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# The Last Thing

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Alex Baldassare

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the last thing



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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 GREETS 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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