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Astral Project: Review of Leaving Saturn by Susan Larson

It takes time to read poetry -- time spent savoring every word, perhaps reading each poem out loud, time spent listening to the voice that struggles to whisper in our ears, to get inside our heads and hearts. Sometimes the voice speaks in a gentle melody, other times it arrives with trumpets blaring. Xavier University professor Major Jackson's voice arrives with a dissonant, unforgettable blast of perspectives and forms. This is poetry to listen to, to reckon with.

In "Leaving Saturn," his first collection of poems and winner of the 2001 Cave Canem Prize, named for the workshop/retreat founded by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady in 1996, Jackson ranges through forms and settings, showing off poetic chops honed early and well.

In the first section of the book, a long poem called "Urban Renewal," Jackson roams the streets of his native Philadelphia, seeing both tragedy and beauty. Sections of the poem are dedicated to those artists who have inspired and influenced Jackson -- among them the Roots, Sonia Sanchez, Chinua Achebe, Afaa M. Weaver. This is a world of contrasts acutely observed:

Stare back down cobbled alleys that coil with clapping horses,
wrought-iron railings, to grand boulevards that make a fiction
of suffering; then stroll these crumbling blocks, housing projects,
man-high weeds snagging the barren pages of our vacant lights.

This is a place with "aching humans" and "prosperous gardens," and Jackson makes us feel the distance between.

The poems I enjoyed the most are those in the third section dealing with musical inspirations, particularly the title poem, inspired by the life and art of jazz artist Sun Ra, who claimed to be a messenger from Saturn, delivering the news through the medium of his Myth Science Arkestra, or his Astro-Infinity Arkestra, or the American Spirit Arkestra or the Solar Arkestra, specific performances of which inspire Jackson's poems. In "Shipwrecked in Birmingham," he says, Sun Ra played out his beliefs and his art on the world stage. In "Crossing Over," Jackson writes,

Mars? Venus?
Not the point!
What but a family
Of Dynasties endowed
With the divine
Cadence to administer
The infinite swells
& ripples of Funk?

Channeling this unique vision, Jackson imagines a man always in motion, both of his time and ahead of it, full speed ahead and damn the consequences. These poems hum with passion and energy.

What is impressive about this debut collection is its variety in both form and subject. But what is amazing is its compassion and tenderness. In "Rock the Body Body," Jackson writes,

. . . Half of what I knew
Of living I discovered in a disco;
The deft execution of bones,
Eyes, muscles, or something so basic
As keeping in step with your fellow man.

Jackson is in step, but he's also out there on the sidelines watching, with a keen eye for the tender moment, a rage at unfairness, a clever perception of vision where others might see only craziness. With such an auspicious beginning, what a future lies ahead of him.

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