

Anything the Landlord Touches

Also by Emma Lew:

The Wild Reply

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Anything the Landlord Touches

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*To the memory of John Anderson
and for Phil, Rosie, Tom and Ian.*

Marshes

They speak of stridency and of nothingness
and wrap up their shoulders in grey light.
I want to walk again in this miry place.
I want the fever and fret beneath, though
it's something I forget, like pain.

Sky a tent immaculately pitched and noon's
ghosts are creeping across paddocks.
Low, lame winds grow in the rushes –
the smoky pool mad in its sleep. I have
found earth still adhering. I wait for storms
to crack the glamour open.

I don't know the language of this country.
It begins in mists, sombre wild bees.
Moss sophistry while I lie listening. Dark
snake rumours grave in my ear.

Butterflies edged with wonder. Sly harrier,
cool stealing the day. A wraith's day –
slow and gentle and ravaged. This whole
calm world's sweet venom. My puritan
soul half in a sea, clawing deep in the peace
of mud.

The Peaks

We awoke and slipped out of the hut the gods had given us.
We crossed the river and fought and dropped and lifted again,
standing in our stirrups to coax the mist apart,
and the mountains leapt like lords of the sunbaked ledge.

I wonder, did the agile children love their gentler slopes,
and dawn making the valley a wet tomb?
Dingoes came and took and dangled among the dark leaves.
Black shadow bore the perfume of the peaks.

We were pulling ourselves up over the wind,
with thrilling smoothness to the summits that drop so straight.
The trees seemed always to be in our way,
falling swift and deep, foaming with us.

It is a strange thing when an astronomer tells us that the moon
is slowing down,
for by sunset our stove lay in undreamed-of bits,
and the rations rolled in bundles on our heads,
so soft and riding such slow work.

Becoming tough, growing beautifully,
we breathed the forest air and heard the sound of streams.
We ran down the long, long ridge unstrapping all that
remained of glaciers.
Stars came out and we rolled in their imaginary throng.

We were in that austere land of canyons.
We had looked over the secretive edges and found we could
go down.
The moon was bearable in the sadness of our world,

and sometimes pathways for our horses' hooves would fit into
a baby's hand.

I wonder if love can be born so close to the hills.
We slivered our noses to drink it dry.
Mountains somehow seem a concrete song.
Surely it must be the warm heaviness of the sun.

Falconer's Dawn

What is the motive of light?
Birds rise like night from the soil,
beautiful wing-made murmur fading,
the intake of breath
so slight and slurred.

From my maps
the lake is nameless.
The moon seems too heavy,
stumbling in cloud.
Birds have moved into my arms
and are flourishing.
The glistening, brittle
world is mine.

Birds fly as the threnody pours.
Let them come twice
past my outstretched hand.
Let them tangle and list
and submerge
as day throws down
its berries and pearl.

The Tale of Dark Louise

Must there always be some stray, hungry suitor?
I strive and I struggle, I can't keep the wolf.
On the day foretold by the travelling scholar,
I take my hank of flax and ride out.
The herring in the sea fall into a trance.
I put on the dress that brought me this shame.
Fire is never out of my chamber,
and the convent's interdiction falls between.
I'm not beautiful, but my eyes are drunk with music.
I will write whatever I want on your soul.
The vine is heavy again with the sweetest grapes,
and the ale flows, and the cellar drowns.

Perhaps the Travellers

Not the most remarkable things but the things
nobody has ever seen. We went ashore on barges
in the mid-morning or flopped in the streets
of perfectly ordinary villages. June, almost dawn,
after the valley. We spoke in French, of course.
I did not forget to limp; and when it was cold
in my room I wrote there, the visible passages
letting down the grey light, so that when
he asked whether I was in pain, I said, 'No';
and sometimes, when I confessed, and I said
that I had nothing to confess, my conscience
was arrows. This is the beauty of effacement.
It happened so often, and for so long, that I became
someone else – a promise akin to breathing,
secreting myself in other people's ruined lives,
as dusk came poor across the river, shimmering
over the ancient houses, like the forms
of precious vessels, having no wound to feign.

The Rider

He woke and rose before any colour
And moved shadow to reassure himself.
This is a desert, no one can save it.
Can you walk noiselessly on the outer edge,
Shake fire from the rocky trails?
He turned and there were eyes in the sage
And juniper.

Without word or whip or spur,
To the westward the plateau.
Downwards to a dark stampede,
As the sun peeled from a cliff.
The wind thereafter hung at his heels,
While the mescal flowered and faded
And died, keeping its secret.

He had broken from the aspen:
He would have to go under stars,
Pull the coat up over him like sand,
Fling chance back where the graves blew bare.
Dream put water to his lips,
And then he seemed to rise in his saddle.

Blue Campaign

Flight and retreat and the male sky
crying above me as I walk down
bitter in the head.

In the sonnets they pray for rain
with beautiful fists,
with beautiful thirst.

Her Embroideries

He was the shadow of the deep bed.
He was very beautiful and, as always,
there was something perfect,
as though I were his cousin.
On the map he had shown me
a forest, but there was no such forest,
hence the lies, the discomfiture,
and the rest – the manor, steeped
in the odours of freshly ploughed
earth; shops rife with Trieste dialect.
And his messages ended with vows
like, 'Believe me, I am always
at your side.' It is impossible
to relate what or how he played,
the sudden modulations that
I could not grasp. I felt at such times
that only my body was riding,
yet I said the loveliest things.
He awoke with the violence
of the sensation, so that I was forced
to fasten with pins. His sisters again
donned their sombre mourning.
Even the sea birds lost their way.
And then the moon rose and shed
a different light. Listen – how he
dreams, how he weeps!

Rose Constructions

Sometimes my teacher
changes her conduct strangely,
pressing her heart
like dead leaves.
She sleeps in the chapel,
which is haunted.
Already the shadows
write in her diary.

She burns the letters
silently, reverently.
Like a bride,
she pushes away her plate.
She reads to me
like a will-o'-the-wisp,
and I ask her
if there are bitter drops
in everyone's cup.

She says, 'I respond
to the ploughing
of the fields,
whereas a man
grows fainter by a love.'
All the things
we talk about
I sew into the seams.
She opens the window
and lets in the dark flowers.

Nettle Song

Why glimmer? Seize fire!
What has sunk? The sweet hour,
all havens, the corners –
gloom's in the folds!

The rose has broken,
I am in fever.
Lead me to hyacinths,
let me run to seed.

What's in your heart?
Glaciers, glaciers,
a strange, cruel starvation,
the smallest storm.

What are your riches?
Puddles and thistles,
Burst fruit, such ashes,
wild as I wish.