



Athletes. by Kirby Congdon
Rockford, MI: Presa Press, 2011.

Review by Emily Braile

Kirby Congdon chose an ambitious theme for his short volume of poetry, *Athletes*. As indicated by the title, most of the poems Congdon has compiled are about athletes and athletics. However, he deviates from this theme in several poems to explore comic book characters and motorcyclists, leaving the volume feeling a bit disjointed and unfocused. His poetry also lacks a subtlety and refinement common to sophisticated poetry, evident in lines such as:

Their leather torsos,
riding iron bulls,
intimate and crouched,
intense in the lover's act,
copulate with their hot machines.
Blood and oil are one.
They eat and digest
death (Motorcyclist 21).

Perhaps Congdon intended to use such raw language to reflect the raw nature he sees in the athletic world. I understand and appreciate the rugged, even primitive energy of athletics, but I also see a grace and power in sports that I find myself wishing was reflected in Congdon's writing. At the end of the volume, I'm left unsatisfied, wanting something more, or maybe less.

Within Congdon's poems are ideas that, again, are ambitious, but could be clearer. The poem "Swimmers" opens with the lines:

Before their oceans,
swimmers inhale,
select their wave
and, charging, dive.

The beginning is straightforward, but then becomes a bit ambiguous in lines five to seven:

The liquid birth
rehearses in reverse
that of death's flat curse.

Thematic clarity and consistency are aspects generally missing in *Athletes*. For instance, the poem "Figure" seems to explore the theme of death rather than athletics, comic book characters, or motorcyclists. Congdon again displays a lack of subtlety in lines such as:

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His firm figure
is erect
and from that phallic silhouette
the language flows,
free and fertile as a brook...

The poem ends with:

Death does not come to us;
soon or late,
men ready
their manliness
for that final state,
and, walking,
steady and direct,
march straight on
into the end of it.

The idea that people reach a point where they, knowing it's their time, go to "Death," rather than have "Death" come to them, is again an ambitious theme. However, the lines quoted above feel a bit over the top, most likely because of the phrase: "men ready/their manliness..." Lines like these, scattered liberally throughout Congdon's writing, display a romanticized machismo unnecessary in elegant poetry. The lines quoted above illustrate such machismo and an aggressive sexuality, as do lines such as:

burn tire tracks
though my guts;
roar, exhausting,
under rearing buttocks;
cut corners
across my taut chest;
like roving lovers,
leave me, strapped,
silent and stranded (Motorcyclists 28).

And:

Hard helmets and high boots
tumescent in the sun,
got-up in rubber skin
and leather hide,
black, strapped, laced,
buckled with grommets,
chrome and brassy-eyed,
their dress itself is an act of sex... (Daredevil 29).

"Daredevil" is an interesting piece in that it clearly, and more gracefully than many of the others, expresses its theme. The poem is a comment

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on how men who ride motorcycles for sport entertain a higher chance of sudden, young death, but at least they die with their boots on, as opposed to people who spend their lives behind desks and doors, too afraid of death and pain to really live. The word selection and phrasing could be tighter, but this piece shows promise.

Athletes requires an overall tightening. The many poems that deviate from the stated theme of the collection hinder the effect I, as a reader, assumed Congdon wanted to communicate. The poetry is weakened by the way Congdon presents it with his over-the-top sexualized machismo and loose, unclear phrasing. I would encourage Congdon to write and publish more prose than poetry. He included one piece of prose, "The Speed Track," opening it with the simple, clean, descriptive statement: "But we saved the machine." Congdon's one example of prose is more eloquent than his poetry and was, in the end, what I wanted more of.

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