

THE RACKET

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Hi.

How is everyone?

It's been a rough year. Right? I'm not surprising anyone by announcing that 2021, hot on the heels of the poo-party of 2020, was, for all accounts and purposes a sort of head-down, eyes squinted against the light, slog through a sort of existential purgatory. Everything felt just on the verge of being better only to inevitably be, well, not. Global, national, local, personal—on just about every layer, 2021 was a hard one.

Really, I thought I'd exhausted my ability to be angry, I'd broken the lever that makes me raise my fist in anger, finally laid myself down on the train tracks to wait for the next disaster to hew me in half. And then a jury in Wisconsin decided that an 18-year old kid who taken the lives of three people when he was "scared" was an act of self-defense and somewhere deep in the reservoirs I found another spark of rage.

The spectacle of the trial aside (the jury selection, the suspect sobs of the teenager on trial, the judge himself) what I'm angry at is more than the verdict, more than the murders, more than the fact that some amped up man-child was not only able to get a fully automatic assault rifle, kill three people and walk away with a slap on his wrist. These things make me angry but at this point in my life I am, sadly, used to this kind of anger.

I am filled with the oily residue of teeth-grinding rage because this is just another overtly public step forward in a certain segment of society's ham-fisted attempt to permanently warp the way we understand language. Kyle Rittenhouse killed three people because he thought he was justified to do so and when he was put on trial for murder, he claimed self-defense. I'm not going to argue about his emotional state at the time of these killings, but I am going to call bullshit that anyone who brings a gun into an already volatile situation has any plans other than to use it.

To call what this child did anything but murder—premeditated or not—is a just another way to skew the meaning of self-defense towards a more politicized, gun-friendly definition. A way to further normalize the idea of carrying a gun in public. We have already in this country, on a societal level, rationalized the concept of owning a tool that exists to to kill another person. We have used fear, hatred, myth and a glorified version of history to place weapons of war in our homes and on our persons and at the bedrock of this increasingly insane place called America.

I ask myself how have we drifted so far from the abject truth that a gun is a weapon meant to harm others? And the only answer that comes to mind is that failure after failure after failure to do anything to stem the flow of weapons in America combined with our continued shoulder-shrugging approval of those who use these weapons to do egregious harm has pummeled us over and over again until even thinking about pushing back seems too great a burden.

I'm angry because the system is so terribly broken and even when a situation like this raises my ire enough to want to do something, at this point, I don't even know what that is.

'Till next time.

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

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Language, language Oberman.

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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.

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FOLDS
SIDNEY MASUGA
2014

When I was sixteen

CASSANDRA DALLETT

My cotton candy hair
red pout of stolen Revlon Red
When I was sixteen
stumbling drunk most night
doc martins or Stan Smiths
every pair of jeans had torn knees from falling.

When I was seventeen still uncoupled,
sleeping with anybody who cornered me drunk enough,
made me feel wanted for a minute.
I hung pics of a Navy guy I'd flung with on Fleet Week.
Then met Dwayne who was twenty-five
working as a plumber next door,
told him he could leave the lights on,
rode him like I had all the confidence I did not,
knew he wouldn't be able to give me up after that.
Our first date, walking around Fisherman's Wharf
Pouring liquor into soda bottles
His sheepskin coat tall and lean
high cheekbones
dark sexy disturbed eyes
I was lucky to make it out alive.

But I did right before I turned eighteen
I'd met Andre while I was still with Dwayne

Dre who is six months younger than me
Was inexperienced and boyish with an oversized mouth
usually sneering.

I needed to split his bad attitude
into that giant Hey Kool-Aid grin.
In my dreams I still need a glimpse of
those big teeth working over Juicy Fruit
and thoughts of me.

What can I say I've already written entire books
about how impossible he was.

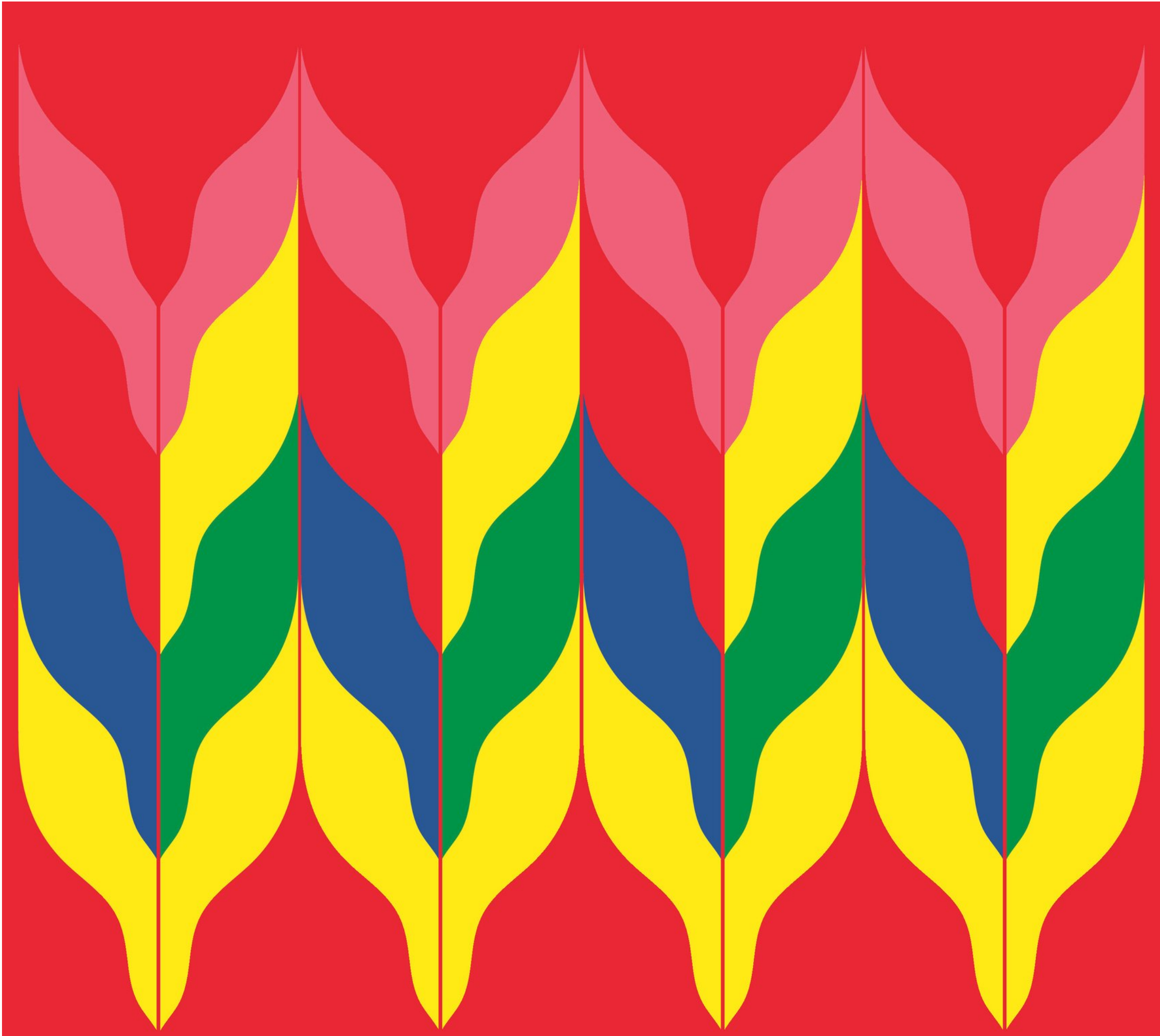
How I was nineteen before I was done—
and then fifty-one.

When I look back
I want to know if I ever knew
what love was
or is.

How much is blind desire and addiction
wanting someone to be something
or make you feel some kind of way.

At fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen—
I wanted someone to care
about me more than I wanted any other thing.
I haven't changed much.

When writing about those years
I still chose to write about who I loved each year,
as if that would tell you who I was .



CROCUS-ADE
SIDNEY MASUGA
2014

Sad Girls Love to Bowl

ERIKA GALLION

ACT 1

I am eleven and I'm at the bowling alley. It's my birthday party; classmates come equipped with quarters to spend on slime-hands or fake tattoos from the quarter machines. I've been a guest at multiple birthday bashes centered around bowling. Last year, at Natalie's party, I watched in envy as she bowled a strike to close out the festivity. Everyone clapped and her dad wrapped her in a tight hug, like he couldn't be more proud.

There are three bowling alleys near our house. East Sparta Alley is small, the lights dingy, cigarette smoke nudged into the floorboards like mold. But it's cheap, and Dad is allowed to bring his own case of beer (Busch) instead of being forced to buy a draft he doesn't love (Budweiser). Strikers, the alley on Whipple, is fine but my parents don't like its parking lot or its location, and no one from school goes there anyway. AMF, the biggest and most commercialized of the three alleys, is expensive, *ridiculous*, Dad says, but they have a bar, food service, an arcade. It's the only alley that hosts birthday parties, the one open past midnight on weekends, and every year for New Year's Eve, AMF holds a Scotch Doubles event. It's the Scotch Doubles that brings my family to AMF more than the other two alleys, and it's the alley where we celebrate kids aging into whatever comes next. Every New Year's Eve is here, Dad bitching about the cost of beer, Mom applauding me and my brother as we bowl between one another's legs.

My parents reserve two lanes at AMF, and my mother requests lanes 10 and 11 because 10 is my number in softball. AMF gifts birthday kids their own bowling pin, clean and shiny, the white of its laminate paint almost neon it is so bright. This pin is what I've been longing for, or so I think. I expect the loveliest notes to be written on my pin— confessions of love, odes of friendship, minuets of pride. The party moves fast, though, and suddenly we're cutting the



FALL CREATURES 1
YVONNE DALSCHE
2021

cake, we're singing. I'm staring at the air conditioner vent trying not to notice the gray ash coating the ceiling. All of those burnt out candles, those flimsy wishes. I squint to try and find the magic of the day but I can only see my dad's lips cursing in anger at a \$6 Budweiser, can only see my brother and his friend sneaking sips out of my Mountain Dew.

After my party guests have left I bowl an eight-pound marble ball of pink down the lane. There are no bumpers here anymore, not since I turned ten, just the slick surface of the wood and my will. At first I think I'm going to hit the pins head-on, a strike; then I'm sure instead that I'm heading right for the gutter, the ker-plunk noise of disappointment. My ball knicks the bulbous side of the back-left pin, and that pin, once it falls, knocks down two others near it. Behind me my family cleans the area. No one comments on my shitty bowl. I feel robbed of something, not only of the power that comes from a strike, but also of the freedom only complete failure can give you, the shrug of the shoulders from your parents after bowling a gutter, the moments of silence you're entitled to afterward. In the silence there is no disappointment, just a sadness I can fall deeper and deeper into.

ACT 2

I am fourteen and I'm at the bowling alley. My mother has dropped me and a friend off at AMF, not for a birthday party but for Black Light Night, arguably the hippest thing going on in Canton, Ohio for teens like us. On Black Light Night AMF turns out the overhead lights and the alley becomes aglow with neon. We buy glow sticks at the dollar store and crack their spines just before going inside the alley. We want to be glowing when the boys see us.

I am in love with one of these boys. He is my 'boyfriend,' has been since sixth grade. He comes over to my house; he's heard my dad scream about the remote control, about the shoes in the foyer. Through AIM I tell this boy everything I know about who I am, about who I want to be. I use the word alcoholic to describe my father for the first time via pink font with a black background. Me and the boy kiss and hug in the hallways of school and I know I'm lucky, the luckiest. He is smart and athletic and artistic and when we go bowling together, especially on Black Light Night, I feel limitless. Something about the darkness, the abyss, all the corners we could sneak into together but won't. I fantasize about kissing in the locker room but sitting next to him while our friends bowl is unbearable enough. We don't stop holding each other's hands, not even when our hands start to sweat.

My parents still bowl, although they can't stand one another enough to be on a league together anymore. My brother bowls too, eventually committing to his own bowling ball,



FALL CREATURES 2
YVONNE DALSCHE
2021

just like my parents. He goes with them every time they ask but when they ask me I feel adamant in my refusal. I can't verbalize why I don't want to go bowling with them, why I don't want to go skiing either, why I hide in my bedroom instead of shooting the basketball in the driveway with them. My family is athletic and I am too. The activities are a chance for us to come together, a chance for my parents to speak without arguing. But I will not participate. I tell them I no longer like to bowl or play basketball or ski. It's not true.

I tell the boy I'm in love with that I think I'm too sad for my family. I know I have become too difficult for my family to understand. I find that they are most uncomfortable with my sadness, how massive it is, how insidious. They side-eye me when I put another Dashboard Confessional album on. I know what the implication is, even if they're not speaking it aloud. Or maybe it's an implication of my own creation, not their doing at all.

I stop bowling with my family because I expect too much out of life. I long for the moments of awe and if I cannot find them I drift away to that island of sadness I cater to so well. I am difficult and emotional and it's too much for my family to deal with. It becomes, two years later, too much for the boy to deal with, too. One night I left Black Light Night not knowing it would be my last.

ACT 3

I am almost thirty and I'm at the bowling alley. In Los Angeles there's Shatto 39, an alley in Koreatown where friends invite me and my partner to bowl. When I slip my shoes on, their tread worn down and their heels thin as wafer cookies, I'm struck with remembering. The gloss on the lane brings me back to the lipgloss I used to wear before Black Light Nights, the one that would glow in the dark. The smell of concession snacks makes me remember the boy's lips, how his kisses always felt as holy as a microwaveable pizza after school. A friend inputs our name into the display and if I squint hard enough I can see my dad doing the same, typing our names every New Year's Eve.

I learn quickly that the only people in Los Angeles who can bowl are those originally from the Midwest. My friends bowl gutter after gutter and when I knock six pins down my first round they guffaw. *Teach us your secrets!* They urge. *Muscle memory*, I explain when I bowl a strike. *It's in my blood.*

But I do know how to teach someone to bowl. Because my father taught me. He steered me and my brother, ages four and five, to the rows of dots on the floor next to the ball return machine. He told us where to put our feet, how our fingers should feel within their



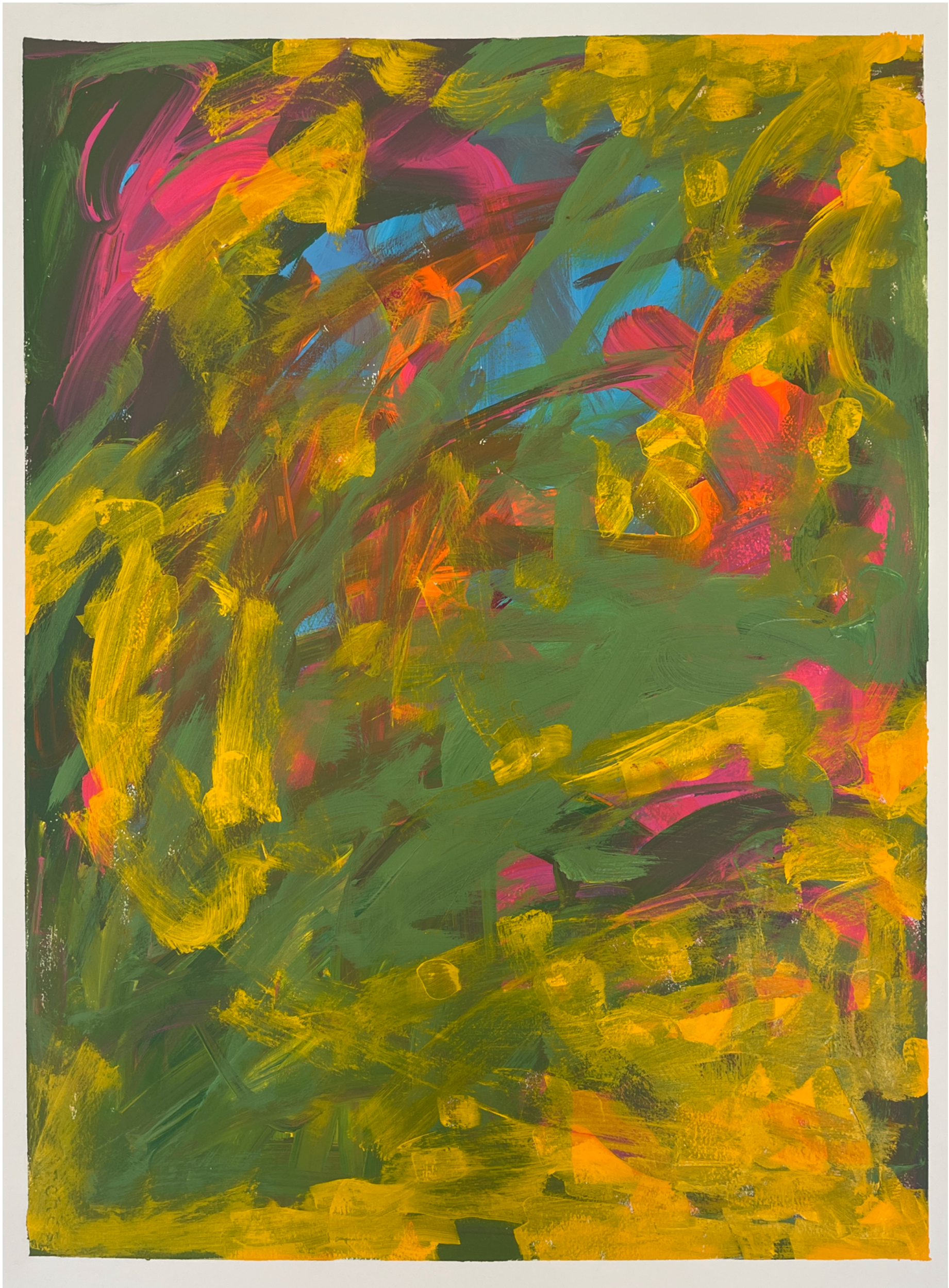
FALL CREATURES 9
YVONNE DALSCHE
2021

sockets. He taught us how to focus on the head pin, how to lay the ball with your wrist.

My partner and I start to go bowling alone. We go during the day, when no one's there. We go on weekends, watch teens flirt. I point at the dots on the floor and hear my dad in my throat. I refused to bowl with my family because I didn't think I was worthy of the kind of love that comes from teaching someone how to do something. I didn't think we, as a family, were worthy of that love when every day we screamed, every day we ignored.

When you bowl, you're alone. There's a group behind you that you'll return to soon but at the lane, it's just you. The long lane, the openness in front of you. I realize that's what I craved that day at my birthday party; not a strike or some magical moment of gratitude. Just the silence, the small oasis of alone the moment grants you. I want the open space to feel before I have to return.

I tell my parents I'm teaching my partner to bowl. *Wow!* They chuckle. *We had so much fun at that alley*, my Dad says, and I laugh at how time can massage a memory. The dad of my past wouldn't have called the alley fun. He was always annoyed or half-drunk or annoyed he wasn't half-drunk. But I see that him differently now, too. I feel empathy for him, for the man trying his best. And I feel empathy for 11 year old me, 14 year old me, who didn't know what the fuck it was about bowling alleys that made her so sad.



STUDY 3 HEADLANDS
SHARA MAYS
2021

cancer

NICOLE AMADOR

I called yesterday
Thinking today was the day

They would remove
Her sister's breast

But I got the day wrong
It's Tuesday and she doesn't want

To talk about it
We have already waited

A month
Does anyone die

Waiting for an operating room?
She's an octogenarian and

Not as important to them
As my 35 year old

College roommate
Who had two young girls

And a husband who
Posted on Facebook

Breast cancer doesn't kill
Metastatic breast cancer kills

I thought about all the crocheted hats
I've brought to hospitals

Always announcing a loose stitch
Only to be told

Don't worry
They don't wear them for long

That is when
I unraveled

In my twenties
A coworker said to me

I want to suck on your titties
But he was close to retirement

My boss said
You can't prove it

And a letter will go in your file
He died

Of colon cancer
Turns out the mass

Was not benign
And neither am I.



STUDY 10 HEADLANDS
SHARA MAYS
2021

Taking A Shower with Esther Hays

LEXI COVALSEN

So I'm sitting on one of those dumb little plastic shelves in the shower while Esther Hays washes the conditioner out of her hair beside me. The water's turning cold as we stand there, making animals out of strands of hair on the wall. Zebra in gold, wild moose in red. After we run out of hair, we start plucking eyelashes and I say, Esther, we can use this too – we can make animals out of this too. I say, Esther, there's a rage inside of you and it's inside me too. She says, but anger never ends. To us, daydreaming about punching the bathroom mirror is actually punching the bathroom mirror, but no one else can feel that. To everyone else we're just dumb long hair and no one will ever for as long as you live see anger in your body until it's dead. I say, okay, but I miss you. We met that day in July at the DMV and I want to go back. I want to be fifteen again, air condition cold in the aisle – ruining my life in some new and exciting way. I say, Esther, wasn't there some loose tile in the ceiling we could have slipped through that day and disappeared forever? Let's go back. Let's fly up into the dark sogging stain on the ceiling; mold and magic, the sky a marigold. We can leave things like missed calls and money and dumb shower shelves behind to crust up with ice in that world blue as snow globe. We can live in a house with no sadness, where we sit in pools of hot water and dance in the yellow light of ceilingless places. Esther, we can go there and leave our anger all alone like lemon to crust on cold bathroom windowsills, stirring in black night and stars that will never reach us.

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**THE END OF THE ROAD
AS WE KNOW IT.**

