

A MIGHTY PRETTY BLUE

Shafter, Texas, 1986–2003

BY MICHAEL PARKER

with art by Jo Ann H. Hart

JO ANN H. HART has been a member of the art faculty at UNC Pembroke since 2007. She received her BFA in painting and drawing at Texas Tech University and her MFA in painting at the University of North Texas. Her work has been exhibited in such venues as the North Carolina Museum of Art; the Gertrude Herbert Institute of Art in Augusta, GA; the Brooklyn Art Library in New York; the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur; and the Banshi College in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. She has served as a member of both the Committee 100 and the Education Committee for the North Carolina Museum of Art, and she received the Fine Arts Award for Community Enrichment at the University of North Texas, where she was also honored with the Golden Eagle Award for community commitment. See more of her work on her [website](#).

THE DAY THAT THE BUICK

CORD BOUGHT FOR HER SHOWED UP IN THE DRIVEWAY, EVELYN HAD TAKEN THE PICKUP INTO TOWN. They had been down to one vehicle since Evelyn had hit a pronghorn coming home from church one night four months earlier.

All Evelyn said about the Buick when she got home was, “It’s a mighty pretty blue.”

“I know you never cared to drive this thing into town,” Cord said, helping her unload groceries from the extended cab of his truck, but of course what he meant was, I want my truck back and I will be goddamned if I am going to hang around town waiting on you to practice choir.

A month later Cord had a heart attack. He died alone, out penning cows. He was just sixty-six, but he hated doctors and hospitals, even though his father and one of his brothers had died young with bad hearts. Evelyn buried him and came home to the cries of mother cows calling for their babies. It was time to separate the calves from their mothers, and her husband’s friends and neighbors had skipped the funeral to take calves away from their mothers because this is what her husband would have expected them to do. This is how they should pay their respects. In all her years out here she had never gotten used to the wails of cattle mourning their taken-away calves. Sometimes it would last three or four days. She’d run fans and sometimes even turn up the radio to drown it out, but it lingered even after the cows had given up on ever seeing their babies again and then it was their silence that got to her. How could any of God’s creatures put up with the loss of a child and go right on eating and sleeping? She didn’t see how that was possible. She had wanted children and her husband had not. Cord was from a large family and had nothing to do with any of his siblings. Two of his sisters up in Fort Worth she had never even seen since their wedding forty-four years earlier. The few times Evelyn brought

up wanting children, Cord said, “Once you start, you have to keep on going. You can’t have just one, because they’d need someone to play with and they say one is just as much work as five. More work, because the older ones will raise the youngest and let you do your chores. Fill a house up with young’uns and they’ll grow up hating how you made ’em share everything from toys to oatmeal to dungarees.”

Evelyn thought this was either the strangest reason she’d ever heard of for not having children or the saddest. Because he did not want his children to have to share? She knew Cord had grown up in a house where nothing ever got talked about. He said to her once when they first started dating that his parents acted like two kids in a contest to see who could hold their breath the longest. About purple in the face and bug-eyed three-quarters of the time. He only mentioned this the one time, but she never forgot it because she had grown up in a house not too far off from what he described. Her father, home from work at the sawmill he ran, sat in his chair next to the radio asleep with his mouth open, and her mother sat knitting across the room from him. The whole house filled with flies that Evelyn went around swatting just to exercise something so deep and buried in her she favored it, something a little cruel and a lot desperate, maybe what made her marry whom she married when she married and surely what made her – still in the dress she wore to the funeral, her house filled with women of the church come to comfort her with rectangles of Pyrex they all knew she would give to the Mexican girl who came twice a week to help her around the house, or feed untouched to her dogs – climb into the Buick he had bought her and drive the six miles of two-track out to where the men were loading up the calves to the cries of mothers and tell them she wanted every last cow off the ranch as soon as they could move them, cow and calf and bull, all of them, and when they



Peach (collage, digital print, film, paper, ink, LED light) by Jo Ann H. Hart

opened their mouths to tell her what she knew would be what her husband would have said to this, she got back in the Buick and backed it the six miles to the house, getting within the first half mile a crick in her neck so awful she welcomed it, for this sort of pain was far preferable to what she felt listening to the cows keep up their vigil for the calves who were not coming back.

The Buick went backward as good as it drove forward. She winced at the pain in her neck as she remembered a time when her older brother was driving her to a friend’s house in town and they came to a fork, and she said, “Go straight,” and her brother taunted her, saying, “You mean forward, dummy, not straight.” Her life had been straight but not forward. A path with no forks, but she *stood* in it more than traveled up or down it. She’d never thought to notice a difference between straight and forward until her smart-alecky brother claimed there was one.

The crying cattle were gone, but she still heard their cries in the wind whipped up in the winter night. After a year she sold the ranch and bought a small green cottage in town with a patch of grass and three oak trees. First shade she’d been able to savor other than a porch in nearly forty years. She was sixty-four years old. She pulled the Buick up under the carport and rolled the windows up tight against the dust, and there it sat. She was six blocks from church and only two to the market and she hardly ate anything but cottage cheese and Pepperidge Farm cookies and did not cook more than a sweet potato.

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Her sister Edith and her husband came down from Amarillo when Evelyn turned seventy-two. They had meant to come when she turned seventy but something came up and then it was two years before they could make the drive. They were sitting out on the porch when her brother-in-law Herb got up and walked over to the Buick and started poking around it. He had already tried to put a washer in her kitchen faucet and it leaked worse than before, and here he was, about to act like he knew something about cars even though he sold insurance. Evelyn supposed this was his idea about what he ought to do when he visited a widow. She thought it was kind of sweet, but she didn't like it when he started asking her questions about the Buick.

"How long has it been since you drove this car?"

"I drive it to the store some, but when it's nice out, I'd rather walk."

"That's a classic right there," he said. Then he said he was going off to the library to do some research. When he was gone, Evelyn said to Edith, "What is Herb wanting to do research on exactly?" and Edith told Evelyn what she already knew, that Herb didn't have one iota what to do with himself when he was a guest in someone else's home and the reason they hadn't come on her seventieth was that Herb acted like he was sick. "Let's just let him go on acting like he's going to take care of everything," Edith said. "That way he'll be out of our hair."

Herb came back in an hour and told Evelyn that she owned a mint specimen of the last Electra they manufactured.

"You could get top dollar for that car," said Herb.

"How's she going to get around if she sells her car?" Edith asked her husband.

"She said herself she hardly ever uses it." He turned to Evelyn and said he would be happy to take it off her hands.

Edith said, "Herb, come inside for a minute, I want to talk to you." They went inside the house and Edith tried to whisper but it came out like a scream strained through a towel. Evelyn heard every word. Her sister lit into her husband, accusing him of trying to take advantage. Herb said he was going to pay her what it was worth, he liked the car, he'd drive it himself, and Edith said, "You got two trucks, Herb, and one of them sits in the yard," and no.

While they were in the kitchen arguing, Evelyn studied the Buick. It struck her as funny that it would turn out to be worth a dime. But she didn't need another dime. She was set from selling the ranch and even if she were about to starve she would never try and make money off that vehicle. How could she admit to her sister and Herb the real reason she had let that car sit, even when she would have saved time or stayed warmer by driving it? How could she admit that she had never even turned on the radio because every time she got in that car she heard the cries of all those mother cows sounding out their loss night and day?

But that wasn't the worst of it. It took her moving into town and living alone for the first time in her life and not minding it at all to realize her husband had bought her that Buick for the same reason he claimed he did not want children. He was tired of sharing his vehicle. Had he not wanted children because he did not want to share her? Was that out-and-out selfish or was there somewhere in it a sweetness? Was it straight or forward? Her brother had claimed there was a difference, but even if there was, she did not see how, at this point in her life, it mattered. ■

This story is excerpted from *All I Have in This World* by **MICHAEL PARKER** © 2014 by Michael Parker. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. All rights reserved. Read more about the novel and the author in the preceding review and on the [publisher's website](#).

