

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 3

June 2006

The Piano Downstairs

James Pate

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Recommended Citation

Pate, James (2006) "The Piano Downstairs," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol6/iss1/3>

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Pate: The Piano Downstairs

THE PIANO DOWNSTAIRS

James Pate

There's the piano downstairs
not a small one either
the size of a rotting Buick with water inside and fish in the
windows
and the old woman who stays there with it
as if she's its keeper its prisoner
while most everything else around them is in stacks of leaning
columns
newspapers scratched up by cat claws and boxes crammed
with armies of broken figurines illegible photographs
is playing that piano as if she's never heard a song before
just one note and a long break and another
until the passing train behind our building
speeds by with its pulse of yellow windows
beating against the evening air
and as the silence after the train settles
across the streetlights the snow-caked courtyards
another note and then
a long stretch of nothing
again

The piano is enormous
I've seen it in the downstairs windows as I go along searching
for someplace cheap
where the waiters have a reclusive kind of despair
chiseled in their brows the cooks cough from the kitchen like
diseased dragons
where fish steams up from clay bowls
the breath of garlic and salt
from the display of meat and bone
the other fish codes of violet floating in the windows
in their coma of water

the glass pane a slow blink between light and dark
I've seen that piano so many nights they thaw into one
and I've seen her in that mood she gets into around it
her on the bench in a parka even in the hothouse of July
striking one note
and then another
leading to no place
you'd ever want to think about yourself
where one tree stands and there are no birds around in the
wind
but you can't help but speculate
she's almost there
just one more note
and there