
THE EAR IS AN ORGAN MADE FOR LOVE:

Poems by E. Ethelbert Miller

In Memory of Enid Miller

(1919-2010)

For my friends:

Grace A. Ali

Me-K Ahn

Wendy Rieger

We have been raised to fear the yes
within ourselves, our deepest cravings.

-
- Audre Lorde

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Thomas Jefferson said he saw you in Paris...

AFTER PHILLIS WHEATLEY SAILED TO ENGLAND

Master took me into town

where the big boats dock.

I stopped loading the wagon

and stared at the water.

The horizon had a familiar

glow. I touched my skin

and remembered chains.

An elder in the Square

was weeping. He said we
could only return home
after the invention of the
airplane. Is this true Phillis?

Until then, must we stand
In the middle of fields
with our arms open?

WINGS & THINGS

I looked for you there
and now I find you here.
I wanted to love you then
like I want to love you now.
I need you close and not
far. I need to be inside
not outside. I keep looking
for your door. I keep jumping

out my window. It's so foolish
but my wings are horny for your
beauty. I'm a strange bird looking
for a nest. Let's fuck before we fly.

YOU ARE A GALAXY TO ME

A man dreams of a woman's
nakedness and her body
becomes his pillow. He sleeps
making love to her with his eyes
closed and heart open.
There is nothing but desire
in darkness.

A man falls off the world
from loving a woman too much.
Why is there so much space
between bodies? A man holds
his penis like a star.

WHY IS IT GREEK OMELET AND NOT PUERTO RICAN?

Every morning
I look for you
on the menu.

Where are
your eyes and lips,
my side order of thighs?

I'm so hungry for the
sauce of you and the way
your blouse opens
like a flame

AUTUMN

The back of your neck
Is a beautiful path for walking
Your hair is falling

TATUM

Show me your hands

If you're Art Tatum

Music keeps sitting

By my window

Some days I just want jazz

To place her tongue in my ear

MAY 16, 2003

The Lakers lost last night

Kobe crying sweat and tears

at the end of the game. Robert

Horry was horrible. I thought

of Albert Aylor floating near

New York without a horn. Poor

Horry without a note of a shot

left in his hands.

NERUDA

(for Naomi)

Neruda's head is across town.

It's in the garden outside

the OAS building.

I need to go there.

No, I need to find what they

did to the rest of Neruda's body.

Where are Neruda's hands?

Legs? Feet? Did someone believe

Neruda's poems came only from his head?

What does one make love with?

Bring me Neruda's poems!

Ask them to confess.

ON SATURDAYS I SANTANA WITH YOU

What can I say to you on Saturday afternoons?

Nothing translates the way your hips talk to my eyes.

Spin my world and let it twirl. Girl, you whirl my world.

What is your name?

I want to walk with you to the corner of Heart and Love.

Oh, baby – oye com ova!

TENDER ZIPPERS

You make me feel zip.

Unzip.

Zippery.

I would love to zip you.

Zip with you.

Zip off with you.

Pull your zipper.

Zip.

Zip.

Zip down.

Don't zip me up.

Zip along with me.

Zip today.

Zip tomorrow.

I want to always zip you.

What's your zip-code?

My hand is on my zipper.

Come play with my tender zipper.

You make my tender zip.

Zip goes my zipper.

Oh, tender zippers!

Oh, tender, tender zippers.

TOO YOUNG TO GO STEADY

I was just thinking about you

Sounds like something Lester Young
would say. I'm alone, my face a puddle
after the rain.

Nothing sounds like your voice
when our bed folds against the wall.

I sit with a saxophone, the music

forgetting my hands.

I know you'll never call.

YOU'VE REALLY GOT A HOLD ON ME

I'm trying to write this in falsetto.

I'm looking for those words that make me feel

I can reach those high notes.

Your face interrupting my thoughts

like the extraordinary seducing me.

Yes, I'm a fool for love.

Do you want candlelight and a song?

You've really got a hold on me.

Miracles come with Temptations.

And this is where you come in.

You know now and then I lose my way.

Hold me – don't let me go.

POEM FOR GRACE A. ALI

The Harlem Renaissance

outside your window.

Carl Van Vechten takes your picture

and you're Negro famous.

Langston saw you the other night

and called you – Simply Heavenly!

Amazing Grace – Sweet Jesus!

Blow trumpets!

SLEEP

Last night

my dreams

confessed

their love

for you

ALONE

The streets are empty
without your arms.

UNTITLED

On your left hand
a paper cut near your thumb.

I notice small things
because I love you so much.

ORANGE(S)

I bring oranges

and place them near your bed.

Joan Miro is painting a hand

near my heart. So surreal.

Colors the color of oranges.

Should I rent kisses or move

into you. Why are the oranges

cut in half? The lips of your
clitoris wet with juice. I
remember the smell
of everything.

BODY ARMOR

Everybody is looking for work

Nobody has money

Somebody always gets paid

Touching a body

Comes with a price

CLASS STRUGGLE WITH WINGS

Birds fighting for food

near my bench.

Why do I feed them crumbs?

RACE KOAN

A white man murders a black man.

He straps him to the back of a truck and drags him several miles.

Is this a hate crime or a moving violation?

HOW FRAGILE THE AIR

Cleaning up
after the storm
the flower pot
breaks

THE DARK SIDE

The dark side of the house
has undisturbed secrets.

My hands grab rake
and bags. I pull weeds,
stare at them as if they
were confessions – so
many.

THE EAR IS AN ORGAN MADE FOR LOVE

(for Me-K)

It was the language that left us first,
The Great Migration of words. When people
spoke they punched each other in the mouth.
There was no vocabulary for love. Women
became masculine and could no longer give
birth to warmth or a simple caress with their
lips. Tongues were overweight from profanity

and the taste of nastiness. It settled over cities
like fog smothering everything in sight. My
ears begged for camouflage and the chance
to go to war. Everywhere was the decay of
how we sound. Someone said it reminded
them of the time Sonny Rollins disappeared.
People spread stories of how the air would
never be the same or forgive. It was the end
of civilization and nowhere could one hear
the first notes of *A Love Supreme* . It was as
if John Coltrane had never been born.

SO THIS IS WHAT THE LIVING DO

When did we begin to wear sneakers to funerals
Or sport jerseys and caps?

When did things begin

To die?

I pass a church four blocks from the Safeway.

I see the last generation of old black men in suits.

These men are professionals.

They touch death everyday

They carry the coffin and drive the hearse.

They arrange the flowers and offer comfort.

They escort you into limos and tell you where to sit.

They know the directions to the cemetery.

What do you know?

I know that I am dying.

Dreams first or what you might call the lint of disappointment.

It has always been this way – this knowing.

The realization that I will do this alone.

I once believed in love the way I believed in beauty;

The living with dignity, style and grace.

I thought my shoes always needed to be polished

Whenever I left the house.

There is a way the day ends after you pass a funeral.

How you walk down the street afraid to look over your shoulder.

They say this is what the living do.

A POEM FOR WOMEN WHO PURR

A woman who purrs when she rises
begins her day discovering her own beauty.
The sound should start from between her legs
and move upward to her belly and search further
for her heart. The heart must speak to the mind.
Be sure the heart translates feelings into touch.
Too often the mind fails to find the right words.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO COLUMBUS

Yes, let me discover you
(again). Your mountains
and your forest. Let my
ship in. Whoever said
the world was round was
staring at your beautiful ass.

AUSTERITY

(for Temo)

We will all lose our jobs

If not today then tomorrow.

A writer calls me asking about

How to get published. Writers

Are having a difficult time. I start

To explain the journey we are on,

The poet's path. The writer interrupts

Me and says –

Cut the metaphysical bullshit!

I want a Mercedes Benz.

What do you want?

Today I returned my poems to my lover.

I filed for unemployment.

My heart stopped.

STONE

Maybe next year

we will live with more urgency.

We will love days of dangerous

new beginnings.

I once waited near windows

and doors for your return.

Outside it is October (again),
everything is changing color.

Red, orange, brown.

The leaves are falling.

I remain black. A small stone
for your coat pocket?

I like how your hands hold me.

Maybe you could *skip* me across

the lake and make me believe

It's love.

EXCERPTS FROM THE LOST DIARY OF THE BLACK HOUDINI

(for Enid Miller)

1.

What if I told you slavery was nothing but a magic trick gone wrong.

Would you believe me?

2.

It was during segregation that I decided to hang myself upside down.

My feet pointing North and upwards – my head still in the South.

3.

There is no prison I cannot escape from.

I've known blackness.

4.

When I was a young boy, I was a runaway.

I disappeared from the plantation and then history.

5.

What is the difference between escape and erasure?

How many times have I changed my name?

6.

The Colorline makes us all acrobats.

I learn to pass white folks without a net.

7.

The crowd applauds after each performance.

When they look into their mirrors they see me.

8.

I taught Marcus Garvey the hat trick.

Everyone loves a parade.

9.

King tells me his dream.

I consult my dream book and find a page missing.

10.

My father takes me to Coney Island.

He tells me all of America is an amusement park. Learn to laugh or die.

11.

Fame made me a Race Leader.

I get paid for describing misery not magic.

12.

White teeth and a big smile.

I hide the key under my tongue

13.

Let me tell you about "Metamorphosis."

It will explain why I'm there and not here.

14.

Love is a pair of handcuffs.

Do I want to escape? Can I?

15.

My mother died yesterday afternoon.

All my life I've been trying to reach her.

16.

I hold my breath and keep counting.

How long can I survive underwater without love?

WHO TURNS THE WHEEL?

(for Charles Johnson)

We dreamers.

Men of night emails and exchanges.

Composers of narratives and American songs.

We believers and followers of the Buddhist path.

We understand the blackness that surrounds us.

We surround the blackness, we follow it

Embracing ourselves.

We are brothers because everything in life
Is related to love. We take refuge in the future
Knowing the past is always found in the present.
Your silver hair filled with the roots of wisdom.
Now the lotus flower blossoms – erasing pain
And suffering. Paradise is no longer fiction. So many
Waiting to hear from you. Speak. Write.

RED LIGHT AND GREEN MEANS GO

There are moments when I miss you
or simply wonder what you're doing.
I think of you sad, tired, even alone.
Maybe too many of us love in foreign
languages, which is why our hearts are
always searching for someone to translate
a feeling into something else. There are
days when the only thing I want to do is

cross the street. Why is there always a red
light in the corner of your eye?

I REMEMBER LORETTA YOUNG

(for Enid Miller)

I am holding my mother's death certificate.

There are no more secrets between us.

I know the exact time she departed: 3:45 PM.

I even know her Social Security number.

I am holding more than my mother's hand.

On my mother's death certificate her occupation

Is listed as homemaker. Who wrote this?

I thought an occupation was what you did when you left the house. When you went downtown and punched a time card or carried a briefcase. I thought my mother was a seamstress, a woman who sewed rhinestones onto clothes. A woman who worked in a factory. Maybe my mother only did this when my father failed as a homemaker. When he could no longer pay all the bills. When there was a need for more money. Did my mother change her clothes while I was sleeping? Did she leave the house when I was at school? Homemaker? I thought my mother was a housewife. I thought a homemaker was someone I saw on television. One day I told my brother and sister that our mother

was Loretta Young. They laughed at me and kept their secrets to themselves. Now my sister sends me my mother's Death certificate. It comes in the mail with the latest copy of The New Yorker and a few bills. At the bottom of the document is the cause of death. All the words have something to do with the heart. Nowhere do I see the word love. All the boxes checked are too small.

CHOLERA

In Haiti

A wheelbarrow

Transports

The dead

The living

Keep pushing

BEFORE HIP HOP

Before

Hip Hop

There was

Nat

King

Cole

Sugar Ray

And
Miles.

Cool
Was
How

You
Held
A

Cigarette between
Fingers or entered
A ring or simply

Found your stage
And turned your back
To the world.

THE 6TH Inning

(for Michael Mariani)

This is rally time

If you're behind in life.

It's clutch time

If you're serious about relationships.

It's the inning

Before the late ones arrive.

Play hard!

Build a lead and keep it.

Make the beautiful catch

Reporters write about after the game.

Whatever the score

Believe you can win.

Life continues after the 5th.

Love is what you play for.

Tip your cap to the fans.

All dreams can be won.

Always know the score.

Run even when you walk.

CIRCUS ANIMAL

Another day
inside this cage

My life broken
into many pieces

I keep cutting myself
against the bars

BREATH

So you open yourself

And take your heart out

It's still beating

You blow on it to

Make it go faster

AFTER THE RAIN

(for Liam)

This is what it sounds like when doves cry.

- *Prince*

The poets sat on the roofs

of their homes speechless

and not a poem in sight.

Floods sweeping away

every word they could imagine.

There was no dry earth,
no memory of land.
Only the water was endless.
It was as if history was drowning
and man was struggling to invent air.

FLYING

Did you know Flying Africans were seen before the Civil War?
I saw a photograph of Frederick Douglass surrounded by proud black men.

It was taken before 1863. Everyone has freedom in their eyes.
One man is wearing a Tuskegee Airman jacket, another an Air Jordan cap.

Lately the wind comes down to watch me stand in the doorway of my cabin.
It extends a hand of light when I see nothing but darkness.

The wind tells me to breathe, then flutter.

It tells me to stretch, then rise.

Flying is nothing but memory.

LESSONS FROM HOUDINI

You practice disappearing

in front of a mirror. All your wife

can see is your face. Magic is how

your body vanished in bed. Once

you practiced with knives and hats.

The rabbit trick was a snap. Houdini

comes back from the dead to explain

how to escape from a trunk underwater.

He tells you to hide a divorce in your
marriage. Learn to pick the lock.

Convince yourself there are no chains.

Practice holding your breath. Count
the years. Surface through the pain.

SNEAKERS 1995

(In the holy year of our Jordans)

When there were cracks

in our sidewalks

children killed

each other for sneakers.

My neighbor

buried a son barefoot,

a reminder of how
he came into the world.

I looked out windows
late at night

and saw white joggers
running like stars.

I didn't know
they were missionaries

announcing the end
to this sad world.

MEETINGS

(for Holly)

I'm sitting in another meeting

where people are talking about money.

They call this fundraising. We spend the time
talking about people who have money.

We mention names of people we don't know.

This is what you do when you don't have money.

You talk about people who do.

Before the meeting ends there is agreement
among everyone to contact three people
who have money. I leave the meeting knowing
I won't make any calls. I walk down the street
talking to myself. At the bust stop I search
my pockets for money. This too is fundraising.

When the bus arrives all the poor people board.
I'm on my way to another meeting.
The poor people are going to work.
A guy sitting in front of me is yelling
on his cell phone. He is talking about money.

He says –

I don't give a fuck!

I want my fuckin' money!

This too is fundraising.

CELL PHONES

In the days before cell phones
we spent our time looking for loose change.

We ran to the phone.

We tripped over phone cords
or stood on lines waiting to use a phone.

We forgot phone numbers.

We were listed in phone books.

There was no text messaging.

In the days before cell phones
there was phone sex and people slept with their phones.
Phones were big and hung on walls.
You could cradle a phone and wait for a sweet dial tone.
If you were lonely, you could call the operator.
There was always someone to assist you.

Today everyone has a cell phone.
They spend days and nights talking in strange places.
You could be in the middle of reading a poem and –
someone's cell phone will ring.
In the days before cell phones you searched frantically
in your bag trying to find something to write with.
You wanted to find a pen not a phone
before the ringing in your head stopped.

FRUIT

The dictator opened his eyes.

It was early morning.

Prisoners waited in cold cells like bruised apples and plums.

Their skin peeling from pain.

The dictator yawned and scratched himself

where the media could not see.

Lately, too many things in the country were going unreported.

No one compiled the list of nightmares refrigerated by the police.

The dictator pushed aside his blanket like democracy.

His own people had left a bad taste in his mouth.

Near his bed an orange bled.

THE WIDOW OF BAGHDAD

After the funeral
the widow removes
her black dress.

She hangs it
in the corner
of her room.

THE WOMEN

This is what will happen to the women.

This is what will happen to mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts and grandmothers.

This is what is probably happening now.

Some of the women will be arrested.

Some of the women will return home and be warned.

Some of the women will remain in prison.

Some of the women will be in prison for hours.

Some of the women will be in prison for days.

Some of the women will be in prison for months.

Many women will forget they are in prison.

Some of the women will be blindfolded.

Some of the women will be tortured.

Some of the women will be raped.

Some will confess to truth.

Some will confess to lies.

Some will simply confess.

Other women will cover their faces.

Other women will cover their hair.

Other women will cover their lives.

This is what happens to mothers.

This is what will happen to our sisters.

This is what happens to aunts.

This is what will happen to our daughters.

There are many grandmothers who are silent.

There are many grandmothers praying in the back of mosques.

There are too many women swaying in sorrow.

This is what happens to mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts and grandmothers.

This is what many men in the world witness.

This is what many men give birth to.

FATHERS IN EXILE

We are exiles

Not only from the land but from our sons.

The young men who no longer desire our worn suitcases and torn books.

We never held

A map of love, a way of knowing

The secret directions to the heart.

When we became fathers

Something made us jump back from the heat of it,

The burning of innocence, the hot iron scars on our failed breath.

It was about the land and body we could no longer see or touch.

Between the entrance and the exit.

Between somewhere and nowhere.

We tried to make a home out of the ruins of imagination.

What is lost is bone and memories more than sperm.

The faces of our sons are the fingerprints on our souls.

Our sons catch breath – struggle to breathe

Each small fist a nail hammered to air.

THE KILLERS

1927 and I'm just a Negro in a kitchen.

Will they kill me too? I got a towel

In my mouth like it's ham and eggs. Sam

they call me, but it's not my name. Al

ties Nick to me like I'm Sidney Poitier.

Two big killers in a small diner looking

for a Swede. What do they think I know?

Have they lost their Hemingway?

Short stories die young.

Characters try to run.

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in.

BOXING WITH YOUR MOM

Whoever said men

Hit harder when wome

Are around is right

- *Yusef Komunyakaa*

You push the door open not knowing
what to expect. She sits in a chair next
to her hospital bed. Just sitting. How long?

Before you can even enter the room a big
smile of recognition kisses her lips before
she kisses you. Her seamstress eyes survey

your clothes. You're a rhinestone of a son
slipping between her shaking hands. As the
sparkle leaves her eyes she withdraws under

her hospital robe. So small she looks. So small
she is. You want to leave but you just came.
It's just you and her. You're overmatched.

Her moods change so quickly you can't avoid
her jabs. There's bitterness in each blow. She
has you against the wall. You're fighting with

her again. This is sick you tell yourself.

You want to leave but the bell never rings.

You're trying to love her too much.

You're losing another round.

Palm Sunday

Two cardinals

Enter the yard

Flying over

Flowers

Laughing

At the bloom

AFTER THE FLOOD

In New Orleans

Brenda Marie Osbey is sitting in the lobby
of the Omni Royal on St. Louis Street.

Outside Don Cherry is talking to the whales.

POEMS FROM NOTEBOOK:

THE LONESOME LOVER

The lonesome lover hands me

Her card. It reads:

Burial comes with a vacancy.

Walk in beauty on the path to love.

THE SOUL AS SOUVENIR

A store on Commercial Street

Many Buddhas in the window

A tourist stops and looks for a path

There is only one doorway

SEA CHANGE

My last week here

I stay in the moment

There is no tomorrow

WHEN CLOUDS UNDRRESS

The painters are out today

Easels near the beach

Brushstrokes under a nude sky

FRANK O'HARA AND ME

Narrow streets in P-Town

Anything could be an accident

The sound of dunes calling

WHAT DID YOU DO TODAY?

Sadness was sitting in the dark

Outside the sun was standing

On one leg

UNTITLED

Red Garland playing

Gone Again. Why do I

Remember this?

NEWS

Cheese. Crackers.

Lunch in the cottage.

The New York Times is here.

It's Sunday!

PILGRIMS

More rain. Cold.

Commercial Street a combination

Of hoods and sweaters. Bike riders

Wear shorts. Where are they from?

WHERE BREAKFAST COMES FROM

After days of smiles

Breakfast comes with conversation.

“From Belarus” she says.

She leans against my table

Body explaining geography.

DAILY CONSTRUCTION

Resting on the ground, two shirts resting.

Working on the roof, two men working.

I JUST DROPPED BY

Surrounding the red cottage

are arms of trees. The sun

can only leave a note. I pull

the latch on the gate. A sound
of surprise. There is a key in
my pocket waiting to say hello.

SMALL THINGS

Today I watched men
assemble boats. Push
them into the water.
There are postcards
that describe this.
The wind is a stamp.

MORNING MEDITATION FOR POETS

(Giovanni)

Try to let go of everything.
Think only of the moment.
Let go of our poems.

COTTAGE SUITE FOR TWO

Jazz keeps me company.

This could be Paris.

I tap the table with my fingers.

I must be falling in love.

SATURDAY AT THE COTTAGE

I recycle bottles and cans

Dirty clothes I take to the basement

I have only a few things to wash

Read all labels

Happiness comes with instructions

UNDER A PROVINCETOWN SKY

Alone after the rain.

Each puddle a mirror.

I leap without falling.

THE FOG

Chips of fog in my hair

Time slowly moving

Mistakes hide everything then departs

THE 10 RACE KOANS

As presented to Charles Johnson on the morning of July 13, 2008

RACE KOAN # 1

Why is the cotton white

and the hands black?

RACE KOAN # 2

How come our ears are always open

but we can't hear the sound of freedom?

RACE KOAN # 3

What's the difference between
the Colorline and the starting line?

RACE KOAN # 4

I have a dream
and you have a dream.
Do we share the same dream?

RACE KOAN # 5

Is sitting in the dark
the best way to describe
Blackness?

RACE KOAN # 6

A blind black man
boards a bus.
What do you notice first
his blindness or blackness?

RACE KOAN # 7

Do you ever wonder
what Stevie Wonder
sees?

RACE KOAN # 8

When DuBois called Garvey
“a Negro with a hat”
What was he wearing?

RACE KOAN # 9

When a black fist
causes a black eye
is this Black Power?

RACE KOAN # 10

Red, white and blue.
Red, black and green.
What do colors mean?

THE ONE

So me and Omar are walking to the movies
To see the new Matrix movie when Natalie comes running
Around the corner talking about white folks.

She's running like she's Trinity but we don't know that yet
Because our money is stuck deep inside our pockets
Jingling with our keys.

Omar stops and strikes his Neo pose. You know like he's not

A Muslim but instead he's The One. What are you talking about Natalie?

Catch your breath and just say one word at a time.

Natalie stops and looks at both of us like we Scottie Pippin

And Michael Jordan or maybe Kobe and Shaq.

Well maybe not...

White folks moving into the neighborhood

Natalie shouts.

Where are they coming from?

Omar finds his serious look and asks Natalie

Where she thinks the white folks

Be coming from?

They coming from everywhere

Natalie mumbles.

They moving into our neighborhoods and we moving out.

What's up with that?

But where are these white folks coming from? Omar asks.

Natalie shakes her head and swears she don't know.

Then Omar looks at me and says

You think someone is catching white folks and bringing

Them here like Africans?

You think maybe some white folks be getting up somewhere

And deciding to get their groceries for the day and then – Whup

They be moving into the house next door carrying credit cards like chains.

Natalie says the next white person

She sees she's gonna ask to see their papers.

What papers I ask?

You know – their papers.

Papers that say this is So and So and he belongs to So and So

So let them pass. So you know So and So is OK.

So what you think about that?

I think you crazy Nat – I say.

You ain't gonna ask no white person to see their papers.

White folks got all the ID they need. You blind if you can't see it.

Omar says maybe we don't need to see the Matrix.

Maybe the Matrix is right here and we in it.

I tell Omar someone needs to unplug his head.

The next thing he'll be saying is Muslims can fly

And don't need no airplanes.

Hmmm.

Omar can be All-Quran at times.

Sometimes he walks around with just one book

Trying to explain everything.

Can you explain white folks? I ask him.

Maybe Natalie is right

Maybe we should ask to see their papers.

What you want to see a white piece of paper for? Omar says.

We should just get our

Notebooks and make observations.

Maybe so I say.

I know sometimes when I pass white folks

They don't say anything to me.

They don't look at me.

They don't even see me.

I'm just invisible like maybe they own the Matrix

And we just going to the movies to see it.

I'm stuck on this corner with Omar and Natalie

The phone isn't ringing but my head is.

I'm trying to make sense out of this.

Maybe one day

I'll be able to make

Bullets stop.

Everything else today seems impossible.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS DOES THE JESSE

John Brown's raid on television

And I think about running again.

This time from television and the tabloids.

Yes, those pictures of me were taken during slavery.

No, I didn't give that 4th of July Speech.

I supported the war to free the colored people

But that's not my signature next to Lincoln's.

Please wait until my next narrative is released

If you don't believe me.

Do you like my hair?

I think my style might encourage the afro.

Should I let Essence photograph me for their Fall

Abolitionist issue?

Yes, let's keep hope alive and save the Union.

If you want to know the price of freedom

Call my agent.

EMMETT TILL LOOKS AT A PHOTO ALBUM FROM IRAQ

Sometimes I try to remind folks that Money

Mississippi was a jail too.

Hoods come in all sizes.

I look at the pictures in this book

And see myself

Whistling at the lady guard

Who gives the thumbs up.

Life is an open coffin

When we live with our eyes closed.

THE ODYSSEY OF O

Origins omen oracle obvious odd odd-ball odds one

Outsider outrageous obstacles obstinate obstruction

Orator options obligations onlookers

Opponents old guard old school

Operation objectives organize organization overwhelm

Ovation outstanding overcome overdue obtain

Optimism outvote outspend overflow opportunities

Official occupant Oval Office Obama obsidian

Ovations Old Glory open house our O

READING ANOTHER POETRY BOOK

I take her in my hands

I open her gently

I part her pages

I stare at her words

I want her letters in my mouth

I run my hand down her spine

I love reading her

I love making love to her

I let her fall asleep in my lap

THE END OF CIVILIZATION AS WE KNOW IT

You're sitting on the toilet

And turn to discover

There is no more toilet tissue

HEATH LEDGER WAS FOUND DEAD YESTERDAY

So I get ready to leave Busboys and Poets around 2:15 in the afternoon.

After meeting with Marc, John, Lorrie, Andy and Beth.

Steve our waiter recommended the pecan pie so there

is still a sweet taste left in my mouth. I walk by the bookstore

only to discover – Don is not working today. I look over my shoulder

wondering about all the novels that will go unread.

Oh – there is LORI TSANG standing next to the magazines and the work

of Garcia Lorca. I run over and pull her away from Neruda who wants

to recite another love poem. I hug Lori while humming “Embraceable You.”

There is no foul play – just old friends meeting in another city outside New York.

POET

To be a poet

Is to place one word

On the tip of your tongue

And offer it to another...

THE FICTIONAL LETTERS OF DON MILLO WRITTEN TO THE
COLORED POET MICKY AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY

LETTER # 1

Dear Micky,

I got the real dope. I'm going with this new book – no film offers yet. What you think about The Fictional Letters of Don Millo written to the Colored Poet Micky at the end of the 20th Century?

Yesterday my son's soccer team won 9-0. Just like in the old country. We gotta keep tradition alive. That's why I'm going with the letters Micky.

None of this Dear God feminist stuff. You know what color I'm talking about Micky?

It ain't purple. I don't make promises to editors who can't dance. These letters are salsa Micky.

Hot to taste. Hot to touch.

Ciao baby – let the good Lord rub your head.

Thanks for the luck Micky. Thanks for the luck.

Don Millo

LETTER # 2

Dear Micky,

Get out of the kitchen. That's what's wrong with this country. Too many men want to cook. This ain't Ellington. What's with the big band? Louie had the same problem before he went to New York. Now those Colored poets you talking about can only trace their roots back to Free Negroes. I was talking blues Micky – your people.

Do I have to sing it for you? Only youngster who can finger the keys is that fiction writer Hank Lewis. Colored kid came to AWP (you know what that stands for- heh heh) conference and sounded like Bird before he decided to record with strings. Micky, stay out of Roxbury. I told that boy Malcolm Little the same thing. See, where he went Micky? Soon you will be talking black out of the side of your mouth. Micky this is America. It's still a melting pot but you have to know your place and stay out of the kitchen. Wait at the table. Think of Langston. Don't gamble Micky. Let me run the numbers. I can loan you a poem if you promise to pay me back. Pies Micky? You making pies? Nothing sweeter than a brown girl's legs. I know Micky, my cousin's family comes from south of the Vatican. There were African elephants in the neighborhood. Folks said they came from across the sea.

Go figure Micky, your people still talk about Flying Africans. I guess there must be a circus of folks trying to get what's mine. I'm not a nice guy Micky. I know my name. No X for me Micky.

Don Millo

LETTER # 3

Dear Micky,

Don't let them make you smile. Show them the back of your head. Tell them to look but don't touch. Micky, if folks want to talk English tell them this is America. Tell them to talk American. That's why I'm at Howard measuring heads. We got a new line of hats coming from the old country. If folks let their heads get big I can't help them Micky. You remember when you had that factory job in Baltimore? What did those union guys tell you? Micky, writing poetry and plays is good for the young girls who drink wine and quote Yeats. Soul, clap hands and sing Micky. Sing for your dinner. Have a beer and let someone else do the Xeroxing in the office. Micky, you too much of a gentleman. What can I say? I wrote my first letter down at the docks listening to Otis Redding. You see, what I'm talking about Micky? Nobody talks about Otis, not even in the office. Watch your back Micky. I got a hat for your head.

Don Millo

LETTER # 4

Dear Micky,

How can you go to the park? Do you remember the colored kid Pumpsie Green? The Red Sox was one of the last clubs to hire your people. I know. I got contacts in both leagues. We had a deal to bring in some Cubans but Fidel spoiled that. Now Micky stay away from ballgames and the autobiographical essay. So many folks writing them and not hitting their weight. If you just want to go to the game for a beer and a cap – let me know. I try to keep everything cold. Once, Ted Williams kept his bat in my freezer. Kid got three hits the next game. They said he was the greatest hitter but no one ever knew about the icebox. You have to be real cool to hit .400. Now Toni Morrison she has speed just like that boy Jackie Robinson. Beloved, I call both of them. God I can still see him stealing home and Milkman falling back to earth. God Micky, why don't you just read instead of sitting behind third base. Wave the other poets home the next time the World Series hits Boston.

Don Millo

LETTER # 5

Dear Micky,

What's with the sermon? You sound like one of those colored preachers. What was the name of the guy who ran for president? You know the guy who was always talking about how pretty he was. Was that Clay or Jackson? Anyway, all that stuff you talking about smells like the sixties Form is James Brown asking for his cape back or Ricky Henderson slapping his glove after catching a ball. Form is Jordan pulling at his shorts and everything else comes from the blues. Micky, go south and watch the Mississippi chase a dog's tail. The blues is the essence of black culture. All you have to do is play, folks think too much Micky. I told Booker T this was going to happen. Micky, go get your guitar. I can find you a nice place to play and study. I'll treat you better than Capone did Armstrong. You remember Louie? Boy could play. Micky, I'm talking form. Blues baby, just hum and everything will be alright. Now just don't go back to church on me Micky. I need you in the business. Folks getting published and no one needs a godfather? Go figure. Too much color in the world Micky. Too much color. It makes me cry white sometimes. Sometimes I just form all over my mouth. It must be the food I eat Micky. I need to hire a

colored cook. Talk to me Micky send me some references. I hear that gal Toi has those black notebooks. Anything I need to taste? I could use a good poem Micky. Sometimes to ease the pain, sonnet and tonic. Is that too civilized for this time of year? I miss the old country Micky. I miss it.

Don Millo

LETTER # 6

Dear Micky,

See, folks don't understand politics. It's a mind thing, something DuBois didn't understand. Not even Rosa Parks. You want a seat on the bus get your ass on it. Do you think Parks had on the right dress and hat that day? If you dress colored and look colored then folks will treat you like colored. Now Micky, I keep telling you – you the next Langston. You after rap music and hip hop. The next century has to come through your work but you don't know how to pose. We have to place you back on that slave bloc. Teach your eyes that distant I love Africa look and keep your Mojo straight. Someone mess with your Mojo you in deep trouble. It will take Hollywood and 100 directors to correct it on the big screen. Now your problem is that you play with the ladies too much. You need to get some Zen tea and keep your heart pure. Follow your Mojo Momba and rise. I'm talking about spirits Micky. Pray to the spirits and they will come – they might even bring you one of those lit prizes and an NAACP image award. But don't pray too much Micky – it's bad on the knees.

Don Millo

LETTER # 7

Dear Micky,

So you only write to me when you have good news? OK. I took those poems. No more sitting outside the hospital doors. If you can make a person well – do it. That’s what Toni Cade Bambara was talking about in *The Salt Eaters*. You remember that important first page – “Don’t you want to be well?” Well that’s the question for the 21st century. No more colorline bullshit. So It’s important for my Micky to be well. Let me look out for you. I want books and prizes for you. Nothing less. If we have to get you a Little Richard uniform we can play that too. Maybe you too black to win? Are we back to Ellison? What did you do to be so black and blue? Tell me Micky. You know everyone was surprised about how that stamp project went. How did Don Millo pull that off? Folks was calling me a Wizard. Hey – they need to read Hurston. It’s all there in her work. All you have to do is believe Micky. That’s what Lena Horne told Diana Ross in the *Wiz* – right? Be sure your eyes are watching God Micky and not the legs of the woman next door. Problems of the heart are for romance writers. Problems of the mind are for academics and revolutionaries. Problems of the spirit is what we have to solve. Find your bowl and love your soul.

That's my advice to black poets. OK Micky? Find your bowl and love your soul. Everything else is business and a card will take care of that. I got your back Micky. Just keep writing. It beats picking cotton or working for Mr. Ford. That's why musicians were so nice to Mr. Capone. He just let them play. Don't you like to play Micky? Ciao baby - and let Lester leap in.

Don Millo

LETTER # 8

Dear Micky,

Third base is where the IRS never looks. Many of us in the family had box seats. Even for the Series in October. You want to know why we never let the colored coach third base? We come to the ball park for space Micky. Nobody was playing baseball in Africa. It's an American game, like pie and the flag. Talking about the flag – you remember that colored guy who got hit in the face many years ago in Boston? Well, I found out he was a Met fan. Micky the guy was running across the street like Mookie Wilson and nobody gonna take a shot at him? This is America Micky – that's why I support the funding for the arts. I want to paint the best baseball diamond and bring in performance artists to pitch. You can sit next to me near third Micky – but bring a glove. I never like to raise my hands or even write.

Don Millo

DIVINE LOVE

(for Alexs and Soojin)

I wish I had loved you many years ago.

I would have loved you like Ellington loved jazz and Bearden loved scissors.

I would have loved you like Langston loved Harlem and the blues loved Muddy Waters.

I would have loved you like Douglass loved to read and Garvey loved parades.

I would have loved you like Zora loved stories and DuBois loved suits.

I would have loved you like Louis loved boxing and Mahalia loved to sing.

I would have loved you like Carver loved peanuts and Wheatley loved poems.

I would have loved you like Jimmy loved Lorraine and Ossie loved Ruby.

I would have loved you like Martin loved Jesus and Malcolm loved Allah.

IN A TIME OF ZORA

After the terribleness-

We survived and learned to call ourselves

Count and Duke. This was after the lash

and Douglass. It was a time when Harlem

was on our minds and our souls prayed

their way into Amen Corners. One could

overhear Zora telling stories. She was

fabulous and gave the world its glitter.

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