

Classic Poetry Series

Etheridge Knight
- poems -

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Etheridge Knight(1931 - 1991)

Etheridge Knight was an African-American poet who became a notable poet in 1968 with his debut volume, *Poems from Prison*.

Biography

Etheridge Knight was born on April 19, 1931 in Corinth, Mississippi. He was one of seven children in a poor family, and only completed a ninth-grade education. Spending many of his adolescent years working in pool halls, bars, and juke joints, he mastered the art of "telling toasts". Toasts are long narrative poems coming from an oral tradition which are performed from memory and with spirit. This environment honed his poetic experience, however, it also introduced him to drugs. He became addicted to drugs at an early age.

He joined the U.S. Army, serving as a medical technician in the Korean war, was discharged from service in 1951, after suffering from a shrapnel wound that caused him to fall deeper into his drug addiction. After his time in the Army he settled in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he picked up the art of telling toasts, which are traditional, black, oral narrative poems acted out in a theatrical manner. During this time, he still maintained his addiction to heroin.

Arrested in Indianapolis for stealing a purse in 1960, Knight was imprisoned for eight years. He recounts this experience in verse in *Poems from Prison* and in prose in the anthology *Black Voices from Prison* (1970; originally published two years earlier in Italian as *Voce negra dal carcere*).

He emerged as the voice of the black aesthetic movement with his first volume of verse *Poems from Prison* (1968). His poetry was a combination of "toasts" and a concern for freedom from oppression.

After his release from prison he married fellow poet Sonia Sanchez only to divorce her two years later. Knight taught at various universities and contributed to several magazines, working for two years as an editor of *Motive* and as a contributing editor of *New Letters* (1974). He experimented with rhythmic forms of punctuation in *Belly Song and Other Poems* (1973), which addressed the themes of ancestry, racism, and love in *Born of a Woman* (1980) - a work that balances personal suffering with affirmation - he introduced the concept of the poet as a "meddler" who forms a trinity with the poem and the reader. Much of his verse was collected in *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (1986).

Knight's books and oral performances awarded him both popular and critical acclaim. He received honors from such institutions as the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Poetry Society of America. In 1990 he earned a bachelor's degree in American poetry and criminal justice from Martin Center University in Indianapolis.

He married Mary McNally in 1972, and fathered her two children. They settled in Minneapolis, Minnesota until they separated in 1977. He then resided in Memphis, Tennessee where he received Methadone treatments. Knight rose from a life of poverty, crime, and drug addiction to become exactly what he expressed in his notebook in 1965: a voice that was heard and helped his people. Knight died in Indianapolis, Indiana, of lung cancer on March 10, 1991.

A Poem For Myself

I was born in Mississippi;
I walked barefooted thru the mud.
Born black in Mississippi,
Walked barefooted thru the mud.
But, when I reached the age of twelve
I left that place for good.
My daddy chopped cotton
And he drank his liquor straight.
Said my daddy chopped cotton
And he drank his liquor straight.
When I left that Sunday morning
He was leaning on the barnyard gate.
Left my mama standing
With the sun shining in her eyes.
Left her standing in the yard
With the sun shining in her eyes.
And I headed North
As straight as the Wild Goose Flies,
I been to Detroit & Chicago
Been to New York city too.
I been to Detroit & Chicago
Been to New York city too.
Said I done strolled all those funky avenues
I'm still the same old black boy with the same old blues.
Going back to Mississippi
This time to stay for good
Going back to Mississippi
This time to stay for good-
Gonna be free in Mississippi
Or dead in the Mississippi mud.

Etheridge Knight

As You Leave Me

Shiny record albums scattered over
the living room floor, reflecting light
from the lamp, sharp reflections that hurt
my eyes as I watch you, squatting among the platters,
the beer foam making mustaches on your lips.

And, too,
the shadows on your cheeks from your long lashes
fascinate me--almost as much as the dimples
in your cheeks, your arms and your legs.

You
hum along with Mathis--how you love Mathis!
with his burnished hair and quicksilver voice that dances
among the stars and whirls through canyons
like windblown snow, sometimes I think that Mathis
could take you from me if you could be complete
without me. I glance at my watch. It is now time.

You rise,
silently, and to the bedroom and the paint;
on the lips red, on the eyes black,
and I lean in the doorway and smoke, and see you
grow old before my eyes, and smoke, why do you
chatter while you dress? and smile when you grab
your large leather purse? don't you know that when you leave me
I walk to the window and watch you? and light
a reefer as I watch you? and I die as I watch you
disappear in the dark streets
to whistle and smile at the johns

Submitted by Hen

Etheridge Knight

Cell Song

Night Music Slanted

Light strike the cave of sleep. I alone
tread the red circle
and twist the space with speech

Come now, etheridge, don't
be a savior; take your words and scrape
the sky, shake rain

on the desert, sprinkle
salt on the tail
of a girl,

can there anything
good come out of
prison

Etheridge Knight

He Sees Through Stone

He sees through stone
he has the secret
eyes this old black one
who under prison skies
sits pressed by the sun
against the western wall
his pipe between purple gums

the years fall
like overripe plums
bursting red flesh
on the dark earth

his time is not my time
but I have known him
in a time gone

he led me trembling cold
into the dark forest
taught me the secret rites
to make it with a woman
to be true to my brothers
to make my spear drink
the blood of my enemies

now black cats circle him
flash white teeth
snarl at the air
mashing green grass beneath
shining muscles

ears peeling his words
he smiles
he knows
the hunt the enemy
he has the secret eyes
he sees through stone

The Idea Of Ancestry

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at one time or another been in love with my mother, 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum), and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece (she sends me letters in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews, and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in the clan, he is an empty father's mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates (and death dates) in it, always mentions is no place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."

Etheridge Knight

The Violent Space (Or When Your Sister Sleeps Around For Money)

Exchange in greed the ungraceful signs. Thrust
The thick notes between green apple breasts.
Then the shadow of the devil descends,
The violent space cries and angel eyes,
Large and dark, retreat in innocence and in ice.
(Run sister run—the Bugga man comes!)

The violent space cries silently,
Like you cried wide years ago
In another space, speckled by the sun
And the leaves of a green plum tree,
And you were stung
By a red wasp and we flew home.
(Run sister run—the Bugga man comes!)

Well, hell, lil sis, wasps still sting.
You are all of seventeen and as alone now
In your pain as you were with the sting
On your brow.
Well, shit. lil sis, here we are:
You and I and this poem.
And what should I do? should I squat
In the dust and make strange markings on the ground?
Shall I chant a spell to drive the demon away?
(Run sister run—the Bugga man comes!)

In the beginning you were the Virgin Mary,
And you are the Virgin Mary now.
But somewhere between Nazareth and Bethlehem
You lost your name in the nameless void.
'O Mary don't you weep don't you moan'
O Mary shake your butt to the violent juke,
Absord the demon puke and watch the whites eyes pop,
(Run sister run—the Bugga man comes!)

And what do I do. I boil my tears in a twisted spoon
And dance like an angel on the point of a needle.

I sit counting syllables like Midas gold.
I am not bold. I cannot yet take hold of the demon
And lift his weight from you black belly,
So I grab the air and sing my song.
(But the air cannot stand my singing long.)

Etheridge Knight

Vigo County

Beyond the brown hill
Above the silent cedars,
Blackbirds flee the April rains.

Etheridge Knight