

THE RACKET | 74



THE RACKET

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Hello.

It's only been 11 days since 2022 tipped over into 2023. And if the current machinations by the Republican Party in the House of Representatives are any indication of the political year to come, well, we're in for a shitshow.

I say this with full understanding that at this point in time raising an eyebrow at the state of politics in America is less a judgement and more a national pastime. The governance of our country (though I do believe Joe Biden is doing a solid, if unremarkable job of keeping everything afloat) devolves more and more into unscripted television. Everyone's playing a part—the aggrieved conservative, the overlooked progressive, the staunch moderate, etc.—and everyone's scheming to get their close-up.

Building, buffing and tailoring reality to fit your public image takes time and it takes effort. And all of the energy needed for this exertion has to come from somewhere. From what I can tell, as the country founders around us, this energy is being taken from whatever source powers the none-too-easy job of running the government. We are falling apart because those in charge are no better than reality television idols preening for the camera.

It's bad. And I don't think it's going to get any better in the foreseeable future.

It took Kevin McCarthy—the potential all-star bootlicker of all bootlickers—fifteen tries just to get himself settled as the Speaker of the House. Fifteen tries. Almost three full days where the all the many, many problems plaguing our country and the world continued to grow and fester and spread unchecked.

Clearly, I'm aware that the problems in our country are deep and systemic and won't be fixed in the three days Kevin McCarthy spent selling his soul to become a skeletal version of the position he so desperately sought. But with the country in its current state, it takes an unchecked level of audacity to waste three days butting heads with your fellow politicians who should be, by all accounts, spending their time doing something far more useful.

That's what pisses me off. I don't believe for a single second the collection of goons that have taken power in the House have any plans, let alone the intellectual means, to do anything but willfully push the country deeper in to the mud. I understand that.

THE RACKET

For these b-level reality clowns posturing as politicians to drop any pretense of trying though, to ostensibly turn towards the camera, break the fourth wall and whisper, "We just don't give a fuck"-yeah, that's a step too far for me.

But it's only the 11th day of brand new year and I can't begin to imagine how this next 365 days will stretch my capacity to endure.

Welcome to 2023. It's going to be a long fucking haul.

-N

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My brother and my sister make the ugliest decisions.



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

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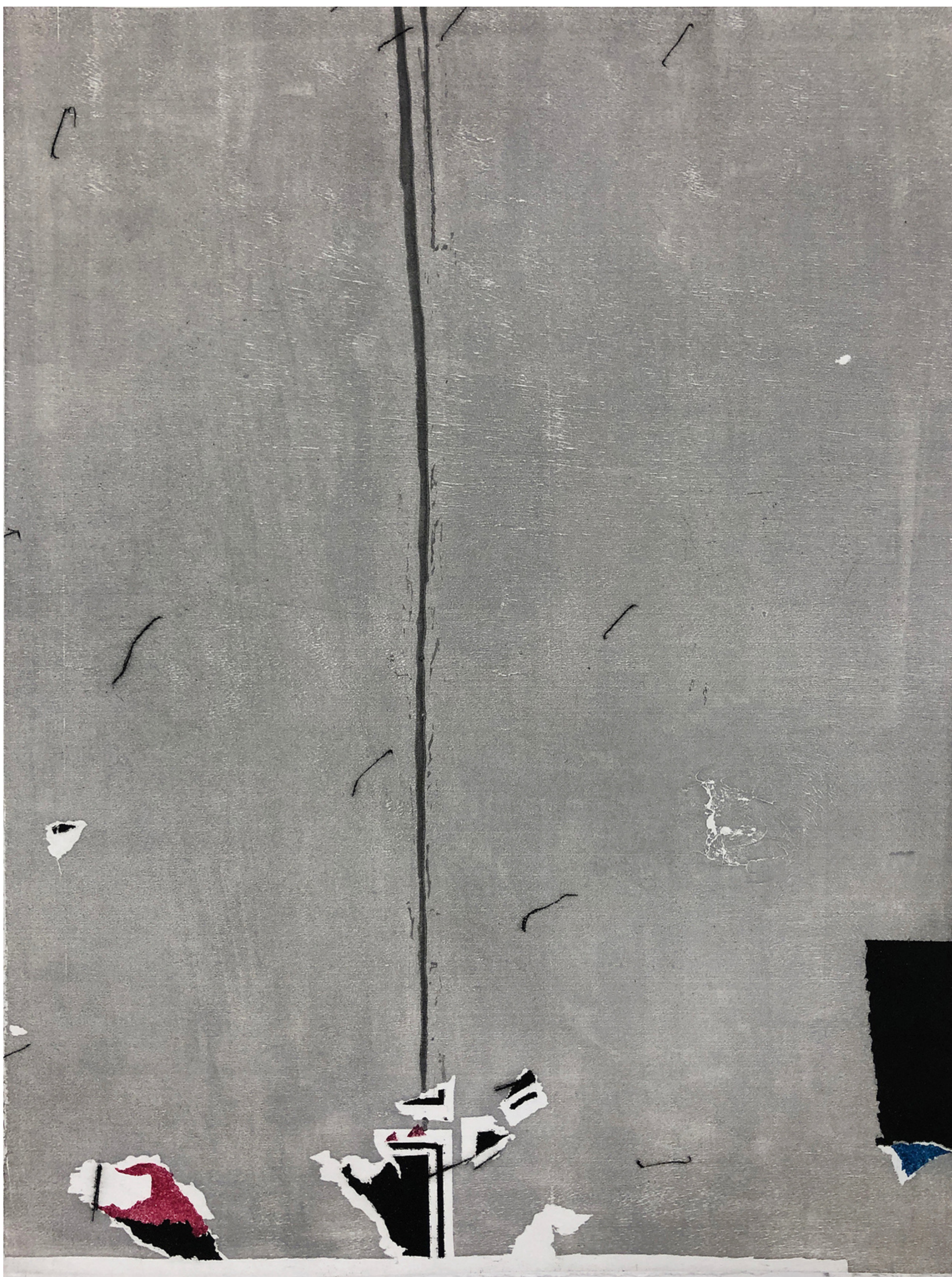


3300 CLUB
ROBBIE SUGG
2018

Admiral Fitzroy's Storm Glass Predicts Snow in April

KATE WYLIE

I can't put out birdfeed
without the whole neighborhood singing
about it. *Here comes the woman
in her father's old tee shirts.
He isn't even dead
yet. She already mourns him.*
What long shadows he will leave
at the foot of each mountain.
Time's unhinged revolving door. Acorns
grown up and down simultaneously.
The crimson wounds of wallflowers.
What spellbooks and secrets we keep.
*Poor daddies. Poor grannies. See girl run.
See girl flee police.
See girl slit her wrist over the sink.*
Closet the questions. My answers
will kill you. Send larkspur bending backward.
I can't shine this silverware anymore
without dogwoods glimmering
beyond the windowpane. In this instant,
future becomes past. Holy Moses,
don't let me be a ghost so soon.
Don't take the black hills and badlands
from me now. Don't take my father.
Bet my life on how fast a bad mind goes.
Give me back starlings, their merciless laughter.
Give me back those memories, tattered
clothes we never throw away. Give me lone notes
in darkness, that wayward, weathered song.





STUCCO
ROBBIE SUGG
2017

Cash Only

CAMERON DEAN GIBSON

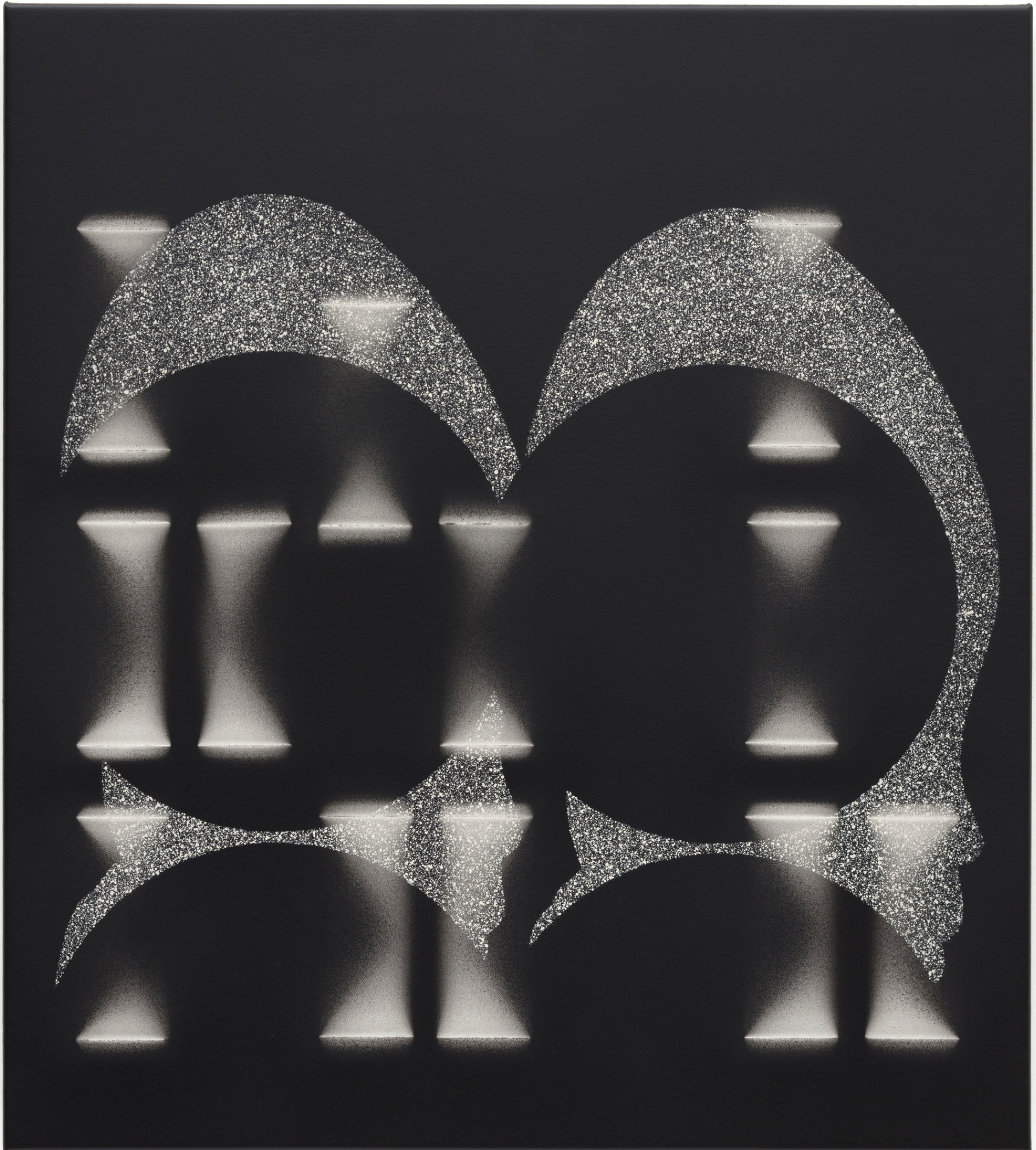
My little sister doesn't want to be home on Saturdays,
so she'll pretend to blend in with a rotating table of bitter old women,
who only tip in change ever since we got video poker.

They make a pile of ones
for her to flatten around her thigh.
I whisper in her ear, "You're not old enough to play,"
as the game flashes in the corner
where the old booths used to be
cracked red leather, asleep,
a curve around my back
as a kid.

She sucks her teeth and says, "Okay, Mom,"
like it means something, then flinches
when the front door opens with a gasp.

One of dad's friends, pulling up
in blue jeans, work boots,
harvest season or not, he's here for my shift.
Give enough eye contact,
our local rep for Pioneer Seed will save his cash for me.

My sister sees me staring, pretends to gag.
There's nothing to explain,
so I just give her what I got —
burnt coffee, unleaded.



SPLIT TINT (X-RAY)
ANDREW CHAPMAN
2022



BIT QUE
ANDREW CHAPMAN
2022

Good Guy With Gun

MATT CARNEY

Arlington, Texas

Before he was called Good Guy With Gun, Good Guy With Gun was called Just Chuck. Just Chuck the divorcé with one ex-wife and one adult child, whereabouts unknown, both of them goddamned Libras. Just Chuck pawned his wedding ring, a black tungsten extra wide dude band with a guitar string inlay and whiskey barrel sleeve, and used the money to buy a scalped PS5, a copy of Call of Duty Vanguard, and a Colt .45 ACP 1911 at the marvelous 50%-off gun show sale in Humble, Texas.

Just Chuck had indeed been called Area Man, once, many years prior. But it was a prior that finally he could soon forget. In August, eight months after pawning the ring, Just Chuck sat again among the families and tourists in the cafeteria of the International Bowling Museum and Hall of Fame, pining wistfully, doin’ the Dew fifty-fifty with George Dickle.

He drank and absently fingered the only ring he still owned: The high school graduation ring his father had given him. With the summer light streaming through the windows, he could still hear dad’s voice as he read engraving to himself again: “NOT BAD – PRETTY GOOD.”

That’s the moment the peace of the bowling museum cafeteria was shattered by gunfire erupting through the glass door – the shooter kicked it open, and Just Chuck whirled in his seat to face Bad Guy With Gun. Some exhausted, pox-scarred piece-of-shit in a Kevlar vest with an AR and an abysmal manifesto on the tip of his tongue.

It was the moment Just Chuck had been waiting for his entire life.

Every jerk and twitch reflex, every match of Call of Duty, every crystal of Mountain Dew in his body popped off all at once. He fell from his barstool to one knee, unsheathed his .45, and fired a single shot – *woosh* – it sailed through the air as if flicked cross the room by Christ himself right between the eyes of Bad Guy With Gun.

And just like that, it was over. Bad Guy With Gun seemed to not even know what had

hit him, locked forever in his final moment of mouth-breathing as his skull emptied into the foyer in slow motion.

And of course Just Chuck stood, tossed his jacket back, and sheathed his .45 *without even blinking*.

This lucky shot was more than a miracle: it was an American miracle. Women and children cried, fell at his feet, tried to hug him – he politely declined the hugs because he was stoic, somewhat of an asshole, but above all he was a good fucking guy, and good fucking guys never hug crying women.

With the miracle and the media, Just Chuck had transcended Area Man, had transformed into Good Guy With Gun.

Hannity. Jesse Watters. Bred Baier. All of them wanted Zoom interviews with Good Guy With Gun. The United States of America averages a mass shooting every 20 hours, and Just Chuck had stopped one of them, once, had stopped one Bad Guy With Gun by just being a Good Fucking Guy. Just Chuck, Good Fucking Guy in the sheets became Good Guy With Gun in the streets, a stable genius and a real hero who'd proved the Right right, finally. Forget the police, the FBI. Forget regulations. Obviously, Good Guy With Gun needed to be in every single room in America all at once, always, forever, to solve the problem.

There was only one interview Good Guy With Gun really wanted to give. Naturally. Tucker Carlson. But the Tuck had not sent Good Guy With Gun an invite.

Still, he got calls from everybody else. Sponsorships. This unregulated provocateur heartthrob, Good Guy With a Gun, had stopped Bad Guy With Gun in one shot, had turned down all the interviews on purpose to own the fucking feckless Libras, asserting his genius and total lack of concern.

Even his estranged son reached out to him. His son left a voicemail on September 7th, 2022, sounding quite drunk, shouting something from a crowded bar. He slurred something like, “Wow. Okay. *Dad*. Go ahead and be Good Guy With Gun. I don’t care if you’re Good Guy With Gun, ‘cause mama is a bad bitch with a ray gun, rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.” Relishing the tongue roll impossible to Good Guy With Gun before he hung up laughing.

Good Guy With Gun was certain hearing from his son was a bad omen.

Good Guy With Gun started to have real bad dreams. He dreamt of lemurs with shotguns, baristas with machineguns. Things were moving way too fast and outside his control.

But Good Guy With Gun also started to have his favorite dream again. About his dark fantasy. About his special fetish: The ball pit.

He told nobody of the ball pit fetish. Ever. Maybe the secret had driven away the wife

and kid. But it was just something about that stickiness. Something about that stink of polymer. That hollow sound, the sinking ankle deep, then knee deep, then falling backwards into clattering chatters of a thousand different colored balls, then being totally swallowed like a microbe in glassy quicksand. He couldn't help himself. Hard-on was an understatement. Premature ejaculate was an overture. Just Chuck knew a deep dive and slow swallow totally alone into a brand-new ball pit made him a real man.

The ball pit fetish was of course the secret rabbit hole that had led him late at night again and again to Reddit. To 4chan. To 8chan. To Dedchan. The darkest places of the internet.

Right before he'd become Good Guy With Gun, this internet searching led him to something new. Something *more*. He'd read on Reddit shortly before the miracle shot all about Tucker Carlson's ball pit slip-n-slide.

The details are scant. Nobody knows really what it is—I don't even know really what it is. But Tucker Carlson's ball pit slip-n-slide *is a thing*, risqué photos from a slick situation that the Tuck himself still fights to erase from the internet. The pictures still exist.

Good Guy With Gun prayed, fingering his Christ tattoo, that Tucker Carlson's ball pit slip-n-slide was not just another Libra hoax.

Tucker Carlson's ball pit slip-n-slide gave Good Guy With Gun something he'd not had in so many years. It gave him *hope*. Hope that he could finally be open with his secrets. Hope that someone would understand him.

And you know what else? It gave him the best cry he'd ever had in his life. Because on September 12th, Good Guy With Gun received the invitation he'd been waiting for: Tucker Carlson Tonight.

The day came. Good Guy With Gun got his clothes back on after the strip search, holstered his .45, and entered the green room to wait for showtime. He grinned, sauntered in his shitty untreated skin, his unleaded mullet and rimless glasses and a sleeveless shirt which read one word in simple all-caps: HOCKEY.

But his heart sank as he entered. He wasn't alone.

Some of them wore denim, some of them wore leather, some plaid and some just shirt sleeves. There were crew cuts, close shaves, mullets. There were guns, guns, guns.

Good Guy With Gun realized, crestfallen, that the green room was full of Other Good Guys With Guns. That this was, in fact, an entire segment on Good Guys With Guns.

He wasn't special. There would be no private talk, no interview. Good Guy With Gun was not even Just Chuck to the Tuck. He was *nobody*.

And just then, walking towards Good Guy With Gun, laughing and laughing, was

Another Good Guy With Gun in double denim and a snake t-shirt and a nine million gallon cowboy hat.

“Ho ho holy shit,” Another Good Guy With Gun said to Good Guy With Gun. “Hold up. Dude. I remember you.”

Good Guy With Gun was absolutely still, then. Silent. Sweating.

“I seen you on TV years ago.” Another Good Guy With Gun continued. “You’re... Area Man. You’re Area Man! They arrested you, Area Man! Arlington, 2013. They arrested you for blowing a load in that ball pit right on TV. Chuck-E-Cheese grand opening! You tell me I’m wrong, bud. Tell me I’m wrong.”

The entire green room, a room loaded with Other Good Guys With Guns, were howling with laughter at Good Guy With Gun, Just Chuck again, who could never escape being Area Man after all.

But he’d never go back to who he was. Ever.

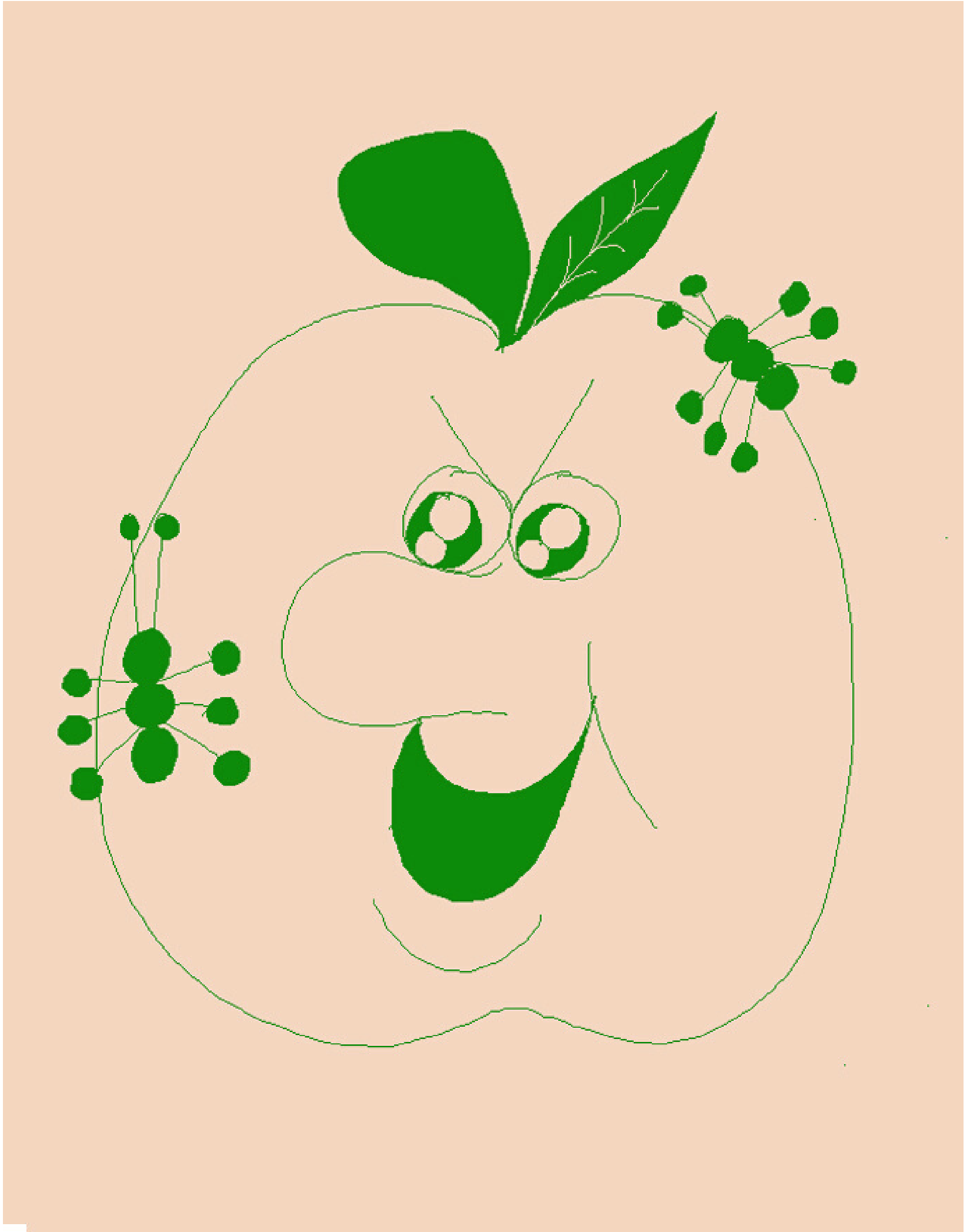
There was only one thing left he could do: Good Guy With a Gun squared up.

Good Guy With Gun squared up against Another Good Guy With Gun, a bead of sweat and a hand hovering over the handle and hammer of his .45. Not about to become Just Chuck again, never to become Area Man again. But about to make a big mistake.

Good Guy With Gun was seconds away from becoming Just Another Dumb Motherfucker.



UNTITLED
MARK OCHINERO
2023



UNTITLED
MARK OCHINERO
2023

circus poem # 3

B E E L B

to braid the tightrope as you walk across it
is to balance while bent at the waist

keep both pigeon toes right at the pivot point,
keep your fingers loose & deft & avoid cramping at all costs.

it is to look a fool & know you're foolish &
continue walking until you run out of rope

because you know there is no turning back
but you also know that you don't know

how much more rope you have to braid
& so it may all end the same anyway.

this metaphor is coming at you like confetti
through a blowhorn, are you ready?

this poem is six painted clowns tucked in one small car,
pushing & shoving & all talking over another.

this poem is the elephant's trumpet & the band's trumpet
competing & both are balancing on bright rolling balls

& you know a crash is coming but you don't know when
& anticipation is kissing nerves with tongue

& the slick sound of connection isn't nearly as loud
as the trumpets but somehow you can hear it better

& it's making you sick to your stomach. you're dizzy
from the spotlights & the hightop is beginning to spin

& you're reminded when you were very young you thought
the parachute game was like living inside a kaleidoscope

& you never wanted to come back out
but it was called mousetrap instead of parachute game

& all you could think of was gnawing your leg off
or the cat doing it for you & you haven't held a kaleidoscope

in years & you will never recapture the feeling of the parachute
staying suspended above you but you're here under the hightop &

all the lights are on you
& somewhere, someone in the crowd is watching

waiting for you to put on a show.



UNTITLED
MARK OCHINERO
2023

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BEARDED LADY

WHEN YOU'RE A WOMAN WITH A BEARD, YOUR
SECRET IS WRITTEN ALL OVER YOUR FACE

by Allison Landa



"Bearded Lady is a tale of hiding and revealing, of secrets and salvation, of how what we believe sets us apart actually unites us. It's the story of what happens when you can no longer push down your deepest humiliation and instead must truly face the world."

GET YOUR COPY.

**NEW BEGINNINGS.
BUT THIS IS STILL
AN ENDING.**

