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"Yet what connects those dots": the slim rim of fear in Major Jackson's "Hoops".

Book review by Page Richards

The dots that make up the circle of life in Major Jackson's new book *Hoops* have a surprising linkage: fear. Major Jackson reveals in this second book an unexpected and deep-seated trust in it. His is different from the fear of a relatively young culture, mapped in the United States by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Walt Whitman, for example, in the postrevolutionary and early modern era, or that of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, among others, who picked up that thread of cultural defensiveness and went on the offensive, famously propounding the "new."

Such responses to a colonial past reproduce the familiar arc of the fight-or-flight response embedded in fear's genetic code. When Major Jackson identifies fear inhabiting the country from a racial rather than trans-Atlantic angle in *Hoops*, he sounds off on another history and another lineage, "Hayden, Baraka, Dove, and Wright." As he says, "America could / Never deal with a diverse canon of poets."

In Jackson's world, the nearly-dead are ferried back into the *afterlife* of living: "to arrive / here, where the page is blank, an afterlife." So the actual dead are also transported back into the world of the living on this reenergized spectrum that includes all dead, all living. Jackson's position on fear therefore is not essentially defensive, nor offensive: neither fight nor flight. In *Hoops*, fear serves as an extraordinary ferry, and the poet can be a "chauffeur" who carries the "true and living through muck and mire." In this revitalized echo (rather than full-fledged allusion) to Charon, the ferryman of the dead over the river Acheron, the divide between the alive and the dead from all times is effectively crossed out, making room for more crossings. *Hoops* thus ties and connects back together fearful and wounded bodies.

This is also true at the level of form. In a resounding interconnection of literary forms, rhetoric, and prosody (ballad stanza, rime royal, updated Skeltonics, allusion, and sometimes downgraded allusion), *Hoops* focuses on a network of transversing, ferrying verbs: "I cross," "I liken to," "I jet." Utilizing these verbs as the book's pump, the poems, as a body, organize the circulation, simultaneously profound and humorous: "I've a long ride to Philly / I'll give this [letter] to Gramps. Perhaps, he'll think it silly."

Almost the entire second half of the book is a humorously long and seriously engaged "epistolary chat" from the near-dead poet Jackson to the dead poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who herself is depicted as nearly-alive, "up there." The nearly-dead and the nearly-alive, therefore, are never far apart. Addressed to Brooks, the letter is a juxtaposition in epic time between every two hands held in fear: "which is to say, we are / Never alone."

The epistolary chat is at once ceremonial and informal; completed and dangling; written and voiced; conversational and ultra self-conscious (sometimes too much so, as in "I want a form / For my lyrical stealth. I want a malt / To toast the public's health. / I want a storm to rest my perfect shelf"). Sometimes the self-deprecation and recovery can stick out awkwardly, as in these lines where Jackson ropes Thomas Hardy with Seamus Heaney: "Far from the maddening / caravan of fistfights, jacked-rides, drunkards / my pen takes aim from the thumbnail of his [Grandfather's] yard."

Still, most interestingly, Jackson's pen does not dig down to history, as Heaney's "squat pen" dug in tune with his rural father's own spade. Instead, by "tak[ing] aim," it literalizes and urbanizes such a pen. In a long-winded extenuation of fear, Jackson reconnects history not just to the dead, as Heaney does, but to the living, including himself. What we experience overall through these hoops is the slim rim, forged in fear. This fine circle is not between life and death, but less conventionally—and beginning in reverse—death-as-rebirth and life-as-near-death. In *Hoops*, they are never far apart in the first place.

Jackson's first book *Leaving Saturn* gave us a more conventional journey forward, an elegy, from anointment of origins ("streets I love") to a "patchwork of goodbyes." *Leaving Saturn* not surprisingly, then, was composed of more traditional drawn-out allusions to fate, social injustices, and poetic form, as in this urban ballad, opening with a dunk shot:

Bound by a falling CYCLONE
fence, a black rush streaks
for netless hoops & one alone
from a distance, seeming to break
above the undulant pack, soars—

Akin to this basketball player Radar, who like Icarus flies to the hoop, so the poet of *Hoops* also attempts to streak above the "scribble[rs]" at conferences, "sorry" literary critics, the "epicurean" mob, only to soar on the same solitary momentum back into the world of connections, hanging onto the hands of the living and dead, whether Auden, Hughes, or 2Pac. The solitary dunk turns out to be a choral gesture, a bold move of indebtedness and acknowledgement. It is a continual jamming, the "thank-you" to fellow artists on the ground and in the air, their lives and art recognized on the page. Jackson's lines keep holding hands with all of them, and hanging onto the eternal "afterlife" of the written page.

The writer, the one who inhabits the worlds of both the living and the dead, is therefore a new choral voice whose strength, not weakness, includes fear. Fear links the generations, resisting its own silence. "We've a story in those towers," the grandfather says. That story is a plot of land, of home, of the grave, together. Therefore, *Hoops* crosses time, both forwards and backwards. It rediscovers the medieval tropes of the wheel of fortune, and reinvents the wheel (he spins and stops it to "preserve / The fibers" in "Hunting Park").

At times, Jackson can sound like the reluctant and self-conscious narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde* who attempts to stand back and record. But like the older poet, Jackson changes his tale with the telling. From Orpheus to The Supremes, from rime royal to rap, Jackson continuously attempts to straighten the zigzag of dots to lineages of rebirth that allow him to connect and redirect artistic, genetic, and emotional ancestors, dead and alive. Just shy of fate, it is a binding of fear, freshly heard, that "connects those dots." Major Jackson lets us hear in *Hoops* what he calls an "eternal chorus." In this new volume, he humbly renders what he names "sound" to such "collective necessity" while amplifying it for all of us to hear and reconnect with.

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