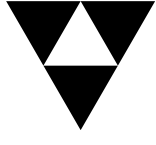




THE RACKET | 79



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In the wake of the shooting in Nashville this week, a friend of mine started talking about moving to Canada. His thought was that a country that did nothing to address a clear problem—the ease of purchasing assault rifles in America—that was leading to the deaths of children, wasn't a country that was looking out for his, or his family's best interest.

To start this discussion, my friend needed to clarify that he wasn't "the type of guy to move to Canada because Trump got elected" but that the ongoing situation in America was not only becoming untenable, but wasn't being addressed in any meaningful way by the people in power. Why should he continue living, and paying taxes, in a country that was unable, or unwilling to make the needed, and very evident, changes to protect its populace?

Like my friend, in the aftermath of these increasingly and sadly common events, I'm left wondering if America is a country I want to continue living in. And like my friend I also feel the need to qualify my burgeoning fear that America isn't everything it's cracked up to be.

But, why?

Why am I, and I imagine many of you, so horribly entangled with this country that continues to do nothing to improve our safety, or even the quality of our lives? Why are we so caught up in the privilege of being "American" when America clearly gives two shits about us? Why can't we even talk about packing our bags and finding a place that puts people over politics without guilt creeping in at the edges?

At this point we are in what amounts to an abusive relationship with The United States of America. We've been conditioned to think that this country that over the last twenty years has failed us over and over and over again, is getting better. That with the hard work of its populace (us) and "hope" we're going to move past these terrible tragedies and become a better, safer country. That we're going to shake off these gaping wounds in our collective souls and stride forward stronger than ever before.

But at this point it's pretty evident that our government is doing nothing. That regardless of the atrocities, the governing body is at best sitting on their hands as fixing, worst actively pushing back against anything that might actually start to unravel this deadly knot we are caught in.

THE RACKET

So why are we still so enamored with this place? Why do we feel obligated to stand tall and try and make things better for a place that clearly isn't doing the same for us?

Why does even the notion of moving to a different country somehow feel like giving up? And more so, what exactly are we giving up on? Why does the thought of leaving make us question our dedication to "patriotism" and what in the holy fuck does that even mean any more?

There are, clearly, a million reasons why most of us can't just pull up stakes and move to another country and there's a million reasons why another country would probably be just as problematic, but we have to acknowledge that if merely thinking about doing so dredges up these deep, existential concerns, we need to start looking at the relationship we have with this country.

We need to acknowledge that this country isn't, and hasn't been looking out for its citizens and that seeking an escape route, or even thinking about an escape route, isn't, by any means, a betrayal.

-N

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police brutality, racism and violence
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THE RACKET : QUARANTINE JOURNAL, Vol. 5, NO. 79

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People standing with their arms crossed.



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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.

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2017



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PHIL CHANG
2017

Cherry Pitting

RISHONA MICHAEL

The summer is now only a whisper so I sit
amongst her last breaths pitting cherries until
they are vulnerable between the tips
of my fingernails. Licking off the red
upon palms, my palms; thinking about how
Louis cheated on Kimmy. And Kimmy
got herpes. Not that you need to know who
they are, but you should know that they love
each other. And Louis went and went
and came. And when I tell you about this
new man I'm seeing, I tell you this
because I'm too scared to do this alone.
I didn't expect to be given and to be pitting
this bag of on-their-way-out cherries.
There's always that point
when everything moves so fast.
Like last night when the sky should
have been black, but was navy.
Too excited for the morning.
Everything moves faster when
it's something you're good at
or used to, and the sky is great
at being the sky. And Louis was great
at communicating with Kimmy until
he wasn't. And there's a pile of cherries
before us, aware that their season
is almost over. Plump and tired,
holding themselves up high
and oh so sweet.



SUBMITTING TO THE SUBCONSCIOUS I
EMMA LARSSON
2022



HIDING MY FIRE
EMMA LARSSON
2022

pregnancy diaries

notes from a mom-to-be

BRITTANY ACKERMAN

In February I was in the hospital. In September I am here again. This time I am dehydrated and given a bag of fluid. It's cold when it enters my arm. I shiver and the nurse helps me into my jacket. I read Fitzgerald's *The Pat Hobby Stories* while I wait to be hydrated. When I get home I drink a glass of water and eat toast with fake, organic butter. I run to the bathroom to vomit, closing my eyes to do so. I imagine the stream brown and ugly but I'll never know. The force of it surprises me, but I am also glad to get it over with so fast. My first thought, *You are so pregnant.*

My new therapist has me try Brainspotting in our second session together. She says some people see colors, numbers, patterns. Some people don't have words to describe what they see. I feel my head tense, sharp and dull at once. And then neon green, pale green, white. Purple rolls in, blue. *I feel a split; above and below*, I tell her. I am so tired of trying to make sense of things lately. I am so glad to let my mind go.

At our twelve-week appointment, we hear the baby's heartbeat. At first, it sounds like the ocean noises we play at night to help us sleep, but as the doctor presses her instrument to my tummy, the noise becomes a galloping. The rest of the day I am dehydrated and have trouble eating. My husband makes a Target run and as soon as he pulls out of the driveway, I throw-up all over myself in bed.

The first day of my second trimester there is a weight lifted, a change, a lightening, a hope.

It's not helpful to hear anyone else's stories; how sick they were, how sick they weren't. Although I do recall one friend who said that while the first four months were filled with sickness, she felt her body align with all the women of the past who have ever been with child. She felt herself one with all the women of the earth who have held this pain. And that is sort of how it feels, to be one with all the experiences. This helped.

My muscles and ligaments soften and stretch. At night, my ribs hurt, but I know it's not my ribs, but the movement of my ribs to make room for the baby. None of this upsets me or scares me the way I thought it would, to carry life inside. It feels like magic, the most magical thing. How can people do this every day all the time? How has this been happening since the beginning of time, this most natural thing?

The baby is the size of a pomegranate this week. My mom tells me to drink pomegranate juice to lower my blood pressure.

First Thanksgiving, the three of us. The dog across the street won't stop barking so we turn the music up, the new Fruit Bats album. They play here in Nashville around my due date. I'm sitting in the dining room and writing. We have five pictures up, all of horses. Two of them Carl took, two we found at an antique shop, and one I found at the Melrose Trading post years ago. It's my favorite—a man and two horses walk toward the left of the frame. The man wears a top hat and a scarf around his neck, a black and white spotted dog at his feet. The sky is cloudy and grey, the land is dry, but they press on.

December. 20 weeks. Five months pregnant. We feel the baby kick for the first time before Carl leaves to LA for a job. I had asked the baby to kick before he left and the baby kicked before he left. I find the movements comforting. I like placing my hand on my belly and feeling it from the inside and the outside. It's still wild to me that a baby is growing inside there, the size of an endive.

I start working on the novel again. For four months, I hadn't written a word toward it, but somehow there is no guilt around this. I pick up where I left off and get back into the groove of 1,000 words a day. But lately I've been writing more, partly because I'm online less, partly because I can drink coffee again and let my mind go to that precious zone where all that exists is me and the words and I'm able to access memory and shuffle through time in my mind. I write even though the future of the writing is uncertain. I write maybe because it's uncertain and the time I have when I sit down is the only thing that's certain.

A white spider sets up camp on my windshield. I look it up to see what it means. It's a symbol of purity, balance, new beginnings. Spiders remind us to stay calm in the face of change and to trust in the process of transformation. When we see a white spider, it is a reminder that we are always connected to the web of life and that we are never alone.

An orange ladybug crawls outside on my bedroom window. Orange, the color of the sacral chakra, related to creativity, vitality, fertility, overall health. My grandmother's favorite color. To see an orange ladybug relates to healing and the peak of fertility. Sounds about right.

Two nights before our ultrasound, I dream I am pushing a stroller on a boardwalk by the water. The baby is a girl with blonde hair and she responds to my voice. She looks at the blue water and I think of the word daughter. She can't speak yet, but I know she wants to go closer to the shoreline. I knew our baby was a girl from the beginning. I listened to "Shoulders" by Men I Trust and couldn't help but bawl my eyes out to the lyrics: *I don't know who she is but I can tell/ she's got delicate hands/ that must dance around you with grace/ of a free bird/ of a song...*

And then the ultrasound tech confirms we're having a girl.

I walk backwards onto the scale when they take my weight at appointments. There's no point to me knowing the number. It grows as I grow. It's supposed to, and me measuring myself against that number won't do me any good.

I do pay attention to my blood pressure though, and my blood work that shows I'm slightly anemic. My doctor says I need more iron. I start waking up in the middle of the night again with hunger pains. I'm up from 2:00AM-4:00AM eating protein bars and bananas and slices of bread. Nothing helps to quell the hunger. I sit in the dark and drink water until the bottle is empty. Then I have to pee, sometimes more than once, sometimes more than twice. I eventually fall back asleep, but it feels like I've only rested for a second before my alarm sounds and I start the day. All of a sudden, I'm at twenty-four weeks, six months pregnant.

In the morning, we go to our scheduled OB appointment and my blood pressure is normal but my pulse is high. My doctor says that my anxiety is a lifelong battle, that it's not going away anytime soon, that I have to find a way to move through it. I love the burgundy, rounded-frames of her glasses. I stare at them as she talks, the two circles big and chunky and chic. She says I'm doing a great

job, which is maybe what I needed to hear, what I want to hear, always. I try to stay present in the room, to make a mental note of this moment where I'm being told everything is fine. Here, now, I receive the encouragement I crave. My body relaxes in the chair. My pulse slows. Carl twirls a piece of my hair against my back.

Twenty-seven weeks and the baby is the size of a bunch of bananas. The nighttime nausea has returned, and along with it so much movement in my belly. Sometimes it feels like she's waving her hand across the sky of my stomach, waving at me maybe, at Carl. My hand is a magnet to her movements. I wake at least twice to pee every night, and the last time is usually around 6:30AM, a half hour before my alarm goes off. This last thirty minutes is mostly spent feeling the baby's kicks, and sometimes Carl will wake up too and put his hand on my belly and feel his daughter moving. *Playtime*, he calls it, and he communes with her through my skin. There is nothing else like this in the world. This is life. And now this is our life.

I want to know what my writing life will look like once I have my daughter and what might change, what might grow or dissipate. What will I be able to let go of once she arrives? What will feel lighter, heavier, or just different?



SPIRITED AWAY
EMMA LARSSON
2022



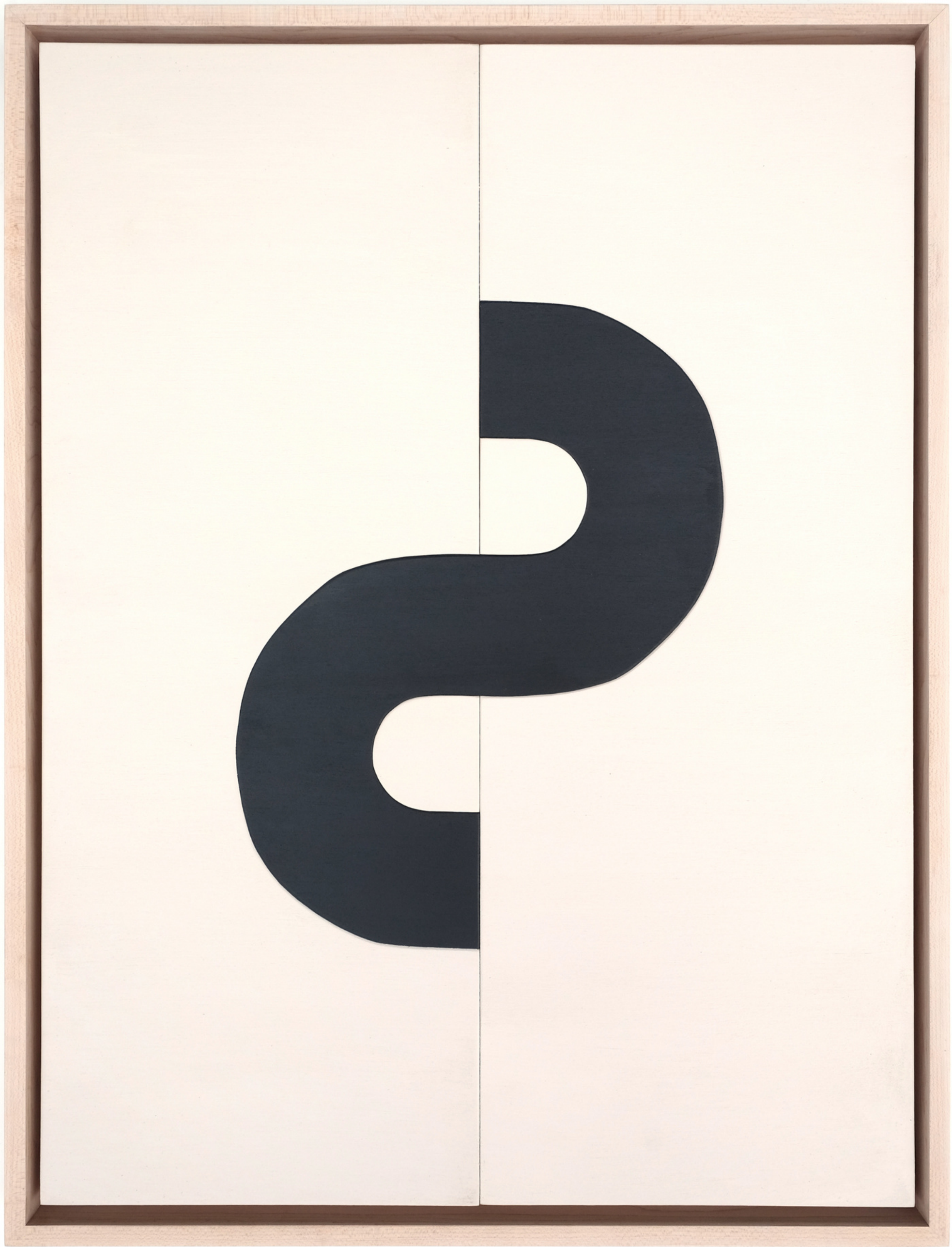
I play in net cafes

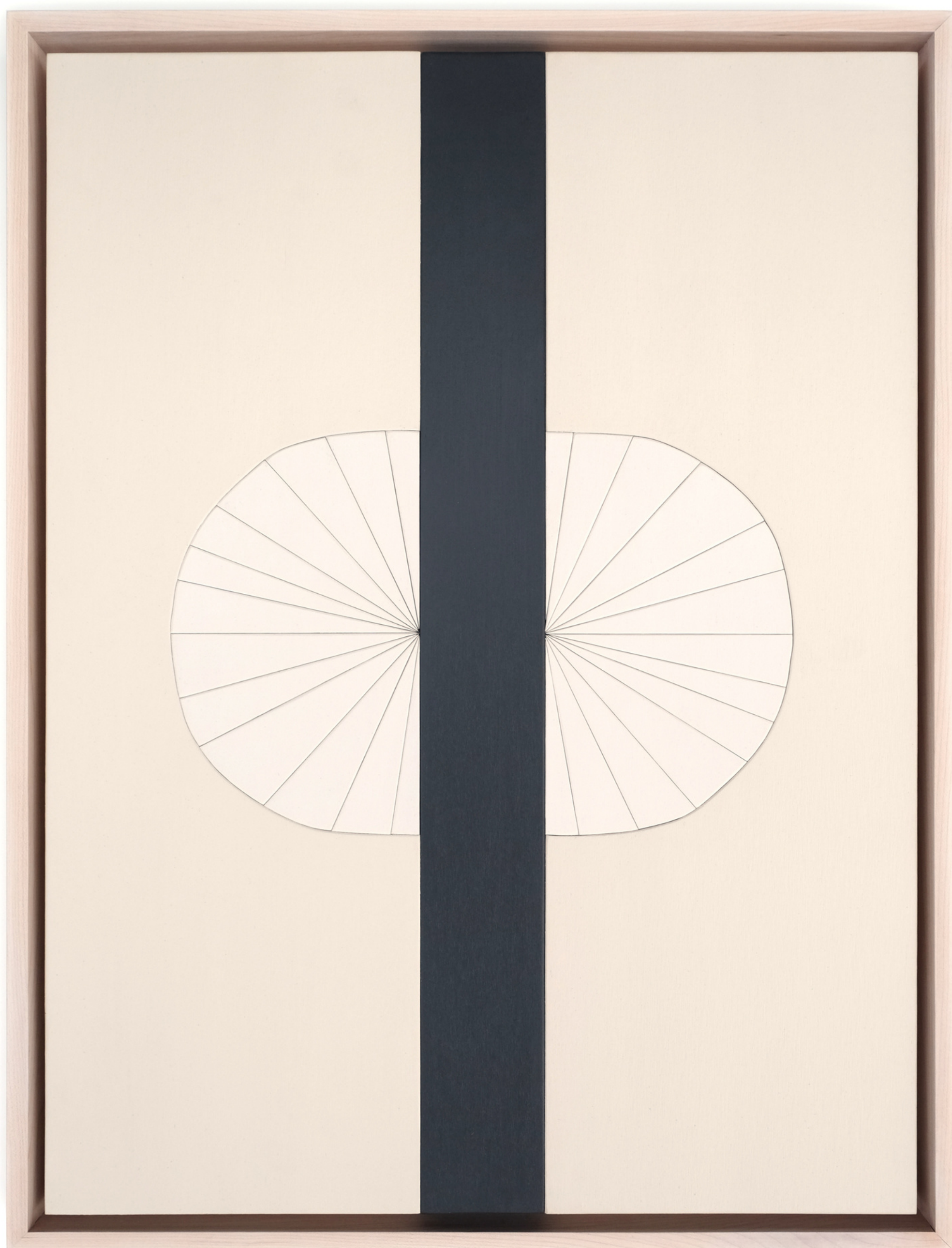
KATHLEEN HELLEN

As far from *neko-chan* as *kitty*, as far from Tokyo as Pittsburgh
where I landed, licking my cartoon paws.

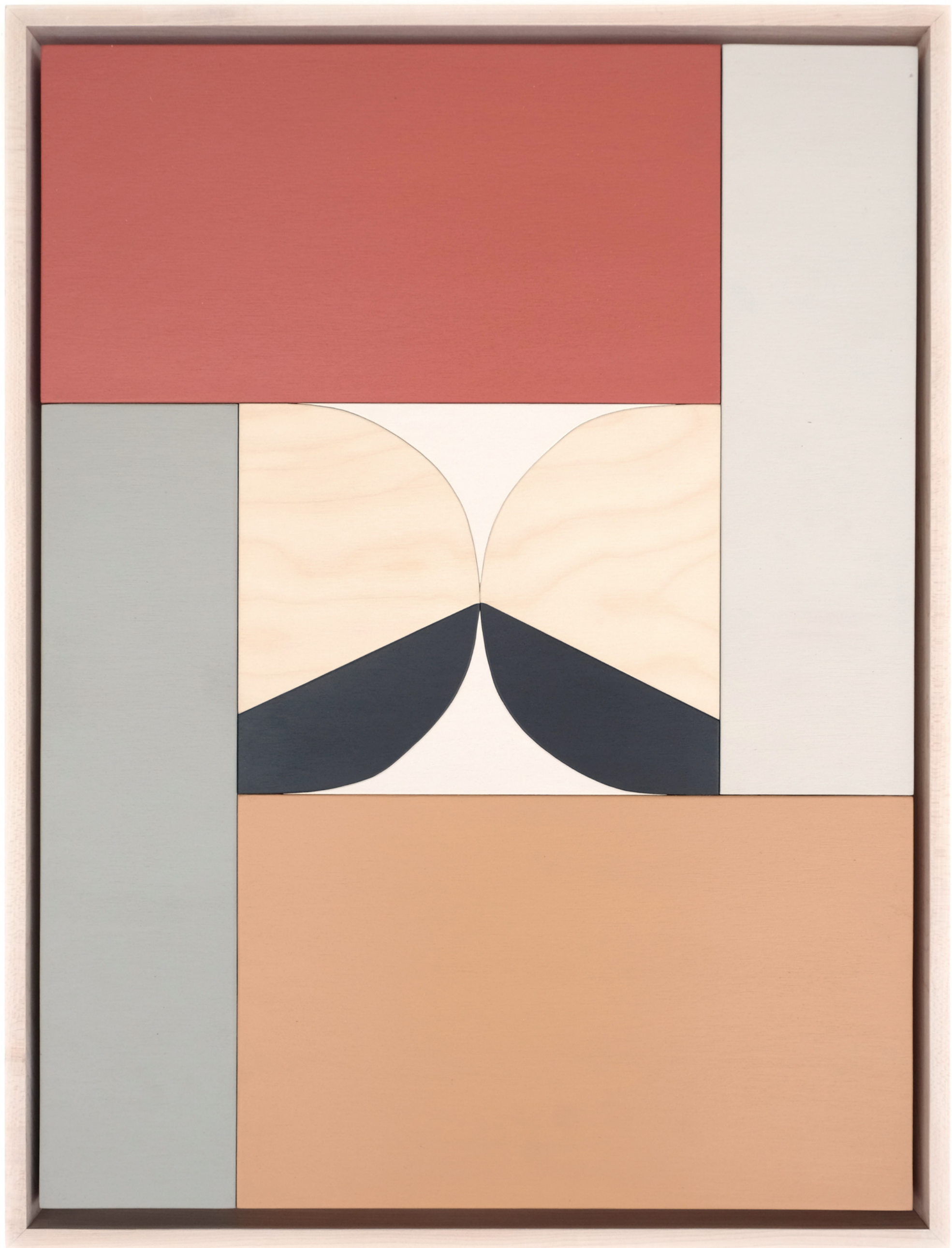
A freetered refugee who never mastered “Go” in hellish places
clear of dirt, which was war:: clear of clan, which was pure—*Kathleen*

on my certificate, *Kathleen*: as if I were haiku, the “cutting word” between
*I will take you home...*and bottom girls who whisper: *The japanese
have stopped having babies.*





THE SPACE BETWEEN
SCOTT ALBRECHT
2020



A TILTED HOURGLASS
SCOTT ALBRECHT
2020

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