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Alex Lemon, Mark Doty (Introduction)

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Lyrical and explosive, this debut book of poetry explores Alex Lemon's experiences as a brain surgery patient. Mosquito blends autobiography and poetry, bearing witness to a young man's journey through serious illness and his emergence into a world where eroticism, hope, and wisdom allow him to see life in a wholly new way. Mosquito is a resilient meditation that is as much Zen as it is explosive, as clinical as it is philosophical and lyrical.

Mosquito Details

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Valerie says

I enjoyed Alex Lemon's Mosquito: Poems. His book deals a lot with illness, whether it is his own or his grandfather's. Even the love poems in this book have a bit of sickness in them. The poems feel like they are more alive in a way because the speaker in the poems doesn't take life for granted.

I think this book is something everyone can relate to because we all have or will have to deal with serious illness. It is authentic in the way it portrays a life trying to be normal and day to day while having something scary and serious always looming.

I don't mind that Lemon doesn't spell everything out in his poems. He leads the reader through the poetry with beautiful wordplay and lovely phrases that almost reveal what is going on.

My favorites from the book:

MRI

Ashtray

Portrait My Mother Painted from My Mugshot

Kinematics (the second poem after the interview, which is an interesting interview, btw)

Jennifer says

Many of the poems seemed immature to me. My feeling about this collection is very lukewarm.

Stephanie says

When it was good it was great but when it was bad it was awful. If u ever read this book. I say only read part 3.

Tricia says

it's like being swarmed with the prettiest bees, and for a second being able to notice how lovely they are, their glass beads and needles, and million wings thrumming, and the smell of all that pollen in all their knee pockets, and all their spit, and all of that. then it's like feeling them sting you a million times. and it's worth it "&the sparks".

Russel says

Blitz me anytime.

Gary McDowell says

Incredible book. I'm super thankful to Adam Clay for turning me on to Lemon's work.

A mixture of William Matthews, Larry Levis, and, more contemporarily, Nick Flynn, Lemon's book offers brilliant lyrics and touching narratives. His poems are never flat, never predictable, never cliche, and never less than astonishing.

I can't recommend this book enough. If you like raw, honest, brilliantly nuanced poetry, Lemon's work is for you.

I love the whole book, but section 3 was particularly mind-blowing. I left the book in the car (yes, it's that good... it's been my ride-along book for the past week... I kept re-reading poems at stoplights, finding new treasures in parking lots, on the shore while fishing, etc), so I can't name titles of stand-out poems. Suffice it to say that you could name most any poem and you'd be sure enough to find something to praise.

Milkweed Editions is putting out a new collection next year and a memoir is forthcoming from Lemon, so this young writer looks to be around for good. Thank God for that.

Craig says

(read as a 3.5)

I was told by several friends that I should read this book since I am a fan of Nick Flynn and Larry Levis... I have to say that I understand why it was recommended to me. At the same time, it didn't hit me as hard as either of these other authors.

I constantly found lines that hammered themselves into the skin - lines that pierced you with their intensity. There were couplets, stanzas, even tiny single lines in this collection that packed more punch than other entire books that I have read.

I guess my only complaint - and what keeps it from climbing into the 4 and 5 review area - is that few whole poems grabbed me like that and refused to let go. Some did (DNA and Plum, easily being my two favorites), but otherwise, I found myself liking lines more than the whole of any specific poem.

Amelia Stanton says

Alex Lemon's Mosquito both entrances and shocks the reader. This collection is an introduction to his poetic

style, which is founded in personal experience. As a college athlete, Lemon suffered multiple strokes and endured invasive neurosurgery. These poems chronicle his reconstructive journey, a painful process of repair, growth, and renewal. Lemon channels his utter inability to speak about or process the agony he has endured, and the physicality of poetry seems to conquer his speechlessness. This collection is a testament to the power of poetry to articulate that which is to painful and impossible to say. Thus the written word allows the individual to feel when lost.

Todd says

In her poem “Poetry,” Marianne Moore claims that until poets “can be ‘literalists of the imagination’” we won’t have actually achieved the proverbial “it” of poetry. And though contemporary poetry obviously isn’t a direct response to Moore’s suggestion, within the scope of poetry written in the past fifty years there’s an implication of a response, a need to tighten narrative while expanding its scope, and in doing so bringing to life the words we cherish on our pages. Certainly the number of schools of poetry, MFA programs and literary magazines saturating the poetry world mean that either no one’s actually gotten “it,” or there are as many “its” as there are writers. Because of this, it is rare to come across a book of poems that negotiates numerous styles, and in doing so speaks to writers of almost every kind.

Alex Lemon’s book *Mosquito* does just that. With its popping language, lucid narrative and striking imagery, Lemon seems to have greedily plundered the entire scope of contemporary poetry for what may be one of the most solid book debuts in years. What’s more, it’s not just the craft of his poetic artifice that is so striking, but that it comes from the perspective of a brain surgery survivor. Lemon’s turned his encounter with death and recovery into a world of pain and rediscovery, a reclamation of life through the word that re-informs our own sense of the world.

Lemon’s language has all the acuity of a lyrical, imagistic poet in its ability to depict a scene, but possesses all the in your face energy of a performance poet—or, if that’s not your cup of tea, it is at least a little reminiscent of the matrices of rhyme, assonation, alliteration and register that Sylvia Plath or John Berryman perfected. And by employing these sonorous peaks and troughs, Lemon maps out the emotions of his poems. In the poem “Last Body,” Lemon uses the stuttering “p” and “b” in the introductory plea of the poem: “Please me when I say take it / For a ride—...Let me explain— / A prairie puzzled apart by lightning / For example...” From there, the register leaps into the panicky, long “i” sound, peppered with more aggressive “d” and “t” consonants, and the poem ends with a haunting couplet: “The half-chewed chick bone is a truth / That little victim is suffer everything & joy,” a move that juxtaposes the mellowed, lower-register language with a narration that has broken down (or can no longer grasp) literal meaning.

Paralleling the brain’s interaction with the body, Lemon conjures up—literally and figuratively—images of lightening that fire like neuron synapses through the bodies of his poems. The book’s first image of a “friend, beautiful face / in a car fire” launches the reader into Lemon’s world; one that initially seems familiar to us, only to later have that familiarity taken away. This dialogue of recognition and loss fleshes out Lemon’s thesis of pain, and is the one element of *Mosquito* to which Lemon constantly returns. The poem “The Portrait My Mother Painted from My Mug Shot” is rife with examples:

It’s old canvas—rotted wood & splinter,

paint shattered like ice. My face is a riot

of flake and line...

...She squeezed melody

from my bruises. Hold the mug shot next

to the frame & I look like I fathered myself.

From “my face is a riot” to the poem’s final hues of rebirth, Lemon seeks not only to reinvent but redefine the images of his external world, and in doing so shows how that external shift is inflected within his narrator—“I look like I fathered myself.”

The most riveting thing about Lemon’s Mosquito is its narration. The narrator here is a kind of achievement, one that seems always on the verge of shifting into the confessional, and in avoiding that shift, seems all the more real. This is the kind of voice poetry needs; ragged and honest, blunt and beautiful. In seven couplets Lemon’s poem “DNA” shows a narrator empathizing with his mother’s guilt, and with a subdued kind of anger, reconciling the “befores and afters” of his post-surgery life:

You have to admit, pushing my wheelchair

was better than painting my dead lips.

Maybe, the surgeon said, caressing my head

like a hurricane. I wished I was a tan girl, hands

overflowing with perfect shells. You needn’t

ask, Mother, I forgive you...

What makes this work is the humor mixed with a narration that seems to want to fold back in on itself before moving on. Rather than be stifled by a common linear narrative, Lemon works towards a concentric narrative, poems hinged on a particular point that expand and contract towards that point throughout the

poem, as if the poems themselves are living, as if the pages here breathe.

So with *Mosquito* begins, hopefully, the career of a fresh, new and powerful voice in American poetry. Lemon's poems amalgamate some of the most interesting styles of poetry seen in the last half-century, and suggest a kind of expansion in artifice and craft that will probably cue younger poets in the years to come.

Koki says

In "Mosquito," the poet creates a sense of suffering and pain without being overt. He uses jarring line breaks, adding to the unpredictability of the poems, and makes many references to surgical tools, often referring to them as something cold. He also employs several interesting and often ironic-sounding similes that seem to have been drawn from our normal every day experience, such as "Like Blackouts, I have perfect timing."

Jenny says

I feel like I should reread this book so I'm sure it gets a fair shake. There were some lovely lyrical moments and interesting verb choices, but after reading it, it felt sort of like the gastronomic equivalent of having eaten a beautiful blown-sugar ornament. And nothing in it really lasted with me. Still, there's beauty in here.

C says

I was really excited to read this book, which was billed as the sort of poetic accompaniment to Lemon's memoir about his brain surgery. Unfortunately, I wasn't that impressed. Lemon's poems generally fall under a couple of umbrellas: the macho-man-meat-hooks-look-at-this-fist-in-your-face-bodies-bodies-bodies-uncontrollably-exuberant sort of poetry (akin to Richard Siken) and the look-how-fucked-up-my-family-is sort of poetry (akin to Nick Flynn). I am not a huge fan of either of these poetic modes, neither of which seem to be interested enough in the project of meaning-making outside the individual experience. Some of Lemon's lines of poetry are just GORGEOUS, but they don't add up to anything larger than gorgeous lines strung together by a lot of explosions and scalpels. I did quite like a couple of these poems, but they were inevitably the ones that showed a certain amount of coherence and restraint.

Austin Grigg says

This book can be a little dense -- you have to wade through some of it, but Lemon's powerful language cut through you and leave your mouth puckering. This book tells the story of Lemon's brain surgery, an intense and raw collection of poems.

Miriam says

*You want evidence of the street
fight? A gutter-grate bruise & concrete scabs—
here are nails on the tongue,
a mosaic of glass shards on my lips.*

*I am midnight banging against housefire.
A naked woman shaking
with the sweat of need.*

*An ocean of burning diamonds
beneath my roadkill, my hitchhiker
belly fills sweet. I am neon blind & kiss
too black. Dangle stars—*

*let me sleep hoarse-throated in the desert
under a blanket sewn from spiders.
Let me be delicate & invisible.*

*Kick my ribs, tug my hair.
Scream You're Gonna Miss Me
When I'm Gone. Sing implosion
to this world where nothing is healed.*

Slap me, I'll be any kind of sinner.

John Medeiros says

This is a book that has a permanent home on my nightstand. I just read it for the third time and with each reading I gain new insight. The perfect---absolute perfect---balance of lyric and narrative. I can't get enough.
