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E. Ethelbert Miller: *Partisan of Literature*

24 *By Harriet Jackson Scarupa*

Dan Moldea, past president of Washington Independent Writers, the nation's largest local organization of freelance writers, was walking down the street near Dupont Circle in the heart of town one evening with E. Ethelbert Miller.

"I swear Ethelbert knew every single person who was walking past us," Moldea recalls. "And even people who were driving by were beeping their horns and yelling, 'Hey E-thel-bert, how ya doing?' And that's typical. A lot of times I've run into people with big smiles on their faces as a result of just seeing Ethelbert. That's the kind of aura he has about him."

Miller loves being surrounded by the works of people like W.E.B. Du Bois, John Hope Franklin and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Russell Adams, chairman of Howard University's Afro-American Studies Department, often works in his office late at night and for a while last spring was constantly being bombarded with phone calls. The callers asked the same question: "Is the baby here yet?" "They didn't say whose baby or Is this the right number?, but 'is *the* baby here yet,'" Adams says. The baby in question was Miller's first child and the sheer number of the calls and the diversity of the accents over the phone, says Adams, shows "the kind of affection people feel for Ethelbert. He has a kind of glowing charisma that pulls people from all kinds of strata up to this floor."

"This floor" is the fourth floor of Founders Library on the Howard campus which houses the Department of Afro-American Studies, and its Resource Center which Miller directs. Bea Hackett, chairperson of the D. C. Community Humanities Council, speaks of Miller's "incredible compassion." Stephen Henderson, director of



Howard's Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, says Miller is "a very special kind of person" . . . "a very wise young man." Mildred Bautista, executive director of the D. C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and cultural adviser to D. C. Mayor Marion Barry, calls Miller "knowledgeable," "creative," "sensitive." Barry himself proclaimed September 28, 1979 E. Ethelbert Miller Day, calling "on all of the residents of our great city to join with me in honoring E. Ethelbert Miller in grateful acknowledgement of the exceptionally outstanding contributions which he has made to his fellow citizens and to all humanity." This June, the mayor honored him again at an Arts Awards ceremony.

Wait a minute! Enough is enough already! We interrupt this testimonial for a question or two: Just who is this effusively-praised man with this most intriguing name and why, oh why, are so many diverse folks saying so many nice things about him?

Those in the Washington literary community already know the answer. They might be more likely to rephrase the question: Just who doesn't know E. Ethelbert Miller? But for those outside this community or for those for whom literature was something they had to "take" in school and have never given a thought to since, the following are some particulars.

We've already said that Miller is director of the Afro-American Studies Resource Center, a job that involves acquiring, cataloguing and disseminating books, magazines, records, films and other materials relating to the global Black experience, and organizing seminars, lectures and diverse programs relating to that experience for the department.

Miller loves his job. He loves being in this room surrounded by the works of people like W.E.B. Du Bois, John Hope Franklin and Gwendolyn Brooks. He loves being at Howard, which he sees as an especially fertile place for poets and artists of all kinds. He loves helping the faculty and students, visiting scholars and people who walk in off the street to find the right materials they need for whatever project they're working on.

But his work on the fourth floor of Founders Library represents just one part of Miller's life. It doesn't explain all those glowing testimonials from those outside the Howard community.

To understand them, one has to know something about Miller's role as an active partisan of literature.

For the past eight years, he has directed the Ascension Poetry Reading Series, which has provided a platform for Black poets—both those with established reputations and those who are as yet unrecognized—to read their works before audiences in a variety of settings in the D. C. area. There have been 66 readings so far, ranging from one-person programs to marathon 70-poet sessions that have lasted from six in the evening until three in the morning.

He has edited two anthologies: *Synergy*, a collection of the works of Black D. C. poets (co-edited with Ahmos Zu-Bolton II); and *Women Surviving Massacres and Men*, a collection of feminist poetry.

He has produced several radio programs for WHUR, the Howard University radio station, highlighting the work of Black writers, notably Sterling Brown and Amiri Baraka.

He is a member of the literature panel of the D. C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and a member of the D. C. Community Humanities Council, both fund-granting organizations. In both groups, he has developed a reputation as someone who pushes for excellence—an excellence he defines in non-elitist terms.

He served as Washington area coordinator for the American Writers Congress which was held in New York last October and which brought together more than 3,000 writers to focus in on their concerns and consider initiating a national writers' union. Currently he serves on the Congress' executive committee, representing Washington area writers.

He is a senior associate editor of the *Washington Review*, a bi-monthly journal of arts and literature; a contributing editor to *Nethula Review*, a D. C. literary journal; and an associate editor of *Black Box*, a cassette taped poetry magazine.

As a poet, he is the author of *Andromeda*, *The Land of Smiles and The Land of No Smiles*, *Migrant Worker and Season of Hunger/Cry of Rain*, all published by small, independent publishing houses. His individual poems and articles have appeared in such publications as *Essence*, *Encore*, *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Obsidian*,

Black Scholar and *New Directions*.

He has read his works before a wide variety of audiences in the Washington area and in New York City and is known for his quiet, rhythmical, word-relishing performing style.

He was one of 500 invited to the White House by Rosalynn Carter on January 3, 1980 for a historic salute to American poets.

... everybody's favorite younger (or older) brother or cousin or uncle or son.

The man behind these dizzying activities/accomplishments is young (31); tall; skinny (Yes, skinny. Please, oh please, don't call him "Slim," he hates it.); soft-spoken; and unerringly polite (even if you do call him "Slim.") His completely round brown-rimmed glasses make him appear both serious and quizzical, but they can't hide the glimmer of wry humor that often shines in his eyes—and in his poetry. Consider this self-portrait in his poem "Big Mac: The Columbia Road Connection:"

*i'm eatin and poetin
got my hat pushed back
got one leg crossing the other*

i looks good

*i's cosmopolitan
eatin bo willie's fries*

so i say to this poem

i say poem take it from here

All in all, Miller comes across not as an Important Figure in the Washington Literary Community—which he is—but as everybody's favorite younger (or older) brother or cousin or uncle or son. Just an all 'round nice guy. Which may well explain all those "nice" things people say about him.

But to *really* understand Miller's significance one has to look beyond his "niceness" and even look beyond the particulars of his various activities. One has to look at that whole business of being a writer and what it means.

Writing is a lonely business. Ultimately, it boils down to one individual sitting before the typewriter and trying to find the best way possible to transfer thoughts to paper. For the beginning writer, it can be terrifying. For the established writer, it's not any easier.

Often, the isolation inherent in the whole writing business is compounded

by isolation of background, ideology and style. Black nationalist writers won't talk to *my-art-is-universal* Black writers, who won't talk to Muslim writers, who won't talk to Marxist writers, who won't talk to feminist writers, who won't talk to *feminism-is-a-distraction* writers, who won't talk to those who read their poems in bars and coffeehouses, who won't talk to those who read their poems in libraries and auditoriums, who won't talk to bus-driver poets, who won't talk to English professor poets, who won't talk to free verse proponents, who won't talk to sonnet lovers. . . . An exaggeration, perhaps, but not completely. The only thing any of these writers would agree on is this: the writer is an *individualist*.

Enter E. Ethelbert Miller. Yes, the writer is an individualist, he agrees . . . but the writer still must look beyond the individual business of transferring thoughts to paper. Yes, writers have wide variations of ideology, background, ethnicity, style . . . but writers must join together to survive. Yes, the Black writer has a special obligation to his people . . . but this obligation shouldn't trap him in an airless artistic box.

Through his poetry reading series, anthologies, involvement in arts and literary organizations, and the mere fact that he knows scores of writers and often introduces them to each other, Miller is credited by many with doing the impossible: bringing writers—perhaps the last unreconstructed individualists—together.

"He's got such a wide range of affiliations from the Folger (Shakespeare) Library all the way over to what you might call those with radical concerns," says Henderson. "He's been a good bridge not only between minority literature and the white literary community, but between the more established writers and the younger emerging writers," says Bautista. "If you know independent writers, if you put 150 in a room and throw out an issue, you'll get 150 different ways to deal with that issue; but when Ethelbert's in the room, somehow you'll come up with some consensus," says Moldea.

... the individual writer's self-interest demands that he or she speak out.

In the keynote speech at the American Writers Congress, novelist Toni Morrison painted what she called "a

loved picture—the alienated, isolated individual writer, beleaguered but fiercely alone." "A loved picture," she added, "but a truly lethal one. Because if we buy it completely, it keeps us single, weak, disconnected, vulnerable." She urged writers to erase this picture, declaring, "We don't need any more writers as solitary heroes. We need a heroic writers movement—assertive, militant, pugnacious."

Miller was one of the many who greeted Morrison's speech with thunderous applause. He strongly supports the call for a writers' union and, as a member of the Congress' executive committee, is working on ways to implement that call. His reasoning: "If you look overseas, you find there are many countries where writers are organized. I think we're at a point politically where writers in this country need to be organized. It would be in the interests of American writers to protect themselves—whether it's protection in terms of contracts, libel or things like that or simple things dealing with the distribution of books. You can speak much more strongly as a collective body than as an individual."

But whether formally organized or not, Miller does not see how writers can be concerned only with the production of their Art and divorce themselves from larger social issues. Even the individual writer's self-interest, he insists, demands that he or she speak out:

"If you're dealing with something like closing libraries, you as a writer speak out because you're dealing with books, with literature, and you recognize the importance of libraries to society. If you're talking about banning certain books from the school system, you as a writer have to be involved. It's your books they may be trying to ban tomorrow. If they're talking about weakening the Freedom of Information Act, then you speak out because *any* writer who's trying to obtain certain types of information and is denied that material, will be hurt. If you know someone who's written something and suddenly you look up and he's in jail because of what he believes, then you as a writer have a responsibility to speak out."

Moldea jokingly accuses Miller of sometimes "being a preacher" and as you listen to Miller it's not hard to understand why. The "preaching" continues as he branches off into that much pontificated-upon subject, "the role of the

writer," and offers his views on the direction of Black poetry today.

"The role of the writer," Miller says, "is always determined by 1) the society that he finds himself in and 2) the responsibility that the writer perceives in terms of what he should be doing in that society. So if one is living in a society like ours right now where there are a number of issues in the forefront—from the economy to nuclear disarmament—then immediately the role of the writer becomes one of using his craft and his talent and his skill to either explore or give direction to these issues. Even with somebody who says he is a 'pure writer,' when you really examine his work, you'll find he ends up commenting indirectly on whatever social, racial or whatever conditions have shaped him in terms of who he is.

"I think writers offer a sense of vision as well as clarity. And you find that in

Some Black writers in the '60s . . . did feel they were being forced to conform to a narrow definition of what Black poetry should be.

many many countries—whether it's Chile or South Africa—that writers are those people in society who do take the initiative to speak up primarily because they are concerned with some of the basic human emotions like love and death."

"The Black writer," he continues, "because of the predicament of Black people in this country, just in terms of being oppressed and because we have a story that has been so misinterpreted, has a greater task to perform." But this greater sense of social responsibility, he believes, shouldn't squeeze the Black writer into a straightjacket: "The key thing is for a Black writer to always be creative. If you begin to place some borders around your work then you're not acting as an artist."

Some Black writers in the '60s, Miller says, did feel they were being forced to conform to a narrow definition of what Black poetry should be, i.e. it had to be militantly, vociferously and visibly BLACK. It was a definition that was bound to produce some fraud, as he writes in his poem, "Gravity:"

*blackness
is gravity
but some
of us be*

rockets
speeding
towards
stardom
Ⓣ although
we look black
and talk blacker
we are actually
weightless

Miller sees a far more open type of Black poetry being written these days. "You could say the emphasis on revolution and hate whitey and all that has changed—and it's true," he says. "At the same time, in the '70s you begin to see the emergence of women writers, women poets.

"What I uphold is that there was a feminization of Black literature in the '70s. Many Black women writers were the ones who began to be very introspective. They began to write about their mothers. They began to write about who they were as women. They downplayed the whole armed conflict, up-against-the-wall type of stuff. And that had a way of alleviating a lot of tension in the work.

"At the same time, you had a number of writers—people like Quincy Troupe and David Jackson—who began to look outward to the literature of the Third World and engage in a kind of cross-cultural dialogue with those producing that literature. And with this you find poets who might have been writing very strong political poems beginning to mellow out and use a lot more symbolism. They still can speak out against oppression, but it's a different style."

Miller's partisan support for the writings of Black women writers who came to the forefront in the '70s has not been as well received in some quarters as his partisan support for the writings of Black writers—in general. He is given to such bald statements as: "The strongest work in this country is probably being done by Black women writers. That's where the freshness and vitality are." Some, whether because of latent male chauvinism or whatever, consider such statements extreme. Not surprisingly, Miller disagrees with those Black male writers and others who accuse some Black women writers of projecting negative images of Black men (at best) or castrating Black men (at worst) through their work. His answer: "I think everything that many of the women are saying is the truth and people just don't want to deal with that. Take Ntozake Shange's 'For

Colored Girls,' which a lot of people had trouble with. It was very honest. All she did was talk about growing up from a woman's point of view. And the scene where Beau Willie throws his babies out the window was dealing with a reality: some Black women were wrestling with returning Vietnam veterans who had lost their minds." (He closes a poem written for Shange with a question: *how is it that you are so misunderstood by blindmen who call their blindness blackness/Ⓣ by women who would turn all men to stone!*)

That some Black men treat some Black women shabbily is a fact that should be faced, Miller upholds. And it's something he's written of as well, as in the title poem to his anthology of feminist poetry, *Women Surviving Massacres and Men*:

she was beaten
she was blue
her man had hit her
and he had run

she said she now found comfort
in watching tv westerns
said she felt like an indian
surviving massacres
and men

Both from his vantage point as a poet and a supporter-spokesman-promoter of writers and their concerns, Miller finds it "amusing" the way Black writers—regardless of their sex—are treated in our society. His "amusing," though, has a bitter tone to it. "If a Black writer writes extremely well, it's looked upon as being some sort of mystical talent he's performed," he elaborates. "I use as an example, Toni Morrison on the cover of *Newsweek* under the title 'Black Magic,' as if her skill is just a hocus pocus type of thing." He sees that *Newsweek* cover as indicative of a still larger issue, a particularly disturbing issue:

"We still look at the number of good Black writers we have produced in this country as being exceptional or removed from the others. Maybe it all goes back to this society only being able to deal with one Black writer at a time—a Toni Morrison or a James Baldwin or a Ralph Ellison. It's always like, 'We'll hold up this person as proof that Black people can write and then when this person's time expires we'll find someone else.' But that kind of mentality really is a disservice to the skills of Black people as a whole."

How Miller came to hold such strong

views and how he came to be a poet himself has a lot to do with Howard University.

"... writing is something I could do well... and I especially like being a poet."

Miller entered Howard as a freshman in 1968 on the heels of the dramatic Black Power-student power upheavals that had rocked the campus the previous spring. He had grown up in the South Bronx, one of three children of a father who worked in the Post Office and a mother who worked in the garment industry. His parents' roots were in Barbados, but because they were living in the predominantly Black American and Puerto Rican South Bronx, they were cut off somewhat from the flourishing West Indian community over the bridge and beyond in Brooklyn. So, Miller says, he never grew up with a strong sense of West Indianness, nor is that reflected in his own writings.

He attended a predominantly Jewish and Italian-American high school and grew up listening to the likes of Bob Dylan, Paul Simon and Phil Ochs, which made for some culture shock when confronted with The Four Tops and The Temptations at Howard. He grew up learning next to nothing about Black writers, was more interested in playing baseball than anything as seemingly arcane as Literature, and applied to Howard, he says half-jokingly, "to find a wife."

But Howard's impact on his life was profound. The Black consciousness movement was still very much alive on campus and he met many of the student leaders of that movement and was influenced by them. He even became a bit of a student leader himself, serving briefly as freshman class treasurer. And it was then that Eugene E. Miller of the South Bronx became E. Ethelbert Miller of Howard, et al, when a friend thought his middle name would lend itself to catchier campaign slogans.

He began writing, first letters to his family about this whole new Howard world, then love poems—"some of them got a little syrupy"—to various Howard coeds. In addition to the love poems, he began writing poems dealing with Black consciousness, some of which were published in *The Hilltop*, the student newspaper. His creativity was fueled by his talks with some of the more radical and more artistic students; by the

whole atmosphere of the campus which was highlighted by such events as a major conference entitled "Towards A Black University," by the examples of writers John Killens, Clay Goss and Haki Madhubuti who were then affiliated with the university; by two courses taught by Henderson which dealt with some of the concerns of the whole Black Arts movement, "Problems of the Black Aesthetic" and "Blues, Soul and Black Identity;" by two teachers in the English department, Jennifer Jordan and William Thomas, who encouraged his early attempts at writing.

Initially, Miller planned to major in history, with an eye towards a law career. Instead, he majored in Afro-American studies, becoming part of the first class of graduates from the department. Because his primary interest was Black literature and history, he saw an Afro-American studies major—as opposed to a literature or history major—as the most direct route to fulfilling his intellectual interests.

It was during his junior year at college that he decided he wanted to be a writer. The reasons weren't particularly profound: "I felt I had something to say and I felt writing was something I could do well. It's something I like doing. It's something that comes easily to me. And I especially like being a poet. I'm comfortable being a poet." His mother, with visions of "my-son-the-lawyer" dancing in her head, greeted his vocational choice with skepticism. "After all," says Miller colloquially, "poetry don't ring no cash register."

His involvement in the Ascension series paved the way for his involvement in other activities.

Following his graduation from Howard in 1972, Miller began working part-time as assistant director of the Afro-American Studies Resource Center and part-time as a junior research assistant with the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities. (Sterling Brown was senior research associate.) He started out organizing poetry readings as part of his work with the Institute but when the Institute's grant for such readings ran out, Miller continued them, expanding them into the Ascension series. (The title is from a John Coltrane album.)

The series started in 1974, the same year Miller became full-time director

of the Afro American Studies Resource Center. For almost two years, he personally picked up the tab for the series. Later, he received grants from the D. C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He started the series, he says, "because at the time there was no way for many writers who were starting out [he includes himself] to get their work out. It's important for young writers to do some readings, reach out, build your audience up, find out exactly what poems convey certain messages to people, interact with other writers who come to readings. I think it's part of becoming part of what I call the literary community. Also, because doing readings builds up your audience. if you do come out with a book, people will buy your book because of a particular poem or poems they heard you recite."

His involvement in the Ascension series paved the way for his involvement in many other activities within the Washington literary community. "I've always seen myself as dealing with the political aspects of writing—literary politics," he says. "When it comes to pushing people to appreciate Black literature, you've got to wheel and deal."

His wheeling and dealing is appreciated. "Through his efforts many people have become much better known and also many people have taken heart about their own work, which is extremely important in the realm of the arts because the problem of demoralization is an extreme one," says poet and teacher June Jordan. Jordan also pays tribute to what she calls Miller's "archival habits."

"He is," she has written, "the unarguable and personal center for information about us [Black poets]: How to find us/ what we have written/where it's been published and future writing plans. Given the negligible notice ordinarily accorded to Black poets of the past and present alike, Miller's archival habits of paying attention distinguish him as a man of unprecedented historic function in Black culture: he is, if you will, a loving Boswell to the art of his people." This last effusive (and probably overstated) quote is from the introduction to Miller's poetry collection, *Season of Hunger/Cry of Rain*, which was scheduled for publication by Lotus Press in June . . . And this brings us to a brief examination of E. Ethelbert Miller, poet. For even though it is not his poetry

that puts bread on his table, and even though he is probably better known for his activism in the cause of literature than any individual poems, Miller looks upon himself primarily as a poet.

*only language
can hold us together*

*i watch the women
bead their hair
each bead a word*

braids becoming sentences

she would

*never comb her hair
it was always wild*

*like new poetry
it was difficult
to understand*

Miller's own poetry is not like the "new poetry" of his poem. His poetry is easy to understand. His poetry is accessible. Observes Henderson, who is also author of *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (Morrow), "Ethelbert's not an Ivory Tower kind of poet." Henderson then pauses to reflect on what kind of poet he thinks Miller is: "I think he's a good poet. His poetry is usually very quiet, very subtle. It's deceptive, really, because it has the kind of insights you expect in a short story but they don't jump out at you. His poetry reflects his personality; he's not the shouting type. But it does more than that. It also addresses a certain kind of range of sensibility that was and still is in various communities that other people aren't taking the time to address.

"In a way, what it means historically is that he's one of the poets who represents what distinguishes the poetry of the '70s from the poetry of the '60s, that is, it's a more introspective poetry but it's an introspective poetry that's developed into an outward social and political kind of expression."

. . . through the years, Miller's poems have changed—both in style and substance.

Miller's first collection, *Adromeda* (1974) dealt extensively with love, (*we/waited/so long/to touch/that fingers/dripped/tears/into/palms*) and with the pain of loving, (*my mouth/opens/I vomit/I am learning/how to let go/I must/not cling/to people/who say/they love/me/and wish/to see/me well*) and with a kind of comforting spirituality, (*I/lift my body/out of earth's/blackness/and/extend/my arms outwards/embracing/ALL*).

The Land of Smiles and the Land of No Smiles (also 1974) was inspired by a trip to Tanzania he made for the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities to videotape some of the proceedings of the Sixth Pan African Congress. It deals epigrammatically with the harsh forces of history which propelled Black people to America and contrasts the land in which they now live, (*in the land of no smiles/two legged creatures hide behind/masks of deceit and plot/destruction*) with an idealized picture of the African homeland, (*in the land of smiles/laughter is the bride/of happiness/and winter does not/wear dark clothes*).

The poems in both these early collections are the poems of a very young man, vulnerable, self-absorbed, perhaps naive. Through the years, his poems have changed—both in style and substance. Commenting on this, Jordan observes, "One of the things I'm happy about in Ethelbert's work is that it is questing. It's not fixed and settled prematurely on a particular style or a particular set of subjects. It seems to me that he is rigorously attempting to allow for the integrity of his own voice and vision—and that can only come from experimentation."

Whereas Miller's early poems are sparse, almost in the tradition of Japanese Haiku, many of his more recent poems are longer, denser, more narrative. Partly this is because he found that short, sparse poems don't lend themselves well to reading aloud. Partly this is because now that he is older he feels he has more to say.

The subject matter of his work shows a shift away from his own spiritual and emotional concerns to the material environment, especially the realm of national and international politics. In fact, he's abandoned writing love poems altogether. Usually in the past, he says, he wrote love poems when a relationship was breaking up, (*the love poems/I wrote were taken/from coffins*). But these days, with the happiness he's experienced with Denise King and their infant daughter, Jasmine-Simone, he says he has no motivation to deal with love in his writing. In a sense, the stability at the core of his personal life seems to have freed him to look outward. Miller calls himself a "progressive," which he defines as "seeking to be supportive of various movements of social change which I think beyond a doubt will at least bring a little more comfort

to people's lives." This viewpoint has been shaped by his extensive readings; by his travels, especially to Tanzania and Cuba; by his dialogues with many people who see the Black American struggle for full personhood as part of a global struggle of the oppressed; by simply opening his eyes and seeing heart-wrenching poverty and knowing "it just doesn't have to be." What this means for Miller, the poet, is that his work shows "a growing political sophistication, a maturation," Henderson believes.

A poem... is only an insight away.

Miller's most recent poems, dealing with the struggle for social justice in Latin America, reflect his maturing progressive viewpoint. But they are not the works of the ideologue, so blinded by his love for "the masses" that he fails to see *people*. [As in that old joke about the "revolutionary" who says, "I love the masses; it's just people I can't stand."] Organized under the title "Where Are the Love Poems for Dictators?" they offer social commentary on the turmoil in Central America through many highly individualized voices—a peasant, a political prisoner, the friend of a man who has "disappeared," a mother, a priest, a revolutionary poet. "The title is like a little ironic contradiction," Miller explains. "I mean, who would write a love poem for a dictator?" Typical of the poems in this group is this one:

*when eagles fly south
seasons change
spring turns to summer
oppression burns in the wind
i walk beneath trees
where small birds
once perched on freedom
i see blood on the end of branches
when eagles fly south
the sun hides
darkness enters the eyes
of my children
i watch their dreams
turn blind*

Jordan says she finds the poems in this group "very beautiful, with an almost Spanish quality to the language." Miller himself believes these poems should hold up well—regardless of the outcome of the situation in any particular Central American country: "It may be El Salvador today, Bolivia or Paraguay tomorrow. You're going to have somebody putting people in prison and

denying them their basic rights. You're going to have people exploited and their land taken away from them. You have the problem of poverty. You have the problem of corruption. These are not going to be things which are going to change in two, three years. And I see parallels with what's going on in Latin America with what's going on in Africa and other parts of the world."

The next group of poems he hopes to write will focus on South Africa and will again be expressed through different voices. And after that? Miller isn't exactly sure. A poem, after all, is only an insight away. He's gotten ideas for poems from reading newspaper articles about Haitian refugees or evacuation plans in the event of nuclear attack or the alleged threat posed by Fidel Castro or the takeover of Washington buildings by a group of Hanafi Muslims. He's gotten ideas for poems from a snatch of conversation, an incident at a restaurant, a concert given by a favorite singing group, a question posed to him on a trip to Cuba, even the weather. So, rest assured, there will be poems, and poems and more poems.

As for the style of these poems, that's hard for Miller to predict. The truth is, he confesses, he doesn't know if he has a style. The way he looks at it, "Right now, I'm just writing to say what I want to say."

I write to say what I want to say. I write because I have something to say. I write to say what I want to say. I write because I have something to say. Surely this recurring litany is what propels all writers to take up this lonely/demanding/frustrating/glorious craft.

E. Ethelbert Miller's own writing, his views on writing, his work on behalf of Black writers—and all writers—shows how acutely tuned-in he is to the power of this litany. No wonder some call him "a very wise young man." □