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Claiming the Field: Major Jackson's Poetry Takes a Stand by Beth Kannell

The big issues in poetry aren't always "life, death, love, and loss," after all. Major Jackson, the soft-spoken young poet who has already seized a vibrant professorship in English at the University of Vermont and who travels cross-country to talk rhyme and reason on a calendar that looks like a President's, wrestles bigger ones in his new collection, *Hoops* (March 2006, Norton).

What's bigger? How about racism? How about the potent rhyme of "skin" and "grin," as he noted to a high school audience recently: the way African Americans often embraced the White stereotypes of grinning idiocy in order to survive in America's slavery-shamed history. And the way that, even today, editors, program planners, and readers want to press Black authors into "single-race anthologies," as though their voices took some separate, mildly inferior, less intellectually challenging stance.

In a volume offered as "a great big hug and kiss" to his hero Gwendolyn Brooks, Jackson proclaims both strength and craft:

What we profess: black poetry
As the eloquent testament and record,
A tacit argument for greater liberty
In America. Readers are rewarded,
Embodying an interiority
They need to possess their lyric freedom,
Their moral lineage, and borrowed drums.

This proclamation comes at the climax of the collection, in a 70-page sequence of poems titled "Letter to Brooks." Whitman-like, it ranges over a nation that includes the clotted highways of New Jersey, the weighted bulk of the Rocky Mountains, the brilliant light of Cape Cod, and the green shadows around Robert Frost's home in Franconia, N.H., where Jackson spent a summer as resident poet. There are concrete, entertaining moments tucked in, like the one at The Frost Place when a family of tourists arrives unexpectedly and peers like zoo visitors at Major, munching a dawn breakfast of Frosted Flakes, garbed in his briefs. And the North Philadelphia childhood and brutal high school years erupt repeatedly throughout, with flashes of gunshots, friends wounded in body and soul, joyous explorations of breakdance and music, threads of familiar musicians like The Supremes or, much later, 2Pac Shakur.

In fact, the wide scope of life that pounds from these poems demands a reader's constant attention. Don't look away, or you'll miss conversations with and of poets Robert Hayden and Thoman Sayres Ellis and the controversial old man of modern Black poetics and politics, Amiri Baraka, as Jackson deftly salutes them. Stay alert for changes of locale: You're flying like a touring poet, in and out of scenes.

Opening with a shattering evocation of risk, death, and afterlife in a prologue poem, "Selling Out," *Hoops* is strongly structured into three sections. The first, launched with the poem "Hoops" (can you possibly miss the way African Americans on television took their 20th-century heroic labels from the basketball court?), includes a half-dozen sharp pieces, mostly with short, drum-hard lines, evocative of life in North Philly and of the leap of the heart that being on home turf can produce.

The second section, poems infuriatingly numbered with roman numerals XIII through XX (which turn out to be continuing a series from Jackson's earlier collection *Leaving Saturn*), comes as "Urban Renewal": an embrace of high school's smoky sexuality and the frightening mysteries of baptism and of friends plunging into risk and even death.

...This is where Darren measured absence round
visible stars the night his dad punched the bright
smile of his mother into a soundless
hole, ...

I sought the quickening
gaze of the disky flycatcher and listened
to the greenish-black like a secret pitched
between a pair of crickets. No hunger, no wind
swayed the top of our corner's paperback mapleleaf,
for Jamie. A nameless hurt so deep, he leapt
the farthest, a branchless fall to his death,
from the top of Blumberg Housing Projects.

And then the remarkable sequence "Letter to Brooks" opens, a "Dear Gwendolyn" missive to launch across the borders of absence and generation, to the poet who beyond her death stands as symbol of both strength and kindness to Jackson. Admitting that "I take my cue, as you have likely guessed, / From the recent bloom of epistles. / Doty's 'Letter to Walt Whitman,' his largesse / Of fraternal pluck, make many an apostle."

The sections of the sequence bear titles that I first thought were airports, tuning in to the surging movement taking place here. But they turn out to be stops along the North Philly train line: Fern Rock, Olney, Logan, Wyoming, Hunting Park, more. They roll forth, packed with tight seven-line stanzas written in rhyme royal (Jackson's roots are in both rap and formalism), spreading the encomium to Brooks along an equivalent length of memory and poetic history. Jackson's relationship with Brooks is both through her poems and through a life-marking occasion when he drove the airplane-avoiding Brooks from Philadelphia to New York City, talking with her about poetry all the way. Snubbed at one point for taking a stand she disagreed with, he was stunned by her end-of-journey invitation: Come read with me, be the "opener" for my performance. The young Jackson scribbled onto paper the only two of his poems he knew by heart, and took the stage with the giant of American poetry. Remarkably, she afterward handed him a check for \$500, a magnificent portion of her evening's honorarium. The salute to him as poet was the greatest of generosity, and in a sense, this entire collection becomes a thank you for the life of the page that Brooks fueled in him.

The form, the rhyme, the regularly enjambed lines all insist on the massive education and intellect that foreground Jackson's poetry. At the same time, he raises a defense of rhyme that draws on the physical connection of music and rap to the self: "I put a premium on rhymes -- how could I / Not living the times of the Supa / Emcees where styles are def, lyrics fly, / Tight the way our minds move over / Beats and grooves. Our brain matter's / Amped, mic-checked so we non-stop. / My spirit feels echoes thanks to hip-hop." (If those lines won't quite parse for you, try a mental comma after the word "Not" in the second line. I have a hunch this collection wasn't copyedited as carefully as it should have been.)

Even as Jackson salutes Brooks and many of today's Black voices (poet or rapper), he insists too on erasing the race line by weaving in Stanley Kunitz, W. H. Auden, Camus, Martin Buber. We are drinking the wine of words, each speaker resolutely skin-tinted yet simultaneously skinned to heart and breath that come only in the color of blood and soul. I dare to predict that "Letter to Brooks" could be the blueprint for a true poet's education:

rich with the past, and throbbing with the risks and outspokenness of honest passion.

Jackson's work is notable also for the absence of love poems, although he is married with children; instead, his on-the-pages love is for his son Langston (not named for Hughes though), and for the sense of one generation nourishing the next. For his son's sake, he took care to include a video game or two in the text, with a chuckle of shared delight, while also citing Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* and using an image from *The Matrix* .

Read this collection for the vivid picture it gives of life well considered, savored, pressed into meter and rhyme as a way to capture its heartbeat and violent joy. Keep at least an anthology of fine poets at your elbow as you press through, so that you can follow up on the zesty lines and declarations that Jackson weaves into the lines as they are clearly woven into himself. This may be the best book of poetry of the season -- because it draws the reader to both labor and delight. Jackson offers the best reason for this work, near the end of "Letter to Brooks":

Yet we cannot overlook how we inspire
Each other into song, thus I propose
The praise poem as one of our chief desires ...

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