

50



THE RACKET

50

THE RACKET

Hi.

So, this is 50.

Since April 3rd 2020, in the opening salvos of the pandemic, a small crew of individuals has been putting together this journal on a weekly basis. There was a moment in the middle of everything when Miah Jeffra (saint that he is) was listening to me kvetch about a lack of submissions, or a lack of free time, or a lack of something and he stopped me and said, "Why are you doing a weekly?" And, honestly, I didn't have an answer. It started as a weekly and every time I'd start playing with the idea of changing the format I'd be overcome by my pre-existing fear of change and I just grit my teeth and keep going. But now, well, I've finally come around to the idea and starting with our next issue—Issue Fifty-One—*this will be a monthly publication.*

And let me tell you though this kind of change terrifies me and it fills my imagination with the worst possible outcomes, I am excited about this. Excited to have some time to futz around with formula, to add new sections, to sometimes, possibly, sleep at night without some lingering concern about this whole *thing* floating in my mind. It's going to be good and hope you'll join on us this next step.

I've had a few people lately thank me for helping to "keep the community together" during the last horrible year. I don't know about all that, but I will say this: everyone struggled (and in a lot of places, continue to struggle) to stay sane in their own way. This was mine. I filled the space where fear and anxiety might creep in with The Racket and, very frankly put, it kept me sane. It gave me a reason to keep using my brain when every part of me just wanted to curl up in a dark room and wait for the world to end. It kept me together.

Thank you for giving me a reason to keep doing all this. It would have been a much harder year without you.

And know this: if this journal, or the reading series, or the playlists, or anything related to The Racket provided you with a touch of relief over the last year, a small space where you could think about anything else but the state of the world for a moment, well, it's been a my great honor to help provide.

But anyway, I love to celebrate a big moment so I asked a bunch of friends of The Racket (very talented friends at that) if they wouldn't mind contributing some work to help me do so.

And let me tell you: they came through.

With that said: The Racket Journal will return sometime in July. The rest of the operation—the playlists, the website, the newsletter, our IG presence—that'll still be kicking, more so even. So please, stick around, see what happens next.

Again, thank you so, so very much.

'Till next time.

-N

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

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The Racket

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*The average life span in 1880 was 50.
Don't look that up.*

WWW.THERACKETSF.COM

WE HAVE A PATREON

We aren't in this for the money.

That said: 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.

If so, we're working on some special rewards. And we know you love special rewards.

THANK YOU TO THESE FOLKS

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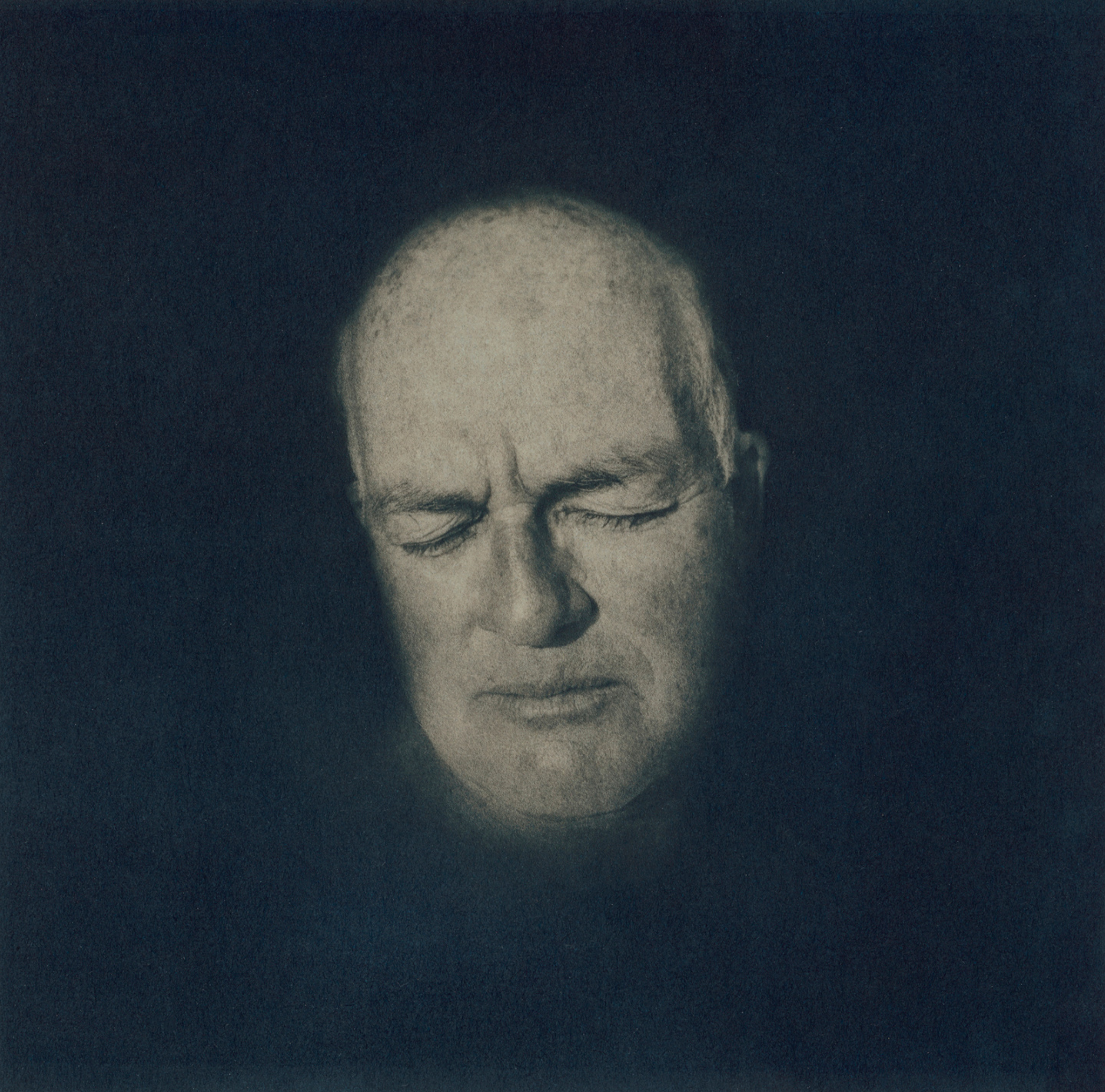
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THE RACKET

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STEVE
ANNA ROTTY
2020

THE ENDING OF THINGS

JAMES CAGNEY

new year's 2020

my first caller after midnight
finally mispronounced my name
after 14 years a guest at her
holiday tables she choked
on fermented black eyed peas
and together we celebrated
the ending of things.

after that, only robot
marketers would call
just to let me know
how much longer i had to live

Dogface

ELIZABETH STIX

Dogface won't shut up. He stands above me on his haunches, tail arched. "That's right, Skinsuit," he says. "Keep digging."

The earth is hard clay mixed with wormy loam. I'm not quite six feet under, but if I were, at least I'd know I'd reached the end.

"It's futile, don't you see?" I say. I heave the shovel in and don't look up. It just pisses him off when I do. "You're a smart dog. You're a freaking beagle. You used to be smarter than this."

Dogface snorts. My collar buzzes as a wave of electricity shuttles through me. Warmth spreads from my neck to my groin. My teeth chatter. I drop the shovel to the sticky earth and buckle to my knees. Then it stops.

My nose runs wet and my eyes blur, but I have to laugh. I've found it. Its sharp edges dig into my shin. I scrape away the dirt and hold it to the light. It's old and ugly, but the marrow is still soft and good. "It was here after all," I say, offering it up to him. I smile. "Who's a good boy?"

He snatches it with his teeth and drops to all fours, sniffing it. I stand in what I wish were my own grave. "We used to be best friends, Peanut," I say.

He looks at me. "You sold my children," he says, then turns back to his bone. He licks it once, twice, and doesn't look up when my teeth start to vibrate again.



PHTHALO GREEN
ALUN RHYS JONES
2010

Proper Cutlery

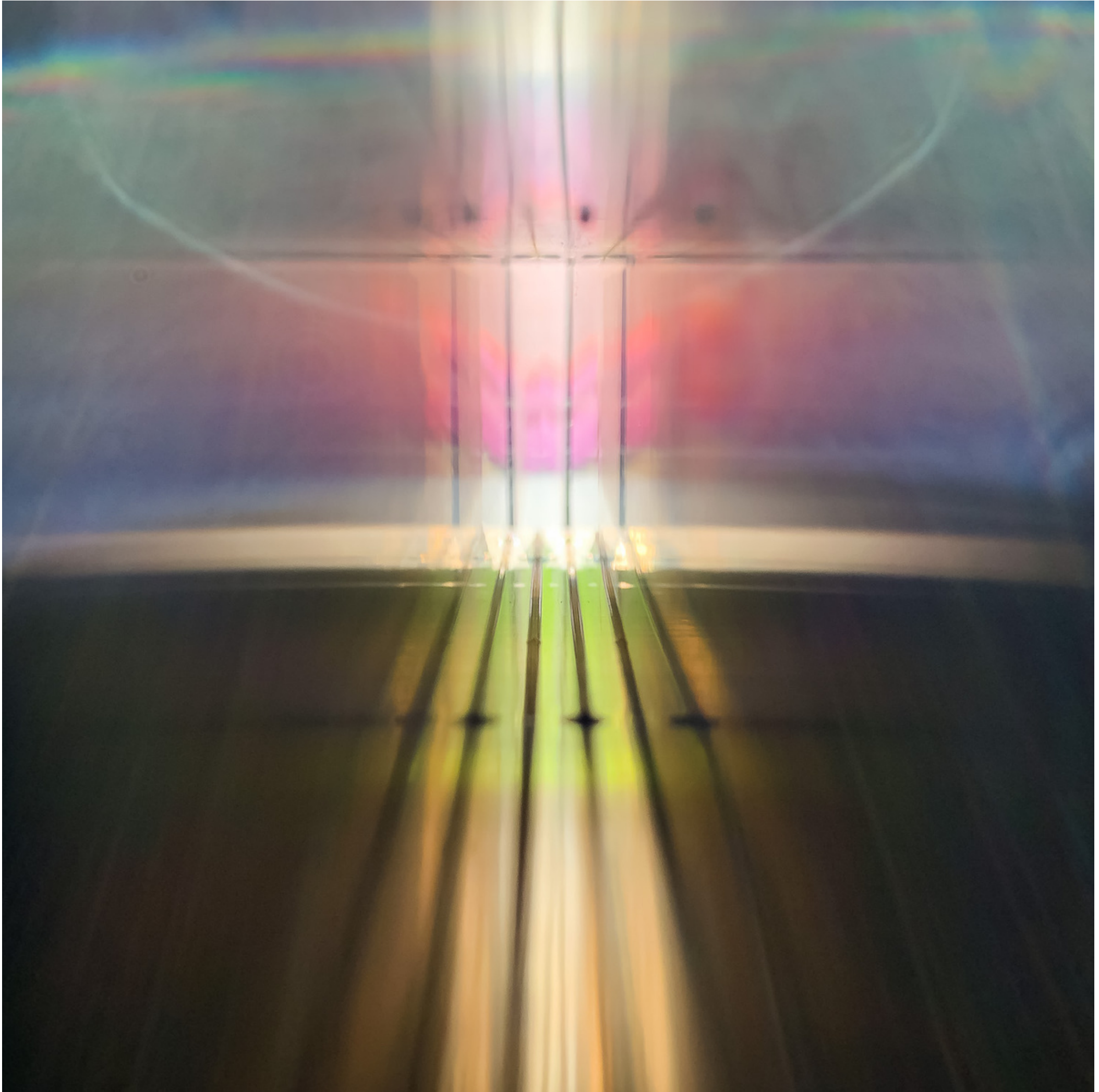
LAUREN PARKER

The only way to kill a wolf
Is to eat it up
Teeth and all, you boil those
Until they are soft like eggs
Slurp them down with gravy
That's breakfast

Offal is next - the organs that hold secrets
Divine entrails, ropes and ropes of sausage
Soak them in oil, salt
Frankincense and myrrh
a few sprigs of rosemary
Tuck in a bay leaf
(for prosperity)
At the sun's highest point, eat the basest parts

Dinner is the fine cuts
You'll need a good knife
Not that old iron thing
the Woodsman gave you
Not the skinning knife, no
It's silver and shiny and modern
You need something domestic
Ceramic, tame every cut.
Conquest in cuisine.

Chew, chew the meat, rare and red
Taste it, no brine,
The spread is divine, good wine
Folded napkins
The sort of effort you never used to do
But when you sit down to your feast
Every bit will taste and feel
Like you're chewing off your own hind leg.



CONTEMPLATING TITAN 2
YVONNE DALSCHE
2021

A River Road Grovel

TOMAS MONIZ

The old man neighbor warned me to take it easy.

Like really go slow on the one lane road to the cabin I've house-sat for the past six months to get myself together. It's outside Guerneville, California and follows the river and twists and bends in ways that you just can't see oncoming cars at all. You have to drive basically five miles an hour as you approach each corner.

It's enough to make me reuse old coffee grinds one morning because the thought of driving it was too much.

Make a list, my neighbor advised, and check it before you come back to make sure you got everything you need.

He's been living here forever and more than willing to educate you on how things work. He repeated: Check the list before, not after.

Like I don't get his point.

And listen, he added, don't be ashamed to ask a neighbor you pass on the road who's leaving to pick something up that you forgot. We've all done it. It's called a river road grovel.

When I do have to drive the road, I can gage what kind of mood I'm in: whether the squeaks and bounces of my 1996 Ford Ranger bug the shit out of me or whether I'm lost in thought, loving the way the leaves twist in the wind flashing their underbellies, a lighter shade of green, so the world looks so welcoming.

Then I don't mind that moment you face another car. That awkward moment of trying to decipher who does what.

But: general etiquette question here. On a windy one lane road when you roll up on someone, Who reverses? Who makes way?

I'm sure my neighbor would know.

Side thought on this point: I believe if you have the capacity to pull aside, you should. I believe who has the closest off road spot should be the one to move over. I believe you should always wave *thanks* or *hello* or *I see you* when you pass by. I even roll down my window to make sure they know I'm acknowledging them.

If people don't do this common courtesy, it peeves me more than having to drive so damn slow on the road in the first place.

Today I'm actually feeling good: hiked in the redwoods, found a tick crawling up my leg before it bit into me, swam in the river, and now headed out to pick up groceries (got my list) and a six pack to drink on the shore later under the night time sky that when it's clear shocks in its arrogance and glory. Everything that gets me down just falls way under something that confident.

It's an early spring afternoon, the heat and chill mingle in the air, the smell of redwoods sharp and rich.

I come face to face with this driver and they just stop and idol. I'm the car at the curve with nowhere to go, no spot to pull off. I can't even reverse out of the bend. I wait because they have room to scoot over so I can squeeze by.

I see the driver raise their hands like: *What do we do?* I wave them to the side and begin to inch forward. We do this slowly, haltingly, until we crawl past each other with seriously like an inch to spare on each end.

When we get across from each other, this older woman with a hand rolled cigarette in her mouth rolls down her window. I lean out mine ready to snap: *It's called being considerate.*

I get the first two words out when she interrupts: Listen sweetie, I've had a couple cocktails. And pauses.

Like that explains everything around us. How we got here and where we're going.

She then smiles and shrugs.

I stop speaking and -- I can't help it -- I smile back.

How do you respond to that? It actually made sense.

I say, No worries, take your time.

She says, That's all anyone can really do.

I wave my hand motioning her onward. Like I'm a gentleman.

She waves at me as we move past each other.

Then she stops and beeps.

I lean out and creen my neck to look back.

I see her silhouette. She doesn't try to turn around but says, And sweetie if you can, grab me some cheddar cheese and tortillas.

Is this a river road grovel, I say, feeling some strange sense of belonging.

You call it what you want. I call it a friendly favor. Just leave it all in the mailbox at Oak and River. I'll find it.

I drive the road home in the dark and don't encounter another car. My truck squeaks up to the mailbox. I step out and the evening sky sparkles and preens above me. I can't hear the river, but I know it's there, flowing and bending and finding its way to the ocean. I place the items in the mailbox. I take out my list which I did, in fact, forget to check prior to returning but I remembered everything. I write on the back of it my name and number.

But add, so it doesn't seem weird: *A friendly favor from your neighbor.*

I have to scratch out my first attempt at neighbor because I spell it wrong.

But whatever.

That's not the point really.

Not the point at all.



WESTERN VOYAGE
TRAVIS WELLER
2021

Thought Log # 5

MAW SHEIN WIN

My eyelashes are falling out, one by one.

Pink tarantulas.

We experienced an understated turmoil.

Chirp, dwell, urn.

Evidence of future life forms.

Marshmallow blooms in sleepy cul-de-sac.

Thought they saw a dagger in his side pocket. Lit glint.

I used to make a living playing air drums on YouTube.

Has this department contributed to your personal and professional growth?

Cortisol valleys.

My husband grew up on Inspiration Drive.

K-pop signature movements.

Document your inner landings.

How do we fold into each other?

We memorized all suborbital flight patterns.

I'm drowning in honey.



The Story of Every Living Thing

MIAH JEFFRA

Structures—big things—are making me panic lately. Large, beyond-the-size-of-human things that we dwell in, that we swarm inside, that we rely on to stay intact. Made by us. Every time I bike or drive or walk over the Golden Gate Bridge, I can't help but marvel how this 85-year-old thing stands in the water so confidently. Why doesn't this crashing wild water erode the foundation to the point of collapse? I ask this to my roommate, Sean, who prides himself on his physics knowledge, even though he is a photographer for hipster hoodrats in the Lower Haight. We are driving over the Golden Gate with our friend Marie to get Dippin' Dots in Sausalito.

Well, eventually it will fall. I mean, it is water, he says.

Exactly, I say. Look at what it does to earth, to metal, to skin.

Nothing is indestructible, he says.

Then, why do we drive on this thing?

Why are you asking this while we are on the bridge, Marie asks.

The bartender at The Page and a tremor (un)plant the idea. I am sipping my pilsner, the hiccup of earth occurs, and debris from the ceiling dusts the floor. I look up. Everything looks the same. Large brick slabs nestle between lines of concrete mortar. I look at her, and she's shaking her head. I share the empirical probability that if shakes like this happen enough, the ceiling could fall—*the sky is falling, the sky is falling*. She laughs, and then stops laughing. Wow, that's deep, she says.

Why? I ask. Her eyes stay fixed on the ceiling.

It ends, man. You know? It ends with the nothingness that, like, when the whatever that was whatever has finally ceased, you know, being what it was, and becomes many things, or many parts of things. Or maybe it's nothing at all. You want another beer?

I stare at the ceiling with her.

It begins with the observations, quick glimpses, interstitial musings that bob now and then, when the air isn't too hot or cold, when the spaces between our doings aren't busy swatting away bugs from our face, yelling at drivers who cut us off, pushing ourselves into the world with a force that could never be mistaken as listening. A woman is talking on her cell phone during her lunch break. Her panini sits patiently as she pulls a strand of loose hair, fiddles and releases it into the wind. The hair dances nervously, snakes in its weightlessness, then settles on the back of a chair filled with a man who is talking on his cell phone during his lunch break. He doesn't have much hair left. But he does pull on his nose. He smears the crusty mucous, some on his creased slacks, some on the edge of the table. He misses his mother, who passed away the previous September. He is considered attractive by several people. So is the woman. She has already forgotten about her strand of hair, but it has only begun.

In the bathroom after school. I am burning paper because it is punk rock. Trying to convince Chris Curtis that we were supposed to join our bodies in splendid oneness, I watched the fire pare the white paper into gray ash, then fall, disappear out of sight, wondering where it went. Where was this nothingness and suchness?

I was watching the mini-series adaptation of *Angels in America* (I had read the play, and loved it immensely, more than the mini-series, but then is *not* when I got a boner, and that is what this is about.) The actor playing Louis says to the actor playing Mormon Joe that smelling *something* is the particles of the object coming into you. The object—that very real thing—sloughs off bits of itself at all moments, every moment, a little bit and a little bit. Upon hearing this I get an astonishing boner.

Making out with Karen Fiorito in the tenth grade, I unexpectedly got a nose bleed. She didn't care, even laughed, while my tongue was licking the back of her teeth. Afterwards, after the wetness had dried on her skin and panties, she recoiled at the thin brown line down her neck. I touched it. Where it was dry, it rubbed off and disappeared.

My father opens his hands and says nothing when I ask him why he is my father, why I am his son, the vastness of the question in my small five-year-old mouth. He sits on the porch, the wicker chair, facing the stretch of Blue Ridge woods that was infinite to me then, even though the road ran 100 meters beyond. The question feels authentic, but I can feel its danger. I stare at his hands, my chest barely higher than his lap. Even then, I know something abides in the open hands—a fullness, a thing, the answer I seek? We open our hands, something goes. What?

Sausalito eases itself within the final breath before the Headlands exhale into the Bay. We pass the storefronts designed for white people who vacation by eating. The Dippin' Dots cart is next to a restaurant that rests itself over the water, perched on a pier, a series of exposed wood beams disappearing into the murky water. Barnacles grow all over the wood.

See, look at that, I say. Isn't everyone freaking out about that building relying on *wood in water*? I mean, isn't it soaking, softening, rotting?

Well, yeah, I guess, says Marie.

Then, I say.

Eventually, my roommate says.

Then what? I say.

Then, they build another one that won't rot for a while, he says.

I ball my fists and shake, and let out a contained growl, only for them.

Dippin' Dots! Marie says, and runs along the pier towards the cart.

One week after we shared a bed, you looked at me from across the car that shielded you from my barbed questions. Your eyes showed that you had rubbed me off, and I disappeared from you: the mucous, the semen, the spit, the hair, the particles of me, all gone. Where did it go? If it is a gift, who have I given it to, now? Do I have any say in this?

I stare at my brick ceiling—when will it corrupt enough to give up and fall on my face while I sleep? How many shakes will it take?

We made the Titanic, we made the Hindenburg, we made the Challenger Shuttle. We made Fukushima. We make love.

I am a structure. Dust is skin, floating in the light. When we sleep, we not only shut off the waking world, we dissipate, pieces of us leaving, rolling in the soft motion, in stillness. Air and water move around us, taking bit by bit. We stand, and we can hold up many things, and we are certain, even as the little bit and the little bit leave. How many shakes will I take? And what of the violence?

When I was small, a fierce and tight little bud of my eventual self, my grandmother swayed with the stories of every living thing. The late summer would swarm with dandelions, and when they were ready, the white fluffy seeds would take flight. The flower knew of its end, and would let go in one last grateful gesture of life, a soft woolen sigh into the air. And off the seeds would go, twirling with the air and light. I chased them, delighted when they grazed my outstretched palm, but

beyond me and the seeds, over the horizon and somewhere beyond. It was a face I couldn't have understood. My father opens his hands and says nothing when I ask him why he is my father.

One last grateful gesture of the mystery, and why it should stay that way. The world breathes, in its own woven way.

We are sitting on the dock, Marie, my roommate, and I, facing the Bay on a sunny day. Below us, the water. We are supported by rotting beams of wood. We are nibbling our Dippin' Dots— nibbling renegade flakes of skin, sea water, salt, early morning sneezes, fingernail crud, snot, rust, cat hair, dog dander, fly eggs, cum, sweat, pus, shit, fish ick, toe jam, rotten meat, fungus.

This is fucking good, my roommate says, little bits of Dots sticking to his hipster whiskers. Marie is too busy tonguing the dots to say anything at all.

Yeah, it is, I say.



EVERY NIGHT WE WATCH THE 10 O'CLOCK NEWS OFTEN AT 11, THIS WAY I CAN FAST-FORWARD THROUGH THE COMMERCIALS. SALLY REDEEMS THE TIME BY FLOSSING AND ICING HER NECK WHILE WATCHING THE NEWS.

SOMETHING ABOUT GROWING UP WITH A TV OR TALK RADIO PROGRAM CONSTANTLY BLARING HAS MADE ME VERY ADVERSE TO THESE SOUNDS. IT TOOK ME UNTIL I WAS IN MID-30S TO OPEN UP TO LISTENING TO NPR.

LOIS BIELEFELD
2020



When Lois visits she stays in her old room. I just finished showering and I sat down to visit with her. I'm so happy she's home.

I moved out the summer of 1996. My walls and ceiling were wallpapered in National Geographic photos. Slowly over the years they fell down. Once I tried to help by taking a bunch down and my mom cried. I think I understand now as I feel a hole daily since my daughter moved out in 2018.

LOIS BIELEFELD
2020

Sedimentation

VERNON KEEVE

A year ago I was sitting underneath
a blossoming avocado tree—

and I was wondering

how long does take for the fruit
to start growing after

the blossoms fall?

My mother, your then ex-wife, called
and said “Trey, your Daddy died?

Your Daddy died today.”

In my memory I thought it happened later—
further from your 67th Birthday—

but you died nine days later.

When I returned to California,
after seeing you get tucked away
into the soil of your boyhood home,

I saw avocado seeds on the ground—
drying in the sun.



WE ARE A TRADITIONAL COUPLE FOR OUR GENERATION. I WAS A z/OS SYSTEMS PROGRAMMER INSTALLING OPERATING SYSTEMS SOFTWARE AND PROGRAM PRODUCT SOFTWARE ON IBM MAINFRAME COMPUTERS. SALLY WAS A FULL-TIME HOMEMAKER AND STILL IS. I RETIRED IN 2013 AND SHE WON'T RETIRE UNTIL SHE GOES TO HEAVEN.

I REMEMBER WHEN DAD GOT HOME FROM WORK EACH DAY AND MY PARENTS WOULD KISS. DAD WOULD HAVE TO LEAN DOWN AND MOM WOULD BE ON HER TIPPY-TOES. THAT WAS THE ONLY OUTWARD AFFECTION I SAW.

LOIS BIELEFELD
2020



I LOOK AT THE TREES, AND REALIZE I WILL HAVE MANY MORE RAKINGS AFTER THIS ONE.

WHEN I WAS A KID WE'D HAVE HUGE LEAF PILES. I CAN STILL HEAR THE BOISTEROUS NOISES AND THEN FEELING SLIGHTLY GROSSED OUT BY THE WET LEAVES AND EARTH.

LOIS BIELEFELD
2020

Heads Up, Seven Up

KRISTINA TEN

The first time Mara played heads up, seven up was in Ms. Koslowski's fifth-grade class. Only Ms. K wasn't there, was out for bunion surgery, the first time she'd missed school all year. Mara wasn't sure if she believed the story about the bunion surgery, in part because Ms. K never missed school and in part because the news was delivered by the substitute teacher, a short, smiling man who introduced himself as Mr. Aiter. He said his name before writing it on the board, so even though Mara knew it was spelled A-I-T-E-R, for the rest of the day she remembered it the way she had heard it: Ate Her.

Mara could tell Mr. Aiter was used to subbing for the little-kid classes, because he spent forty minutes on math and history combined, then had them take turns reading passages from the science textbook out loud and made too big a deal when she pronounced "mitochondria" right on the first try.

"And what are mitochondria?" he asked, beaming in anticipation.

"The powerhouses of the cell," the class answered robotically, and Bobby Tremaine in the back of the room flexed his arm and kissed his tiny bicep like always.

Mr. Aiter nodded. Then, satisfied with the day's lesson, he leaned his back against the wall and said, "Hey, do you kids know heads up, seven up?" When everyone, even Taegan Kelly the know-it-all, shook their heads no, he explained the rules.

First: Everyone puts their heads down on their desks, closes their eyes, and sticks one thumb up toward the ceiling. Next: He secretly chooses one student to be "it" and that student goes around the room pinching the thumbs of six other students. Then: Those kids, plus the kid who was "it," go up to the front of the room. Finally: Everyone opens their eyes and the still-seated kids, the ones who didn't get picked, guess which one of the standing kids was "it."

As Mr. Aiter talked, Mara focused on his teeth. They seemed unnaturally yellow and unusually large, and there was something like a poppyseed wedged between the left incisor and canine. Mara wondered if it really was a poppyseed or if it was something else. She imagined Ms. K begging for her life as those teeth hovered above her neck, sour dog breath. Ate Her. Ate Her.

“Questions?” Mr. Aiter asked. The room sat silent, except for Danielle Snyder, who popped her gum shamelessly at the desk next to Mara’s. Last month Danielle’s dad had told her that she would be getting braces over the summer, and now all she did was chew bubblegum and order double corn on the cob at lunch.

“Okay then,” Mr. Aiter clapped his hands. “Let’s give it a try. *Heads down, thumbs up, it’s time to play seven up!*”

Eighteen heads lowered obediently, though Mara swore she saw Danielle roll her eyes on the way down. The wood was cool and smooth against Mara’s forehead, and as she crossed her arms on top of the desk, her ponytail tickled the inside of her arm. She ran her fingers over the part where she knew the wood was scratched: the ghosts of fifth-graders past, song lyrics and initials etched deep with pen. Then finally, slowly, she drew her hands into fists and lifted one thumb a single centimeter into the air.

With her eyes shut, Mara noticed sounds she had never noticed before. The rustle of the papers taped to the windows. The angry drone of the forced air. The hum of the light over the iguana tank, where Spider-Man the spiny-tailed iguana lolled beneath his artificial sun. The name Spider-Man had won the popular vote because there were more boys in the class than girls, even though iguanas eat spiders, the girls had argued, plus crickets and scorpions and other things too. The girls had wanted to name him Jade.

Mara wondered who Mr. Aiter would pick to be “it.” If Ms. K were there, she would have picked Taegan, obviously, teacher’s pet, neatest penmanship, first one to flip her quizzes over to show she was done. But with Mr. Aiter, Mara had no idea what about any of them would make them stand out.

All of a sudden, Mara was overcome by a desperate desire not to have her thumb pinched. She tucked it into her fist, then thought better of it and laid it flat across the top. Then, worrying she might be drawing too much attention to herself, she stuck it up normally, the way she assumed everyone else’s must’ve looked, bent back a little at the top, just another thumb in a field of them.

Maybe the footsteps up and down the aisles weren’t Mr. Aiter’s at all. Maybe he had already chosen. The papers, the forced air, the light had grown so loud that it was impossible for Mara to tell now whether there was one set of footsteps or two or more. Anything could be happening out there, she decided, beyond the boundaries of her encircled arms. Bobby could be

letting Spider-Man out of his tank, Danielle could be twirling her flavorless white gum between her fingers, or worse, and Mara wouldn't know.

She remembered then, she had heard those instructions before. To close her eyes tight. To wait to be touched. The spare bedroom at her aunt's house, or maybe her grandma's. Thanksgiving, or maybe Christmas. She remembered the smell of sweet spiced pecans coming in through the vents, at odds with everything.

She remembered, too, something her sister Julyssa had told her, when Mara had asked to talk about anything else. Julyssa, who was in junior high and liked to watch nature documentaries, told her about the survival strategies of prey animals on the African savanna. How some animals, as a form of protection, had evolved to sleep standing up. Zebras, giraffes, even elephants slept fully upright, and only in short bursts, so that if a lion approached they were already on their feet and ready to run.

None of them would be caught sitting like Mara was now, with their heads down in the middle of a wide-open classroom, sightless and exposed, as one long minute stretched into the next, pretending the rules didn't exist in the self-imposed darkness. Easy kills.

Mara felt her thumb shaking. She fought to still her body, quiet her breath. She tried to blend into the background of the classroom, to become furniture, invisible, just another desk or chair or white floor tile marked by the black sole of a sneaker. Julyssa had taught her this trick of giving up the body to its surroundings. The way a stick insect disappeared into its tree or a gazelle into the tall brown savanna grasses.

Julyssa said first you give up the body, then your mind's free to float away somewhere good.

As if you could pause the show, take the gazelle out of the frame, and when you pressed play in the lion's jaws would be empty air.

Hours passed, or minutes, or days, or time folded in on itself and it was actually earlier than it had been when they started when Mr. Aiter said, "Seven up!" and everyone raised their heads and opened their eyes. Danielle squinted against the overhead fluorescents and Bobby gave an exaggerated yawn and Spider-Man was in so much the same place as always that Mara wondered if he was actually dead this time.

That's when Mara realized that she was safe. That she hadn't been picked, and that in not being picked for one thing, she had been chosen for another.

That it was time for her, and the others like her, to guess.

Earlier Mr. Aiter had stalked through the room looking for his prey, the person he would call "it." Then that person had tiptoed around seeking theirs, taking hold of the victims while they slept, two times, four times, six. And now they all stood at the front of the room, silhouettes sharp against

the dark green chalkboard. Vulnerable in the open space between the front row of desks and the door.

And now it was Mara's turn. To seek and select, and come out unscathed. She felt something swell within her as she scanned the line of students, each casting longing glances at the clock on the wall and doing their best impressions of innocence. They hid their hands behind their backs, as if Mara and the others could have known, could have easily discerned, from the mere sight of their hands, who had been pinched and who had done the pinching.

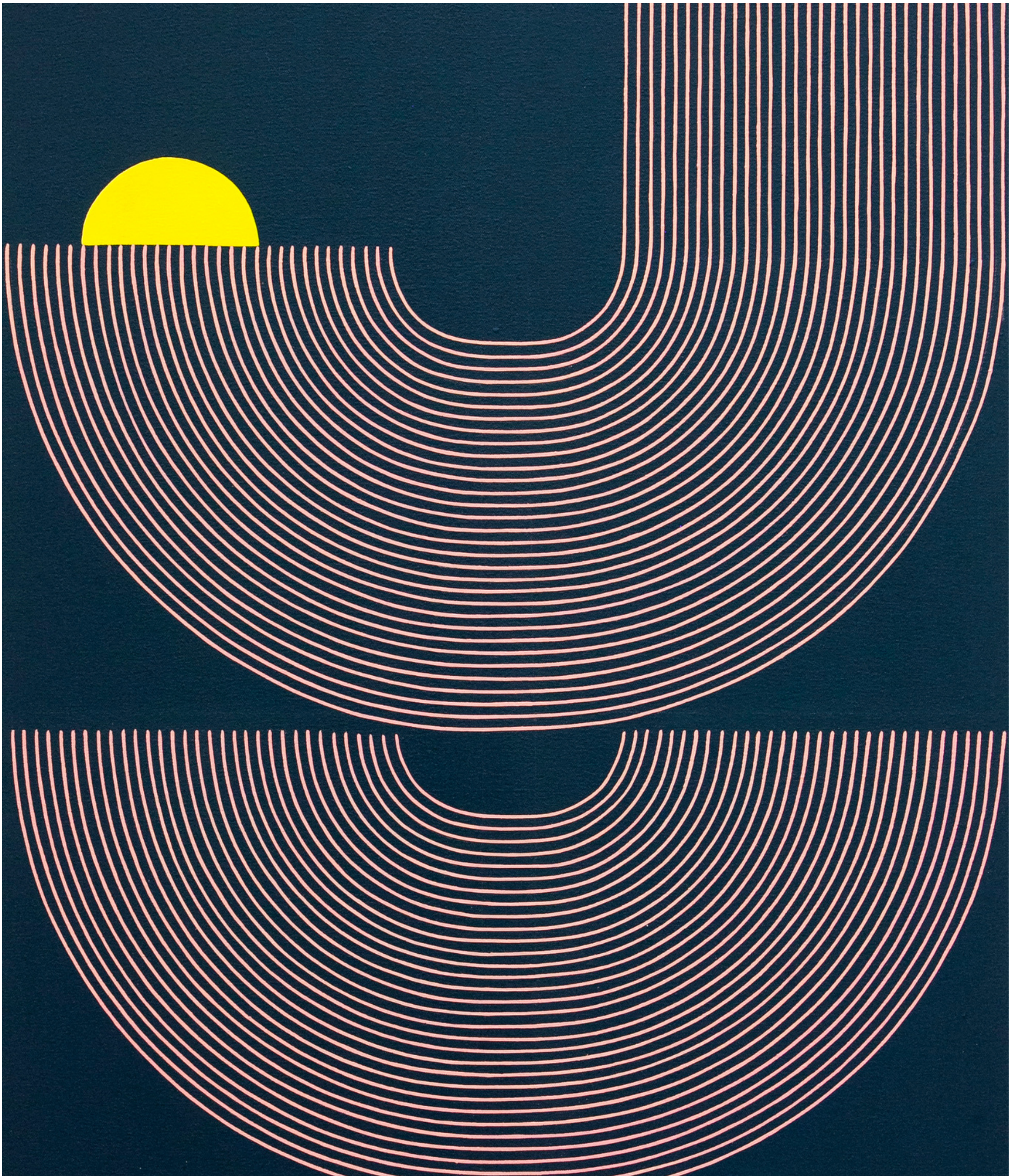
In heads up, seven up, the power shifts. The hunted become the hunters. But one thing stays the same: It begins and ends with the hands. She remembered his picking the turkey off the bone, holding white bread too long in a bowl of gravy; hers rooting through sweet pecans from her place at the kids' table, which made her, after all of it, still a kid.

In the classroom, at the game's end, Mara pointed the finger of one hand forward.

She used the other to brace herself against the chair, which was cheap blue plastic and cold smudged metal and doomed to be stationary, and of which she was no part, and for which she could never be mistaken.

She pointed the finger of one hand forward.

And she said a name.



J (SUNNYSIDE)
KELLY ORDING
2020

2019
CHRISTINE NO

*"under cover of darkness
the city mourns for the girl"*
- Sophocles (fr. Antigone)

I've outgrown this skin suit. I want to read naked.
I want to write a love song. I want to crash and
dance, sweat and salt and teeth until I crumple
like a soda can, until my heart dissolves beneath
my tongue, until I find another one.

Smear me red on every window: 'break girl
in case of emergency'. Should read: 'settle in
the ruins are here'. Should read: 'the ruins want
to bury her dead'.

Love ruined my mother at the gates of Hell
I was born of ruin and woman. A woman
who braves the love of ruins. Love,
a ruin that feeds—

So, don't take me for a sucker. See?
This bright hand I've been dealt. See?
Three naked summers. My new skin,
nuclear, now. My new skin bristles where
she used to break.

I've outgrown my thing for starfuckers.
Watch me dodge ancestral fate.
I am finished

with the slips of lyres, the
recycled love songs, the glittering
pretense of real promise—

So, I'm skipping town. Shred
the evidence. The skin out back
for garbage day.

Please thank the boys I've tried to bury.
I appreciate their patience.

& keep the stars, I've cradled them.
All of them, already



LOVE AND/OR SALAD.

PETER BULLEN

I saw her coming down the street carrying a salad. It's possible to be madly in love with a person carrying a salad, but it's also confusing the way a salad can sometimes be, on account of the variety of ingredients involved, and which ones enjoy a place of prominence over others that wind up being poorly represented. I don't want to overstate the confusion provoked by a salad for fear of being judged as simple minded, insufficiently discriminating, or just too easily overwhelmed. In some ways though I am a little of all those things. I can't properly measure how much so I say 'a little', which may explain my nervousness and trepidation when gauging just what quantity of salad dressing to apply to a salad; I don't want to bury it but I do want to know it's there. And the woman coming towards me, not unlike the right amount of salad dressing, was indisputably there and headed in my direction. I liked that she was there but I was unsettled by the pace of her approach.

Sometimes the very thing you dream of happening is the very thing you are not ready for.

Our love affair was a closely kept secret. I was the one in love so I was the one keeping it secret. All our prior meetings were of a public nature so it's possible she saw them differently than I did. They took place at poorly attended literary readings in poorly lit bars. I found solace in dimly lit environs; such places felt romantic to me, bohemian almost, what with the well crafted words of the writers who read floating through the atmosphere. And then there was the look of sadness on her face when a poignant line was being read, her terribly infectious laugh when something funny was delivered. She was often alone, although she never seemed alone to me in the way I felt alone. She asked me my name once and told me hers. It's something I'd love to have happened again and again but once two people have exchanged names, it's seen as unnecessary and possibly odd to repeat the procedure.

Her eyebrows were thick and pronounced, her eyes were green, and her mouth had such a friendly shape I couldn't help myself from hoping that one day we might kiss.

Now here she was getting closer to me by the minute. I could see that she had not yet noticed me, perhaps she was thinking about her salad, the fact that she hadn't eaten since breakfast, if in fact she hadn't eaten since breakfast. I could always ask her I suppose, once she and her salad landed right in front of me which at this point seemed inevitable. It was the last thing I wanted to ask her though and I was not going to have the time to figure out what the first thing I wanted to ask her was.

The day was bright, way too bright for my liking. I was squinting and who wants to be seen squinting in the light of day like some hopelessly nocturnal creature. The sidewalk was full of people going about their business. I thought she must be on her way back to work with that to-go salad of hers in its see-through container. The whole world felt cold and functional, as though it knew what it was doing, but all of what it was doing made me uneasy because I didn't know what it was doing, nor, when I came to think of it, had I ever known.

I crossed the street quickly so she would not detect my rapid escape.

I don't know why.



SEA CLIFF
KATE BARRENGOS
2021

gamma-aminobutyric acid or GABA

DENA ROD

worry is another love, to worry is to love
sweet talismans of *take care / be well*
not enough to guard against
metal sharpened teeth biting down
on inner cheeks, salted salivary
shame flowing down through lips.

my mother's love is worried
cuticles, scorched forearms
forcing a plastic lid cracked open,
to peel back foil of never sour enough *mast*,
tanged with thick prepped herbs
that radiate love, a worried radiation full

of sweet morsels to feed syrup down
your throat, raw short nails scoring
the plane of mars, kindling flames
humming glassy-eyed, worry sheared razor-thin,
roasted fat dripping hot, burning flesh,
wiping out well-being.

my mother's love a sun small enough
to burn me, encompassing warmth,
coppered hot and floral, mint alighting
my tongue, irradiated comfort
fleeting against bordered
creases in our eyes.

mirror the way my love is worried.
care tossed and wrapped
around my figure, refreshed
to pink and blue plump little cakes
climbing to dream ourselves
wicked, benzos bitter on our tongues.

unease dissolving sharp and metallic,
worry burned brightly away under
a chemical blank, a challenge forgotten.

Toreador

ELIZABETH STIX

You say you want to be like Hemingway.

“In what way?” I ask.

“In every way,” you answer. “The life is the writing. The writing is life. There is no space between man and creation. Creation and God.” We’re in a hotel bar – bright lights and worn maroon carpet – waiting for a hot fudge sundae. On a TV in the corner, Peter Jennings says that Skylab has pierced the atmosphere, a burning trail of fire.

“Didn’t Hemingway shoot himself in the chest?” I ask.

You laugh at me. “You’re looking at it from the wrong angle. Think of the running of the bulls, the roar of the crowd at a bullfight.”

“Do you know that bulls are colorblind?” I say. “It’s the motion of the cape that gets them. The cape hides the matador’s sword. They use red to mask the blood.”

The waitress brings our sundae, lays down two long spoons. Her earrings are thick white hoops and her hair smells like Breck shampoo. I scrape chocolate from the side and lick the spoon.

“You’re not like anyone I’ve ever met before,” you say, and I wonder if you know how many women men have said that to. You lean in and kiss me, once on the forehead and once on the cheek, and I’m startled by your gesture. An ambush, yet deferential. I think: *I should leave now. This can’t go anywhere good.* But then we are dating, and then we are married, and I can’t blame you for that.



OF MOUNTAINS AND CANYONS
TRAVIS WELLER
2021

Settlement House

PREETI VANGANI

In the redesign, we concealed
all our faults and all your gods, Ma,

we displayed them in the rooms, just
as you had them. Durga on her lion,

Saraswati on swan: gliding between
worlds. You departed on a controlled

flame. I didn't know how to carry
the absence of who carried me.

Even the most comical Ganesha,
I wept into laughs, resurrecting

your DIY temples, has a mouse to sledge it
through the world. The earliest vehicle

for carrying humans was the marriage
of heat and mechanics. I argue

it should have been memory.

And mothers. But what carried you,

Mother, bower of head, roller of rosary --
your sisters, your anger, your eight

glasses of water? Your maiden life
white Ambassador or the father

who believed in loving for so long
as this love crowned from fear?

Surely not the hormonal blaze
of my teenage that wanted from you

only distance. See, how I now seduce
your Krishna with ghee, sing, *Master*

Manipulator, bring her back to me.
Like the uncountable minus signs

necklacing your heels, despite me
washing Lakshmi's feet, hoping

for fortunes to turn, wall by wall,
the cracks in our house reappear.

Your footprints are all over.

Fixer Upper

LAUREN PARKER

You live inside the beautiful house
That is where you live, windows lidded in shudders
Rose bushes blushing on either side
The front stoop wonky as a grin.
That is where you live, and it is beautiful.

It does not matter that no one in town
Likes you very much, and the wind
Blows through your beautiful house, rickety
As a cough, or that night seems a little bit
Darker here, your house is beautiful and that is enough.

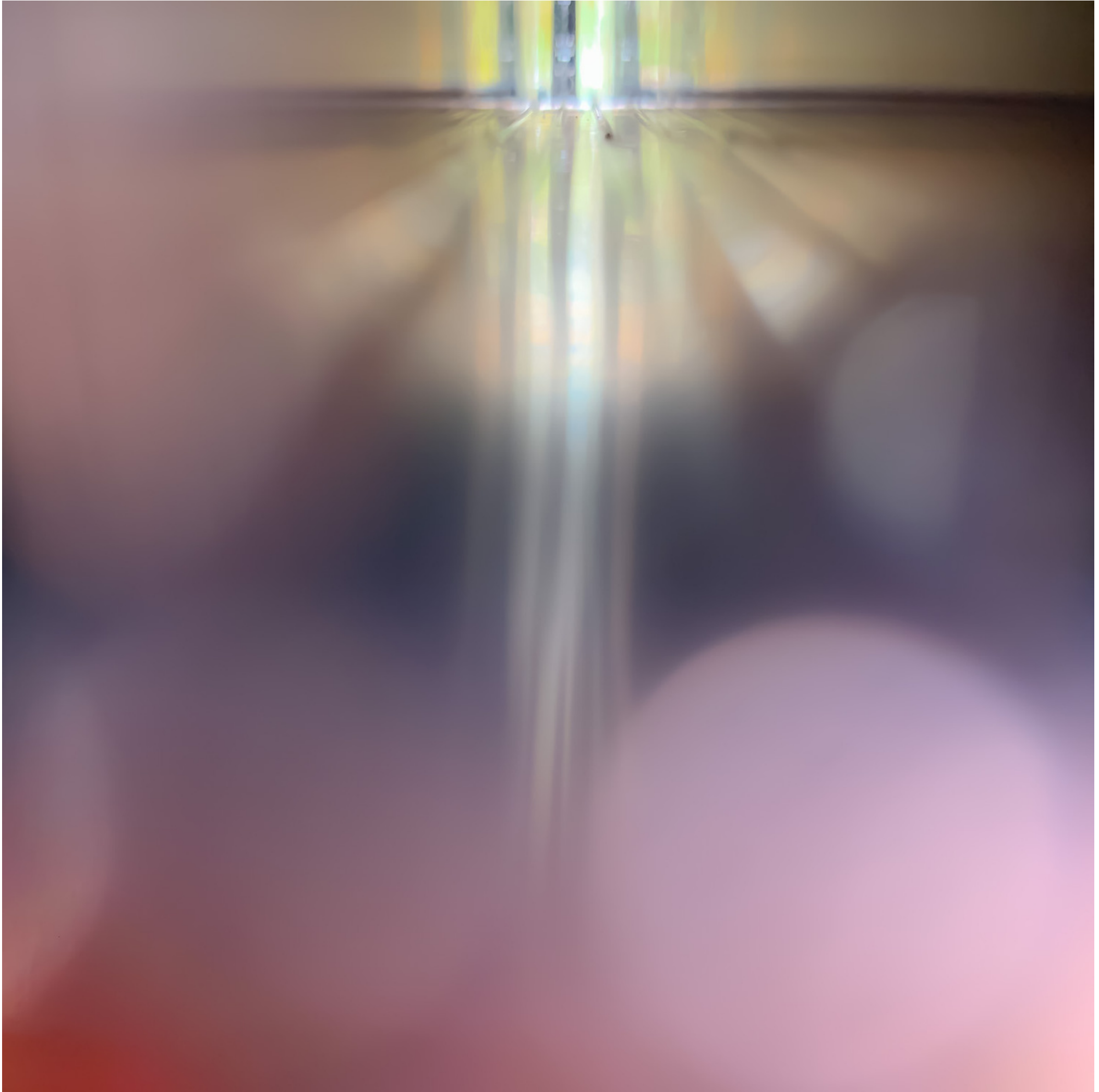
Then there is the rich mahogany baseboards
That suck up all the light in the room so you
Creep from shadow to shadow, pining for a white
Wall to rest against like a climbing strand of ivy
The people in town also think your house is beautiful
They do not like you, that is where you live.

The roof - the true marvel, terra cotta shingles
Brassy in the sunlight like curls, the rain beats
Down on it, you are trapped under a jar
You will always have to replace them with the exact clay
From the exact region of Italy, because your beautiful house
Is historic, and must be kept up. You keep up
Your beautiful house. That is where you live.

You thought you would be happy when you bought it
You thought it would be enough to roll your chair
Down its long hallways every day, your laughter
Filling every open pocket, your joy would be
A white wall to rest against, Enough sunlight to keep you
stretching and growing. But the sunlight is harder to find,
the laughter harder to make
the house has beaten you, this beautiful house
You must keep up, that is where you live.

The people in town cannot save you, from your
Beautiful house. It is yours to keep up,
That is where you live, They forget about you
Most of the time, unless they pass by
your rosy bushes, Your clay tiles, reminded that
They do not like you, but agree your house,
the one that darkens at 3pm, the one that rattles
and shakes, is very beautiful and well kept.

You would love it too if you were on the other side
Of the little gate and little fence, and it were grinning
At you with its wonky stoop and bashful shudders
You would think, "if I lived in a house so beautiful
I would be so content and happy, the place would
Hum with my joy." This is what you keep up.
But now you know the beautiful house does not
grin on the inside, nor you inside it.



CONTEMPLATING TITAN 1
YVONNE DALSCHEN
2021

Coffins to the Capitol

JAMES CAGNEY

Brings coffins to the capitol - you might need a ride home
these mobs see democracy as a nigger and will torch their own courthouse for it
beer can politicians mosh pit with police until insecurities become law
common sense is copyrighted and morality a worthless stock

these mobs see democracy as a nigger and will torch their own courthouse for it
ignorance is a jealous god and many of our enemies now see our point
common sense is copyrighted and morality a worthless stock
there's a sale on souvenirs at the crucifixion where despots worldwide are fighting for seats

ignorance is a jealous god and many of our enemies now see our point
beer can politicians mosh pit with police until insecurities become law
there's a sale on souvenirs at the crucifixion where despots worldwide are fighting for seats
bring coffins to the capitol - you might need a ride home



Tips on How to Get Through a Pandemic

BARUCH PORRAS-HERNANDEZ

Go for a Walk once a day, try to be around trees

Try not to Think about ghosts. Don't think about the over 500,000 new ghosts walking around, wondering what happened? 500,000 ghost voices asking why? New ghosts crowding into boarded up empty San Francisco bars, sitting in empty movie theatres, Play some music for these new ghosts, pour them a drink, put your hand out to the air to maybe touch some ghostly hand, or get a ghost hi-five from someone who misses touching someone as much as you do.

Light a candle for them, speak the words; I'm sorry in the dark, even though you did what you could, you stayed in side, you wore your mask. Let Netflix keep playing on a loop as you clean your room in case the ghosts want something to watch.

If you miss people so much it hurts, picture yourself on a dance floor with all the people you have ever loved. All of them. Your friends, family, past lovers, new lovers, even your frienemies, have a big ass dance party, go wild.

Let yourself cry as much as you need to.

Don't forget to hydrate.

Call a friend once a day. Even if you run out of things to talk about, Try talking about the best positions to cry in despair, like on the floor!, against the wall! In the bathroom, ooor stick to the classics, lie down and be depressed on your own actual bed.

Wear your mask, wash your hands, call your mom, write letters, video chat your friends, think about how you will all be in the same room together again someday, hugging, smiling, laughing, It may get rough, but gotta push through, Do it for the people who love you, Do it for the people that we lost,

Google how to punch Nazis in the throat to take them down, even though you have no upper body strength

Dance in your room alone to a sexy and or romantic song, It's ok, No one will see you, This time don't picture a room full of your friends, make it a dance floor full of queer strangers! – all dancing close and slowly together passionately, see a handsome man across the room, slowly move towards each other like a musical, slowly touch each other's hands, take in the scent of this man as you begin to dance, let him press himself against you even though you don't even know his name, feel his cheek on your cheek,

smile every time each of your ears brush softly
together with each dance move,
both leading, both following,
close your eyes
and let your heart open again

Picture a room in the future
where you will let your heart open again
and sing.



MICHAEL
ANNA ROTTY
2019

**THE
BACK
PAGE**

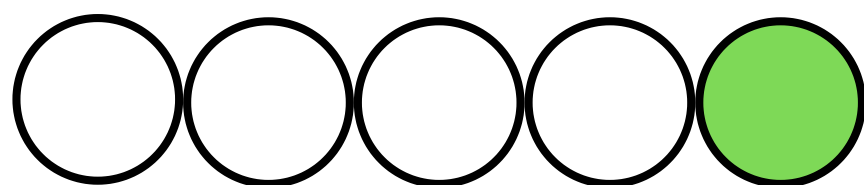
BY
LAURA JAYE CRAMER

THE WEEKLY MUMBLE

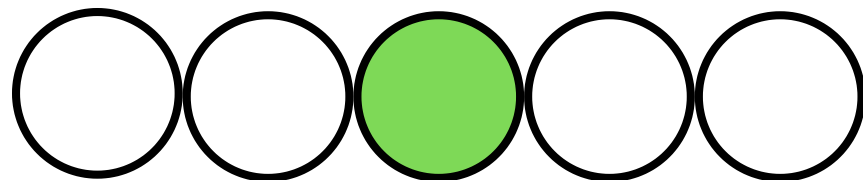
WORD STUFF

Unscramble each Mumble to form five ordinary words.
Then, arrange the green letters in the highlighted spaces to
complete the punchline.

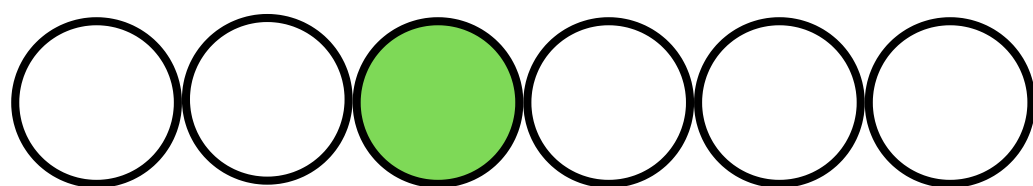
OIPES



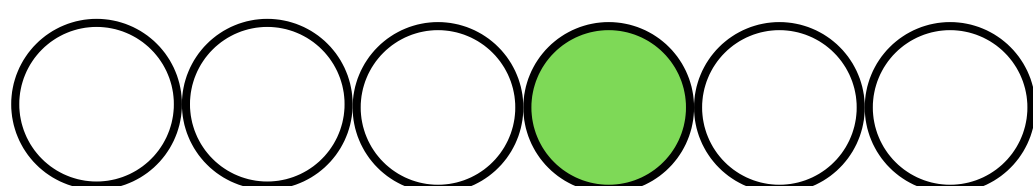
SREDS



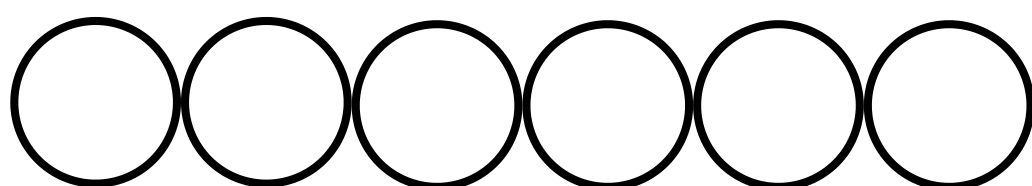
FMNIRO



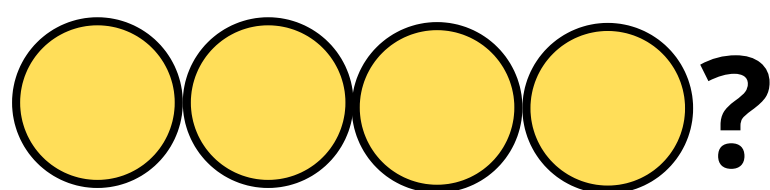
BIGMTA



YPTOSR



When two
vegans
fight, is it
still
called a...



(Answers next week.)

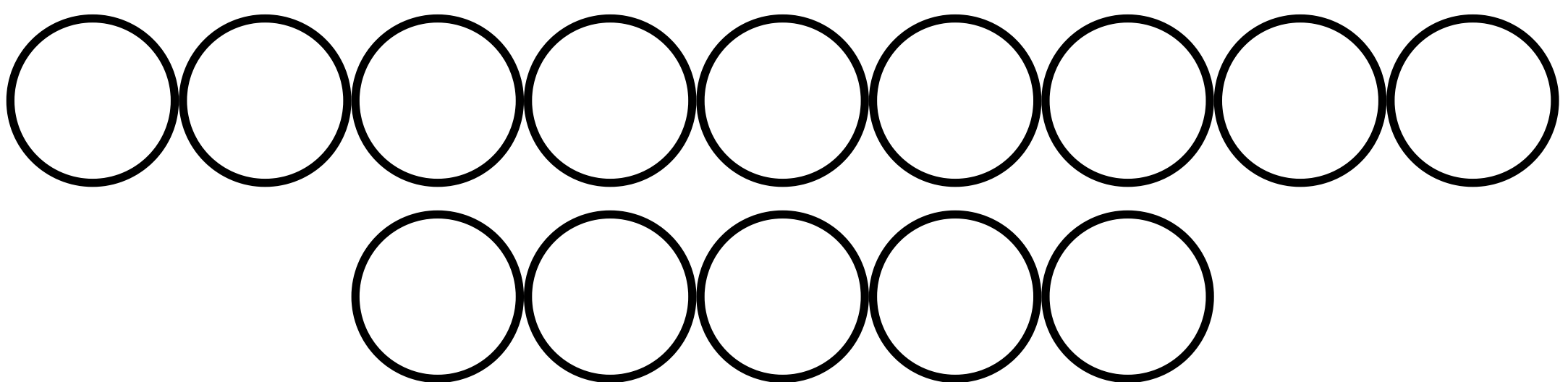
Last week's answers:

PLUME, SNARL, ENCORE, SPRAWL, GRILLE

I spent all weekend working in the garden. *Good thymes.*

HUSTLE & REBUSTLE

Decipher the rebus to reveal a word or phrase that fits in the circles below.
(Remember: One letter per circle.)



LAST WEEK'S ANSWER

better late than never

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THE RACKET

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**END OF
AN ERA.**

