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FATHERING WORDS



The Making of an
African American Writer



Ethelbert Miller



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E. ETHELBERT MILLER

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE FOUR WOMEN
WHO HELPED WITH THE MOTHERING OF *Fathering Words*:

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Often the father is more than absent; he is lost, as he has been lost to himself for most of his adult life, crushed by his burdens, rendered impotent by fatigue and anxieties, reduced to a number, a statistical integer, in the army or the factory of the marketplace. The son goes in search of the father, to be reconciled in a healing embrace. In that act of love he restores his father's lost pride and manhood. Perhaps he also finds himself.

—Stanley Kunitz

Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.

—Søren Kierkegaard

FATHERING WORDS

promised I would be good for the rest of my life. I would never steal or lie. I closed my eyes and only opened them when I heard my father running across the street, cursing and trying to fix his clothes at the same time. When I was little I thought my father was God.

Sitting in the back of a black limousine, parked on a hill in a cemetery near Yonkers, on a cold day in December 1985, I saw my father cry for the first time in my life. It was one of those moments when the world slows down and you notice the color of air. You stare at your hands and wonder how long you will live or which member of the family you will bury next. My father, Egberto Miller, dressed in black, his shoes polished in a way he could never teach my brother or me, sat in the limousine waiting to return home from Richard's funeral. I watched him raise his hands and heard him mumble one word, "gone." Maybe this is how God will end the world. He will say one word and end everything. No fire or rain. I listened to my father, repeating one word and knew he would never be comforted again. Little did I know that another black limousine would come for me in two years. It would take me to my father's funeral. On that day I would begin to search for my own words in order to make sense out of my loss. All the men in my family were suddenly—gone.

In the past whenever I was troubled I could sit down and write a few poems. But what I am recovering from now is a different type of heart surgery. Sorrow and grief can be found in that place within the blues where words end and moans begin. The singer is speechless because the hurt is so bad. The only thing one can do is ride the song.

A few years ago, I remember reading the second chapter of Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate* in which Billy explains how it was juggling that got him to where he was. This is how it feels to be a writer. I need to write about my father

and brother. The story, however, is too deep and heavy for poems. I need to father more words and explain the beginning. Maybe it starts with a young boy coming to this country from Panama, a place where the oceans kiss. Or maybe the threads of this story begin with a man on his knees in a monastery, praying to his mother instead of God. I would like to believe this story can be told while I am juggling.

Several members of my family described me as a "blue baby" when I was born. Richard was born with six fingers. So both of us were the subject of early family stories. One of my cousins claimed I was supposed to be given to her mother to be raised. Only Richard's crying prevented this. When I returned from the hospital I became the baby of the family. My sister was happy with this new development.

There were many things that took place before my birth. My family owned pets such as roosters. My father had not yet found employment in the post office. He was a coffee-colored man with two children to feed and clothe. He met my mother dancing at the Savoy. The war was going on in Europe and the dreams of black people could be seen hanging from fire escapes. Neighborhoods were changing. Folks were leaving Harlem for the Bronx. It was like moving to the suburbs. Egberto Miller would find the 1940s a challenge as he listened to the new sounds of bebop coming from the jazz clubs.

Egberto, who was called Eddie by his friends, became a young man with only a few coins in his pocket. He had been a baby in the arms of a woman too young and too fast to slow down. In the old country, a canal had been built. West Indians came from every island to find work. A frontier of water separated them from "paper gold." Malaria, accidents, broken promises were enough for some to

lose hope and others to believe in their own destiny. America was like heaven, far off to the north. It was the place where a great uncle would plant and harvest the first seeds of success. Investing in real estate, he would later send for other members of his family. His mother would bring his sisters and brothers to America. One child already had a child, she was my grandmother Marie. It was her mother who decided we would all be Millers, and so the ties to Panama were cut. Egberto's father became a ghost. His own family geography disappeared because of a woman's desire and need to forget. Many years later a writer would be born into the family searching for stories to tell. There would be a decision made to take him back to the hospital or perhaps even give him away.

II

When they brought the baby home I was so excited. I pushed Richard out of the way. I remember holding Eugene for the first time. He was smaller than some of my dolls. I thought he would break. My mother thought I was silly. My name is Marie. I was named after my grandmother. I was the bald-headed child. My father often refused to take me out in the stroller if my head was not covered. He could not believe a girl could be born without any hair. I must have been five or six before my mother could hold something in her hands and make a braid. The reason I had no hair is because I was yet to be trusted with the family stories. I was not wise enough to understand why people acted the way they did, especially men. My mother would have to teach me these things, along with cook-

ing, cleaning, and dressing myself. My hair would grow with each story I learned to remember. Now that I am over fifty years old, my hair is long and beautiful. There are places where it has turned gray, and here I find myself wanting to forget my memory.

My brother Eugene wants me to tell him what happened before he was born. He is a writer now and maybe he will realize how much is missing or has become what he calls whispers and secrets. I have always been trusted because I was a girl they wanted to become a woman. I belong to a family of mostly women. Everyone it seems is an aunt and lives in Brooklyn. They are women who hold onto their West Indian accents like spices and the silver bangles that dance around their arms. I believed their power could be found in their jewelry or how they sat in chairs on Sunday afternoons, their wide hips and large arms taking up the space of rooms. One could listen all day to kitchen conversations. Words mixing with the smell of food. Once I learned how to cook I knew I would be accepted into this magical club of women. My mother, the oldest of three sisters, would instruct me how to cook not from books but from watching. One could only learn if one was quiet and watched. There was never any time for questions. So, what I know about my family is what I know. It is difficult to explain or make sense out of some of the things that happened. I don't understand all the pain and guilt that has accumulated over the years. I can't explain why my father was filled with so much rage and so much love. I wonder why my mother seldom closed her eyes except for a few minutes each day. She was a woman who heard and knew the source of every

sound inside and outside her apartment. As children, we could not escape her watch. Our mother saw everything. When I told her Carmen saw Richard walking his dog after he died, she said that was foolish devil talk. I don't believe everything my mother tells me anymore. I think she saw Richard after he died, I think she was talking with him in the kitchen one morning while making my father breakfast.

III

My father had no father. Instead he had an English name on a Spanish birth certificate. It was a document he could not read. He kept it among medical and financial records. A birth certificate mixed up with old receipts, health and bank statements, contained in a metal box, the kind you associate with burglaries and semiprecious jewels. Whenever one of my parents opened the "tin" they did so in the back of the apartment, with shades and curtains closed. It would be many years later, after college, a first marriage, a few published books that I would be permitted in the same room with the metal box. How shocked and disappointed I was to discover that much of what the box held was junk. There were things my parents held onto because they felt the papers were important. Documents with small print and legal jargon. Both my parents were baffled by words. I knew my father was unable to read much of what he had collected. But what could he hide? His father did not suddenly walk out a door, turn a corner, and disappear. He never came to America. In the movie the boat moves slowly from the dock, the passengers look back at the land, lovers, and the past.

Farewells are different from good-byes. The separation more permanent. The farewell can be romantic, like a tear falling from an eye. A woman leaving behind a relationship no stronger than the tide. The good-bye could have been blessed by a parent angry at a daughter's early pregnancy. Seldom during his life did my father escort anyone to the front door to shake their hands, pat them on their backs, and wish them well.

No father, what does that mean? Is it just a theme in books, articles in newspapers, and conference topics? I have found it to be an ingredient in numerous conversations. Black boys need black fathers.

It is the 1930s and Egberto is learning the streets of Harlem like so many others. He will have many addresses and receive little schooling, the movement from place to place imitating the improvisation of a jazz solo. A few years before his death my father sent me out shopping for an entire day looking for a Miles Davis composition. What was the name of that song? Or the one he asked my mother to dance to when he met her at the Savoy.

A family struggles to find its own rhythms, the duets between brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. The family music escapes through open windows and closed doors. It can be upstairs, downstairs, or next door. The music is the joy of weddings and birthdays, the slow sadness of illness and funerals. It is the overcrowded housing projects and the empty playgrounds too dangerous for play. The music is what raises us and teaches us to sing. Sometimes it makes you want to dance, and you need a partner. You must learn to play the beat, setting the tone and tempo, hoping someone will hear your lament and leap in and pull you out of depression. Family music, and Egberto hears the space in between notes. The place where a father's smile and hand should be.

IV

The green Dodge begins to move backward slowly down the hill. My mother and I are in the front seat. My father went into the store to purchase ice. The car is rolling backward. Behind us a man is looking under the hood of his own vehicle. His legs will soon be trapped between the two cars. There is nothing my mother and I can do. She has never learned how to drive and cannot operate the brakes. The man's screams come through the back window of our car. My father comes rushing out of the store. He panics before running to the car. On this day I lose all desire to learn how to drive. I will join a long list of writers who cannot drive and become as different as the music of Sun Ra.

My father's Dodge is the car that took us to the beach. I don't remember going anywhere else. Why was my father so attracted to water? He could not swim. In the summer on his days off from work we would pack food and blankets and go to Jones Beach. Some times we went to Far Rockaway and had to be reminded of how once someone had stolen my father's clothes at the beach and he had to ride the subway home in only his bathing suit. Incidents like this make you want to buy ice. How else can one keep the soda cold and the sandwiches fresh? On the day before we went to the beach my father would polish his car and get it ready for the journey. I guess the Dodge was like a boat. The kind his father refused to board or was not invited to place his foot on. A car with enough room for five. After the green Dodge would come a black one. By this time my brother would be getting ready to enter the monastery. The fun of going to the beach would end. The ice would melt.

V

I hated the beach because the sand would get in my hair. Eugene would make those silly castles with a red pail and yellow shovel. He also walked along the shore looking for seashells. Our father would be far out in the water, unable to swim but capable of jumping up and down and making his own waves. Strange how near the water my father would become so happy and warm. Maybe he was baptizing himself, beginning to believe in his own power. There were times when we were the only black people at the beach and our skins would glow and wink back at the sun.

VI

I let the water cover my ankles. Behind me my mother and father are sitting on a blanket. I will forget this day along with many others. My childhood, like my first marriage, is almost gone from my memories. What tide claimed them before old age? Why is it so difficult to remember those days in New York? I want to see my father's face again. I want him to talk this time. I cannot watch him sleep throughout eternity. I must wake him from his dreams. When I was standing on a corner of Longwood Avenue and my father came to get me, it was like someone crossing a huge ocean or walking on water. I opened my eyes and my father was there.

For much of my life I tried to connect with him. When I would come home in the early seventies from college, I attempted to talk with him more than my mother. My father was usually in the bedroom with the television playing.

"Hi, Gené," he would say as I kissed him. It was often a glance across his beard. My father was not a fan of kissing and hugging. Our conversations were always brief and I would leave my father alone in his bedroom with a pillow behind him and I would walk back into the kitchen to talk to my mother.

How did it feel to lie in bed and listen to laughter coming from the kitchen? My father was an outsider even within his own family. Nothing much had changed from when he was a boy living in Harlem. He would come back to his grandmother's house and the food that was set aside for him to eat would be gone. It was the thirties and the grayness of the period would cover black people like ash. Food and clothing would disappear like work. Apartments were overcrowded and families struggled to make ends meet.

I knew my parents were not wealthy. I knew my mother and father were not poor. Still, in the fifties, there were days without heat and hot water and one was encouraged to take care of one's shoes. My mother believed that you could tell a man by his shoes. During the good times we could buy Buster Browns. It was important to keep your shoes polished and the heels in good condition.

As the black limousine slowly moved down the hill in the cemetery, I sat in the back seat with my sister, Marie. I looked at my shoes. The sun was shining on this cold February day. My father had been cremated and perhaps we should have taken his ashes to the beach. We could have rented a boat and sailed to the center of some isolated spot. Marie and I could have held hands. We could have made a wish or said a prayer. We could have scattered our father's ashes across the water with the knowledge that he never learned to swim but loved the waves. We could say good-bye to our father, our eyes looking back at the shore.

CHAPTER TWO

I

When I was ten I wanted to live inside my father's dreams. My father worked nights and slept during the day. Our apartment on 938 Longwood Avenue in the fifties was what someone coming from the South, or maybe Texas, might call a shotgun shack. My family lived in unit number three. One walked up several stairs from the front stoop past the mailboxes, a long corridor, and then up a long flight of stairs. The first door on the right was where we lived. Inside, the rooms were next to each other like shoe boxes. Off the hallway, was a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, then a living room, with two more bedrooms in the back. A fire escape outside the bedroom on the left. During the years I would grow up in this space, the rooms would change. Bedrooms would become living rooms. A kitchen would become a bathroom if there was no hot water. Richard's room would become Marie's room. I saw my father sleeping in many different rooms.

A man sleeps because he is tired. He also has a thirst for sleep if he wishes to escape. Maybe after drinking or making love, the wetness of sleep can wash away a man's pain or guilt. A man can also crave sleep if he wishes to