

## The Southern Review

### History Shaping Selves: Four Poets by David Wojahn

*Native Guard: Poems* by Natasha Trethewey (Houghton Mifflin Company)

***Hoops: Poems* by Major Jackson (W. W. Norton & Company)**

*Sugartown* by David Rivard (Graywolf Press)

*Salvation Blues: One Hundred Poems, 1985-2005* by Rodney Jones (Houghton Mifflin Company)

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IN THE TITLE POEM of his late-in-life collection, *History*, Robert Lowell writes that "History has to live with what was here--/clutching and close to fumbling all we had." This famously visceral poet refuses to make history an abstraction; it is an august but gangling force, a kind of murky, debris- and detritus-laden river, flowing relentlessly, and in its currents the public and the personal are impossible to distinguish from one another. As Lowell insists in many of his greatest poems--think of the embittered elegy for Colonel Shaw and his black regiment in "For the Union Dead"--selves write history, but history shapes selves in powerfully mysterious ways. This is certainly not a fashionable contention, but I think it is one shared by all of the four poets under discussion here. They are not by any means Lowell's descendants, but they share with him a desire to superimpose the historical upon the personal; and for them the river of history is even more turbid than it was for the aristocratic Lowell, involving above all matters of race and of class, currents which Lowell with his patrician sense of entitlement could not have so acutely identified. Natasha Trethewey and Major Jackson are young African American poets concerned not so much with problems of identity politics as with the challenge of forging an authentic and personal voice in an era when definitions of African American literary identity promise to be significantly reconfigured. David Rivard and Rodney Jones, white male poets in midcareer, differ from many of their generational counterparts in their willingness to overtly acknowledge class as a force that still shapes our lives and continues to foster injustice. The milieu of Trethewey and Jones is primarily the rural South, while for Rivard and Jackson it is the urban Northeast. Trethewey and Jackson favor received forms, often the more intricate varieties, while Jones and Rivard work primarily in free verse--yet it is a tautly controlled and elegantly modulated variety of free verse. However, for all their formal and thematic differences, these four poets struggle with the same question that animated Lowell--how does history "live with what was here"?

Major Jackson is another young African American writer who has with his new collection embraced a thoroughly unfashionable style. *Hoops* is a puzzling and eccentric volume, maddening at times in its digressive self-indulgence but always brilliantly readable. And, in contrast to the exemplary cohesion of Jackson's first collection, *Leaving Saturn* (2002), *Hoops* is something of a loose, baggy monster of a book; its title poem is a revised and expanded version of a poem included in *Leaving Saturn*, and it also includes a number of additional sections of "Urban Renewal," the effort that served as the opening sequence of the earlier book. *Hoops*, therefore, seems less an individual collection than an ongoing installment of some larger project. This project seems now to include a long poem that serves as the book's centerpiece, the sixty-page "Letter to Brooks" a sprawling discursive piece written in, of all things, rime royal. As Jackson reminds us at one point in the poem, it's the stanza employed in Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron." The form gives him the opportunity to rhyme "desk" with "Audenesque" and offer up Audenesque chatter, allusion-mongering, wit, and name-dropping. It also permits Jackson to undertake what amounts to a book-length mash note to his first poetic love, Gwendolyn Brooks. It's the early--and often Audenesque--poetry of Brooks which Jackson loves, the elegance and narrative complexity of *A Street in Bronzeville* and particularly *Annie Allen*, a book that also contains lengthy passages in a variation on rime royal. I've spoken in some detail about "Letter's" prosodic pedigree because this sort of thing seems to be a matter of crucial importance to Jackson. Whereas *Leaving*

Saturn was concerned with the Bildungsroman narrative, which drives many a first collection of poetry--in Jackson's case with gritty portraits and narratives of growing up in Philadelphia--Hoops is all about learning your chops; it's about technique more than content. Leaving Saturn was an exemplary first collection, and I suppose in a more problematic way Hoops is an exemplary second book. Interestingly enough, the contrast I speak of is no better described than by Stanley Kunitz in a 1950 review of Brooks's Annie Allen:

Like many second books, this is an uneven one. In his (sic) first book, as a rule, the poet exults in his discovery that he can fly; in his second book he tests his speed and his range and possibly even begins his examination of his theory of flight ...

Jackson tries all of these things, too, some more successfully than others. The strongest efforts in the new collection remain the sort of autobiographical narratives Jackson perfected in Leaving Saturn. Hoops's title poem falls into this category, as does "Selling Out," which opens the collection. Here the adolescent speaker and a friend, flesh from working a shift at McDonald's, attempt to score some drugs; they're way out of their league, however:

We wore Gazelles, matching sheepskins,  
and the ushanka, miles from Leningrad.  
Chris said, Let's cop some blow despite  
my schoolboy jitters. A loose spread  
of dealers preserved corners. Then a kid,  
large for the chrome Huffly he pedaled,  
said he had the white stuff and led us  
to an alley fronted by an iron gate on  
a gentrified street edging Northern Liberties.  
I turned to tell Chris how the night  
air dissolved like soil, how jangling  
keys made my neck itch, how maybe  
this wasn't so good an idea, when  
the cold opening of gun-barrel  
steel poked my head, and Chris's eyes  
widened like two water spills before  
he bound away to a future of headphones  
and release parties. Me? The afterlife?  
Had I ever welcomed back the old

neighborhood? Might a longing  
persistent as the seedcorn maggot  
tunnel through me? All I know:  
a single dog barked his own vapor,  
an emptiness echoed through blasted  
shells of rowhomes rising above,  
and I heard deliverance in the bare  
branches fingering a series of powerlines  
in silhouette to the moon's hushed  
excursion across the battered fields  
of our lives, that endless night  
of ricocheting fear and shame....

The effortless tetrameter, the shift from the narrative of the mugging to the lyric introspection of the later lines--it's all handled with great panache. Jackson surely has proven that he can fly, that he has the "speed and range."

"Letter to Brooks," however, is mostly "theory of flight." As the ending of "Selling Out," suggests, Jackson has a weakness for elaborately worked-over metaphors and conceits, and a penchant for show-stopping rhetoric. "Letter to Brooks" has all this in abundance, sometimes to the poem's detriment, for it frequently turns into digression and beside-the-point editorializing on culture--high and low--and (especially) poetry. Like Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron," the poem is given some structural cohesion through its epistolary conceit: Jackson's aim is to guide his illustrious forebear through contemporary America, but he doesn't follow a carefully plotted itinerary. We glimpse the poet on his travels to reading gigs, writers' colonies, and even that most unpoetic of destinations, the AWP convention. And we get rhymes on the order of "Derrida" and "DVD" "get our fill" and "Cypress Hill." Here's a fairly representative stanza:

Art as ritual, said again and again,  
Most recently by DJ Spooky,  
Who cites the sound collage as transcendent  
Rite building a nation, our esprit  
De corps. Hip-hop's current genius loci  
Believes the cut, scratch, and spin  
Amends heteroglossia & situates Bakhtin.

It helps that Jackson employs all of these strategies with a fair amount of earnestness, displaying a self-deprecating humor that is quite different from the self-congratulatory wit that often mars Auden's "Lord

Byron." And the poem is not all about networking; there are, for example, some touching passages devoted to the poet's young son, and for all the with-it references in the poem, Jackson comes across as endearingly square. He makes it clear to us that his sympathies are not with the avant-garde. He slams the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and, for that matter, slams Slams. In a fairly lengthy appraisal of the era of the Black Arts movement, he sides with Robert Hayden over Amiri Baraka, and he of course favors Brooks's early formalist work over the sloganeering free verse of her later career. This is not to say that Jackson secretly watches the Fox network or subscribes to *The New Criterion*. Jackson, like Trethewey, is in search of a personal canon and a self-defining style, one that is not hobbled by doctrinaire approaches to ideologies or aesthetics. "Letter to Brooks" for all its eccentricity and sometimes misplaced ambition, can be seen as a step toward realizing this goal. Jackson is clearly a significant talent, and his accomplishment may prove to be considerable.

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