

Luca Penne

Strangers in My Basement

Jennie calls me to the phone: "Your father." Dead for three years, he's confidential as ever. "There are strangers in your basement," he chuckles. Who pays for the phone line to the grave? I stumble downstairs and find a man and woman rooting through files of personal letters. The man is a credit counselor; the woman sells annuities. The damp basement air feels velvety, antique. Mold smell tweaks allergies I developed during puberty. As I open my mouth to shout these intruders into oblivion a sneeze erupts, then another so powerful it strips the flesh from their bones. Good enough, though I've a mess to clean up. Meanwhile the shades of regret I detected in my father's voice begin to haunt me. Looking about the basement I count the mildewed books and magazines, note the old computer, used exercise bike, unfinished heaps of manuscript. Much sadder than a pharaoh's tomb, this space embodies me so critically it's no wonder it attracted those late financial vultures. Jennie brings a dustpan and brush to sweep up the sorry remains. I hope my father never calls again. I don't like hearing his cheerful round voice unfazed by death, and worry that his knowledge of my primal life style remains unabashed by the dimming of his circuits. We box the skeletons to display at Halloween and bag the flesh-gobbets for the dogs. Jennie intends to finish painting the basement this fall. Fresh white walls will look brighter and shed less dust. Also they will better absorb my shadow when I sit here and brood alone.

Margie's Gone

Too cool for August. Hard rain slices the evening crosswise, exposing its entrails. I wonder where Margie and her white mouse have gone, her frank and cuddly passions probably long expended, her pet long expired. She taught me to tap-dance ten years ago when tap-dancers were in demand; but stage-shy, I never performed in public.

Still, we had hot times in the clammy parking garage under the mall. Pneumatic bliss, T.S. Eliot called it. Too bad he enjoyed so little of it himself. His moral deliberation spoiled everything his Anglican forefinger touched. Too bad he never touched Margie's engrossing and friendly organs.

Margie's gone and the rain's angry against the windows. Too clumsy for tap-dancing, I squeeze the book I'm reading so hard a few words pop off the page and disintegrate in stagnant air. Off to bed, where I dream of Margie sailing through marbled reddish skies, her elegance ageless, her hair the same neutral beige she earned at birth, her orange eyes brimming with tears of naïve sexual pleasure.

Margie loved her body as much as men did. It flowered in elementary school while the rest of us played marbles or jacks. It fit her so well and yet was unexceptional other than in comfort. I wake to utter silence. The house holds its breath while I realize I've never known anyone named Margie but wish that I had: her ease and warmth soothing to an ego grown callous with disuse.

Self-Perpetrating Baptism

Rain falls so decisively that I want to imitate its formal qualities, its bluff precision, its larger conception of form. Yet drowsing through *Necronomicon* and *Culte de Ghouls* and other tomes Marcy plucked from a shabby antique shop, I'm convinced that worlds hang in the balance, seen and unseen equally at odds with restless populations: demons, ghosts, Republicans, Communists, Charterists, plutocrats. The friction keeps the planet warm but erodes the atmosphere so that breathing becomes difficult some days, the summer light too steep to illuminate the workings of the bodies we still wish to love.

By "we" I mean demons and ghosts as well as my foolish neighbors whose squalling children overrun the forest: evil little people left unwashed like fabulous mushrooms. I mean everyone but Marcy, who loves and wishes to love no one, nothing but her four thuggish cats, who push us around with ease. Meanwhile the rain falls right through these ruminations, nailing me to the page. When I'm wrinkled enough I'll be a text, too.

Whoever wants to read me, complete with illustrations by R. Crumb, will discover me by thumbing through discarded phone books. Maybe someone will pause at my name long enough to invoke a rainstorm and renew the self-perpetrating baptism for which I'd like to be famous.

Secret

Give it up, your last dollar damp and discolored, your punk onion winking at crows preening their silky feathers, the udder utterly out of wisdom and milk. The dog comes back to you only after there's nothing left to chase. The wind secretes a blessing, oiling your face. Pine needles catch in your hair. If you wait any longer, you'll grow roots and your head will go to seed, flying every which way. If you wait any longer, some creature is bound to piss on your legs. Give it up, the ducks rowing on the pond, the long vowel curling over chilly water, the wings that badger you with a promise of flight, tomatoes fat and red, but rotting like friends, carrots riffing off rhymes as molecules collide in the hot tub as doves return to their condos, as the stew simmers in a pot as a white net drifts down from the sky...as your retirement fund retires, as the witch flies off on a witch hunt, as your wishes blow out the windows and your secret spills into silence, the bloody mouth waiting for you to kiss it.

Love Poem in Brown

What's in a brown? I ask, a little gold and green—as in your eyes are not really brown more like hazel but the color keeps shifting
like clouds on a not quite gloomy day.

“Why do you always wear the same color?” she responds, pushing her nail into my chest. “That brown is a wall.”

The sky turns brown. A brown bird settles on the sill. A chipmunk loses its stripe, munching an acorn. The phoebe frowns in her brown nest. And water drips a little rust into the brown sink, “That brown smells,” she says, “Why don't you take it off?”