

## **Tom Dent Literary Festival: 4th Annual Tom Dent Forum Sponsored by the New Orleans Public Library African American Resource Center - November 7 - 9, 2002**

### **Re-membering ecstatic landscapes: A view of Major Jackson's *Leaving Saturn* by Laura Tuley**

*"The language of art must communicate a truth, an objectivity, which is not accessible to ordinary experience."*—Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

*"Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat."*—Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

I teased Major Jackson when I learned that he was leaving New Orleans and his position at an HBCU, as a professor and role model for young African-Americans, to teach and write in the icy white north. "Shouldn't you be here "giving back" to your community?" I would prod him. Invariably, he would smile or sigh and, in some form or other, express his own genuine ambivalence about his professional and artistic choices. What strikes me about this particular forum (today) is that it is designed, explicitly, to honor those who have already, in fact, "given back" to their community. Although, I did not have the good fortune to meet Tom Dent, myself, I do know members of his family and a number of his former friends. What seems consistent in their account of Tom, is the deep and lasting impression he made upon all those with whom he came in contact. He was, I am given to understand, especially concerned with encouraging and inspiring his younger African-American brothers and sisters to take up his poetic legacy, disseminating the good word and work born of creatively owning one's culture, history and voice. While I had had the opportunity to discuss teaching with Jackson, I had never, previously, had the pleasure of delving into his writing; a writing which is, in its own rhythmic, wise and passionate body, a gift to his community, as well as to those individuals, outside of his community (strictly speaking), who happen upon his vibrant and home grown aesthetic.

One of Jackson's objectives in *Leaving Saturn*, and, perhaps, more precisely, in assuming the poetic vocation, seems to me, as reader, to be a classically romantic one: to revisit and revise (as in reinvent) the landscape of his formative years. That landscape is not limited to the literal physical geography of Philadelphia where Jackson spent much of his youth, nor is it limited to his own biography; the smell, color and texture of his intimate and violent encounters with others; the smell, color and texture of his intimate and violent encounters with self. Rather, the landscape of *Leaving Saturn* also includes the collective cultural history to which Jackson is heir as both African-American and poet. It evokes the rhythms and activity of the urban environment in which he visits the barbershop, shoots hoops, dances, gets high, runs and etches his way through time. It evokes the spirits of his artistic mentors, living and dead, whom he honors and with whom he 'plays.' Sun Ra, Sonia Sanchez, Chinua Achebe, Afaa Weaver. What Jackson crafts, in other words, is a kind of palimpsest, a book of multiple landscapes, populated by images both real and imagined, rendered ecstatically, much like the respiration of any creative soul in the act of re-membering. (I want to note that I speak of Jackson's re-membering in its original Greek sense of *amnesia*, or the dis-forgetting of what was always already there, the forgotten or neglected "essence" of an object or place. Jackson, I would claim, returns to the sets of his memory an originary beauty, recast on the page by his now distanced, yet compassionate lens.)

*"That lost summer dusk I watched/a mother straddle a stoop of brushes, combs,/a jar of ROYAL CROWN. She was fingering rows/dark as alleys on a young girl's head cocked to one side like a MODLGLIANI. I pledged/my life right then to braiding her lines to mine,/ to anointing streets I love with all my mind's wit."*

The poet Adrienne Rich writes that “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a critical new direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.” I would amend this quotation to read that for anyone, of either gender, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a critical new direction—can be an act of personal and collective survival. In much of his volume, what is re-vised by the poet, are images that those of us with more pedestrian or tinted contacts, might disregard as urban squalor, or box as decay. In reviewing these images the poet both looks anew at old texts of racial, cultural and class oppression, and reinvests those texts with value (personal and collective). From this first freely written stanza of his eleven part poem “Urban Renewal,” Jackson inscribes the significance of his re-vision: to anoint the streets he loves with all his mind’s wit, to reenter the beloved and haunting subjects of his past in order to interrupt the random viewer’s perception of dangerous lack. “Because some patron, fearing she’s stumbled/into the wrong part of town, will likely clutch her purse and quicken her pace, I funnel all the light/spreading across that young girl’s lustrous head/with hopes we will lift our downturned eyes,/stroll more leisurely, pour over these sights.”

By Jackson’s sensuous camera, the streets of Philadelphia, of Urban America, become a rhythmic montage: black bathers are likened to Cézannes as “A chorus of power lines hums a melancholic hymn.” The vibrant rhymes that spill out of woofers or smoke that rises from the grill of a block party are “Song broken down to a dream of song” that flows from the poet’s pen; a “measured freedom,” played by the artist with an ear for the aesthetic pleasure to be had in defiant reformulations of social constraints, of poetic conventions which confine the beauty of “nature” to the whistle of birds or color of Rose. What Jackson returns to his reader, and community, is “life ruptured and then looped back, def and gaudy like those phat, gold chains.” Yet the music of cultural revolt and celebration that traces its notes across his canvas is hardly all aesthetic or purely melodic. Rather, Jackson’s art of “bagging tiny mountains” also recounts the darker underbelly of indigence, in the background of which are the universal pangs of mortality. Leaving Saturn makes, at times, a dissonant sound, which echoes the cruelties of urban environs, the edges of violence, the need for reform; all a pretext for the achy subtext of human suffering. “Streets flare up” as “an elderly woman curses the caretaker who smacks her hourly” in a “urinous bed,” a boy’s mother “studies pavement cracks for half empty vials,” and a Barber’s “little helper is lost to cross-fire.” “All’s combustible,” Jackson sings, and “each groan puts us closer to the grave.” “But how else,” he asks of our suffering in nature, our suffering natures, “do we know we are here?” The poet mourns, as he shuffles insightfully through the litter of the slums, the fragmented legacy of democracy, the dirt of existence. Yet, like the Barber, “gathering clumps of fallen hair, at the end of the day,” he, too, will gather clumps of fallen hair to arrange lovingly on the page, “as though/they were the fine findings of gold dust/he’d deposit in a jar & place on a shelf, only/to return on Saturdays, collecting, as an antique dealer/collects, growing tired, but never forgetting someone has to cherish these tiny heads.” All is combustible, yet someone, like a mother or a barber or a poet, has to grieve, has to honor the beautiful fragility of tiny heads.

And then there’s dance. In the second section of Leaving Saturn, in between his tribute to the layered effects of history, the body’s naturally rapturous life takes over, blending with lyrics, to transform the poet as prophetic witness into the poet/body as conductor of joy. He rocks the body with body (in “Rock the Body Body”), “one hand extended, the fingers curling...” as the “arm joints & shoulders, in one/Fluid motion,” follow “each other like butterflies.” “Half of what I knew/Of living, I discovered in a disco,” the speaker professes, “The deft execution of bones,/Eyes, muscles, or something so basic/As keeping in step with your fellow man.” Half of what he knows, the poet dancer confesses, he has learned by attuning his body—psychological and physical—to the movements of others, regardless of their particular stripe. “Prancing about like royalty, stretching out/Limbs, pampering their features, is enough/To inspire a frolicsome bone in your body and join the fray.” In other words, half of living is learning to travel with style in a given community, or environment, playfully affirming the rules of the game. The other half might be learning to dance with the creative intensity and ingenuity of a poet in search of his lines...“At 10 I did the Freak with Nikki Keys...as the music came to us

on the 18th floor/Like the need for language...we could have crushed/pebbles, thrown fine specks of dust/at the moon.”

In Part III, Jackson acknowledges the creative figure that inspired this writing: the musician Sun Ra, from whose claim to have been sent to earth from his “birthplace” on Saturn, the title is drawn. Assuming the persona of Sun Ra in four poems, Jackson moves through the artist’s experience of concerts and critics, citing his fundamental alienation by contemporary “readers” as a seeming point of identification. “Brushed aside: a naif,/A charlatan, too avant-/Garde. Satellite music for/A futuristic tent, says/One Critic. Heartbreak/In outer space, says/Another,--lunar/Dust on the brain.” One wonders if Jackson, too, feels “brushed aside” or “too avant-garde,” as he revisits the streets of his youth, “here to save the cosmos,/Here to dance in a bed/Of living gravestones.” Yet, Sun Ra appears to reply, “You can only play what/You feel,” while bemoaning the persistent conformity and loss of soul characteristic of black art in a capitalist society. “can one museum/Rhythm? Where is/Parker’s horn?/In any event, we flaunt/The stuff of old/as if it were a claim/Ticket.” One wonders, again, about Jackson’s own ambivalence, about his departure from Saturn, or Philadelphia (or New Orleans), for other, artistic and professional, venues, while always remaining, on some level, in outer space, in order to give back what he inflects of birth to the alien reader. Such questions I am unable to answer (as an alien reader). What I can say is what I’ve said, already: that, in his sojourn to the streets of his past, Jackson has collected “fine findings of hair,” with which to adorn his text and that it is this activity of collecting and re-presenting which is, to my mind, the imperative of the artist. As Frankfurt school critic Theodore Adorno remarks in his *Aesthetic Theory* “In refusing to play the worldly game,” that is, in refusing to reiterate the status quo, art is able to “utter the unutterable” of ordinary experience. So, in presenting the dark side of urban alleyways along side the richness of African-American aesthetics, the poet dancer contests to suffering, while reveling in the native beauty of “ordinary” life. In returning to New Orleans, or outerspace, Jackson gives back a deftly contoured head of hair.