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Michael Sweeney, In Memory of the Fast Break

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Book Review

Michael Sweeney, *In Memory of the Fast Break*. Austin, TX: Plain View Press, 2008. 77 pp.

Reviewed by Jeffrey P. Cain

Without footnotes, reading Michael Sweeney's new book of poems is like mental participation in a pop-cultural trapeze act with no net. The title, *In Memory of the Fast Break*, is itself a brief poem of six words length; its theme is the formation, at high speed, of a profoundly intertextual mosaic of memory and memorial. In order to create its multiple levels and chains of signification, Sweeney's work ventures far beyond a mere rhetoric of allusion. Instead he crafts a whole conceptual system of reference, sometimes obvious, sometimes elusive, often speculative. Sources branch out to include everything from old television shows to the Allman Brothers Band. In "Rainy Day Women Revisited," for example, Sweeney writes in-your-face parody that honors Bob Dylan's original while invoking a darkly satiric view of institutionalized misogyny:

We'll bless you when we put you in the stocks
We'll bless you when we fasten all the locks

Michael Sweeney has for many years taught writing and literature in the English Department at Sacred Heart University. Jeffrey P. Cain is associate professor of English at Sacred Heart University.

We'll bless you when we knock your sisters up
We'll bless you when we blow your clinics up
Now we wouldn't be in such a mess
Everybody must get blessed.

Many of the poems revolve around the cultural space of sports and include explications of the cynical process in which even star athletes learn that all glory is fleeting. Poems like "Celtics Last Stand" and "Why I Write about Sports" require of the reader a fairly comprehensive knowledge of the history of professional athletics in America. But a little gem like "First Time Over the Rim" will resonate with almost anyone who ever played pick-up basketball after school:

. . . my left foot splashing the half-
frozen puddle but the right one
coming down hard on dry asphalt
& pushing off, up through
March sunlight splintered against
the chainlink fence, above the whir
of elbows and hips like I'd
never quite be again . . .

Is it part of the plan that this kinetic shift inspires the player's body on a sunny day in March? Or is it simply that vegetation cycles sort agreeably with poetic intuition? Along a vertical axis, Sweeney's narrator rises up toward the early spring sunlight. And on the horizontal plane, an icy winter puddle shades into the dry surface that sustains a sure-footed leap of synecdoche that vaults the narrator into the rest of his life's seasons.

Sweeney's poems will stand reading from many different angles, offering his audience a whole inventory of textual encounter. The reader is a major character in every poem, so that she or he must be capable of discerning cultural context while following rapid jumps back and forth from one ideological implication to another. In "Kung Fu Redux," for example, Sweeney explores a trajectory that

starts in the seventies and ends in the present. He does so via David Carradine's two best-known vehicles: the vintage television series *Kung Fu* and Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*. As a long-time practitioner of karate as well as a poet, Sweeney adroitly memorializes Kwai Chang Caine, Bruce Lee, Lee's son Brandon, and—of all people—William Butler Yeats:

. . . Caine's seen enough
 hysterical women who sons lay wasted
 & maimed to last the millennium, they
 never fucking learn: syndicated hemorrhaging
 can't revive Saint Bruce Lee, never
 a gentle man, Brandon stiffens underground
 without a second take to cast a
 colder eye on epitaphs worse than his,
 gauntlets Kwai Chang's yet to run
 like katas in his sleep . . .

Sometimes the very incongruity of Sweeney's textual references evokes a nearly mystical significance. What does it mean to name Bruce Lee a "saint," and in the same breath introduce an oblique allusion to Yeats' epitaph from "Under Ben Bulben"? To follow Sweeney's peripatetic lesson in metaphysical discovery, the reader must understand some of the finer points of Asian martial arts. The katas, mentioned in the last line quoted above, are progressive fighting forms and movements taught in almost all martial arts classes. A kata performed by a true adept is something of a ballet whose subject is controlled violence. Katas are structured carefully, as are Sweeney's poems. But the katas are not just physical movements; they require a certain spiritual skill, including focusing the "Ki," or inner strength and harmony. Sweeney's poems are absorbing because they bring into an esoteric accord widely dissimilar cultural forces. And Yeats, the poetic voice of the *spiritus mundi* and "A Vision," would be intrigued, as will any reader who wants to acquire some of Sweeney's astonishing cultural dexterity.