

## *Foreword*

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS

Etheridge Knight, for all of the things he was, he was certainly *with it*. *With it*, colloquial for in the mix, for there, there when it mattered the most, no matter where that where happened to be. Put more plainly, Etheridge Knight always seemed to be at the center of things, because in his way of seeing and being, he frequent became that center.

Seems like it makes sense to start this riff on Knight with something that feels improvised—a sketch of a man that is more sketch than note. It’s the history of things. A few years ago, just after my forty-first birthday, my son wrote a poem for me. His refrain: *there are no dry bones here*.

In the poem, my son tells me that I am a man of stories. The line hits me like the flat end of a bat each time. I’ve always wanted to be a man of stories. This is who Knight is and was—a man of stories. That’s how you end up always at the center of things. Quintessentially, because Knight has always been a chronicler. Without effort, he turns anecdotes from his childhood memories into scenes in a novel he’s yet to write. And here, in *Freedom & Confinement*, we get a glimpse of a differently refracted Knight. Elizabeth Gordon McKim brings us memories of Knight that would have otherwise been lost,

and in doing so, the poet that sometimes appears to be more myth than man, becomes, again, a bit of both. I've never met or read written of another man named Etheridge, and that singularity seems fitting. The man who passed out nicknames to others like blessings earned several of his own: Black Knight and Cell Boss seem most fitting, an erstwhile hero who succumbs to heroin but not sorrow, a man who sung his way into relevance, when all he had left was a song.

I realized months into not writing this essay that I wasn't sure how much I wanted to know about Knight. Back in 1998, I was in a cell in solitary confinement in Southampton, Virginia, someone slipped the *Black Poets* by Dudley Randall under my cell door. I ain't know it then, but reading Knight in the cell would turn me into a poet. Imagine—I'm 17 or 18-years old and discover a poet who learned the pen in prison. Though I didn't even have a half-sketch of his life then, I imagined that he knew where I was from what he wrote. Etheridge Knight's words stood out in a way that no other words ever had: they spoke to a loneliness and a path toward understanding and liberating myself, one that prison had drunkenly led me to.

Etheridge Knight's own life was riddled with complexities. He had a father, but felt isolated from him, bearing resentment toward a man who struggled to give his children the sanctuary and protection that only deepened Knight's sense of alienation. Fatherless in spirit, if not in fact, Knight wrestled with anger and loss, two burdens I knew all too well. I be saying I stumbled into prison, which ain't halfway a lie—but Knight, he ran headlong unable to get over a heroin addiction. For us both, books became our sanctuary. For us both, literature became a route back to ourselves.

**Reginald Dwayne Betts**

## *Preface*

*Freedom and Confinement: An Interview with Etheridge Knight* is the result of a series of discussions between myself and Etheridge Knight that began in the early spring of 1990 in his home at the Barton Apartments, 555 Massachusetts Avenue in Indianapolis.

Etheridge was dying of lung cancer, a disease that had spread into his liver. I lived with him during the last year of his life. We decided to tape these conversations to serve as a basis for an autobiography or as transcripts to publish on their own.

During our talks, we sat at a small card table in the front room of the apartment on the 18th floor with the help of a small, simple cassette tape recorder, the same one I used for recording poems of my students. There was an ashtray on the table with numerous cigarette butts, a bowl of walnuts, and a book by Alice Walker, *Temple of My Familiar*.

Listening to the tapes, I still remember the cracking of the walnut shells, the smell of coffee and tobacco, the phone ringing, the sound of the elevator coming up and going down, visits from friends, family, pastors, therapists, familiars from prison and the county jail, musicians and poets inter-weaving with the jazz of John Coltrane and the recurring wail of sirens from the street below.

During that year, we also traveled out of the United States—one time to Vancouver where I taught a class called “The Language of Poetry” as an adjunct professor at Lesley College in Cambridge. The second time we went to El Paso, where I also taught a class, and traveled into Juarez, Mexico.

We spoke quietly, with intimacy and honesty. The interviews began in earnest when I asked Etheridge: “Where shall we begin?” Over more than seven hours, we discussed his childhood in Paducah, Kentucky, running away from home, the Army, Korea, his drug addiction, and other essential elements of his early development and experience.

Etheridge also speaks of getting out of prison and meeting the poet Sonia Sanchez for the first time after communicating with her by letters. We stopped the interviews in the summer of 1990 because of his weakening health and because it was emotional for him to talk about his past.

The second interview was carried out in 1984 by my daughter Jenifer McKim who was a senior in high school writing a paper about suffering. They spoke in our third-floor apartment in Brookline in a conversation that was grounded in respect and honesty with special sensitivity to their shared commonalities despite their differences in age and experience. She’s now an investigative reporter in Boston.

The interviews have been edited and condensed. I am grateful to Reginald Dwayne Betts for agreeing to write the introduction. Many thanks to Norman Minnick, Chris Jansen, Susan Neville, Yusef Komunyakaa, Fran Quinn, the entire Knight family and Pitt Press for helping me put these interviews out into the world after so many years of listening to them in my own home.

Lastly and most importantly to all the poets and writers in the United States and around the world who share places at the wide and inclusive table of FREE PEOPLES POETRY.

**Elizabeth McKim**

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