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In All Their Animal Brilliance. by Lance Larsen

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Lance Larsen. *In All Their Animal Brilliance.*
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Reviewed by Casualene Meyer

How can I respond to Lance Larsen's *In All Their Animal Brilliance*? I could say that I am not equal to the task of adequately analyzing or appreciating this collection of poems, but therein lies the responsibility to respond: Should I shrink from reviewing poems Larsen did not shrink from writing? Larsen takes on something bigger than himself, and he presents the telestial world of mortality with brilliant humility.

In some ways it is ironic that the word that signifies human existence on the earth, *mortality*, has the Latin root *mort*, or death. To be alive on earth means to be subject to death. As we live, we see death all about us. Surviving organisms depend on the death of other organisms for them to live. Carnivorous animals are an obvious example of this; even a vegetarian human who pulls a carrot out of the ground to eat has stayed alive through the death of another organism.

In a life-death reading of Larsen's collection, the animal in "animal brilliance" is significant in that animals remind us of our mortal condition on almost a daily basis. Not only do many humans depend on the death of animals for food and clothing, but roadkill, swatted flies, belly-up goldfish, hatchlings fallen from the nest, poisoned fire ant mounds, and countless other organisms that are regularly found dead remind us that life can be easily cut off. There is the other face of mortality—reproduction. One reason we coexist with so many dead and dying animals is that animals are so fecund. Cattle are bred and talked about in terms of herds, dogs and cats have multiple litters, bees and mosquitoes have high populations, and fruit flies multiply quickly. Pondering on the reproduction and death of animals enriches a vision of mortality and the telestial world in which humans and other organisms reproduce, live, and die in such interlocking ways. This vision is the substance of Larsen's *In All Their Animal Brilliance*.

The life-death theme, including human and animal fecundity and death, corporeality, the sensuous body, and desire for intimacy is

ubiquitous in Larsen's collection. If readers wish, they can read thematically, tallying and analyzing the numerous instances of these themes in the poems. Truly, a study of Larsen's book would be larger than the book itself. For this review, let us look at a few representative poems that blend bodies, animals, and death in reflection of the telestial world.

Consider first a tally in "Landscape, with Hungry Gulls." This poem is a beach panorama in which a "pair of teenage girls in matching swim suits" (body awareness) bury their brother in the sand (death), and the speaker's son (human reproduction) hunts up horse bones (animal death) and catches damsel fly larvae (animal reproduction). The speaker, keenly aware of life and death, seems to be trying to come to terms with his own being and that of those around him:

> If I said *burial*, if I said *a lovely morning*
> *to prepare the body*, who would I startle?
> Not this pair of teenage girls in matching swim suits
> making a mound of their brother.
> And not the boy himself, laid out like a cadaver
> on rye, who volunteered for interment. (16)

Death continues in an animal variation with the horse bones and seagulls that appear near the sand-buried boy "to peck at his heart." The speaker concludes by meditating on the horse bones:

> And this horse my son is decorating the moat with,
> broken into pieces so various and eloquent—
> where are its pastures, does it have enough to eat? (17)

This poem's blend of life, death, and animals does not draw explicit conclusions about the nature of mortality; rather, it presents the elements and angst of living in a telestial world.

"Santiago Commute" is another panoramic poem, this time from the perspective of an exchange student who rides the bus in Chile. Here is the animal, "*Diablo*, the three-legged nanny," and the dead animals: "each dead dog [who] grew wiser with decay" and "At the slaughterhouse, trotters [who] went in whole / and came out viscera tossed into a pickup." Here also are the dying humans, "At *El Estado National* . . . dissidents / once lay down to be shot," and humans who do glorious things with their bodies, "soccer gods / . . . Part Pelé, part Orpheus." Here are fertile humans, "Teenage girls bibbed / in blue uniforms giggling as they squeezed past." Here also is the complex blended image of new life in peril protected by a dead animal, "A charm dipped in pigeon blood pinned / to a baby's bib." Returning to himself, the speaker, aware of his physical being in an ambiguous existence, confesses:

I chewed my shirt sleeve.
Miracles were everyday. Not the body
I got on the bus with, but the sacred
dirty air and tin saints that dreamed me as I stepped off. (64–65)

Once again, the mortal elements are presented in their animal brilliance, and the conclusions are for the reader to draw.

"Planaria" functions somewhat differently. In this narrative poem, two brothers are on a night expedition to catch planaria, or "*turbellarian flatworms moving / by means of cilia*" with "two pounds of pig liver" on a "rusty lure." This time it is a pig that is dead, and the planaria, the teeming, lower-order animals unsettle the speaker—and probably readers—of the poem. The planaria "cannot see light. They grow fat on water / and blood . . . Cut them / just right, and they will grow an extra head." The speaker calls the mass of planaria a "squirming song" in a coffee can and ends the poem with a picture of his brother and him sharing warmth by zipping their sleeping bags together and "counting / constellations we could point to but not name."

All night, the smell of fire kept oblivion
close. All night, to the left of our heads,
that coffee can—rock securing
its lid—failing to contain the word *planaria*. (33)

The speaker of the poem is cold. Is it simply a cold night, or is it the speaker chilled by the uncontainable thought of raw animal life, raw existence that is persistent and resilient, growing new heads when cut, and feeding blindly on the death and life of other beings? If the latter is true, "Planaria" shows a human facing the animality of life and death and the darkness of a telestial world by drawing his own body nearer to another human body for warmth.

In All Their Animal Brilliance sees a fallen world that is very much a matter of life and death, reproduction and decay, bodies living and bodies dying, the animal world bringing the human world into focus.

Larsen's collection is solid not only for its content, but also for its delivery. Larsen's collection has insight, wit, humor, *tours-de-force* form poems, pure beauty, and brilliance. I will highlight one poem as an example of this beauty and brilliance. "This World, Not the Next," a poem about Adam and Eve and their mortal bodies in a fallen world, is my favorite of the collection. The poem begins:

True, God dreamed our first parents out
of a chaos of firmament and longing.
And true, he pled with them to return
to a savory Forever of his making.

But it was this world, with its tides and machinery
of sweet decay, they learned to love.

The poem ends:

And God blessed
Their bounty to be infinite, but left them
ten crooked fingers to count with.
And buried His echo inside their bodies,
a delicious lapping that answered *yes* and *yes*
to a question neither could recall. (5)

In All Their Animal Brilliance is intelligent but not at all haughty. The poet can certainly find words to take on the mortal experience, and yet can make fun of his old sports coat or his own moustache; who confesses having thrown up on his prom suit; who calls himself a dolt; who, as an exchange student, is anything but an ugly American; and who lauds his wife's talents and respects her and their relationship.

The strongest example of Larsen's humility is the lack of reduction and easy conclusions in the poetry. If the poems are inspired re-creations of a fallen world, they also avoid making explicit commentaries on the nature of that world. While I wish the poems had more memorable lines for me to add to my poetic emergency kit, I respect them for what they give me: a large impression from which I must draw my own conclusions. Such a strategy of show-don't-tell is a humble trusting of the reader to read and think.

In All Their Animal Brilliance requires its readers to believe in its poetry from the outset. Readers who come to the book ready to accept it will enjoy it. My only concern is whether readers will give this book the pondering it requires. Nobel Prize laureate Czeslaw Milosz contends that "elemental humanity's openness to science and art is only potential, and much time will pass before it becomes a fact everywhere. A poet, however, presupposes the existence of an ideal reader, and the poetic act both anticipates the future and speeds its coming."[1] Larsen's collection, with its humbly brilliant blends of life, death, and animality, believes in its readers.

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1. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 109.