

## New Letters 74.4 (Fall 2008)

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAJOR JACKSON Conducted by Robert Stewart 32 (June 2007)

NEW LETTERS: Describe for us the Philadelphia where you grew up—it occurs so often in your poems.

MAJOR JACKSON: My world was complex, having grown up in north Philadelphia, which, by all accounts gets dismissed as a ghetto. That term is meant to sum up not only the landscape, a landscape that's been devastated by poverty and failed urban-renewal policies, but also to sum up and summarily dismiss its inhabitants. In writing the poems, I set out to complete and maybe even challenge to some extent the portraits that we inherit, either through mass media or movies like *Boyz n the Hood* when I was growing up, and maybe give a more textured feel for the people of whom I grew up with. I say it's complex because although I grew up in north Philadelphia, by no accounts was my life impoverished. In fact, I grew up solidly working class, middle class, but I lived with my grandparents who had settled in that area of Philadelphia when it was predominately Jewish, interestingly enough. Then the '60s came along and white flight happened, and the neighborhood deteriorated, degenerated into a ghetto. But I also spent time in Germantown and Mount Airy, which are old, solidly middle-class areas. I went back and forth, and I was able to witness a few economic levels.

NL: I want to make a bit of a leap here because I saw a photograph of you, recently, in which you were with B.H. Fairchild. When I saw the picture, I thought, this is interesting because there's a similar approach to poetry that Major Jackson shares with B.H. Fairchild, a kind of a storytelling quality, a celebration of the life you come from. Yet, Fairchild came from a small town in Kansas, and you came from a big, Eastern city. Does my comparison seem true?

JACKSON: It's actually quite true. I think there is a tradition out of which both B.H. Fairchild and I write, and it's enormously American. I mean, it goes back to people like Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters and Gwendolyn Brooks. These are writers for whom common people give the work purpose and relevance. There is a desire, like you said, to celebrate and uphold and render permanent individuals, landscapes, and childhood memories as well, and think about the ways in which our interior is educated, our interior is fed by—I won't say folk, capital F, but folklore, lowercase. I'm often enriched when I come across a poem in which there is—despite the geographical difference, despite the generational difference—something utterly humane when we seek to render people who share a commonality of spirit. That's what it boils down to.

NL: Exactly. That sense of the human being seems to get lost in some of the poetry I see these days.

JACKSON: I think one of the reasons poets like Thomas Hardy or Shakespeare are asserted and sustained over the years is because we do come back to the humanity. Language is important; make no mistake about it. Language is the medium. But I think you're talking about a kind of eccentric play we sometimes have, an excess of playfulness. Those poems being written today have their audiences and will create their audiences; and I would imagine that those audiences will fade in and out with time, but we'll never worry about poets like Gwendolyn Brooks—"The Life of Lincoln West," for example. Lincoln West is someone who will always resonate for us. It's about the language but is even more so about the human spirit and its capacity to love. NL: We were talking about mentors and, of course, you have in your book *Hoops* a long poem, half the book, I suppose, "Letter to Brooks," referring to Gwendolyn Brooks, the great poet from Chicago.

JACKSON: And Topeka. Born in Topeka, Kansas.

NL: That's right, Kansas claims her, too. Of course, Gwendolyn Brooks was a great formalist, especially early on. Is that the work that influenced you most and drew you in?

JACKSON: I wrote "Letter to Brooks" primarily as a meditation on inheritances: aesthetic as well as political. I went to school in Philadelphia, educated at Temple University where Sonia Sanchez taught for many years. Sonia Sanchez was one of the important poets of the 1960s, as we know, but she's been an important poet throughout the decades. She probably was the first to really render and talk about the necessity of having certain kinds of consciousness, awarenesses about how one's work affects the world. My study of Gwendolyn Brooks, believe it or not, happened before I met Sonia Sanchez. I had this Ebony pictorial history of African-Americans that my mother gave to me when I was 11 or 12 years old. The book went from ancient civilizations of Africa to 1973, with a section on black literary figures. I found Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden, among many others; a guy named Julian Mayfield, I remember, was also pictured in there. Then in college I studied African-American literature. That's when I really started getting into her work.

The work of hers that influenced me the most was her pivotal book, *In the Mecca*, published in the late '60s. Many American poets who were formalists early on—Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, others, including Brooks—have that hinge book, that book in which they haven't totally thrown off the shackles, so to speak, of form, but they're also pushing to some new terrain. Lowell's *Life Studies* comes to mind. *In the Mecca* is Gwendolyn Brooks' model for the kind of flexibility you can exercise with form. Yes, those early poems are fascinating to me—"Beverly Hills Chicago," the sonnets in *Annie Allen*—I loved those poems. But I like where she's struggling, also. When I say my poem to Gwendolyn Brooks is a meditation on inheritance, that's what I inherited—I inherited the notion of form as being a political decision, even though I never fully agreed with that, particularly form being a race issue. The sonnet is English and Italian; the villanelle is French. Well, what's African about those forms? There were a number of theorists of "the black aesthetic" in the late '60s and early '70s who called into question the decision to write in those forms. That's what I inherited, a kind of, not ambivalence, but of thinking critically about how I can use form. I don't ultimately believe that form is a decision of politics. I think that we can make form, bend form to do the things that we want to do. So that's what I set out to do with that "Letter to Brooks," which as you know is written in rhyme royale. I set out to do it after reading W.H. Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron," the great romantic poet. I was fascinated by the notion of a letter; you can throw in all kinds of wonderful details and observations; you can leap from subject to subject, and it's written in rhyme, which automatically invites wit. Where is wit in American poetry these days?

NL: "Letter to Brooks" is exactly what you say. It's sweeping and witty and, just great fun to read.

JACKSON: This is the last section of "Letter to Brooks" in which I begin and use as an aphoristic phrase, a line from Gwendolyn Brooks, one of her more famous poems, "When you have forgotten Sunday: a love story." This is "Spring Garden," and I should say the letter is constructed in sections based on subway stops in Philadelphia along the Broad Street line, which runs north to south. This is subway stop Spring Garden, and the poem starts, When you have forgotten (to bring into Play that fragrant morsel of rhetoric, Crisp as autumnal air), when you Have forgotten, say, sun-lit corners, brick Full of skyline, rowhomes, smokestacks, Billboards, littered rooftops & wondered What bread wrappers reflect of our hunger,

NL: Let me ask you about rhyme. The poet Carolyn Kizer was on this show a few years ago, and she made the comment that the trouble with rhyme in English is that all the good rhymes have been used up.

JACKSON: Ha.

NL: You often use rhymes, although, sometimes they're barely noticeable the way you use them. What is the role of rhyme in American culture? It seems to demand to be there, no matter how much sometimes we poets want to get rid of it.

JACKSON: For me, rhyme has a few functions. One, it's generative; it allows me to make an utterance or make an assertion or an observation or tap into some observation that I would not have made without that generating device. In one of my poems, I rhyme skin with grin. That was a revelation because if you know the history of entertainment in this country, and you know some of the survival tactics that African-Americans have used to get out of trouble, or to advance themselves, part of that had to do with how they smiled, how they grinned. So there's a narrative, there's a relationship between those two words, and I was happy to at least suggest it in the poem. Piggybacking off that thought, there's something about the English language that we are tapping into, and what we are tapping into is power. These sounds that we make are ancient, and whenever we use a word, even if it's mother or father or truth, these words began as guttural sounds, or just intuitive sounds that eventually gave shape and form to our lives. Much in those same way that we tap into the power of alluding to form, or a historical figure, or some sort of symbol like the scale or the sea, I believe words carry that same kind of resonance in poems. So, I was thinking, I was looking at one of the poems today on the plane, and I rhyme "truth" with "strut." Sonically there's only a slight relationship. But they share letters, and they share letters almost in the same place. And I like thinking about how truth struts its glory through time. I believe, subtly a reader will feel that and detect that; I'm someone who doesn't necessarily believe rhyme only happens in sound. I think it happens in idea. I think it happens at the level of the eye, at the level of the syllable, and the other function—it's fun for me. It's fun for me to try to meet the challenge of finding new associations.

NL: You have a section of your long poem "Urban Renewal" that travels from high school physics to Desdemona's neardeath, or the moment before she gets killed. You've taken this and other poems from your first book, Leaving Saturn, and expanded them and developed them further into your second book, Hoops. So there must be a deep, deliberate, methodical quality of your work process.

JACKSON: Yes. I would say that there are some poems that I've become obsessed over. I really thought my first book was going to be a collection of all urban renewals, mainly because I was influenced by Robert Lowell. He published a book in 1969 called Notebook, and then he published another version of it in 1970, and then he broke those poems out into History, and just kept revising. But I love the block shape of these poems, the heft of it, the weight of it, the gravitas. I also have been influenced by Derek Walcott. And Derek Walcott in the '80s and '90s put out Midsummer, first, and then The Bounty, which had an enormous impact on me, because Lowell had given up rhyme with his Notebooks. He used mostly allusion, and he always has a kind of dramatic, rhythmic surge in his work. But there was an elegance in Walcott's Midsummer, and a landscape mostly that I was kind of familiar with. I wanted to echo those books. So, I became obsessed with writing urban renewals.

NL: It is interesting that you mention Walcott. Even though he won the Nobel Prize in the '80s, and he is someone whom I also frequently go back to when I want to be reminded how language can work in just absolutely dazzling ways, he isn't someone one hears about often.

JACKSON: I believe generations will find him. There's something about humanity captured in the grand poems of his, whether it's Omeros or books like The Bounty. It's a high kind of regard for the art, and for language, and for other poems, and for a tradition that I believe subsequent generations will come to admire. Talk about politics. You know, to talk about tradition in such exalted ways gets dismissed at times as hierarchical and maybe even masculinist. But, I believe such judgments will fall away. The poems will speak to themselves, to speak at a raw level. To come back to your question about my poem "Urban Renewal," for a long time, I carried those things in my head. My grandmother was an evangelist, so we would go from church, depending

on the weekend; and Sundays were long, and we were definitely at Wednesday night prayer revivals. In "Urban Renewal XIX," I wrote about my first experience of the laying on of hands, where the reverend or the minister hit my head, you know. That carried with me for years. Now we see it on TV, of course, with televangelists. Well, it never really happened to me like what you see on TV, but I play with that in the poem. I imagine that. What struck me about that actual moment is when the ushers are there to catch the body and usher it down, that moment of holding tenderly—I wanted to explore the resonance of that moment where I saw it in other areas of my life; so the poem begins, That moment in church when I stared at the reverend's black kente-paneled robe & sash, his right hand clasping the back of my neck, the other seizing my forehead, standing in his Watch this pose, a leg behind him ready to spring, his whole body leaning into the salvation of my wizened soul, I thought of the Saturday morning wrestlers of my youth who'd hold their opponents. . . .

NL: I read that the poet Robert Pinsky declared "Urban Renewal" to be a hopeful poem. I wonder if you feel hopeful, or if growing up you felt particularly hopeful about the world and about your life.

JACKSON: Yes. I believe that hope is manifested most in the work of writing poems, of having faith that the artful phrase, the poem, has at its core concentrations around our lives as manifested in language—whether, as in the last poem, the tenderness I want to convey in that series of images, or in the language I use. That's where I believe hope manifests most for me, in the act of writing.

NL: You have a lot of poems about the musician Sun Ra, who overtly wants to elevate humanity with music. Does poetry take on that role for you, of elevating us?

JACKSON: That's why I was attracted to Sun Ra as a figure, as a cultural figure. There's something that's familiar in his belief that music and its energies can impact and create a better world. That was always the notion of high art in poetry. Some people believed, regretfully, in the 19th century when we started teaching English, that it was about elevating the savages to civilization. I don't think that was it at all. I believe there was something about language that created a particular kind of music that entered us and widened our humanity. Sun Ra is an powerful jazz musician, whose faith and hope and compositions are a gift. I love him as a composer; I love him as a cultural figure. I believe in his project. I identify with it. I'm not as zealous about it, but there is a faith that the teacher has; there's a faith that the minister has; there's a faith that the politician has that we all have when we put ourselves to the task of doing what we do and doing it well.

NL: How do you keep that going with new poems?

JACKSON: I've been writing ten-line poems, and the project started off as an assignment from the administrators of the Cave Canem workshop, which was founded in 1996 by Tori Derricot and Cornelius Eady as a retreat for African-American poets. And, to celebrate the 10th year, they asked all the participating poets at Cave Canem to write a 10-line poem that could be collected into an anthology. I wrote one poem and the fever overcame me to write more. So it's been a project; what I loved about this, about affording myself 10 lines is that I could play with language, have fun, and not sacrifice raw emotion, and that was the intent. One poem is called "Picket Monsters." I taught at Columbia University for a semester, on Thursdays; and every Thursday, there seemed to be a protest. It had me recall my youth as a student activist in Philadelphia, and I was a little jealous that there was my past right before me. [reprint "Picket Monsters." ?]

NL: So, for you, as a lot of poets who work in any kind of an arranged structure, it's a liberating experience.

JACKSON: Yes. I know some people experience it as walking into a prison, and at the same time being straight-jacketed.

NL: When you were studying, and you were in school, and you were learning how to write poetry, was the approach of the study toward formal writing or was it more open?

JACKSON: I remember enrolling in an advanced creativewriting course with Sonia Sanchez, and my expectation of writing a bunch of poems in free verse about global race, environmental racism, and politics, and corrupt politicians in Philadelphia. You know? Instead, she assigned a form a week, and I was shocked, but I was on board because I trusted her as a teacher and as a poet, and she definitely has a relationship to the art of poetry that even I recognized at that young age wasn't solely about politics. She had an aesthetic awareness of what language and what poems could do. I will invoke the metaphor that you used earlier about the jazz musician in composition. You know, jazz musicians work within a particular rhythmic, rhythm section and a harmonic section; the act of soloing is something that is about resisting those structures, and also walking in sync with those structures. So when I teach form, it's the image of the, let's say, saxophonist or trumpeter, starting off with the quartet or the quintet, and then breaking away. The quartet keeps going, and the soloist finds the greatest freedom within the frame itself. That's how I think about form, or think about giving myself some constraint, that I've been given this box, much like life. I've been given a particular social class, ethnic box. Yet, I refuse to let that box dictate my existence, if you understand that.

NL: I do understand, because I read the poem "Hoops."

JACKSON: Right.

NL: The contrasts that are set up in "Hoops" are just beautiful. What I see as a great celebration of the different kinds of life that pass through that poem, whether they're on the neighborhood basketball court, at home with the speaker's cousins, or aspiring to go off to study Nabokov— everything is celebrated. Nothing really is condemned.

JACKSON: That's art, you know? I believe I'm tapping into the complexity of my existence, which has never been one track. It's always been multitracked, or, as we say, polyrhythmic. I've been fed by literature; I've been fed by church; I've been fed by history, by politics, by relationship with my family, both imagined and real; and as someone who lived in two different homes and had friends who were quick with the tongue and friends who were quick with their instruments, I understood the capacity for humanity to try to make sense of their realities. I adore it; I love it when it comes out in jokes and humor, or in art, or like my aunt. and her sense of fashion and style. I think that's what we're trying to do in this life, make sense and stylize a self. For me, it happens to be through poetry, and I can't imagine where my life would be today without my finding it. That's the thing with poems: You look at them, and there's this moment of distance, like, Oh, I wrote that? That came from me? Yet I know it's the deep, multiple levels of who I am that is finding itself on the page. A lot of the stuff, particularly the autobiographical lyric narratives, they're not all that autobiographical. I'm doing some fictionalizing there, and that's also the imagination asserting itself as personality and spirit.

NL: Absolutely. Speaking of the richness that I see in your books, you also have a blog? On [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org). There's one section in there, I don't know why I happened to stumble on it, "What's In, What's Out?"

JACKSON: Yes.

NL: You know what was funny about that was that even though I'm not that much in tune with a lot of aspects of that, of the American culture unfortunately, but most of that seemed right to me.

JACKSON: Ha ha ha!

NL: I mean, you know, villanelles are out, and I thought, yeah, villanelles were pretty hot for awhile, and it's about time for them to be out. But also slouchy boots are out. Kobe Bryant is out. I think that was on your list. Very interesting. I guess my question of all that is how do you stay so in touch with all of these phenomena happening in the country, maybe the world?

JACKSON: We are in touch with so many different parts of the world vis-à-vis the Internet. I also have friends, and we share e-mails, share music, share web sites, blogs, podcasts. I'm not a big TV person; I think television stopped being important to me, maybe 10 or 15 years ago. But there's certain shows that I will follow; there are other shows when three or four seasons will go by before someone says you gotta rent the last four seasons. That was something that we didn't do in the '70s and '80s, watching *Good Times*, and *Mel's Diner*. You know, we have a big glut of emotion, and we need help. We need help. Again, my assertion is that poetry competes with it. How poetry wins out is because we get to select. The thing with popular culture is that it's not selective. It just wants to grab everything and absorb it, and maybe even zap it of its power so that we've sucked it in, and now we're moving on to the next thing. Writing that "What's In, What's Out" was fun for me because I could, in a cheeky way, play with that notion and really be self-referential about the whole culture. It's absurd to do what's in, what's out, you know, but I think we instantly, instinctively, know like what you said, some of it is true. I was havin' fun with that. What am I doin' saying the Grinch is out? The Grinch comes back every Christmas, doesn't he? But I love playing with it. Rhyming Grinch with Annie Finch, you know. Pairing Robert deNiro with, I think, Robert Haas. I play with, you know. Frank Bidart and Frank Geary. I think reading a lot keeps me in touch with those things, reading *The Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, certain magazines. I haven't seen a Broadway play, but I could almost tell you what's the hot thing that's going on right now on Broadway just from riding the trains.

NL: Well, you seem to be one on, as Henry James said, "on whom nothing is lost." You mentioned Frank Bidart, and he said "the history of taste is not the history of art," and your response to that was that "his words echoed through me like one of Moses' stone tablets." Do you remember that statement?

JACKSON: I do. He said it in a poem, and he recycled it in a graduation ceremony. The utterance, itself, describes what happens between the artist, the artwork, and the audience. As someone who contemplates quite often—maybe too often—the relevance of what I'm doing and whether or not my audience is five years down the line, 10 years down the line, 50, 100. I often think about what's fashionable and try to avoid that at all costs, and try to get at core what is timehonored about language and poems and my relationship to them. I think his, that utterance—by Bidart—the history of taste is not the history of art—struck me like a rainfall. And I live by it.

NL: Can we say that the real competition for poets alive today are Yeats, and Emily Dickinson, and Shakespeare, even? I think that's what you're getting at by looking at the core value that's going to remain in the poems.

JACKSON: I would be lucky to have one poem enter into the consciousness of humanity. I'd be lucky to write a poem like Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts;" I'd be lucky to write Pound's "In a Station at the Metro," or Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," or any number of other poems To enter into the stream of consciousness of humanity is probably the ultimate accolade or laurel for a poet. That's what we're struggling for. It's not ego-driven. I think it's a giving back. I mean, those poems, Rilke's "You Who Never Arrived," Czeslaw Milosz's "Song on the End of the World," those poems are true gifts for me. How often do we experience an epiphany in the way that only a poem can give it to us? The way to do that, to enter into that consciousness of humanity, is to go to the center of the language and think about what holds for us. How we can tap into that stream of sound? I'm driven by that. Let's face it, the pop lyric is only going to take us so far in terms of its

emotional complexity. I fell in love; she broke up with me; my pain is deeper than the sea. Or, I want her back. Although that's universal, it's not giving us shades of that emotion the way poetry does.

NL: Is that what compelled you to go on from Leaving Saturn, to continue to develop a poem like "Hoops," because you felt like it wasn't quite fulfilled?

JACKSON: With "Hoops" definitely. I imagine with the next two or three books, I will always have a poem or group of poems titled "Urban Renewal," and the hope and the aim is to get that family of poems together and to think about order. I hope it turns out to be the thing that I go back to when I'm faced with a writer's block. It's my stone, it's my great sculpture. Yes. I have a restlessness with that project, and I had a restlessness with "Hoops," which took me four or five years to write, and I did not want to force it; I wanted to come back to it with the patience that a visual artist will approach a particular painting.