

The Montserrat Review's Best of Spring Poetry, 2006 "Best Picks" by Grace Cavalieri

This is Jackson's second book and once again he has done for North Philadelphia what August Wilson, Gaston Neal and DJ Renegade did for Pittsburgh. We have a city of metaphor. But this time the neighborhood comprises only a part of this book, as Jackson has scaled new heights in the genuine. His well-packaged narrative units are broadening into epic poems, and are most successful when he dialogues with other writers. Major Jackson is a literary figure and he knows that a part of the fiber is only as important as the tapestry. The homage to ancestry is here, the respectful view of family, antecedents, give a perspective to the writer's life. From a long poem titled "North Philadelphia," here are the first 2 stanzas of 18:

"North Philadelphia" (P.96)

1.

Baltimore Harbor is foggy this morn
Like my head, another AWP Conference, too many cocktails adorned
In a hotel bar, too many thorny
Conversations. Many wear their scorn
On their sleeves and talk of chopping folks
At the knees. Others yield to dirty jokes.

2.

My neck hurts. I've said a hundred hellos.
I've gone down elevators and faced
My ghoulish past. At times I wanted to know
& sought a name tag. My overnight case
Hasn't arrived. I thought I'd touch base
To relieve some of the low-stakes tension,
Time to transport to the fourth dimension.

...

The form Jackson has invented seems his own although I have seen it elsewhere. He owns it for sure in Hoops. Consistency of his constructed verse is a good way for the reader to relax and know someone is in control. There is in this volume an accountability of who the writer is, a social responsibility, a narrative frame that gives the speaker's life a trajectory. "North Philadelphia" is but one poem in Section III, "Letter to Brooks." I do not know of a more eloquent testimony from a writer's race, gender, politics, nationality than this. It is an incantation, a cry, a song, a question, discourse, set forth within 13 poems. The sequence of poems takes us to geographical locations with an ideological climate. Spatial formations create discrete worlds but there is a message throughout, a high personal code, and a set of decorations for those artists who have gone on before and have lighted the way. This is a high minded book, a strong energetic evocative book which begins and ends in the neighborhood. There is a buoyancy and poetic diction that marks a seasoned writer in but his second book.

In the Letter To Brooks suite, the first section is "Fern Rock" (stanza 2:) (P.57)

Disagree, respectfully of course-for what
Is a corpus but the Spirit on foot?
On such ground I begin my epistolary chat,
Although I gather you'd prefer we strut
On through, fisted pens raised imaging truth.
Plus up there you must I bet have other
Celestial errands with which to bother.

The final stanza in the book is from "Spring Garden:" (p.125)

When you have forgotten popsicle stick
Races along the curb and hydrant fights,
Then, retrieve this letter from your stack
I've sent by clairvoyant post & read by light.
For it brought me as much longing and delight.
This week's Father's Day; I've a long ride to Philly.
I'll give this to Gramps, then head to Black Lily.

I show the sweep from the metaphysical to the physical realms which both are a way of blessing.