The Borrowed World
POEMS BY
Emily Leithauser

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for Richie, Maggie, and Stella
Acknowledgments

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_Blackbird:_ “Shadow”

_Harvard Divinity Bulletin:_ “Bonsai”

_Iron Horse Literary Review:_ “And, Again, Walking with You” and “Encounter in East Coker”

_Measure:_ “Pagoda Cinema”

_New Ohio Review:_ “Haiku for a Divorce” and “Baltimore on Fire”

_The Raintown Review:_ “Alzheimer’s” and “Chest of Dolls”

_Sewanee Theological Review:_ “The Leopard”

_South Loop Review:_ “Hotel Room in Phoenix”

_Southwest Review:_ “Ocmulgee Burial Grounds”

_Unsplendid:_ “Boston Arboretum,” “Elms,” “The Drive,” “Hakafot,” and “The Guesthouse”
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A remarkable book by any measure, Emily Leithauser’s *The Borrowed World* is even more remarkable in light of the fact that it is the author’s first book. Where many poets’ first collections tend to be medleys of styles and subjects drawn from admired older poets, Leithauser’s is remarkably unified in content and written in a carefully cultivated style. Where many first books are showy in manner and extravagant of metaphor, hers is characterized throughout by quiet authority and precise description. Apt as it is in thematic terms, her book’s title has an unintended ironic dimension, in that the world she creates in *The Borrowed World* is entirely her own.

Every poem provides evidence of Leithauser’s extraordinary technical skill, from the subtle but wrenching indirectness of “Haiku for a Divorce” to the smooth pentameters and seemingly effortless rhymes of “Trip to Alcatraz” to the idiosyncratically structured, masterfully executed sonnet “The Leopard.” At times her technical fluency is all the more extraordinary for its unobtrusiveness, as in “My Mother’s Riddle.” The poem appears to be written in loose blank verse couplets, but closer examination shows that the end words of each pair of lines are anagrams of one another—“garden/danger,” “lives/veils,” and so on. Just as English-language poets have done for centuries, she has used a self-imposed formal challenge to spur herself to a memorable result.

An air of sadness permeates the volume:
the linen curtains recall your voice tonight,
recall the wordless steadiness of rain
some months ago, when I first learned how sorrow
saturates objects in a room.
(“Late Night Conversation”)

The title itself sets the keynote for the book’s emphasis on fragility,
impermanence, and loss, and the titles of its three sections—“The
Guesthouse,” “Privacy,” and “Trespass”—underscore its recurring
feelings of isolation, of not belonging, of never feeling completely at
home. Powerful emotions are everywhere in these poems, but they
are frequently portrayed as disruptive, better indulged in fantasy
than acted upon, as in “Out of the Grotto”:

Inside, a deep-set pool, silvered
with fish, where I can swim, and kick for air
and only almost drown,

or “The Undertow,” in which “[t]he undertow beguiles” and

I tell you that I’ll steer us through,
but something pulls and I release

your palm from mine, letting the current
comb and choke your little ribs

for half a second. Then I decide
to tug you up and lead us home.

or “Instinct,” in which the speaker decides to put a wounded animal
out of its misery, but is then unable to find it again, and concludes:

I place the rock back in my purse.
It’s for the best—
this instinct teased,
and put to rest.
Emotional volatility threatens the stability of all relationships, whether the speaker’s own love affairs or the decades-long marriage of her parents. Near the end of the book, in “Encounter in East Coker,” she alludes to “the misguided search// for rapture at all costs. Or is it arrogance?/ I loved someone. Now I leave things up to chance.” The most successful—and, in its way, most satisfying—relationship is one that is unconsummated:

and we know we will never marry,
never turn from each other;

no accidents of lust or lustlessness
will occur, and we can always live

on the edge of something we cannot ruin,
and what a tease that is, what a privilege:

I am yours because I am never yours,
and you are mine because you cannot wander—

or not wander—and the body and its vagaries
are incidents and not the story.

(“And, Again, Walking with You”)

Very near the end of the book, the poem “The Cut” alludes to “the lust/ unique to memory” and concludes with the assertion that “if healing is a gradual disappearance,/ then I don’t want to heal from you.” Here the speaker expresses a view that has been gradually emerging from the losses and instabilities that run through the collection: nurturing our memories, even—if not especially—the painful ones, is our way of holding on to what has shaped us, our way of holding on to ourselves. Earlier, in “Chest of Dolls,” she looks through the wooden chest containing the dolls that she and her older sister had played with, recalling how “[f]or years their little ecstasies/ were more authentic than our own” and asking
herself “when did their lips/ stop moving, the staples in their
joints/ appear?” Remembering when her sister had outgrown the
dolls, she ends the poem with lines that not only acknowledge her
sister’s sensitivity but also point to lessons learned about making
one’s way through the world:

I understood

you’d keep pretending out of love;
for me, for them, you’d make them live

as long as, humanly, you could.

I have said that The Borrowed World is a sad book, but reading it is
far from a sad experience; it is instead a satisfying, even exhilarating
one. It inspires the joy that one always feels when a skilled artist
gives us a memorable portrayal of the reality we inhabit, the joy
inspired by even such grim works as King Lear and Waiting for
Godot because they make us say, Yes, this is how it is to be as we
are and to make our way in this world. In “Haiku for Insomnia,”
the speaker recalls the sleepless nights of her childhood when her
father would share with her a volume of Hiroshige prints. As he
closed the book, he would tease her interest by saying “Tomorrow
night’s will amaze you.” The poem concludes:

I’m grateful
now you taught me that suspense:
art that waits for you.

I have read The Borrowed World several times, and each time I find
more in it to be delighted and touched by. Emily Leithauser’s art
waits for you, and I am sure that you will be as pleased and moved
by it as I have been.

—Michael Palma
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The Borrowed World
I. The Guesthouse
The Drive

Its crooked sign is a darker patch of night.
The road’s so black between the fringe of pines
it could almost be your street. And I could almost be making my way to you, the white brush
of high beams brightly fogging names I know, catching a candle, a gesture, a flicker, a wink
in a passing window, a piece of streetlight in the cobwebbed gap between two branches.

I don’t believe, or mostly don’t, but when I pass the stubbled cornfield, frozen gray,
an hour before Christmas, the needle shaking on the speedometer in the corner of my sight,
I consider saying a prayer, not for you, not Not for you, for nothing abstract and nothing
I know, like the slight notch in the road, this or that tree, but, unthinking, for snow.
The Guesthouse

We hold our breath in a haze of sulfur, watching the grass and leaves slip down our legs, down the drain. I touch you, sensing the heat is going,

and swallow soap behind your ear, as I kiss the places your beard is growing back, then I bury my face in your neck, your collarbone. You wash my shoulders; I touch the dent between your ribs, an upturned spoon, too small to capture the water. It’s not getting colder, I want to tell you,

as shampoo coils around your ankles, under your arches, between your toes like the vines of Virginia creeper outside. And now, wrapped in a towel,

I watch the sun set in a wine bottle, tipped over on the balcony, and then the stars. Your hair is still damp; I lay you down,

trying to meet your eyes. I should have known, that night, our hips knocking softly together, my mouth on your shoulder, to meet your eyes for longer. We’re in a wooden bed, carved for guests, in someone else’s house, in sheets that smell like the sawdust and wild lilies outside.
I should have made the scraps of light, shining
from the main house into our room,
moving with our movements, into a memory.
Shadow

As the plane descends, its shadow runs ahead, widens, spreading like a bruise,

one wing slanted toward the lit and lettered gates below, and I remember

the hanging circles of a hawk above the rocks, a vole or squirrel caught

in talons, beating the air. The creature doesn’t see the massive wingspan cast

its image below: a stingray coasting slowly, closely, over uneven ground.

The prey cannot see its shadow held inside the hawk’s, or know its captor

as a deepening of water, a darkening of rocks, or an eclipse

that wanders; cannot fear the far-off nest—but only senses rushing air,

only knows the angled fall.
Undertow

They warned against the coming surf:
abandoned towels fringed in foam,
cabals of wind-warped parasols
tipping in the growing tide.

The undertow beguiles. We’re hand
in hand, swimming through seaweed and sand.

I tell you that I’ll steer us through,
but something pulls and I release
your palm from mine, letting the current
comb and choke your little ribs
for half a second. Then I decide
to tug you up and lead us home.
Instinct

Hunched, obsidian-eyed, and inches from the curb—one paw gone, the other tight as a clasp—
the animal,
unblinking, breathes

in little rasps. Why isn’t he shaking,
crawling beneath settled leaves,
or moving toward
the gutter, where
it’s quiet under

the sidewalk’s shadow? Cars keep missing
him. You tell me a rock will do.
A skull that small
will crack. Nothing ironic in

your tone, or in the five-pound block of cement I pretend is
a stone. To let
him live seems coldly primitive.