

New Review: Michael Carson on Kevin Honold's *Our Lady of Good Voyage*



CROATOAN: A Review of Kevin Honold's *Our Lady of Good Voyage* (Orison Books, 2024).

Kevin Honold's *Our Lady of Good Voyage* begins in an unnamed Ohio town populated with German ghosts. The Germans, the children and grandchildren of once prosperous immigrants, all elderly now, move through the streets incuriously, "lacking the imagination to move on." Joe, the novel's reluctant protagonist, pulls his squad car over and tries to help one of these living ghosts but ends up giving her two dollars and advice to buy some lozenges. As he drives off, he realizes that despite "a common language," he once again "failed to trade a single piece of worthwhile information." "I may as well be a god damn ghost," he thinks.

Joe's childhood friend does not have time to be a ghost. Kenny believes that Mary, the mother of God, comes to him in dreams with a crown of stars and the moon beneath her feet and wants Kenny to visit her in what the Aztecs called the center of the moon, and what we, today, call Mexico. He believes that the devil is a miracle that has created the illusion of our self-centered world ("lovelier than a thousand Sistine Chapels") and only the act of a journey, a pilgrimage, can save us from this first miracle with a second. He believes that the voyages of Captain Cook and Intuit hunting practices are as real and as present as the toilet pipes he and Joe repair after high school. He knows that all is sacred, all always alive, and that we, unlike ghosts, have a choice to see this or not.

But Kenny is gone, and has been for ten years. He haunts the edges of Joe's muted days, appearing shoeless in crowded city streets, preaching his vision to empty train cars, leaving the final message of the vanished Roanoke settlers (CROATOAN) graffitied in drainage ditches. Joe circles the flickers of this ebbing fire in his squad car, these hints, only sure of one thing: that Kenny, his best friend, failed at everything, but that failure itself somehow legitimized the undertaking. "Anything else was not worth the time."

The novel's other chapters take place on the road, in memory. Joe and Kenny make their way down from Ohio toward Mexico. They drink with a man with his head caved in on a bus, hitchhike with a suicidal veteran, violate the Missouri law of being poor (and from Ohio), escape an apocalypse-obsessed family cult in Louisiana, and hop trains with immigrants across Texas. The immigrants smile but nod off at Kenny's story. They are too exhausted to hear the end, how he and Joe will find Mary outside Mexico City and beg her to reveal the truth, and this truth, her love for them, and their love for her, will make it impossible to deny the sacredness of every living thing. Border Control disappears the immigrants. VA hospitals and jails disappear the drunks. Churches and homes warm the faithful and the righteous and those who never leave home. It is difficult to say who the ghosts are here. Kenny tells us the devil most certainly is not one. We should love the devil, he confides to his fellow inmates in a Missouri prison, for "if we don't love him too, the work will forever remain unfinished...I see him every day."

Joe smashes a scorpion during his tour of duty in Somalia that follows their pilgrimage. He uses an oil barrel three times to crush it, and it does nothing spectacular, just stops moving. "Damn, killer," says another soldier. Joe does not believe in God or that this world can mean anything more than it is. He sees only the humiliated and the humiliation. He signs up for the military because in a world that is all ghost, deployments

and war become un-ghostly, a quickening, bloody heart in a waste of gray. They have been raised by exhausted and unhappy men with repressed memories of brutal World War 2 campaigns. But the pride of that rare past, of being someone else once, keeps their uncles and fathers alive to themselves in a world that has moved on. Joe sees this. He is smart enough to know that it is nice to have done something, to go somewhere, to be someone, at least once. And the military pays for school now, they say.

We all have a bit of Joe in us. It's all sad. It's all a loop, nonsense, a slow fading away. Don't be too curious. Don't look too far outside the electric light. Suck it up. You don't know what's out there. Keep your head down by pretending to hold it up. The is is the is. Stay alive. And we do. We survive for so long. Thousands of years. Whole eternities. Look at us! Examine our cities, our "brief golden clusters suspended in the night" and the armies of creatures crossing silently through the fields and trainyards around and within them. "The dead never hurt anybody," Kenny tells Joe during a training exercise with the moon above them like a spider's egg in the naked, winter branches. "It's the other ones we have to worry about."

Then Kenny almost despairs. He says he can hardly remember Her anymore. He warns Joe that "forgetting is the only death...Evil is everything that dims and obscures and wears away the gift for remembering." Joe says, no, "Evil is time itself. Time is what takes everything away." Kenny's eyes go bright (brighter) with tears and hugs his friend. "You have been listening. Now I know. Thank you." Joe does listen. We do listen. Even if we pretend that we don't. Some say that's all ghosts can really do. Some say that only ghosts believe in time because they are trapped in the idea of it. Others—like me—say that novels as true and wise and joyful as *Our Lady of Good Voyage* prove Kenny wrong. There will *always* be people among us who remember, ergo nothing ever dies, and there is no evil,

despite the best attempts of the righteous and incurious to make us believe otherwise.

But enough with the ghosts. In the book's final pages Joe, a child again, runs away from a snapping turtle that a group of boys have stomped to death, back to Kenny, off the path, somewhere in the woods. They spend hours "contriving little ships from bark and twigs, binding the planks and timbers with long green grasses." They make a fort out of some old logs and beg for food from the local bakery. They work like devils to create a home that is not a home thanks to Kenny's mom, who provides them somewhere safe to come back to, to return to after their long difficult pilgrimages, in Ohio, and Mexico, and Africa, searching for the mother of God the world over. They complete their project. They look out from their fort with immense human satisfaction. "Neither deadlines nor schedules concerned them, not the world's troubles, and the long days led away, in gratuitous succession, to the very vanishing point of time, which was inexhaustible as air, and warranted as little concern."

You can buy *Our Lady of Good Voyage* at [Orison Books](#).