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All things being equal, it sometimes seems, as a culture, we have come to see most art as a form of entertainment (and even crudest entertainment as some sort of art form). Witness aesthetics of sneakers and stock cars, the poetics of professional wrestling (a personal favorite) and reality TV, and the spate (nay, flood) of memoirs.

Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Defense of Poesy* (1595) famously formulated that the end of poetry was "to teach and delight." More precisely, what he said was "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it ... that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture; with this end, to teach and delight." A distillation of Renaissance literary criticism, it must seem quaint to the contemporary reader, conjuring visions of well-sculpted and neatly rhymed poems full of platitudes buffed and burnished into clichés. Then again, Sidney's formulation is not all that far afield from Frost's proposition that "The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom." Frost then goes on to say, "The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion." So, Sidney's hoary formulation may be quite so antiquated; and it is on those terms ("to teach delight") that I want to examine Ron Drummond's recent chapbook *Why I Kick At Night*, winner of the Portlandia Poetry Chapbook Contest.

In the interest of full disclosure, an admission or two and a *caveat*: I know Ron Drummond and count him as a friend; and I've heard him read his work. I could, however, have just as easily evaded writing this review with few or no repercussions; and hearing a poem read (as wonderful a reader as Ron is) is not the same as reading a poem on the page. As for that caveat, I'm not gay. (I'm tempted here to quote that line from the Seinfeld episode where someone thinks one of the characters is gay, and he keeps saying he's not, adding "not that there's anything wrong with that.") I mention this last only because it's important for the reader to understand how, while Ron's sexuality and HIV status are central to some (though not all) of his poetry, his poetry (like the work of anyone worth reading) transcends the particulars of his life to touch the particulars of mine and yours.

It is easy enough to examine *Why I Kick At Night* in terms of the first half of Frost's formulation—"The figure ... begins in delight"—since delight is the seductress that leads the reader to the heart of the poem. Ron's best poems tend to begin with easy, eye-catching lines, a slight thought slightly off-kilter, such as this, the opening of the title poem:

*I kick in my sleep because I haven't yet figured how to sing in my sleep.
If they're high kicks, I'm auditioning for the Rockettes or the June Taylor dancers.*

Or these lines from "All Hallows Eve":

*Christ came to the party
and I wasn't spooked.
She was so pretty was the thing.
Her crown was more a twiggy nest
than a ring of thorns.*

Even the portentously titled "To a Poet Who Reads Death into All My Poems" begins:

*My friend, I'm afraid
you are simply
seeing things.*

From such beginnings, the poems, even the sparest of them, develop through a profusion of details, like the garden in "Midnight Georgic" that serves as a vehicle to describe something much deeper.

*I'm concerned about the astilbes; they're susceptible to heat.
But try not to oversoak the armeria. However, the heathers
don't mind a thorough drouking, but you'll want to keep
from spraying water directly on the roses...
...And you may
want to occasionally check the soil beneath the columbine
and azalea; damp is fine, but swampy isn't...*

Just stop a moment to admire this carefully laid out garden, and note how the context is so neatly crafted that you don't even trip over the word "drouking." You take its meaning (correctly) from the context. The delight here, and it is the beauty in the best of Ron's work, is in the deceptive simplicity of a surface that has been carefully planned to create such an illusion, as much through the language as through the careful accretion of details.

Still, as easy as it is to demonstrate how a poem might delight a reader—the painstaking construction, the felicitous turn of phrase, a certain musicality—it's that much harder to describe how the poem might end in wisdom. And it is at the end of the poem, just past the last lines, as the reader turns away from the page, that a poem must deliver what insight it intended. If the poem is successful, that thin echo in the reader's ear is the sound of the poem snapping shut, as Yeats would have it do, closing around the reader, later to draw the reader round again. So, like the last chords in a piece of music, the last lines of "Midnight Georgic" seem almost inevitable:

*Take what pleasure you can from this holiday, and know
I'd level whole plantations for your touch.*

And more so, the final chords of the title poem:

*Paul tells me my kicks are prayers not put into words, unuttered groanings
that can't be heard. It's all a gift. Amen to Paul.
Kick because you can, I say.*

I don't want to put too great a weight on this work. The poetry often makes use of the long, almost prosy lines favored by so many poets today; and not all the poems hit the mark quite as well as the ones I've quoted (though more do than don't). We have become so accustomed to neat themes and tidy morals (tag lines like "Based on a true story," the wit of bumper stickers, and the wisdom of sound bites) that we've lost sight of how true art, for both the poet and the reader, "begins in delight" and "ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification ... a momentary stay against confusion." If Sidney's formulation still holds, if Frost's figure is still relevant, then these poems "teach and delight," and that is no mean accomplishment.

—Carl Rosenstock

Carl Rosenstock was born in Albany, New York, and grew up on a farm near there. He received a B.A. in Asian History from Union College, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Vermont College. His work has appeared in various magazines, and anthologies. He lives and works on the westernmost end of Long Island, in Brooklyn, New York.