

Small Spiral Notebook (Volume IV, Issue 4, Spring 2006)

Reviewed by Laura McCullough

In the tradition of Rita Dove and Cornelius Eady, Major Jackson is both a poet and a storyteller. His first book, *Leaving Saturn*, was the 2000 Cave Canem Poetry Prize winner and was a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist. Jackson was launched through Cave Canem, an organization of African American writers and poets, and certainly his work reflects what some might call an African American imagination and bounces off concerns and specifics relevant to his experience as an African American male. However, to categorize his work as solely that which speaks to race would be an error. If a white reader, for example, were to pass up *Hoops* because they felt it was "just" about the "Black Experience," they would be making a mistake, one that would deny them the richness of Jackson's poetry, his finely honed sense of craft, his blending of heart and mind.

Structured in three parts, *Hoops* is similar to a novel. There is a clear speaker present in all of the poems whose intelligence and development over the course of the poems in relation to many characters, (the grandfather who tends an urban garden, for example) helps shape the developing speaker and flesh out the story that the poems' accrual reveal.

Jackson is a careful observer. Much of the richness of these poems derives from his ability to capture and assimilate the details of life growing up in Philadelphia, a city known for its history of racial integration as well as for the collisions between races and ethnicities, for its vibrant music and creative communities, for its financial riches as well as for its poverty both in white and black communities. The final section of the book - *A Letter to Brooks* (one of Jackson's clear progenitor's is Gwendolyn Brooks) - is rife with poems titled after sections in Philly: Olney, Fairmont, and Spring Garden.

The title, *Hoops*, does hard work for Jackson evoking the b-ball famously played in urban areas and especially beloved in Philly as well as evoking the heart wrenching documentary, *Hoop Dreams*, about Chicago teens hoping to get out of the inner city by parlaying their "skills" into NBA super-stardom. It also evokes the jewelry of the women who populate the poems in this collection as in the poem, "Metaphor" which does so figuratively and in the poem "XVIII" which begins, "How untouchable the girls arm-locked strutting" which evokes high school girls bedazzled in *Hoops* and urban finery. Teachers in high schools come to know that one way to sense if a girl-gang fight is about to happen is that the girls take out their hoop earrings, so that they can't be ripped out. But Jackson's title poem, "Hoops," which established literal meaning also sets up the reader for the metaphoric resonance of *Hoops*. These poems are hoops, which intersect and interlock just like the lives in these poems do, just like the speaker experiences when he walks in different domains.

The intelligent observer, the poet is also the boy, is also the man. The speaker walks between races and classes and genders and generations, childhood and adulthood, and locations both urban and suburban, city and country. He finds the wild and the graceful in both and among all the people he intersects with. *Hoops*, like bangles on a woman's arms or in her ears, jangle dissonantly or tinkle harmoniously. The ball court can be a place of hope or a place of emotional as well as physical violence.

"Urban Renewal" is the most striking section of the collection. These are the most lyric, the most personally voiced, the ones that take on their subjects with the least distance. The craft is most transparent and the palpable sense of emotion is most immediate. These poems give the book great heart, and sandwiched in between the generous and finely crafted opening and closing sections, which flesh out the intellectual musculature of the book, this makes sense. These are the poems that give us a sense of otherness as well as the desperate need of the writer to fight against "the knowledge of death's necessity." The closing poem, "XX", the first line of which reads, "Out of punctured wounds we spun up, less" is a great example of the paradoxical theme running through the book: someone can be both a phoenix and a dive-bomber; ball players leap toward hope or dive toward despair and destruction. We come to learn the need of Jackson to survive and to witness.

There are hurts so deep, he tells us, they cross the intersection of all the Hoops of a life and color it. The color is black and the many beautiful and subtle shades thereof. The hopes and dreams are specific and in the accurate rendering, they become universal. Hoops is a magnificent second book that will put Jackson's his face among the reflected faces he evokes in the closing section of his poem, "Fern Rock," faces that represent many times, many races, all who struggled to give voice to a dream not deferred, but constantly in hand like the player whose feet have left the court and whose hands have just let go of the ball, the always striving toward a lay-up, the living always in that moment of "maybe I can."