

A Conversation with
Joseph Millar

April 21, 2006

Raised in western Pennsylvania, Joseph Millar received an MA from Johns Hopkins University in 1970, after which he worked in a variety of occupations, including telephone installation and commercial fishing. His writing includes two books of poetry from Eastern Washington University Press, *Overtime* (2001) and *Fortune* (2006), as well as two chapbooks, *Slow Dancer* and *Midlife: (Passionate Lives: Eight Autobiographical Poem Cycles)*. In 1995, Millar was awarded first place in the Montalvo Biennial Poetry Competition, judged by Garrett Hongo, and won second place in the National Writers' Union Competition, judged by Philip Levine. His work has appeared in many magazines and journals, including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry International*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He has also been the recipient of fellowships from the Montalvo Center for the Arts and Oregon Literary Arts. He teaches at Oregon State University, The University of Oregon, and Pacific University's MFA in Writing Program.

Yusef Komunyakaa has described Millar as a “poet we can believe,” because his poetry not only focuses on commonplace jobs, possessions, and situations, but because his voice is charged with such authority regarding these matters.

We met with Mr. Millar over lunch at the Palm Court Grill in Spokane.

MILLAR

I'm warning you right now: I read your interview with Gerry Stern, and he is a hell of a lot smarter than I am.

VINEYARD

But you'll be funnier, right?

MILLAR

Well, okay. Gerry visited me at my house one time. He didn't know I had a back porch because he hadn't been to the house. And the bathroom is right next to where he was sleeping. So he wakes up in the morning and has to piss like a racehorse, and right out on the front porch he's standing, peeing. The front porch is like eight feet from the sidewalk. And he said two people went by; they were very polite. He said they never looked up at him. [Laughs.] He's a wild man.

VINEYARD

Switching gears slightly, do you consider yourself the speaker of the poems in *Overtime*?

MILLAR

That's the thing about poetry with me. I can't get out of it. I know people who write from different perspectives, you know, who write persona poems, but I think the subtext to all poems—the really good ones—is that the author is the speaker. They're in there. One of the best poets who acts as a speaker in her work is Louise Glück, in *Wild Irises*. You know she's there. All those needling observations she makes, and the short discursive statements about life that aren't very salutary—that's her.

When anybody writes a persona poem but can't really inhabit the persona, it's just, it'll be a shitty persona. It won't have any juice. I didn't even try to write persona poems for *Overtime*. The first-person speaker in there, I'm afraid, is the dreaded "I."

I think the best thing about writing, when it's working, is that you somehow figure out how to make it direct. You get a poem going and say, Oh, that's how it was. That's how it was. There's that old man standing there by the railroad station with the paper blowing in the streets, and that's how it was that day, and it's coming back to you and you're getting it down. To me, you have a real piece of life that you've lived and you've got it down on paper in some way. And when that happens,

it's magical and it makes you feel great. So people that say, "Oh the 'I' sucks; get the 'I' out of there—it's all so boring and everything," they're just doing a bunch of smoke and mirrors, a bunch of misdirection. If the 'I' really isn't in there, what are they doing it for? If you have to ask yourself why the person wrote it, that basically means the poem bites. You can say, "This poem, I don't know why the guy wrote it." The next statement is, "Because I don't care about it and it doesn't seem like they care about it."

HALINEN

Do you generally write from memory, or from something near the present moment?

MILLAR

Memory, mostly. And I have short lists in my notebook of stuff I mean to write about someday. Because I'll forget it. So I write it down in notes. When a woman has a flat tire, or something like that. And I can't always make a poem out of it, but I come back and give it a try a lot of the time.

HALINEN

Do you often find yourself writing in the same kind of vein?

MILLAR

Well, that was Overtime because when I wrote a lot of those poems, my life was changing. In 1997, I quit working in the trades, and now I'm like, kind of fat and blah. So you think I'd be writing poems with gratitude, which is really how I feel a lot of times. But when I sit down and write, the poems are angry, sad, not so cheery. I'm not real proud of that, but I don't know what to do because that's the kind I'm getting, so I'm taking them, and I say Thank you and keep going. Sometimes I read wonderful praise poems. The whole tradition of praise poetry, from Hopkins on, and before him, Wordsworth, Shakespeare. Praise poems. Praise the world. Even the neos and Adam Zagajewski, and the poets

captured that lived through the war, they're writing praise poems. And here I am, this gringo American, you know, had to work for a living for a while and raise some kids and all I can do is piss and moan. What's the matter with me?

HALINEN

Your poems pay a great deal of attention to sound. Does that come right away as you're writing, or is it something you pay attention to in revision?

MILLAR

I sort of have a natural ear for language, especially internal rhyme. I do a lot of that. Phrases occur to me in that way. Of course when I revise, if I can think of a way to amplify that, I do.

HALINEN

Do you consider writing poems to be work or play or somewhere in between?

MILLAR

It's work, but you know—when you've been doing it for even the amount of time I've been doing it, which is longer than you guys, it gets more like, I've got to go back in there, but sometimes I put it off. And poetry, you don't get to go back to the same one like a fiction writer does. The poem's over. So when you go back, you have to start over again. And sometimes I'm like, How did I do that? Can I still do that? And then I'm thinking, I can't do this anymore. William Stafford has this poem where he's trying to climb a cliff, and it ends where he goes, "I made it again." That's the last line. And that's what it's like. It's always coming from someplace where you can't exactly tell how you did it. The good ones, especially. So to me, it's messing with that thing that I can't make work yet or whatever it is. It's like working out or starting a run—you've got to stretch, you've got to get out there, and it's raining, goddammit. But then you get going a little bit, and you're going, Oh yeah, okay.

VINEYARD

And you know that later on you're going to forget this process, like it's just going to go out the window—

MILLAR

Yeah, and it's going to be over, and you're going to be over and you're going to be a greedy bastard and want some more. It's like sex: there's never enough. And that's the thing about poetry, there's magic like that. So it's work and play and magic and it's frightening. Sometimes when I don't write for a long time, I get anxious. I want to pick a fight with somebody; I want to break something. But I live in a house with a family. I can't go around doing that.

HALINEN

What's it like being married to a poet?

MILLAR

Being married to my wife, it's mostly a good deal. There's times when it's not such a good deal, but mostly it's a good deal. Because I can show her my stuff and she doesn't lie to me. She risks me getting pissed off at her, which I do. "I'm not changing that! That's the whole goddamn thing, right there! What do you mean change that?" And the thing is, most of the time she's right. I trust her. But it's hard sometimes because we're both writing in the house and the phone rings and you say, "I answered it last time." Who's going to do this, and who's going to do that? We're got the chores of living divided up pretty even. And we've both been married before and we know what some of the pitfalls of a relationship can be. A lot of times there's certain things, if you're married, that you should never say, and I think people—and this is a little of a digression—sometimes people think—in the name of honesty, of really having a good, honestly grounded relationship—people should be able to say anything to each other. And the thing is, you can't. You can't say anything you want. If you say the wrong thing, you'll never be able to take it back. And it's never the same after that. Because when we're intimate with one another, we know things about each other nobody else knows. So there's a rule of decency that comes in there.

When we've had an argument, talking about poetry is like a neutral

ground. I'll say something like, "I saw these translations of Tranströmer" or something and she'll say, "Oh yeah?" and you start talking again about this thing that you both have respect for. That's a good thing about being married to a poet. It gives us a way of relating that's personal, yet impersonal, too.

Because there's an impersonality about art. There's a story about Miles Davis, where somebody in his family said "Listen, I want you to use so and so, somebody's cousin, I want you to use him as a drummer," and Miles said, "Well I've played with that guy already, and he ain't that good." And she goes, "Yeah, but come on, he's our friend." And Miles says, "Music doesn't have friends like that." That's the way poetry is, too. It doesn't have friends like that. Now you know you don't always play bad. If you look around at the poetry scene, that thing is not always evident. Sometimes you see in somebody or in somebody's friend, they're getting over a lot and they're not that good. But it doesn't change the thing of the poetry. As Keats looked at it or Shakespeare looked at it, or Dante. It's up on here and you're bringing your little flowers to it. In our case, they're kind of like dandelions. You're bringing it over there and it's what it is and they're as good as you can make them. And no matter who publishes the book or who writes on the back of it, it's as good as the poems are. Sometimes you'll read poetry from the big houses and you'll go, "You know, that guy shouldn't have published this." It's got maybe five good poems in there and about thirty that are pretty mediocre. So you can't tell, there's an impersonality to it, and that's part of what's cool about it.

HALINEN

Have you ever co-written poems with Dorianne [Laux]?

MILLAR

Everything that comes out of our house is co-written in a way, because we look at each other's stuff and pencil it up and sometimes give each other lines and give each other images. But, no. I don't have anything against collaborations. But collaborations on poems, I don't know. I'm not that thrilled with the idea.

HALINEN

Christopher Howell said in an interview that poems written during Vietnam forced people to act, and since then, poems haven't accomplished that same type of "motivation." How much power do you think the individual has to bring about positive change to such complex problems, and how do you see the poet's role as a means toward bringing those changes?

MILLAR

When I was your age and the war was going on, there was a good chance the government would reach in, grab your ass, and send you to the jungle to be shot at by the Vietcong. So, there was a galvanizing effect in the country. We didn't have all these "smart bombs" they have now, where you can invade a country from the air. The poets against the war in the 1960s, I agree with Chris, did motivate people to speak out. I remember watching Robert Bly read and being very inspired by him. Abbie Hoffman was reading in 1969, back when the Chicago Seven were up for trial, and he talked about flying into Washington, DC, on the plane, and he said you could see the Potomac River going out like a big leg, and another river in DC going out the other way like a big leg, and then the Washington Monument sticking straight up between them like a big cock. That whole time was different. The government could put hands on you personally in a way they couldn't before. There was a draft. That had a lot more to do with it than Bly, Levertov, Stafford, and Kinnell going around reading poems. Although that was a great thing, I don't think it was the poems.

Social injustice toward black people during the 1960s was also a motivating force behind poetry. There's a book by David Hilliard called *This Side of Glory*. He was the minister of information for the Black Panthers. He talks about the beginning of the Black Panther Party, which was him and Huey Newton and Bobby Seale getting together to read a bunch of communist literature, getting all amped-up about it, and deciding that they would get some guns and patrol Oakland. If they saw the cops unfairly shake someone down, they were going to break loose. They were going to have this free breakfast program for children. They were going to do things in their community.

We lived in a much more fascist state during Vietnam. We were thinking, back then, that there was going to be a revolution. We were really thinking we were going to have an end to racism and other things. Compared to 1954, racism was a lot better, so anyone who said they wanted to go back to the way it was before the 1960s was crazy. Now they try to discredit the 1960s by saying it was just a bunch of drug-induced kids running around. Bullshit. We stopped a war. But it wasn't the poems.