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Yusef Komunyakaa
University of Indiana

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Tough Eloquence

by

Yusef Komunyakaa

I began reading Etheridge Knight's poetry in the early 1970s, and what immediately caught my attention was his ability to balance an eloquence and toughness, exhibiting a complex man behind the words. His technique and content were one—the profane alongside the sacred—accomplished without disturbing the poem's tonal congruity and imagistic exactitude. Here was a streetwise poet who loved and revered language. Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, and Langston Hughes seem to have been his mentors, but Knight appeared to have sprung into the literary world almost fully formed. He had so much control and authority; he was authentic from the onset. Irony pulsed beneath each phrase, urbane and rural in the same breath. Maybe his duality evolved from the necessity of switching codes in his native Mississippi, having honed his ability to talk to whites and blacks simultaneously.

He was a poet who could play the dozens, who had been initiated into the various jailhouse toasts, who had accomplished the grace of a blues legend. Here was Robert Johnson back from the dead, a survivor speaking with the biting lyricism automatically associated with spirituals and defined by the art of signifying. He had the tongue of a two-headed man—a Texas-jack that could cut two ways at once. Where had this black genius been hiding?

Prison Life

Etheridge Knight had been saved by poetry. As he says in *Colorado Review* (Spring/Summer 1987): "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 lot of support. Guys thought I functioned like a 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."

Etheridge was a chronicler of prison life and its immense pathos, and he conveyed each story with such clarity that the images would cut through almost anybody's armor. Poetry became his choice of weapons. The poem entitled "For Freckle-Faced Gerald" is a tragedy in motion, with all the nerves exposed: "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." Of course, this young unseasoned convict was marked by his innocence, which makes one think of similar sideshows depicted by Genet. In Knight's poem, it is Gerald's personality that makes him vulnerable.



Etheridge Knight (*left*) and Yusef Komunyakaa

He is in a place where prisoners have to create their own cycle of victims out of situational greed: ". . . Gerald could never quite win / with his precise speech and innocent grin / the trust and fists of the young black cats." Streetwise idioms work for Knight in a natural way; the "young black cats" become real, pacing the perimeter of their caged lives. They must claim their prey in order to nurture and qualify their psychological existence.

Experience is the caretaker of the imprisoned in Knight's poem "He Sees Through Stone." This unnamed man becomes the prototypical survivor—a patriarch of the initiated: "he smiles / he knows / the hunt the enemy / he has the secret eyes / he sees through stone." The same "black cats," like shadows of the real men, who circled Gerald and brought him down like a young gazelle, also pace "this old black one," but they can't bring him down because of his experience. This prisoner is heroic, contrasting Gerald's almost anti-heroic posture.

Knight knows that people in such a psychological clench need heroes of mythic proportions to fight their real and imaginary battles. Hard Rock is one they, and Knight, have claimed. He has a history of standing up to adversaries and symbols of authority, a figure of folkloric stature: ". . . and he had the scars to prove it: / Split purple lips, lumbed ears, welts above / His yellow eyes, and one long scar that cut / across his temple and plowed through a thick / canopy of kinky hair." This hero doesn't wear a white hat. He is crude, brute-looking, unsophisticated, but also noble. In order for him to belong to the group he has to sacrifice himself; thus, he's misused by this fraternity of black victims. Also, one knows, like Hard Rock, what the "collective we" has been reduced to—that only savagery equals survival in such a hellhole. The situation has invented Hard Rock. This modern Frankenstein is unloved. When black manhood has been thwarted and misshaped, this is the reflection a black Narcissus sees.

Knight also knows that the threat of black manhood is what terrifies white America. This same fear drove lynch mobs out into the streets in recent history. When the poet gives us such poems as “On Seeing the Black Male as #1 Sex Object in America,” he very consciously throws some inside jabs: “In bright jeans, tight jeans, bulging; / Shining their cars, / Hanging in the bars, Leaning on the corners...” He seems to be stacking the deck and playing with minds. But there’s also a penetrating mind here; he knows the American psyche, and this is what makes him an expert signifier—playing the dozens with his reader—a speaker in control. Similar to the young men “wearing flashing red caps,” Etheridge is also insinuating when he gives us a speaker who knows the score. This is a position of power. The masked persona has control not only because he can articulate the politics of the situation, but also because he’s the caretaker of a biting truth. He’s a bonafide witness. He can speak for the victims, for the unaware, for the powerless who can only mock and shadowplay power with their audacious presence—as if their tongues have been cut out.

War and Rage

Many of Knight’s characters possess a pent-up rage. They are imprisoned emotionally and/or physically. One of his few war-related poems is “At A VA Hospital in the Middle of the United States of America: An Act in a Play”; these half-dead veterans of “five wars” are imprisoned in their doped-up dream worlds. They are little more than phantoms: “words filled with ice and fear, / Nightflares and fogginess, and a studied regularity.” They can only daydream of their various exploits, real and imagined, contained in a blurred existence, but what is truly ironic is that their plausible histories and lies control them to the extent that they are imprisoned in numerous ways: “Midnight seeks the red-eyes, the tried / Temper, the pains in the head.” And: “For an end to sin, / For a surcease of sorrow. / He nods the days away, / And curses his Ranger Colonel in fluent Vietnamese.” And: “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 italicized refrain that ends each stanza comes from the spiritual “Down By the Riverside.”

The reader cannot overlook how the poet feels about war. It reminds me of W. E. B. Du Bois’s statement in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “They that walked in darkness, sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart.” The refrain is Knight’s antiwar statement. In the poem, there is also a reference to an “ex-medic in Korea”; the only other mention of the Korean War is in his short poem for a PFC in his first book, *Poems from Prison*, published in 1968 by Broadside Press. Knight had been an army medic in that war. He has written, “I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound, and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life.” He had been convicted of armed robbery and spent six years in prison. Perhaps there is an answer here

as to why Etheridge didn’t write more war-related poems. I still wish he had. He could have filled a missing space in our literary history.

Poetry for the People

Poetry for the People was Etheridge Knight’s credo. He knew how important it is to empower people with a sense of history, with an articulated presence in life: Hadn’t poetry saved him? In early 1990, a young poet friend, Kenneth May, introduced me to the man who had been leading The People’s Workshop at a bar called the Slippery Noodle in Indianapolis. It seemed as though I had known Etheridge for many years. He was kinfolk. There was something in his eyes that reminded me of the men in my family. He was another survivor, a hat-wearing shaman with a hint of Railroad Bill in his voice. He believed that the poet should say the poem, suggesting that a recitation or a reading was more academic, more removed, and more self-conscious. He was a poet who could talk the blues. The oral tradition was the basis of his personal aesthetics. Of course, this takes us straight back to the beginning of African-American poetry, back to such voices as James M. Whitfield, Frances Harper, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Langston Hughes.

What is most remarkable about Knight’s poetry is that it avoids moralizing, and what I had learned earlier in the songs of Big Joe Turner, Johnny Ace, Bobby Blue Bland, T-Bone Walker, Muddy Waters, Ma Rainey, and a host of other blues legends, he brought back to me as I read “Cell Song,” “The Warden Said to Me the Other Day,” “A Poem for Black Relocation Centers,” “The Stretching of the Belly,” “No Moon Floods the Memory of that Night,” “Feeling Fucked Up,” “The Bones of My Father,” “We Free Singers,” and others.

Women’s Voices

As I had tried to forget those old blues wrung from the flesh and soul, so had I attempted to cut out what troubled tenderness still clung to me, but Etheridge knew how to get close to his feminine side, so much so that you could almost hear a woman singing underneath his voice. Or, maybe there were the voices of many women there—mother, grandmother, sister, daughter—singing one collective acknowledgement. He was raw and gutsy, but also respectful of womanhood. A passionate, naturalistic awareness informed many of these jaunty poems. Even when Etheridge gets caught up in signification, the humanness isn’t undermined. Something genuine remains intact, untroubled. We find ourselves in the poem’s center and must feel our way out. Thus, a poem like “As You Leave Me” stays with the reader. We might not want to know, but we do, at least in some measured way, what the narrator feels: “and I die as I watch you / disappear in the streets / to whistle and smile at the johns.” This is hardcore, down-to-earth poetry. We feel the speaker’s skin because we can hear some part of ourselves speaking. We know the woman in “The Violet Space” because she’s like too many women (not just black women) who have been reduced by the hard facts of economics. We can also

empathize with the poem's narrator, can taste his rage when he says, "I boil my tears in a twisted spoon / and dance like an angel on the point of a needle. / I sit counting syllables like Midas gold / I am not bold."

Etheridge was familiar with the rituals that made life painful, but he was also aware of what could make us whole, and vulnerable to simple beauty. And, sometimes, we realize that these are the most threatening moments. Knight knew the importance of affirming human existence. This is exemplified in "Circling the Daughter": "Now I sit, / Trembling in your presence. Fourteen years / Have brought the moon-blood, the roundness . . ." The poem continues: "Reach always within / For the Music and the Dance and the Circling." Of course, this circling is different from the "black cats" circling their prey in the poems discussed earlier. This circling is an affirmation; it says that sex is natural and beautiful. The poem has a poignant italicized couplet that appears twice, after the first stanza and at the poem's end, and it sounds like both a love call and a confession: "You break my eyes with your beauty: / OOOOuuuobaby-I-love-you." This is dedicated to his daughter, Tandi, celebrating womanhood with a quiet awe—as if whispered in a dark room.

Etheridge Knight died in March 1991. For more than a year before, at various readings, he'd say a poem by Melissa Orion, "Where is the Poet?" He often used to say he wished he'd written it. Of course, he had memorized the poem, as if reciting his own elegy:

So I went to Soweto and asked the wounded
Have you seen my friend the poet?

Oh no, answered the wounded, but we're longing to
see him
before we die

Maybe you should go to the prisons, they said
where there is loneliness, the poet should be

Knight had been there. He answered the calling like one of those oldtimey baptist preachers from Mississippi. Tough and eloquent, he was nothing if not a fall guy for beauty and truth, because he believed that the poet was duty-bound to take chances. He was a man who had been roughed up by life, by bad luck, and he had the emotional and physical scars to prove it. This was the very quality about him that mystified so many of us, young and old, educated and unlettered, black and white, fulfilling our need to embrace him as our friend, the poet, who had been tried by water and baptized by fire.

Notes

¹W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903, 250.

Yusef Komunyakaa is professor of English and African-American Studies at Indiana University and recently was the Holloway Lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley. His latest books are *Magic City* (chosen by the *Village Voice* as one of the twenty-five best books for 1992) and *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems*. He is also co-editor (with Sascha Feinstein) of the *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*.

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

Stars from five wars, scars,
Words filled with ice and fear,
Nightflares and fogginess,
and a studied regularity.

*Gon' lay down my sword 'n' shield—
Down by the river side, down by the river side—
Down by the riverside . . .*

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 riverside . . .*

A. C. Williams drove a half-track
"Half da goddamn way 'cross Africa
In da second war," his black
Face proclaims, and exclaims—
Along with other rosy exaggerations.
Each week he sneaks through the iron-wrought fence
To the Blinking Bar down the street.
Midnight reeks the red-eyes, the tired
Temper, the pains in the head.

A phone call summons an aide to bring A. C. to bed.
*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.*

"Doc" Kramer, ex-medic in Korea
Is armless. And legless,
is an amazement of machines
And bubbling bottles. His nurse,
White starched and erect, beams
A calloused cheerfulness:

"How *are* we today?" Kramer's wife leans
Forward, sparkling fingers caressing his stump
Of arm. She is pink, fifty-six, and plump.
"Doc" Kramer desires sleep.

*Gon' put on my long, white robe—
Down by the river side, down by the river side—
Down by the river side . . .*

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.

*Gon' put on my long, white robe—
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.*

Indianapolis
September 1982