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The Pets

Bragi Olafsson
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In *The Pets* (Open Letter Books/University of Nebraska Press, 978-1-934824-01-6), Icelandic writer Bragi Ólafsson gives us Emil Halldorsson, who experiences a similar dislocation in a more contemporary setting and without the drastic global consequences.

Soon after returning from London to his home in Reykjavik, Havard Knuttson, with whom Emil spent an ill-fated month house-sitting in London five years ago and hasn't heard from since, is knocking at his door.

So reluctant is Emil to confront the man who proved himself a bad friend that he hides under his own bed, hoping Havard will assume he isn't home to answer the door. Instead, Havard enters by the window and inserts himself into Emil's life for the rest of the evening, affecting his relationships with friends, girlfriends, his mother, his music. People come, they stay, they go, and Emil, stuck under the bed, feels his own grasp on his identity and place in the world slip further and further afield.

How do we know we are who we think we are? Though tickled by doubtful feelings of dislocation even before he dives under the bed, Emil seems to live solidly in the world, but his sense of remove grows the longer he stays among the dust bunnies.

Ólafsson treats his characters with a light hand and a steady cadence. There's no swooning prose for readers to confuse with Emil's keenly felt, growing sense of displacement. Placing the main character under the bed turns out to be an ingenious way of allowing peeks into the private moments of friends and enemies; Emil, for better or for worse, has a view of the bathroom and not everyone sees the point in closing the door. He can only watch, listen, and wait for release. He is powerless.

We are all worlds unto ourselves; Emil, if he ever manages to extract himself, will never be the same. (August 18, 2009)

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