

**Excerpts from
Notes of an Oral Rhapsodist**

An Introduction to the Poetry and Aesthetic of Etheridge Knight

by Thomas C. Johnson
(Edited by Rodger Martin)

*Over my head
I see freedom in the air
Over my head, Oh Lord
I see freedom in the air
Over my head
I see freedom in the air
There must be a God somewhere*

(traditional African-American gospel)

Throughout his artistic career, Etheridge Knight maintained that his major theme was Freedom and his major metaphor was Prison – a delicious poetic paradox, but a sobering comment on both the conditions of his life and the state of Black Consciousness in late 20th century America. The contiguity of this distinction to that of “freedom and slavery” is obvious and ever-present, and it is proper to invoke it now as an unattached, distant murmur and to give it a kind of historical freeplay in the discussion that follows. Etheridge Knight’s life was replete with various tensions and contradictions which are wholly reflected and magnified in his arts, and yet there is (paradoxically) a unity to his aesthetic that is able to contain and even transcend these conflicts, without necessarily redressing them individually. His poems deal with love and despair in equal measure, and the emotional effect of his poetry is usually intense, sometimes playful, and always immediate. The intellectual content of his work, however, is often contained in the subtler hollows of form and context, and without some knowledge of African-American culture and its various artistic traditions, it is easily overpowered by the force of his direct emotional appeal and his natural lyricism. One must therefore be aware of his frequent signifying on the traditions of African-American artists’ expression, as well as his positions in relation to the prevailing rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement – particularly with regard to their respective conceptions of revolution and the poet’s role in its

advancement. Knight’s finest poems stand up well on the page and lend themselves to conventional means of appraisal, but to appreciate the deep structure of his work and its complexity, one must be aware of these underlying personal and artistic tensions, and perhaps most importantly, one must understand that ritual is at the core of his aesthetic. To the reader who is only slightly familiar with Knight’s work, the following pages will construct as composite a rendering of his life and art as I am able, by honoring the body of his poetry; and for the scholar, friend, or experienced enthusiast of Etheridge Knight’s poetry, I will share the results of two years spent meandering in his archives and chasing his long shadow. And none of this knowledge (for what it’s worth) shall escape the prism of ritual or this paradox of Freedom and Prison, in its many manifestations.

Placing Knight’s work in a large context, Robert Bly has written (correctly, I believe) that, “Wallace Stevens and Etheridge Knight stand as two poles of North American poetry.”¹ The accuracy and relevancy of this positioning has myriad applications both in terms of art and cultural influence. The biographical contrasts are stark and readily apparent, but perhaps the most essential distinction lies in what we might call the “geography” of their respective poetry. While Stevens is undoubtedly a poet of the mind (or a mind), Knight is a self-proclaimed poet of the “belly.” To say that Knight dispensed with erudition and intellectual rigor in his poetry is accurate, but misleading. He often said that it is a “valid ambition to want the words you strung together to live on the lips on ordinary people,”² but according to Bly:

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? (Bly 108)

As Bly points out, the genius of Etheridge Knight’s poetry lies in its ability to convey deep truth, from the belly, in language that remains elegant even when its particular locations are harsh, brutal, or (some might say) vulgar. In his best



poems, he simply presumes the legitimacy of his own experience as a worthy poetic proposition, regardless of its nature and without ornament. Haki Madhubuti (then writing as Don L. Lee) described the poetry in Knight's first collection, *Poems from Prison*, as "simple/ deep, like the man has actually lived his word."³

This Poem is a song/ I sing/ I sing/ to you
From the bottom
of the sea
in my belly

"Belly Song"

Knight's conception of the belly as both the source and destination of his art is difficult to define with precision, because it essentially represents a concentration of those aspects of our humanity that defy categorical translation, save in the mediate form of art itself. In the crudest and most unsatisfying of terms, it could be said to contain the emotions, the soul, intuition, and any latent instinctual or deep ancestral knowledge we may possess about our existence (which is always presumed to be pure and true – even if untranslatable). My intention here is not, of course, to philosophically argue the legitimacy of these concepts; rather, it is to point out one of the fundamental assumptions of Knight's poetry and to describe the symbol he uses to convey it. Simply stated, the belly is the primary organ of our empathy, and therefore the portal through which we are able to make the deepest connections with other human beings.

Such a conception of empathy implies communion – a union in *The Belly*, as it were – and nowhere is the need for such communion as urgent as it is in "the belly of the beast," Knight's epithet for prison. The most compelling expression of this need can be found in one of his signature poems, "The Idea of Ancestry."

To conclude, I would like to offer some reflections on Knight's life in terms of prison and freedom, his major metaphor and theme. To this point, I have presented a fairly romanticized picture of Etheridge Knight, which I must confess is relatively easy to do. And I think he is worthy of it in the end, so long as we do not fail to register the

darker side of his life, and in so doing contemplate as nearly as we can the whole man. In the opening lines of his preface to *Black Voices from Prison*, Knight quotes a Malcolm X remark that reads: "Don't be shocked when I say that I was in prison. You're still in prison. That's what American means: prison."⁴ Knight lives in just about every conceivable form of prison over the course of his sixty years – from Jim Crow in the Deep South, to the Army, to the hospital, to the county jail and the state penitentiary; and from the color of his skin, to the bottle and the needle, and finally to himself . . . his own personality. In the end he was his own toughest "screw" and if you were to close to him at the wrong time, that prison door could shut behind you and leave *you* struggling in the empty space, straining for clean air.

I came across a rather telling document in the archives, that should have been a clear sign that he would never completely fly from "the life." It is a priority list written on the back of a folder. The first priority was an essay for Steve Berg as APR, the second was business letters, the third a proposal for an Afro-AM course, etc. The last two priorities, number ten and eleven respectively, are "stay clean and sober" and "love Carol Ann consistently and vigorously" (Knight, *Butler*). It goes without saying that this program was doomed to failure from the beginning. We know his own turmoil from his poems, but the archives tell the other side of the tale. People gravitated to knight and he was always generous with his time, but he also left people in his wake. One need only read Sonia Sanchez' short story, *After Saturday, Night Come Sunday* to see the other side. No one who was close to him escaped his hustle when times were lean, and they often were. I am reminded of a poem that Knight began to draft but never finished for "the students at Alamo Haight High School in San Antonio, TX, who never got the books they bought." When his habit raged, he lied, forged checks, and on one occasion even sold the same car to two different people. He was definitely his own bag of tricks.

Knight was awarded the Shelly Memorial Award in 1985 from the Poetry Society of America for distinguished achievement in poetry and the American Book Award in 1987. In the winter of 1988, he was strung out and homeless in New York



City, staying at the Fort Washington Shelter until he was rescued by a fellow artist from Philadelphia. This was three years before his death from terminal lung cancer, and he died angry. So I began to consider this man and his tremendous suffering, and I tried to see how art functioned in his life. Heretofore I had been looking through the other end of the telescope, and I came upon a series of revelatory conclusions. I began to marvel at how he could keep picking himself up and making his asymptotic gestures toward freedom and the sense of hope that it infers. And then I realized that his poetry, the idea of freedom is always necessarily left in the abstract. How could it not be, since it was never manifest in his world? This is a critical distinction. Now, the strength of this claim varies from poem to poem, but overall it seems to be the case, as it is in the African-American gospels and spirituals – hence the epigraph of this introduction and its spatial placement of freedom overhead and in the air:

Over my head
I see freedom in the air
There must be a God somewhere

Then I realize the tragic proportions of such a situation. Etheridge Knight, toiling in life, toiling in his poetry, liberating his audience with a short cut to catharsis, and him remaining in the prison of his poems/ life to toil again – remaining on the page, so to speak. And then I realized that I was completely wrong. Knight did indeed cross the divided line and achieve his freedom, however fleeting, every time the poet, the poem, and the people came together. I am not being melodramatic here either. Consider the following two observations of Etheridge Knight at a reading from Robert Bly and Houston Baker respectively:

I saw the applause blow right through his body, as mist blows through trees. Nothing held it. I had never seen anything like that. (Bly 101)

I saw him read on three or four occasions when the spirit had passed through his body and resurrected, redeemed, and reclaimed the audience. And he would sort of stop,

and there would just be silence. People were like *bang*, you know? I mean, they couldn't move. They were like paralyzed. They would just go into squeals and whistles and applause, and the smile on Etheridge's face was just beautiful. I would say his soul was being fed. That return of the spirit kind of thing. (Baker)

So the sun did come, and in this arena, Etheridge never goofed. Here then, that constant tension between prison and freedom, between self and the uni/ verse is transcended, if only for one time, and only for one place.

Michael Harper wrote in his preface to the *Collected Poems of Sterling Brown*, the “biography is not poetry, but poetry demands a life fully lived – the poem is the performance.”⁵ Because of the tangled life he lived, so close to the bone, and because he opened his belly wide to the world, and because he said to us, “my poems love you,” Etheridge Knight became his own unique category of American letters, and seven years after his death in 1991, he is still its only tenant.

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¹ Bly, Robert. “Hearing Etheridge Knight.” *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991. 108.

² Knight, Etheridge. “On the Oral Nature of Poetry.” *Painted Bride Quarterly*. Etheridge Knight Issue, number 32/33 (1988). 16. (A reprint of a talk given at Colorado State University on 2/8/87.)

³ Madhubuti, Haki. (Don L. Lee). *Dynamite Voice I: Black Poets of the 1960's*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971. 52

⁴ Knight, Etheridge. “The Day the Young Blacks Came.” *Black Voices from Prison*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970. 5.



⁵ Harper, Michael. Preface. *Collected Poetry of Sterling Brown*. Evanston: TriQuarterly Books, 1980. xi.

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