This thing of darkness in a memoir and three books of poetry, including his latest, Fancy Beasts, Alex Lemon shines a light into the dark corners of physical and emotional pain to find something rather surprising: joy.

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Main content

MOST of his friends and students at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth know Alex Lemon as a handsome, athletic-looking, cheerful young man, as fresh and sunny as his last name. He smiles often, laughs oftener—a necessity, since he finds so very many things funny. He’s an optimist, if not quite of the cockeyed variety, and sees beauty in things that others view only as garbage; although his wife barely tolerates it, he’s an inveterate Dumpster diver, always searching for cast-off items to inspire his art. Strangers often find him so disarmingly open and trustworthy that within minutes of meeting him they’re spilling their deepest secrets. The fact that his college nickname was Happy surprises them not at all.

But the title of Lemon’s memoir, Happy, published by Scribner last December, turns out to be a wee bit ironic. The book is the harrowing story of a golden-boy college jock’s struggles with recurrent brain hemorrhages and the legacy of childhood sexual abuse—which young Lemon initially copes with by indulging in drugs and alcohol, cheating on his girlfriends and, at times, resenting his forced dependence on others, including the artist mother who gave up her teaching job to care for him.

Lemon covered much of the same agonized territory in poetic form in his debut collection, Mosquito (Tin House Books, 2006), and its follow-up, Hallelujah Blackout (Milkweed Editions, 2008). Along with the memoir, they constitute a trilogy whose emotional touchstones are dread, grief, and self-reproach, which are only slightly offset by Lemon’s furious instinct for survival—and, more often, for black comedy, which lacquers the tragic elements of his story to a fine sheen.

Readers with any lingering doubts about the shadow land of Lemon’s mind will find them forcefully dispelled by Fancy Beasts, (published this month by Milkweed), his darkest book yet. Here, the collapse of his health—though its aftermath unfolds to this day in the form of constant double vision, numbness of the face, vertigo, and other symptoms—largsely old news. “My entire body is killing me, / & I have witnessed my own death // & lived,” the speaker announces, with no ring of triumph, in “It Had Only Been Dead a Few Hours.” “I whisper my own wagers / against disaster into the dark air.” But if the wounds of the body are less dire in Fancy Beasts, the wounds of the mind fester unabated, giving the book’s whispered wagers a serrated, accusatory edge. Sometimes the poet seems like a descendant of Jeremiah and the speaker in Eliot’s The Waste Land, a disgusted spectator at the dance of Eros and Thanatos in a contemporary culture that has become startlingly inane. He finds himself, in “Vista Verde,” at a shopping mall counting women with “basketball-sized breasts, lips like bloated // Caterpillars, cheeks stretched taut, identical / Almond eyes & one banging body—model-shaped // & gorgeous—with the head of a cadaver.” He fidgets and frets, nursing a sense of looming apocalypse—as in “Please Please More Napalm,” in which the...
Identical to the weather in the corner of Scotland that Minnie lived, but the city-folk didn’t have the same sunsets. Tempest didn’t bother with a trolley, unwilling to force herself past hundreds of other damp commuters to fetch one, instead heading straight for platform nine and three-quarters. Platform nine and three-quarters materialized before her. The Hogwarts Express, a gleaming scarlet steam engine, billowed clouds of steam in every direction. A haze of white mist drifted down on the heads of students and parents alike, appearing like ghosts as she drew closer. Hermione grew tired of the talk, burying herself in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, a book whose spine was already creased from use. The light shines in darkness. Act I. Scene 1. The scene represents the verandah of a fine country-house, in front of which a croquet-lawn and tennis-court are shown, also a flower-bed. The children are playing croquet with their governess. ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA [contemptuously] And what are the many things that Nicholas Ivánovich maintains that are quite true? Is it true that the Sermon on the Mount bids us give our property away to strangers and let our own families go begging? PRIEST. And instead of bringing him to his senses, you read Renan with him, and interpret the Gospels in a way of your own. PRIEST [excitedly] I cannot answer. I am, in fact, upset, and will hold my tongue. This Thing. of Darkness. An Inspector Green Mystery. BARBARA FRADKIN. His fingers, frostbitten more times than he could remember, had trouble doing up zippers or opening bottles, so he never bothered to wrap himself properly in his sleeping bag. This wasn’t the first sleeping bag he’d lost, but it was the warmest. With the autumn frosts coming, he was damned if he would give it up without a fight. A little ways up, he spotted it in an alleyway, almost hidden in the window well of a building, like the bum had tried to get out of sight. Outrage propelled him forward, a string of insults already forming on his lips. The culprit was completely wrapped in the bag. Contemporary English Version The light has come into the world, and people who do evil things are judged guilty because they love the dark more than the light. Good News Translation This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. Proverbs 2:13 from those who leave the straight paths to walk in the ways of darkness, Jeremiah 9:6 You dwell in the midst of deception; in their deceit they refuse to know Me,” declares the LORD. John 1:4 In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. John 1:5 The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Including the feminine he, and the neuter to in all their inflections; the definite article; the.