SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

When the University of Arkansas Press invited me to be the editor of its annual publication prize named in honor of Miller Williams—the longtime director of the press and its poetry program—I was quick to accept. Since 1988, when he published my first full-length book, *The Apple That Astonished Paris*, I have felt keenly indebted to Miller. Among the improvements to the world made by Miller before his death in January 2015 at the age of eighty-four was his dedication to finding a place for new poets on the literary stage. In 1990, this commitment became official when the first Arkansas Poetry Prize was awarded. Fittingly, upon his retirement, the prize was renamed the Miller Williams Poetry Prize.

When Miller first spotted my poetry, I was forty-six years old with only two chapbooks to my name. Not a pretty sight. Miller was the one who carried me across that critical line, where the "unpublished poets" impatiently wait, and who made me, in one stroke, a "published poet." Funny, you never hear "unpublished novelist." I suppose if you were a novelist who remained unpublished you would stop writing novels. Not the case with many poets, including me.

Miller Williams was more than my first editor. Over the years, he and I became friends, but even more importantly, before I knew him, I knew his poems. His straightforward, sometimes folksy, sometimes witty, and always trenchant poems were to me models of how poems might sound and how they could *go*. He was one of the poets who showed me that humor had a legitimate place in poetry—that a poem could be humorous without being silly or merely comical. He also showed me that a plainspoken poem did not have to be imaginatively plain or short on surprises. He was one of my literary fathers.

Miller occupied a solid position on the American literary map, though considering his extensive career and steady poetic output, it's surprising that his poems don't enjoy even more prominence.

As his daughter became the well-known singer and recording artist that she is today, Miller came to be known as the father of Lucinda Williams. Miller and Lucinda even appeared on stage together several times, performing a father-daughter act of song and poetry. In 1997, Miller came to the nation's attention when Bill Clinton chose him to be the inaugural poet for his second inauguration. The poem he wrote for that event, "Of History and Hope," is a meditation on how "we have memorized America." In turning to the children of our country, he broadens a nursery rhyme question by asking "how does *our* garden grow?" Miller knew that occasional poems, especially for occasions of such importance, are notoriously difficult—some would say impossible—to write with success. But he rose to that occasion and produced a winner. His confident reading of the poem before the nation added cultural and emotional weight to the morning's ceremony and lifted Miller Williams to a new level of popularity and respect.

Miller was pleased by public recognition. What poet is immune? At home one evening, spotting a headline in a newspaper that read POET BURNS TO BE HONORED, Miller's wife, Jordan, remarked, "They sure have your number." Of course, the article was about an annual celebration honoring Robert Burns.

Miller's true legacy lies in his teaching and his career as a poet, which covered four decades. In that time, he produced over a dozen books of his own poetry and literary theory. His poetic voice tends to be soft-spoken but can be humorous or bitingly mordant. The poems sound like speech running to a meter. And they show a courteous, engaging awareness of the presence of a reader. Miller knew that the idea behind a good poem is to make the reader feel something, rather than to merely display the poet's emotional state, which has a habit of boiling down to one of the many forms of misery. Miller also possessed the authority of experience to produce poems that were just plain wise.

With Miller's sensibility in mind, I set out to judge the first year's contest. I was on the lookout for poems that resembled Miller's. But the more I read, the more I realized that applying such narrow criteria would be selling Miller short and would not be fair to the entrants. It would make more sense to select manuscripts

that Miller would enjoy reading for their own merits, not for their similarity to his own poems. That his tastes in poetry were broader than the territory of his own verse can be seen in the variety of the books he published. The list included poets as different from one another as John Ciardi and Jimmy Carter. Broadening my own field of judgment brought happy results, and I'm confident that Miller would enthusiastically approve of this year's selections—winner Michael McGriff's *Eternal Sentences*, finalist Craig Blais's *Moon News*, and finalist Madeleine Wattenberg's *I/O*—as well as those of previous years.

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If I had to give a Hollywood elevator pitch on behalf of Michael McGriff's *Eternal Sentences*, the 2021 Miller Williams Poetry Prize winner, I might say that it's a blend of the low-rent sociology of Raymond Carver with the quirky imagination of Richard Brautigan. The speaker of these poems lives in the realm of Kmart, McDonald's, and Gas Qwik. Friends are in jail. A snake is coiled inside a Schlitz can, the family is too proud to accept food stamps, and the neighbors are "too poor for a fence." But that, compared to the method and power of these poems, is just the scene, not the subject.

The title of this book is very explicit about what lies inside, that is, a series of sentences. Of course, we could describe just about all writing from the Bible to Jim Thompson as a progression of sentences, but here the sentence is king. I was enjoying myself so much on first reading that I failed to notice right away the distinguishing scheme at work in every poem. Each line of every poem is its own periodic sentence, where the reader must fully stop before he or she can go on. And the period is the only punctuation allowed in this collection, apart from a handful of apostrophes just to keep track of who owns what. The comma, a useful way to guide the sentence and control its rhythm, is banned. The period rules. The deeper we wade into McGriff's collection, the more we realize that while the exclusive use of end-stopped sentences, one after the other, is the source of the poems' power, it is also a self-imposed restriction. It reminded me of W. S. Merwin's comment

that he abandoned (or transcended!) punctuation in order to make writing poems more difficult for himself by doing without its help. Here, every one of McGriff's poems is a box of sentences.

Such a repetition of short, declarative sentences risks the monotony some associate with the lockstep heroic couplets of eighteenth-century English poetry. But the sentences here, for the most part, are a wonder. Whether linked to create a suggestion of a narrative or, just as commonly, to not strain toward a singular point, the stacks of sentences are always fresh and often striking. Some are straightforward:

"I wore the same jacket to your wedding and your funeral."
"My sandwich tastes worse than I thought."
"They're poking at a fire with curtain rods."

Others are quirky, surrealistic:

"A skyful of sparrows poured from my chest."
"I try to step through a mirror discarded in an alley."
"Three early stars torqued into place along the border."

And the hand of Brautigan is present:

"The elk sharpen their craft of disregarding us."
"Everyone from the eighteenth century looks seventy-five and doomed."

Eternal Sentences makes us reexamine the line in poetry and the sentences that lines can hold. Charles Olsen ordered that "no line must sleep." The lines gathered here could not be more aroused, aware, and wakeful. Here's one poem in its entirety:

Tonight I Am

A dead flashlight in a kitchen drawer.
A sheet of three-cent stamps.
A fistful of gravel as a last defense.
Wind against the house lying through its teeth.

This series of short sentences produces both individual eye-openers as well as some overlap that suggests possible patterns.

One leaves these poems with the feeling that life comes at us in a series of sentences too stark to be interrupted by the brake-tapping of a comma. I've heard metaphors for life that hold less truth. *Eternal Sentences* will come at its readers as a series of happily endless delights.

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To return to the elevator for a moment—*Moon News*, finalist for the 2021 Miller Williams Poetry Prize, can be seen as the unlikely marriage of Charles Bukowski and Sir Philip Sidney, but of course, that doesn't do justice to Craig Blais, who is a strong and engaging poet in his own right. We can say that *Moon News* is a collection of sonnets if we allow that a poem cast in the basic shape of a sonnet is a sonnet. The shadow of the English sonnet is visible here: fourteen lines divided into three quatrains and the couplet. But the quatrains are not grammatical units as they tend to be with the Elizabethans; rather, they run on into the next quatrain and finally into the couplet, amen. This is the more urgent, jumpy sonnet in which the poet talks through the shape of the poem, hurrying ahead until he feels the couplet nearing; then he finds a way to use the two remaining lines to close the poem up. As readers, we experience both the familiarity of the sonnet box and the many novel twists and odd surprises of this poet's original hand. In one poem, Blais's grandmother's pea soup recipe acts as the closing couplet. In other scenarios, the couplets sound like items from a police blotter or a nurse's log. This is the sonnet repurposed for our time.

Here's one example from a stack of endings. The speaker is sitting at home watching a football game and drinking "a thirty-pack" when a friend stops by and declares he is "interested in exploring 'traditional / masculine gender roles.'" And here are the lines that directly follow:

> The sun is reversing
>
> its magnetic field every eleven years—flipping
> end over end like a chariot tossed by horses

off the road and down a rocky embankment.
North becomes south and south north as it follows

an orbit around a galaxy center that flails its arms
like a wide receiver looking for a penalty flag.

That is not allowed in prose, and it shows Blais's full awareness of the high degree of imaginative freedom offered by poetry. To read these poems is to be both enclosed by the sonnet's chalk lines and released by the wildness of the content. The swerves of thought are not dictated by the sonnet's divisions. A poem that begins about a friend schooling the poet for his drinking ends this way: "Molten iron / converts to steel and hardens until the next thing // you know, there are 446 bridges in your city / and a weapon for every imaginable atrocity." Poems, it has been said, should at least be interesting—and these are in spades. Speaking of which, a woman reading tarot cards is "bluffing like she's in the middle of a poker game." The poet writes someone's phone number on a rock and tosses it into his backyard in case he ever locks himself out of his house; he does this because "I am scared."

Most poets in America teach. Blais is in the minority who admit the experience into their poems. In teaching Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, he deals with one student who says, "'That's weird.' / The same thing he's said all semester about everything." Another thinks Gregor—the "bug-man"—"brought it on himself somehow." Or "his family did it to him." Finally, the "weird" kid is given the couplet: "'Maybe it's not about *why*. Maybe it's about / how everybody left behind just has to deal with it.'" In another poem about teaching English, the students are unimpressed when told "that *stanza* in Italian / means *room*," so teacher tells them it really means *crime scene*.

Moon News modulates into a series of sonnets about Saint Blaise, "patron saint of animals and those suffering from throat ailments." Here reverential prayers mix with hagiographic exaggerations: "Like Jesus, Blaise walked on water, but unlike Jesus, / when he got to the center of the lake, he sat down." Another section is a kind of elegy for friend "Alex," but the tone is mixed

like the tone of this whole book. The sonnet never before carried such cargo: heroin, hospital rooms, poems growing out of trees and out of a person's open hand, a flower drooping "like it could give a fuck," Jeff Bezos, Tom Brady, and SpongeBob himself.

Moon News is a dazzling collection of fully American sonnets. And if you want to get the real moon news, Blais will tell you that "the moon appeared after earth took a glancing blow / off the chin 4.5 billion years ago. // Every day since it has been tugging at our seas / like a child afraid its mother will leave."

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Io, you might recall, was one of the lovers of Zeus who was turned into a heifer then back into a woman. And in *I/O*, she holds a lantern to guide a poet through a book of poems, for Madeleine Wattenberg is a votary of this goddess. Io is her confidante and confessor. It is Io to whom her letters are addressed, as if the poet had one foot in the ancient world of mythology and the other in her own time. In opening up a channel between her personal history and the age of mythology, the poet develops a private association with Io and her time. *I/O* is peppered with questions as if the poet sought answers to her own unfolding journey: "Io, tell me how you left the grove." "Tell me how you crossed the sea with only a gnat for company." "Were you surprised when Hera took you into the grove and fastened your gold collar?" The poems seem to toggle back and forth between ancient and modern realms, with the ancient world dominating the sensibility and the sound of each utterance. Even when the poet is in her own time, her language sounds vaguely elemental, as if she wants to be better understood by Io. Subtle, intentional missteps in grammar and diction signal an effort to write in a more basic English with a more ancient sound. Nature is even animated as it would be in a mythological world: "The hills shift their shadows as though swinging a load from hip to hip." Her more natural language is tinged with a delicate sensuousness. She is "careful not to tear the purple skin" of a plum. She announces that "I don't wash my hair for ten straight years / and each day the oil drips down my back."

And while swimming, "Underwater, my feet / glitter like pink cities." And many of Wattenberg's poems sparkle with stunningly inventive images, as when trees spread "like tails of peacocks to the sky" or "the clouds remain closed as caskets."

Another female figure enters the scene with Margaret Cavendish, the seventeenth-century poet, scientist, and pioneer feminist who published under her own name and challenged the belief in a mechanistic world. We get a view of the duchess's complex laboratory. Cavendish appears in a poem titled "Uses for Late Frost," which recalls a scene from her groundbreaking novel *The Blazing World* in which "a merchant abducts / a daughter as she gathers / shells along the shore." The lines that follow—"They sail to where two / worlds meet"—reminded me of how Wattenberg makes the two worlds of today and ancient Greece meet through the agency of Io.

For me, the poem that best represents the strange power and imaginative pressure of this book is "Charon's Obol," in reference to the coin that those being transported to the underworld must give the ferryman. The myth serves as background and grounding wire to the poet's growing up, from her father placing on her tongue "a sliver of peach / or a white pastille . . . a homeopathic moon," to her tongue "sliding against the edges of men," including "a boy who tastes of copper." Finally, the coin becomes the obol of death. The poet practices dying by placing "a coin / across my tongue." "How can I know which boat to board," she asks in terminal confusion, "I'm just trying to pay my way." *I/O*, despite its brief title, is a book of expansive power and enviable craft.

Congratulations to all three of these poets. The University of Arkansas Press is honored to be the home for these titles for years to come.

Billy Collins

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