

Roddy Lumsden is Dead. By Roddy Lumsden. Wrecking Ball Press, 2001.
110 pp., \$12.46 paperback.

Like Robert Johnson, Roddy Lumsden is a ballsy, bluesy poet. A quick example is the epigraph to a poem called *My Pain*:

one begins...to long for the contrasting tone of some honest, unironic misery, confident that when it arrives Roddy Lumsden will have the technical resources to handle it.

Simultaneously bragging and self-denigrating, Lumsden fills *Roddy Lumsden is Dead* with poems unabashedly about the poet's sorrows, heartbreaks and weaknesses. This description suggests Confessional poetry, yet nothing could be further from the truth. (The tone Lumsden achieves is totally different.) For one thing, Lumsden is aware of the self-indulgent subject matter and mocks his own work:

Or an allegory for the thoughts which swell in my head
when you hold me in the lane behind the sweet shop.
That is, if metaphors for thoughts are still allowed
on this plundered and squandered nosebag of a planet.
(*My Allegory*)

Many of the poems in the book have titles of the formula "My X," but the technical resources alluded to in the epigraph prevent these poems from falling into melodrama while still resembling naked howls of pain. Take these lines from the aforementioned *My Pain*:

And that's me back down, head on the floor.
It's like Cathal Coughlan goes in his song:
*I don't think I'll rise again
til I've seen how low I can go.*

It's like what my ancestor told me in a dream:
You'll be a sponge for the pain of others.
It's like what I told the lassie from the local paper:
I do not suffer for my art, I just suffer.

Using informal diction to disarm pretense, such as "goes," "it's like what," and "lassie," Lumsden presents bare and evocative images, borrowing freely from song and pop culture and dreams, sounding like nothing so much as Johnson's blues in lyrics like those of *Love in Vain*:

When the train rolled up to the station I looked her in the eye
When the train rolled up to the station and I looked her in the eye
Well, I was lonesome, I felt so lonesome and I
could not help but cry
All my love's in vain.

Both Johnson and Lumsden present their sorrow plainly, without letting us into the psychology of the pain. Rather than sacrificing depth, this approach heightens affect by allowing us to build an emotional edifice around bare words. Lumsden keeps the poem moving with short lines and italics, which, to this reader, provide a quickening urgency.

After *My Pain* the poems don't get any happier. In *My Death*, Lumsden uses the euphony of tight rhyme to honey the message of dread:

Bouts of thunder shift the world all day.
A sweet voice says, *hold tight, it's time to pay.*

Millions quietly talk of their diseases.
The black-hubbed wind does as it pleases.

The sound of these lines gets us in the ear before their meaning stabs us in the gut, and the finality of the sound and sense of "Black-hubbed" is the nail in the speaker's coffin.

My Funeral and *My Post-mortem* continue in the same vein, which threatens to become monotonous and obsessive, until Lumsden finds another classic blues subject, women. In *My True Love*, Lumsden describes a retired cart-horse that imagines himself forever dragging a "phantom cart" uphill, even while he is ridden by the farmer's daughters. Lumsden ends the poem with "I want you then. I do not want you now," complicating all the previous imagery. In *My Hormones*, he hints at trysts with other poets: "We poets / should keep our damn hands off each other." Blunt endings are Lumsden's trademark, finishing many of his poems with a jolt. *My Dark Side* presents a brooding, dangerous-to-women speaker:

... I could only walk
as if the sand was thick beneath my feet,

so my women always sense a depth,
another side to me I hide from them,
behind the firewall, nurturing its luck.

Besides the skillfully varied meter, what impresses me about this short poem is its unmitigated heterosexual maleness. I submit that not many contemporary poets would have the nerve to use the phrase "my women." It's a common usage, but the attitude it implies is usually scrubbed from our literature. Lumsden drops it casually, and goes on to assert in macho fashion that he's more than *his* women can handle. That Lumsden even tries this is surprising; that he pulls it off is astounding.

Lumsden's account of male heterosexuality gets taken up from a more tender angle in *My Sex Life*. He writes:

When those things happen
you thought would never happen

and they happen gently
on sweet-smelling beds in back rooms;

when you find a mouth
which completes the machine of yours--
two halves of a split penny reunited;
when you unbutton a body so perfect

and rounded it dips into the abstract;

Images like "gently / on sweet-smelling beds" and metaphors like "a mouth / which completes the machine of yours" and "two halves of split penny reunited" are a simultaneously fresh and spot-on description of the excitement and power of intimate love--not to mention one in which the presumably male speaker is exposed and vulnerable and nigh-overwhelmed by sensuous experience. Far from macho or aggressive, it is a refreshing presentation of male sexual subjectivity.

Roddy Lumsden is Dead etherizes the poet upon a table with Eliotic grimness. The best poems in the book are short, dark lyrics that leave the reader rueful yet amazed at the skill with which Lumsden staves off self-pity and morbidity. The poems are too chiseled, too free of fat, for the reader to mind the bits of gore they drip. They are indeed good blues songs: simple, sad and somehow sweet.