beginning of their sails. She threw up and hid somewhere in the bilges, meowing. And then when they were coming back to their mooring, Walker overshot it and they slammed into another boat. The only time he'd ever done that, made that kind of sailing mistake.

It was an accident, Nina and her mother had told people after her father went for a swim and slipped under the water and didn't come back up.

Nina's mother gave them a duffel bag of Christmas presents, which Walker hated. They fought about it. Making lists of each other's useless possessions.

Then Nina said it:

"You might hate my mother and the things she buys, but you don't hate it when she buys you a boat."

* * *

The water is calm and pewter grey under moonlight, when Walker smells mud. He calls to Nina to wake up and come on deck. The water is moving funny. She smells it too. "Land," she says.

It's shocking how familiar it smells. The smell of gardens, of childhood playgrounds. Mud ground into the knee, red clay under the nails. The loamy dark black compost spread on his grandmother's asparagus patch. The smell of the thawing earth in spring.

When they bump ground, it's a soft nudge. One that does not belong in an ocean Walker thinks is sixty fathoms or 360 feet deep.

"COME ABOUT!" Walker screams. "Take the tiller. Keep her hard over."

They are heading north when off the port beam a white foam fence appears. Breakers, breaking waves. The night is so dark that the line of white foam defines the horizon, the place where sky meets water. There's something there, drawing them near, pulling them into itself. Again and again he sees the line of foam bloom and spread across the horizon.

"Breakers," he says, almost in a whisper, as if it's a phantom. He moves to the bow, to get a closer look.

They bloom again, a bit brighter, with the sound of crunching shells.

"Those are breakers!" He repeats to himself, absorbing the shock of it.

"Fall off," he screams as he jumps into action, "fall off, Nina! To port, to your left!"

But the current keeps sucking them in, broadside, towards the reef. No matter how hard she pushes the tiller, *Papio* will not turn any more. They are moving sideways. Hardly any wind in their sails. The reef is pulling them in.

He backs the sails and ties them off. He takes out the large oar called the sweep.

"Turn!" he says. "Come on, wind! Come on! Have mercy!"

As he works the sweep he makes calculations. They are windward of the reef. They have no engine. It's the middle of the night. And they're going to be shipwrecked on a coral reef sixty miles north of any inhabited land.

He stops looking at the white foam hissing and spraying. But he feels it sucking at them, gnawing at them. The undertow pulls towards wreckage.

His body reaches and pulls, working the sweep. A groan comes from inside his chest. He uses everything he has to turn the world beneath their boat. He swears, he raises his voice to the gods that he hasn't believed in until this moment.

Time slows. He can see everything. He can float above them on this little boat and watch their desperate struggle. He knows everything about his life, his choices. He sees it laid out, how each thing led to the next, perfectly like a chain. But here, he has made a mistake. He has a regret. He has brought the woman he loves out to sea and now she will die and it will be his fault.

He manages to get *Papio* turned around with the sweep just as a gust of wind snaps the slack canvas full, as if the boat herself is gasping for air. She digs into the water, bends over and pulls away from the current, slowly. He unties the backed sails and pushes the beam out to grab all the wind. He turns to look astern. They came so close to the reef, pulled into its danger, the same way a dangerous desire can pull you in. They are only a few feet away. He tacks and heads west, and then north. It takes forever to

clear the ground, the bumping and jerking as *Papio* drags on bottom. At each bump, he thinks she will split apart.

But she moves along, towards open water. *An accident.* Walker spends the rest of the night on the bow scanning the horizon, Nina at the helm.

Gwen Strauss is based in southern France, where she works as the on-site director of the Dora Maar House, an artist residency program. Her poetry book *Trail of Stones*, with illustrations by Anthony Browne, is widely anthologized, and was recently turned into a theatrical performance. *The Night Shimmy*, a children's book with the same illustrator, was translated into six languages. *Ruth and the Green Book* received wide recognition, including as an ALA 2011 Notable Children's Middle Reader, a 2011 Honor Book from the Jane Addams Peace Association, and this year, as "one of ten books all Georgians should read" by the Georgia Center for the Book Advisory Council. Her writing has appeared in *The New Republic*, *New England Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *London Sunday Times*, and *Antioch Review*. "The Reef" is an extract from her novel manuscript *Papio*, which is based on her own life. When a naive American couple on a small boat sailing around the Yucatan run out of money, they accept a job smuggling contraband, only to discover they are carrying weapons illegally supplied by the CIA to the Guatemalan military.