

## **To Lift Our Downturned Eyes A Profile of Major Jackson by Elizabeth Ready**

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Black night wraps around the Robert Frost homestead, and it's cold for early August. The poet's old barn is packed with rows of writers sitting on folding chairs. Each person leans toward the lit corner as the Poet in Residence takes the small stage to open the 26th weeklong Festival of Poetry.

The first thing you notice about Major Jackson is his kindness.

It's as if he's lived next door a long time. As he opens his book, *Leaving Saturn*, you leave New Hampshire's Franconia Notch for what at first seems like another world. You trust the poet and go along willingly.

Jackson is no swinger of birches. He grew up in North Philly, and his poems map the Hood as James Joyce's prose does the streets of Dublin.

On the first page of his first book, Jackson offers a pledge, a mighty aspiration to speak the human voice of his home ground in a series entitled "Urban Renewal." He travels back to a summer night of his childhood. A block party is in full sway. Neighbors sit out on rooftops and the hoods of cars, or they gather in doorways. The senses come alive. Stevie Wonder blares above Bullocks Corner Store and kids lick blue-sky Popsicles. A mother straddles a stoop of brushes and combs and a jar of Royal Crown, as she bends to her daughter's hair:

She was fingering rows dark as alleys on a young girl's head cocked to one side .... I pledged my life right then to braiding her lines to mine, to anointing streets I love with all my mind's wit.

The poem is an invitation to put aside what you've heard on the news, the preconceptions, biases, or notions that you carry. There is a sense of fresh start. The city is not just chaos but a human place that is better seen than judged. There is empathy in the poet's voice and an almost elegiac tone:

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

But it's not just the sights, it's the sounds. The title of the book, and most of its third section, invokes the music of the late jazz legend Sun Ra who practiced and jammed right around the corner from where Jackson lived in Philadelphia. It was Sun Ra who said, "Space is the place," and claimed to be born on Saturn and sent to this world by higher powers. Jackson too, addresses himself to the universe:

So here I am In Philadelphia, Death's headquarters Here to save the cosmos, Here to dance in a bed Of living gravestones.

Mingled throughout this poem are the tragedies and rhythms of the African Brazilian Band, the Manifesto of the One Stringed Harp, the magic pull of the electric slide. Some passages may border on being too hip or even obscure. But if the reader can stay with the dissonance, the verse also holds a sense that multiple dimensions can exist at once, and there is a call in the strains of the music.

It is his ability to hold together both the wretched and the sublime that has earned Jackson high praise and a long list of awards.

Jackson has been recognized with the Cave Canem Award, as finalist for the Critic's Circle Award, with a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, and with numerous other fellowships, commissions, and residencies. His work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The American Poetry Review*, and in *The Best American Poetry of 2004*. Critics, too, have welcomed his debut.

"Jackson knows the truth of black magic," says Afaa M. Weaver in *Ploughshares*. "It is music as simple as the belief in humanity that subverts racism, or the esoteric and mystical magic of making jazz, the music of hope and love. The black man is these things, God's almighty riff, the miracle Countee Cullen inscribes as 'to make a poet black and bid him sing.'"

Yet, with some of these accolades comes the threat of being boxed in too soon. Jackson tells a story of being recruited as a young man for the Marines. He was a good student and on a whim took a military aptitude test and scored well. The recruiter called again and again to sign him up. After declining a number of times, Jackson wondered why the man just wouldn't give up on him. In answer, the recruiter as much as said, "We know your type and who you are. You'll need us. We'll get you in the end."

In the same way, readers should take caution in allowing critics to box in Jackson as just another black poet whose writing is inspired by and infused with music. When critics apply even positive stereotypes, they risk missing the depth of the work. Like far-reaching writers of any time, Jackson is not primarily a poet of place or race, but of the human heart.

That chilly night at the Frost Place when Jackson told the crowd about another summer in Mr. Pate's Barbershop, the details were palpable:

a water fountain by the door, how I drank the summer of '88 over and over from a paper cone cup & still could not quench my thirst, for this was the year funeral homes boomed, the year Mr. Pate swept his own shop for he had lost his best little helper Squeaky to cross fire.

The words are stark, without an overlay of good or bad. Geography slips away. There is a pause where the poem opens out and something else can happen: a different response to present violence. We learn that Mr. Pate has been gathering clumps of fallen hair,

in short delicate whisks, as though they were the fine findings of gold dust.

And he keeps them in a jar on the shelf, collecting as an antique dealer does. What else can be done, Jackson seems to ask, but what Mr. Pate does,

growing tired, but never forgetting someone has to cherish these tiny little heads.

Now in Vermont with his wife and two children, Jackson greets a yearly crop of students at the University of Vermont with the same generosity that runs through his poems.

"In order to be a good poet, you have to have an allegiance to truth in the work, to be fierce here [he points to his chest], to trust in yourself. You avoid the pressure and start over with every poem. Not all my students will be writers," he says. "I am also fostering the next generation of readers."

Jackson says he became "a nature boy" after his first visit to the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference as a fellow in 1992. "I loved swimming in those watering holes," he laughs. When UVM advertised an opening, he not only applied, but put other job offers on hold until the position came through. While he hasn't yet taken up

snowboarding, his son Langston has. Jackson says he wants to write about the natural beauty of his new home, but it may have to wait because “I have lots of stories to tell.”

His new project, *Hoops*, is nearly in its final form and will be published later this year. It features a long poem presented in the form of a letter to poet Gwendolyn Brooks, inspired in part by Auden’s “Letter to Byron.” Jackson addresses himself to the late Pulitzer Prize winner in talky stanzas of rhyme that leap from the topic of raising children, to writing on a laptop, to things he has seen on recent trips. “I am learning much about the significance of raising Lazarus,” he says.

The title of the book comes from a series of poems using city pick-up games as a jumping off point to explore the complex play of lives. “The editors are always thinking of what will sell,” he jokes of the book’s title.

But Jackson has other things on his mind. “During the act of creating, there is that momentous, ontological millisecond when the interior self veiled as the speaker in a poem joins the chain of the living, the dead, and the yet born,” Jackson says.

Standing with him in his fourth floor office in UVM’s Old Mill, Lake Champlain stretches out below. But the buckling seas of city asphalt and the outposts of the universe are not far away. His poems introduce the possibilities of existence in a simple, daily way. It is brave to recognize motes of hair as signs of hope. It is surprising to suggest we lift up our eyes, pour over these sights.

His success will be his challenge. Sights are always changing, and the urge to package Jackson and his poems can marginalize. He will have to live up to his own standard of fierceness. He will have to start again with every poem.