

THE RACKET | 85



THE RACKET

Hi.

After almost eight months, we're back.

In today's information-deluged culture, eight months is a particularly long time. Things have changed – for myself, for the world, and I'm sure for each and all of you reading – and it seems, almost across the board, things have gotten worse. And as always our collective consciousness turns towards doomsday, towards the worst outcome we can possibly imagine.

I get it. We are watching genocide unfold across the Internet each and every day. War bubbles across the surface of a tenuous global politic. The effects of climate change spiral further and further and no one seems to be doing anything about it. Every American has front row seats to what is already the most depressing presidential election in memory.

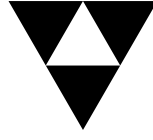
Things aren't great.

In almost four years of publishing The Racket Journal I've now written roughly 84 of these intro essays. Looking back, on subject matter and my general tone, it becomes pretty apparent the world is always, from an overhead view, in pretty rough shape. On the surface we are always grappling with violence, with governmental neglect, with some new asshole pushing on to the political stage.

This is not to diminish the horrors and suffering being experienced by innocent people in Gaza. This is not a means to turn my head away from the specific pain so many individuals in so many places are currently experiencing. More so, I argue that more than just being here before, we, as a society, continually exist in this place. We are always, from a certain angle, neck deep in the worst of it. We are always on the precipice of the end.

And yet somehow, we continue forward.

We continue to celebrate each other, to love each other, to make plans for the future, to wax nostalgic about the past. We continue to be assholes and do petty things. We continue to fight and fuck and makeup. We continue to do incredible things as we continue to do the very worst. We are, if anything, a world that has survived by the sheer ability to keep rolling, to keep moving forward even as the fires burn around us. We exist only because we continue to do so.



I started publishing The Racket Journal in the earliest days of the pandemic, when it truly felt like the world was coming to an end. I not only needed a project to keep myself sane, but I wanted to create a project to help others stay sane.

The gist is the same today: Here, for you, is, I believe, a powerful arrangement of poetry and art. It's not long because I never wanted it to feel like another chore, another line on your to-do list. Instead, I hope it is a momentary break from wherever you are, mentally or physically. I hope it helps to pull you above the constant churn of existence a remind you that even in the worst of it, there is still art and there are still artists pushing back against the ceaseless tide. There is still, as there always is, some reason to continue.

Thanks for being here.

- N

The Racket stands against
police brutality, racism and violence
perpetuated towards BIPOC
communities in all forms.

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donate here

WOMEN FOR WOMEN
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MIDDLE EAST CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE
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The Racket

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Nothing but quiet.



WE HAVE A PATREON

We aren't in this for the money.

But there are costs in doing what we do.

Any help with those costs (and with the costs of future endeavors) would be greatly appreciated.

If not, we get it and we still appreciate you.

THANK YOU TO THESE FOLKS

MATTHEW CARNEY
CATHY & JOHN SANDERS
HALLIE YOUNG
JAMIE ENGELMANN
CASEY BENNETT
LILIAN CAYLEE
LAUREN C. JOHNSON
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THE RACKET

85



MIRROR
KAREN LEDERER
2022

Some Wound of Color

NATHAN D. METZ

The strawberries here are picked fat in the summer. Rinsed
shining under the steady flow of cold running water.

Slicing them scents the air in the kitchen for hours and colors
fingers like childhood firetrucks. The wind keeps the air

from bugs except dragonflies which glide easy
cyan and gold at soft angles barely buzzing.

The strawberries will be used in a pie.

This time last year the sky was a chunk

of amber torched with ash, which is like dust

but thicker. Fire is such a familiar word, it has lost something:

somewhere else always an alive thing is on fire

which is also strange because it seems alive things

always appear to be *in* the fire, that fire is

always *on* the thing. The forest floor neoned,

the sequoias old as Christianity neoned, raw land soaked

in something like orange but greedier, the spilled internals

of a blood orange. Neon as a verb,

as dynamics. It was because ash

particles in the air are large and only let pass colors

of large wavelengths: red, red-orange, bronze, amber,

and ash is a dead thing.

That is not a metaphor.

How a whole state tears into shades of heat,
endures or surrenders to the distance

between word and color: roars, energy, juice. How color,
amidst no field of counterevidence, seems to be the only

prerequisite for death. How things are colorful
and then die. Ocean Vuong saying to be gorgeous

is to be hunted, and Christopher Smart illustrating
a thousand worlds between white and silver. Between that

and this, between that home and this heat and that heat
and this home, between fat strawberries under warm

piecrust a dragonfly angling mosquito flight fire
neon and sweetness, so much happens so slowly, all at once.



MELTING BUTTER
KAREN LEDERER
2022



CUTTING GARDEN
KAREN LEDERER
2022

The President of Kisses

TOM LACHMAN

I have 23 children
I own 148 acres of virgin forest
I have eliminated virginity in Ward 8
I have swallowed sickness whole in Ward 7
Raise your hand if you like playing on grass
Bees enjoy me
Everything I play is imperceptibly faster
Drop me a line if you like saplings
Honk if you love thrombosis
Expect 337 gifts no later than Dec. 24
Expenses sure are low
The boys are named Bobby
The girls are named Bobbi
I got a new way of walking
I got a new way of talking
I am the president of kisses



YOU'RE HERE
JUSTIN YOON
2022

Formal Objection to the Repeal of Ordinance 162, subsection 3A of the Arthurian Estates Home Owners Association Agreement

KEVIN P. KEATING

Esteemed committee members,

After hearing previous testimonials, it's clear that Pullman was a man of unimpeachable integrity. For ten years, he served as president of our homeowner's association. We always trusted his judgment, but certainly you can appreciate why we began having doubts.

On a soggy May morning a year ago, without notifying the board or calling a meeting, Pullman hired a surveyor to mark his property line. Two days later, he hired a landscaping crew to remove from his backyard all of the shrubs and decorative dogwoods that were then in full flower. That same weekend, he rented a backhoe and paid a union operator to grade the yard and create a gentle slope around the white oak behind his house. This task completed, he had hundreds of feet of lumber delivered and neatly stacked behind the house. In the evenings, while walking our Labradoodles and Wire-Haired Griffins around the block, we spied Pullman wandering among the wooden pyramids like some suburban pharaoh, contemplating the prospect of his own embalment. He made no mystery of his intentions. Last summer, he'd promised his two boys he'd build them a tree fort, and now he was making good on that promise.

After last year's frightening winter, with its record-setting polar vortex and deadly highway pileup just two miles from Arthurian Estates, Pullman understandably took an extended leave of absence from his law practice and enrolled in classes at the community college. Without any hint of irony in this voice, he explained that he was earning his associate's degree in carpentry and mechanical drawing.

Of his wife and two small boys, Pullman never uttered a word.

By springtime, when the work crews arrived with their skid-steer loaders and excavators, he'd become proficient with a hammer and nails and had developed a remarkable talent for woodcarving. As the seasons wheeled back to summer, he invested in a circular saw, a smoothing plane, a sander, and a power drill. In the pocket of his flannel shirt, he kept a notepad and pencil, and on a leather belt hanging loosely from his hips, he carried a trusty tape measure. Seldom taking time to eat a proper meal, he

labored day and night in his backyard so that, by the end of May, the treehouse was beginning to take shape.

While no one would describe him as a nature lover, he adored that oak and took great pride in its age. Inside the new lambskin wallet his wife had intended to give him as a Christmas gift (found buried in the back of her dresser drawer after the flower arrangements had wilted and the petals had fallen on his unswept floors; after friends and family had ceased coming to the house to bring him food and lament the condition of the icy roads and the ferociousness of the polar vortex), he kept a grainy black and white aerial photo of a vineyard taken decades ago, before developers bulldozed the trellises to make room for our subdivision's grillwork of streets and sewers. In the distance, at the edge of a meadow, there was a lonely farmhouse and a couple of spotted horses tethered to a post. The most prominent object in the photo was the white oak, Pullman's oak, its branches reaching up like a hand to a painfully overexposed sky.

In our neighborhood of decorative poplars and persimmons, the oak was the tallest tree around. It was certainly the oldest, having gazed over forests and fields for at least two centuries. It now seemed to keep watch over our tranquil homes, and we mistakenly believed it could shield us from the tragedies we read about in newspapers.

The tree's flowing limbs, now encased in rectangles of rough-hewn wood, creaked and groaned during strong summer storms. From the safety of our kitchens and living rooms, we waited for Pullman, scurrying like a squirrel through the labyrinth of tiny makeshift compartments, to come tumbling to earth. Though the work of an obvious apprentice, his carpentry proved surprisingly resilient to the forces of nature. By July, the oak had vanished completely beneath an exoskeleton of plywood and 2x4s. It looked more like a dystopian high-rise than anything we might call a tree. During the first days of August, Pullman packed a small bag and henceforth occupied the treehouse's bird-infested warren of rooms. As far as we could tell, he no longer entered his home. To bathe, he used a garden hose and stood naked under the icy spray of water; to catch the ballgames, he ran an orange electric cord to one of the rooms and listened on a radio; and to prepare his meals, he made do with the coal-burning grill on his patio. Warding away the robins and sparrows proved difficult, and on the window ledges, he placed plastic owls and rubber snakes. At night, we saw a blaze of candlelight through the rustling leaves.

During the final days of summer, on the highest roof, Pullman, a staunch secularist who'd renounced the faith of his fathers, started building a conical spire, one that made the treehouse look like a contorted countryside chapel. Only then did we decide the time had come to take action. As you're well aware, Arthurian Estates has strict codes against religious shrines and temples. During our monthly meeting, the committee drafted a new amendment to our charter, retroactively forbidding treehouses as well as sacred

structures. As some of you will no doubt claim, this may have been an egregious case of bureaucratic overreach, but we felt it the most diplomatic way to deal with this delicate matter. Technically speaking, because the president wasn't in attendance that night, we couldn't bring the amendment to the clubhouse floor for a simple up or down vote. But in emergency situations (dam failures, train derailments, limnic eruptions, temporary mental crackups) a plurality of homeowners can take matters into their own hands.

The measure passed without a single dissenting vote. We adjourned the meeting, wondering who would break the news to Pullman, but when we returned to our homes, we were startled to find handwritten invitations in our mailboxes. Pullman wanted to host a Labor Day barbecue in his backyard.

Compared to Parsifal Meadows across town, the lots in our community are small, the houses crammed together in uncertain suburban solidarity, but Pullman's lot extended nearly an acre until it reached the ravine, large enough to accommodate the one hundred guests who mingled between tents and tiki torches. Our host had draped the treehouse in festive twinkling lights and encouraged us to take self-guided tours through the funhouse confusion of rooms. We eagerly climbed the ladder, those of us who could manage, and entered through the tight, splintered hole at the bottom.

Painted in vibrant summer colors—periwinkle, persimmon, pomegranate—the claustrophobic interiors served practical functions. On the lower level, for example, we found a laundry room with a galvanized steel tub and retractable clothesline, a storage room stocked with canned goods and mason jars, and a kitchenette complete with a varnished board and old crate that served as table and chair. Higher up, he'd constructed a game room with shelves on which he'd stacked his sons' favorite board games. There was even a library with boxes of moldering magazines and paperbacks. There was no way to keep out the rain or stop the annoying drips after the clouds had parted. In one of the upper-level rooms, where there was a break in the canopy, he'd built an observatory decorated with sky charts and movie posters. We found two sleeping bags on the floor and next to the window, mounted on a tripod, a new Pluto GalaxyProbe II 76mm telescope.

One by one, we climbed the ladders. Higher and higher we went until we reached the uppermost room with its strange conical spire twisting through the treetop. It took a moment for our eyes to adjust to the flickering candlelight, and more than a few of us gasped when we saw how Pullman had carved into the tree the faces of his wife and sons. Muttering excuses, some guests hurried back to the ground and abruptly left the party.

Luckily, no one was inside the treehouse when the fire started sometime after midnight.

By then, the remaining guests were getting pretty rowdy, and Pullman, still commandeering the grill and sipping from a bottomless jug of whisky, squirted lighter fluid on the glowing coals. We tried to warn him, but he laughed quietly to himself and shook his head. Under his breath, he uttered a curse, or perhaps incantation, and then sprayed more fluid on the grill. He stumbled from the violent whoosh of flames but made no attempt to douse the fire, not that the garden hose would have done him much good. Even when the popping embers floated through the windows and ignited the wood planks like cheap kindling, he seemed more concerned about his incinerated brats and burgers.

Sparks rained down on the roof and drainpipes of his abandoned legal residence. A family of chipmunks darted from beneath a pile of scrap wood and raced across a telephone line. The fire soon reached a transformer near the top of a nearby telephone pole. The neighborhood lights flickered, and then the streets went dark. The fire spread so quickly that we had to drag Pullman from the backyard and keep him from racing into the flames. On the street corner, we marveled as the oak blazed like a torch in the starry night. Two engines arrived just as the heaviest tree limbs exploded. The outer walls toppled end over end, crashing against the roof of Pullman's glassed-in three-season room. The firefighters unrolled hoses and attached them to hydrants, but by then, the fire was burning with such intensity that the vinyl siding melted and peeled away from his home. Somehow, the firefighters minimized the damage to adjacent properties, but by dawn, the Pullman residence was reduced to a shell of smoldering beams and posts. Behind it, the limbless oak towered like a black monolith.

Those who stayed until morning spoke of insurance policies and the likelihood of civil lawsuits. More than a few of us remarked how the handsome reporter from the evening news was much shorter in person. We talked about a dozen topics so long as we made no mention of our complicity in Pullman's breakdown, we who understood his anguish but lacked the courage to intervene and offer our friendship and support.

Pullman's house is long gone, as is Pullman. Where he went, no one can say for sure. He has no other family here in town. Maybe he has relations elsewhere, far away at the edge of some western desert or on a storm-battered barrier island. But before vanishing, he taped to the clubhouse door the old black and white photo of the oak in the meadow just beyond the vineyard, its faded image like something out of a dream. Could there really have been wide open spaces in a community that now feels so confining, so confused?

The picture remained on the meeting room wall until last month when it went missing during a contentious debate with a cohort of new residents, many of whom are unaware of the tree's significance. But we are not here to level accusations at the young homeowners. No, we are here, united as one voice, to object to their motion to repeal the ordinance against building tree houses and their proposal to use Pullman's vacant parcel

as a public park with swings and a jungle gym. For those of us who once listened to Pullman's distant hammering, the lot is hallowed ground.

Before forging ahead with your plans, we hope you give this matter the serious consideration it deserves. You see, we fear our president may one day return from his uncertain quest only to find that a construction crew has disturbed the trio of tempered faces buried beneath a layer of charcoal and ash.

We, the undersigned, enter the preceding statement into the record to be reviewed by all members, declaring that it constitutes an opinion and interpretation of the events discussed therein, and that it shall be posted continuously for no less than 72 hours on the Arthurian Estates clubhouse bulletin board.

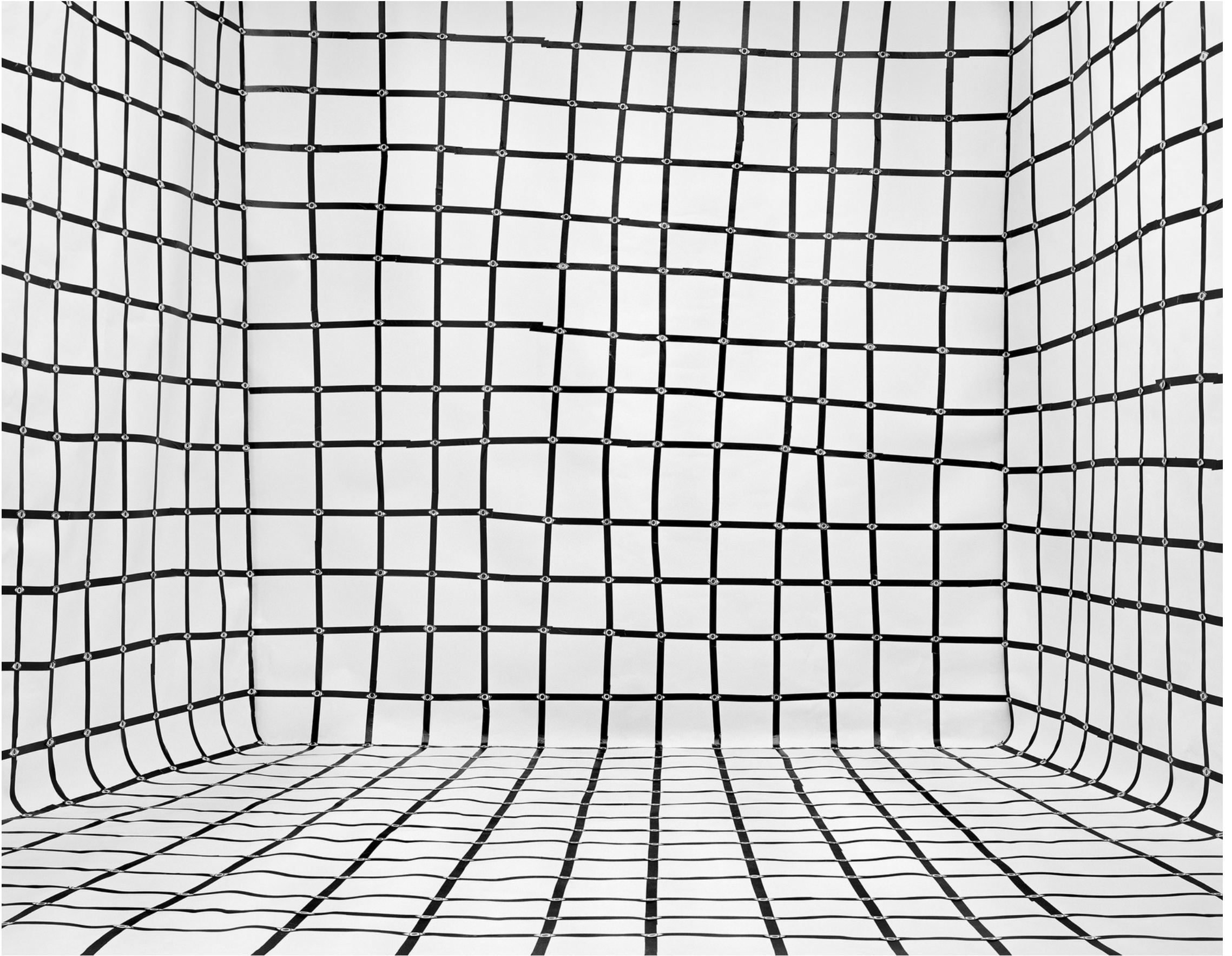


2 BLUE DREAMS
JUSTIN YOON
2022

(that feels like objectification)

ABBIE HART

wolf-whistled while crying at the bus stop
for a bus that never came (i am keeping
a spreadsheet of when the 27 actually arrives)
while on the phone with my mother who is
telling me to uber but i am afraid i will be
killed by a man who has not been background
checked the right amount (whatever the right
amount is) but at least i know i am a pretty
crier (even if it is a show of power over an 18
year old girl crying at a bus stop outside of
a liberal arts college no one has ever heard of)
at least i know i am a pretty crier.



GRID EYES

GINA OSTERLOH

2020

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, SILVERLENS NEW YORK AND MANILA, PHILIPPINES, HIGHER PICTURES NEW YORK, AND NO PLACE GALLERY COLUMBUS, OHIO.



HOLDING ZERO, #2

GINA OSTERLOH

2020

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, SILVERLENS NEW YORK AND MANILA, PHILIPPINES, HIGHER PICTURES NEW YORK, AND NO PLACE GALLERY COLUMBUS, OHIO.

Just Folded Under

ALISON HERON HRUBY

There were twenty-seven oceans in my life,
each accounted for, until I left my home—
grown at last, jelly made firm. The ocean
moved inside. Not inside my heart, my heart

was pulp. I thought, no water would forgive
the mess of me, trying to exact a pin. Love became
a trick, dared me to find it. The ocean slowly bellowed,
a yowl inside my head, a reminder to suffice.

I waited, moved from soil to soil.
My body failed the dare.
The ocean loosed into soap,
into a weathering sky. Ordinary things.

I saw its water where I pleased, a secret theft.
Only then it pulsed, became my skin.
Twenty-seven years,
just folded under.



PRESSING AGAINST LOOKING, MOVEMENT
GINA OSTERLOH

2019

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, SILVERLENS NEW YORK AND MANILA, PHILIPPINES, HIGHER PICTURES NEW YORK, AND NO PLACE GALLERY COLUMBUS, OHIO.

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**BACK
TO SAY
GOODBYE.**

