
POEMS FROM PRISON by etheridge knight

(Broadside Press, 12651 Old Mill Place, Detroit, Mich. 48238 , 1968 \$1.00

A REVIEW

It is difficult to gauge the potential impact of this slender but unbelievably powerful volume of poems by the black poet Etheridge Knight. Written in the bleakest human cage of all, prison, I have rarely heard poetry sing so freely, deeply, and most important, truly. Mercilessly, straight-on, one comes face to face with the true face of prison, the infinite variety of sorrow, until the entire prison soul stands anatomized and the sudden thought strikes you, THIS IS A PICTURE IN MINIATURE OF THE OUTSIDE,

THIS IS THE HARD REALITY OF FREEDOM IN THE MOUTHS OF LIARS AND POLITICAL CHARLATANS EVERYWHERE. Hard Rock, the bad nigger lobotomized to mindlessness, Freckle-Faced Gerald, 16-year-old pigmeat for the hard faggot buzzards, the old soothsayer lifer who sees through stone, the hoky white buddy full of fake-eyed meekness, and, most impotent of all, the omnipotent hierarchy, the blind rulers:

THE WARDEN SAID TO ME THE OTHER DAY

*The warden said to me the other day
(innocently, I think), "Say, etheridge,
why 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 where to run to."*

They all pass before you, dead-on, funky and alive
with their agonies, the final irreducible metaphor:

*Now you take old 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 he 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 has no memory or hope of copper hot lips-
of firm upthrusting thighs
to reenforce his flow,
let tall walls and buzzards change the course
of his river from south to north*

(from FOR FRECKLE-FACED GERALD)



ETHERIDGE KNIGHT, 626 Riverside Dr.,
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Yet do not be mistaken. Etheridge Knight weaves no dead-end tale, no blind wall of hopelessness. First of all, his poems (even the most desperately savage) crackle with a sly penetrating humor at the heart of life itself:

Secondly, after the terrible scrutiny on the inside, Knight then takes us on a trip outside on the wings of the blue myths that sustain him. Listen to this powerful elegy for Malcolm X:

Reviewed by Harvey Feinberg in
"New: American and Canadian Poetry"
Dec.-Jan. 1971, No. 17.

Old lovers, great blues singers, black soldiers staining the moon with their blood, master black poets, all these lead us on to the final revelation, a poem hard and classic as an Elizabethan sonnet, yet not at all steeped in abstractions, nor platonic ice either: instead of a lush elegant consideration of mortality, Knight is concerned with THE LIVING DEATH—how does a man speak through the cage LIFE makes and who has the master key to the final glorious jailbreak:

another book by etheridge knight:

BLACK VOICES FROM PRISON

Pathfinder Press, Inc., 410 West St.,
N.Y., N.Y. 10014 \$2.45

PEACE

*Hound dog sits on tail
On the bank of long dark stream
And howls at the moon.*

*Rabbit sits in hole
On the hill and strokes his fur
In myopic fear.*

*Ringtail coon rests on
Log in stream, and grins, and waits
Till moon behind dog.*

FOR MALCOLM, A YEAR AFTER

*Compose for Red a proper verse;
Adhere to foot and strict iamb;
Control the burst of angry words
Or they might boil and break the dam.
Or they might boil and overflow
And drench me, drown me, drive me mad.
So swear no oath, so shed no tear,
And sing no song blue Baptist sad.
Evoke no image, stir no flame,
And spin no yarn across the air.
Make empty anglo tea lace words—
Make them dead white and dry bone bare.*

*Compose a verse for Malcolm man,
And make it rime and make it prim.
The verse will die—as all men do—
But not the memory of him!
Death might come singing sweet like C,
Or knocking like the old folk say,
the moon and stars may pass away,
But not the anger of that day.*

APOLOGY FOR APOSTASY?

*Soft songs, like birds, die in prison air
So my song cannot now be candy.
Anger rots the oak and elm; roses are rare,
seldom seen through blind despair.*

*And my murmur cannot be heard
Above the din and damn. The night is full
of buggers and bastards; no moon or stars
Light the sky. And my candy is deferred*

*Till peacetime, when my voice shall be light,
Like down, liting in the air; then shall I
Sing of beaches, white in the magic sun,
And of moons and maidens at midnight.*