Front Cover: On the Road from Memphis to Corinth, 1979
Tuxedo Shop in Las Vegas, 1987
Acknowledgements

"The Black Brother Poems" first appeared in *The Missouri Review*.


"Mudsong for Mawdad" first appeared in *beat*.

"Letter to Etheridge" first appeared in *The Florida Review*.

"Upon Reading a Poem by Etheridge Knight" first appeared in *Contact II*.

"Poem for a New Age" first appeared in *PBQ #20*.

"For the Prisoners in South Africa" was first published as a broadside by Slash and Burn Press, 1987.

"Last Call" first appeared in *Southern Humanities Review*.

"Circling the Daughters" and "Various Protestations from Various People" were first published in *PBQ #28*.


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"For Langston Hughes" was first published in *Born of a Woman* (Houghton Mifflin, 1980). Other poems by Etheridge Knight are reprinted with permission from *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986).
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The Library of Congress presents

DONALD HALL
and
ETHERIDGE KNIGHT
reading their poems

The Coolidge Auditorium
Tuesday, February 26, 1996
8:00 p.m.
Tickets are not required.
GWENDOLYN BROOKS' INTRODUCTION
OF ETHERIDGE KNIGHT AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
WASHINGTON, D.C.
February 25, 1986

Etheridge Knight is perceptive. His vision is merciless. He spares himself nothing, and he spares you nothing. Etheridge, I wish I could order your entire program. Don’t let us lack “Hard Rock.” Don’t let us lack the heart-catching, odd beauty, the nourishing heartbreak of “The Idea of Ancestry.” Long ago I wrote a little poem called “Truth,” identifying truth as sunshine, the opening two lines of which were: “and if the sun comes/how shall we greet him?” Well, Etheridge replied to that: “The sun came, Miss Brooks,—/After all the night years./He came spitting fire from his lips./And we flipped—we goofed the whole thing./It looks like our ears were not equipped/For the fierce hammering.”

Many, many visions visited your cell, Etheridge Knight, and they educated you. They vaulted you. Come here and open your mouth.
THE SUN CAME

And if the sun comes
How shall we greet him?

--Gwen Brooks

The sun came, Miss Brooks, --
After all the night years.
He came spitting fire from his lips.
And we flipped -- We goofed the whole thing.
It looks like our ears were not equipped
For the fierce hammering.

And now the Sun has gone, has bled red,
Weeping behind the hills.
Again the night shadows form.
But beneath the placid face a storm rages.
The rays of Red have pierced the deep, have struck
The core. We cannot sleep.
The darkness ain't like before.

The Sun came, Miss Brooks.
And we goofed the whole thing.
I think.
(Though ain't no vision visited my cell.)
WELCOME

--for Etheridge Knight

One and one are two.
Two and two are four.
Pipsissewas and sassafras
Bloom at my front door.
ON THE ORAL NATURE OF POETRY:
A TALK BY ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

[Etheridge Knight spoke at Colorado State University on February 8, 1987, as a guest of the Fine Arts Series. The following presentation was organized from a tape recording of his remarks.]

What I want to lay out is how I see poetry as dealing with the oral and physical aspects of language—poetry off the page. My first argument is that there were poets long before there were printing presses; therefore, poetry is primarily oral utterance, and the end of a poem belongs in somebody’s ears rather than their eyes. Once this orientation becomes your approach to writing a poem, then the whole process of creation is different because you’re making up the poem to be said aloud, to be heard, rather than read. I also see the written word as an extension of the spoken word, not a separate entity. I think it’s somewhere about the fourth or fifth grade when we learn to see the written word as a different entity from the spoken. This detracts from our ability to stay in touch with the fact that the spoken word is a physical entity that is as solid as this table and has its own laws.

If it’s true that as I’m talking to you bones are moving in your inner ears, I’m physically touching you with my voice.

You know, often you hear that reading and writing goes together, but in poetry I think reading and writing, talking and listening goes together. Often, when we’re making up poems we look at the process as delivering an abstraction, concepts, ideas and we don’t use the physical side of the language to touch people, to evoke, because that’s how the language should be used in poetry—to evoke. If I’m clear about my fear, then anybody who has also felt fear can say, “I felt like that, too.” The circumstances might be different that produced the feeling, but feelings are the same. They’re sexless, ageless, colorless. Fear in a nine-year-old is the same as fear in a fifty-nine-year-old.

Another instance of the language as physical is that the rhythms and the rhymes in poetry are very much like the rhythms in music. If you start listening to some music with a strong rhythm, you will find yourself either breathing in that rhythm or moving some part of your body in that rhythm. That’s the mechanics of it. The sounds themselves are the basic tools. Some contemporary poets avoid rhymes. To me, that’s like a carpenter throwing away a hammer out of his kit. This sounds themselves evoke feelings; that’s the way you are touched.

I remember Gwendolyn Brooks when she used to come down to the joint and being critiquing my poems she used to say, “Avoid sibilant sounds at
the end of your lines.” I didn’t understand why until I started getting into this whole question of poetry and sounds in the language. I think it’s this: the sibilant sound is hostile to our ears, it rattles those bones the wrong way—sneaky, snakey, slimy. I notice that an audience will start getting on edge if they hear that sibilant sound—too much hissing sound. It’s not an idea or a concept that causes their uneasiness; their uneasiness is caused by physical means, by the sounds and vibrations themselves.

In the same manner, there are what I call “glad” sounds and “sad” sounds. If you scan a poem where the mood is lost love or the blues or mourning, you’ll find that the dominant sounds in the poem are “oh” and “ah,” like “Lenore” and “Nevermore” and “o’er and o’er.” And the “glad” sounds are “e” and “i” as in “glee” and “whee.” If you’re walking down the street and you step in an open manhole cover, you won’t say “whee,” it just won’t come out that way.

Another thing I believe is that language is not only physical, it’s a living thing, a living organism. It’s informed by the physical environment, by how we breathe and our speech patterns. Therefore, our line-breaths in poems are determined by the physical environment.

We don’t speak English. That’s a political misnomer. We speak American. This language we speak has been informed by a whole number of people, and the breath patterns of the English are close to the breath patterns of the Japanese. People who live in tight places take in air differently than people who live in wide-open spaces. And how we take in air determines how we vocalize. The English might breathe in iambic pentameters. but we don’t take in air like that. I have a friend from Jamaica (her name is Deeta), and she was telling me how they’d be coming down from the mountains going into the marketplace, and they’d call to each other to make plans to meet. “We would oleo to each other,” she said. “Oleo?” I said. And it struck me that that’s the same sound as yodelling. They would make sounds that would go around hills.

How we inhale when we’re caught up in a passion is how our breath-lines come. That’s not new. Whitman saw that. Our breath-lines don’t go like “When I was walking down beside the sea.” That’s not how we take in air. And to force an American poet to breathe in those forms is stifling. That’s what I feel.

What I mean by the language being a living organism connects to hearing Donald Hall talk once about dead metaphors. Generally speaking, a people’s metaphors and figures of speech will come out of their basic economy. If somebody lives near the ocean and they fish, their language will be full of those metaphors. If people are farmers, they will employ that kind of figure of speech. Metaphors are alive. When they come into being, they are informed by the politics and the sociology and the economy of now. That’s how language is. And when we try to use dead metaphors, metaphors that were relevant to Shakespeare’s time, then the audience cannot get in
because the metaphor is out of the audience's experience. When you’re using language to evoke a knowledge that the audience already has, they know it from experience, and the poet is not lecturing, not handing out data. Gwendolyn Brooks told me, “Poetry is using common language in an uncommon way.” And in order to be involved in this creative process of using common language in writing poetry, you have to do a lot of listening. I think one of the reasons Carl Sandburg is out of favor on college campuses is that he’s clear, you can understand him.

How we speak in moments of passion is how most poetry is made; it comes almost always naturally in poetry.

America’s so big in the first place, the speech patterns are different from region to region. I notice that people in New England will take in air; they’ll finish a sentence, “blah, blah, blah,” then they’ll take in air (a long inward breath). The fact that we can be understood and that the environment of this country is like our region-space derives from the fact that we don’t live as close, we have enough space to take in air. For instance, people who live in high places take in air differently from people in low. I’m sure that figures of speech in urban centers like in the North—the live ones—would be different from the live metaphors of the rural deep south. They almost always come out of common, shared experience.

For a long time, I couldn’t get to this “timelessness” thing in poetry—you know how people will say, “This poem has stood the test of time”? So, if I took a poem—you know like how the Mormons have their genealogy under the mountain?—well, now, if I took a book of poems and put it under the mountain for 20,000 years—the whole language would have changed by then. I’m convinced that as long as a poem is spoken aloud it’s “timeless.” Shakespeare will stay alive as long as he’s said aloud because then it becomes activity, an act of communication. You know I’m literate. I’m not saying that writing is not important. I’m just trying to put the horse before the cart. I want to put it right. It wasn’t until I was in prison that I defined myself as a poet. Then I realized that I had a lot of studying to do. I knew I had to study the craft and the techniques and the history of poetry. At that time, they didn’t have “Poets-in-the-Prisons” and “Poets-in-the-Schools.” Gwendolyn Brooks and Dudley Randall came down on their own. I had a couple of poems published in the Negro Digest, and she wrote and asked me to send her “several” poems. I sent about sixty. I guess she said to herself, “I got to get down and see this guy.” Following any discipline, you’ve got to understand the traditions. It’s hard to be innovative if you don’t know what you’re innovating away from.

But too great an emphasis on the written word in poetry leads to a distance between poet and audience. As I said, I first began to define myself as a
poet in prison. Guys in the joint were my first primary audience. I was sending poems to guys in the joint before I started sending them anyplace else. If you can play a guitar or paint or say poems, you have an audience. And you get affirmed. I got a lot of support. Guys thought I functioned like the village scribe. On weekends they would come to me and bring their letters, and I was supposed to be a “poet” so they’d have me write letters to their wives and sweethearts. You got to do a lot of relating if you’re going to do that right. You’ve got to listen. You’ve got to hear their story. They knew I wouldn’t take their business back out into the yard.

I came to poetry from the oral side first. I was always good at playing “the dozens.” I used to absolutely slay them. In Black culture, if you talk about another guy’s mother or sister and make it rhyme, it’s a heavy weapon. You can keep guys off you that way. I learned a lot of poems that we call “toasts.” When I was a teenager, I had a mentor. Duty was a wino, and we’d buy him a bottle, and he’d hold forth and say three or four hours of them, and I learned them and wrote them down. “Stagger Lee,” “The Signifying Monkey,” “The Sinking of the Titanic.” All those classical ones. The “rap” songs you hear on the radio nowadays are direct descendants of the “toasts.” I have heard stanzas that were lifted—especially of sexual prowess—lifted right out of the toasts. They put electronic rhythm in. These toasts are first rural; they tell stories about animals, for instance. But like the Blues, they moved to urban centers, then other characters come in. There are toasts about junkies and whores and street people, things like that. These “rap” songs are long, narrative poems.

As I said, too great an emphasis on the written word leads to a distance between poet and audience. Then the poet begins to speak in a language that’s not relevant to the audience. If you stay too long on the mountain-top, you will miss the development of the language, you will be speaking in dead metaphors, and the people down here will have gone on to something else. You know, by the time language gets into the dictionary, we done moved on to something else.

Another thing I believe is that there are two sides to a word. What I call the masculine, lineal side: the authority for that side of the words comes out of Webster’s or the Oxford dictionary. On the connotative side, the feminine side, the authority comes from common agreement. That’s the side of the language where nuance and inflection come in; we have to agree what the lifting of a voice means. If me and you are standing on a corner with someone from another country—Africa or China—and a pretty woman comes by and I say “mmm-mmm-mmm,” I don’t know if they would get it or not. The nuance is something that the speaker and the listener must agree on. That’s more circular and its authority rests on now. It doesn’t get its authority from the past; it rests on now, where the language is constantly changing. That’s the side the poet deals with. The language of nuance,
coloring, tone, not necessarily the literal meaning of the words. Sometimes the major meaning of a word is not even in the literal sense of the word so much as in the rhythms and rhymes. You can listen to rhyme and rhythms and either feel good or not feel good, just by the sounds. The activity of saying a poem and listening to it is what makes the art. I think that’s true of any kind of oratory, and, in a way, that’s what poetry is—a stylized form of oratory.

My thing about poetry and dead metaphors—let me run this around—is that live poets address the times. I don’t have any arguments with dead poets, but I prefer live ones. How can you be affected politically, socially? You can say, “Shakespeare wrote that Othello, and therefore he was dealing with racism.” That may be true, but only if you’re listening to Shakespeare. If it’s still in the abstract, you’re not being physically touched by the language. What I want to emphasize is life, living. Live metaphor. Living poets. I think it’s a valid ambition to want the words you strung together to live on the lips of ordinary people.
FOR ETHERIDGE

Nine brought
one mound
which insisted.
Eleven carried
the red river
and began
the flow.
I have been
to the river.
A still clay
a clay still
river
in the land
of the drum.
My blood
is in the
jungle
and in that
pregnant river.
Osun Osun
Osun Osun,
I would give back
my breast
to honour your son,
my father
and pound
the sacred
drum.
MUDSONG FOR MAWDAD

From late summer low river
Mississippi naked mudbanks
words from too deep to dry
drove you North up White
Rivers, pushed you, pulled
your words across our eyes.

You were layin concrete
poems on a chalk board,
Jeb gigglin, wisky on your breaths
talkin prison and verbs in some
Indianapolis Highschool.
I felt seven and Hoosier dumb.
And then your voice
which had been through everything,
with that Hard Rock drawl,
turned and said, 'It ain't in no textbook.'
The way your tellin sang spoke magic
and sprung me from that cell.

Now I wish it wasn't history
stole me from that Indy grave.
I sit and damn slow oil slicks
that clog our river veins.
Lean on the bar jonesin for Shine.
I sing the song of circles,
call the sun to salt the wound
and break the venum silence.

I search the healing mudpacked banks
this river's words left wet.
Sandbubbles pop and crawdads click,
'Give back the earthen Etheridge
Voice Father of my poetry.'
A GREEN AUBADE FOR ETHERIDGE

I was thinking just now of Pooky Dee
that summer day whose color
you don't remember, the high
trestle bridge, the wide green water
when Pooky Dee took the high dive
and 2½ gainer and hit
the block with his head, the hard rock
of his skull struck the hidden
grief and split --
how your waters roll
with those skulls, all
those grinning
chieftains, empty sockets like
the shattered headlights of a wreck
drowned and staring up
blind at the everlasting
cold of the moon...
high daring poised
on the ledge
arching, he made of himself
an arrow -- saying, this way, follow me
counting on deep waters
and finding instead
the bright blood spreading
its red flag over the shallows of America

In Kosbad during the monsoons
there are so many shades of green
your mind forgets other colors
What speaks through you remembers
green rivers -- Ganges, Mississippi,
Niger, Nile ... those green
dragons out of whose mouth
came morning
dawn when out of bone, deep
from the river's mouth, the delta
of the water's tongue,
out of rich mud
as the lotus grows from the silken silt
of time, the dark will thrust up life
again -- so green, so many shades of green
the mind forgets
the color of that day
SHINE'S THEOLOGY

1
If you can't see
every whichway at once,
keep your back against a wall.

2
When you move, look
sideways. Step as though you know
where you wanna go.

3
If you're alone,
without anyone's help,
save yourself.

4
What do you want?
You pay your dime,
you take your chances.

FROM THE TALLAHATCHIE BRIDGE

--for E.K.

Wasps making the air hum
near the eaves of a shack
under the locust tree.

One leaf falls from a high limb,
its lilt, a slow drift
to the creek.

It's a leap, from this world
into this world.
Memphis, 1979
TROUBLE OVER

Memphis never seemed to be a peaceful place. There was always, even in the quietest moments, a buzzing electrical tension in the atmosphere. In August of 1979, when I had been there for just three days, Ron Price and Deborah Bowman asked me to go to their poetry group meeting. We went to what may have been the least peaceful neighborhood in all of Memphis, Orange Mound, and a place called Hank’s Disco Lounge. Inside the tough little club there was a heated three-way competition for audibility among poets, the regular bar customers, and the jukebox. After a time I realized that someone was, to a certain extent, orchestrating this event. His name was Etheridge Knight and I had met him before.

Etheridge had not come to Memphis to live as a young man, as do so many people, both black and white, from the small towns of Arkansas, Mississippi, and west Tennessee. His family moved from northeast Mississippi to Paducah, Kentucky before he left home, and when he returned from the military he followed them to their new home in Indianapolis. Still, that was an alternate route in the larger pattern of black migration; Etheridge’s presence in Memphis in 1979 seemed just another part of the picture being filled in.

One Sunday in the late fall of that year we drove from Memphis across the top of Mississippi to Corinth, in the northeastern corner of that state. Etheridge had heard that his relative Pink Knight was staying with family in that vicinity, and he wanted me to take some photographs. We found Uncle Pink without too much trouble. He was at Deborah Harris’s house on Crater Street, where he occupied the room with the stove in the warm center of the house.

No birth records existed for Pink Knight, but by all calculations he had to be at least 110 years old, meaning that he was born in Mississippi shortly after the end of the Civil War. His hearing was poor and his mind drifted when we saw him; it was too late for oral history interviews, but he was aware of his surroundings and still had a sly sense of humor. I have known people who became angry and disconsolate in old age, but Pink Knight seemed to have made an unshakeable peace with himself and the world. That fact, combined with some thought about what slice of history he had lived in, what place and as a man of what race, made a permanent mark on my mind. I know that when Etheridge decided to go to Corinth he hoped to find more than long-lost kin, and he found what he was looking for.

The trip to Corinth was a fine example of how Etheridge Knight works as a teacher. In one sense I was doing him a favor by driving and taking the pictures, but that afternoon gave me back far more than I ever put into it. Etheridge is seldom not teaching, although poetry is actually a secondary part of the curriculum. Poetry, ideally, is part of life; that is why the Free People’s Poetry Workshop always met in neighborhood bars. If you
could make yourself heard you were on the way. Central to the course of study is learning to survive in this world without being crippled or ground to a pulp by it. Much of the teaching is by example, but the throw-'em-in, sink-or-swim approach is also used.

This man is not always easy to know; that is to say he can be difficult. He has a certain ability to, as he says, "stir things up." When the stirring starts, look out for crossfire and beware of shrapnel. Remember that you are dealing with someone who has known shrapnel which was not figurative. Some people clash violently with him; others find him too threatening and make themselves scarce. At times there is much gnashing of teeth over his absence from certain situations.

The last time I saw Etheridge, a year or so ago, he seemed a little mellower than in the past. More accepting, less contentious, drinking only water. I began to think that the man might actually make it to old age. I had always thought that the thing most likely to kill him would be his belief that nothing could kill him. His body and the medical profession finally managed to convince him otherwise. But then he is not going to become an entirely different person at this time in his life, not after years of living as much like the trickster-hero of some archetypal American folk poem as like one who makes poems. The trickster and the poet both inhabit a body which on the surface is scarred by encounters with a violent world. Inside, the two figures fight and contradict each other; at times they make peace and merge into one extraordinary being.
THE BONES OF MY FATHER

1

There are no dry bones
here in this valley. The skull
of my father grins
at the Mississippi moon
from the bottom
of the Tallahatchie,
the bones of my father
are buried in the mud
of these creeks and brooks that twist
and flow their secrets to the sea.
But the wind sings to me
here the sun speaks to me
of the dry bones of my father.

2

There are no dry bones
in the northern valleys, in the Harlem alleys
young/black/men with knees bent
nod on the stoops of the tenements
and dream
of the dry bones of my father.

And young white longhairs who flee
their homes, and bend their minds
and sing their songs of brotherhood
and no more wars are searching for
my father's bones.
There are no dry bones here.  
We hide from the sun.  
No more do we take the long straight strides.  
Our steps have been shaped by the cages  
that kept us.  We glide sideways  
like crabs across the sand.  
We perch on green lilies, we search  
beneath white rocks . . .  
THERE ARE NO DRY BONES HERE

The skull of my father  
grins at the Mississippi moon  
from the bottom  
of the Tallahatchie.
MOTIONS/movements
movements

foward mississippi. look
beyond your swollen mouth.
a voice, like cool water
comes to your brow. makes
passes through your every
dream. makes new motions
you can sing to.
hum along mississippi. your
black poet approaches each
& every door. hum along
to his chords, mississippi
A LIFE IN A STEEL MILL

My father is proud of his life making pipes, his small rowhome, his five children, his peace, two week vacations he took in summertime, hauling us in his '54 Ford to Lawrenceville, his wife throwing her arm around him. He likes to think he was able to pay for good times, crab feasts in public parks, Saturday drinks with my uncles while his wife cooked hot soup. He is as steady as a mountain at rest, in movement he has the force of an inland river. He believes in the Resurrection and good bourbon. He is grateful for the life work has afforded. My father is a burning sun, an oracle of flesh, the damp crush of morning dew on naked feet, a crack and screech of wooden wagons in tobacco, a host of empty echoes like thunder in caverns of steel mills, the clatter of his buddies at a roadside bar coming in town from work. My father is a son of the ten thousand things. My father is an oak tree, tears I have never seen come through buds in springtime to become leaves. My mother in her death is the wind and rain.
With Uncle Pink Knight, Corinth, 1979
THE UNFOLDING MYSTERY

Mystery of the hands
and fingers locked
into eternal motion,
the subsurface design
always there, reliable,
always unfolding anew
and ready.

I would watch
my father with hammer,
saw, chisel. His motion grasping
the motion designed in tools.
Some kind of webbing strung
delicately between
the handiwork of other men
and himself, age and age.

I would hand
him a stone or piece of lumber.
He would study, then chisel
or saw, all done with measurement
and practice not in this age
or our hands and eye alone.
But with the comprehension
and art of generations and centuries
of people discovering
the elemental design
inherent in the wood and stone
of their endeavor,
the necessary act of being --
finding the mystery
unfolding
as hands and fingers in motion.
HEARING ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

I had read Etheridge Knight for years, but never seen him. Then one summer I drove about six hours in the middle of the night to hear him read at 8 in the morning, and when he finished I had the strangest sensation: I saw the applause blow right through his body, as mist blows through trees. Nothing held it. I had never seen anything like that.

I didn’t know what it meant, and I still don’t, but I understood that he wasn’t operating from a defensive position, and his “ego” as we call the hungry-one-with-mouth-open wasn’t opening out to catch and eat everything that went by. His “ego” hadn’t claimed the achieved castle, as either builder or lord.

Some poems, like those of Wallace Stevens, are so marvellous in language that we don’t care if they are true or not. The affectionate and warm language caresses the fur of the mind as young girls sometimes caress a cat, for minutes or hours on end. The language mind arches its back, goes into a trance, and doesn’t care what is happening.

Other poems, equally marvellous, awaken the truth-receiver somewhere inside the body-mind. We go into a different trance this time, a trance in which we expect truth, or perhaps we come out of our ordinary trance, in which we are inured to lies. How much sadness has come into all of us because we can’t keep out lies—every moment of our lives we exchange comfort or discomfort for statements we know are lies, or mostly lies, in gatherings with our parents, or at speeches, or watching a movie. How sad and addicted our truth-receiver is, a bag-man, who spends the day without hope.

All of us who have read Etheridge know entire poems in which the truth receiver feels expectant and proud stanza after stanza for the entire poem: “The Violent Space,” “The Idea of Ancestry,” the Hard Rock poem, “Cop Out Session,” “Ilu, the Talking Drum,” “Welcome Back Mr. Knight: Love of My Life,” “Rehabilitation and Treatment in the Prisons of America.” I feel expectations of truth also reading Villon...In Norman Cameron’s translation of Villon says:

I do confess that, after years
Of anguish’d moanings and laments,
Sorrows and agonies and fears,
Labours and grievous banishments,
I learned from all these chastisements
More than from studying by rote
That which Averroes comments
On that which Aristotle wrote.

and
I mourn the season of my youth
(In which I revell'd more than most
Before old age had brought me truth).
Youth drank with me no final toast;
It did not march on foot, nor post
Away on horse: how did it go?
Suddenly in the sky 'twas lost,
And left no parting gift below.

I'll set down here three poems of Etheridge's. The first is *The Idea of Ancestry*:

1

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 & 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They 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 send me letters written 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 space. My father's mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates (and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."
Each fall the graves of my grandfathers call me, the brown hills and red gullies of Mississippi send out their electric messages, galvanizing my genes. Last yr/like a salmon quitting the cold ocean-leaping and bucking up his birthstream/I hitchhiked my was from LA with 16 caps in my pocket and a monkey on my back. And I almost kicked it with the kinfolks. I walked barefooted in my grandmother’s backyard/I smelled the old land and the woods/I sipped corn whiskey from fruit jars with the men/
I flirted with the women/I had a ball till the caps ran out and my habit came down. That night I looked at my grandmother and split/my guts were screaming for junk/but I was almost contented/I had almost caught up with me. (The next day in Memphis I cracked a croaker’s crib for a fix.)

This yr there is a gray stone wall damming my stream, and when the falling leaves stir my genes, I pace my cell or flop on my bunk and stare at 47 black faces across the space. I am all of them, they are all of me. I am me, they are thee, and I have no children to float in the space between.

What could we say of this poem? It is not written from the defensive position. The alertness to “the kinfolks” is amazing. The “I” feels fully there. The sound is grand; and the unexpected vowels carry the pitches up and down with them as in old Anglo-Saxon poems:

monkey on my back. And I almost kicked it with the kinfolks.
I walked barefoot in my grandmother’s backyard/I smelled the old land and the woods/I sipped corn whiskey from fruit jars with the men./
I flirted with the women/I had a ball till the caps ran out

Like Anna Akkmatova, who inherits a literature of pain, Etheridge Knight puts his pain on us but we don’t feel burdened by it. It is some kind of magic.
Here is "Freckle-Faced Gerald":

Now you take ol Rufus. He beat drums,
was free and funky under the arms,
fucked white girls, jumped off a bridge
(and thought nothing of the sacrilege),
he copped out—and was over twenty-one.

Take Gerald. Sixteen years hadn't even done
a good job on his voice. He didn't even know
how to talk tough, or how to hide the glow
of life before he was thrown in as "pigmeat"
for the buzzards to eat.

Gerald, who had no memory or hope of copper hot lips—
of firm upthrusting thighs
to reinforce his flow,
let tall walls and buzzards change the course
of his river from south to north

(No safety in numbers, like back on the block:
two's aplenty, three? definitely not.
four? "you're all muslims."
five? "you were planning a race riot."
plus, Gerald could never quite win
with his precise speech and innocent grin
the trust and fist of the young black cats.)

Gerald, sun-kissed then thousand times on the nose
and cheeks, didn't stand a chance,
didn't even know that the loss of his balls
had been plotted years in advance
by wiser and bigger buzzards than those
who now hover above his track
and at night light upon his back.

This talks about men raping men; it doesn't go into the cliches of patriarchy
and anger against women, and he lets go all the talk of rehabilitation, of
therapy, that everything can be corrected. As Robert Frost said when the
wife slipped away from her husband in the garden and never returned:
Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.

These poems are relatively early, but his poetry stays with truth. Five or six years ago he wrote a poem in the VA hospital in Indianapolis:

Former Sergeant Crothers, among the worst,
Fought the first. He hears well, tho
He mumbles in his oatmeal. He
Was gassed outside Nice. We
Tease him about “le pom-pom,” and chant:
“There’s a place in France where the women wear no pants.”
Former Sergeant Crothers has gray whiskers
And a gracious grin,
But his eyes do not belie
His chemical high.

_Gon’lay down my sword ’n’ shield—_
_Down by the river side, down by the river side—_
_Down by the river side._

Grant Trotter’s war was the south side
Of San Diego. Storming the pastel sheets
Of Mama Maria’s, he got hit with a fifty
Dollar dose of syphilis. His feats
Are legends of masturbation, the constant coming
As he wanders the back streets of his mind.
The doctors whisper and huddle in fours
When Trotter’s howls roam the corridors.
We listen. We are patient patients.

_Ain’t gon’ study the war no more._ . . _Well,_
_I ain’t gonna study the war no more—_
_Ain’t gonna study the war no more—_
_O I ain’t gonna study the war no more._

I believe that Wallace Stevens and Etheridge Knight stand as two poles of North American poetry. Don’t Mallarmé and Villon stand as two poles in French poetry? One doesn’t have to choose, and make one artificial, the other natural; one complicated, the other direct; one elegant, the other piercing. Nothing is as elegant as words that remain in truth. What do we expect of poetry?
FOLLOWING ETHERIDGE INTO
"THE IDEA OF ANCESTRY"

This poem is for me a visit into a far country. But that country becomes mine through the power of language.

The writer demonstrates again how a sequential telling of particulars can bring us all into the realm identified by those particulars and then more than identified—made available for any other human being who will give alert attention to what is happening in the words and pace of words and trust in words.

By lending himself again to his gift for poetry, Etheridge dives into experience and comes back—to our benefit—with an art object, a poem, made out of whatever materials and presented for imaginative participation to any even temporarily generous reader who will accept the gift, spellbound by the magic of poetry.
THE NATIONAL ENQUIRER HEADLINE WRITER CALLS ETHERIDGE KNIGHT TO INTERVIEW HIM ABOUT GRAVITY

I'm calling because, bless you, you wrote once about a jump that I believe in. A friend of yours who jumped five floors, dead straight. He didn't land in an oak, which might have saved him. No one warned him first. And you got there too late. You found his voice escaping like three frightened sparrows flying away.

They want me to write this headline about a man who jumped from a skyscraper and survived. It's not that easy. What fool would believe it? I want to know this, Mr. Knight, what do you say about a man who jumped fifteen stories and survived? Wouldn't he be utterly changed? Could he still pay his bills and take the bus to work, like he always did, wearing his glasses, filing his income tax?

I want to say a man would have to change, tumbling fifteen stories through the air. Say he raised the sash and stared down at the dizzy street, the tiny people. He'd plunge, feeling his pulse flutter like a flag, feeling cells grow as light as soap bubbles, feeling his workshirt billowing blue around the sun as it hangs there on the far horizon. Wouldn't he grow light with blazing wisdom?

You might know more about this than I do. You've been to jail. You've lost all your women. You've been stranded, broke, and high. You say you had a friend who fell to death. Maybe you've jumped yourself, a time or two.
AN INTERVIEW WITH ETERIDGE KNIGHT

Etheridge Knight was in Philadelphia to receive the 1987 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation for *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986). This interview took place early on May 17, 1987, the morning after the awards ceremony, in the dining room of the Trevose Hilton, outside Philadelphia, as Etheridge and his friend, the poet Elizabeth McKim, were about to return to Boston.

PBQ (Lou Camp): Live free.
McK (Elizabeth McKim): Live free?
EK: Live, free.
McK: I thought you said "lie free.''
PBQ: Able to lie free. Well, how about that. It is generally thought that poets lie. I mean, do you think that poets lie? That's the old . . . Who said that? Archilochos? They are all cowards and they all run, I think, don't they? God, we're into it already . . . I'll drop that out.
McK: No, that's important, I think that's a very good question, Lou, about lying.
PBQ: Do you think poets lie?
EK: We were talking about lying this morning, and there are some lies, and then there are lies, and lies, and I don't think, I don't think poets say no big lies, I don't think they tell no big lies.
PBQ: No big lies.
McK: No, what we were saying was, like, there is a bedrock time, you know, like there is a time when you don't lie, there is a place where you don't lie. I mean, if you can know that a person doesn't lie at that place, they don't lie to you there, you know—the smaller transgressions are palatable.
PBQ: The foundation, yes.
McK: In some way that's true, because we do all lie.
EK: When your orientation . . . In this whole thing, this whole Art thing, there's a whole lot of emphasis on this dead . . . you know, after you've gone, so . . . right? . . . and, you know, it's alright I guess like Whitman if you're certain enough, and you're secure enough in your existence you can try to lay out how you're gonna die . . . you know what I mean? And that, that probably's the way it ought to be. But, some poets, in this whole freedom thing, don't give a fuck how you die, what happens to you about you dead—that's not their orientation. So, as you live your life, there are other things that you have to think about, that are more important than where you are going to be laid, that kind of stuff, it's too immediate, you ain't got that kind of security.
PBQ: So for you poetry is really your living.
EK: Sure.
PBQ: I mean, in a way it’s what gives you your freedom while you’re alive, it’s not something you do for after death, or something to gain a reputation—though you know that’s different from what a lot of the tradition tells us, right?
EK: Sure, sure; and also, when you seek—in this freedom seeking thing, or rather this eternity thing—you asked about poets lying—some poets have to lie more on this narrow line, just to be free in an oppressive situation, you know—a poor person’s just got to lie when you got to lie to the rich man, lie to the—you know what I mean?
McK: I think it’s also when you don’t have anybody to fall back on financially, You know? A lot of people have people that they know that if you really get in trouble you have somebody you can fall back on, but if you know that you don’t, it seems to me that probably, you have to lie more—you do, just to get over. You have to. Whereas middle class—you’re just taught not to lie—you know it’s not right—you’re not taught lying as a means of survival.
PBQ: So, it’s an idea of poetry that isn’t tied to success particularly so much as it is tied to just finding a way to continue to live—
EK: to be as free as possible.
PBQ: to be as free as possible—of course, everybody does that. Young people decide to major in business and all that stuff—they are thinking of the same thing, aren’t they? Do you think? What’s the difference between a young guy or woman who decides to go into a commercial profession in order to get money to be free, and a poet? To go into poetry in order to get free of economics—to get that kind of freedom—is kind of stupid.
McK: Yeah.
EK: See, I don’t think that, in the first place, just having to live like now, I as a poet—I as a human being—I lie a lot. Yeah. I’m a big lie. And that doesn’t mean that it ain’t close to what’s going on—and when we get out of dimes this morning—
PBQ: That’s a great line.
McK: It’s a most true line.
EK: You know as I live my life, presents a problem, like I don’t have any credit cards—my way of going from place to place is not as—however this is how I live my life, especially at this time. It’s easy to wake up in. If you got a chauffeur it’s even better when you wake up first thing in your mind is how am I going to get out of town.
PBQ: Do you think not having credit cards and not being—that makes you freer in a way, forces you to be freer, to make reality the way you have it, right?
EK: Makes you lie a lot.
McK: But I wonder does that make you any freer? It makes you think about a lot of things that a lot of people take for granted—how they are going from place to place. When Nikki Giovanni was in town—Etheridge, I forgot to tell you—she had this talk to Harvard students, and she said—most of them were black—‘‘Look it—you are lucky—probably the chances are in your lifetime you’re not going to have to worry where, how you are going to lay your head down, and whether you are going to have enough to eat the next day. Therefore,’’ she said, ‘‘you are free to invent your reality, to do what you want to do, and so go ahead and do it.’’ That’s what she told them: ‘‘We need you to do this.’’
PBJ: But, it’s a paradox—most of them are trapped by it.
McK: Yes, I know it.
PBJ: Whereas the fact that you don’t have the kind of economic security of the middle class in another way makes you free—and you use poetry as a means of keeping yourself closer to the bone—you can’t lose too much sight of the essentials in your life.
EK: Because it’s essentially as freedom—the more enmeshed in credit cards—and for me—as a black male, in this country—to become enmeshed—the less free—and I suspect this is pretty true for a whole lot of other people, not just me as a black male.
McK: All this projection into the future. It’s like, ‘‘oh, in the future you are going to pay.’’ Always, when you have that mentality—you know, it’s the same way when you owe somebody though, Etheridge, too, it projects you into a thing—it does take a little bit from you.
EK: Look at it. The less you get enmeshed in that, really, the less you have to lie. Now I already admitted I’m a big liar, you know what I mean? But how I live my life—as many lies as I tell—I think I have to tell more lies to myself than to anybody else, the more credit cards I got. The more titles and things, the more I have to lie. Sincere—less I have to lie, to lie less.
McK: Just because you lie doesn’t mean you don’t know what the truth is. Generally Etheridge, you know what the truth is—you lie to get over, to have something happen the way you want it to happen. Sometimes your lies can be more baroque, more polished. . .
PBJ: Even rococo.
McK: Etheridge can lie in rainbow. He can.
PBJ: But we shouldn’t tell people this, should we?
EK: You remember—were you at this black writer’s convention back here in February?
PBJ: You mean the one for—I missed it, I admit.
EK: This brother—Albert Murray—Liz, do you remember what I’m talking about? He said—he was talking about jazz with Baraka—he said at
some point, in this spot, this improvisation, this dancing, or whatever, when you go into the break, you out there by yourself. The more a poet—or anything, especially the black male—I think it’s true of anybody in this country—the more you get enmeshed in the credit card thing, the less chances you get to take that break—because you never get that creative gig—that’s the way that creative gig come—that’s when you do it.
PBQ: The less chance you have to improvise.
McK: No, it is improvisation because you don’t know what is coming after the break. The break is your chance to invent. It’s like, there—you’re up. And if you don’t take it when it comes, it’s gone.
EK: And the more you back into the credit cards, the less chances—
PBQ: All those routines and forms: the band.
EK: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
PBQ: So in your poetry, improvisation is taking a break, and you are free there to say exactly what you want—
McK: It’s not always there—you don’t always live there in the break—you have to be ready for the break—it takes all that you’ve got, really.
PBQ: But the less number of credit cards you have, the more possibility there is of a break coming up for you.
EK: Those come all the time—not all the time—but the more you live and try to be free, the more you going to be called on.
PBQ: To improvise, to take a solo.
McK: You know in meditation, they say the pause between the two breaths—that’s the highest point you can be in life—that little place—it’s not the same as a break, but it still has a break quality to it—it’s got rhythm to it.
PBQ: So, how is that related to poetry lying then. I don’t see that connection yet. You don’t really mean lying then. "Lying" is saying what is true for you rather than trying to square it with what IBM thinks is true.
EK: Yeah.
PBQ: I mean, if you are able to just improvise, to be completely open—who cares if it is true in the business world sense—
EK: I think I mean that—IBM and other institutions like that—the more they invent the less they going to be called on—the authority—when you go into that break and improvise—you’re depending on what’s happening now. The authority does not come from that big band back there—the authority comes from you, it comes from right there.
PBQ: You’re free—you are not tied to what the authorities tell you you ought to do?
EK: When you’re in that break, it ain’t that kind of lie that you’re trying to trick somebody out of some money—when you’re out there improvising—you’re in that dance—I mean, you’re much more alive.
McK: It doesn’t always have to be in poetry.
EK: On your toes, on your toes, you see, them old preachers and things, they get out there—you might be lying in one way—but the biggest lie is this aesthetic history thing. It's this shit of forever—till death—till we're dead, you know. Ah shit—you ain't gonna make too many statements—ain't too many of them around—too many forevers until I'm dead sittin around and living, so when you start sayin—that's the big lie that you see in that western aesthetic, that institutions like that—all this shit on: "this is timeless and forever..."  
McK: That's what everybody wants—"this is timeless," like diamonds are forever.  
EK: I love you forever.  
McK: I got that valentine from an eleven year old, remember? He said he would love me forever.  
PBQ: Sounds awful.  
McK: And you only have to be 11 to really believe—and want to.  
PBQ: Yeah, if you said that when you were 65 or 70 you could get away with it—but at 11, that's heavy duty. I'd wait at least till my middle 20's.  
EK: You remember that fairy tale that Robert [Bly] told about the queen lay dying on the bed, and had this long hair, and made the king promise he would never marry till he found somebody whose hair was as beautiful as hers—and it turned out to be her daughter—the kingdom and all this stuff—and see, where she fucked up, where he fucked up, was when she tried to control past her death, she was dying dead, and he held to that dictate from the dead. I would have told that queen "Yes babe, I most certainly will—I will never marry another woman the rest of my life"—until she dead, then I bury her, then I'd go on with the rest of my life and not hold onto that dictate from the dead. You know what's free.  
McK: You did what was called for. You did it for the form.  
PBQ: and for the moment.  
McK: for the grace of the moment, too. And the person who asked it probably knows it too. My dad is getting to the point where he is in his final phase. And he and my mother talk about how they are going to Maine this summer, and maybe they will. And you know they made a reservation to go into a condominium the September after this September, and its very doubtful that he's going to make it, and they talk about it, and talk about it. And my dad's an old yankee, he knows what's up. He knows. But they talk about it.  
PBQ: So you both write your poetry for the moment rather than for some posterity, for some university professor to anthologize and to talk about it 200 years from now—that has no meaning for you.  
EK: Well, I'll let Elizabeth speak for herself. I make up poems 100% for people hearing now.
PBQ: That seems unusual—you don’t hear that that much, that seems new.
EK: I don’t think it’s so new with the poets. I think a lot of other poets see it that way.
McK: I don’t know how many writers think of immortality all the time.
EK: I think a lot of writers and poets do think—not all the time—I think they think it a lot—you got to be secure, in a way, to think about what’s going to happen to you after you dead. If you ain’t secure, you going to worry about what going to happen to you now. Shit.
McK: It’s like people talking about you across town—unless you are always worrying about it, it’s not going to hurt you that much—you’re just going to go on doing your thing, really.
EK: If you had escaped from one of those Georgia chain gangs, Lou, with dogs after you ass—shit—you at any time gonna be thinking about what your grave gonna look like?—You have any time to reflect on that?
McK: It’s like that WASP joke—you know—How does a WASP propose marriage?—He says “You want to be buried with my people?” [Laughter]
EK: I’m not saying that it’s not valid. I just saying my emphasis is not toward that—not emotionally.
PBQ: And that leaves you free—gives you freedom.
EK: Freedom seeking. Like what Ishmael Reed is doing. I like coming here for this American Book Award.
McK: Beautiful, really. Because that’s a vision—a multicultural vision—that’s the vision.
PBQ: That seems like the best way to go—it might be a lie right now, but then it could come true later.
McK: I know it, and the more you enter into it—everything you do.
PBQ: So you are happy about this award.
EK: I’m happy about some awards—can be making money—be better taken care of—this one—they don’t have credit cards and a whole lot of money—I like what they are doing.
PBQ: Yeah, well they’re not that big time yet, they’ve got you out here in the Trevose Hilton.
McK: Well, but it is a vision you know—the rainbow coalition: I mean, it’s named in different ways.
PBQ: We have to go.
McK: We have to go up and get our bags.
PBQ: Thank you—good to see you here in Philadelphia. Congratulations on your award.
EK: You’re welcome.
SEEING THROUGH THE WALLS:
Etheridge Knight and American Prison Poetry

The first time I heard Etheridge Knight read his poetry was in a prison, but only his voice was there. It was 1973, a few months after the Attica Massacre. I was teaching my first creative writing workshop in a prison at a maximum security joint called Great Meadow Correctional Facility, a sprawling Gothic castle of yellow brick plopped down like an insult in the midst of a huge field at the base of the eastern Adirondack mountains of upstate New York. I had talked the Evening Program Supervisor into letting me bring in a tape player so that the 14 men in my class—a number of them survivors of the guns of Attica (“the Rabbit Hunt,” that’s what they said they heard the state troopers calling it) could hear the voices of some contemporary poets. I opened up the first issue of BLACK BOX, the tape cassette magazine, and slid the tape I’d not yet heard into the machine. Etheridge Knight’s deep voice boomed out:

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 . . .

You could feel the electricity in the room and as we listened more than one guard came to the door to look in and shake his head at the sight of us huddled around that box like travellers around a fire late at night. And when his poems ended and I turned off the machine I could see from their faces—some black, some white, some young kids, some men with long records and the scars to prove it—that his voice had spoken both of them and for them.

There has never been any doubt in my mind—since first reading Knight’s 1968 collection Poems from Prison—that his voice is a very special one in American poetry. The language and visions of those first poems were deeply rooted in prison experience. Knight has never tried to distance himself from that experience and his later poems—such as “On the Yard” or “Prison Graveyard” come directly from the memories of that experience while his often quoted “Dark Prophecy: I Sing of Shine” celebrates and retells the story of the hero of a popular prison toast. (The “toast” is an oral form of poetry once extremely common in prisons. They are long, rhymed poems which speak of such Trickster figures and heroes from black culture as Stagolee, Shine—who survived the sinking of the Titanic by swim-
ming while others begged for help—, the Signifyin' Monkey. Their messages are usually pointedly satirical, defiant, and profane and both white and black inmates alike would memorize and recite toasts to appreciative audiences.) Knight, of course, is more than just a “prison poet.” His voice transcends that experience, even as it rises out of it. But though the origins of his verse in the cells of American jails may be no more than an interesting curiosity to readers and critics who have never done time or worked behind the walls, the fact of Knight’s inmate past has made him more than just another poet for those men and women behind bars who have aspired to verse themselves over the past two decades. Invariably, their discovery of Etheridge Knight’s poetry has been a powerful influence on them.

“Hard Rock,” the tougher-than-nails convict in one of Knight’s poems—“our Destroyer, the doer of things/We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do...” can be seen as an analogue to Knight himself. The inspirational role which Knight holds, an ironic reversal of Hard Rock, is almost unique for contemporary poets in prison. He still stands as proof of the redeeming power of verse and, against all odds (including, at times, those he has set against himself) an example of survival in the “free world.” Shine, too, might be seen as an analogue. In the literary subculture of “prison poetry” Knight swims on while others stop trying or drown in their own despair.

I am not saying that Etheridge Knight’s main value as a contemporary poet has been that of an inspiration to those who are locked up. His poetry comes from the prison subculture and then goes beyond it—if it is possible to talk about going beyond something which is not left behind. There are now many dozens of well-published and recognized inmate or ex-inmate poets who, like Knight, are more than just “prison poets.” But their poetry—the best of it—seems to me to succeed in spite of not because of their incarcerated backgrounds. A great many of them say, without hesitation, that Etheridge Knight and his work have been like a beacon. In many cases, for Knight has never hesitated to do what he can do physically to help other writers in jail, he has been a direct supporter of their work.

Few institutions in American culture have been developed so effectively—whether by accident or by design—to twist and break the human spirit as have our prisons. Perhaps only the reservation system foisted off on Native Americans can compare in scope or bureaucratic indifference to our penal systems. Wavering between the desire to punish and the half-hearted wish to reform, prisons have usually only been effective in only three ways. They temporarily warehouse those we wish to have out of our way. They provide employment for a large number of people—from guards to supplies of goods and services.
They turn men and women who may have landed in prison by nothing more than a twist of fate or the actions of a moment into "career criminals," lifetime outcasts. We may say that the options exist for one to be an ex-inmate Horatio Alger, but we usually are lying. Punishment seldom ends when sentences have been served.

And that is why the example of Etheridge Knight and his poems is so meaningful. Out of a full awareness of that system, out of those forbidden cities of exile, his voice came singing, cautioning, exhorting, praising. There were other writers before him whose careers began in prison and who later rose to fame. William Sidney Porter—better known as "O'Henry"—is a 19th century example. But Knight was the first poet to do so and, as far as I can see, one of the first to maintain a strong public commitment to other incarcerated writers. It may, indeed, be plausible to trace the incredible phenomena of the large and growing body of estimable poetry from prisons to the pioneering efforts and the encouragement of Etheridge Knight. His accomplishment seems even greater when we consider that he began his work before the current era of writing workshops in prisons, of visiting "free world" writers coming in to critique and encourage.

One of the 14 men in that first workshop later said to me, "When I write poetry, I'm not in prison." Then he smiled and said something else. "You know," he said, "I understand now what that poet, Etheridge Knight, meant when he talked about being able to see through stone."
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 scrap
the sky, shake rain

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

can there anything
good come out of
prison
A SCHOOLGIRL WRITES TO A PRISONER

--for Etheridge Knight

Now when I think of you
I feel I can't move, like
I'm holding something heavy and I can't let go.

The first time you came
it was the wrong house. You wanted
someone else but I let you in. We played

checkers and we talked. You
didn't mind that I'm not pretty.
You came back, always when no one else was home

and I opened the door. By then
you were my friend. You said
what jail was like, closed off and still. The way

this house has felt to me.
Thick, cool walls, like a skeleton
on the outside of your body. You told me

that you cried. I began to
love you. I could smell
in your clothes places you had been. Coalyards

and freight trains. When
you took them off I studied you,
black skin full of scars and marks, not empty

white like mine. For once,
you said, inside was good,
inside this house where no one could stop us, inside
my body. And then
they sent you back. I think
you wanted to go back. And could that be? Maybe

it's easier than here. The sun
goes up, comes down, there's
nothing you can do. But even here, what can

I do? Right now I feel that
something's in the house. It could
be just the wind. I hear it rattling saucers.

Or else it is an emptying,
the air going out,
the house going flat like a flat tire. For

a long time I used to think,
and don't you think it too
when you try to sleep -- at the hard thud when you

turn over -- that all that
can hurt, hurts? Wouldn't it
feel good to write to me, wouldn't it steady you,

leaning like I do on this skinny pencil?
HOLMESBURG

I had been teaching poetry courses at Holmesburg Prison for four years when in 1983 I began team-teaching with Etheridge Knight. I had always seen my role as that of a facilitator rather than a teacher. I insisted that the men attending my classes try to get words down on paper, after which I could edit line by line. I was always smuggling in notebook paper and pencils in addition to reproductions of short poems for them to emulate: haiku by Sonia Sanchez, poems by Bly and Williams, even a poem or two by Etheridge Knight, whom I had never met.

In retrospect it is probably inaccurate to say that I team-taught with Etheridge, because Etheridge was a one-man show. I didn’t mind, though. I learned a lot. I began to feel like one of the students, the one in civilian clothes.

Etheridge was very direct with the men. He spoke immediately to the prison experience, itself, something I couldn’t do, lacking the experience, and wouldn’t dare do, lacking the therapeutic skills to follow through. But Etheridge began his sessions by telling the men that he had done time in an Indiana prison, that he understood what they were going through, and that he didn’t want any trouble from anyone. It’s one thing to go into prison to teach when you’ve never been there before, don’t have to go if you don’t want to and can quit at any time. It’s another thing altogether to go back to the joint when you’ve been there before on the other side. I began to appreciate Etheridge’s vested interest in this community: his pride, his ability to share humor and dignity, his fears and shyness.

Poetry in the prisons had always been for me some sort of shield, a tactile thing to be shared with the men, but also in some ways a fence, a distance between me and them. I didn’t have to talk about myself, and I didn’t have to listen to their rap about their individual cases. There was poetry to focus on. That was the business at hand.

With Etheridge, teaching poetry in the prison was a rallying point, but the lesson was life: how to live it while doing time, how to use doing time, how to reflect upon doing time when one got out. One of the men would read a poem he had written that week for the whole group, and while I was being attentive to line breaks, mixed metaphors, and ways to move away from rhymes toward stronger images, Etheridge was nodding his head, maintaining eye contact, saying, “I see where you’re coming from” to the man and reciting from memory a rhymed poem he had written while he was in prison.

It wasn’t that Etheridge discouraged the idea of publishing poems; it was rather a case of him encouraging self-expression in whatever form: rhymes, rapping, tall tales, songs, whatever. The men didn’t have to get it down
on paper for him. They just had to come.

I had always found it difficult to tolerate silence in my classes. If the men came without work, I would try to get them to do work in the class, something they could take back to their cells and look at during the next week. Etheridge didn’t seem to mind the silences. He didn’t call on people who didn’t want to be called on. I began to respect these silences as well.

There was one other thing I admired about Etheridge: what you got from him at a reading in the city was what you got from him in the joint. He was the same person either place, consistent with his life experience and anecdotes between poems, true to the poems, themselves, whatever the audience. Without his ever saying so, his poems were proof that, while bodies can be incarcerated, words cannot.
SIX THINGS TO KNOW IF YOU LOVE A CONVICT

1. Never call him a convict
2. No one is interested in doing a remake of Romeo & Juliet in chains & middle age
3. Five hundred letters a year only keep you warm if you burn them
4. The more you give up on the outside the more of a man he'll be on the inside
5. Underwire bras set off metal detectors when you go through the gates
6. Love & Justice are twin sisters
Philadelphia, 1982
THE SPACE BETWEEN

In white colleges he reads poems about
Black Identity and niggers and prisons.
In prisons he reads about cunts
and assholes and white men
drowning.

In private his mind follows the avenues
on his body stooping and crooking
a little finger to tease
the wax in an ear. All day, records stacked,
he nurses a beer and a smoke, prowls
to music.

At night he makes love and talks about
his garden and his sisters down South,
makes love and eats dill pickles
and talks about his brothers and his mother's
refrigerator, his lover's being bare
up in this white north.

Days, separated from the warm
cave of bed and body, his talk rants
a long tangent: blacks forbidden visas,
writers framed, teenagers sodomized
by prisoners and guards. The revolution must
come soon.

Large, his anger crowds the kitchen;
pink scars mar the black skin. The prison
shave took fifteen weeks
to heal. Somewhere there's a woman
who carried a payroll and faced
his gun.

He expects to be murdered, gauges his power
in visits from the FBI. Loose with bourbon,
he piggybacks a joint. The liquor
hurts his stomach so he can't sleep,
he coughs all night.
BELLY SONG, FOR ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

All day I kept my fingers crossed.
Accepted the collect calls from Toledo,
Pittsburgh, Philadelphia. Heard you slur
out reassurances. You moved East
on that drunken boat of an Allegheny flight
as a thick, red tongue blossomed inside your throat.
It was enough to drive me to drink.
Instead I stayed cold-sober and prepared
to shut your reading down at the first stumble.
I even had a witness, imagining law suits, bad press,
whatever happens when you cancel a poet out.
But you rolled off the plane without a dent
(Not at all white-knuckled like I get) --
poetry books bulging out your knapsack
and sporting a red beret like an enormous tongue
We care about you, Etheridge. All the poets
who wish you off the booze, out of jail.
I hid the scotch. Let me confess it now.
That night you chanted until your voice
gave out, your lids clanking shut like a cell door.
And when you flew off to another reading,
the students here heard poetry in their ears,
chanting your lines like darkling echoes.
You left behind a white sock. My wife
found it the next day, under my daughter's bed.
Bone-tired, it tumbled through our Monday wash.
I put it on while I sang this song.
OUT OF THE DARK

Etheridge Knight came out of the dark of prison to be seen as one of America's most prominent poets. In a 1982 letter to me, he shared: "I have no academic degrees—not even high school. My literary career began while I was an inmate at Indiana State Prison in Michigan City, where I was sentenced in 1960 to a 10-20 year term for robbery. My first book was published while I was an inmate there, and my second book was completed while an inmate and published soon after my release from prison in 1968."

Etheridge Knight's books are: Poems from Prison (Broadside Press, Detroit, 1968); Black Voices from Prison (Pathfinder Press, New York, 1970); Belly Song & Other Poems (Broadside Press, Detroit, 1973); Born of Woman (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1981); The Essential Etheridge Knight (University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1986). His work has been widely anthologized; his famous poem "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminally Insane" appears in The Norton Anthology of Modern Verse, still used in many college courses. (That one poem in that one anthology may have been the only exposure yuppies had to literature from the dark.)

Without "even high school," Etheridge Knight has taught at the University of Pittsburgh in 1968, the University of Hartford in 1970-71, Lincoln University in 1972-73, Temple University in 1985, and at writer's conferences across America. Like Malcom X who came to prison an illiterate and educated himself (first by copying words from a dictionary), Etheridge educated himself in prison (reading The New York Times Book Review and every book he could get his hands upon, working on the prison newspaper, meeting with Gwendolyn Brooks in the prison visiting room—this was long before the time of prison college programs).

Etheridge Knight won a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship ($12,000) in 1974 and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1972. In 1985, he was awarded the Shelly Memorial Award by the Poetry Society of America in recognition of distinguished achievement in poetry. After Judson Jerome asked his readers and later more than 6,000 poets listed by Poets & Writers, Inc., to send their lists of major living American poets, in the November, 1986 issue of Writer's Digest, Etheridge Knight was reported to rank 72nd.

Etheridge has read his poems at the Library of Congress (available from Watershed Tapes), in a Town Hall in New York to an audience of 3,000, and to audiences across the country. When he lived in Memphis, Tennessee in the '70s and early '80s, Etheridge became known as a barroom poet who would walk into a tavern, begin reading poems to flabbergasted customers and capture the attention of serious beer-drinkers, TV sports fans and shuffleboard contestants.

"The way I figure it," Etheridge said in a 1987 interview with William Thomas of the Scripps Howard News Service, "a poet has to learn to deal
with his audiences, even if that means drunks and hecklers. If a poet can say poetry in a bar, he can say it anywhere.’ And Etheridge has said it anywhere—in barbershops, beauty shops, college classrooms and prisons. In the summer of 1982, he was a Poet-in-Residence with the Academy of Prison Arts in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In the same interview, Etheridge said, ‘I still go to prisons and read because I feel blessed.’

Surviving 16 years of imprisonment, I, too, feel blessed just to have been invited by Lou McKee to contribute to the Etheridge Knight issue of Painted Bride Quarterly.

My favorite poem by Etheridge Knight is ‘‘The Warden Said to Me the Other Day’’:

The warden said to me the other day
(innocently, I think), ‘‘Say, etheridge,
how come the black boys don’t run off
like the white boys do?’’
I lowered my jaw and scratched my head
and said (innocently, I think), ‘‘Well, suh,
I ain’t for sure, but I reckon it’s cause
we ain’t got no wheres to run to.’’

As I suspected and later confirmed (see Etheridge’s December 30, 1986 letter) this is a found poem, drawn from one of his 1960s prison experiences. The poem’s simplicity, unadorned by figurative language, is the voice of self-realization, the speech of self-disclosure. The lack of ornamentation and the risk of personal exposure in this poem is what W.H. Auden (speaking of Cavafy) called the ‘‘only translatable element in poetry.’’

The poem’s question, faithfully recorded from the warden’s visit to the newspaper office, was poignantly answered in Etheridge’s own voice: ‘‘we ain’t got no wheres to run to.’’ I have not been able to forget that answer. Can you? It helps one understand the existential angst of being black in America in the 1960s. It captures the sense of alienation felt by anyone who does not belong. Robert Frost described home as the place they have to take you in if you have to go there. What if there is no home, no promised land, no place of refuge? The raw terror of feeling exiled in America is awesome.

A month ago, hours before the sun came up in the morning so the riot here at Western Penitentiary could be televised, I watched six men wearing masks beat a man with iron pipes. He had ‘‘no wheres to run to.’’ A friend of mine, a combat veteran, said it was just like after a fire-fight in Vietnam. The worst time was just before the sun came up. Once out of the dark, everything was better.

Thank you, Etheridge Knight, my brother, for walking out of the dark for us all.
BROTHER OF MY HEART

—for Etheridge Knight

Brother of my heart,
don't you know there's only one
walking into the light, only one,
before this light
flashes out, before this bravest knight
crashes his black bones into the earth?

You will not come back among us,
your cried-out face
laughing; because
those who die by the desire to die
maybe can love their way back,
but as moles or worms,
who grub into the first sorrow and lie there.

Therefore, as you are, this once,
sing, even if you cry; the bravery
of the crying turns it into the true song; soul brother
in heaven, on earth
broken heart brother, sing to us
here, in this place that loses its brothers,
in this emptiness only the singing sometimes almost fills.
A POEM TO GALWAY KINNELL

Saturday, April 26, 1973
Jefferson, Missouri  65101
(500 yards, as the crow flies,
from where I am writing you
this letter, lies the Missouri
State Prison -- it lies, the prison,
like an overfed bear alongside
the raging Missouri river --
the pale prison, out of which
sonny liston, with clenched fist,
fought his way, out of which,
jamie earl ray ripped his way
into the hearts of us all . . .)

dear galway,
it is flooding here, in missouri,
the lowlands are all under water and at night
the lights dance on the dark water,
our president, of late of watergate,
is spozed to fly above the flooded areas
and estimate how much damage has been done
to THE PEOPLES . . .

dear galway,
it is lonely here, and sometimes,
THE PEOPLES can be a bitch

dear galway,
i hear poems in my head
as the wind blows in your hair
and the young brown girl
with the toothpaste smile
who flows freely because she has heard OUR SOUNDS . . .
dear galway,
    OUR SONGS OF LOVE are still
murmurs among these melodies of madness . . .
dear galway, and what the fuck are the irish doing/
and when the IRA sends JUST ONE, just one soldier
to fight with say the American Indians, then i'll believe them . . .

dear galway,
    the river is rising here, and i am
scared and lonely . . .

Mary and the children send their love
to you and yours

always

Etheridge Knight
FOR LANGSTON HUGHES

Gone

Another weaver of black dreams has gone
we sat in June Bug's pad with the shades drawn
and the air thick with holy smoke. and we heard
the Lady sing Langston before we knew his name.
and when Black Bodies stopped swinging June
But, TG and I went out and swung on some white cats.
now I don't think the Mythmaker meant for us to do that
but we didn't know what else to do.

Another weaver of black dreams has gone
ON A PHRASE FROM SOUTHERN OHIO

--for Etheridge Knight

A long time's gone.
Now all I recall for sure
Is a long shattering of jackhammers that stripped
Away the whole one side of one foothill of one
Appalachian mountain

Across the river from me where I was born.
It is summer chilblain, it is blowtorch, it is not
Maiden and morning on the way up that cliff.
Not where I come from.

It is a slab of concrete that for all I know
Is beginning to crumble.

Once,
Lazy and thieving toward the dark of an afternoon,
Shamba, Dick, Crum, Apie, Beanie, Bernardo,
And I got hold of a skiff,
And crawled all the way over to West Virginia
To the narrow hot mud shore, the foot
Of the scarred mountain.

Then from the bottom
Of that absolutely
Smooth dead
Face

We
Climbed
Straight up
And white

To a garden of bloodroots, tangled there, a vicious secret
Of trilliums, the dark purple silk sliding its hands deep
down
In the gorges of those savage flowers, the only
Beauty we found, outraged in that naked hell.

Well, we found two black boys up there
In the wild cliff garden.
Well, we beat the hell out of one
And chased out the other.

And still in my dreams I sway like one fainting strand
Of spiderweb, glittering and vanishing and frail
Above the river.
What were those purple shadows doing
Under the ear
Of the woman who was weeping along the Ohio
River the woman?
Damned if you know;
I don't.
FOR A BLACK POET'S ARRIVAL IN A SMALL TOWN

When you came they praised
you as a man of vision
and voice. An expert craftsman.
But when your people come
to town to help the local
farmers harvest their crops
all the white girls are told
to stay home at night and
horror stories are made up
with almost as much creativity
and impact as one of your
poems.
THE POKER GAME

aces back to back
and there's a pain!
baby in your belly
but it's friday -- deal
the cards. another ace

and a jab!
a jack -- you're high
ante the limit
ride the pain
pant deal yourself a deuce

with deuces wild!
it's yours, the pot
is clearly yours; you rack
coins in, bending with the swell
of crowning blows.

Music in my pocket
You say years later
Reciting how it was -- having me
Along with aces back to back
during the Depression.
THE BLACK BROTHER POEMS

--to Etheridge Knight

Solitary Song For Black Brother Gone
Home To Indianapolis

Think of me, big brother when you slide on down
to the Sunset Lounge for conversation
and some smoke, when you're broke
and ready for the road -- Chicago
or New York, think of me
the way I think of you on the avenue
alone and no woman
in the kitchen to call you home

so when you sleep your thankful hour
shooting through air
or keep vigil on the floor
of a sad waiting room
treading dust in the generous cosmos
we call home in spite
of state lines and linear lie
think of me, big brother

think again of the moon in Omaha
the zero of laughter in Omaha
all rising, all ashes
between black boarders and breakfast
at The Fair Deal (where it is)
where Saturday mornings jig
to the tune of two weird calendars
calling us home

big brother, when you slip off
those traveling shoes and stretch
your old black toes
and the years line up like face cards
think of me undertaking the worn edges
putting them softly in place
like drum beats or cinder blocks
and build, big brother build.
Halloween Song For Black Brother

Hey, you look like Halloween
in that shirt and I want to know
how it feels and you tell me
about your family burying your sister
and I say to myself you look
full of chutzpah in the face of death
and we go from there

like your voice growing
quiet over the year and the way you choke
on "funky" while "America" spits
out clear as ice and fights
right there with your shirt

this time no bells
only the song of Porgy and Bess
spun across the web of the city
we are both grateful to leave
like clean rain
on Halloween seconds before
your soft blackness
brushes mine.
Unsung Song For Black Brother

How can I sing for you
without humming what it's like
to want a woman
to touch the woman in me
when the waters flow
and the college boys
carry themselves just right
into my office
and being 31 and married 13 years
I notice

I want to fill the grave in me
I want to feel
the raw, dreaming edge
nestled in snow and green leaves
without asking
permission
to speak, without knowing
why.
ETHERIDGE

(Indianapolis 5/1/84)

at two a.m. a darkness
like a lion walks the shadows
between streetlights down
in Naptown.

Around dusty trees
and rotted buildings
street light flows like
scars on the face
of a Mississippi poet
gone to North Korea
and back (or part way),
Michigan City, Pendleton,
talked his way out
of more than one hell
(or part way) rhyming
Naptown shadows
with the Delta sun.

True to the rhythm
of an inner drum,
purple-gummed, each year
he's won the Nobel
Prize for War and Peace
against himself, horse
dealers, jailors, black and
white hairsplitters and
bullshitters. Those scars

are stars that tell you
where he's been
with his love, coals
glowing in the cornered towns
and penitentiary night.
Still he can't wear a poem
like a new pair of overalls,
a poem doesn't scare a Hoosier
cracker or those monkeys
jumping on and off his back.

But tonight there's po-cash
in his pocket and his mama
lives just up that street
from where he's climbed out
of a college car

at two a.m., a darkness
like a lion walking
down the paved and curbed
and guttered night.
Las Vegas, 1987
UPON YOUR LEAVING

--for Sonia

Night
and in the warm blackness
your woman smell filled the room
and our rivers flowed together. became one
my love's patterns. our sweat/drenched bellies
made flat cracks as we kissed
like sea waves lapping against the shore
rocks rising and rolling and sliding back.

And
your sighs softly calling my name
became love songs child/woman songs
old as a thousand years new as the few
smiles you released like sacred doves. and I
fell asleep, ashamed of my glow of my halo, and
ignoring them who waited below
to take you away when the sun rose . . .

Day
and the sunlight playing in the green leaves
above us fell across your face traced the tears
in your eyes and love patterns in the wet grass.
and as they waited inside in triumphant patience
to take you away I begged you to stay.
"but, etheridge," you said, "i don't know what to do."
and the love patterns shifted and shimmered in your eyes.

And
after they had taken you and gone, the day
turned stark white. bleak. barren like
the nordic landscape. I turned and entered
into the empty house and fell on the floor
laughing. trying to fill the spaces your love had left.
knowing that we would not remain apart long.
our rivers had flowed together.
we are one.
and are strong.
FEELING FUCKED UP

Lord she's gone done left me done packed/up and split
and I with no way to make her
come back and everywhere the world is bare
bright bone white crystal sand glistens
do/pe death dead dying and jiving drove
her away made her take her laughter and her smiles
and her softness and her midnight sighs —

Fuck Coltrane and music and clouds drifting in the sky
fuck the sea and trees and the sky and birds
and alligators and all the animals that roam the earth
fuck marx and mao fuck fidel and nkrumah and
democracy and communism fuck smack and pot
and red ripe tomatoes fuck joseph fuck mary fuck
god jesus and all the disciples fuck fanon nixon
and malcolm fuck the revolution fuck freedom fuck
the whole muthafucking thing
all i want now is my woman back
so my soul can sing
"A GRIN AND A GRACE OF WHIRLING":
ETERIDGE KNIGHT'S POETRY

There is a structured and literate urban(e) poetry, upper-middle-class, intense, deeply informed, traditional with a bright, high gloss:

A toad the power mower caught,
Chewed and clipped off a leg, with a hobbling hop has got
To the garden verge, and sanctuaried him
Under the cineraria leaves, in the shade
Of the ashen heartshaped leaves, in a dim
Low, and a final glade.
Richard Wilbur, "The Death of a Toad"

Excellent universities and mainstream presses encourage this, deservedly, perhaps expectedly, and there are many influential forces to promote and market their high quality books.
Then there is a throaty, uncomfortable, wrinkly, idiomatic, irregularly vigorous kind of poetry. It doesn't really care to be written down, although it does come to be written down. This too has influential forces which impel its creativity:

You came/ to be/ in the Month of Malcolm,
And the rain fell with a fierce gentleness,
Like a martyr's tears,
On the streets of Manhattan when your light was lit;
And the City sang you Welcome. Now I sit,
Trembling in your presence. Fourteen years
Have brought the moon-blood, the roundness,
The girl-giggles, the grand-leaps.
We are touch-tender in our fears.
Etheridge Knight, "Circling the Daughter"

(These types of poetry, in the context of the novel, have been called Paleface and Indian which is helpful, in a limited but vivid way, although few critics seem to use this analogy anymore.)
One looks to a library; one looks to the street. One looks to scansion; one looks to jazz. One looks to a Writing Assistant II; one looks to oral recitation in bars. One looks to writing conferences; one looks to smoke-filled coffee houses.
This is too simplified, of course, but there is a different source of experience; rather, a different sense of one's experience, a sense that experience is a pool of air or a bath of events in which one lives and that this experience,
seen as a whole, shapes one and that the forms presented to one’s soul are the burden of the poetry.

One really doesn’t select poetry; poetry selects one and impresses its shape into one’s voice, soul, even body, life. So that despite the suffering, shapelessness, and oddities, there is a kind of uniformity of voice, a oneness of voice and words, simple as they might be, a song that one may find grating or flawed, even unpleasant, but undeniably a song that has the earth as much a human throat as its origin:

Ex PFC Leonard Davenport goes to court
Tomorrow. He is accused of “possession and sale”
Of narcotics; his conditional bail
Was that he stay at the VA, for the cure.
For an end to sin,
For a surcease of sorrow.
He spends his pension for ten grams of “pure.”
He nods the days away,
And curses his Ranger Colonel in fluent Vietnamese.
His tour in “Nam” is his golden prize.

“At the VA Hospital in the
Middle of the United States of America:
An Act in a Play”

It’s as though some earth-god were the author, the author-ity, the spokesman for urges that can’t find issue elsewhere, that one suspects are time-bound and fleeting as chicory or an ice-crystal; yet they’re tough (and ironic) in a flinty, hard-edged way, too, so that you really can’t “fool” them, anymore than you can fool a subway car with its stark graffiti and sense of having explored vacant tunnels alone.

Readers should bear in mind the times that Knight is writing in. A styleless time; rather, a time of 1,000 styles and no one. . .

Not styles of “writing” necessarily, although that is part of it, but perhaps styles of communication, of articulating and comprehending experience.

The word processor’s software and desktop publishing packages have come to be the means by which we connect experience and literature and literary forms.

An excellent poet remarked recently that he spent some three months learning PASCAL.

“It looks like poetry on the page,” he said.

And perhaps a computer language and its “output” are like a “poetic” language. It’s certainly a “style” of communication.

The profusion of styles in contemporary American poetry comes from
an apotheosis of the common voice. Every person has a pysche; every person must find a style to express that psyche. Craft is still taught in writing workshops, well taught; there are excellent poets of craft, and, one hopes, there will continue to be, not only because nothing inherently good should be allowed to disappear but that craft must be allowed to embody the con-
temporary spirit of the age.

Any difficulty overcome gracefully is inherently beautiful whether in running the 100 yard dash, playing the cornet or writing a sestina.

The essence of Knight’s achievement is that his voice is spontaneous and thoughtful. He both incorporates “craft” and is beyond craft; his “song” is impromptu and formal:

Do not listen to the lies of old men
Who fear your power,
Who preach that you were “born in sin.”
A flower is moral by its own flowering.
Reach always within
For the Music and the Dance and the Circling.

“Circling the Daughter”

The intelligence and subtlety of craft are obvious here: (“A flower is moral
by its own flowering./ Reach always within/ For the Music. . .” describes
Knight’s poetry.) The language, honest and conversational, superbly lyrical,
is, on second glance, concentrated and bone-hard.

But not shrill, not in-shrill and polemical, not subservient to an idea.
(“Poetry proposes no solutions,” says Robert Hass.) Knight recognizes ex-
perience, the nature of his experience as an outsider to the mainstream of
American capitalism, and he is true to that. His relationship to society,
however, is hardly the energizing factor of his poetry (although “Hard Rock
Returns to Prison From the Hospital for the Criminally Insane” and others
undoubtedly can be used as examples of those who have tellingly indicted
iniquities in American society.)

Knight is both outsider and insider, outsider to the WASP culture, but
insider (with the Amerindian) to oral poetry, which he exemplifies. (To print
it somehow falsifies the concept.) Insider by virtue of the integrity of his
voice, which neither compromises nor backs away from what it has essentially
undergone.

There is no sense that experience is being forced into an alien form or
that an extraneous form is being forced onto experience. It is not that he
“selects” a form, anymore than he selected the nature of experience. If it
is true that a form should find the poem (not vice versa), then Knight’s work,
as a whole, is a perfect example of a fusion of voice and form.

O Tandiwe, my Beloved of this land,
Your spring will come early and
When the earth begins it humming,
Begin your dance with men
With a Grin and a Grace of whirling.
Your place is neither ahead nor behind,
Neither right nor left. The world is round.
Make the sound of your breathing
A silver bell at midnight
And the chilling wet of the morning dew... 

“Circling the Daughter”

Although a hymn to his daughter (and youth and innocence), this passage also describes Knight’s poetry:

“Your spring will come early and / When the earth begins its humming,/
Begin your dance with men/ With a Grin and a Grace of whirling. . .”

Who today, among poets, is as exuberant and honest, as gentle and fierce, as Etheridge Knight?
LETTER TO ETHERIDGE

Your black drumbeats no longer stretch these white yankee walls.
In the upstairs room your smoke hangs in the air as if you'd been Old Scratch on a business trip breathing in and breathing out, leaving a brimstone souvenir straight from the belly, or carrying it like riding dust clung to your accustomed clothing and shook down.

You took the electric heater, good, and a pair of warm winter boots abandoned by a former tenant who made his own bargain with this climate. He's married now, a place of his own under the sun, a fine car, and all the grits he can eat -- except he don't eat grits.

You travel light enough to fly, brother. You left your summer duds in collateral, secure as far as I'm concerned from barter (even those shoes that pinch your wide feet) until you settle. They're here, safe as houses. And I've still got my soul and a bottle of good Irish whiskey. There are some devils loose in the world the whippoorwill can't whistle away.

Mr. Miles writes from Mississippi: he made his crop but still might lose his farm. In the long war between cold and warm, cold is winning.
UPON READING A POEM BY ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

i used to think i qualified
for minority group status

    jew
    woman
    poet

until i saw yr letter
addressed to galway kinnell . . .

i never learned Black English
but i was able to fathom
that a galway is another word for the irish

    white man
    white woman
    white friend

or stranger high on dry ground

maybe i understand
for the first time ever
(dear etheridge, i really love yr poem),

what it means to be caught
low in this land

you say the floodwater rages
against Missouri State Prison

    build an ark
    of gopher wood/
a big canoe

save THE PEOPLES, etheridge, float yr boat
to the hills
HIP/NOTES TO MY/SELF

Lila! -- lips like lilacs!
... Memphis moon, your perfume ...
O me! -- miles from Mississippi!

***

The lake listens
To the black crow's caw:
"We/gonna/bomb Nicaraqua!"

***

Detroit's summer sun
Screams, two black boys, scavenging
Coke-cans, find a corpse.

***

Snow wind blows, squirrels pose . . .
This New Year is two days old --
And I'm two hundred!

***

Philadelphia!
"City of Brotherly Love."
(If you're white 'n' not MOVE!)
FOR ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

Hoodoo numberman  
empty pockets  
filled with the currency  
of cell door nights  
Heart  
a mudswollen river  
pregnant with catfish dinners  
screamin' neckbone jazz  
Preacher  
spoutin' cussin' angels  
beatin' a tambourine  
all the way to the sun
POEM FOR THE NEW AGE

brothers & sisters
it's not like the old days
when
the leisure class
sat back & read poetry
while maids & housekeepers
did the dirty work
or
when poets
sat in the courts
of kings & queens
with nothing to think about
but the words
springing forth from their quills

no
people
today i am writing this poem
fast
because it's about to rain
& you
in all likelihood
are
reading it fast
on the way to the factory
the go-go bar
wherever the day goes down

so let's get to business

i am thinking
of the poem i'll read
to the pennsylvania
unemployment compensation
board of review
& also
about what someone said to me yesterday:
all poetry is celebration

now
looking for work can be a bitch
waiting for the bus
a drag
& life without t.v.
the worst

but
right now
a girl across the street
is selling flowers

watch me go celebrate
ETHERIDGE IN HIGH SCHOOL

In Junior High
Etheridge's first period
was Concert Band.
While the conductor
conducted Sousa marches, Strauss waltzes,
Etheridge shot spitballs at the drummers,
winked at the girls.

When the bell rang for second period
Etheridge locked himself in a closet
in the music room, played his saxophone
till 3 o'clock, not once
taking the reed from his lips.

In December, Etheridge's mother
was asked to appear for an interview.
They walked a mile in the rain.
"Mrs. Knight," the principal began,
"Why has your boy missed so much school?"
"Be cool, Ma," Etheridge said,
but already the umbrella was raised.
She kept swinging
& he kept saying "Be cool, Ma"
while the principal watched
with his mouth wide open.

The rest of that year,
as Etheridge sat in
on Algebra, European History,
he dreamed of playing someday
in Chicago, New York,
& Paris, while under his desk
his fingers moved
over the keys
of an invisible saxophone.
VARIOUS PROTESTATIONS
FROM VARIOUS PEOPLE

Esther say I drink too much.
Mama say pray don't think too much.
My shrink he say I feel too much.
And the cops say I steal too much.
Social Workers say I miss my Daddy too much,
That I dream of driving a Caddy too much.
White folks say I'm lazy and late too much,
Not objective -- depend on fate too much.
Philosophers say I wanna BE too much.
Reagan say I talk about me too much,
Singing songs 'bout being free too much.

I say -- sing about me being free too much?
Say sing about me being free too much?
These poems were written during my March '87 residency at East High Street Elementary School (Elizabethtown, PA) by Mrs. Truitt's and Mrs. Jackson's 4th graders after listening to me read Etheridge's "Various Protestations From Various People" from PBQ #28. The kids knew exactly what to do with it.

--Craig Czury

FOR ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

My mom says I whine too much
My dad says I hang on our pine too much
My dad says I play too much
My sister says I get paid too much
My neighbors say I shout too much
My mom says I pout too much
I think they are off their rockers much too much.

--Ben Myers

FOR ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

My mom say I eat too much
My teacher say I think too much
My dad say I play too much
My mom say I do too much
My grandmother say I'm sick too much

—Say I eat too much?
—Say I do too much?

--Sharon Butz
FOR ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

My mom says I'm lazy
My sister says I'm stupid
My dad says I fight too much
My mom says I eat too much
But my Grandpa likes me.

--Jason Murray

POEM FOR ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

My mom says
stop eating too much
My sister says
stop yelling all the time
My dad says
stop complaining all the time
My grandma says
stop burpin' too much
My grandpa says
stop watching TV
But I just say
Shhh would you stop yelling
at me all the time.

--Keri Kaylor
FOR ETHERIDGE'S HAT

Always the cap to cover Africa
as if that great dark continent
could hide beneath a hat
while down below dusty feet
are doing the ghetto shuffle
to a blue-jazz beat.
Bowed-up back and pear-bald head
boozing with the neighbor's pimps,
spitting poems out
like steel-blade knives:
"... and cut me, Brother, if you can.
The scars on a mother
are the measure of a man."
SOME WORDS OF ADVICE

Be cautious around slow talking men.
Know their minds work at speeds of light
though their tongues speak as though in a
distorted time warp
slow down style.
Never assume to finish their sentences, their questions --
do so only in your mind.
These men use their slow speak
to gain time
to evaluate, estimate,
investigate and speculate
to sniff the situation
to read the people.
These are wise and crafty men.
They ambush, get off on their rush of
pain-in-the-side, tears-in-the-eye
laughter and glee.
They set emotions in others free
with their sly, sleek signifying.
If you dare, enter their lair --
they are playful and the rides they take you on
are always at the edges of pleasure and scare.
No Six Flags Great Adventure Wild Water newest thrill
can compare.
If you dare, enter their lair --
hold on tight, remain nimble and smile --
the embrace of over-the-edge stand-on-your-head
forward and backward 007 rendezvous begins.
The click of gears and wheels in motion signals
ascension into blue jumps parachute free.
CIRCLING THE DAUGHTER

--for Tandi

You came/to be/in the Month of Malcolm,
And the rain fell with a fierce gentleness,
Like a martyr's tears,
On the streets of Manhattan when your light was lit:
And the City sang you Welcome. Now I sit,
Trembling in your presence. Fourteen years
Have brought the moon-blood, the roundness,
The girl-giggles, the grand-leaps.
We are touch-tender in our fears.

You break my eyes with your beauty:
Oooww-oo-baby-I-love-you.

Do not listen to the lies of old men
Who fear your power,
Who preach that you were "born in sin."
A flower is moral by its own flowering.
Reach always within
For the Music and the Dance and the Circling.

O Tandiwe, by Beloved of this land,
Your spring will come early and
When the earth begins its humming,
Begin your dance with men
With a Grin and a Grace of whirling.
Your place is neither ahead nor behind,
Neither right nor left. The world is round.
Make the sound of your breathing
A silver bell at midnight
And the chilling wet of the morning dew . . .

You break my eyes with your beauty:
Oooww-oo-baby-I-love-you.
THE KEEPING OF A PROMISE

--for Charlene Blackburn

There/is/no moon tonight
No soft round globe to light

A golden path for me.
You have snatched our sun(s)
And flown outta sight. Like
A ship will sink
At the edge of the sea.

I/am/left alone to think,
And see Karl's football
Still rocking on the porch,
And Zack's diapers all
Funky with piss.

I feel and smell this --
Along with the talcum from your blouse
That you left in your sudden lurch
From this house.
THE LIFE

What a place for a city poet
who sits over a bus line and bar,
with backfiring from the first
and farting and retching vomit
from the second at the street curb,
splattering the buses. I sit
above, typing away to make it
orderly for presentation
as the life.

EPITAPH FOR A CITY

What though we hear shooting
and shouts, this is a place
to live in, that we built.
The dead will be buried,
as it was assumed
when the city was planned.
The enemy is disorder.
FROM TIME TO TIME

Think of a day without an incident
to frighten us about the world.
Is it possible to have peace,
to feel it in our stomachs,
a quiet spreading from our belly
to our lips and eyes so that
we are thinking of life
as a sweet desert
for having been born into it.
I had such a feeling
a moment ago, and it's gone
in an anxiety that such a future
does not exist, except to feel it
from time to time
this way.

SURFACE

It's no good depending on another
for one's happiness. It's slavery,
and we have slavery in our blood.
Spill the blood.

At the bottom
of a lake I look up at the surface
shimmering in the sun.
LEARNING A LANGUAGE: ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

Years ago as we sat in a living room I asked Etheridge about the word *funky*. It had leaked into white places and I heard people speak it but I didn’t know the word intimately enough to use it. When I asked Etheridge it was early in the evening, a good thing, because three hours later Etheridge was heading around the bend toward the second syllable. I can’t remember everything he said; he touched base on the middle passage, harvesting tobacco, the tenor saxophone, and professional football.

Poets love words and they know or learn how language embodies the life in its joy and suffering. We know best what we know deepest, what comes from land, family, culture, and race. About the time I met Etheridge I learned that black was another culture, another language and another spirit. I had not learned it earlier despite my black roommate at college—maybe because of my black roommate in college? In the 1940s the Negro at Harvard demonstrated that assimilation was accomplished fact.

Probably beginning with black music, later from Etheridge and from other black poets (Gwendolyn Brooks, Dudley Randall), later still from Dock Ellis with his friends and colleagues, I learned that there was a nation or a culture occupying roughly the same space that my culture occupied, that I was alien to and largely ignorant of. If we touch across this space it is only after we acknowledge separation. Then—acknowledging separation—we can find our sameness: I am someone else for whom ideas of ancestry hang in every air.

Then there is the blue music of a poem like “As You Leave Me”:

Shiny record albums scattered over
the livingroom 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 to smile at the johns.

Here is cadence in the service of expressiveness; this poem rises and falls
with its pitches, shouts and whispers, mainly by sinking on the word you.
Not right away; you doesn’t sink in the title, although it rises in volume
to leave, in pitch to leave me. But in the first stanza, in “my eyes as I watch
you,” the pronoun starts its sinking. The second stanza fills itself with gazing
at the beauty that belongs to you; it says your five times. The third stanza
begins with You all by itself, but it’s the last stanza that makes the poem
with its sinking you: After it begins “You rise,” look at the right hand edge
of the page: “see you”; “why do you”; “when you grab”; “when you”;
watch you? and light, “I die as I watch you.”

We die too, as this cadence repeats you insistently and wistfully, falling
into a blue wail of devastation. Again and again the poem dies with this
fall, at line’s end, to try rising again at the start of the next line by pitch
and by volume (you is low-pitched and blue, which it rhymes with)
“you/grow,” “you/chatter,” until it rises (meaning falls) to the utter destitution:
“you/leave me”; “you/disappear.”

The devastation of this poem is clear in plot-summary: He does this; she
does that. But this poem is not plot summary: This poem is song made of
natural speech wailing blue by the skill that comes from word and cadence
lived with, learned and loved.
WHO KNOWS ???

Like Pinnochio's . . . ?
When the doors/
    close
On the Oval office,
Maybe Reagan's nose
Grows . . . red (like Rage
And Sin and Blood), . . . ignores
The good and sage/
    advice
Of his psychic/
    soul:
*White/lies are not nice;*
Like it,
    or not, they won't suffice
*For the truth, the truth,*
*Black and black, and holy/*
    whole;
Contrary to the imaginary
    Pinnochio's nose --
Fiction ain't fact.
Contrary to the Contras,
Contrary to the Contra/
    vening
Of advisory Moles,
Beribboned and bereft,
Contrary to the keening
Of Iran and Iraq --
Right may be Left,
*But white ain't black*
And a lie ain't the truth!
So. So. So suppose . . .
The cancerous growth
On the imperial, and presidential,
    nose
Is the surreal, and the essential
    proof --
Like Pinnochio's
Who knows? -- who knows???
With Eugene McCarthy, Las Vegas, 1987
FOR THE PRISONERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

What squats its vast bulk
at the end of my mind's
shadowy recesses
dominating my thinking like a
legendary bastion, Bastille,
labyrinthinely convoluted
like a basilica upthrust on the
Horn where ages intersect
staring with basilisk-power to
turn my brain to stone
is knowledge of you, thousands,
imprisoned,
(The Fort, Rooi Hel, Pollsmoor, the Island)
and the wound of knowledge
knowledge of my powerlessness.
THINGS AWFULLY QUIET IN AMERICA

(Song of the Mwalimu Nkosi Ajanaku)

Things awfully quiet in America, yeah --
Much too quiet in America.
We/been abused, confused, and misused too long --
We/done played too long -- done prayed too long --
Say things too quiet in America.
We're wearing three-piece suits, and cowboy boots;
We're wearing animal skins, and dry-dry grins --
Sing things too quiet in America
In America "Revolution" is never heard;
Our historical shit is never stirred;
In America "Revolution" is a dirty word,
So things stay quiet in America.
Ghetto rats still bite in America;
Empty bellies ache at night in America,
And Seniors shake with fright in America.
There's a war going on in America,
And we're killing our sons in America,
In the many, many prisons in America.
Things awfully quiet in America, yeah --
Much too quiet in America.
Need to "Raise a Ruckus Tonight" in America;
Need to fight-the-fright in America,
Make the fire-eyes bright in America,
Cause things ain't right in America
Black folks're sad, and mad, in America,
And that's too bad in America.
They say: "Things ain't changed in America;
'The Man' is still deranged in America."
They say: "What went wrong in America? --
Where's the 'Freedom Song' in America?"
We/gonna set things right in America,
Cause things too quiet in America, yeah --
Much too quiet in America.
MEMO #75

Iran and Iraq
Attack and attack!
"Still Waters" now rough
In the Persian Gulf --
Those mines do not bluff.
PARTITIONS
PA
PAR
PART
ART
TIT
IT
PARTITIONS

FUNDAMENTALIST
FUN
FUND
DAME
MEN
MENTAL
LIST
FUNDAMENTALIST

FORTUNATE
AT
ATE
TUNA
FORT
FOR
OR
FORTUNATE

MISINFORMATION
SIN
IN
INFORM
OR
FORMAT
MAT
MISINFORMATION
INTOXICANT
IN
INTO
TOXIC
CAN
AN
ANT
INTOXICANT

ANARCHIST
IS
HIS
ARCH
ARC
NARC
AN
ANARCHIST

HISTORY
OR
TO
TORY
STORY
IS
HIS
HISTORY

FATHER
A
AT
FAT
THE
HER
HE
FATHER
ETHERIDGE KNIGHT, THE BIG WORD MAN . . .

Uncles are special, there are the blood uncles and then there are the honorary ones. Uncles show you their best side most of the time. They tell you really good stories about the great war, stories about legendary baseball games and famous boxers. A good uncle will teach you how to cook thick steaks, fried grits, hash brown potatoes and homemade rolls for breakfast. When you are young they will sometimes let you have a sneak sip of their beer and let you try some of their brown mule chewing tobacco. They'll tell your their stories about women, and warn you about big city living. When you're broke they'll slide you a bill or two. They usually never put you down directly and they always have a good strategy to give you to cool out Pop when he's bearing down on your knucklehead. When they do have to pull your coat they do it in a serious voice but they don't put you down.

In my life I have been blessed to have some real fine uncles in my bloodline and one of the honorary uncles is a poet. A poet wise to the ways of life and the ways of our kinfolk. He led me into the world of poetry by showing me the reality and richness of our oral and written heritage. He tells me good stories. He's special to me and for that I call him "Unc," like in chief, like in somebody with big power.

The first time I met him was in a book of his poems from prison. I was in college at the time in the mid-sixties. Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. At that time there was an explosion in the Black literary galaxy that signaled the coming of a poetic caravan taking new routes across space talking 'bout Black power, talkin' bout' Black pride, talking 'bout calling all Black people together. Struggle set the tempo and the poets blew out the notes in the front line. There was a heavy Black back beat. That Black back beat had been in our race's memory with Langston Hughes, Gwen Brooks, Sterling Brown, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Margaret Walker, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Frances Harper, Claude McKay and people from that school.

A new wave caught our attention based on the old tradition and the new horns were swingsters like Don Lee, A.B. Spelman, Sonia Sanchez, Dante Graham, Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, Ebon Dooley and of course Etheridge Knight.

It was the poem "Hardrock" that moved us in our nightly signifying sessions when we told big lies, talk about people's Mamas, read our work and said some lines. Some of us could tell the toast of "Shine" and the "Signifying Monkey." Reading aloud Knight's poem about "Hardrock" stirred us up, old "Hardrock" the bad nigga signified to us the fate of a fallen hero. It was a toast poem to a sho nuff crazy nigga who we loved and admired.
A man who was so strong and real that the prison system labeled him mad and lobotomized him for being a man.

That poem made us mad but it was poetry and if we had to study poets for our advanced literature class, because we all were advanced and real crazy and too smart to be expelled, then the English Department made room to let us have our way. We read, we recited, we boasted, we bragged, we worked and learned about Black poetry.

Fifteen years later in 1983, I finally met the man who made poetry real. It was in the spring of 1983 at the Academy of Music Hall in Philadelphia where a tribute to Sterling Brown had been organized by the Umum bibliophile James Spady. Etheridge was one of the featured poets on the program that evening that included such Black literati as Percy Johnson, Sonia Sanchez, Quincy Troupe, Michael Winston, Calvin Hernton, Karl Carter and several others.

We were both standing in the outer lobby stretching our legs, Black man’s style. I introduced myself and we struck up a conversation about the poetry being read and the opening of the baseball season. He asked me about the local spots for poetry, jazz and cold beer. I told him about the local scene: people read poetry all over town; jazz is like a bandit, hopping from place to place; cold beer is everywhere; every corner in Philadelphia has a bar.

After the reading, a large group of writers, poets, musicians, dancers and signifyers gathered in a bistro on Locust Street near the theatre. A place called Fiddler’s. People sat and talked. Some moved from table to table exchanging information about old friends, current projects, problems with publishers, new writing techniques, how sleepy they were, and the fresh aroma of the coffee and pastry.

A young poet from Howard University leaned over to Etheridge and started to question him about the time he had spent in jail. Etheridge was kinder than he had to be. Prison is not something that people always like to remember or talk about. But prison for Etheridge is one of his major metaphors and he’ll sometimes tell you that. The young man said “What were you down for?” Knight told him, “Robbery.” He leaned across the table and said in a clear strong voice, “listen man I was guilty, I did my time and that’s just about all there is to say about it.” He turned to me and said, “Clark White, what about the baseball season, who you got?” That’s what was really on his mind, baseball.

I saw him several times shortly after that. We would sit in the book lined living room and talk about all types of subjects. Usually it all came back to writing and the word.

Whenever he expressed himself, his words were controlled and directed. They had a sound like music, like blues, like jazz. A talking, resonant voice. A cross between Arthur Prysock, Bobby Blue Bland and some unknown
blues singer. His vocal chords mellowed by red liquor and unfiltered cigarettes, hardcore and good times.

During this time I began to study and understand what he was saying about the poet, the poem, and the people. He would always remind the poet that there was also the poem and the people. He would say to us “Say your poems, know your words. Words should move the bones in your ears.”

The word went out that spring and summer that Etheridge would hold a writing workshop in Philadelphia. The first session met in the Folklore Department of the University of Pennsylvania. I remember walking onto the campus of the university near the library. The summer weather was hot and pretty. I heard a distant figure yell my name. The figure was standing on a hill. He had on a big brown applejack and a jean jacket. The walk was slow in a four four blues tempo. It was Knight. We met and shook hands. He said, “Good to see you, Clark White.” We made our way to the building where four or five other poets were standing around. We went into the lounge on one of the upper floors where Penn’s Folklore and the Storytelling Department is located. Some of the people in that group included local poets, Harold Watson, Wendy James, Tina Barr, Jean Marie Whitecavage, Ron Price, and Russ Endo. The first session started with Etheridge asking us to join in a chant. It became a song. Then a dance. He asked us all to stand up and dance. Most of the people got rigid. Some people looked puzzled, and some let it flow and danced. Eth watched our reactions very closely. It was his way of reading every person in the group. You can tell a lot about people by watching how they dance and listening to how they sing. After about fifteen minutes, we stopped and took our seats. Etheridge started the workshop. “I just want to say that there are some basic rules here. What we say and do here leave it here. No fighting. Nobody should deal with someone else’s old lady or old man that’s in the group. And whatever we do in the group, stays in the group.” That evening, he went on to speak to us about the meaning of poetry, the power of poetry. The meaning of being in touch with your own feelings. He also expressed a thought that the basis of all good work is love. Without love everything else is, in his words, “bullshit.”

Each of us was asked to write a short poem and present it to the group. He critiqued each poem. The session ended with us standing in a circle and expressing whatever we wanted to express. And, as was his custom, the direction of those speaking in turn, started on his “heartsdie.”

The rest of the session floated from place to place like a caravan of gypsies on the desert. On the floor, in people’s living rooms, in the pub, outside on the sidewalks and down in the subway. We finally settled into a bar, a place in West Philadelphia called the Bonfire. We met on a slow night that we chose and the manager of the place let us use the backroom upstairs. It had booths, chairs, tables and turned out to be quite a comfortable space.
The bar could always be guaranteed that we would run up a big tab of beer, wine and red liquor. These became the work sessions, the important sessions, the sessions where we really learned how to project our voices and say our poems. To speak over, under, around, or sometimes with the laughter of people. The music on the jukebox, the clanking of glasses, the smoke.

The sessions would usually open with Etheridge reading some of his poems and some of the poems of others, such as Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Bly or Sonia Sanchez. In turn, each person would present a piece of work or recite the works of other people. After every person presented, there was some discussion of the works, some comments, perhaps some criticism or some encouragement. Most times, that last word came from Knight. It was never a condescending word. Knight was extremely accessible. Extremely round and circular in his thinking. He was concerned with people developing an independent way of expressing themselves. He gave us good advice. A lot of the advice had to do with fundamentals. The fundamentals of writing good poetry, of being in touch with one's senses, of knowing how to use the language properly and effectively. As usual it all came back to love.

On occasion, I got time to spend with Knight away from the session. We'd walk and talk and sometimes, go eat. These were very important times for me. I enjoyed being in his company. We didn't always have to talk about poetry. We could just talk. We had a lot in common in terms of the country side of ourselves. We were people who were tuned to the earth and appreciated a good joke and a good toast. But most of the time we didn't talk about poetry, we just talked.

I noticed that Knight sometimes just listened and watched very intensely. In those sessions, those one on one encounters, I was able to grow and gain confidence in myself as a writer. You see, Knight was always real with me and always encouraging. Like he said, it all begins with love.

In terms of the subject matter of the poem, Knight always stressed the importance of being in touch with your feelings. Writing about those experiences and environments, those people, those places, those things which are most familiar to you. If you have an eye for detail, develop it. If you have an ear for sounds, use it. If you have a keen nose, then deal with smells. Whatever you do, remember the poem, the poet, and the people form a trinity which is the basis of the poetic philosophy.

His poetry comes from the ways and the lives of Black people, Black men in particular. The themes are similar to the blues. The poems chronicle black working class lives. What Knight showed me was a way of listening and capturing on paper the lifestyle and folk idiom. The cultural "ethos" and realness of living. I discovered that my ear was also tuned to the earth. I could remember good dialogue, comments, exclamations, a joke I heard somewhere in a bar or on a streetcar. A word of wisdom spoken by an older
woman in a church bargain store. Elation expressed by a young person who just got an “A” on a paper. Pain expressed by someone hurt and in love. Writing became an automatic process. An art where the words could stand by themselves. That’s when I discovered some of the inner dynamics of Knight’s poems. I began to notice Knight’s interest in “Haiku.” I started to read and write Haiku myself. Haiku required strong words. Image words, words that can stand by themselves. Words that convey an immediate feeling. Now, if you look at that as a basic structure and put it inside the narrative form of poetry, you essentially have uncovered one of the major characteristics of Knight’s style. Realness and strong immediate images. Along with the characteristics of the Haiku form are also the traditions of the Blues, folk songs, toast telling, storytelling and preaching. For me, these are essentially the main ingredients of Knight’s style. For styling is important to poetry just as it is to basketball, just as it is to jazz, just like it is to love.

It’s been a couple of years now, since I’ve met Knight. I’ve been on poetry readings with him about South Africa. I’ve read with him in bars. He’s covered my back while I’ve read anti-Apartheid poems in front of the corporate headquarters of IBM. We’ve done radio shows and poetry workshops. And over this course of time, we have managed to stay in touch through visits, letters and phone calls. Whenever he comes through town we get together. Sometimes I show him my work. But, most of the time we just talk. Talk that talk and take those blues tempered walks through the streets of the city keeping time to the people. Always keeping in mind, that all shut eyes ain’t asleep, all hello’s ain’t glad to see you and all goodbye’s ain’t gone.
THE STONE ROLLERS

-- for Little Jimmy Scott and Etheridge Knight

The years had rolled their stones
the poet and the jazz singer
hugged each others bones
when they met in the back room of
the club in Philly

The years had rolled their stones
underworld
from Memphis to Detroit to St. Louis
whirls of flim flam money
slick talking honeys

The years have rolled their stones
through the cure at Lexington
a long bit in the joint

The years had rolled their stones
late night rambles
safe cracking and finger popping
scat singer and girl sniffing

The years had rolled their stones
made them smooth
so smooth that the music
and the words still hung together

The years had rolled their stones
to this warm spring evening in Philly
the jazz singer in his club
the poet on his reading tour

The years had rolled their stones
but had not cracked
their bones
EDWARD

(after Etheridge Knight)

He was an evil motherfucker
with a curve ball that didn't.

His passes wobbled like the legs
of his junkie friends.

Stardom eluded him
until he donned the garish colors of gangdom --

when he did, our pocket change
and frightened loyalties
were his.

But they were not enough.
He took to firing pistols in supermarkets.

The next time I saw him, I
was fast approaching manhood
manhood.

and taking stuff off of no one

No matter.
He was Mercedes bound.

Selling love boat, reefer,
and smack --

Collecting dollars once again.

Who killed him?
No one uttered names
once their smiles faded
like those bad pitches of his we'd muscle
in the direction of heaven.

Edward never grinned,
not even when his team won by a million runs.

Even when
when he managed to sail a homer into the blue,

He refused to marvel at the baseball's flight.
FOR ETHERIDGE

When I saw you last, propped against pillows,
tubes dangled from your shoulders.
Your legs stiffened out, skin the color
of leaf-dark silt, smeared with red sediment,
ankles swelling, as if your body had been left to drift.

Calves spotted, a boil on your shin
plugged like a knot on a trunk;
you need to go under, to go in,
as I did once, through an excavated barrow.
I can see you bend, turn a man's bones, and sniff.

Where you walk, fallen logs rot in wet.
Water spiders, tiny pods weighing each leg,
flex and drift. All those long nights
and afternoons: lurching and spinning,
hanging onto your breath -- surfacing.

I think of you in your orange shirt,
loping down the path, leaning ahead.
Your arms grope and swim, snap
the meshed branches. Sap skids like blood
when they cut your chin in prison.

You hear the birds, making song,
tear their stomachs from the inside.
Every few months now you send haiku.
Dim pillows seal us from the door.
From the other side: knocking and knocking.

You stick its lock with your pins.
Its water shadows flick like fish.
With Carolyn Forche, Las Vegas, 1987
ODE

to a Poet

1.
We are not saints, nor are we sinners, either --
From times of war,
In the crook of your knees,
Dark lines, inerasable ridges, wander
Like spiders' legs, or crows' feet.

2.
How the lurid poison swelled first your feet,
Then traveled up your legs,
Up your thighs,
Deep throbing pain,
Pressing the insides of your skin:
Inflating small pockets,
Threatening your life the distance of your skin.

3.
Brother,
Beware the small aneurism
That can find its mark,
That can pierce your brain, flooding your shell with blood;
Beware of all bleeding deaths, beware the stab
Of pain,
Beware the razor, the two-inch needle,
Beware the lie that can never tell the truth again.

4.
When doctors poked your body with their needles,
They found an in-grown hair encrusting your armpit.
Now you peer through the bathroom mirror,
Staring at this former abscess, a cave:
"This is not the Big One," you proudly say
As you prop yourself upright,
Leaning on the intravenous pole beside you, a staff,
A vineyard rod.
5.
I remember
Words you've shared with me before,
Other experiences near death,
The brushings of birds' wings,
The faint musty smell from out of the mouth of a cave
In the mountain's shadow,
Laughter issuing from deep inside

6.
Time has crept swiftly,
Broken strings of army ants foraging across the land.

7.
Brother,
Lift us towards the sun,
Breathe in the heavy air through your pores,
Feel your belly heave
With the pulse of song
As the blood courses again through your veins;
Sense the weighty timbre of your voice,
Expel the demons that cloud
Your throat,
Open your mouth;
Sing.
THE BREATHING/
IN/
AN EMANCIPATORY SPACE

It occurs to me that Etheridge Knight often comments at his poetry readings—and his is a poetry that he means for a reading—that many of his poems were started with his making up lines in order to gain back his breath during the time he was in prison. The comment is made, I think, as a frame for his reading. It is striking because the context for the poetry reading is usually a college campus—maybe a town library or a high school event of some kind. Whatever the setting, the audience out there, the poetry reading audience, the receiver where the poet is the sender in the communicative context of the poetry readings from where I sit in the 1980’s, is usually middleclass, usually white, usually out of touch with the reality of prisons and of the many black men in them. So there is an immeasureable gulf at the beginning of his readings. The audience expects something like itself from the poet. (Of course, this does not go on consciously, of course the audience will know who Etheridge Knight is, will know something of his background—if just from reading a bio off the back of a book. But the audience expects a sameness from its poet. It cannot see other). It is like this with the audience unless Etheridge does something to alter the situation. Reading to prison groups themselves, reading at schools in the cities where there are children of color and children from working class families alters this gulf on the out-there end; Etheridge does this, likewise he reads at nursing homes, hospitals, bars, nightclubs, etc. But there is, even yet, an immeasurable gulf. Because the audience, whatever the audience, will come in expecting more of itself, Etheridge is other. The audience expects what he has to say to be against the forces of disorder and chaos—this is the usual, this is the role ascribed to narrative. But he is the poet. A gulf exists between himself and the audience. He must bring about the destruction of the audience expectation, bring about as poet what Victor Turner, the anthropologist, called disintegrations and indeterminacies in the interest of bringing on unpredictable transformations in events—individuals, cultures, societies. In Etheridge Knight’s case, in order to pull off this transformation with an audience already too ready to undergo—for his tastes—the rules of the poetry reading, the work is doubled. So he recognizes the gulf. He acknowledges the striking dis/similarity between himself and the audience. By framing his reading and his writing he, one could say, covers himself from the otherness where the audience expectation has isolated him. At the same time, by this act of framing, he, one could say, imprisons himself. And this prison of his own making allows a practice, a contact with his life or time as a man that brings him to his urge in poetry, brings him there if, as is commonly thought, temporality is our existence as it is inter-
preted through some kind of narrative. Now his poems are not isolated, not abandoned, but are part of a story he will begin to tell. With the gesture that he frames himself, he frees himself. He tells his story.

* * *

In his essay "The Belly Dance," Etheridge describes the effects of that epitome of the prison—the hole, or solitary confinement. He writes,

... not knowing night from day, I begin to lose track of time, the days, the weeks; I become disoriented, out of touch/with myself and almost out of breath. So I start to re/membering: my grandmother, grade/school classmates, guys I'd been in the army with, ... I was so disoriented, so desperate to regain a sense of my self, of who I was ... So I started to making up/lines and phrases out loud, memorizing them, and I started to breathe again ...

Here Etheridge is referring to his impulse for the poem, "The Idea of Ancestry." As one of what he says is a body of "geneological poems," it is a condensation of connections—lost and found. It has to be viewed as one of those pieces of work—by anybody—that gets at human anguish, that presents the sense of being other. With words, it points to the hell—that exile where there are no words, the inability to make contact—that is existence when you are other. Raw with resignation, the poem presents the undiscussable, by being—paradoxically—a "naming" poem. And we, entering into singing, into communality, become one voice. But, strangely enough, the poem—again paradoxically—accomplishes its naming by not naming. By not naming, by not saying the respective english names borne by the various leaves of his family tree, this poem stands in contrast to the designating and addressing of Etheridge's other poems, poems that bear names or dedications that are a black vernacular and read like Etheridge's personal who's who—Hard Rock, Freckle Faced Gerald, Flukum, Sonia, Malcolm, Gwendolyn Brooks, for Charlene Blackburn, for Mary McAnally, for the Daytop Family, for Tandi, etc. By not naming here, a tension is developed. In the poem mention is made of an "... uncle disappeared ... discussed each year when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in the clan, he is an empty space." Here, the poet is listing, "naming," members of his extended family whose pictures he stares at on his cell wall. He concludes this section of naming/not naming by pointing out the uncle's exile—from the family bible—"... there is no place in [my father's mother's] Bible for 'whereabouts unknown.'" But whereas the poet is pointing out here this particular relative's otherness from the family, the
poem is also claiming this estrangement for all his clan. Since nobody is named, everyone is left floating in a space outside the English Language of the poem; everyone shares this “whereabouts unknown” or otherness to which the bad uncle is assigned. The tension is that we expect the poet to name his people; that he does not is saying something. What it says is pointing to—in this poem of family—the vehicle of connectivity without par: language. One gets though this naming section of the poem with the hurting side of black american history writing every word. The family tree from which every black limb is broken is language. The poem is testament to a tissue torn apart: the poet to the pre-slavery past, the old country and its speech which he does not have access to return to. Indirectly the poem explores the rupture and the issue of “will” in this context.

The “Ancestry” poem has two sections. (The poem is too well known to justify partially quoting it in these short remarks.) At the close of both sections an anxiety is presented. The anxiety of Part 1—loss—was discussed above; the anxiety of Part 2 involves a different metaphor, but the section ends with a frustration and estrangement as in the first part. Why language as the ultimate site of loss seems more than simply alluded to is emphasized by the metaphor of this second part. The action is that of trying to reach bottom, trying to tap something sensed, trying to make contact, to go all the way back to answer an ancestral call “. . . stir[ring] my genes . . .” But the action is thwarted, “There is a gray stone wall damming my stream . . .” so that the narrator is as directly cut off from home as the uncle of Part 1 who has “. . . caught a freight (they say) . . . for ‘whereabouts unknown.’” The gulf that is presented in the poem’s second section, through the concluding clause of the poem—“. . . and I have no children to float in the space between” is chilling. It is as though the fears—not just of a family, not just of a man, but of a race—were funnelled into this remark: that there would be no future reunion where the parts of the family get together and fuse—through discussion—into meaning to rescue each other from “whereabouts unknown,” the fear that productivity—that stuff of the genes—might itself end.

The struggle to connect is pursued on several fronts in “The Idea of Ancestry.” Likewise the gulf exists on these fronts—biological, neurological, perceptual, verbal, geneological, and spiritual (that “whereabouts unknown” in the grandmother’s family bible). In other words, the events to be righted occur across the range of human existence. the pursuit is most intense when the protagonist struggles with his habit—“. . . my guts were screaming for junk/but I was almost contented.” A series of “nows” are impressed on us as the poet as public storyteller recalls and makes present the contact “. . . with the kinfolks./I walked barefooted in my grandmother’s
backyard/. . . I sipped cornwhiskey from fruit jars with the men/I flirted with the women . . .” Then the action whizzes to a close when he ultimately succumbs to his biochemical need, to the synaptic fix through drugs, a fix that finally leaves him unable to contact himself—“. . . I had almost caught up with me.” Let it be said that the poet is talking about himself. It does not matter—in the poem. What does count is the multiple levels at which this struggle to connect is carried on in the poem. When this struggle is compared to a salmon “. . . bucking up his birthstream,” we are all at school in the waters with him. The connection is made.

***

No one is more concerned with time than the person disconnected from the people and things that he is concerned with. Doubly so for the man imprisoned; that man worries—“will I get to do this or that,” worries that this instant, which presents itself so vividly, will be lost as an occasion in which he can be out in public—hence, in time. The imprisoned, a man with seemingly all day on his hands, actually fears he has too little time because he is cut off—disconnected from what he loves, estranged from the time to do what he is all about. A life is time to do what you care involving yourself with. For the prisoner, then, this time never comes. With all day on his hands, his time—paradoxically—feels too short; it is not an interval long enough to permit, or to make contact with, the things of his concern. From this follows a kind of attention whose focus is not on the things of concern and the time rendered through that network of activity, but a kind of naked activity without an object. So staring the prisoner in the face—one cannot even say at every instant, more at every time—is simply his bare preoccupation, his mind, his perceptual contact. He is just lost in time—“whereabouts unknown.” This kind of time is a terror. Heidegger (*Being and Time*, pp. 464-480) offers an everyday language analysis of the distinctiveness of this kind of everyday time, opposing it to the clock time where concern, daily significances, are so matter of fact they are reduced to monotony. Etheridge Knight’s words in the “Belly Dance” essay must be read as a reflection of a man who was abandoned to time itself. His description of his nervous activity—“. . . I pace the dark space, do push-ups, masturbate, curse the guards and gods. Five or six days pass . . . I begin to slow down, and the smothering starts . . . after being in the Hole a couple of weeks, not knowing night from day, I begin to lose track of time. . . .” is a consciousness at work construing every issue—even his humanity itself—into practical temporal exercises. Even his breath.

“The best things in life are free. . . .” goes the first line of the Motown
song sung by the Contours, Barrett Strong, the Miracles, the Beatles, etc. in the early sixties. It was during this period of time that Etheridge Knight was in prison. He no doubt had this aphorism in him long before Berry Gordy turned it into a commercial song. I have heard him say several times that—especially in the turbulent times while he was incarcerated—what was going on in the American streets was happening, maybe on a different scale, inside the physical prison. From this vantage point we can view the poems Etheridge Knight wrote while in prison as a rendering of disinterested responsibility. There is a quick beauty in many of the prison poems, a beauty characterized by the opposite of the environment as a figure needing and doing things to him, characterized by a peace and negative capability. Fueled by an absence of the idea of his hand as prime mover on things (remember that necessary, even historical, stance that so many of us—and Etheridge too—in the midst of the sixties took as biggest, baddest, blackest heroic so and so...), this absence correlated, I think, with the hallmark of imagination—the activity of seeing the scene with the self not as an agent but simply as another element in it, the poems burn with generosity. And an openness and liberty: "I Mississippi Nigger," he was to call himself in the poem "Ilu the Talking Drum." He uses the intimate language only spoken among "members" in the black community; it's either a hard won liberty-privilege, or else a challenge to play with the term "nigger." You get a small surprise from the ease his intimacies produce in print. But the liberties he takes as intimate narrator always have a job to do—to present what is lived or true. In the midst of some of his thickest poems—say, "Welcome Back, Mr. Knight: Love of my Life" or "Another Poem for Me (after Recovering from an O.D.)"—the weight of the truth is so anguished I find myself wishing for his sake that the statements were fictions, figures of speech, or embellishments. One forgets that his material has—in fact—been shaped into his art, and that he has—in fact—lived strongly enough through his material that he can, indeed, craft it. Just at the point where I begin wanting more separation of his personal miseries from his poetry—feeling that he is confusing the two, that he sometimes is reveling in his suffering for the sake of a poem or for audience/other response—he turns up the interrogative in his writing, a stance which is larger than any individual consciousness and which gives his particular woes a formed or "thinged" quality, a quality whose gain is that his personal immediacy absents itself so that his roots become visible and his seeing can be an object for our scrutiny. "... What now dumb nigger damn near dead/where is the correctness/the proper posture/the serious love of living/now that death has fled these quiet corridors. ?" he sings at the close of the "O.D." poem. Through the medium of his music his voice becomes larger than that of his personal distress, larger than the sloganneering he sometimes slips into (and does in the liner of "Welcome Back, Mr. Knight"); it becomes
a situation able to honestly confront itself with the questions that linger like the air of a storm in front of it. Reading his poem "On the Yard," what comes across in his description of a moment with a challenging younger prisoner is his openness to look at himself—at his frustration, his desperation, his human being in his situation. He does not beautify himself in the poem. Likewise his Haiku come tumbling down like verbal snapshots in time—clear and needless. The Haiku stand as his prison preoccupation rendered into time.

The act of making, Poeisis, is what we know of time. Narrativity is the language use that has time as its product. Etheridge Knight is a storyteller from his roots—the Mississippi Delta. His poetry, which parallels the natural trajectory of his speech, has the character of a big slow moving river. What the river brings is tales. The contemporary study of time (cf. Ricoeur) feels that it is a paradox resolved by plot and narrative structure. The story is that the narrative carries enveloped within it two temporal dimensions—a chronological one and a configurational one. What the storyteller does when he sits us down for a reading is to present to us a "present" and then "another present"—giving us an ordered experience in our lives that suggests the sense of linearity, series, succession, etc. And this structure, in turn, prompts us with an expectation of "what next?" prompts us to find answers to our questions. On the other hand, the configurational aspect adds meaning to these events in our lives. Spreading ever outward, the present—unending as the prisoner's felt present must feel—is pulled together into significant wholes—events—by feeling. With the different qualities welling up in a life, the storyteller tries to grasp his temporality into successive patterns to be told. Framing himself as poet in order to free himself from the hell where the audience suspends him, and to free himself from a general time (which is always someone else's time), Etheridge historicalizes his life as poet into two periods: the writing period in prison and this "now" standing in front of you.

* * *

It's February—Black History Month—1987, on the first day of a conference sponsored jointly by Harvard and Roxbury Community College. Etheridge reads at the Boston Public Library as part of a panel which includes Angela Davis and the Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison. On the second day of the conference, Helen Vendler, a professor at Harvard and the New York Book Review's favorite critic, moderating a different panel, uses a poem by Wallace Stevens to discuss the ostensible conference topic—Politics and Black Poetry. The point she is attempting to make is that the poet cannot be involved with politics because he (or she) is not a man (or woman)
of action. The poet is a listener she says. "The Snow Man," the Stevens poem she cites, a piece both so-called modernists and so-called postmodernists claim as indicative of their sense of things, strikes me as a curious example of inactivity. The contingent voice in the poem seems to argue for negative capability, but not a turn away from the act. Stevens saying:

One must have a mind of winter/to regard the frost and boughs/. . . and not to think/Of any misery in the sound of the wind/Which is the sound of the land/. . . . For the listener, who listens in the snow,/And, nothing himself, beholds/Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

must have been done with Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in mind—the early 20th century physics discovery that the observation effects the phenomena observed. This effect is the big boogaboo flawing much psychology research. It is the unacknowledged other that creeps into that wishful thinking called "objectivity." Yet one does not chuck the attempt to know because of observation error. Knowing of the error fuels change. A corrective is to try getting at things by viewing the interaction of the "subject" and the "object," with the subject being very mindful of the effect of his observation. This does bring one closer to things. Another common way of removing some of the impasse of understanding is to become more "like" the "object" one is studying. Hence, the field studies in anthropology. Similitude as understanding. One of the best illustrations for throwing ourselves into this uncertainty out there—an uncertainty which is often clouded over by role prescriptions, by the rule following that social class inclusion performs, by the weight of history itself acting to suppress our outlook, etc.—is taken from psychology, the D.L. Rosenhan study of how individuals act in institutional settings. It was part of a host of work done in the 1960's and 70's that looked at the adjustments the person is trapped into performing as part of his social identity. (This social science work on the interaction of the individual's sense of himself—as absence—with the image of himself that others affront and reflect back to him strikes me as paving the way for all the deconstructionism which has found a home in american universities right now.) In his classic study of the effect played by institutional setting, Rosenhan showed how even "expert" judgements are structured by position and role. In that study of diagnostic procedure at a psychiatric hospital, the finding was that the psychiatric patients themselves were better judges of context "appropriate" behavior than the well-trained staff. Another finding suggested that once an impression was attached to an individual, that once a person's behavior was wrongly assessed, there was no way that the interaction of professional/patient could alter this misinterpretation. So the Rosenhan material is also a classic study
of the drama carried out in the subject/object or writer/content interchange. If we understand "institutional setting" to be "distance" or "perspective," what is being urged is clear. The writer must get into the world of his content. The writer must become nothing—yes. But must become nothing in order to become his content. Those most "like" the phenomena of interest have the most useful understanding, the understanding of the other. Look at the meaning of "understanding."

Does this mean that you have to—as some say—suffer to sing the blues? Well, actually yeah, if suffering is what the blues is all about. But the blues "are" blues; there are many kinds of blues. What crossing the "slash" in the subject/object pole means, what conceptualizing events as object/object interactions gets us closer to, is specificity. The hermeneutic view shows us that understanding is empty when it is thought of as a quality of a dissociated subject; "understanding is a happening, an event, a pathos," a situation (cf. Bernstein, pp.14-143). To achieve an understanding the poet—he or she—must appropriate the set of conditions forming the historicity of his being. Thus he moves freely into the traditions alive in him. If he is all of himself he is able to borrow from those traditions. But his historicity also has an anticipatory dimension. Unless the weight of tradition and the forces of the moment are deadingly oppressive, the situation will always include a sense of possibility. To understand a situation you throw your self forward into specificity, into possible activities with the features of the situation. The event includes a future. The poet reflects upon his possibilities, as well as reflecting on what he is now and on what he has been. Unless one is an anachronism, one does not so much suffer, say, the blues of Robert Johnson, as one applies them. The tradition which is the blues is played out, or tested, to make sense out of such and such a specific context. So even if we grant Vendra I her definition of the poet as listener, her own meaning defies her. In order to listen one must be prepared to hear. To listen you become oriented. The senses are directed. Training and, especially, involvement are part of the job. Getting closer to what and where the thing is. To "hear" what happens at the boundaries and contours—the edges—where things are in formation requires a courage, too, to move from the formulamatic, the slick and trite, into the indeterminate. Keats: "A poet has no Identity . . . he is continually filling some other Body."

Keats’ view that things are most revealed "... when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason..." is the earlier manifestation of the Stevens Snowman poem. Keats was genius; today history as a whole is heading in his direction. It is Etheridge Knight’s position when he is best. Today’s storyteller is much closer to his material. The referent of the story being told by the storyteller
is the storyteller—a man talking about the local, a woman talking about the local. Does this lead to content? The local is the thing at the end of the finger—the thing. That is where the mind is. Isn't this the meaning of Williams' notion "no ideas but in things." I think that this means: let the things—as other—talk. For the poet, with the end of the meaningfulness of the dualism that broke the world up into subject and object, the startling feeling is how much we—as minds—are in the world rather than apart from it. We are like the world; our minds in apprehending things are like the things of our apprehension. For the poet, the maker of stories, we are our situations. With this interchangeability—object/object—the interest turns to the medium of exchange: language. All of this is said as commentary to the explosion of language in Etheridge Knight's poem "Feeling Fucked Up."

Etheridge Knight, then, is a situation. One current I hear running through some of his writing, besides the more direct contributions of the pre- and post 1960's voice of Gwendolyn Brooks (as in especially her realist image and intimate narrator), is the Black Mountain influence. That the Black Mountain group might be looked at as relevant to understanding him is, I think, hardly surprising since its importance was highest during the sixties, the time that Etheridge seems to have begun writing. The relevance of that group, moreover, is even more important now as it provides a bridge—process—that we can support ourselves on top of even as the subject/object structure is being trashed. Robert Creeley is one of the tributaries of the process emphasis. According to Creeley:

The sentence itself... has become "an exchange of force in no way a 'completed thought'" since such completion is impossible in the context of the real... context so defined will include such present statement as this one taken from William Burroughs' Naked Lunch:

There is only one thing a writer can write about: What is in front of his senses at the moment of writing.

Creeley's focus is the perception. The attention. Developing a kind of aesthetic distance so that the things that present themselves—the things of concern—can be seen from themselves as they are. No wonder that the poetry manifestoes of those connected to the Black Mountain group called for a transfer of the world—act, event, situation—without the ego interfering.
The stress was placed on the moment, the factual instant without bypass through the perceiver's subjectivity. A clean and clear "exchange of energy" as Olson, who had all kinds of 20th Century phenomena passing through him, called it. To know a thing one must reenact the thing. When writing, Olson said, one must show:

The kinetics of the thing . . . [the] energy transformed from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.

Also from Olson:

The image . . . has to be taken by a double . . . the Hopi say what goes on over there isn't happening here, therefore it isn't the same: pure "localism" of space-time.

As we have seen this latter notion has been a vital part of 20th Century ideas: the tenets of perspectivism and the sense that understanding needs a likeness. The best applications of this "doubling" concept lead to a concern with or love of the object of attention, lead to the clarity and intimacy which is achieved when we exchange our ongoing preconceptions for the preconceptions of the other. The unspoken side of this "doubling" notion, however, is fascination, which is the cognitive disconcern with all else. Fascination can be beauty; beauty always brings a set of risks. Behind what Olson was pursuing is modern thought's use of the flow of life itself as a metaphor to understand experience. For us, as we warily enter the 1990's, this has become the sense that change, disruption, and decay are the basic categories characterizing everything. The state of trust where we have arrived at feeling, that though there may be other events, we can only state with clarity what is happening now "in front of our senses": the instantaneous and the new, and—for sure—the part. Isn't that disconcern, the presentation of the part, the sense of Leroi Jones', circa 1964, beautiful, blunt terribleness:

I am what I think I am. You are what
I think you are. The world is the
one thing, that will not move. It is
made of stone, round, and very ugly.

What comes down in front of the senses (more correctly, in front of each sense, because the attention is exclusive—perception is always the perception of parts by parts) is history, a tiny bit. While it lasts. For the poet one of the risks here is that of taking the remarks of Olson, Jones, and others of the zeitgeist at face value. At any specific instant one can only get a part
of the picture. The human instant is metonymic. When we look at the world we look at only part; we get the local, picking up the flash that in an earlier age was the detail that assured survival. We do not notice whether the quality belonging to this particular—the moment—is representative of all other particulars. Your participation in the active present—say, your complex of actions while standing beneath the pear trees blooming in May at 588 Pleasant St., Worcester, Massachusetts, the way you are prompted to sneeze due to an allergy—is not necessarily going to be identical with the qualities the moment prompts with me. (Maybe I would be prompted to smile; maybe I would remember a set of pear trees from my childhood.) But with the kind of reality where we assume the priority of the present moment over the status of all others, the comparison question is not a question. As far as a true situation, you take your moment with the pear trees as presenting it as fully as the truth can be given. The same with me. The ugly side of this beauty, though, is to take the local event to mean that nothing beyond it is happening. The perceptual life—the senses—might believe this but the mind does not. Neither does language, whose task is to connect. To cut off the present from its setting is to function without the ego. The ego is language. Contextualism, which is what I’m talking, goes ever outward making connections that point beyond itself. The sentence is the contextualist vehicle without par. It synthesizes. Yet we only recently passed through a phase where this cutting off, a fear of truly becoming involved with things—going into things openly without direction from stricture or correct posturing, was played out among black American poets as a set of constraints—sometimes self-imposed—that criticized any writing which was not part dominated—i.e., not “right now,” and not wholly “saturated” with blackness (cf. Wright, p. 13). As a background aesthetic, this intuition of contextualism in the late 1950’s by the Black Mountainists and later by the Black Arts Movement in the 1960’s, the period during which Etheridge Knight would be at work with “Poems from Prison” and “Belly Songs,” runs, I think, against the strong suit of a storyteller. The storyteller is always fashioning events together—“this” with “now this” with “that.” Despite living in uncertainty, he himself is a figure embodying the transcendence of the local and the temporary. In the narrative matrix—addresor, addressee and content—the storyteller has occupied more than one position or situation. He is who he is as storyteller by virtue of his having been told stories, and by virtue of his having witnessed, his having been intimate with or having been the content of this stories. The storyteller has lived through the uncertainty of the moment, and has come back, bridging moments, to tell it. To truly be saturated with “black americanness” is to be able to tell—in all its complexity—the story of that survival. Such a complexity desires a telling whose sound is indistinguishable from that residual music in the passageway itself: it desires a channel whose “noise” is but the redundant voice of the situation. Etheridge
Knight has been there and back over the passageways of survival, a "free singer." Certainly the urge to be loyal to the "local" is very much a part of his work. Many of his poems where he has obviously "chosen" a subject to write about, where he has circumscribed his writing itself and tried to voice the "correct" political attitudes, stop before he ever begins saying. What else can it be but a short circuiting of his authenticity and complexity as when he calls Idi Amin a "love/singer" in the poem "Love Song to Idi Amin." In this case he so has his mind made up with valorizing Amin that "creation," the movement of the mind from step to step, is excluded from the process of the poem. Likewise excluded are complexity and the sense—characteristic of Etheridge's best poems—that the author is anguished with the situation, that the content, indeed, is existential and matters locally. In this particular case the old black/white saw so cuts off the opening of the voice that, since the poem begins by equating whites with villainy, Idi Amin is equated in the end with the life forces:

... the white-men are
Out to kill/you/man
But you—love/singer—
Grinning at women—
Speaking to alligators
By clapping your hands—
Dancing with children
to African bands . . .
You, love/singer . . .
Skinning and grinning
In the African sun—
You/have/already/won
The war.

This is contrasted with Mr. K's daring in other poems where his stout empathy stands amidst a world of dangers, conflicts, open-ended premises. It is this ability to feel amidst the open, to include as duration itself includes—point with specific point, that gives the local the narrative's extension. Among his poems that I like best are the ones where he is completely abandoned to some incident, yet because of his inclusiveness we go forward or backward in time. Poems where history is talking to me. Here I think of his poems of loss—e.g. "The Idea of Ancestry," "For Langston Hughes," "Feeling Fucked Up," "No Moon Floods the Memory of That Night," "The Violent Space," etc. In "Violent Space," in particular, he links the present (a description of a woman about to lose her dignity to the violence of prostitution) to the past (a time when the woman as a girl also suffered, but physically), and to mythical time (he does this doubly—by
referring to biblical material, and by using a children’s nursery rhyme throughout the poem. As in several of the other “loss” poems, a figure is abandoned to a tormented space of some kind—“... But somewhere between Nazareth and Bethlehem/You lost your name in the nameless void.” And the poem and poet—standing in the midst and also meta to the situation—reflect on language and, perhaps its inadequacies:

... 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?

and later, the poem continues:

... I sit counting syllables like Midas gold.
... So I grab the air and sing my song.
(But the air cannot stand my singing long.)

This uncertainty and confession of helplessness in the poem’s last stanza is navigated by a sudden turn to rhyme—i.e., spoon/demon, needle/belly, gold/bold, song/long—giving the final lines a satisfaction, and reflecting the ironical boldness of the poet. At readings Mr. K. is sometimes apologetic for “The Violent Space” for its characterizations, charge, and the ground it breaks. But it is a powerful poem, full with living for the situation it presents. The poem confronts—so middleclass audiences (white and, also, black) squirm; it gets at that which is without ordinary rules. The poem gets out into the “nameless void” where there is a sorrow which can’t be swept beneath the rug.

Every act in the open is a local act—involves uncertainties, risks. Yet every act which truly involves the open is also a transcendent act—perhaps the only one—because that action, in involving the open, must trust or love it enough to ensure living’s continuation both on the horizon and on into a future moment—and for the other. And Living—despite—uncertainty, a love of the open’s freedom to the extent that one wants to extend that freedom for the self and for the other, is likewise, then, the force which makes it possible for the storyteller’s receiver—the audience in the storytelling matrix—to undertake the drama in the story and, finally, become the storyteller himself. Such a desire for transformation is political—even revolutionary—in its outlook as it is opposed to all forms of fixity, rigidity, ideology, and predetermined meaning in general. Such a desire is continually calling into question all the binary polarities—me/you, inside/outside, subject/object—in favor of that which defies such categorization. Possibility.
Life is the proposal which suspends the certainty (or presence) of the self
in order to invoke or maintain the appearance of the loved thing. On this
day in February 1987, responding to a request from the audience in the Mass.
College of Art auditorium, Etheridge Knight reads his poem ending with
the lines, "And I ain't never stopped loving no/one/O I never stopped loving
no one."

* * *

The song, referred to earlier, that the Contours sang, is called "Money."
Like language money is a medium of exchange. It too, is a means. Money
is the triggering element for where I am here in the late 20th Century. It
is an uncertain place due in part to the lack (for some) of money; in part
due to the striving (for some) money. I am writing from New England.
Boston is in the swell of a frenzied growth boom; everywhere new buildings
abound. The people who live and work in these new buildings eat sushi and
pate. The TV news is happy. The city mayor and and governor of
Massachusetts are both wildly popular. Amidst Boston’s glowing prosperi-
ty is the fact that for the past three years the infant mortality rate has been
climbing, after decades of decline. While the city skyline climbs, so does
the slope of the infant mortality curve due to the intense pockets of devasta-
tion scattered without fanfare throughout the city. It is babies born to low-
income mothers that are filling the pockets—about 25 babies per 1000 births,
low birth weight babies—almost exclusively Black and Puerto Rican—who
never make it far enough into life that they achieve the means to form into
language the question of whether or not money is the summarizing frame
for their lives. The governor of the state, probably a decent fellow, is pro-
claiming the "Massachusetts Miracle.” What the fuck does he mean?

It would be a mistake to believe that because the poet’s outlook is out-
ward and transcendent, because he follows the story in language outward
into its relationship with other language and follows time onward into
history, that he is not interested in the local. Poignant language like time
is specific. It wants to culminate, to point to a point. Language is expressive
because it is sung by a specific singer to a particular listener. Otherwise how
else did either become? The context tells us what we mean. Turning again
to Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, the paradoxical figure who twenty years ago
ushered in much of the demand for the local and for the restricted voice
(what he felt was the voice of the people) in Black Poetry all the while he
was himself undergoing one of his moments of moving from one state of
identity to another as he moved from one context to another, we can learn
much about meaning here:
Money does not mean the same thing to me it must mean to a rich man. I look in my pocket, I have seventy cents. Possibly I can buy a beer. Say to David Rockefeller, "I have money," and he will think you mean something entirely different. That is, if you dress the part. An A flat played twice on the same saxophone by two different men does not have to sound the same. If these men have different ideas of what they want this note to do, the note will not sound the same. For every item in the world, there are a multiplicity of definitions that fit.

Our sense of things today is one of uncertainty. What Jones is trying to get at here is that in such a world a statement—a thing—is useful only according to the context and the difference or use it makes in that context. "Saying" is an act that can make a difference—we would have to check the results. Gregory Bateson, the open systems theorist, sums it up most succinctly: "Information is news that makes a difference." According to my dictionary, then, the governor, when he proclaims a "Massachusetts Miracle," is just talking but he is saying nothing. And let's say here, since money makes all the difference right now in healthcare vis-a-vis whether one has the freedom to continue alive or not, that money talks.

***

I had made arrangements to give Etheridge and Liz McKim a ride to Logan Airport after his Mass. College of Art reading. The storyteller going from town to town with just his piece, his news, his truth, Etheridge was next on his way to do a reading somewhere in Los Angeles. After L.A., Liz was going to go on to do a reading in Denver. The ride arrangement was made over the phone. The last time I'd seen him had been some seven months earlier, but then only a moment between sessions during one of the otherworldly "Great Mother" conferences that Robert Bly stages each summer. Etheridge was part of the faculty; and I was driving to the conference site, a hide-out in the woods near Raymond, Maine, to spend a day with him and the whole conference crew—Fran Quinn, Lou Camp, Jean D'Amico, etc., and Bly, Sharon Olds, and Galway Kinnell and others who were giving talks. It is another one of America's strangenesses that the vast landscape is loaded with summer conferences, retreats from our lives that quizzically push some topic about communication. Like when the nuttiest family tries to break the impasse that befuddles it, each member refers to the private self-help book that he is reading from. I never did get to talk to Etheridge that day. Having just driven from Pittsburgh to Worcester to move back a truckload of books and things I'd used for teaching, I was back in the truck again on just a day's rest. When I hit I-95 north of Boston for Maine,
I was the truck. I rested its tired American motor, and the next day drove back to Worcester where I had more unpacking to do.

Before trying the road again I’d made a pledge to connect up with Etheridge later in the year in Boston. The unfinished business of my trip to the conference left me remembering him as I rode back down to Worcester. I had first met him when he was living—briefly—in Worcester in 1977. He started a “Free Peoples’ Artists Workshop” in town, like he had done in other places—Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Memphis. Not a month after the workshop started in Worcester—in a bar downtown, Etheridge was gone back down south. What I remembered from his time in Worcester was his emphasis on what he called “saying the poem.” The way he went about his reading stressed the fact of the situation in which the poem was being said, as though this state of affairs was a fact existing even before the poem as text was written. While communication seems a not unlikely emphasis for a poet, his particular direction—rooted from a “practical” speech situation had put him at odds with so much of the poetry I found in magazines, so much “literature” based on the opinion between the writer and the text (and supposedly, text and text). The audience feels this communicative commitment the moment Etheridge begins reading—because of his framing devices. That he during his reading opens himself up, makes a contact—no matter how painful—points both to the actual opening up between audience and poet, and to an ideal: the supposition that he and the audience could communicate without constraints. The Open/Possibility. That he imprisons himself in order to make contact with himself is a move he makes, an act undertaken for truth. If, when one bares his deepest concerns, bringing himself into contact with all the hidden and “other” parts of himself, this doesn’t satisfy the condition for a man to tell his truth, what does? This participation in a speech situation that Etheridge stressed in the Worcester Free Peoples’—more strongly by action than by words—has as its goal to lift the whole event closer to the ideal. Another way of saying this is that—at least in the reading—an ideal is being sought for whose boundaries are larger than the poem being read, because the reading has the world as its concern, the reading tries to integrate its parts: narrator, audience, and content.

In the ride over to the airport, there was another ride. Etheridge’s time at the conference is a Friday afternoon—a time when the traffic in Boston has the intensity of living with heart disease. As you move along you worry that any single blockage will mean the game comes to a close. The flow won’t. On Fridays in Boston the five o’clock traffic usually starts at two o’clock. At seven, if you had left your job at five, you’re stuck behind a lane of
cars that has been gridlocked two hours. Everyone is blowing his horn. You turn your car radio on to beat the traffic monotony. A voice more frenzied than that of the most crazed taxi driver says, “THIS IS THE PEPSI GENERATION.” Or the out-of-breath pitch of a car dealer peddling his wares, “WE HAVE JUST WHAT YOU NEED, JUST BEYOND THE INTERSECTION OF ROUTES 128 AND 3. WE HAVE A WHOLE NEW SHIPMENT OF TOYOTAS FRESH OFF THE BOAT, ACRES AND ACRES ALL HERE ON OUR LOT WHERE WE SELL FOR LESS BECAUSE WE SELL MORE.” And the near oracular promise of a sexual experience of some kind, “OH WHAT A FEELING, COME ON DOWN.” Advertising is the epiphenomenal come-on of the “objects” of the late 20th Century talking to each other. “Welcome to the 1980’s,” they all seem to say through their presentation to us, “we are in charge here—or else no one is.” I had worked for years with a children’s psychiatric hospital over near the College of Art building. Nothing was ever scheduled for Friday afternoons—not in the hospital or anywhere else in the area. It was as though an edict had been issued banning late Friday conferences; forget about the actual work. Who lives to work today, anyway? We’re living to beat the next guy getting home from work—everybody all at once. I’m imagining the traffic backed up from the tunnel to the airport all the way here to the hospital area when Etheridge and Liz tell me they have to go first the opposite way—to Brookline—to pick up their luggage. “And how about stopping at the bank to cash a check on the way?” I hadn’t expected any of this. Though more surprising, is, while we’re on the way, when Etheridge and Liz start describing different periods in their lives when they were expectant parents. I am going to be a first-time father come the summer; I didn’t know they knew. Etheridge and Liz are both giving me advice, Etheridge telling me a story about the birth of his son Issac, a story about how his children put him in a different position in the world. The storyteller occupies more than one position in the narrative matrix. (The story about the storyteller is his striving to pass this possibility on.)

Select References


Las Vegas, 1987
HAIKU

Making jazz swing in
Seventeen syllables AIN'T
No square poet's job.
SUNNYLAND SLIM REMEMBERS THE MUSE

a found poem — for Etheridge Knight

One time Ma Rainey didn't have no piano player to play.
    She called me; she had heard about me.
When Ma Rainey was singing,
    she'd say, "Go back to B flat" —
    I didn't know but G, C and F —
        she said B flat.
    I'd just try and catch her voice.

So I went to Memphis Slim;
    he had these facts all in his head.
And I got me a pint of whiskey (Slim love whiskey)
    and talk to him and learn the chords.
So I got hip a little bit;
    I got hip from Slim.
LAST RIFF

--for Les

It was the time of bees --
September's frantic filling of the cells.
He sat alone, wet circles on a cloth,
a finger turning zeroes on a rim. The afternoon
had opened up its rooms, its vast hotel of hours.

What highway runs away from this? or if
the signpost pointed in, then
where was the skid when such roads stop?

The peach pit hugs hard its flesh,
the sun tethers its own children, but he
tossing blue lights down a spiral stair
left his wrists, the long brown legs, the pole
and slipped through the spaces of that afternoon
too stretched out to catch a life that
(why not say it) good as jumped
from patent leather hair and every
smiling shame he had to wear for fifty years

before his horn, a rag jammed down its throat,
called him from that velvet case.
MESSAGE TO ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

Don't stop rummaging, through sacred silence,
inside the head. Yes, it does matter
that you've found the being, the speaker.
How brilliantly you sustain your voice,
capture the rhythms of jazz.
You are the one, the soulful one,
making music, lifting spirits.
It is so magical. We are waiting
in the earthlight, ears attuned:
listening, listening to whatever comes into existence.

There is a sense of belonging, a perpetual aesthetic
like rhythm and blues, kept transforming
Our ancestors who knew about secret cadences,
who held fast to dreams,
sang so jubilantly, so naturally,
while working cultivated ground
against the sun's glare.
Jazzman, we know your art will survive.
Soon enough your fiery words will help people
define their being; oh sing, Etheridge, ease the spirit.
in Corinth, 1979
WITH UNCLE PINK KNIGHT AND RELATIVES
DEARLY/ -- BELOVED/ -- MIZZEE

--for Elizabeth Gordon McKim

DEARLY -- BELOVED -- MIZZEE --
I know that/this surprises Thee
That/this honey-loving Bear
Rumbled outta his lair
Here
In ye olde Framingham
To detective you unaware,
With your white/ass/bare
Cavorting with an/other Sam --
Bo Diddly, do-wop-de-wop-wop.

O I/do love Thee; and if you should/ever/stop
Loving me -- my blood would jam
In my veins; my breath would take
Leave of my lungs, rattling, flop-flop-Ping, like a slave in chains;
My knees would tremble, my hands would shake
Like a Memphis crap-shooter wooing Chance;
My heart would quiver, and break,
Like a Florida oak in a hurricane.

So, I'm glad (and oh so sad) that you're gone
Away from your free and easy home.
So I'm walking this dark and green path alone --
Making this sad, and silly poem --
Singing our blue, and true, romance.
MUSE

You're the one
I searched the world for
the one I clothed
in rags and feathers
and mysterious beads
from sunken treasures
yes you're the one
I followed home
when Papa told me
No, absolutely
no.

You're the one
who keeps me waiting
in frightening ports of entry
pulls me under, pulls
off my outerwear, slips
into me soundlessly
effortlessly
lisps
lullabies
older than thyme
or mama
older than trauma
or boat of the dream
older than knife
or seek a new life
older than shine
or thine
in time with
mine
yes
you're the one
LAST CALL

--for Etheridge Knight

We can never be sure
what might be
on the other side of the door.
So many hours, so many beers,
anything might have happened.
But together we can swell
to the size of ten men, brave men,
and face the cold darkness,
walk into it perfectly
drunk, our heads high, trying
to recall the rhyme
that ended a sonnet or the beginning
of a song not on the jukebox anymore,
but standing tall, straight,
arm in arm, and still
among the living, my friend.
Howard at the Painted Bride Art Center, 1985

With poets Jack referee, Louis MacNe and Eugene
IF I COULD I WOULD AND I'M WORKING ON IT

--for the circle

I give in. I give up.
The backs of my hands
arrive with the open palms.
All of it: kernel, husk,
the bowl of Wheaties.

This is the flag I fly:
Erzulie's veve where my heart once was,
Celtic cross, pentagram.
Shakti's yantra on a field of night.
Believe this:
I second
anything you ever are.
And no matter how far you go away
etheric epistles will be winging from me to you
by astral post.

When you find yourself awake
in the tight round belly of laughter,
know that I have hamboned my thighs in prayer
that your laughter stays true
(and in the belly) for as long as it lasts.

If your losses snap your kneecaps
and you fall on your face,
I'll sit right down with you
(if you let me)
and hold your scraped and bloody hands
until the relief of grief comes.

If the time you have thrown away returns,
rises up, stands directly in front of you,
and throws up walls you cant scale,
listen for me,
I'll be there,
my pick swinging to the rhythms of unconditional love.
And when that face in the morning mirror says:
I don't know you, who are you?  
So what.

I will still lay cut flowers
on the threshold of your life
as a reminder that you and I
and the inhuman perfume of the rose
will all return in the very end
to where we were before we were.

When speech fails us,
as it has, as it will,
know what my soul says:
Today, friends, there is no judgement in these arms
and shamelessly I love you . . .
At Bacchanal, Philadelphia
Contributors

Frank Allen has essays in the Ohio Review, the Iowa Review and the North American Monitor. He is dean of Allentown College in Pennsylvania.

J.A. Anaporte had a poem in PBQ #24. She lives in Albany, N Y.

Tina Barr was featured poet of PBQ #28, and is in Temple’s graduate school, Philadelphia.


Gwendolyn Brooks gave early, vital support to Etheridge Knight. She lives in Chicago.

Joe Bruchac, a Native American, had work in PBQ #29, and edits and publishes Greenfield Review.

Dennis Brutus His remarkable Stubborn Hope (1978) is part of this long expatriate fight against Apartheid in South Africa.

Jared Carter lives in Indiana. Yarrow has a special issue devoted to him.

Craig Czury has three chapbooks and a poetry cassette out. He coordinates the American Poetry Center ALL MUSE in N E. Pennsylvania.

Russell Endo is a Philadelphia attorney. He has had poems in APR and PBQ.

Alice Friman has a book out from Barnwood Press.

Greg Geleta plays Philadelphia jazz and was featured poet in PBQ #31.

Chris Gilbert’s Across the Mutual Landscape won the Walt Whitman award. He lives in Providence, R.I.

Donald Hall North Point just published his short stories, The Ideal Bakery.

Eugene Howard is a Philadelphia poet featured in PBQ #29, and the recipient of a 1987 PA Council on the Arts award.

David Ignatow’s New and Collected Poems came out in 1985 from Wesleyan.

Reuben Jackson is a poet and music critic based in Washington, D C.

Jeanne lives in Croyden, PA and edits Black Bear Review.

James Kates lives in Florida.


Tom Koontz edits Barnwood and has poems recently in Asylum and Spoon River Quarterly.

Richard Kostelanetz lives in NYC and writes about the Art of Art.

Thomas McGrath lives in Minneapolis. Tri-Quarterly’s latest issue is devoted to him.
D. Brett McHale appears in print for the first time. This is his first poem, written after a late night conversation with Etheridge Knight.

Lou McKee is an editor of *PBQ* Pig in the Poke Press published *No Matter* in 1987.

Elizabeth McKim’s latest is *Mud Matters in the first Circle* She lives in Brookline, MA

John Paul Minarik has three collections out, and is working on a fourth. He has taught poetry at Pitt and for the PA Council on the Arts.

Lenard D. Moore lives in Raleigh, N C and is widely published

Simon Ortiz is a Native American poet living in Arizona From Sand Creek (Thunder Mouth Press) is his newest.

Aaren Perry is on the News Staff at WXPN in Philadelphia, and reads live often

Sanford Pinkser teaches at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa

Ron Price lives in Philadelphia, and was featured in *PBQ* #26/27

Johnny G. Roberts works in dance and poetry in NYC

Carol Ann Robertson, Philadelphia, has a chapbook from Blackbird Press

Carol Ann Russell’s *The Red Envelope* was published by South Florida Press

Lynne Savitt edited the well-known magazine *Gavida*.

Joanne Seltzer lives in Schenectady, N Y

Ellen Slack is studying folklore at the University of Pennsylvania Her photos also graced Etheridge Knight’s *Born of a Woman* She is the 1987 Poet Laureate of Bucks County, PA


Lamont Steptoe directs the Spoken Word Series at *PBQ*’s parent Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia He has a poem in *PBQ* #30

Ellen Terranova teaches at Temple U in Philadelphia, and has work forthcoming in *Yarrow, Outerbridge*, and *The South Florida Review*.

Phyllis Tickle is at St Luke’s Press in Memphis

William Van Wert teaches at Temple U in Philadelphia

Jeanne Murray Walker is widely published, and teaches at the U of Delaware

Michael S. Weaver teaches as Essex County College in N.J.

Clark White directs Black Studies at Temple U in Philadelphia

Eleanor Wilner has a recent book from the U. of Chicago Press She lives in Philadelphia

James Wright’s last book, *This Journey*, was published by Random House He died in 1980.