

Small Press Traffic

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Major Jackson - Leaving Saturn

Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002

Major Jackson is a native of North Philly, and though his journey has taken him far from his hometown, Jackson's first book, *Leaving Saturn*, is firmly grounded in Philadelphia, a city he pays homage to throughout: "I pledged / my life right then to braiding her lines to mine, / to anointing streets I love with all my mind's wit". Philly is a city obsessed with its past, while tremulously amnesiac about its own present. Yet Philly also supports a diverse arts community that reflects the city's recent regeneration. This backdrop of crisis and possibility is fertile ground for Jackson to explore personal and national identity, specifically what it means to be a young African-American poet in the 21st century.

In his opening sequence "Urban Renewal," Jackson writes, "From the LIBERTY BELL's glass asylum, / tourists emerge convinced of a cracked republic". The "asylum" that encloses our nation's symbol of democracy connotes both safety and danger: Does the "asylum" protect or imprison? The dualism present in the image of the glass asylum also highlights the seen and unseen. Like a building's beautiful façade masking structural rot, beyond the manicured lawns of Independence Hall you will find Philly's neighborhoods blighted with abandoned properties.

You are almost invisible in all this plain decay.
Children's laughter echoing in arcs of hydrant water-spray
knots the heart; those black bathers like Cézannes
will soon petrify to silence. A chorus of power lines
hums a melancholic hymn, tenements' aching pyrrhics,
doorways and row-homes crumbling to gutted relics:
this one exposing a nude staircase, that one
a second-floor ceiling where swings
a lightbulb like your chipped soul suspended
from a thread of nerves.

Like the lightbulb hanging "from a thread of nerves," Jackson illuminates that which is usually unseen, that which causes the tourists to turn away. Jackson reveals it all, displaying the contradiction that is present-day Philadelphia:

[. . .] Your Kangoled head spins
on cardboard, a windmill garnering allegiance.
Here prayed those who signed for Independence.
Break beats blasting your limbs to Market,
you're ghostbloom in the camera's flash,
so they call you FURIOUS ROCKER, CRAZYLEGS,—
The circle tightens like a colony, horse-and-carriages
hemming OLDE CITY to scraps of time;

Jackson's work is alive with movement and music. These observations break open the false division between past and present.

The importance of music is evident in the title of the collection, an homage to Sun Ra. It is drawn from a poem whose full title is "Leaving Saturn: Sun Ra & His Year 2000 Myth Science Arkestra at Grendel's Lair Cabaret, 1986." This piece is part of a series dedicated to Sun Ra performances. Some of these efforts fall flat: "I created a vacuum. / My story is a mystery. / Ain't no way they / Can fill a vacuum" while others dance: "Skyrocketed— / My eyes dilate old / Copper pennies". Jackson's poems sometimes creak under too much narrative pressure, but this poet has a fine ear and explores multiple trajectories that make this book worthy of the 2000 Cave Canem Poetry Prize.

--- Kathy Lou Schultz