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Featured Poet

[E. Ethelbert Miller](#)

Heath Ledger Was Found Dead Yesterday

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 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 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 and hum “Embraceable You.” There is no foul play, just old friends meeting in another city outside New York.

* * *

The N Words

Name calling naïve nameless natives

Notorius narcotic Neanderthals

Nasty neighbors nationwide

Non-stop nonsense

New voices needed

Nurture numbers now

No naps

Nuzzle & Nudge

* * *

Orange(s)

I bring oranges

and place them by 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.

I remember the smell of everything.

E. Ethelbert Miller

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E. Ethelbert Miller is a literary activist. He is board chair of the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) and the director of the African American Resource Center at Howard University. The author of several collections of poems, his last book is a second memoir, *The 5th Inning*. In 2003 his memoir *Fathering Words: The Making of an African American Writer* was selected by the DC We Read for its one book, one city program. Mr. Miller is often heard on National Public Radio (NPR). Historian Douglas Brinkley writes, "Not since Langston Hughes has an African American poet so ably combined the oral and literary traditions of his people to produce a collective poetic portrait of a singular Black man searching for love in a world gone awry."

from Poet's Bookshelf: Contemporary Poets On Books That Shaped Their Art

poet E. Ethelbert Miller

Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*

James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*

June Jordan, *Things I Do in the Dark*

Carolyn Forché, *The Country Between Us*

Cornelius Eady, *you don't miss your water*

THE ESSENTIAL BOOKS OF A TAMBOURINE MAN

I live in a house full of books. Four floors of volumes have accumulated over the years. One of the more difficult decisions I've had to make recently is deciding which books to discard or give away. Maybe I'm entering a mid-life crisis. I know I can't save or keep everything. I just don't have the space. The thought of placing a book in the trash was never a thought I could make room for. Last year I donated hundreds of books to two charter schools in the Washington, D.C. area. These books I felt were no longer essential to my collection. Some were children's books purchased when my children were at the scratch and sniff stage. Others were economic and education textbooks, computer manuals and novels that were never made into movies. The primary focus of my personal library is African American culture. Quite a number of my books are autographed. I consider them to be precious jewels and a measurement of wealth and information. When I compile a list of books that aided me in my development as a writer it's not something that has to stay too long on the stove. I can easily select five books that are important to me. But first let me mention a few songs and musical compositions that comprise my personal soundtrack. In many ways certain songs led me to become a writer. I don't think I would have become a poet if it wasn't for the lyrics of Paul Simon, Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs. Long before I was studying the Harlem Renaissance and the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, I was humming lines from "Mr. Tambourine Man" on a New York subway.

I wanted to write like Dylan. "Mr. Tambourine Man" was almost an anthem for me. I was young and restless and the words wrapped around me like a harmonica's wail. "Let's forget about today until tomorrow." In almost every Dylan song there is a line or two that sticks in your

head and it's crazy and profound and you can't forget it. That's what forced me out of the house one day in search for a guitar. I purchased one and the only song I learned to play was Simon & Garfunkel's "The Sounds of Silence." That was also the first record I purchased from a store near the Third Avenue El in the South Bronx.

I wasn't writing poetry in high school but I was discovering music. I was one of less than a hundred African American students that attended Christopher Columbus High School. My friends were mostly Jewish and with the Vietnam war going on we often found ourselves drifting around Greenwich Village on the weekend. With the war came the music of Phil Ochs. While black kids were getting into Motown I was singing "Do You Believe in Magic?" in the shower. This song by the Lovin' Spoonful might be the only song I know all the words to. I didn't embrace Soul music until college. Going south to Howard University was a migration of consciousness. I was introduced to the poet laureate Smokey Robinson by way of Michelle Calhoun. She was a cousin in his family and the woman I would eventually marry. Her love of songs like "My Girl" would find a place in my heart long before I saw the movie *Cooley High*. At Howard University my soul was also saved by jazz and the saxophones of Pharoah Sanders, Archie Shepp and John Coltrane. It was my literary mentor Bob Stokes who gave me jazz albums as well as books in the early seventies. He wanted to insure that after I graduated from college, I would graduate to a better sound of music. If you walked pass my first apartment you would have heard Johnny Hartman singing "I Just Dropped by To Say Hello." Bob had suggested I listen to Hartman and maybe this is why I wrote mainly love poems during a time when black poets were angry and talking primarily about revolution. The classic love song for me is "For The Love Of You" by the Isley Brothers. That was my summer song of 1974. The poet Ahmos Zu-Bolton and I toured the southern part of the country reading our poems in places like Tuskegee, Alabama, Alcorn, Mississippi and Galveston, Texas. Ahmos was in love with a woman in Houston and I couldn't keep my mind from not thinking about Charlene back in D.C. There is no better song to listen to on the car radio at night while thinking about the person you love. If you hear "For the Love of you," it's a way of God placing his hand on the back of your head.

What about books? I don't think I would have thought about becoming a writer if I hadn't read *The Big Sea* by Langston Hughes. In my memoir *Fathering Words* I wrote the following:

Langston Hughes did not live in Cook Hall. I was the only poet in a dorm filled with future doctors, lawyers, preachers, teachers, government workers, musicians, dentists, soldiers, lovers, drug addicts, crazy Negroes, Muslims, Republicans, gays and guys who would see you every day and not speak. It was not the best

place to become a writer. I should have left Howard like Langston left Columbia. Would I have thrown my books into the ocean?

The Big Sea introduced me to the writer's world. The second part of Langston Hughes' autobiography also contains a good eyewitness account of the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro Movement. This was all new to me. At Howard I was introduced for the first time to the tradition of African American literature. Reading about Hughes and then walking across Howard's campus and meeting someone like the poet Sterling Brown will make you think twice about going to law school. I only thought about it once. I was also introduced in college to James Baldwin. I remember my brother and sister reading *Another Country* and *Giovanni's Room*. They were older than me so I saw Baldwin's books as belonging to them. It didn't matter since I would be attracted more to Baldwin's essays. *The Price of the Ticket* is where you find all of them. I seem to always be going back to this book in search for a quote or just to remind myself about what the Civil Rights Movement was all about. I'm living in America and what does this mean? Baldwin explains things for me better than Martin Luther King, Jr or Malcolm X.

When I fell in love with the poet June Jordan, I knew what the Isley Brothers were doing when they were not singing. Many of June's "hit" poems can be found in *Things I Do In The Dark*. I laugh every time I read about Miss Valentine Jones. She's the real Miss Black America. I remember when the book was published in 1977. I happened to be staying in June's Brooklyn apartment when the box came. We opened it, celebrated, laughed and had wine. I think we called Alice Walker who lived a few blocks away. Maybe this is my favorite book of June's because it contains her first love poem to me. June's voice and politics shaped my development as a young writer moving from twenties to thirties.

In the 1980's I started writing numerous poems about events taking place in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Chile. In Washington I read at political and cultural gatherings with Roberto Vargas and Ariel Dorfman. My work reached out to countries I had never seen. Poems found their beginnings in the eyes of friends and the pauses in conversations. I was living in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington and interacting with people from Central and South America. Carolyn Forché's *The Country Between Us* was a model for my new work. I wanted to write poems like "The Colonel." This was the first real haunting poem I had ever read. Today whenever I see a picture of a hostage or a prisoner of war with a black bag tied over his head I think of Forché and the ending to her poem "The Visitor" which she wrote in 1979, "There is nothing one man will not do to another."

When I started thinking about writing my memoir and trying to remember things about my father, Eady's *you don't miss your water* was the emotional rock I climbed. When I read this

book in order to write a blurb I could feel the honesty and pain on every page. I learned so much about the relationship between men from this book. The theme of family has been a major one in my work the last few years. This book by Eady was a key to a door hidden inside my heart. Even the way he wrote about his sister helped me to explore my own sister's voice in *Fathering Words*.

What is *essential* is that a writer always remember the beginning of things. Writing is a way of not forgetting. It might take a few more years to determine what new books (or songs) will become essential to my growth.

I hope to remain humble as I continue on my creative and spiritual journey. Right now I'm listening to Alicia Keys and she is singing "You Don't Know My Name." So it was in the beginning so it shall be in the end.

