

Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review No. 21 Fall/Winter 2003: Reviewed by Philip Pardi
Major Jackson, *Leaving Saturn* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 75 pp. \$15.95

There is a story told by United Farm Worker organizers of a press conference held once to launch a new initiative. In addition to the representatives from the union, the agenda included a number of men and women who were currently employed as farm workers and whose testimony was therefore central to anything the union might do. When these workers arrived on the day of the press conference, they came dressed in their nicest clothes—clean slacks, buttoned shirts, a flowered dress, shined shoes—their Sunday best, as it were. And the organizers were upset. They had wanted the workers to come dressed in their daily field clothes, the pants smeared with soil, stained with pesticides, the boots held together with duct tape.

I was reminded of this story while reading Major Jackson's *Leaving Saturn*, an impressive and lively first book of poems. Time and again, emissaries from different worlds meet, each with their different inner worlds and outer semblances:

From the Liberty Bell's glass asylum
tourists emerge convinced of a cracked republic,
and for signs further join the edge of the human
circle where you break-dance the bionic two-step.

And the poem goes on to music:

Democracy depends upon such literacy.
Snapshots. Maps. A vendor's fist of stars and stripes—
She sewed pennants.

Other meetings abound. Sonia Sanchez visits China and meets Mao, and in the next poem, Sanchez and Jackson travel together to a college in upstate New York to meet Chinua Achebe:

When we arrived, earth seeped from this mouth—
the fragility of African genius, shrines of the Old South.

Again and again, the poems in this collection force or recreate a meeting across lines—racial, generational, class, calling. In "Mr. Pate's Barbership," the poet considers the barber who "had lost his best little helper Squeaky / to cross fire" and "forgot everything and would never be the same again." Jackson wonders

if I could lay down my pen, close up
my ledgers and my journals, if I could undo
my tie and take up barbering where
months on end a child's head would darken
at my feet & bring with it the uncertainty
of tomorrow . . .

Jackson is at his best in moments such as these: two worlds brought side by side, close enough for one to see into—even imagine crossing into—the other. The success of these poems lies largely in how quickly and effortlessly the "I" of the poems is able to peer into that other world while remaining truly and genuinely the "I" that we have come to trust. There is no forced empathy or understanding, no trite settling of scores. There is instead a small world brought to life, and the reader is left to account for the way the world as a whole

might all fit together. A plane passes over a highway: “30,000 feet above someone is buttering a muffin” while below the poet is “heading west.” No explanation, just the two patches brought together and Cezanne, who “looked at a landscape so long he felt / As if his eyes were bleeding.”

Not that Jackson is afraid to lay his cards on the table. Consider this passage from “Sunday in July” from his series “Urban Renewal”:

You’ve seen man’s inner furnace scorch this city,
not like the driver who opened fire on a street corner
of children, nor the teen mother pushing her young
from a project roof, nor the husband who held his family
hostage, but the sharp sparks of cruelty that explode
off the cuff: in a ruinous bed, an elderly woman curses
the caretaker who smacks her hourly with a flyswatter;
on a sidewalk, shirtless boys play a game of dozens,
and soon a sucker punch, the wrong word about
someone’s mother.

Or consider “Euphoria” in which the poet waits in the car while his mother buys drugs:

And a girl my age, maybe 16 or so,
in a black miniskirt, her hair crimped
With glitter, squats down to pane glass
And asks, A date, baby? for five?

He pays and, on a street where the garbage swirls and boys are “slap-boxing”,

She crams the crushed bill down
Her stockings, cradles & slides her palm
In rhythm to my hips thrashing

This is, as he writes, a world where “happiness is so hard to come by.” But there is happiness to be found: on basketball courts and dance-floors, in music and in language itself.

At work beneath many of the poems in *Leaving Saturn* is the poet’s own meeting with his world and the way these meetings are mediated by his chosen calling of poetry: “I was on my way to a life of bagging tiny mountains, / selling poetry on the corners of North Philly, / a burden to mothers & Christians” he writes, and then he describes his arrest at the age of thirteen. The cop arresting him pauses as they both listen to the termites behind the wall, “for he was an entomologist / in a former lifetime & knew the many / song structures of cicadas, bush crickets & / fruit flies.”

There is even some wonderment that the same “slum” can foster both basketball players and poets. His buddy Radar is “off / on a scholarship to UNC” while Jackson himself is off “to study Nabokov / at the state’s university” and he wonders,

Yet, what fate connects those dots
that rattle in hustler’s palms
with Radar’s stutter-step
& my pen’s panopticon?

If there are moments when the poems ring less true, it is usually where Jackson has felt the need to tidy things up for us—for example, at the end of “Blunts,” an otherwise beautiful poem in which the narrator exclaims to his buddies “I want to be a poet,” but which ends with false-sounding “We were tragically hip.” Likewise in “Born Under Punches,” the beaten man has eyes that “darted / Like a man nailed / To a burning crucifix.” But this is a book that is mostly free of the common first-book pitfalls. The voice is stern and culpable, and the formality of the poems, far from being a record of workshop exercises, provides a consistent framework within which the free-wheeling musicality of the poems can spin.

Indeed, an entire section of poems—each set in tight quatrains that resemble musical measures—deals entirely with music. Sun Ra, whose story of having been born on Saturn provides the title for this book, is seen at four different concerts, and briefly his voice overlaps with the voice of Jackson in this book:

Mars is dying, it's after
The end of the world.
So, here I am,
In Philadelphia,

*

Death's headquarters,
Here to save the cosmos,
Here to dance in a bed
Of living gravestones.

Certain poems, particularly in this third section, feel a little less alive, but they would doubtless come fervently to life when read aloud. Indeed, the theme of music points to another characteristic of Jackson's book, namely, the sheer oral-ness of poems. In Jackson's hands, the language on the page is hardly contained by it. Jackson uses not just italics but capital letters to give a jolt to words or phrases. All told, this gives energy to even the less vivid writing; at its best, Jackson's language begs to be read out loud:

A boom-box bobs
& breaks beats on a buckling sea
of asphalts;--the hard,
pounding rhymes of BDP

flooding a wall as a crowd
of hustlers toss craps, waging
fists, dollar bets, only louder—
& one, more enraged,

promises to pistol-whip
the punk who doesn't pay.

In this poem, from a section that brings together poems that draw on his youth, basketball and music become the background and the vocabulary for his choice of poetry as a vocation. But that project is established in the very first poem of the book, where he writes of a girl's hair being braided:

I pledged
my life right then to braiding her lines to mine,
anointing streets I love with all my mind's wit

. . . .

I funnel all the light
spreading across that young girl's lustrous head
with hopes we will lift our downturned eyes,
stroll more leisurely, pour over these sights.

In this book, the role of the poet is sacred. When he tells his buddies that he wants to be a poet the answer, slow in coming, is nonetheless clear: "So, you want the tongue of God" says a friend. His burden, he tells us later, is to "see Beauty in everything / everywhere." But if his calling is holy, it is also a calling to be plied here on earth: "Half of what I knew / Of living I discovered in the disco; / The deft execution of bones, / Eyes, muscles, or something so basic / As keeping in step with your fellow man."

The story of the UFW farm workers, as told to me, ends like this: the workers refused to change their clothes, to "dress down" and court sympathy, and so the press conference was cancelled. There is, at times, no greater defiance than being exactly who you are. In the hands of a poet like Jackson, that act can feel both simple and visionary:

In a beat, jam-packed bus
the poor return
in their Sunday best, breaking a sweat;
windows open, they haven't a chance. Hurry dusk!
All's combustible; streets flare up and the slid-
ing window of an ice-cream truck opens like gospel.