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The Last Thing

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the last thing

Alex Baldassare

May 2016

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
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the last thing

TABLE OF CONTENTS

the last thing 3

I

The Quiet that Greet Me	7
Talking to Florida	8
(She) Made a Supplication	9
Delicate	10
Treetops Over Fog and Mist	11
Doze	12
Widow's Peak	13
the last thing	14
After Party	15
Hide	16
For My Brother, Buffalo	17
Cleaning His Room	18
praise her hands	19
Ma	20
Converse	21
Less-	22
Pops	23
Oh, Terror	24
Divorced	25
the last thing	26

II

Beige	29
Goose	30
Be Scared With Me	31
Creatures	32
Frequency	33
Seconds	34
Charlie	35
Curb	36
Eventide	37
Static	38

To Know a Man	39
the last thing	40
Sick, Together	41
Girls	42
Different Now	43
Last Cup	44
Gravedigger's Lullaby	45
Pneumomediastinum	46
the last thing	47
One on One	48

For Charllote and Catherine,
the first women in my life.

*I've hung my happiness
on what it all could be*

– Damien Rice

i saw the door
that door that stands there
i saw her stand at this door
she saw me stand at a door

THE QUIET THAT GREET'S ME

Door slams, fog
fills the car I
drive home in. Radio

just to have something—

home. Just me
to eat dinner with me,
and I hate sharing.

TALKING TO FLORIDA

Walking along a raised curb
to the gutter, to my mailbox and back,
nights in front of the willow
on the phone with her.

I see the sand there,
waves rolling and stacking,
building below a starless sky
dragging out, revealing memories

I'll never see. Just noise
and the earth beneath her feet—

soft, cool, sinking, lifting, slipping past
fallen sandcastles, hoping to reach
the water's edge to wash her heels,
only to dirty them again.

Here, gravel pokes through my shoes.
I try to shake it loose.
Down broken stairs,
through grass, into woods.

The moon is gone.
The stars— gone.

But her voice. Her voice tells me
how the earth feels beneath her feet.

(SHE) MADE A SUPPLICATION

*Forever is so forward.
I want you to take me backward,
before where I've been. Before
where I've known. I want to know
you'll love me backward.*

DELICATE

You kick confetti barefoot
and spin to no music—
I stand and stare.

You look for your shoes and curse I'm late,
grab a broom to clean and lean on
as the tent drips, lakes the empty floor.

You slip and smile, I take it,
and for a moment we have our dance,
high heel down hill, hard for me to follow.

So I listen to clicks cobbled and cloaked
in orange light, fill my mouth with the sound,
swallow, try to hold it down.

Am I only cute when you're drunk?
An empty glass in the morning, smudged?

You laugh and loiter at the door.
No thanks, I say as you go inside,

white paper still stuck to your feet.
Do you kick them off one by one?

No thanks, I say and lie
and hope you come back.

TREETOPS OVER FOG AND MIST

When I read books you've read,
my favorite part is
where you leave yourself
on the page I've yet to read.

Star, circle, checkered line
broken off mid-sentence.

My eyes not on the words,
but on your marks– stuffed
in the corner, tucked to the right,
just behind what's in front of me.

I wish this page was made
of onion skins.

I want to see what you see.
I have to wait.

DOZE

You sleep and flinch as if
running across a sheet of ice.

Your breath hangs sharp,
I try to swallow the cloud whole,

inhale you, show you
papier mâché lungs.

When you wake there,
please, scrape me up.

Pack me under your fingernails.
Pick me out somewhere

I'm not afraid to feel
my ankles touch.

WIDOW'S PEAK

Push back beyond the matte,
let the sliver shine,
wiggle it between your fingers,
ask what else hides besides time.

Push back the flat- the black,
school of silversides
off shore- full of shells and glass
once sharp, now worn
dull and beautiful.

i saw
her eyes
her eyes saw me stand at a door
saw me ask
why can't you love me

AFTER PARTY

*One more, pours over my lips,
down my cheeks. I taste
the half cough caught in my throat.
My past comes up.*

HIDE

Crosses the corner of my eye,
past stalks I cut through after school—
a maze I only know exists.

Crackling muffled in cracking
walls of cane, louder and louder,
not loud enough to hamper

the smell. Something sweet,
charred, like honey-glazed ham
left out in the sun.

Tangled in scents
meant for no man,
boy found by no one,

by a bouquet of no roses
and no foxtails. In a clearing
never there before.

FOR MY BROTHER, BUFFALO

Bullied into taking money,
bullied into knocking over mailboxes,
knocking on doors, running
till legs go numb, running with kids
pretending to be men,
stolen cigarettes and Playboys
from soda jerks, clenched fistings
clerks, screaming in their faces.

Ma screams when he knocks
over the espresso brick,
makes him drink it, tiny cup
in tiny hands, she lifts the dish,
a click, a clink, she sips,
he guzzles back black,
down his throat, down a road
he was told not to go down,
his legs disappear in the dark,
long strides chase a light not there,
might never be.

CLEANING HIS ROOM

Bees hived his hollow—
may have yelled help,
prayed, swallowed.

Jellybeans and peanuts
cover hardwood floors,
assorted, roasted.

Buried in boxelder shade,
ankles rashed purple—

My tongue lacquered in licorice,
his in honey.

PRAISE HER HANDS

Red sauce
bubbling beside the sink,
she lifts a can from beneath
the water and steam.

Pours yellow on a dish,
quiets my stomach
grumbling over a radio
that hums but doesn't sing.

She covers her mouth
and laughs when I say
that is the best corn
that has ever been made.

MA

The day Medusa sheared her snakes,
trusted man not to turn stone,
she became pregnant at fourteen.

Her mother never charmed the gods,
but there were no gods then.

Only men who forced a feel,
forced her to forget.

She escaped closets
she was locked into, kicked out,
walked a cold Fordham Road.

Baby with a baby her own.

CONVERSE

She speaks a certain English
no one understands. A mix
of sighs and mutters, plush
like her hands with storylines
lost when she lets go.

It's met with a dialect
of silent stares, short questions,
one she's fluent in,
not familiar with.

That talk's too comfortable for this—

drives when we try to go back
to the Bronx, Colden Ave,
the fifth floor, five flights,
thousands of grocery bags
it takes to get there.

Now, the store's closed, stairs hard.

But the radio's low,
so we hum and stammer
a conversation between
me, her, and the night.

LESS-

I hear it still, his laugh
like giant rocks
dumped into a lake.
We went fishing once—
he told me they like the hook.

POPS

Worked three months in construction,
lost three fingers.

What makes your heart hurt?
Why numb it with the present
when it's the past that longs?

*It's harder to write with your left
than to hold a bottle
of scotch with it.*

Sits, stares, says it again,
and I ignore him.

OH, TERROR

*Scoop out the heart and boil it
in rose water and lard.
If you're not going to eat it,
at least smell it for a second.*

*Slam the rest into the ground,
don't use a wheelbarrow.
Use your back and enough rope
and don't bury it with anything.*

*Not leftovers, a flourish,
no floral arrangement.
You're not trying to hide it
with the distant wild,*

*but between the last yawns of pine
beneath the lawn covered in ice.*

DIVORCED

Too big for any bed,
he ran to a cave, tucked
his head between two rocks.

Couldn't see his feet,
boats always crashing ashore,
dragging dirt where they wash up.

Vines tangled his trunk,
tightened when he tried to run
that run, slow and ugly.

There, no panes, cracks,
sights seen beyond where he leaned
against the sill and stared.

he saw her
stand at this door
closed like my mother's mouth
my mother who had no heart
just a stomach

BEIGE

on my mattress,
those pearls
I didn't give her,
a dog
needs a walk.
lie beside her?
a tulip in a trash heap.
what I'd never do,
but did.

GOOSE

Black and huge.
Bigger than I'd expected.
It took two of us,
one with a shovel,
the other with a bag.

I would have never seen it
if the tide hadn't been so low.
There, in the marsh,
stuck beneath a canoe,
feathers melting off.

Too slick to hold,
it fell to the beach,
laid in a way it couldn't,
neck pointing at me, the deep.
I swear I felt her shake awake.

BE SCARED WITH ME

Carry that weight far enough,
when you fall there'll be no trail.

Be scared with me,
make a nest lost in the grove,
a pollen pillow to suck and grind.

Be scared with me,
rest your head in a shallow home,
your teeth seeded to tomorrow.

A murder of crows still follows.

CREATURES

I want to know why my body
feels borrowed, a suit
of sticky steam. I can't breathe,

don't speak, don't look in the mirror
or anyone in the eyes.
They will see this swamped thing.

FREQUENCY

Morning dry. Floor cold.
I lift our stomach to see
where it pressed against jeans,

afraid to feel where the button
pressed back. I can't yell at you.
Wouldn't if I could.

But no one ever talked to you,
did they? Someone must've seen
your rusty fingers

one swing over, heard
that teacher whisper
stop crying cause your fat-

it was just orange zest
in your eyes.
I want to hold that hand,

ask you to stop sucking in.
We still suck in,
sit with a pillow on our lap.

Still sweat through shirts
till they're yellowed.
Please, speak into jars,

brush your teeth more
so our voice can be fresh
in my head.

SECONDS

I sneak pizza to the basement,
choke on anchovy.
Wake up the same way
I go to bed– shirt too short,
jeans don't fit.

Pops sees me, I see him.
He walks away, I cry.
Painted red like quizzes, tests,
unseen. I don't think I guess,
more trust somehow,

like looking at the willow,
wondering if it's dead
or if leaves are about
to come in.

CHARLIE

These midnight walks are crawls now,
drags his paw, doesn't lift his leg to pee,
hobbles away before he ends.

I hope he's just tired, sitting out
the next few rounds to catch his breath,
rest his hinds to bolt back up the hill again.

Tonight he doesn't whine. Doesn't howl.
Doesn't run. He scuffs toward the corner light
he can't see but seems to know is there.

CURB

I saw the river,
the Palisades, the marsh
hidden under high tide.

I saw children climb into waders,
the net unroll thirty feet long
end to end.

I saw them crowd around her—
short haircut
brown above her shoulders.

I saw them link hands,
tight and tied together
to the yellow pole.

I saw them on one side, ready,
waiting to walk in to their knees,
their waists, their chests.

I saw it takes two to seine.

I saw them try to get tall,
shrug off the cold,
grow from the water like reeds.

I saw them sweep the bed,
drag poles,
rest it onto dry land.

I saw them forget her,
look at the ground,
sparkling and moving.

I saw it gasp for air,
the American eel
glowing in the sun.

EVENTIDE

to open her eyes,
reach inside and dredge silt
from the bottom of her mind.

to wash the marsh mud
off the back of her tongue,
let her rest into the tide.

STATIC

You said these bent bottle caps
look like seashells without the beach.
This place, that smell– dank dusk

caught between walls of mossed rock.
Leave if you want,
this is all I've got.

Matted hair, receded, revealed
a scar I've washed so many times,
still shines.

Beg to come back,
but you've already gone.
Beg to forget,

but we played a song
static in fuzz on my tongue.

TO KNOW A MAN

I get lost even when I know where I'm going.
My feet always hang off the bed.
I don't know if I could protect anyone,
don't own a car. The home I have
may be the only one I ever have.
How much does it take to know me?
I've only taken drugs to hide.
I've never held a gun.
When my lung let out, so did my chest,
and I don't like what's underneath.
I don't like the beach;
I need to take my shirt off,
lost my hair at seventeen.
I'm afraid to be alone, even outside
drenched in blue morning.

i have no stomach for
her eyes
lies i realize
i will never ask
why cant you love me

SICK, TOGETHER

Her head's bald like mine.
Moonlight caught in beads of sweat
runs past bleared eyes. A milky trail
she tries to lick away but shines
the corners of a smirk, a sigh.

I see her chest, red in the dark,
pale where her breasts were.
My hands, still beneath sheets,
stroke hips jutting skin,
smolder between her thighs.

Okay? And she says,
Please, again, again.

GIRLS

Will a stranger tell them–

repaint my pictures
in long beautiful strokes?

Long, maybe like their hair,
too fine for my fingers to feel.

Will their faces squint and soften
white like fall's first snow,

freckles blossom on their jaws?
They may see so many things,

not me.

DIFFERENT NOW

Sun peers through French doors
over the kitchen table.

He stares at her. Woman who left
a ring in his ear, screamed on a bike
her daddy said not to ride.

Woman who made life, all boys,
all cried like him the first time.

Woman's palms he places pills in
each night, watches her fade
beside their wedding photo.

*Lightly toasted pumpernickel
with hazelnut, your favorite.*

She stares, and lifts it to her lips.

LAST CUP

She skinny-dipped into the dark.
A black sea shook in her hands,
crashed and foamed the back of her throat.

GRAVEDIGGER'S LULLABY

Thawed beside someone's sister
or wife, I pick a rose
off the box, unbutton my coat
and dig into my pocket.

Dig into the night. Dig
till walls of dirt are high.
Dig till I can't see the sun
set over grassy horizon.
Dig until the stars break
and I do, too.

A leopard flask, a swig,
and all the company I need.

PNEUMOMEDIASTINUM

She's gone, cleared the site.
Took the tent and hit the light.
Left the smoke, let it rise
up my throat.

i want to be the door i
want to be the heart i want
to be the stomach i want to
be the mouth i want to be
the last thing

ONE ON ONE

Three hours since you said
you had to leave in fifteen minutes.
Two months since I messed up
your name the first time we met.
Now we're alone, quarter to midnight,
in a room we shouldn't be in,
at the edge of the cave,
slipping deep behind the rocks.

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