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Book Review on Lance Larsen's *In All Their Animal Brilliance*

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When you read this book (because I'm assuming at this point you will; you've gotten past the title, know it's a book of poetry, and are still reading, after all), you will peek into spheres both cosmic and embarrassingly intimate. Larsen has obsessions that will probably possess you as well for a time: for example, he fixates on the idea of translation, taking it beyond linguistic conversion to apply to people, bodies that, together with nouns, "quiver to be translated." He has a passion for strange animals and their remains, which feels at once like strange morbidity and sympathy. He casually and repeatedly applies words that you probably didn't know existed or could be used the way he uses them (who knew that "to gentle" was a verb?); words that will stick as awkward recruits to
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your vocabulary, refusing to be forgotten by sheer virtue of their odd grace. "Planaria," for example, will remain with you, perhaps haunting your dreams. His explorations with words do not, however, necessarily make him a meta-poet, and thus he frees himself of the vice that so many poets fall into: writing poetry about poetry which only poets will read, relate to, or care about. His work feels genuinely inclusive and universally approachable—beautiful enough that even those who don’t normally seek out poetry would find themselves drawn back for more.

Needless to say, I think this is a great book. From the first taloned talisman to the final haunting vineyard, he draws parallels between beautifully macabre images and vast mythologies, between
the mundane and the supernal. He pulls aside a curtain to a familiar yet alien space and, with a single word or with an entire poem, makes connections that shouldn’t make sense yet uncannily do and are all the more curious and charming for it. He applies a beautiful art of description, using unusual or unfit words and shifting them to fit until we readers begin to think using his language and logic.

He’s also not afraid to take us further into his personal life than might be comfortable for either party, and we get from this a sense of poetic honesty—that nothing is ignored and nothing is safe, that everything can be viewed with a poetic eye. This helps the reader take the oddities he introduces on faith and believe in the world he presents us, as well as accept his new viewpoints into the mundane.

In order to be completely honest, however, I must admit that there are some points at which his poeticism prods the edges of being vague or indecipherable. Some symbols or allusions are hard to understand, if there is even a deeper meaning to understand. These are poems that take some work and don’t yield all their secrets up immediately. This doesn’t have to be bad, though, and if you are willing to put in the effort to squeeze
more out of them, those secrets lie waiting. And there's enough that's readily comprehensible and compelling to be quite enjoyable and even entice you on to deeper readings.

Finally, they are simply beautiful poems. His language looks and sounds good, rolling along the page and down your tongue. His subjects are pleasantly varied, and he addresses several difficult areas with remarkable skill, managing to keep his religious poetry, for example, powerful but not trite. I felt that his poems earned the emotions they evoked. I was inspired, and while reading his poetry I felt the urge to resume the attempt to write poetry of my own. I believe this book will have a similarly inspiring or pleasing effect on any reader and thoroughly recommend it.