

## **Major Jackson**

Major Jackson was born and raised in Philadelphia, my favorite city, at a time when brotherly love in William Penn's "green country towne" was in short supply. He lived with his parents as well as his grandparents in both solidly African-American north Philadelphia, and in the gentrifying Germantown section of the city. He went on to college at Temple University, also in North Philly, where he may have been the only major poet who ever majored in accounting --as it turned out, a trade not as tangential to a poetry trajectory as it might seem since it helped him become the Finance Director of the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia, a performance venue. A year later, he was appointed Poetry Curator at the Bride, becoming thereby an impresario of poetry performance. Among the groups he booked were members of the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Dark Room Collective, a group of some dozen African American poets and writers, whose small numbers belied its importance: not least, two of its members, Natasha Tretheway and Tracy Smith each went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry and to become poet laureate of the US, and several others deserved such honors as well. Jackson joined the collective in 1992 until it dissolved a few years later.

Jackson's Philadelphia roots, Philadelphia passions, and Philadelphia associations are on full display in his first poetry collection, *Leaving Saturn*, published in 2002, the winner of the Cave Canem poetry prize and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle poetry award. It introduced many of the themes and concerns that Jackson would return to repeatedly: the urban landscape and the urban characters that Jackson grew up with; the attachment to b-ball and flirtation with drugs; the music and musicians that inspired him, particularly the flamboyant and very talented Sun Ra who arrived conspicuously in Philadelphia in the 60s with his large jazz Astro-Infinity Arkestra, having, he said, recently departed his home planet, Saturn; and Jackson's homage to the poets, primarily African American, that mentored or assisted him, particularly his teacher, Sonia Sanchez. *Leaving Saturn* left no doubt that a powerful, eclectic, fearless new voice had arrived, one that was, to be sure, self-consciously the heir to several generations of brilliant, if too often ignored, African-American poets -- Jackson cites Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Countee Coleen, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Cornelius Eady, Rita Dove, Yusuf Kumunyaka, and Michael Harper among many others -- but a voice that remained fiercely independent, welcoming as well mainstream poetry and poets. So Frost, Auden, Lowell, Lorca, Allen Ginsberg and Mark Doty are featured in Jackson's playlist along with rap and hip-hop, poetry of the alleys and

street corners, playgrounds and drug houses, barbershops and brothels. The “urban renewal” section of this book was to thread its way prominently through all his later books as well.

*Hoops*, his second book of poetry, published in 2006, at its outset continues the urban renewal story without missing a beat, but then devotes more than half its pages to a 70 page letter to the deceased Gwendolyn Brooks, one of Jackson’s poetry idols and briefly once a benefactor. Inspired in part by W.H. Auden’s epistolary poem to Lord Byron, and Mark Doty’s similar missive to Walt Whitman, Jackson chose to write his letter to Brooks in the seven line poetic form known as Rime Royal, apparently invented by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century. With this capricious choice, Jackson made clear his freedom from any constraints on his poetry, whether pressure to stay within more common forms of African American poetry, or to avoid the more rarified forms of the historical canon.

In fact, Jackson often demonstrates that he can deploy the gamut of traditional poetic forms as well as the poets of the so-called new-Formalist school, and he can also convey the purely aural and visual connections of poetic language as well as the best of the so-called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets (and to whom he delivers a wry beat-down in his poem). But he remains ever aware that as much as the musicality of poetry is essential, the meaning of poetry is even more fundamental, meanings that with more or less difficulty can be traced and decoded; that can be subjective and personal as well as public and cultural; that address, directly or aslant, issues of ethnic identity, class, and race; that depict the delights and the disasters of urban, particularly African-American, life; but that can also treat some of the more traditional concerns of poetry -- love , loss, nature -- with a welcome freshness.

The poems in his third book, *Holding Company*, are each written in unrhymed ten-line, yet sonnet-like, stanzas (you got a problem with that??) that depart from Jackson’s more familiar terrain to explore the boundaries and consolations of art and literature, the painful end of a marriage, and the legacies of more political poets like Neruda, Akhmatova, and Cavafay; form-bending, mind-bending poems that push up against the limits of his own or any other poetry

*Holding Company*, as well as *Hoops* before it, was a finalist for the NAACP Image award for outstanding poetry. Among other awards, Jackson has been honored by the Pew Fellowship

of the Arts; the Whiting Writer's Award; and the Wytter Brinner Foundation. He is the Richard Dennis Green and Gold Professor at the University of Vermont and a core faculty member of the Bennington Writing Seminars. Also the Poetry Editor of the Harvard Review, and has been recently appointed head of the writing program at the Provincetown Writer's Workshop.

Tonight Major Jackson will read from his new collection of poems, *Roll Deep*, poems that demonstrate a maturity and depth of both language and perspective that only age, distance, and long-term commitment can provide. These are poems that display his consistency over several decades as well as his transformations; in short, this is edifying, inspiring, and profound poetry. I am privileged to introduce our Vermont neighbor, Major Jackson.