

WILLIAM KOHLER

Come Up from a Ground, 2023
Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

BETTE LYNCH HUSTED

Gracie

If I'd had a shovel in my hand I might have gotten myself into trouble. But I had already dug the garden bed and was crawling down the first row on my hands and knees, humming that little planting song that always makes me think of Pete, and young Arlo. And my grandmother, of course. I see her hands, hear her voice. *About two inches apart*, she told me, all those years ago in her little backyard garden. *Smooth the dirt over them like this.*

So I do. Every year about this time, ever since I found this place.

And then there he was, standing over me with the bright spring sun directly behind his head, making me crane my neck to squint up at him. Same khakis, same blue tie. Doctor Mustache, I called him when I was in the hospital—not a doctor, really, just the case manager who had kept asking me those questions that were none of his damned business and had no relation to the ministroke that had landed me in St. Gertrude's in the first place, either. Did I have friends, he wanted to know. Hobbies. (Hobbies!) Had I gotten on with my mother-in-law? So long ago. As well as could have been expected, I told him, though nuance was clearly lost on Doctor Mustache.

A soft landing, he called it: that nursing home he wanted me to go to. Rose Manor. How would I manage living out here on my own? Been managing for over forty years, I told him. Intend to go on managing, thank you very much. I signed myself out before he got around to his home safety inspection, because it was time to plant the peas.

Which I'd gone back to doing. He could stand there all day for all I cared.

"I can see why you love it here," he said.

Where was my Boyo? Why had he let this man down the driveway without so much as a bark?

"Miss Grace, can you tell me what day it is?"

I let that pass.

"What year?"

I stood up and brushed my hands against my jeans. My heart was back in business, bumping against my chest. "Mr."—what did his name tag say?—"Monteith. I'm not sure what game we're playing here, but if we're taking turns, let's say you tell me. What phase is the moon in?"

He blinked.

"I keep a calendar hanging in the kitchen. Just to the left of the door, right there above the coat hooks. Go on in

and check it out if you like. It will tell you the day and year, all right, anything like that you need to know, and those little crescents and circle symbols represent the moon.”

Blank. The man was a blank slate. *Tabula rasa*. Surely he had a family, an apartment, somewhere else to go besides my place?

“The calendar will say it’s waxing now, just past crescent. Gibbous. It’s a gibbous moon.”

He looked toward the house. For a minute there I thought he was going to take me up on it. Check me out. But he just nodded. “You have a nice day, Miss Grace.”

“I’m having one right now, Mr. Monteith. You have yourself one, too.”

I heard his car start up on the county road and then a red-winged blackbird. One of the first this spring. And then a low chuckle from over across the creek. It could have been the murmur of current around rock, a sound so quiet I could almost talk myself into thinking I’d imagined it.

I went back to planting, so I didn’t see which direction Boy-Dog came from, but when he poked his nose under my arm and I sat back on my heels, I saw a dandelion stem someone—a woman, surely—had split and curled around his collar. His soft white chest fur smelled like woodsmoke.

“You’re not the only ghost hanging around here,” I told her.

Sometimes when I’m waking up, just before I open my eyes, I think: What season are we in? Winter? Summer? Fall? It comes to me, of course. But there’s that feeling, a kind of floating weightlessness.

And the truth is, I don’t always know what day it is. Doctor Mustache might not understand this—but except for keeping appointments and not showing up at the library when it’s closed, what difference does it make? Every once in a while I have to remind myself what year it is. Convince myself, more like. I *know*, but it feels so unreal. Who knew time could go so fast?

In fact, I’d love to talk with someone about time. Trouble is, you have to walk through a whole lot of years to have the kind of questions I do. David would have loved this kind of talk, but David left this place, and me, long ago. There are times when I wonder if he was ever really

here. It was our dream, going back to the land as they called it in those days, but I’m the one who wallpapered the upstairs bedrooms and calked the windows of this old farmhouse and carried water to the young orchard trees until they bore fruit.

The big box stores at the edge of town have driven most of the old shops into the ground. Maybe that’s why the scuffed wood floor of Ray’s Hardware slopes downhill a little more each year, is what I was thinking, which is why I was laughing as I came through the door, setting off the sleigh bell that lets Ray know he has a customer. The mounted cougar was still stalking customers from her shelf above the counter and of course there were deer heads on the wall behind the till, along with fading color photographs of the men who’d shot them. I’ve never understood the need for that kind of thing.

“What’s the joke, Gracie?”

“Oh, nothing, Ray, just thinking. Inside joke, I guess.”

“Yeah?” He grinned. We’ve known each other for a long time. We were halfway down the narrow aisle where Ray keeps pull-out drawers full of screws and nails, almost to the fence staples, when RoseMarie appeared out of nowhere.

“Heard they had you down at the hospital last week.” She put her hand on my shoulder as if we were best friends. “Hope you’re feeling better. Heart, was it?”

But she’s Ray’s kid, so all I said was, “Nothing an aspirin won’t take care of.” I suppose if your own life hasn’t gone like you’d planned you might want to start minding other people’s business, see if that works out better for you.

Well, and gossip is what keeps small-town life clicking along. I’d given her just enough to build a good story. Who knows? She might even come up with the same diagnosis the doctors did.

But she had news. “Did you hear, Grace? About the homeless woman? People have seen her passing their windows just as it’s getting dark. No one knows where she goes. You know, where she sleeps.”

“Here they are. Fence staples.” Ray pulled the drawer open. “How many you need?”

“Might as well get a pound. Bear got excited and went through my fence last night, dragged the whole length of it out into the pasture.”

“A bear!” RoseMarie would be passing this along, too. “Aren’t you scared, living out there alone?”

“Not as scared as he was,” I told her. “He didn’t even take time to find the gate.”

Ray shook his head, but he was smiling.

RoseMarie followed us back to the till, so she was there to see Dr. Mustache—Monteith—walk by the window. He had a girl about twelve years old with him. His daughter, maybe. Same blue eyes, anyway. She caught RoseMarie watching and waved.

“There’s something different about that girl.”

It wasn’t like RoseMarie to stop after making a comment like that one, but stop is what she did.

And now, of course, I was the curious one. *Go home and fix your fence*, I told myself.

The peas were up, that shade of green that can make you believe in spring all over again. That first year we planted peas in a February thaw. Couldn’t wait, the weather was so beautiful. They had sprouted as green as these when we woke up to find them buried under half a foot of snow.

Well, you learn. But there are days I wish I still had that kind of hope. That eagerness.

I was putting in the onion sets, feeling the sun warm on my back, when I happened to think, *Where’s Boy?* I stood up and looked around. He wanders, of course, but usually when I’m working on the ground like this he’s right beside me.

“Boy?” I called. “Boy-Dog?”

Then I remembered and thought to look down by the creek. *She may like dogs, whoever she is, but I can’t lose my Boy.*

This time I caught a glimpse of her, or of something, just a motion really, fading into the brush the way a deer can do. And there was Boy, right beside me.

“Where’d you come from?” I asked him. I could feel my heart doing its dance again. His coat was damp.

“Wait!” I called out. Who knows why. Of course she didn’t answer.

I do try to mind my own business, but I swear, sometimes people just won’t let me. And when Boyo and I were taking our walk up Split Creek Road and Lois stopped her rig to

tell me I had a new neighbor, I was curious. “They’re my next stop,” she said. “The old Jeffers place. So far off the road I forget it’s there. Wouldn’t have thought that house was still fit to live in, but I guess they’re making do.”

“They?”

“A man and a girl. He’s new at the hospital.” She looked down at the pile of envelopes and catalogs on the seat. “Monteith. Kevin Monteith.”

So.

And the girl?

Lois contracts to deliver the mail out here, so she keeps up on things without worrying about regulations, rules about privacy and such. Her ear is always to the ground, so to speak.

Sure enough, there was more. “The daughter’s eleven, maybe twelve. Poor kid, she’s the one who shot her own mother when she was barely old enough to walk.”

Oh, God. I remembered hearing about that. Some man thought he should make sure his wife could protect herself and gave her a gun for her birthday. Just big enough to slip into a purse, the purse she’d set next to her toddler in the child seat of a grocery cart. It was the kind of story that just sank your heart.

That was Dr. Mustache? I remembered now, studying his face. Those lines around his eyes. *Time to get your attitude up off the floor, Gracie*, I told myself. *Monteith. He’s your neighbor, it turns out, and he has a lot on his plate. And making that old house fit to live in after the pack rats is the least of it.*

I could almost convince myself that I was spending so much time down at the creek because the days were getting warm now and Boy needed to cool off. He loved splashing and swimming after sticks, and I loved watching him, even when he shook himself dry and bright drops of water flew in all directions, including mine.

I was really watching for her, of course. Hoping to get a glimpse.

I didn’t have much to go on, just that low chuckle from the creek. I knew she was “outside,” as the homeless people call it, probably sleeping on the ground. But it was this ground. This land. I had this crazy feeling we’d be kindred spirits. That she would feel the way I did about this place.

But here was David's ghost again, reminding me he was no longer a kindred spirit, if he'd ever been one. "You've changed," he said. "You've fallen in love with the land."

By solstice time the peas had begun to fill out so I figured it was time to welcome my new neighbors. They'd get the first picking, and I'd open a hill of red potatoes too. Creamed peas and new potatoes: there's nothing sweeter, this time of year. And I owed Dr. Mustache, is what I thought. Defense can turn into offense all too easily, at least in my case.

"Monteith," I told Boy-Dog. "Kevin Monteith. Remember."

Sometimes I swear he's laughing.

They were home; at least his rig was there, and a red bicycle leaned against the siding. We had walked, so they wouldn't have heard a motor or a pickup door shutting. I didn't want to startle him, so I made some noise, but it was the girl who answered the door. Blue eyes and freckles, shading her eyes against the light. Behind me Boy was already wagging his tail. "Hi there!" she said. Whether to me or the dog I wasn't sure, until she knelt in the doorway and opened her arms.

"You two know each other?"

Her face was buried in Boy's white neck fur. "I met him down at the creek. He's the most beautiful dog I've ever seen."

"He likes you, too," I said.

She looked up. "What's his name?"

"Boy-Dog. Or just Boy. Or Boyo."

"Boyo," she said. "Oh, Boyo." Her laugh was a laugh, not a giggle.

Then there was Monteith, bare feet and faded Levis. White T-shirt that looked as if he'd been sleeping in it. "Grace." It had taken him a second, but of course I was out of context.

"Yes, hello again, Mr. Monteith." His daughter was still down on her knees, Boy panting happily. "I just came by to welcome you to the neighborhood. Brought you some peas and potatoes."

"Peas and—"

He'd been asleep. Give him a minute. "First picking," I said. "Tastes special this time of year." Surely he'd heard of creamed peas and potatoes?

"Well, thank you." He had finally blinked himself awake. Standing straighter now, and there was that mustache.

"Megs."

The girl looked up. "This is him, Dad," she said. "The dog I was telling you about. Isn't he great?"

"I'm sure he is." Monteith's smile was already gone, but it had been there. "But you need to greet people too. Grace, this is my daughter, Megan. And Megan, this is Grace. You already know the dog."

"Hello," she said. But she didn't let go, and I had to pass the paper bag over the two of them, girl and dog, to her father.

"You can come visit him any time," I told her. I wasn't sure how Monteith reacted to that—stood even straighter, maybe—but he didn't say anything and finally I was the one who spoke. "Okay, Boy."

I had tried.

I shut the chickens up evenings, so as not to tempt fate—coyotes have lived here lot longer than I have, and they're always hungry—but I let the hens run loose all day, and in the summer they tend to shun the nest boxes and hide their eggs in nests of their own making, hoping for chicks. I sympathize with their instinct, even though that particular miracle hadn't happened for David and me and it wasn't going to happen for them, either, since I don't keep any roosters. I try to listen for their announcements—*kutkut-kutkedackit!*—but sometimes they will accumulate four or five eggs before I find their nest. Just on a hunch I left three in one of these, a grassy bowl tucked under brush near the creek bank. Sure enough, the next day there were only two.

I'm always happy to share. That's just one of the things the earth has taught me, living here.

Could I set some eggs out in a bowl, I wondered? Or would that just scare her away? She was private, that much I knew. It seemed a shame not to be able to offer her fresh peas and potatoes. She was as much of a neighbor as Monteith.

The next time Boy went bounding down to the creek I followed him, and there was Megan, perched on a rock in midstream, her arms wrapped around Boy's neck. I could see a blue feather drying on the rock next to her and three pieces of quartz still shiny wet. Was it this girl whose

shadow I'd seen at the creek? Not a woman but a child who loved dogs and minnows and wading through leaf-shadow, a child set free in the world to explore?

"Look!" She didn't let go of Boy-Dog, just tipped her head back to look nearly straight up at the cottonwood branch that hung over the creek and, though I hadn't noticed it before, an oriole nest hanging from its tip. They always make my heart skip too, these woven bags dangling miraculously above the earth. Or in this case, water.

"What's it for?" she wanted to know. "Bees? Or squirrels?"

I had to smile. "Good guesses, but no, the answer is birds. Orioles. They make this kind of nest."

"How do they hatch the eggs?"

"They must snuggle down in from the top."

She cocked her head, trying to see the opening, I imagined.

"Do you think you could make a nest like this one?"

That got her attention.

"I mean, not just you, but anyone. Do you think people can do this?"

I watched it happen, but how to describe it—all I can say is something happened to her face. It changed. She was smiling now, but it was more than that.

"I like you," she said.

RoseMarie was right: there was something different about this girl.

"You might want to watch for the orioles. Do you know what they look like?" When she shook her head, I said, "Well, come on up to the house and we'll get out the bird book."

She looked down.

"Better yet, you stay here with Boy-Dog and I'll bring the book to you. Okay?"

She nodded. Quiet now.

But she was still there when I came back with the book, *Birds of the Inland Northwest*. It's a good one, easy to use, great photographs, and I've always loved the "Did you know?" feature, one for every bird. It would fit in the pocket of her little daypack, and I was pretty sure I could find another copy somewhere. There's a color-coded index on the first page, so it was easy to show her how to find the oriole.

"Oh, they're beautiful!" She looked up at the nest. "Do you think they'll come today?"

"Wouldn't be surprised." I couldn't help smiling. There had been so few children in my life.

"You can keep the book," I told her.

When we first came to this place, I was a lot like Megan: just waking up to the world. It was all so beautiful, to use her word, and there was so much to learn. That wrap-around shelf in my kitchen meant for spices and tins of sugar and flour is still filled with bird books, books about wildflowers and weeds, rocks. Stars. Mammals and insects and fish.

One spring the creek ran so high that it washed away part of the bank, and that summer I found a piece of basalt with a hollow place big enough to hold acorns or seeds. A metate, a grinding stone. The people who had left it, I learned at the library—the Takelma—had lived here for thousands of years and knew this land in ways no book could teach me. They knew how to recognize the gifts of this place—food, clothing, shelter, stories. Imagine! I've tried to learn everything I can about how to live here, on this particular piece of earth, but books are a poor substitute for elders.

And there's this: four years after my own people got here, the Takelma were force marched to reservations far up the coast. A few survived.

I wasn't there. But I'm here now. A settler colonial, as they say.

Back to whose land?

Boy and I were taking our daily walk up Split Creek Road when Monteith's little blue Toyota pickup passed us. He didn't wave. But he slowed, and I could see him looking in his rearview mirror. Then he shifted into reverse and backed up until he was even with us.

"Hello, Grace."

"Hello, yourself!" I was smiling, and Boy was wagging his tail as if Monteith were a long-lost friend.

But he was shifting in his seat, reaching for his wallet, it turned out. "I wanted to pay you for the bird book." And just that quick, there was a twenty hanging in the air between us.

"What?"

"For the book you gave my daughter the other day."

"Oh, no, the book was a gift." *Don't you know anything?*

I wanted to add. “She’s quite the budding naturalist, isn’t she?” I smiled again and stepped back, ready to go on with our walk.

“It’s just . . .” He looked at the road ahead, then back at me. “I want her to stay close to home when I’m at work.”

“It’s hard with girls, isn’t it?” I said. “Just when they’re wanting to explore the world you feel like you need to protect them even more. ‘Shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy,’ but even more, it’s always seemed to me, for the growing girl.”

His face tightened. He’d shaved his mustache, I finally noticed. Something about me irritated him, and this conversation wasn’t helping.

“Do you have children, Grace?”

“No.”

“No.” He shifted into gear.

Boy-Dog was still wagging his tail as Monteith’s pickup turned the corner. “Not a Wordsworth fan, apparently,” I said, finally, but even Boy didn’t seem to think it was funny.

By now the speckled hen had moved on to another place to try her luck, but I’d been slipping two or three eggs into her old nest by the creek anyway, and sometimes one disappeared. Gifts appeared, too—not in the nest, but close enough for me to notice. An orange flicker feather, a blue half shell of robin’s egg. Once a piece of pink quartz.

Or maybe I was just imagining things. Robins do drop shells from their nests, and birds lose feathers.

I suppose it was this business with Monteith that had me questioning myself. Yes, I live alone, I’d told him, and I get along just fine. But the truth is, I’ve never felt totally alone. I’ve always sensed the spirits of the people who birthed their babies here, laughed and cried and buried their dead in this land for thousands of years. We talk ourselves out of believing in these things, but really, how could it be otherwise?

What I didn’t understand is why I couldn’t stop wondering about this woman.

And the girl, for that matter. Megan. I couldn’t stop thinking about her either, her pure delight in that oriole nest. So I dug out David’s old binoculars and Boy and I took a ride. Sure enough, we found her bicycle stashed in the Queen Anne’s lace beside the road, and I looped the strap around her handlebars.

Now, *mind your own business*, I told myself.

And for quite a while, I did. I was busy enough with the canning, green beans and beets, and then picking berries for jam. I was almost back to my old self—my *old* self, as I was beginning to think—when I saw Monteith’s pickup coming down my driveway. Megan was with him, but she didn’t get out when he opened the driver’s side door and walked up my steps. He was carrying the binoculars.

“Thanks for these,” he said. “I got her a pair of her own, so we’re returning yours.”

It wasn’t all that shocking a thing to do, I suppose, but for a minute I couldn’t breathe, much less speak. We stood there looking at each other. Finally I took the binoculars. The fine lines in his face that made me think of a porcelain bowl someone had shattered and tried to glue back together. Megan was waving. Monteith moved to go, then stopped. “You can’t replace her.” His words were thick and heavy in the air.

“I know,” I told him. “I’m sorry.” I reached to touch his arm, but he shook me away. And then he was gone.

The next time he passed us on our morning walk he slowed, then shifted into reverse. What now? Even Boyo watched him back up with what seemed like suspicion.

But what he wanted was help. He’d feel better about Meg going off exploring if she could take a dog with her. Would I mind telling him where he could find a dog like Boy? “She loves him so much, I thought maybe a similar breed,” he said. Smiling now.

I’ll admit I liked that view better.

“I’ll ask around,” I told him. “Boy is border collie and a bit of Aussie. Australian shepherd. It’s a good cross—they’re just as smart and usually not quite as hyper as a purebred. Though a puppy . . . well, any puppy will keep you busy.”

“Keeping her busy until school starts is the plan.” This time he actually grinned.

The number on the card he handed me was his work extension at St. Gertrude’s. Still, it was a start.

The next time Boy and I went exploring, we found Megan sitting on a creek-side windfall with her new binoculars pointed at the oriole nest. “I think the babies have flown now,” she said. “Fledged, I mean.”

“I expect so.”

She lowered the binoculars and put her arm around Boy’s neck. “Oh, Boyo, Boyo, Boyo!”

“Not long now until school starts,” I said, and then wished I hadn’t. I wasn’t even sure if she had been here long enough to have friends at school. I had the feeling they had moved a lot.

There was sudden motion in the brush across the creek.

“Squirrels! And they’re playing chase!” The vine maple branches seemed to have a life of their own.

But I was still scanning the shadows when Megan lowered her binoculars. “Are you looking for that woman?”

I nodded. How did she know about this woman?

“She’s gone. She had the same name as my mom. She wasn’t a ghost, though. She was real.” Megan raised the binoculars again. Boy leaned closer, lifting his muzzle beneath her girl-slender arm.

“Boyo.” She rubbed her cheek against his fur.

“I’m glad you got to talk with her,” I said, finally.

“I think she was shy. But she liked the eggs.”

“That’s good.”

“She showed me where the kingfisher lives, how it burrows way back in the bank to make its nest. And she could catch fish with her hand! I tried, but I can’t do it.”

“Yet.”

There it was again, her face lit by the surprise of joy. She laughed.

“I wouldn’t want to bet against it, anyway,” I said.

Edna and Roy had saved two pups from Sadie’s litter, and it was already clear that the female was destined to be a pet, not a working dog. “She’s hopeless,” Roy laughed, pointing at Edna with his chin as the puppy curled into her lap.

She smiled up at him. “Oh, go on. You can have your turn in a minute.”

This dog would be perfect. Coming up on four months, she was already big enough to follow Megan on her adventures. House-trained, even. She had Boy’s coloring, though Sadie had found a different father for her pups this time.

But she wouldn’t be my dog. I left Monteith’s number with them and waited to see what they could work out.

The next afternoon I was in the garden checking for full ears of corn when I heard a pickup coming down my driveway. And then there they were, Monteith looking

almost as happy as his daughter. “Isn’t she beautiful?” Megan was already on her knees in a swirl of moving fur, Boyo wagging this new dog a wild welcome. “Her name’s Gracie. We named her after you!”

“Did you?”

“If that’s okay.” Monteith shrugged, smiling. “Thanks for your help with this, Grace.”

“Kevin,” I said. “That’s what neighbors . . . do.” I bent to the puppy, probably fooling no one. When I had control of my voice again I whispered, “You are a pretty one, aren’t you?”

“She’s so soft!” Megan couldn’t stop smiling.

Monteith—Kevin—squatted down beside his daughter and the dogs, scratching the pup beneath her chin. “We’re your neighbors too, Grace.” He wasn’t looking in my direction. “If you ever need—” Gracie leaped to lick his face, and he sputtered back, laughing. “Though that’s getting harder to imagine.”

“Oh, I don’t know. We can all use help from time to time.”

That evening, shucking corn for dinner, I told Boy, “Now there’s a changed man.” He cocked his head. “Okay,” I said. “Yes, I’ve softened a bit, too.”

Something else was different. It took me a while, but then it came to me. The spirits were still here, all around us, but the ghost was gone.

Bette Lynch Husted’s previous work includes the novel *All Coyote’s Children* (Oregon State University Press, 2018); a poetry collection, *At This Distance* (Wordcraft of Oregon, 2010); and two collections of personal essays—*Lessons from the Borderlands* (Plain View Press, 2012) and *Above the Clearwater: Living on Stolen Land* (Oregon State University Press, 2004), which was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award.