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Clarence Major, *Configurations: New and Selected Poems 1958-1998*, Copper Canyon, 1998
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Readers will discover extraordinary new poems in *Configurations*, Clarence Major's new and selected poems, a volume that was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1999. Almost half of *Configurations* consists of new and uncollected poems, most of them written after his 1989 book, *Observations of a Stranger at Zuni in the Latter Part of the Century*. *Configurations* is important because it collects many poems in volumes now no longer in print, some of them classics in Major's work. "Swallow the Lake," the title poem of his early book, published in 1970, opens *Configurations*; his last line, "I could not swallow the lake," a coda to this poem of protest situated in Chicago, is as effective as it was when I read it first in the early 70s. Similarly, "Madman of the South Side," from the 1972 book, *Cotton Club*, has the same kind of dramatic ending; already he is invoking "the Catawba and the Shawnee." His work has always explored cultures; it describes a geography both internal and external, in the United States, Africa and Europe. It is poetry with a strong basis in the Harlem Renaissance tradition, as well as the Objectivist tradition, with its emphasis on open form. Major's work incorporates the improvisational and collage activities of the Langston Hughes of "Montage," and "Ask Your Mama," the compression and concreteness of early William Carlos Williams, as well as his more diffuse and exploratory late work.

Major's knowledge of and practice in painting seems congruent with the invocation of the surreal and metaphorical figure in "Giant Red Woman," from *The Syncopated Cakewalk* (1974). The poem opens up a space in which we can develop multiple interpretive responses to it. Major's interrogative mind plays against traditional metaphor, and the poem creates a mental and imaginative arena that eschews mimetic interaction and plays with received narrative expectations. His poems, often philosophical, can end with a shout and a cry. He writes about sex with humor and balanced amusement. The language itself has a carefully honed focus on rhythms and line breaks. Older poems like "Syncopated Cakewalk," are lively, accessible, energetic, still vital in their commitments. They are constructed with deceptively simple technical mastery. The tone is often comic, detached, ruminative.

In "At Pointe de Rompe Talon," a 1985 poem that references the work of Wallace Stevens, "A woman sits on the one rock / white as her body. She gazes out / to the tuna-fishing silence / of the early morning watercolor / with its sloshing and response." The woman operates as a kind of trope integrated in the landscape, but the "tuna-fishing silence" is comic, the "early morning watercolor" a play against Romantic idealized landscape, the call and response of the waves palpable and ironic. In the second half of the poem the use of the verb "flooring" is also comic, but the poem presents the woman's solitude as essential even as it continues to elaborate upon

her refusal to be incorporated into the Botticellian imperative. "She is far away from herself: / not a hysterical uterine, not / Leda peaceful after flooring / the swan. Sea foam is not her / counterpoint. Sea motion is / not her metaphor."

Travel allows Major to explore cultural crossings as he does in other poems from *Inside Diameter: The France Poems* (1985). His mind, culturally savvy, intellectual, continually asserts itself as the example of these selected lines from "Home on Rue du Bourg-Tibourg," illustrates: "I take my coffee on rue de Rivoli. / Against the gray, red is intense. / Surfaces swell and crack. / The gray breaks and bleeds / into the frankness of red. / But don't think you've found a logical / extension of Expressionism." The speaker possesses a sophisticated awareness of cultural dislocations, contingencies that are depicted with humor and anger in *Some Observations of a Stranger at Zuni in the Latter Part @the Century* (1989). Conceptions about cultural ideation become occasions for poems of great vitality.

But among the most astonishing poems of *Configurations* are those previously uncollected, written after 1989. In "Apple Core," for example, a pine box, which elicits an initial association with a coffin, becomes a box that holds apples. A blackbird catches the core of an apple the speaker has just eaten. "He flew off across the field, / carrying this thing, / about twice the size / of his own head." The poet has entered Stevens' arena, his "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Williams' "This is Just to Say," and left with a prize of his own. The pared-back, effortless quality of the language, the bright, concrete evocation of the scene have produced an astonishing poem. "Honey Dripper," about a boy named Paul Romance, killed and consumed by the family dog, carries remarkable dramatic force and speculative possibilities in its twenty-eight lines. Many of these poems, the previously anthologized "Frenzy," for example, "Wyoming," and "A Slow Process," offer the reader experiences as rich with possibility as any others in contemporary poetry. Major's work reflects upon the realities of African-American histories, in "Descendant of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba," for example, or Vietnamese histories, in "Waiter in a California Vietnamese Restaurant." His compassion is incorporated into a powerful vision of writer as explorer, both in terms of style and subject matter. He's refused to follow fashions; instead he has cleared his own ground. *Configurations* demonstrates an extraordinary trajectory of development. Major has internalized and worked within the tradition of Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, William Carlos Williams and Robert Hayden. Indeed, the last poem in the volume is "The Slave Trade: View From the Middle Passage," spoken by Mfu, a water spirit, whose vision from under the sea recognizes a continuing terror, a reality confronted and assuaged through the trickster vision of spirit, the title's configurations:

Where one does not believe there is hope,
And one strains too to keep the gentle face
of, say, Carl Bernhard Wadstrom,
white man,
bent over Peter Panah, black man,
teaching him to read.
And wish the configuration
said something more
than it does.
Mfu remembers Equiano.

Equiano (1789) said: "We are almost a
Nation of dancers, musicians, and poets."

And although we're more,
much much more,
let's have a revival-Why
not celebrate?
If nothing else,
it can't hurt to celebrate survival.

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