

## Philadelphia Inquirer, September 2002

Leaving Saturn, University of Georgia. 75 pp. \$15.95.

***Of Philly's projects and way beyond: Major Jackson's debut poetry - free verse and formal - finds art in the 'hood and transcendent liberation in flight. Reviewed by George Held***

In this winning debut collection, Major Jackson begins as a poet of the Philadelphia projects, then projects himself into the wider arena of American literature. Raised where "MJ" signifies a certain aging basketball player, he makes those initials his own in the 'hood and wherever Americans read poetry.

While the first part of *Leaving Saturn*, "Urban Renewal," pays tribute to black Philadelphia and predecessor African American poets, the 11 free-verse poems here portray Jackson as a self-conscious observer, pen at the ready. Thus, in "Block Party," with the DJ working his art on the summer dance crowd, "Song broken down to a dream of song flows / from my pen; the measured freedom coming off this page / was his pillared spell of drums... ." Here Jackson creates his own art out of his experience of life in the projects. Like Dickens' London, Jackson's Philadelphia is "a Parthenon, / a ruin that makes great literature of ghostly houses... ."

But he always has an eye open for an escape route, expressing a "longing for other stones to worship," using as an epigraph Michael Harper's "Mama, unplug me please," accepting Sonia Sanchez's invitation, "Come, young brother, to Bard, to the Catskills," and finishing Part 1 in Oregon, where Jackson earned a master of fine arts degree in creative writing at the University of Oregon.

*Leaving Saturn* really comes to life in Part 2, when Jackson turns to more formal verse, and rhymes infuse his work with vitality. In "Hoops," end rhymes are exact, like cyclone/alone, or more often inventively slant, like streaks/break or ghost/lost. The speed and wit of this poem, in 19 rhymed quatrains, and the freedom of its rhymes and line-lengths match its theme of escape. He and his pal Radar, a star hoopster, evade the local hustlers and dealers by playing "on a buckling sea / of asphalt," shooting at "netless hoops." "Four years later, he's off / on scholarship to UNC. / I'm to study Nabokov / at the state's university," for "If the slum's our dungeon, / school's our Bethlehem."

Dance and music provide other avenues of liberation, whether Jackson is learning to break-dance or voguing with a girlfriend at "a gay club." Music dominates Part 3, including the title poem, "Leaving Saturn," the first of four poems with Jackson's alter ego Sun Ra, the futuristic black musician who arrived on the scene in 1968, the year of Jackson's birth. When, like Jackson, Sun Ra finds himself in Philadelphia, he is inspired by "the cracked bell" and uses his African-based music "to embark upon tonight's / Spaceship... ."

Like the splendid Sun Ra, Jackson creates celestial music in this sequence, then segues to Part 4 with "I'll Fly Away." If "Urban Renewal" is elegiac, this final part takes the poet out of the ghetto to new worlds of promise. "I'll Fly Away" thus begins, "I'm best when I'm running full-throated / towards the whitecaps in Truro," offering "dirges of our common dreams of flight," a connection both to Sun Ra's spaceship and to the early poems' quest for escape.

*Leaving Saturn* marks the arrival of a poet who could be the Langston Hughes of North Philadelphia or the next Robert Hayden, whose "Tattooed Man" yearns, "Oh to break through, / to free myself... ." Major Jackson has the talent to free himself to become whatever kind of poet he wants. Now living in New Orleans, he will always have Philadelphia and his black roots as a source of "tropes," which he calls "brutal, / relentless, miraculous... ." - just like his poetry.

--George Held's latest book of poems is "Beyond Renewal."