pantry seemed pale and listless in light of the treasures he evokes. The pull of his narrative is strong enough to inspire emulation if not outright envy; fortunately, Jacobsen includes both recipes—my favorite being a reminder of the simple and sublime combination of avocado, salt, and lime—and source listings for all the ingredients he encounters.

Jacobsen appears to spend every waking moment traveling or eating, and his book induces a contradictory combination of wanderlust and delight in the local that leaves the reader hungry for both.

—Jeff Nield, Vancouver, Canada

Animals: A Novel
Don LePan
New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010
160 pp. $13.95 (paper)

No one likes to kick a dog when it’s down. Yet down is just where venerable indie house Soft Skull Press, the American publisher of Don LePan’s debut novel, Animals, has found itself. Saved from financial collapse in 2007 by the Berkeley outfit Counterpoint, Soft Skull survived another few years in New York before closing its doors last October and heading (in name only—its two editors were fired) to the West Coast. This is too bad.

Also pretty bad, though, is LePan’s Animals, which tells of a dark, not-too-distant future where we have gone so far down the road of intensive farming that, if humanity is to survive, we can no longer afford to distinguish between animals and a growing number of human children born with birth defects. These children come to be known as “mon-grels,” and they are raised as both pets and as the industrial food known as yurn.

Part of the book details the life of one such child, Sam, who turns out merely to be deaf, not otherwise “defective”; his harrowing journey to the feedlots provides half the tragedy of the book. The other half is provided by way of a long, detailed history of industrial food production and factory farming, told by a man named Broderick Clark, Sam’s long lost brother. Compelling stuff, to be sure, and LePan’s heart—we could go so far as to say his soul—seems truly in the right place.

What makes Animals tough to get through, though, is the writing itself. Supposedly written by the fictional Naomi Okun, a “renowned novelist and professor of creative writing” (pp.130–131) who happens also to be Sam’s adoptive sister, the narrative sections of the book simply don’t read like the product of a great fiction writer. The prose often feels sophomoric: “[H]e always made himself wait if he was feeling the sadness coming, wait until she had left him, had turned out the light and shut the door. Then it was all right to cry, that was the all-right time” (p.63). The point of view shifts constantly, in a way that, at one point, LePan gets defensive about: “[Naomi’s] reputation as a novelist, of course, has been based very largely on her skill with the very sort of shifting third-person narrative—those who don’t like it call it ‘slippery’—that she offers here” (p.131). Broderick’s history lesson, sad and true as it is, often gets a tad preachy. The result is that in Animals, there is a ton of soul but very little art. And, as it happens, I’m one of those who don’t like it.

—Scott Korb, New York, NY

L’Oursin
Xavier Girard
Marseille: André Dimanche Éditeur, 2010
174 pp. €15

One can divide literary memory into two categories, “the rosebud complex” and “the madeleine complex,” the former characterized by a tragic repression of origins, the latter by a joyful celebration of life. Xavier Girard’s L’Oursin (The Sea Urchin) is an example of just such ecstatic wisdom, ranging from gastronomic meditation to erotic frenzy, from scientific observation to architectural fantasy. But above all it is the autobiography of a writer enamored of the Mediterranean, one who has found his emblem in this bizarre and solitary creature that is the height of contradiction, its interior an empty sphere housing nothing but the enticing delicate orange-red roe, its exterior a forbidding, brittle, spiked bastion. Girard’s flights of rhetoric (whether by analogy, notably the porcupine; or anthesis, the oyster) are pure poetry, and even the Mediterranean declension of the creature’s name reveals its startling complexity: “my favorites are perhaps the lisping zinzu of Ajaccio, the soft zinzu of Bastia, or the tender, crackling and puerile zinzu of Cervione.” So as not to disappoint the readers of Gastronomica, I would like to interject a personal note and offer the best recipe for sea urchins I have ever tasted: a Catalan brouillade, where the roe is mixed with egg and cream, placed back into the shell, and cooked to the consistency of a custard. For this book is not, strictly speaking, a gastronomic text, and the mere seven pages devoted to recipes are presented in a tone of disdain, if not
total mockery. The reason is simple: “But nothing, nothing, I repeat, equals the sea urchin solum, salted with sea water and sugared with a drop of blood from the creek.” Concerning the sea urchin (as well as the oyster, that luxurious, celebrated, aristocratic foil against which our eccentric subject is contrasted), the author is absolutely on the side of the raw against the cooked. Such is a philosophy of life. The blood in question is the author’s own. It is also that of an art historical fantasy, an extraordinary revisionist iconography of the spinario, the boy (or occasionally girl) removing from his foot a thorn, now seen as a sea urchin spine! No less original, and far more hallucinatory, are Girard’s architectural fantasies à la Bachelard, and an eroticism that verges on science fiction. One final contradiction: while the flavor of the sea urchin is absolutely unique, the author also claims that, “to taste a sea urchin is to swallow the taste of the Mediterranean in its entirety.” But he quickly corrects this exuberant exaggeration with a nuance, explaining that the sea in question is not the Mediterranean itself, but that miniature Mediterranean that washed the creeks of his childhood, in regard to which “the sea urchin is the little bristling madeleine.”

—Allen S. Weiss, New York University