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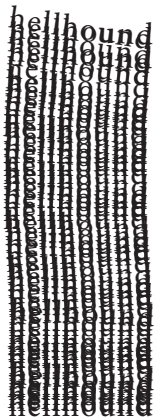
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DRINKING IN THE UPSIDE DOWN

That year, in bars across the country, several drinks appeared on menus all at once. “The Grim Reaper” was a vermouth and gin concoction served with no ice. The “Shameful Display of Histrionics” was part Mezcal, black bile, and a splash of orange Fanta. The “Your Country Is Dead and You Should Be Too” consisted of two lemon wedges, rice wine, and an assortment of bitters, the specificity of which was left to the bartender’s discretion, or whatever he could get his hands on with slippery, tear-stained palms. All three drinks shared in common one oblique characteristic: they had no consistency of flavor. Furthermore, their genesis conformed neither to prevalent tastes, whatever they may have been, nor to customer concerns for self-preservation. They appeared spontaneously, at times when drinkers were already deep in their night, having two or possibly three times observed the menu in detail, the well liquor doing laps in their guts, so that their memories (as if disassembled and put back together the wrong way) were the result of some haphazard redoubling of effort on their part. The drinks appeared on chalkboards in unknown handwriting, as if a universal prankster had doused them all in disappearing ink, and him- or herself disappeared to have a laugh in some dark corner of the bar, which had yet to be discovered. There was nowhere to go but down. It was said that they sometimes coerced patrons into a deep sleep, after which they awoke, having dreamed of playing a violin inside the belly of a whale, itself rotting inside the steaming belly of the world. The smell of a spoiled inner sanctum. Some woke up singing. When asked about the sudden irony of such beverages, or their origins, several bartenders across the country, each one a stranger to the other, shook their heads in quiet, yet dimly stunned concern, as if to say, “I thought that you made them. I thought you were the one.”

MARK NEELY

a.m/p.m.



TERRELL JAMAL TERRY

BURLAP, TRUMPET & NIGHT OWL NO. 5

I tested trouble's mettle

Snake-words ruptured

I rubbed a verb until it yawned

Under the dark-burn

Let them open the sky-ground

I'm showing you (with) out

My mirror-wished eyes

To see trees not ending

Limbs stuck to the moon

Beaming, imbued in history

BURLAP, TRUMPET & NIGHT OWL NO. 8

Now the step of murderers

People couldn't see listening

They only saw with their eyes

Ask if it's a sun-stained street

Rain fell like a friend low on joy

I want to go back/moonless?

Disappear again (aluminum pasture)

I can't hide the lost stags

Their dusty lives leaked

Smooth dirt doesn't hurt much



"Rise and Fall"

1/4

Shae Meyer

RISE AND FALL

SHAE MEYER

LITHOGRAPH

THE APPOINTMENT

Linda had the window down in the taxi but it wasn't helping. She asked the driver for air. He turned knobs. She asked him if the air was on. Only hot air was coming out of the vents. He was taking her down Seventh Avenue, away from her work. People were out for lunch, lining up at counters to order, lining all the way out of doors and up the sidewalks. The driver was stopping at lights. Linda leaned forward: "Faster to cut across to Second?" He shook his head. She was sullen. It didn't matter, because she didn't want to be early to the appointment. But she didn't want to sit, sweating, in this heat. "Hell," she said. "Hell." She fanned herself with her folded suit jacket. She'd rolled up the sleeves of her white blouse.

The driver stopped at her building, across from Tompkins Square Park. She paid him and tipped him next to nothing.

Alone on the street, in the shade of a tree, Linda checked her watch and opened her purse for her keys, to go upstairs, but then decided that she didn't have time to do that. There was this noon appointment at the café on the corner. She was already the fifteen minutes late she'd wanted to be. She'd wanted to arrive early enough to have a moment to herself here, upstairs in her apartment at the front window, to watch the children at the playground in the park. To be, for a moment, with pictures of her son, Joey, who was away at camp. He was somewhere else with his arms crossed, ready to talk back. Or maybe at a table with other boys, trading cards. Maybe twisting one of those little curls of his hair. Maybe eating watermelon right off the wedge, making a mess. Or on a playground.

She took out the cosmetic mirror from her purse to check her hair, up in clips. Behind her, the bells at St. Brigid's Church rang the hour, though the church was scheduled for demolition. Above her, the sky reflected on the apartment's front window. That window, the sky on the glass, it all seemed to be trembling—from the sound of St. Brigid's bells? At the kitchen window, an agitated pigeon paced on the fire escape. Frank, in his letter, had suggested dinner at a midtown French bistro. She'd written him back: no, she would meet him at this café, in the middle of the day. She'd thrown away his letters after reading them, along with the

mail-order catalogs that also wanted something from her, credit card offers that wanted something from her, charity solicitations that wanted something from her, and restaurant menus that wanted something from her. But she wanted something from him, too, so over the years she'd kept his address up to date. He was now living somewhere all the way out on Long Island.

She checked her watch again, and headed toward the café. Sometimes, she brought Joey there for breakfast. She longed for this. Instead of this, the appointment with that man. She had her keys in her hand, clenched tightly. She thought she'd put the keys back in her purse. Any of these cars parked along the street might be his. There was a train from Long Island, but that man was the type to drive. She felt swollen. Crossly, she threw the keys into her purse. Was Joey having fun at camp today, or missing her as much as she missed him? What had they given him for breakfast today? Joey liked his eggs sunny-side-up—"eggs sunny," he'd said once, and it had become his usual at this café: eggs sunny and OJ. She would order tea and something sweet—a short stack of strawberry pancakes or a waffle with maple crème or simply a scone. Joey would prefer hers, saying please, so she would cut pieces and put them on his plate. The waiter would ask, smiling down at Joey, "How old are you today?" Joey's answer varied—seven or nine or ten or 'leven. The waiter, wide-eyed: "Nine? You're *nine* already?" Linda would shake her head, smiling at her son across the table, and say, "He's eight. You're eight, aren't you?" Joey would very seriously insist otherwise. Did Joey want to come home early?

Linda saw that man at a table, his back to the door. An ache had been in her belly for some time, deepening as this moment had hurtled closer. Now, it clamped. She teetered between staying and walking away. The ache was unbearable, this situation was unbearable, and she could easily have thrown up.

She didn't walk away. Nearing him, she instinctively tensed. Her nostrils flared. Her eyes narrowed. She thought he was pretending not to notice that she'd come in. She didn't want to look him in the eye anyway. His were eyes she'd walked away from eight years ago.

As she tried to be outwardly composed, and went around to the other chair, he said, "Linda." He half-stood as she sat. It seemed an

afterthought.

“Hello,” she replied, and clenched her back teeth.

“It’s me. It’s Frank.”

“What the hell. Of course it’s you, Frank.”

He was smiling. “I just wanted to hear you say my name. The way you said hello...”

“Fuck you, Frank. How’s that?”

“Perfect. Just as I remember it.”

She picked up her glass of water and gulped some. “Hot as hell,” she said, putting down the glass, trying not to throw up. It was rising in her throat. “Dammit, let’s eat. I’m starving.” But she was thinking she couldn’t eat a thing.

“Good,” he said, his smile fixed.

He’d gained weight. His chin was softer. His eyes—at a glance, she noticed—had lost shine. His hair was thinner and graying. In eight years, her son had grown into a little man, while her son’s father had decayed, even decomposed. Worms were in him. Larvae were in him; they were pupating into flies. He kept on smiling, though there was nothing pleasant or amusing to smile about. She became conscious of her fixed frown. She eased her frown into thin-lipped neutrality. He was watching her, and she didn’t want to give him any clues. His face was creased. Seams were starting to show after so many years of use. He was a piece of furniture coming apart. Spiders were in him. His nose was still pug-like. He was still lumbering, probably still clumsy; he’d never been the athletic type. His fixed smile was something else new. It rankled her. It wasn’t quite condescending, but it was certainly phony. To her, there wasn’t a goddamn thing to smile about.

“Linda,” he said, turning his attention to the menu. “What do you recommend?”

“It’s all good. I don’t know what you like. You used to like ham. There’s a ham sandwich. I don’t like ham. I hate it, actually, so I haven’t had that sandwich, but I’ve heard it’s good.”

“You didn’t used to hate ham.”

“Always did, Frank.”

“Let’s order,” he said abruptly and motioned to the waiter. The waiter filled her wine glass. There was a bottle of white wine on the table. He’d had some already. They ordered, and Linda chatted with the waiter. She felt better when the waiter was at the table because she could pretend Frank wasn’t there, but then the waiter left to put in their order, and she was alone with Frank again. The waiter had asked her about Joey, so she guessed Frank would say something about Joey next.

Frank said, “So you bring Joey here. I saw a McDonald’s down the street. I bet he likes McDonald’s.”

She brusquely dismissed it: “I don’t take my son there.”

He fell silent. He turned his water glass, staring at it, and then he sighed and said, “Christ, Linda.”

“What?”

“The hostility,” he said and waved his hands, “*exuding* from you.”

“What do you want, Frank?”

“It wasn’t so bad, you know. Our split, I mean, after what happened.”

“After what happened?”

“Your appointment at the clinic.”

She crossed her arms. “Is that what you want to talk about?”

“No. Actually, no, I don’t want to talk about that. Christ, I’d rather claw my own eyes out. But don’t you think people have been through worse? I talk to people. They tell me their stories. Some went through hell. Close friends of mine, in fact, are still deep in it. It *was* hell for us. I’m not saying it wasn’t. And now, here we are, eight years later. There’s Joey to consider. Our boy ought to know who his father is. A boy without a father—well, what the hell kind of a young man will he become without men in his life? His father, I mean. Decent men. Growing up in this place, the East Village, around these people. He’ll be maladjusted, Linda.”

She laughed at the word. “Maladjusted? Really?”

“Like him.” Frank raised his chin in the direction of the waiter. “For example.”

Linda fumed, glaring, “You bigot!” She made fists.

His eyes widened. “I don’t mean black. Not because he’s black, Linda.”

I'm not a bigot. You know I'm not. I mean gay. I mean tattooed. Who knows what else—*Christ*, isn't that enough?—there's a hell of a lot of ugliness out there and Joey's being exposed to all of it."

She swallowed hard. Suppressed the instinct to gag. "You're worried about his sexual orientation." She shook her head. "Unbelievable. I don't know what to say. You invited me out to lunch to say you don't want a gay son. What the fuck, Frank?"

"The gay thing—you're taking it out of context. It's not the point. I'm worried about his future, having no father at his side."

"Ubiquitous," she said, aiming to fluster him.

"What's that?"

"Ubiquitous. It's a word."

"What does it mean?"

"Always there."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ubiquitous absence. Your absence. Reliably absent. You've always been absent, and Joey has turned out wonderfully, without you around." She sneered: "Who knows how he might've turned out otherwise. *Christ*, with more men in his life, he might've turned out gay! At eight years old!"

He frowned. "Linda..."

"We are perfectly fine and unabashedly pleased without you."

"Unabashedly?"

"You started it...with maladjusted."

"Quit it, Linda." He poured more wine into his glass. Hers was full. He said, "Let me tell you what I do. I'm a director at this place. Over all of regional services. I've worked hard at this firm. It's been five years now. I climbed my way to where I am. I made it work." He smiled. It was vanity, she thought. "I'm good at what I do, working with people, building relationships, managing accounts, architecting our business."

She pretended to yawn.

He said, "I have friends—"

"—you do?"

“Friends with children. Lots of them. I’ve been reading—”

“—you have?”

“Reading some books about how kids think, what makes them tick. You know, rudimentary child psychology. I want him to live with me. I’m the boy’s father. I can’t say enough that the reason for all this is because I’m his father and a boy needs a father. He’ll divide his time: six months with you, six with me. More time with me at first, if you don’t mind. The books say a boy needs his father. I’m talking about our boy’s health, Linda.”

She wasn’t looking him in the eye. She didn’t want to appear to be attentive. Instead, she watched his hands. He rolled up his sleeves when the food came. While he spoke, he’d unfolded his napkin and put it across his lap. He’d picked up his fork, his knife in the other hand, and proceeded to cut his sandwich into bite-size triangles.

“What the hell are you doing, Frank?”

“I told you, I’m Director of Regional—”

“No, your food, Frank. Your goddamn sandwich. You’re cutting it like a steak.”

“Oh,” he said, pausing his knife, staring down, and then he smiled and shrugged. “I took the train in. My hands—the train—my hands aren’t clean. I guess it’s just habit to think that way. I didn’t want to pick up the sandwich.”

“Go wash your hands, Frank.”

“It’s a clean washroom?”

He left the table. There were his fork and knife, leaning on the plate’s edge, and his sandwich in pieces. Frank was almost out of wine. She hadn’t touched her own. She lifted her wine and gulped it. He was asking for six months. Like hell he was. She gulped too fast—it went down the wrong way—and it made her cough. She coughed into her napkin. She coughed and her eyes were wet. And then she realized she was crying. It startled her, and abruptly she stopped. Then she frantically wiped her eyes. She took another slug of wine. She blotted her eyes more. She wiped her lip marks from the glass and refilled her wine, so he wouldn’t know she’d taken a slug for courage, so he’d know she was stronger than he was, so he’d know eight years had made her the toughest, strongest, smartest

woman in the world, a woman who wouldn't give up her child, and she didn't need a goddamn thing from him, least of all help raising Joey.

When he came back to the table, he asked, "Where is he, by the way? I thought, I'd hoped, you might bring him."

"He's at camp."

"Oh, that must be the camp I paid for."

"You paid for some of it."

"When's he coming back?"

"Three-thirty."

"Oh—" Frank chuckled. "I thought it was a *summer* camp."

"It is a summer camp, only the kids don't stay overnight."

"There are some good summer camps, you know. I might've thought twice about this one. But I don't know anything about it."

He was picking up the sandwich pieces and eating them. She remembered how, before eight years ago, he would follow her lead. He wouldn't order first. When she'd unfold her napkin, he would, too. She would ask for more wine in her glass, and he'd apologize and quickly pour, hers first and then his. And so on. Even so, he was the least considerate man she'd ever known. She experimented now: she stopped eating, and after a moment he stopped; she started again and so did he—all this while they were talking. The one thing he didn't follow her on was the wine. Nothing held him back. She was drinking only sips, and it seemed to encourage him. He finished the bottle and ordered another.

He said, "Let's ask him."

"What?"

"Let's ask Joey what he wants to do."

"No!"

He set one hand flat on the table. "Why not?"

"Like hell we're going to put that question to an eight year old."

"You're probably right. It's a bad idea."

"Damn right it is."

"Anyway, he'd choose you. We both know he would."

"Damn right he would."

“He doesn’t know me. That’s got to change.”

She didn’t agree. Coolly, she set down her fork and sipped wine.

He said, “I imagine it’s tough for you at times. You’re a single mom with a career. When he’s with me, you could have more fun, enjoy your days in the city, spend time with friends, go to parties.”

She hadn’t listened to what he’d just said. She leaned forward, saying, “Why now? I don’t understand. Why has it become so important? To come here and suggest to take away my son?”

“Linda, I’m not taking—”

“Answer the goddamn question, Frank.”

“Well,” he said, wiping his mouth with his napkin, “part of it is where I am, out in a pleasant community on Long Island, in a nice, clean house with big windows, a yard, trees in the yard, a deck with a grill. A stone’s throw from the North Shore. All those years of sending you money.” He shook his head. “It kept me poor, Linda. I’ve lived in some filthy buildings, with mice and roaches coming out of the walls. Bugs as big as my hand. I didn’t want my son to remember me in a place like that. Now that I’m a director at this company, I’m making more money, a base salary with a quarterly bonus and a commission on new business, so I was able to put together a down payment and start to live decently. I’m ready now. That’s why. That’s why now.”

“It’s possible,” she said slowly, “that you’re incapable of understanding how Joey *is* my life, and how life without him is not an option.”

“I don’t mean to take him away.”

“You know very well that you do.”

“I’ve sent you a lot of money over the years.”

“As was your duty and your obligation.”

He scratched his head, frowning. “Let’s not follow that particular talking point, Linda. Let’s not. Let’s forget the past for a moment. Let’s focus on what’s good for Joey.”

“Let’s, let’s, let’s! Are you about to pray? Let’s pray.” She clasped her hands.

“Quit mocking me, Linda.”

“Still waving bibles?”

“Why not,” he grunted, shoving the last piece of sandwich in his mouth.

“Do you believe in a woman’s choice today? What do you believe today?”

He was chewing.

She said, “You were a coward for walking away from our marriage. No matter how hard you try, you can’t change that.”

He drew back as if stung. He lowered his voice: “I would be careful about calling a man a coward, Linda. You can’t know everything about someone. You’ve no idea, really, why I quit our marriage, and maybe I didn’t at the time. Anyway, we both quit.”

“You gave up sooner.”

He nodded. “We both quit.”

“Yes, well, I guess we agree on something.” She forced a smile. Her eyelids fluttered and she sipped wine.

When the bill came, he paid for lunch. She’d expected him to.

Outside the café, she said, “Take care of yourself, Frank.”

He was surprised. “I’m flattered.”

“I say it for Joey’s sake.” She looked away and said, “In other words, the money needs to keep coming.”

He replied evenly, “Take care of Joey.”

“I do. Goodbye, Frank.”

“Wait. Listen, Linda,” and he spoke. She didn’t look him in the eye. She tried not to listen. She knew what words he would say here, on the street: the most difficult words, the real meat of it. She was stone. If a car were to swerve and jump the curb and hit her, it would wrap around her. He, on the other hand, was very soft—she knew this for a fact—and he might easily be killed. Saying his words, he had the phony smile. His eyes were dull. And he stood with his arms at his side, his hands occasionally fluttering, especially when he paused to collect his thoughts. And he believed—she knew he believed—that he was doing the right thing. She was thinking, What a fool. He said he regretted what would need to be done if she didn’t agree, and he spoke of his attorney who was a man named Carl, a friend and a good man who was capable of doing what

had to be done, if it came to that.

He raised his arm. She flinched involuntarily. He was only hailing a taxi. She'd already said goodbye. She didn't say anything else. He wasn't gone yet when she walked away. She walked west and passed her building. She passed Avenue A. She passed First Avenue. She walked to the subway at Astor Place. There were people everywhere. She was glad to be in a crowd.

It was stifling hot on the subway platform. She had trouble pulling the hot air into her lungs. She stood at the edge. She leaned in, watching the local train arrive. She felt a wave of dizziness. She felt she might faint. The train roared into the station. Wind blew against her. The train came to a screeching halt and its doors opened, as they did every day every nine minutes.

At the playground, children were at the fence watching what was happening at St. Brigid's Church. Not one of them was going down the slide, or hanging on the jungle gym, or looking with surprise from either end of the tunnel.

A little girl at the fence, twisting one of her blonde curls, said, "I was baptized there."

"I took communion," a boy said who was smaller than her.

One of the rough boys, called Joe-Joe among them, thought this was a bunch of girl talk and said to another boy, "Hey T, let's go help them tear it down."

But Trevor, too, was watching men in yellow hardhats position two hydraulic truck cranes, and he merely said, "I've been there. It's a beautiful church."

Joe-Joe put his hands on his hips, scowling at Trevor. "What do you mean, a beautiful church?"

Two workmen came out of the church, each carrying a statue. A mother exclaimed, pointing, "There they are! It's Mary and Jesus!" The children gasped. A second mother said, "I heard Jesus is going to a diocese in Nebraska, and Mary's going to a warehouse in Boston."

The men wrapped the statues in separate bundles with blue quilted blankets, bound them with packing tape, and put them on a truck. In the two steeples, men tied rags around each clapper's ball. They buttressed the

supporting timber beams with two-by-fours. One of them powered up an electric reciprocating saw and cut through the blocks and stays. A crane hoisted the bells, swung them out, and lowered them to a flatbed truck. Then two other men, in a crane's basket, began to cut away the north and south steeples. Debris hit the ground with loud claps.

STUDIES OF “LADY AGNEW OF LOCHNAW” BY JOHN SINGER SARGENT.

I've been an admirer of John Singer Sargent's ever since I was a little kid. Weekends during my childhood were spent with my father and two sisters visiting the art museums in and around Boston and Cambridge. My favorites were the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. There were several John Singer Sargents in each towards which I would gravitate. I was mesmerized by his effortless brushstrokes and his ability to capture light and color and feeling.

As part of my studio art minor at Mt Holyoke College, I was given an assignment to choose a painting by an artist I admired and paint several different studies of that piece. The goal was to hone my skills as a painter and, on a more personal level, to understand how Sargent so masterfully created structure and depth within his works using shape and color. Flipping through a book of his paintings one day, I came across the portrait of “Lady Agnew of Lochnaw” and knew instantly this was the piece that I wanted to study. I did a quick representational study of Lady Agnew, which I decided to leave unfinished, and an abstract. My teacher suggested that I paint the abstract upside down, which helped move my focus from the human figure in the image to the different shapes each color made. The result is a playful take on one of John Singer Sargent's most iconic portraits.



CLASSICAL LADY

NICOLE GUILD

OIL ON CANVAS



CUBIST LADY
NICOLE GUILD
OIL ON CANVAS

DEAR HORIZONTAL STRIPED SHIRT

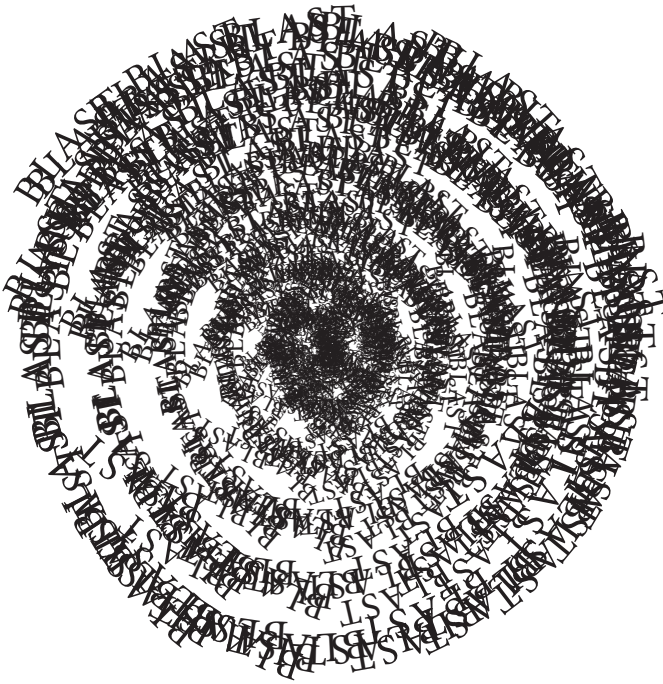
A perfect pierce, his legs snug to my spine, shirt opened, my nipples more visible than I wanted. I remember when the baby was born from my chest. Porcelain where wood was expected. Not my baby. He was me. Delicate, my satchel of salt-feelings tipped into his eyes screaming uneven. His cheek was my cheek, born again at eleven, glowing constellation green on the stucco ceiling. Tender too, and redder. At twenty-two the doctor dug the second baby from my chest, the shovel larger than the baby, sharper than the pillow under my back. Truffle shaving my spine. There was not enough anesthetic. There were goosebumps and the linger dream walking through the slit of light. Chronic. Thirty-three. I remember the babies born from my chest when the third comes. Bonds still hold, but his skin reflects my organ's rejection. No, I will not hold your hand while you sweat in the delivery room.



VOID
SHAE MEYER
MULTIMEDIA ON CANVAS

MARK NEELY

PUPIL/MEADOW/MINE



PEBBLEWORM

One quiet afternoon when I was eight years old, I turned on the television and watched a show about animals in Africa. It couldn't have been meant for young children, but the rest of my family was playing outside. I remember liking the patterned giraffe and laughing at the helmeted turtle—an omnivore, I learned, who would eat almost anything.

Then there was a section on crocodiles. It began with a gazelle dipping her soft mouth into the water. A second later, her neck was caught between the jaws of a giant crocodile. The pond filled with blood and the gazelle gasped for air, gasped to rid her throat of blood, gasped for the energy to get away. I watched the screen closely. *Was that*, I asked in my head, *the dead gazelle's eyeball floating across the water?* I didn't make it to the bathroom, and threw up on the rug in the hallway.

Now, I'm twenty-four years old. It's 11:00 p.m. and I'm lying in bed. I keep thinking about this playwright named Adam who wears horn-rimmed glasses and has an impressive beard. He isn't my boyfriend, but we like each other and tell each other often how much we like each other.

These confessions usually happen right after we have sex, when he'll say something like, "God, you're amazing," and I'll say, "God, I'm so crazy about you." We always use protection. I'm worried that he'll stop liking me, so I try to make sure he'll never want to leave me. A man once told me: "Men like to be worshipped, not needed," which I suppose was something I always knew but had never heard out loud. I worship Adam and pretend that I don't need him at all. I read his plays and drink whiskey even though I hate whiskey. He'll never find anyone as good as I am.

After throwing up on the rug, I wondered, *why did the crocodile scare me so much?* The lion, even with his long teeth and bloody, post-meal lips, was boring by comparison. I decided that it had to be the crocodile's speedy ambush. Lions will chase their prey for ages before catching them, but, with

crocodiles, the split-second capture and kill was almost instant. I guess I didn't understand how temporary life was until I saw that program.

This morning at 7:30, I threw up. I have a stronger stomach now than I did as a kid, so I'm a little worried. Also, my period is five days late, which isn't something I can ignore. I'm not going to tell anyone. If Adam were my boyfriend, I would tell him. But he's not. And either way, this information would be unsolicited and ruthlessly sobering. If he knew, he'd be scared, and I don't want him to feel as scared as I do.

Soon after watching that show, I feared crocodiles and saw them everywhere. I would stare into the toilet every time I peed, ready to leap away if a crocodile emerged to eat me. I imagined he'd start with my private parts and finish by spitting out my meatless skull. The ponds and rivers in my hometown turned into crocodile dens. My sister had a crocodile stuffed-animal named Cindy who began to terrorize me with her hungry eye-contact. I took Cindy outside early one morning, found a small shovel, and buried her in the backyard.

It was an irrational fear, mostly because we lived in the Midwest. I would later learn that the closest crocodiles dwelled on the southern tip of Florida. This Floridian species, the *Crocodylus acutus*, can weigh up to a ton, and they will bellow loudly at each other during their drawn-out mating ceremonies.

If I am pregnant, then I'll get an abortion. When I researched abortions on the internet, I found out that there are two different kinds. Abortions are either surgical or medical. The surgical one sounds awful but the medical one should be doable. Both procedures have potential complications. Both procedures may result in a lot of bleeding. If I get an abortion, I'll have to find someone to take me to the appointment and stay with me for a while afterwards.

But back to crocodiles: after a few weeks, and with no real explanation, my crocodile fear became a fascination. At my request, my mother drove me to the library, where I checked out books on reptiles. I looked for crocodiles in

the National Geographic magazines that my parents brought inside every month. On TV, I watched nature documentaries where they hunted, swam, and sunned themselves on the shore. I asked my mother to record those shows for me and I saved the tapes in a shoebox under my bed. It was early in September when I snuck out to the backyard and unearthed Cindy. After shampooing her in the bathtub, I dried her and shoved her between my mattress and the wall, where her gaze fell on me and no one else.

I didn't start worrying until the second day of my missed period. I began praying on the third day, and I don't even believe in god. At first when I prayed, I thought the word *please* again and again. Then, to be more specific, I thought: *please don't let me be pregnant*. Now I mouth those words—I practically whisper them out loud. No one taught me how to pray but this seems like the most effective combination. On the fourth night, I had a dream, and my dream-self was not pregnant. I wasn't doing anything remarkable in the dream. All I did was go to the dentist for a teeth cleaning and walk home. But I wasn't pregnant. I had forgotten by the time I woke up, but then I remembered and started praying again.

My obsession with crocodiles was a delicious, guilty one. I would stare at their pale tongues until I felt like a piece of meat and had to look away. With every new fact, I felt closer to the crocodiles living and breathing in southern Florida. If reading about their guerrilla tactics made me dizzy, I'd close my eyes and hope the spins would last. It was like watching a horror movie or riding a roller coaster—I would shake with anticipation, feel my heart pound, blanch, and fall into relief when it was over.

Not that it matters, but I can't help it: the baby would have light brown hair. And it would be smart. We're both quite smart. We both love to learn and have a good ear for music. When it got old enough, this baby would practice the piano more than I ever did. There's a lot I don't know about Adam. It's only been two and a half months, so I haven't asked him about his family's medical history or if he's ever wanted to kill himself. That's not the sort of thing that comes up during our dates—not what we talk about at midnight movie screenings or 24-hour diners. It would

be a cute baby, but it is actually a flea. I hate that every time I eat I'm unintentionally feeding it. When no one is looking, I punch my stomach and hope it will die. The past three nights before bed I have spent at least fifteen minutes massaging my gut so that I can break its tiny pre-neck.

The English word crocodile comes from the Ancient Greek *krokèdrilos*. *Krokè* means pebble and *drilos* means worm. Pebbleworm. When I was a kid, I assumed that this was because of the stone-like knobs and horns that cover their long, wormy bodies. Though I wanted to slice off those horns (there was something about the bumpy skin that begged for smoothing), I also longed to hold and count each one. Crocodiles have a more acidic stomach than any other vertebrate. They can digest things that we can only dream of digesting. Sobek, an ancient Egyptian deity, has the head of a crocodile and the body of a muscular man. He is the God of the Nile, the military, and fertility.

By tomorrow, it will be long enough for a pregnancy test to be 98% accurate. I'll go to the drugstore with the self-checkout and buy one. We always use protection, except when we can't—when we don't have time or when it ruins the moment. I should have taken birth control pills. I should have been celibate. I should have insisted. These past five days have diluted me. I couldn't have predicted this: that I would envy the gazelle who knows, within a second, that she will die.

When I was eighteen, I moved away from home and Cindy came with me. By then, I knew how to use a washing machine, so she was lint-free and fragrant in my suitcase. She stayed stuck between the wall and mattress even in my new bedroom. My crocodile fear and fascination is a secret. Those who know about my most reckless behaviors and embarrassing habits don't know anything about my crocodiles.

Like most reptiles, saltwater crocodiles are solitary creatures. Males will even kill the females who enter their territory outside of the mating season. Tonight it's dark and my bed is huge. I've lost a lot but there's no one to kick or wake with my snores, and for that alone, I'm grateful.



ABSTRACT STUDY 1
NICOLE GUILD
SILK SCREEN ON PRINTING PAPER

THE HIP NEIGHBORHOOD OF ANDROID AMERICA

You know it's a ghetto of elevator music
thinly-veiled with fly paper.

You want to bitch-slap everyone's floppy mugs of "gallery vibes,"
often clinked in toasts

over platters of resected ribs
in the Kool Kafeteria.

Yuppies motorize and numb the stalk
of the central limbic system.

They also maintain the green line of the shuttlebug,
engineer eigenfaced family dogs

by straining them through gluten-free layers
of avocado and flax meal.

They won't allow you to cross the free sample border
frosted with posterchildren.

Before you can stand, horned and horny,
over the last wetland,

they'll suffocate you
with senatorial coughing fits
and thick dollops
of Chobani.

MODEL TOURIST

I'm paid to be Elizabeth Gilbert.
Travel agencies want me to quantify and determine
how to guarantee an Eat, Pray, Love experience.

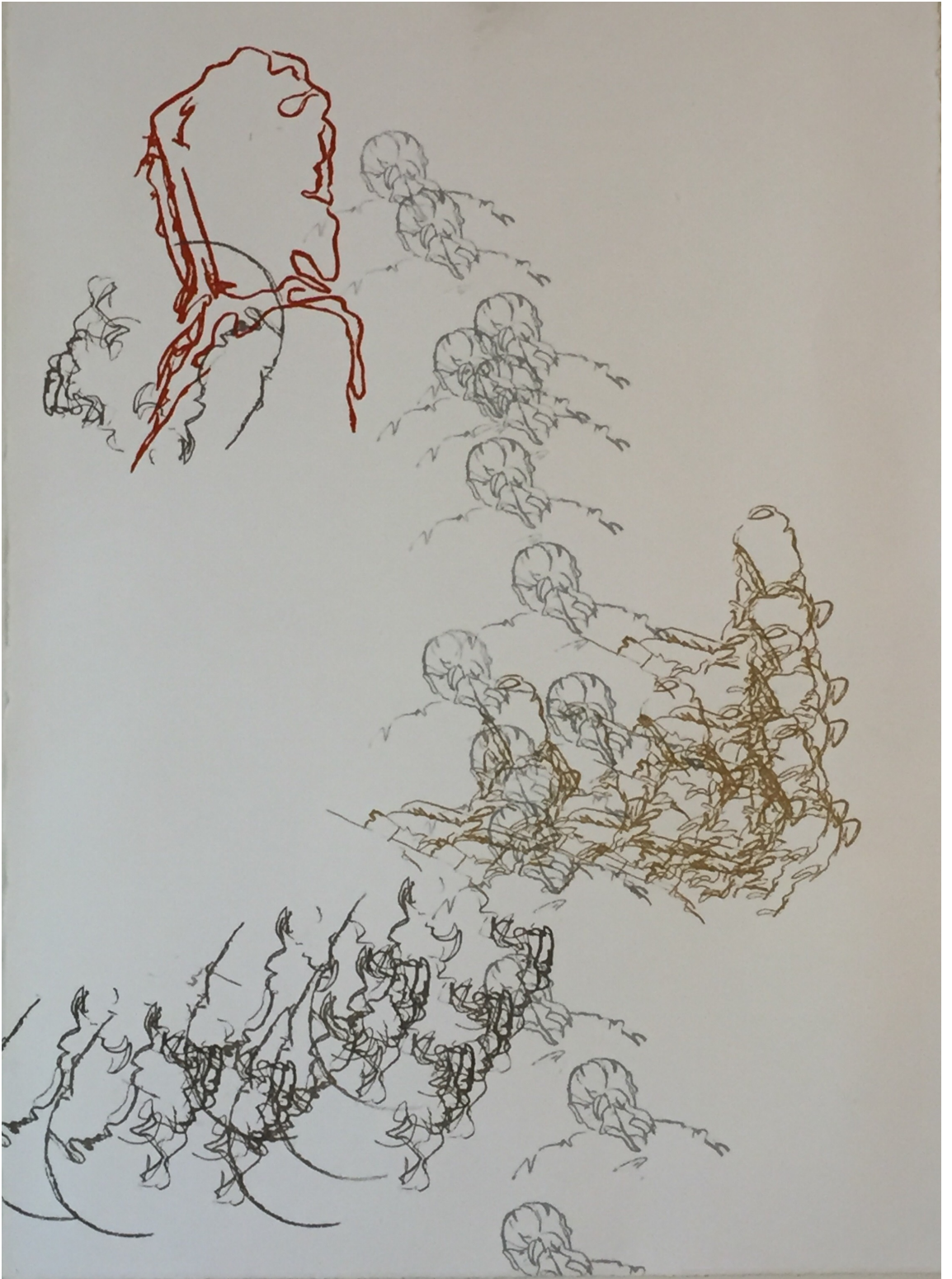
Before each departure, their engineers rove through me in dune buggies
to inflate my alveoli, loosen my gonads,
input psychosomatic charisma
so I will be a good little selfie-taking photoambulist.

They sent me to St. Thomas,
enlisting pirates to ransack my fallopian spires,
lure me with honey daggers,
finger me in the back of a cozy sunblock confectionery.

Luckily, when I went to Italy,
they armed me with redaction scouts.
They provided Mentos
as they deleted evidence of the Catholic Church cerebrum
graphing my masturbation cycle,
ostracizing me as a whiplash troll
who needed a good chill in a cubby hole
after mass.

The best was Scotland:
as the haar shined my hair,
a shepherd impressed me with his shutter-speed goats,
promenaded me through his orchard of levers and consoles.

We made love below his majestic family tapestry:
I stirred up the Red 40 Lake flooding his cellar
by whipping around my hairpiece.



ABSTRACT STUDY 2
NICOLE GUILD
SILK SCREEN ON PRINTING PAPER

CINEMATIC

red

head

r-

ed

dread

re-

d

dream



3 MILLION YEARS IN A SECOND

SHAE MEYER

MULTIMEDIA ON CANVAS

ABANDONERS

As Edith Mayberry stands at the sink in her kitchen, methodically washing dishes, she thinks of her daughter's missing dog, Cooper. It is going on three weeks since he disappeared this time. Edith is not concerned. The posters they distributed for his previous disappearance, back in the summer, are still hanging in shop windows and peeling off telephone poles. The first time, Edith's daughter found the dog at the edge of the darkened tree line behind their house, his white fur streaked with red mud. He was near the base of the old beech tree, the one with the roots that rose high above the ground, as if the tree were in the act of uprooting itself, inching its way closer and closer to the house. Edith hadn't wanted a dog to begin with. She'd only adopted Cooper because she thought he would cheer her daughter up after she found out about Meemaw. Puppies could make anyone happy, and although Cooper wasn't technically a puppy anymore, Edith still thought he would do the trick. And he had, for a while, until he started running off for days, leaving her daughter alone yet again.

A sudden bang against the kitchen window makes Edith flinch. She cranes her neck, leaning forward over the sink. She does not see anything, so she goes outside. Nothing moves aside from the protective coverings over the patio furniture that ripple in the breeze. Edith is about to return to the dishes when she spots a flash of green on the ground. She moves closer. A hummingbird lies on the deck. Its tongue flashes in and out like an anteater's, leaving wet slash marks on the woodwork. Edith kneels beside it, watches its chest heave. She hesitates for a moment, glances over her shoulder, then eases her hand under the creature.

It feels like nothing in her palm. Its head lulls as she lifts it, and her other hand moves instinctively to hold it. The tongue licks her palm once before disappearing. Edith stares at the bird, afraid that it has died because of her awkward handling. She should have left it alone. But then one of the stray cats could have come along and devoured it. Edith has seen it happen before. She does not want to see the mess of iridescent feathers pinned to the deck again. Distracted by her thoughts, Edith sits down in one of the covered chairs. She raises the hummingbird to her chest, nestles it there just above her heart as she waits to see if it will come back to life, if it's even

really dead.

Edith was never gentle as a child. Her mother got her a rabbit one Easter when she was seven. Edith had been so happy that she squeezed the rabbit for ten whole minutes. When she finally let go, the animal sagged to the floor. Edith had not understood what happened. She'd prodded the fluffy rabbit before assuming it had fallen asleep, so she wandered off to give it some time. She never saw it again. Her mother never brought it up, pretending instead that particular Easter had never occurred.

Another time, she found a fruit fly in her coffee mug, not too long ago. Edith had scooped out the dead bug and wiped it on a napkin beside her before returning to the drink. Later, she discovered that the fly had survived the drowning. It sat there quietly cleaning itself next to her. Edith had nudged the napkin just to make the fly move, which it did, but it hadn't flown away. Maybe its wings were too weighed down with the coffee. It was strange though, how the smallest things seem to be the most indestructible.

Her mother had grown smaller since she was first placed in the Home three years ago, just a few days after Edith's forty-seventh birthday. At first Edith and her daughter went to visit her every Saturday morning. They would make a day of it, bringing a picnic basket loaded with all the things her mother loved—cheese, bread, olive oil, and black and green olives. They would talk for hours, Edith standing by the window, waving a piece of baguette for effect while telling one of her stories. Edith's little girl would be sitting on the edge of the bed, twirling the ends of her hair absently as she listened to her mother. Every once in a while, the child would be touched by laughter, and she would look to her Meemaw in the hopes of passing the sound along. Her grandmother always made sure to at least smile back, in the beginning. But Edith knew her mother felt guilty somehow for trapping them there every Saturday. The old woman would gaze out the window, past Edith and her gesturing baguette, not even a flicker of amusement in her eyes. The only movement was her hand tapping an unknown message into the fabric of the bedspread.

They never discussed it, but Edith knew. So she started taking her daughter to visit less and less frequently, until she had faded her mother out of their lives. At first, Edith thought her daughter had noticed her plan and just decided to go along. But then the girl came home from elementary school one day shortly before Thanksgiving Break and placed herself on one

of the high chairs at the island in the kitchen, facing her mother's back.

How long's it been since we've visited Meemaw? her daughter had asked.

Edith's shoulders hunched as she bent over the pot on the stove. She raised the lid and the steam rose into her face, forcing her to turn away from the counter and toward her daughter.

I'm not sure, Edith said, waving one hand in front of her face and balancing the lid in the other. I'd have to check the calendar. Why do you ask?

We were going around the room in school today, her daughter said, telling the class what we're thankful for. Everyone kept saying things about their family, so when it got to me, I said how thankful I was for you and Meemaw, but then I got to thinking about it, and I couldn't remember when I last saw Meemaw.

Oh, Honey. Edith took a seat at the island across from her daughter. I thought you knew, she continued. Meemaw didn't like us visiting so often, so we stopped going.

She looked into her daughter's eyes and saw the question Edith herself was afraid to ask.

The next day, Edith went to the local animal shelter and adopted Cooper. Her daughter tried to convince her to keep the dog in the house, but Edith said the furniture was too delicate for that. Secretly, she could not stand the click of his toenails against the hardwood floor. It was like the dead were trying to reach her with a typewriter. So they kept Cooper on a leash outside, with a little dog house to sleep in for days when it rained.

The last time Edith visited her mother in the Home, it was in the middle of the day. Edith made sure to schedule the visit while her daughter was still in school. The bed was starch white and the room smelled of disinfectant desperate to mask the scent of death. Outside the door, the nurse had warned Edith of the smell. Her mother had an infection, the nurse said. It was the kind with a name longer than the time Edith imagined her mother had left. Edith stood by the door for a long while after the nurse let her in. She watched her mother's exhalations fog the hospital breathing mask. She sank into the chair by the bed, her purse on her lap in the uncomfortable way women sit when prepared to leave at any moment. Her finger snaked out to prod the silicone mask, almost against her own will, like a curious child's. The fog enveloped the other side, and Edith withdrew. As she closed

the door, Edith was certain her mother wouldn't remember the visit.

* * * * *

It is getting dark out. Edith feels half frozen to the chair, yet when she eases the cold hummingbird onto the table, its wings are matted with her sweat. She lets the head fall last, and the beak taps the glass table. She rubs the line in the middle of her palm, as if to wipe the memory from her flesh. At least she knows this one is dead for sure.

Edith hears a playful growl behind her. She turns her head to peak over the hunch of her shoulders. Cooper is standing on the porch. His stance is wide, and there are clumps of red mud tangled in his long white fur. He is carrying a large bone. As she watches, Cooper lets the bone fall from his mouth. It clatters to the ground, and he noses it toward her until it bumps against the leg of her chair. Edith stays seated. She rubs her palm and gazes at the bone. It is a faded yellow color. Does that mean it's a fresh bone, or an old one, she thinks. Old paper is yellow, but aren't ancient bones pure white? She does not know. She imagines a person lying in the snow somewhere in the woods, groping for her lost femur, thinking the cold is the only reason she cannot feel it, cannot find it.

Edith laughs suddenly, a quick, sharp laugh that is almost a bark. Cooper lets out a nervous whine, backing up. His claws scrape against the deck. The bone, which Edith has labeled as a femur for some reason, is marked with scratches. She reaches down and runs a finger over a particularly deep one. The serrated edges make her think of firewood, the way it splits slowly as you chop it, followed by the sudden shower of chips as you heave it apart by hand, unsatisfied with the job of the axe. She grasps the shaft of the bone, pressing the uneven edges into her palm.

She rises from the chair, the bone held loosely at her side, and moves off the porch into the backyard, leaving the hummingbird behind. The leaves crunch beneath her bare feet. She does not feel them. Cooper follows, weaving in and out of her shadow. His soft panting soothes her. She stands in the backyard like a batter waiting for the pitcher's throw, something to hit. The trees stare back, offer nothing. The fine layer of frost beneath her feet begins to melt, seeping into bare skin, and she can smell the dampness of thawing life. It disgusts her.

With a roar, Edith heaves the bone at the accusatory trees. In a flash,

Cooper pushes past her after it, stepping on her bare foot in the process. She curses and rubs the foot. This is ridiculous, she thinks. She can no longer see Cooper or the bone. She calls for him. Nothing.

Now she's going to have to follow him. Her daughter should be home soon, and Edith knows things will only get worse if she finds out Edith found Cooper only to lose him again. But how would she even know? Edith does not have to tell her. She glances back at her house, sees the dirty paw prints on the deck. Edith thinks of the pet rabbit from her childhood, imagines it hopping through the trees. If she does not go after Cooper now, he may disappear for good, and she is not willing to let her daughter lose someone else. Edith is not willing to lose someone else, so she moves toward the trees.

Most of the ground is snowless, but the trees hide a few stray mounds within their shade. Edith spies a single print of Cooper's paw in one of them and follows the point of the longest toe into the growing darkness, a fleeting compass. Edith wonders briefly if she will die out here. Who's to say the bone really did belong to a body lost in the dense wilderness. It was likely. Edith never liked the forest. No one ever went very far into these woods. That's probably why she never thought to look for the dog back here herself. Or why she had thought about it, but decided to forget.

Edith hears a single knock somewhere to her left. She turns to see a white tail pass behind a tree. She makes her way over to the tree only to hear another knock behind her. This time Edith turns fast enough to see Cooper standing next to the tree, the femur bone back in his mouth. The dog's droopy lips seem to smile around the bone, and he knocks the head of it against the tree once more before disappearing again.

Angry now, Edith begins to run. Her footsteps reverberate through the woods, echoing back to her until she is unable to hear the knocking anymore. But she still runs. She runs from the dead hummingbird, from the possibility that her mother is already dead, from the fact that Edith knows she is fifty years old and the next one in line for the Home, leaving her daughter all alone. Edith does not want to be held responsible. It is not her fault things die. She does not want to be the one to find the bodies.

Edith barrels into a large snow drift and trips over a root. She falls to the ground, crunching the snow beneath her as she slides sideways down a slope. Edith does not even fight gravity, but lets her momentum carry her numb

body where it will. When it comes to a rest, everything is black, in every direction she looks. She closes her eyes, lets the snow seep into her sweater. The world can do the crying for her. She no longer wants to be the finder. That is her daughter's job now. Edith is the abandoner.

It's not like her mother begged her to stay. Edith had at least tried. The first time Edith brought up the Home, her mother just nodded her head. She had already accepted the inevitable. All of her mother's friends were either dead already or in the Home. It was time for her to join the ranks. It was simple, a given. Maybe that was the problem. The acceptance, the lack of any sort of emotion, not even regret. Edith thinks she would have regrets if she ended up in the Home. Even if it was only the regret of not ending her own life beforehand. Why go somewhere to die when you could do it at your own house just as easily?

Edith remembers reading somewhere that women are less likely to commit suicide with a gun because they have the forethought to realize someone will have to clean up the mess. Even at their worst, women are thinking of others, so why can't Edith think of her mother more often? She guesses she is not worthy enough to be a woman. That must be it. She was not taught to be anything other than apathetic.

As Edith lies in the dirty snow, her eyes rove through the darkness, which seems to blur at the edges. The knocking sound she heard earlier changes to a loud buzzing, like that of a swarm of hornets. It draws nearer, then something lands on her hand. Tiny claws grasp the skin, little fish hooks that can't quite break the flesh. A tapping begins in the crease of her palm. The hummingbird, she thinks. Too afraid to move that hand for fear of scaring it off, she begins to tap the same pattern into the earth under her.

The tapping sound from the hummingbird makes its way into her body. It echoes within her whenever she closes her eyes, but once she opens them, the sound moves off into the distance, as if it is trying to inhabit her body while she is away. Intrigued, Edith tries an experiment. She begins blinking rapidly but has to stop almost immediately. The intrusive noise whooshes into her system and flees with each blink. She imagines a giant gong in her head. Her mother stands in front of it, holding the bone in her frail hands. When she hits the gong, it does not make a musical sound. Rather, it is like throwing stones down a mountain, a continuous clicking of bone against rock.

Wake up, her imaginary mother says, her voice raspy from disuse. You're not dead yet, and neither am I.

I don't believe you, Edith says. Her mother hits the gong again. Edith flinches, but continues, I haven't seen you in months. That means you must be gone.

Silly girl, her mother says, just because you don't see me all the time doesn't mean I'm not real. Her mother raises the bone and hits the gong one final time. The force of the sound echoes through Edith's body, and she opens her eyes.

"Mom?" Her daughter's voice. Edith hears a tentative whine as Cooper scabbles down into the hole under the tree with her. He begins digging next to her, showering her numb body with dirt damp from the melting snow. Edith manages to prop herself on her elbows. She knows where she is, under the eerie beech tree at the edge of her backyard. She must have run in a circle somehow. Edith can see her daughter's shadow on the porch, backlit by the lights in the house.

Cooper stops digging. Edith looks over at him, finally curious. He's unearthed more bones. He brings one over to her, sets it on her chest. It's smaller than the last one. This one looks like it belongs to an animal. Perhaps a rabbit. It is at this moment she remembers the hummingbird. She looks around for it, but it is gone. No, Edith tells herself, I just can't see it right now.

She looks toward the house again. As Edith watches, her daughter turns in the open doorway and goes back inside. The outdoor light clicks off.



TOY HORSE WITH SKULL - PIONEERTOWN, CA

ROGER CAMP
PHOTOGRAPH



LA POSTA DINER - LA POSTA, CA

ROGER CAMP
PHOTOGRAPH



ABANDONED TRAIN CAR - JACUMBA, CA

ROGER CAMP
PHOTOGRAPH

THIS IS A TARGET

Any moment a terrorist. Why we radio the man in the tower before crossing the dam. Bright Hawaiian t-shirt, his silhouette. He nods or shakes his head. This is the field below the dam you check for power-line markers that slip off during windstorms & crack in half. You can spot them from the freeway. Orange shells big as a bathtub. When you get in one it shows you as small to the men around you. You make them laugh when they can see you & they only see you in relation to them being the man. This is where you set the beaver trap. Staple wires at the stumps of what few trees stand. Signs you drive stop boats from loading in endangered wetlands. This is where the wind knocked the train off the bridge to the bottom of the river. Foundations of what was built around the tracks. Cinderblocks, graffiti. Your face on the screen of your phone in a blue outhouse. Boys from your high school starting a fire during the burn ban. Nobody listens specifically when you ask so you kick the rocks & a dozen mice scramble out. This is your thick uniform. Each part. Glossy line through your hair where a ponytail holder shielded dirt. When your boss starts the game of *who can find the strangest piece of trash*. Dunes where Ray hid the peg-leg before work. The meal at Olive Garden he won for bringing it back. This is the most giant American flag. Line of white trucks with numbers on the back. The job a registered sex offender had. Hot water on the hot sand. A little red knife you got from your dad.

SOME VALUES OF WEATHER AND LANDSCAPE

A set of men, having pitched camp, venture out to hunt bears. They travel one mile due south, then one mile due east, at which point they spot a bear. Bagging their game, they return to the camp and figure that altogether they have gone three miles. What was the color of the bear? It's nonsense as somebody once said, or unquestionably should have said, and the man can't wait to tell his daughter. To tell his daughter, when and if she were to be born, this silly riddle. Right now, he believes she's like the glistening foam that pretends to restore the sea level. The man's tongue slips like a plunging waterfall and he whispers the riddle to his wife's belly, through the sublittoral drone of his words, irrefragible, as not lust, as love is, as he says that maybe he'll make it teddy bears at first, which is to say, or to imply, that this all starts to take on a necessarily anticipatory form for him. He will tell her this riddle before she can speak or, at the very least, even understand it. But it will be there, in her sap and marrow, *prima facie*, and her emotions will vacation with fervor as it all dissolves into syllables. This riddle as *credenda*, he thinks, also, that it would be nice to create words that didn't need to be read, or that there were paintings that were non-retinal. He will want her to know that there are things that can never be about the eyes and that whatever you are thinking can go away. And, as she gets older, she will be forced to become an ostensible subject of the world around her, slowly buried beneath a vertiginous mass of data. And he will tell her the riddle and she will be in pre-school and she will call the toilet water on airplanes blue juice and he would give just about anything in the world to understand how one's beautiful, tiny head sometimes manages to jump about the way it does all the time. And when she is in elementary school and sliding on her first patch of ice, she will answer with her own nonsense. What do you call a dog that can walk? A human, she'll say, without waiting for reply. They'll laugh and feel all around the emptying out where whatever else you were thinking goes away. She'll laugh loudly, soaked in joy's spittle below the motionless sky and its blue absence of clouds. And the man will ask her what Tarzan said when he saw ten zebras coming over the hill? She'll look painted over, milky, not a shade, a mood hers, like her mother's, imagining

the striped arrangement of flesh on the moving horizon. He'll say, Hey! Here come ten zebras coming over the hill! And when he tells her that joke again she's a little older and asking him why there's a Paris, Illinois and a Paris, Kentucky and she'll ponder if everything is just a fifteenth generation copy of everything else and he'll ask her the color of the bear. And with time, she moves on, no longer cut by the scratches of language and she'll eventually put effort toward understanding the inguinal rumbles of teenagers like herself. In the new, prolix millennium, where boredom becomes perfection and everything that happens will be blunders, the man will start to feel alchemically removed from it all, he'll ask her what color. She's seventeen now and says it sounds boring, all of the nonsense, and he'll hope it lasts for eternity. She'll leave at some point and he'll see clouds like flat anti-depressants and any emotions he feels will be colored by them, even when he steps inside away from them. In a manner of speaking, almost everything he was able to see turns to rain. The buzz of it dopplers in passing cars, the partial minims pattering a scalp lock of elms in the field. And when and if she is born, she will go on her own and when she leaves she'll answer white. The bear is white. And he won't know why, but she's right, and she'll say it has to do with vertices and it has to do with how we understand distance. And it won't have to make sense, here, when the rain bellies up, where the trees write against the movement.

YOU CALL ME BIRDWATCHER

Over my head, you, and you're living. Again, you carry into a longer day and disappear. Somewhere, I'm thinking you'll turn back with a season: a well-mapped body, newfeathered, having learned something else of smallness. Shrunken, the city from way up. Scary, this air—empty, but you. Else, you've seen a winter thick with wings and hungry ifs. If together, a taken shape. If

a calling out, a way to reason—a window, a way around. History or heart insists, insists, until listless. Way up, as you are and among the weather, I wonder how strangely you know the darkening clouds—of course, it's now, I'm here, and don't I know how human I've been: to ask up for any answer.

DO NOT BECOME PREOCCUPIED WITH HANDS, YOU SAID

*

Midtown, the streets are busied with hardhats
and hands. The pavement is set in wills today.
I'm thinking far off today, about the riverbird

we watched on the Maumee, the earth-full
bridge crossing over, its pavement given over
to decay—how it looked, to me,
like an herb garden, or ruins. I imagine

that riverbird building, in
brush that is low and re-
shaping, with or without song.
I can't help it: September will

ripen and forget; a bird will insist
its mouth; something tall
will be built up
midtown, and sky must compromise

to house us. No simple way around it. I carry, want-
heavy, near the Maumee bridge. Stones tossed
in a river are covered in, and still
the river—slow, able—rounds
through and through.

ANY ELSE THAT REACHES

Think your hand a map or any else
that reaches. Consider what
you turn back to: backs of knees, Achilles',
a farmhouse without a field or bleating
anything. Give or get a name
like any else that reaches. Think of her
moving out, after all of it. All those books
& things, things made, & how she will choose
what to take with her. There
is never room enough to hold a too much
& isn't it obvious by now: there's nothing
with wheels to carry it out & for you.

Tell me again of the architect who kept
telling the house atop the hill: We've lost
the hill; we've lost the hill; we've lost it. Tell me
how to keep a hold on, to stay a part of. We both
know
a plum will dimple under something
other than mistake. Show a room:
its high shelves. She's there
picking titles; her body made
long & longer, like any else that reaches.

SAY: TURN

How well we wear the prairie
down—coatless, call it
as we use it: slow legs, late
February. So this is the hum
you're living now. Everywhere,
the leveled fields. Passed where
the road cuts, away-away eats up
a house—everything becomes a line. Everything
split having healed, split
wide again. Winter skin. Chicken-wired,
a retriever barks and barks.

You tore out the rot
to save the roof, once. You built the dam
to keep the creek. See
the barn, half-fallen. See
a river, wider. What you saw
once you see again. Try, try—
and all you can see is an endless, and all
you can know is an end. Just look
at your hands. It's too
cold, you
say. Turn home; a few miles back
home, you
say. Do you think we can bear it?



MELANIE STEINWAY 2016

ORCA
MELANIE STEINWAY
TATTOO ON FOREARM



CROW TELECASTER
 MELANIE STEINWAY
 WOODBURNING AND PAINT ON GUITAR



CREATOR DESTROYER.

MELANIE STEINWAY

WOODBURNING, WOOD STAIN, PAINT ON PINE

MERCY

It starts with clumps in the shower. Black, trailing globs that snake into the drain and stick to the sides of the bathtub. By then it is too late. By then the soft, white flesh of Robin's scalp has begun to push out from beneath those dark locks which, at the time, fall almost to his shoulders. He always liked to keep his hair long.

When she first glimpses that pupil-less eye, Mercy is standing over him with brush in hand, and she drops it. It is the first day of school. Just seconds ago, she had been teasing the hair away from his face, as though in a trance, her eyelids drooping with each stroke of the brush. But it is only when Robin bends over to tie his shoes that she sees it: the white spot, the size and sheen of a *peso* coin. She cries out his name but when he turns, she does not know what to say.

What, yaya?

Nothing. Go get your things ready for school.

She checks the brush for hair when he leaves. Pulls out tufts of it with her fingernails, trying to decide if there is more on there than usual, trying to remember the last time she cleaned the brush. But as much as she stares, she cannot be sure.

She puts the hair in her pocket. It is early, but already the sun shines like pinpricks into the eyes, drawing tears, drawing sweat. In a moment she will send Robin off to school, and within the hour she will return to the bath tub and see those black globs, thinking *mold*, thinking *spiders*. She will find herself reaching into her pocket to feel that ball of matted hair like a marble in her hand.

*

At the doctor's office, Mercy holds Robin as they check his temperature and swab his scalp. She rubs his sweaty cheek and sings to him when they take his blood. When the *Doctora* asks his mother and father to step into her office, Mercy waits with Robin in a room of soft walls and tiny furniture, the chairs so sized to make a child feel tall. She puts two of them together and sits with her knees to her chin. For just a moment, she watches as Robin picks up a toy car and listlessly slides it back and forth along the carpet.

Then just as quickly he rolls onto his belly and closes his eyes, tumbling into sleep. The toy car is still in his hand.

The door to *Doctora's* office opens, and she invites Mercy to come inside. *Not to worry*, she says, waving to her receptionist. *Maria will take care of him*. With a gentle hand, she guides Mercy into the other room, inviting her to take the chair next to the desk, against the window. *Please, sit*. Mercy looks over her shoulder at the city sprawled before her: the highways and the slums, the blue blanket of Laguna de Bay, the tiny cars on their way to Makati, or Las Piñas, or perhaps even further. She spots the steeple of the church Robin's family frequents for Sunday mass, the cushion of homes, all the way up to the walled edges of their *barangay*. She thinks, *this is what it must feel like to fly in an airplane*.

The room is focused on her now. Robin's mother sits with her stomach pressed against the armrest, so she can look Mercy in the eye. His father, too, stares hard, leaning away, his wife's head over his shoulder.

Mercy, Doctora says. What can you tell me about Robin's diet? Has he eaten any new foods? Does he drink too much soda?

Mercy shakes her head.

Have you been using any new soaps or shampoos? New laundry detergent?

No, says Mercy. There is a long silence as *Doctora* scribbles on a notepad with pursed lips. Mercy has always liked *Doctora*, has thought of her always as kind and powerful, but now she fears that her answers are a disappointment. She believes that this is the worst *Doctora* is capable of, that anger and fear do not manifest themselves on her face because they are too vulgar, too commonplace. And now the worst is occurring because of Mercy.

She remembers the only time the family has ever come to *Doctora's* office in an emergency. It was an abscess, caused by a single rotten tooth; Robin, too young to speak, had simply cried and clutched at the offending cheek, hoping someone would eventually notice.

There is a dentist on the third floor, Doctora had said, after a brief examination. Only seconds of watching him had allowed her to discover the source of the pain. I can take you there now. But you really must make sure that he maintains good dental hygiene. Make sure he brushes his teeth. You're lucky this is a baby tooth; it would have come out soon anyway.

Robin's mother had turned to Mercy then. *How could you let this happen?*

In her anger, she snatched the boy from Mercy's hands, which made him cry even harder. His face reddened, his fists clenched, he kicked out in pain. But Mercy knew it was best to stay quiet when faced with his mother's expression. It was the same look which often precluded the slam of a door, or the sound of something breaking. *Aren't you his yaya? What do we even pay you for?*

The *Doctora*, however, did not play by these rules. *Now, no need for that*, she said, stroking Robin's hair. At her words, Mercy's stomach clenched, bracing. But Robin's mother merely sighed, shook her head, and fixed *Doctora* with a supine gaze.

I'm sorry, she said, gasping. *I just hate to see him like this.*

The *Doctora's* smile was reassuring. *Come, let's take him now to the dentist. He'll be ok.*

Later, inside the elevator down to the dentist's office, Mercy had cried silently as she stood behind the other women. Not because of what Robin's mother had said, or how she had said it, but because she was right—she had not done the job she was supposed to do. That she had caused Robin such pain, no matter how unintentional, was a realization which shook Mercy to her core.

On the drive home, after the dentist had plucked out that cursed tooth; after Robin, with exhaustion and relief, fell into Mercy's lap and slept until the next morning; Mercy held that boy to her body like he was her own, sure she would be fired, sure that these were the last moments she would ever have with her ward.

But then a day passed, then another, and another. Mercy still lived in the house. She still woke when Robin woke, stayed up watching him when he slept, took special care now to make sure he brushed his teeth, washed his hands, took his vitamins. She began to believe she could stay for good. It was a situation that could not have occurred on its own. It was all, Mercy knew, a result of *Doctora's* intervention, her power, her ability to make change.

Please, Mercy, the woman says now. *You know Robin best. Hair loss like this, the suddenness of it.... Sometimes, in extreme cases of stress, the body can stop hair growth and cause more hair to fall out. Has Robin seemed stressed to you lately?*

Mercy does not want to disappoint *Doctora* again. For the first time, she gazes wide-eyed at Robin's mother and father, sees their taught mouths, expressions that mirror her own. She waits for them to give her the answer. But they too are silent.

The *Doctora* heaves another sigh and gives the thing in question a new name: *alopecia*, though she warns that it is just a fancy way of saying *hair loss*; which is to say, at this point, there is no reason for it and therefore no cure. Soon, there is nothing left to do but stare out the window.

Mercy's gaze falls to the street below, where traffic blooms like a fungus beneath the wet June heat. Any day now, that heat will break into four straight months of angry winds, torrential rain, hungry floods. It will cleanse the streets not just of filth but of homes, of bodies and their consequences, and in some places that water will stay for weeks to spread disease and bring tragedy anew. Any day. For now, Mercy imagines the *Doctora* sitting at her desk at the end of a long night, the lines of her face gentle and stern as she makes a decision that might save someone's life. She imagines her smile. The satisfaction in *Doctora's* face as she closes a book and swivels around, towards the window, to gaze at all life's blessings.

*

Faced with the failures of medical science, Robin's family goes to church.

It has been three weeks since their visit to *Doctora's* office. That sickly spot, once small, now gleams in the yellow light of the altar, looking like something that consumed, something parasitic. Mercy sits with Robin's family in the very first pew. When the priest instructs them to kneel, she stays seated, but from this vantage point she can now see clearly that smooth expanse of skin stretching from Robin's neck almost to the crown of his head. Above his left ear, another spot winks at her, ominous, though it is no larger than a fingernail. Mercy kneels.

This is the week Robin has stopped looking in the mirror. These are the mornings he has begged, tears and snot drenching his white uniform, to stay home from school, even for a day. With these thoughts in her head, Mercy prays for the first time since her discovery. She does not close her eyes; instead lifts her gaze to the ivory-draped Virgin and her forgiving face, her golden, gleaming crown.

Lord have mercy, says the priest.

Christ have mercy, intones the crowd.

Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy. From Robin's catechism books, Mercy knows that all prayers are delivered to Christ through the Virgin Mary. That without her, prayers were no more than plastic beads, strung on a line and let loose to scatter over the earth.

But with her help, anything could be a prayer: a song, a dream, a thought. So when she prays, Mercy looks to that immaculate visage to make sure she is listening.

Dear Lord, forgive us for our sins. Forgive us for what we have done and what we have failed to do. And please, please heal Robin. Make him happy again.

During communion, she falls in line with the rest of the family, but does not take the bread into her mouth. She has never been baptized. It would only be a sin.

It is past noon when the Mass finally ends. Outside, the heat of the asphalt soaks into Mercy's shoes as she follows Robin's family through the packed parking lot. Men in sweaty uniforms with yellowed collars snap to attention as the church empties itself of bodies, breathing hot sighs of relief; these men who have waited for hours in the sun for their families to receive their blessings. She listens to the priest leading his congregation in a final hymn, singing *blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth*; sees the sunlight reflecting in prisms off the Basilica de San José.

The next few moments come to her as though from a dream. *Look*, she says to Robin. *See the rainbow?* But when she reaches for him, he is not there. He is standing in the street so far away from her, she thinks, and then there is the smell of rubber, a flash of chrome, and fear, rising within her like a wave. She hears Robin scream. Only then does she realize she has thrown herself between him and the car, like an offering, like a person willing to protect another person with her body.

He is scooped away, out of sight, and this is what jolts her awake. But her body is paralyzed even as her mind cries out, even when knuckles crack hard against her cheek again and again, her skin burning like she has been branded. She looks up to see Robin's father grasping his wife's arm tightly.

Enough, he says. His voice is soft even as his grip tightens, causing pain. *Not here.* Suddenly, Mercy is aware of all the faces pressed against car windows, the divine silence that now surrounds her.

The car's weight thrums over Mercy's shoulder, nudging her like an

animal, so finally she stands. It passes as she wipes the dirt off her shins and hands, the driver avoiding eye contact, everyone else retreating into their cars and lives as Robin's family disappears into their own vehicle. As the engine revs, Mercy slips silently into the backseat. She watches the golden dome of the Basilica shrink in the rearview mirror, giving thanks to the Virgin Mary for her immaculate intervention, for using Mercy's body to save Robin's life. She continues to pray long after the church disappears from sight.

*

They drop her off at the grocery store on the way home, after Sunday lunch, to buy honey, which Robin's mother says is good for his scalp. Robin clings to Mercy as she steps out of the car, but she reassures him with a soft pinch on the cheek and then makes sure his seatbelt is cinched tight. His father gives her too much money but tells her she can return it to him when she comes home. Then he hands her an umbrella too, because, he says, it looks like it might rain.

Inside, she searches for a sign that will point her toward the honey without having to ask someone for help. She realizes that this might be the first time she has been alone outside for almost a year, that she no longer knows how to act, what to say to people. She does not need to be reminded that it has been almost as long since she last spoke to her own mother.

With the money she would slip into envelopes each month, she used to send long letters home to her province, detailed accounts of her days with Robin, caring for him; and then, when Mercy finally grew accustomed to life in her employer's household, she began to ask for stories about what had continued on without her. To these letters, her mother at first had responded with news of her growing nieces and nephews, her brother who had recently opened a street side *sari-sari* store. But when Mercy, in a fit of rage and pain, finally wrote the words that would reveal how her employers had been abusing her, the tone of her mother's responses had abruptly changed.

Protect yourself, she wrote in her final letter, *and leave.*

You are not a part of that family.

If it happens again, call the police.

Mercy stopped writing then, though it was not because she disagreed. After all, how could her mother know that she had already thought to leave, tried to leave, only to realize that Robin needed her more?

Still, she kept those words close for a long time. No longer for her sake, but for Robin's, who with each day seemed to shrink and shrink, his expressions growing too tired and fearful for the face of a child. Some days, when his mother doled out no more than a slap for eating with his hands, or a pinch for not saying *please* or *thank you*, Mercy could still get the boy to smile.

But then there were the bad days. Days when Robin's mother came home with that look on her face, and his father was nowhere in sight, and Mercy would close the door to Robin's room until the sound of a shower running in the master bathroom told them they were safe, almost. They would build a fort out of pillows and blankets and come out only when Robin's stomach grumbled for dinner. Other times, despite their precautions, the door would swing open like a gunshot and his mother would step inside. Those times, Mercy could only accept that there was nothing more she could do.

Once, at Robin's school, she wondered out loud to another *yaya* what might happen if she took Robin and simply...left.

Don't you think many of us have tried? the woman replied. *They have power, we do not. Within hours you would be rotting in jail, and then what?* As much as Mercy tried to fight it, she could not deny that this was true. There was only one solution, she realized. To stay. To protect her ward.

She finds the honey in the baking aisle, rows and rows of different kinds. She picks the bottle shaped like a bear because she thinks Robin will like it, and then rushes to the register. She has been away for too long already. The woman in front of her wears a white coat and is reaching for her wallet when Mercy realizes it is the *Doctora*. In the blue light of the grocery store she looks different, somehow smaller, older.

Mercy, she yelps, and then her eyes search the space behind her. *How's Robin? Is he here?*

When she sees that he is not, and neither is his family, she takes a small step towards Mercy, just close enough to take her hand. It is a gesture which is surprising and reassuring to both women. *I'm sorry I cannot help him*, says *Doctora*. *I only wish I knew what was causing it*. Then she is silent for a long time.

To risk her job would be easy, Mercy thinks. But risking Robin's safety was something she could never do.

She withdraws her hands from *Doctora's* grasp. She pays for the honey,

and, walking home, unfurls the umbrella when it starts to rain. She is eager to get back. At the *barangay* gate, she hands the security guard her ID, but before she can wonder if she has made the right decision he immediately hands it back to her.

He says something that she cannot hear over the sound of the rain. But the locking of the gate as he turns away makes the message clear. When someone else comes to knock on the guardhouse and is able to pass through, she realizes that she has been standing there for a long time, perhaps waiting for someone to realize that a mistake has been made.

Finally, the security guard is forced to shoo her away. *Go home*, he says, stepping towards her, forcing her back out into the street.

She pulls out the money she has left over from Robin's father, the bills growing damp beneath her fingers as she counts. It is just enough for a bus ticket home.

SULIGHT LOCATION

I get up from the couch and walk
to the desk where I sit until
the timer indicates I should go
to the porch. This is the way I solve
everything, my cells bang
banging together in a chorus
of swords against the gates of a city.
Or else it's the long green neck
of the lily as it pushes through the air
toward the sun. As if you were never
stung by a flower in midsentence,
as if you never longed to lay your head down
upon the serene white bosom
of any convenient angel. I work
to make everything portable –
I put handles on each of my organs
so they can be transported and reused,
I deposit anything that matters
into the cloud. All of this while
making sound effect noises
with my mouth, but I'm pretty sure
everyone does this when they have spent
a long time alone. I convince myself
that the light patterns the sun makes
as it cascades through the window
mean something profound
after I have spent a long time alone.
It's the space I'm most interested in,
not the hue or the brilliance.
The location is all that matters.

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MELANIE STEINWAY is a tattooist, illustrator, and musician who grew up in Boulder, CO, drawing artistic inspiration from the mountains and woods that surrounded her. She attended the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, RI, where she graduated in 2012 with a BFA in illustration. During her time at RISD she explored a variety of mediums ranging from oil painting and silkscreening to woodburning and animation. After moving back to Colorado, Melanie began to pursue tattooing, after focusing heavily on woodburning for several years and working with clients that include Fender and Welsh rock band The Joy Formidable. She currently tattoos at Urban Element Tattoo in Denver, where her work still focuses on the natural world. When not tattooing, Melanie enjoys silkscreening, creating fine art, and playing guitar in her band Tyto Alba. She can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/melaniesteinwayart>, <http://www.instagram.com/melaniesteinway>, and <http://melaniesteinway.tumblr.com>

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