

Mosaic Literary Magazine, Issue 10 (June, 2002): Interview with Ron Kavanaugh

A Major Poet

"Candidly speaking, I walked away from Cave Canem's first retreat feeling both challenged and supported -- so much so I could not fully discern the complexity of my emotions. But most of all, I learned I was not alone in my ardent quest to be a respected writer of poetry. So many excellent writers, so many intelligent, widely read Black poets as that Cave Canem provides is something the world should experience. I was terribly reflective during my brief, week-long stay, yet this is always the case with me whenever I am in the company of hugely talented people," says Major Jackson, 32, and a Temple University graduate, summing up his place in the new poetry world.

Humble, intelligent and talented, he is the most recent winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize for his upcoming book of poetry, *Leaving Saturn* (University of Georgia, January 2002).

His poetry reads honest and simple, without the shouts and theatrics often associated with young poets. Jackson's text brings to mind Nikkey Finney or Gwendolyn Brooks, featuring short poetic stories that sear with reality and a myriad of external influences.

Jackson is what you would call "hot," his work appearing in *Callaloo*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Code*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Beacon's Best of 1999: Creative Writing by Men and Women of Color* (Beacon Press, 1999) and *Reading & Writing The Human Experience* (St. Martins Press, 2001).

It seems strange to hear the admission that poetry was not his original academic pursuit. "At Temple University, I was an accounting major. My senior year I attended one of those campus Kwanzaa programs and enjoyed it immensely, especially listening to Sonia Sanchez give a powerful reading that featured a poem about a woman who has to negotiate loneliness and a drug-addicted husband. When I returned from winter break, I quickly enrolled in her Introduction to African American Literature class, which was even more moving than her campus readings."

Professor Sanchez, now retired, acquainted Jackson with works such as Harriet A. Jacob's *Incidents in Life of A Slave Girl* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. "The means by which she brought to light these authors (and others), the books' humanistic themes and the relevance of the texts to students' lives was simply masterful."

Though he came to poetry late in life, it was his evangelist grandmother, whom he spent summers with, who sparked his first love of literature. "There were months in which I rarely went outside, and instead spent time foraging my grandmother's floor-to-ceiling books and magazines." Jackson continues, "Because she bought them mostly from thrift stores and flea markets, a great number of books were abridged Reader Digests with embossed covers, books on etiquette, paperback romantics and exotic tales like the *Wife-Sharers*, but she also coveted

the classics and a host of contemporary writers: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, *The Langston Hughes Reader*, pocket-sized Robert Frost's *Poems* edited by Louis Untermeyer, [and] Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* come to mind." Another factor that led to his interest in poetry was a chance discovery of Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay," which was followed by his discovery of works by Langston Hughes. "Since then, I have never been without a book of poetry in my possession."

When you consider who some of Jackson's childhood neighbors were, it seemed inevitable his life would go in an artistic direction. Besides his future professor, Sonia Sanchez, there was Afaa Michael Weaver, Toni Cade Bambara, Lorene Cary, Houston Baker, Dave Burrell, Rufus Harley, Sun Ra, and the late drummer Tony Williams. This exposure demonstrated to Jackson that most artists were working people, their lives normal and more attainable than one would believe. These same neighbors visited the local schools, gave free concerts in the park, and exhibited their works during block parties.

Even with this artistic atmosphere, Jackson's parents expected him to attend college and matriculate toward a degree in accounting (which he did), then join one of the major accounting firms. "I carry with me a [question] my grandfather once asked after I told him I won a PEW Fellowship, awarded to support me while I wrote poetry for two years: 'So when are you going to start working?' I told him in two years; he thought I was sassing him and being smartass. The reality for him as well as for society in general, writing poetry is not work. Poets have only been able to retain dignity among their families and friends by obtaining and securing jobs in the academy. Even an adjunct job teaching composition will go a long way in earning one an ounce of respect among one's family. I also carry with me a tender and placatory moment with my father who was a counselor and psychoanalyst during a part of his life. While I was on fellowship, we set aside Monday evenings to play chess. One night he saw some papers strewn about on my desk and asked me about my process. Then, he began to convey a strategy he used to get his patients to understand the emotional complexity of their actions. It was compelling: the gesture as well as his suggestion. Very small and brief no doubt, but a lasting memory for me. Since then, it's been, 'So when are you going back to school for your doctorate?'"

Familial opinions aside, Jackson has pursued poetry with a passion and his career choices have led him on a path of artistic freedom. Since receiving his B.S. from Temple in 1992, he has received a M.F.A. from the University of Oregon, served as curator-in-residence for the Mountain Writers' Center in Portland, OR, curator and finance director of the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia and edited for both *Painted Bride Quarterly* and *American Poetry Review*. Jackson's choices reflect his quest to broaden horizons and explore the country. His desire to escape what he refers to as "over-taxed human relationships" of big cities is a driving force of his desire to experience the United States on a more intimate level. Rather than accepting any position that comes his way, he has sought out opportunities that have led him both South and West. "To me, that adage, 'write what you know' does not preclude the necessity of intensifying (through travel, exploration, interaction with others unlike us) what we

already know. I guess this is what I have never liked about that statement; beneath it is a directive to recycle one's ignorance.

I was thrilled to learn I would finally reside on the Pacific coast when I heard news of my acceptance into University of Oregon's Creative Writing Program. In the United States, the Northwest is unparalleled in its sense of grandeur; the Cascade Mountains and valleys, its stunningly beautiful coastline and rivers are powerful even in their serenity. That kind of splendor and scale is bound to have a bearing on one's interior and relationship to all that is sacred, which is essentially the lesson we ultimately inherit from the Romantics, and 20th Century environmental writers and poets; in a sense a lesson not unlike that of our grandparents and family members who took great pains to make sure we made it south during the summers. What is quite evident and obvious, but I will say it anyway, is that it politicized and deepened my understanding of the urban experience. Contrasts are gorgeous in this way."

During his travels, and time spent as Curator of Literary Arts at the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia, the one constant has been the poetry and the poets he has been honored to work with -- Amiri Baraka, Yusef Komunyakaa, Patricia Smith, A. Van Jordan, Sharon Olds, Sekou Sundiata; the late Safiya Henderson-Holmes, Sapphire, Ursula Rucker, and Willie Perdomo among others.

But it seems the poets who he has an affinity with are those from his affiliation with The Dark Room Collective out of Philadelphia -- John Keene, *Annotations* (New Directions Press, 1995), Natasha Trethewey, *Domestic Work* (Graywolf, 2000), Thomas Sayers Ellis, *The Genuine Negro Hero* (Kent State Univ Press, 2001), Kevin Young, *To Repel Ghosts* (Zoland Books, 2001), Carl Phillips, *The Tether* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2001) and Sharan Strange, *Ash* (Beacon Press, 2001). Jackson points to both their talent and comradeship as being important factors in his poetic directions. "The friendships and bonds created through the collective have fortified me over the years -- god, how necessary if you are Black and a writer of poetry! It is these friendships that have helped to buttress any doubts (which I still experience from time to time) about my abilities or sense of sanity at choosing a life imagining, a life committed to language and transformation of self through creativity."

In the end, Jackson doesn't point to any one poet as inspiration but to the actual poem. "Quite often a poem will begin as an exercise in imitation of some wonderful poem I might have read that. However, I am inspired by the life of poets; this has more to do with personal journeys, the means by which a poet evolves."