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Hoops Major Jackson. Norton, \$23.95 (128p) ISBN 0-393-05937-5

The title of this impressive, enjoyable, readable book, Major Jackson's second, refers to the hotly contested games of basketball on the asphalt courts of the author's native North Philadelphia. After a prologue poem of well paced, three- and four-beat lines, in which Jackson and a friend, "off from a double at McDonald's," are stuck up at gunpoint while trying, despite "schoolboy jitters," to buy cocaine, we enter the macadam rectangle, a multi-ringed circus of which the game is only the central part. Around the edges of the chain-link fence, nicknamed figures throw craps and drink malt liquor to the sound track of a Boogie Down Productions tape pumping out of a boom box. On the court itself, urban art is being made:

At gate's entrance, my gaze
follows Radar & his half-cocked
jump shot. All morning I sang
hymns yet weighed his form:
his flashing the lane, quick-
stop to become sky-born.

The casual ballad stanzas of the title poem point early on to Jackson's greatest strength, which is his ability to marry without anxiety the traditional forms of the English poetic tradition with the poetic vernacular and the human concerns of an urban, black population.

Jackson, of course, is not exactly a representative member of that population--he's a published and polished poet, after all; and no matter what population you're from, to be a poet is to be an odd man out. But this simply reinforces another meaning in the collection's title, namely, that American upward mobility, especially for a black man, involves jumping through multiple hoops. The process is not necessarily hateful, although it can be dangerous, and not only psychologically. That the title poem is dedicated to Hank Gathers, the Loyola Marymount guard who once led the nation in scoring and rebounding but died of heart failure on the court during his conference tournament, suggests that even the most successful of the upwardly mobile are guaranteed nothing.

The poetic instinct was there early on in this author, if the poem "Metaphor" is any indication. Jackson recalls watching a thunderstorm with a cousin, the two trying to outdo each other in figurative invention. The eventual poet ultimately takes the prize, "likening the meteoric openings / to glowing keyholes into / an alien world," thereby describing not only electrical gashes but also the "openings" made by metaphor. Here is DuBois' famed "double-consciousness" oriented toward the particularities of the poet and operating at the most organic level.

But nobody rises alone and in this book Jackson pays homage to those who have buoyed him up. In "Urban Renewal," a multi-part poem that constitutes the second part of this three-part book, Jackson honors in deft pentameter a man who showed him how to work in and beautify the world:

The backyard garden wall is mossy green
and flakes a craggy mound of chips. Nearby
my grandfather kneels between a row of beans
and stabs his shears into earth. I squint an eye,--
a comma grows at his feet.

From close to the ground we rise (with hitches). Later on in the poem Jackson remembers the Kelly family of Philly, whose daughter Grace became a model of genteel beauty. But powerful locals could sniff out Irish blood: "No amount of Monacan / crowns or Hitchcock thrillers could propel the Kellys / up the Main Line. What W.A.S.P. would sign?" Jackson's own grandfather, meanwhile, "points at the skyline's glory / he once scaffolded," reminiscing, "'We gave the city light with those towers.'" Presumably, the Main-Liners refrained, if not from complaints about Irish bricklayers and black construction workers, then from complaints about the light they provided.

"You might say," writes Jackson, that "my whole life led / to celebrating youth and how it snubs and rebuffs." And about two-thirds of the way through this book, one begins to wish for writing not so exclusively retrospective, something adult. The poet seems to have shared this wish, for the volume's final section is a masterful and multi-part epistolary poem to Gwendolyn Brooks. Although it is gently retrospective in being elegiac, its orientation is more toward the present, toward Jackson himself as a practicing poet, husband, father, and man. In 176 stanzas, a flexible rime royal, we are taken to places all over the world--vacations, writing retreats, academic conferences, family gatherings--without ever leaving the head of a man represented to us in a conversational prosody that is one of the best contemporary examples of the multi-tiered tradition of Wordsworth, Auden, Whitman, Frost, and our black vernacular poets. It has been some time since I have read such a successful poem of our time. "What age granted these lines material good? / Can the epistolary form contain our hoods?" The answer to the former is an ambivalent ours; the answer to the latter is a definite yes. Jackson's poem is the proof.