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WHERE I AM
Alex Keenan

I think, sometimes, that my home here
is tea with a golden yolk of honey at the end – tea, never beer.
It’s chased by a straight shot of liberal vodka
and everyone agrees that it is a wonderful town.
But even when I drink, I miss my mountains, the trees
of my first home, the rain striking the Flatirons with an anvil’s beat.
Here, in a town of college bedrooms and cheap eats,
I have a bedroom on the first floor, and it’s a wonderful room.
It’s here that I have learned that sound is free.
I know the shuffling of my roommates living above me,
I know the sound of running water through the walls –
I know it, crisp against the lips and echoing hollowly down the drain.
It’s the sound of loss, of memories gone away from me –
home is only a liquor cabinet spiked with tea and honey.

SONDER
Kaci Ally
Photography | Telluride, CO
TO THE GIRL WITH THE BLACK HAIR
THAT HAS GROWN OUT BROWN
Keelan Kenny

Don't look in the rearview mirror.
Your father was a recruit,
your mother a whippoorwill,
and so you were born a peace dove.

*Its reflection holds nothing but flesh.*
I know you wake from sleep
to the sound of vomit. The vomit
of anorexia and alcoholism.

*Flesh that will haunt your hollowed bones.*
You feast on nothing more than the holy
fibers of Manna. Carefully pulling apart
the nacreous skin of pomegranate and jackfruit.

*Forget of blood and body.*
You live outside the shapes and curves
of your body and I love you for it.
Singing from soul rather than mouth.

*Look instead into the reservoir.*
Forget the days of amethyst and rose seed,
when your belly was round and full. Look
ahead at the road and fill every cavity you find with song.
The engineers have stayed up all night, calculating, for three days, and they are quite certain. It has been finals week for 342.62 days. They tell us this quite triumphantly and are disappointed when no one is surprised. What we are most curious about is how the engineers had the time to do the calculations.

The emergency phones scattered around campus are fake. They are meant to lull nightly sacrifices into a false sense of security. If you pick up the phone, a toneless voice says, “We know,” or sometimes, “The world is spinning itself gently apart, there is no purpose in life, and we are all dying, so hang up the phone.”

If you travel deep enough into the library, there are books that can teach you everything. Everything. They can tell you when the world will end, why God does not speak to you, and even what that cute person is thinking about you. There is unlimited knowledge in the library bookshelves, which is why no one goes back there, preferring to stay in the study rooms and pour over their art history textbooks. No one really wants to know.

Yesterday our professor fell silent mid-sentence. In the ensuing silence, we heard him whisper, “But they’re all just children. They’re just children.” He held his hands out to us as he gazed, teary-eyed, over each face. Then he turned around and shut his binder, tucked it under his arm, and walked outside without another word.

We marvel at the preacher shouting in the quad. He tells us that we are all going to hell. We surround him, and as we gather, his voice gets stronger. We are all thinking the same thing. We thought that we had hunted them all to extinction. The dining hall will have to change its menu. No one can get a signal. Then the power went out. Something is coming. And we will be helpless against it.

We talk about our families and laugh about all the dumb stuff they do. How much they annoy us. Someone asks when the last time we all went home was. “Christmas... I think,” someone answers. In fact, now that we think about it, none of us can rightly remember. We’re not even sure we can remember what their faces look like. We casually take out our phones and scroll through pictures, but they’re all of us at school. There are no pictures of our families. We want to go home. But we can’t. So we laugh instead.

In class a girl reads out loud from the textbook, “He fell into a dreamless sleep.” Then she stops and looks with some bewilderment at the coffee cup she has in her hand. We all look at the energy drinks and the coffee cups in each of our hands. We don’t remember buying them. We don’t remember how many we’ve had, no more than we remember the last breath we took or how many times we’ve blinked. How long has it been since we last slept? It’s been years. We all clearly remember our last dream though. We all dreamed of dandelion seeds.
“The first have arrived,” I told Jack as I opened the door to a horde of zombies. They looked at me with gnarled faces distorted to ghoulish proportions of decaying flesh, and I distributed candy among them to a friendly chorus of gratitude.

One of the zombies said that she liked my witch costume, which would have been sweet if I was wearing one. After shutting the door, I turned to look in the mirror, sorely examining my hunched figure, sunken cheeks, and weary eyes. A frizzled curtain of gray hair hung around my face, which was crumpled in a cascade of wrinkles. Who could blame her for the mistake?

Pain blared in my knees from the labor of standing, but it was drowned out by my enthusiasm for the evening. These days, it was rare for me to entertain visitors of any sort, but tonight would bring a parade of them straight to my doorstep.

“Do you think we have enough?” I asked Jack, peering down into my bucket of chocolates. But of course we did. I’d gone shopping far in advance, even before the store was doused in Halloween décor – plus, I’d stocked the cupboard with five extra bags, just to be safe.

I opened the door again, thinking I’d heard someone approach, but it was a false alarm. All this excitement was getting to my head. Who knew a holiday meant for children could be fun for someone so old? Relax, Margie, I told myself. Temper your expectations.

The last few nights, I’d dreamed of answering the door and finding my own grandkids standing there – Toby a bashful dragon and Laura a beaming princess. Their mom, Vanessa, stood behind them, and Jack stood behind me, and after a momentary joke in which we all pretended to be strangers, the kids bounded forward to wrap us in a festive explosion of laughter and tears.

The scene left a smile on my face long after I woke up, but of course, as I kept reminding myself, it was completely outlandish. Vanessa’s family lived across the country, and by now, Toby and Laura were too grown-up to be trick-or-treating anyway. I suppose in my head, they were frozen at the ages when I last saw them, which was years ago, when they were still pre-teens. That is, unless you counted the gathering over the summer – the funeral – which I didn’t.

When was the last time she’d called? Our daughter. It must have been several weeks by now. As usual, I’d assured her I was fine and flipped the question around: how was she? Her family was just so busy, what with Laura’s soccer games, Toby’s
band concerts, etc. I remembered those times – rushing home after a full day at work, driving kids from thing to thing, throwing meals together, battling the perpetual onslaught of dishes and laundry and clutter encroaching on the house, and starting all over again the next morning. Vanessa talked about that a lot, her busy-ness, in an apologetic tone, and I understood. The thing was, however, my days were quite the opposite – frustratingly empty. Some evenings, I sat by the phone thinking of them.

It wasn't that there weren't enjoyable things in my life. We had hobbies, Jack and I, though lately nothing I used to love was quite as enriching. I used to be so good at taking care of plants – tending to them obsessively, naming them like pets, accepting compliments on their beauty from guests – but over the past few months, my green thumb had gone brown. Speaking of which – I stared grimly at the shriveled plant on my windowsill, which had long surrendered itself to the sorrow of decay. I lived surrounded by dying beings I was unable to support, my house haunted by remnants of a better time.

Secretly, I hoped the next group wouldn't be another round of zombies. Something disturbed me about the imagery of bodily deterioration superimposed onto a group of young ones. Why walk around looking so decrepit when you could dress up like anything? I glanced again at my witch-like form in the mirror and turned to make a comment about this to Jack, but just then, the doorbell rang and I broke into a smile, jittering nervously as I opened the door.

No wretched zombies, thankfully. This time, it was a lone boy dressed as a crazy time traveler from the future, donning a wild white wig like a radiant halo. He cracked himself up by shouting, “What year is it?!” in place of the traditional “Trick or treat.” I laughed to hide the panic taking root in my eyes. He grabbed my candy distractedly, scarcely acknowledging me, and went sprinting down the sidewalk to the next person's house.

“Trick or treat.” I laughed to hide the panic taking root in my eyes. He grabbed my candy distractedly, scarcely acknowledging me, and went sprinting down the sidewalk to the next person's house.

When the door closed, my smile disappeared. I slowly made my way to the calendar by my desk, my mind silent with blank frustration.

2017. How could I forget something like that? Yet I'd searched my mind when he'd asked the question, and the answer was nowhere to be found.

“I think we're getting old, Jack,” I said, but the oft-repeated joke had lost its ironic charm as I grappled with a sickening wave of fear.

The doorbell rang again, startling me, but by the time I completed the arduous trek back from the calendar to the door, moving as fast as I could, the kids had already left.

I took a few deep breaths to regroup and calm my throbbing heart. This wasn't going quite how I'd hoped.

But what had I been hoping for, exactly? A visit from the grandkids was out of the question. I suppose I was looking for a return to my days as an elementary school nurse, back at... oh, whatever that school's name was. I used to love getting visits from the children to my office. I loved to make them smile by handing out lollipops, and I guess Halloween felt like that.

My legs cried out from all the standing, their steady ache surging into a spark of pain, jolting me out of my thoughts in a flurry of confusion. What was I just doing, anyway? Just now.

At that moment, the doorbell rang, which was odd... Rarely did I have visitors, much less at this hour of the evening. I hesitated, frowning, anxiety twisting in my stomach.

Cautiously, I squinted through the peephole and saw none other than the Grim Reaper standing on my doorstep. An ominous chill rippled through me as I eyed his dark form through the peephole's warped lens. Was I hallucinating? Was this a nightmare? Some kind of twisted prank? I gripped the doorknob with a shaking hand.

Suddenly, the reality of the situation came crashing down on me in a fury of disbelief and humiliation. It's Halloween, Margie – you dunce! I shook my head at myself harshly. What do you think you're doing here anyway, standing by the door, holding a bucket of chocolates?

After giving some candy to the harbinger of death, I proceeded to berate myself internally for my own stupidity. You've been gearing up for this all month! Only to forget that it's even happening? What in God's name is wrong with you?

I was shaken, so I turned to Jack to make it better, to make a self-deprecating joke or something, but he was nowhere to be seen.

A thick cloud of confusion descended around my head and would not let go. For a moment, I stood in deep concentration, though on what, I wasn't sure. I knew I was forgetting something and furiously tried to remember what it was, struggling in vain against an encroaching veil of blankness. The fingers in my mind stretched out, reaching for something, and nearly brushed some kind of truth but then slipped and sent me plummeting.

Language fled my mind and thinking ceased. I looked down at the abyss and saw a container filled with small wrapped objects dragging my hand down like an anchor. My fingers shriveled up like the limb leaf of a dead plant and the handle slipped away. I sank down to lie on the floor among the scattered pieces, staring at the ceiling but strangely unable to make sense of it, suddenly submerged in a silent, wordless terror.
An odd chime of two descending tones echoed periodically in my ears, and sometimes a knocking like a distant drum, but the sounds were just sounds, floating in space, disconnected from meaning and action. I was an astronaut flailing for a rope, tumbling into the depths of star-specked blackness – a panicked child outdoors with a balloon slipping from her grasp. Time swirled in murky patterns, and flashes of memory emerged erratically before fading back into the chaos. All familiarity drained away from my environment and I was lost, a nameless being in an unknown place, drowning in the unspeakable horror of losing oneself.

Then my mother’s voice: “Margaret.” And I see my brother’s yellow backpack bouncing as I follow him to the school bus.

Am I a child, still? Now? But no: I envision myself standing in a wedding dress. My parents are proud, and I am too. I remember that day – how long ago? But Jack isn’t by my side at the altar anymore; he falls apart, and the dress turns black, and my veil sprouts up into a witch’s hat. My skin withers into a brown and crumpled corpse, and the corpse starts shrinking until it is the size of a child, but the child takes off its mask – and it is not a zombie, but me, a little girl once again. I look up at my mother – who is also me? We’re visiting grandma, but when the door opens, I am grandmother too, and I see myself split into three: daughter, mother, grandmother, standing side-by-side and rushing forward to greet one another, as the neighborhood is a confounding labyrinth, populated appropriately with beasts lurking around every corner. I squint at each creature as they pass, hoping one of their blurry forms may coalesce into the image of a family member. My only direction is forward: ceaselessly, and with no thought of how to find my way back, I proceed into the maze’s winding depths, propelled by a singular determination.

A few moments pass. From where I lie on the ground, I can see a plant in the windowsill that looks in desperate need of watering, and I make a mental note to take care of that later.

Facts pop into place like shining beacons slashing through the dark: My name is Margie Dickinson. I am a school nurse. My husband is Jack. Vanessa is my daughter. She's in third grade. Tonight is Halloween – Vanessa must be out trick-or-treating with her friends.

Relief floods through me as the clarity of the situation intensifies. I blink as if waking up from a disorienting nightmare (what am I doing down here?) and then fall into a familiar pattern of thinking – worrying about Vanessa. Did she remember her coat? Will she be back before 9 p.m., like I asked?

Looking around, an awful realization jolts through me: Vanessa forgot her chocolates. Of course! They are scattered here, all over the floor. She needs them – isn’t that how it works on Halloween? Vanessa needs candy to hand out to each house she visits...My poor girl – probably getting embarrassed in front of all her friends. And she will have nothing to offer all the lonely widows waiting in their homes for children to visit.

"Jack, dear?” I call, but there is no answer.

Ah, yes – he must have gone along with her. I sigh in frustration. How could they be so forgetful? Why is it that I always have to keep track of everything around here? And why haven’t they realized their mistake by now and come home?

If my family isn’t coming to me, I’ll just have to go to them. With awkward difficulty, I sweep the chocolate pieces back into the bucket, lurch up to my feet, and stumble outside into the frigid October air, determined to find my missing daughter and husband.

Dead leaves clatter past my feet in clumsy rivulets, dragged along by the wind like cans bouncing and popping behind the car of a newlywed couple. An ominous chill permeates the air, like a presence – or a lack of one. I scan the streets for Jack’s tall figure wandering among the undead hordes of ghosts and skeletons.

What was Vanessa dressed as again? A dragon? Or a princess, perhaps? Shame washes over my cheeks. Some kind of mother I am, not remembering my own kid’s costume.


"I'm missing my family too," I say. "It's scary to be lost and alone, isn't it?"

A few streets down, isolated on the edge of a crowd, a little girl illuminated under a street lamp catches my eye. She is standing by herself, dressed as a butterfly with glowing yellow wings. Is it Vanessa? No, her hair is blonde. I approach and see under a street lamp catches my eye. She is standing by herself, dressed as a butterfly with glowing yellow wings. Is it Vanessa? No, her hair is blonde. I approach and see...
The girl nods. I take her hand, and we set out together in search of our loved ones.

We creep through the crowd with caution, a pair of lost souls immersed in a disorienting array of colorful costumes. I look down at the girl gripping my hand — a helpless butterfly adrift within a sea of monsters — and feel like her savior. Her caretaker. A dignified witch with protective powers. Yet the wind threatens to knock me over as we stagger down the moonlit street. Pain churns and reverberates through my exhausted body, which threatens to collapse at any moment.

A few houses down, the girl gasps and goes hurtling forward into the arms of a woman wearing a bright green mask of some character I don't recognize.

“Hey! It’s okay sweetie, no need to worry – I was right here!” she says, laughing sadly and hugging the child. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Then the woman looks up and sees me staring at them.

“Hey, Margie!” she says. “Look at you, out and about!”

She takes the mask off, but it makes no difference — her identity remains concealed to me.

“Have you seen my husband?” I ask, but she doesn’t seem to understand.

I repeat it, more urgently: “I’m looking for my husband, Jack.”

“Jack?” Something in her eyes shifts, and she starts looking worried and sad.

“Please!” I say, confused by her reaction. “I need help.”

The world blurs and my legs give out, but the woman rushes forward to catch me before my head hits the concrete. She starts saying urgent things and I can no longer make out the words, but I can tell she is going to try and help me, and that is enough.

As I rise back to my feet, leaning against the woman for support, I hand my bucket of chocolates to the little girl. She looks at me uncertainly, as if to ask, all of them? For me?

I nod, and my heart swells as a smile blooms across her tear-stained face.
all i write about is water
Bella Martinez

in my mind, always,
you are the river that roars
and the ocean that swallows, merciless,
ebbing and flowing at the edges of me
until i wear down like a smooth stone at sea.
you stay that impermanent edge,
that whisper of a horizon,
the promise of an end
that never comes.
i find myself as
a beach at low tide;
exposed, crawling with
hard, bony things,
seashells and clumps of algae
clogging my arteries.
through this ebbing and flowing,
i discover that i
ache
for solid land;
for my sandbars
overflow in your wake, then
shrink again, then
bulge back into place.
my heart cannot keep swelling
to contain you;
soon i will be all heart
and no girl.
PHANTOM
Cassie Alfaro
Photography | Corona del Mar, Orange County, CA

NIGHT IN AMSTERDAM
Faith Nowlin
Charcoal on paper
A sharp sweet inhale
Of morning light
And morning bread
But still the chair is empty.

A change of clothes
Sweat drenched from unhappy sleep
To soft, pale cotton shirt, my best,
But still the chair is empty.

The bed is made,
The window open, drinks prepared.
The room is lovely, open, clean,
But still the chair is empty.

The paint is wet, cold, thick, blue, red
*God damn it, God damn*
Slamming it to canvas, swirls straight from the palette
And still the chair is empty.
Tumultuous
Furrowed eyebrows that betray attraction and anguish in each ebb and flow.

Tumultuous
The joy and fearful pride of breaking your first horse.
Shattered is a better word.

Tumultuous
Checking off your to-do list in between attempts to keep your emotional sanity together.
Such mortal discoveries that pretend to be mutually exclusive.

Tumultuous
When sleep seems like a waste of time because it’s not dedicated to her.
Only to sleep like a baby a week later; waking only to write down the poem you dreamt.
Dedicated to her.

Tumultuous
Asking a boy of 19 to savor the pallet of human suffering in totality.
To then turn that breath of fire into lemon.
Eating away at the enamel.

Tumultuous
From the pinnacle of human belonging, to living the innate fear of all.
Specialized ostracization – a family matter.

Love will conquer all except for oneself.

Tumultuous
Rocketing 5000 times the speed of light through the hearts of man, stopping only to envelop oneself in the entirety of Existence’s facets.

Tumultuous
Working on the puzzle your roommate got you for Christmas. Hoping that each new piece will add the Clarity and collectivism seen on the table. Listening to shitty sad songs to equate what you feel inside.
Unable to cry because it would warp the puzzle pieces.
However a month later you did cry, when you finished the puzzle and all it showed was a mirror.
But you saw it coming.
You put the pieces down.
Tumultuous
A simple word that tries to explain how it feels to never want to see someone again, but because of your desire to appear mature and your love for tribe you instead stare into their open eyes and tell them that it will be alright. Flashing a smile that relinquishes a piece of your soul in the parting.

Tumultuous
The dichotomous unity of mind and heart. That makes you think what you feel is wrong. But that which you know cannot be separated from the dimension within. As a rain cloud drops the water that made it.
The shrink would call this one of our “bad days,”
But we’ve been having an awful lot of these bad days lately.
    So much so, that we start to wonder –
    Will the bad days ever end?

Another species got put on The List today –
    Yet another crack in our personality.
    They call it a “loss in biodiversity,”
    But for us it feels like something is chip-
        Chip-
        Chipping away at our sanity.

Too much time is spent crying alone in the bedroom;
The bathroom;
The closet.
    Our tears drip,
        Roll down our faces.
    Glaciers melting.

The doctors
And the scientists
Are saying The Problem is progressing –
    Not getting better on its own.
They prescribe us pills:
Pill –
After pill –
After pill.
    “Be patient,
        The process,
        The healing,
        Is slow.”
    They try to reassure us –
But there is fear in both of our eyes.
We both know there might be no “cure.”
We can try every little thing in the book –
    Old or new –
        Habits and techniques that will help at least at the small-scale;

Who knows if we’ll ever feel
    Normal
    Again.

So many people say there’s no such thing as “environmental degradation”;
    “Depression isn’t a real illness.”
    “It’s all a hoax.”
Do they choose to only see our good days?
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