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Etheridge Knight: Making Up Poems

The World is much more complicated than most people are able to comprehend. Most of us think that artists – poets, writers, actors, musicians, visual artists, and dancers – have insight into this complexity and many of us depend upon them to give us clarity as well as enjoyment and ideas. More often than not the best and most blessed and talented of our artists do give us, in their work, profound utterances that are not available anyplace else. Art is essential in making great civilizations possible, nurturing and lasting. Where art thrives children smile, the people grow and contribute to the national discourse, and political and economic progress are not reserved for the monied few.

Yet, even among the most gifted artists there is in their work – and this is a broad statement – a lack of completion. This can be best understood by looking at different periods of an artist's work, for example, the early Langston Hughes is better understood if juxtaposed against the totality of his entire body of work. This is why critics, scholars and historians are essential in our mastering the complete value of an artist and his/her work. Duke Ellington is not a household name; however, it is all but impossible and indefensible to discuss the music of twentieth-century America without covering the contributions of Mr. Ellington and other lesser known musicians/ composers if we are to be fair, inclusive, and exhaustive in our examination. Art gives us multiple memories and is indispensable in defining our culture and civilization.

The longer an artist lives, provided that growth is not impeded, generally the closer his/ her production arrives to the answers of our times. It is obvious that the education and/ or acculturation of an artist is central and critical in his/ her assessment of their world. Often the most insightful of our artists are “self” educated and are considered “outsiders” and their work is often critical of the state and status quo. This is why, in part, the works of many great artists are not discovered or appreciated until late in their lives or until after their deaths. The best of our artists are deep questioners, confident, yet full of doubt, often self-righteous and

radical in their politics and lifestyles and generally are products of an economically distressed community.

Etheridge Knight would clearly fall into this category of writers. He was a Black poet who “made poems” out of his life and the lives of those closest to him. He matured during the sixties, a time when Black poetry and the poetry of protest was in the air, water, and fire that leveled many of the cities of this nation. Civil Rights, Vietnam, Black Power, Women's Liberation, “Power to the People,” “Viet Cong never called me nigger,” “power comes out the barrel of a gun,” and countless other code words and slogans were fueling the struggles of that decade. It is still a debatable point among some, but for Black folks and other people of color, the struggles of the sixties changed the United States and influenced much of the world for the better. During most of that period Etheridge Knight was incarcerated at Indiana State Prison. He used his time there to shape his mind and grow his intellect in a way that allowed him to write some of the most important and influential poems of this century.

His life was not an easy one. I write about Etheridge Knight out of a deep sense of respect and admiration for him as a poet, yet in me is a profound sadness and disappointment for him as a Black man and brother. For those who knew him, really knew him, they realized after five or six encounters that it was not difficult for Etheridge to capture your heart. He truly had the poet's smile and gift for gab. He knew what to say, how to say it, and to whom to say it to get what he wanted, whether it was money, friendship, love, sex, or drugs. He was especially adept at hitting on friends and new acquaintances for a twenty-five dollar “loan.”

It was obvious to me and others that after his release from prison he felt that his community should have been more “revolutionary” than it was. However, while in prison, his readings and discussions had prepared him to be intellectually and politically light years away from the majority of people in the African-American community. The average Black person had not, nor was about to read Mao Tse-Tung, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Marx, Amilcar Cabral, Leon Trotsky, Amiri Baraka,



Eldridge Cleaver, *The Left Press*, *The Black Panther paper*, or *Muhammad Speaks*.

In 1968, when he returned home, he found that most Black people were busy doing what they did before he went to prison. They were trying to survive from one day to the next. He quickly noticed that the great majority of Blacks worked hard, tried desperately to educate, protect, and raise their children. Black families paid rent, bought homes, food, clothing, and automobiles. Many moved into middle-class existence while others could only aspire for such. He saw that the majority of Blacks formed protective communities, went to and supported churches and other places of worship, and that many never heard of the Black Revolution.

In Indianapolis, his home city, as well as throughout the African-American nation, there had been some gains at the political level. Also, as a direct result of the struggles of the sixties, the public's imagination and public policy toward Black people had shifted somewhat for the better. Centers for higher learning began to recruit Black and women and term minority was becoming the accepted designation for people of color and women. More Blacks and women were being elected to local, state, and national legislative bodies. Many felt that nationally the political climate had become a little more inclusive. However, for many Black activists – and this included Etheridge Knight – this was clearly not enough.

He hit the streets with a poet's and revolutionary's mentality. It was extremely difficult for him to find his community. Shortly after his release from Indiana State Prison, he married the woman he idealized and the person that probably inspired him the most as a poet, Sonia Sanchez. The marriage was a nightmare and ended within a year. This was partially due to Etheridge's reverting back to his hustler-pimp mindset which included heavy drug usage. Many whites that he came in contact with during the period tended to romanticize and/or patronize him, but it was clear to those who knew him that he was still a thief, a con-man, womanizer, and junkie. They knew that he could not be trusted alone in their homes or businesses. In many one-to-one conversations his need for money would come up, and it is widely

known that he often disappeared before and after poetry readings.

However, it must be stated rather emphatically that he had been received warmly and with great anticipation by the Black writing community. Wherever he traveled, with few exceptions, in the Black Arts community he was welcomed and supported. Most certainly his early champions—Gwendolyn Brooks, Dudley Randall, Mari Evans, Sonia Sanchez and myself—extended our hands without conditions during much of the difficult decade of the seventies. We knew then that we had among us an extraordinary talent and that he needed love and support. Yet, his new freedom carried with it a demanding personal responsibility and an artistic commitment for which, in the final analysis, he was not ready. To travel from a prison environment to being literally on stage reading poetry to hundreds of people at some of the nation's most prestigious institutions is a challenge that only the unusually strong and well prepared can handle. It was naïve and quite a mental stretch to think he could reenter the population without serious reeducation, economic support, professional counsel, and drug rehabilitation. The effects of his journey from a state-imposed lock-down to that of a highly public one is still an open question.

Therefore, we cannot lightly dismiss Etheridge Knight's prison life as minor or minimal in his maturation into a poet and cultured Black man. In fact, many would say that it was indispensable to his success as a poet. His now famous quote, "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," can now be read as part of his epitaph. Prison life has a way of uniquely destroying genius or forcing genius to accommodate itself in exceptional and often destructive ways. While incarcerated Etheridge Knight's genius was nurtured by intense reading and study, correspondence via U.S. mail to great minds across the country, reading, writing, and rewriting his poetry, teaching, and rendering service and advice to others, mainly the young "Black militant" prisoners hitting the yard. His gathering of friends in the Black writing community and the publishing of his poetry outside the concrete walls brought



critical notice to the Black man at Indiana State Prison “making up” poems.

In many ways, Etheridge had emerged in prison as a hero, leader, and big brother to inmates. As a published poet, which was to most inmates a feat akin to a new preacher giving his first sermon, Etheridge was considered by many as a learned and trusted brother, a wise and tested warrior, and a find to his calling and to discover the meaning, significance, and beauty of ideas and literature. He had to wake up behind bars before he realized the empowering magic of the acquisition of knowledge. He had to be locked to become politicized, to understand the potential of his first-rate mind as he struggled to use it to write memory, melody, and song in the poetry form. He began to use his intellect in the service of others who had not discovered their genius or were too busy surviving the horrors of prison life.

He had not exactly broken new ground. There were other Black men who did not allow prison to destroy their genius and capacity for greatness. Two such men, well known to Black writers were Chester Himes and Malcolm X. Himes, the internationally respected novelist, short story writer, and essayist is best known for his detective novel featuring four Black cops Grave Differ Jones and Coffin Ed. The most famous of his novels is *Cotton Comes to Harlem* which in 1969 was made into a movie starring Godfrey Cambridge and Sidney Poitier. In his book *Chester Himes*, a study of Himes’ work, James Lundquist writes, “Writing, if it does not exactly flourish inside a prison, is a major diversion of many inmates, and it is not surprising that Himes should have started to write stories while in the penitentiary.” Chester Himes was one of the first Blacks to publish fiction in *Esquire* (1934). His novels *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), *Lonely Crusade* (1947), *Cast the First Stone* (1952), *The Third Generation* (1954), and *The Primitive* (1955) represent examples of his serious fiction that are still overlooked and undervalued today.

Malcolm X, formerly Malcolm Little, became a young disciple of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and his Nation of Islam and proved to the world that imprisonment could not destroy true genius. Malcolm X’s rise and development as a

leading human rights advocate is well chronicled in his and Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (1965) edited by George Breitman. Malcolm X as an activist, thinker, spiritual man, writer, and institution builder became the shining example for countless people all over the world. His life and work had a direct influence on Etheridge Knight as well as other inmates like Eldridge Cleaver who published *Soul on Ice* in 1968 and George Jackson who gave us *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970).

The sixties brought back Black militancy to the nation and its prisons. Many of the young Black entering prisons in the sixties and seventies were products of the political, cultural, civil rights, Black Power, and human rights battles that were sweeping the country. These young freedom fighters in the United States were identifying, supporting, and inspired by the liberation struggles in Africa and elsewhere. Clearly, many of them saw themselves as “political prisoners” and for them the nation’s prisons became just another war zone. These young men had an attitude, a self-confidence and a boldness about themselves for which prison administrators and many inmates were unprepared. Etheridge Knight was not immune to the fire in their young bellies because he too was developing a Black voice that had been liberated as a direct result of his newfound knowledge of *self* and the politics of revolution.

In October of 1968 Etheridge sent me a copy of his *Voci Negre Dal Carcere (Black Voices from Prison)* published in Italy. Soon to follow, which I read in manuscript, was his highly influential *Poems from Prison* (1968), published by Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press of Detroit. Because of his international recognition as a poet, his national publishing activity, good behavior, letters of support from family and friends from the outside, and his service to other prisoners, he was paroled. An American edition of *Voci Negre Dal Carcere* with a few additions was published as *Black Voices from Prison* (1970) by Pathfinder Press, which meant that his work had caught the attention of the white Left in the United States.



The publishing and importance of *Black Voices from Prison* confirmed that Etheridge Knight's support for other incarcerated writers. He was giving a voice to others as well as to himself. By this time Etheridge has been published in small journals and his poetry was being considered for a number of anthologies, including one by the poet Donald Hall. Gwendolyn Brooks had already become a mentor and Dudley Randall was considering new poetry for publication. However, in *Black Voices from Prison* Etheridge had helped to expose the deplorable state of the nation's prisons in book form. In the preface to *Black Voices from Prison* the political and culture insights of Knight are evident. Playing off of Malcolm X's metaphoric use of America or a prison for Black people, Knight writes:

Everywhere it is said that "crime" is rising; and everywhere there was prison walls, growing higher and higher. Walls – we live in a world of walls: from the wall of racism that shut Martin Luther King out of Gage Park, Illinois, to the walls of fire in Vietnam and Newark, to the gray stone walls of San Quentin. And it is all too clear that there is a direct relationship between men behind prison walls and men behind the myriad walls that permeate this society.

However, it was the young political prisoners that helped to feed Etheridge Knight's passion for service to his community and his search for new definitions. It is they who took theory and brought it right to the yard of Indiana State Prison. It was the young students outraged outside and inside prison who, often looking death in the eye, refused to buck dance to evil, corruption, and unjust laws. Etheridge Knight in his own unique way understood this new breed of men and in the most deadly of times had their backs:

These cats (most of them under twenty-five) make no apologies for being who they are; and, though they accept – up to a certain point – their won personal responsibilities for being here, they no longer accept whitey's definition of their selves. They use a new frame of reference. And in spite of

the tyrannical character of prison, without bowing or whining and without much hope, they somehow manage to keep body and spirit intact. Prison usually breaks men, but not these cats; they are a new breed of convict. Unlike the old convicts who sink lead-like into a sea of inertia, these young men *think* and *feel* – regardless of the accompanying pain. They are restless: they emit a great energy wherever they gather, on the Yard or in the cell houses, they mill about like a herd of cattle before a storm breaks. They are conscious, and their consciousness rocks the boat dangerously.

In his essay, "The Day That Young Blacks Came" he writes lovingly of their strength and the energy they gave to everyone else. He writes of how there was "an almost imperceptible lifting of the shoulders," and the "beneficial effect of the young Blacks on the older ones was to be proved: Knifings and fist-fights among 'brothers' decrease." Black literature and history was now more important than lifting weights and boxing. Lenore Bennett's *Before the Mayflower* was "worth ten cartons of cigarettes – prison currency." Etheridge Knight's exchange of letters with young prisoners put him in the role of older brother, big uncle, and sometimes that of a father figure that many of the new arrivals needed badly. In one of his many letters to a young man named Bucky he writes:

You asked me once if it is possible not to love one's self. Yes, if one has no sense of, no concept of self, in a positive sense, then he could not possibly love himself. Now could he? And it is true that understanding is one of the things that moves one toward freedom. But again, before he can understand his situation, the nature of his existence under oppression, he must first understand that he exists. Understanding stems from love, is in fact a component of love. This awareness of "the masses" that Fanon and the Marxists speak of does not quite fit our situation. Do you remember Malcolm telling about this house nigger that identified with the slavemaster to such an



extent that when the slavemaster's house caught on fire, the slave said, "Massa, our house is on fire." Do you think that slave had any awareness of himself of his situation?

The African, even under colonialism, maintained a kind of identity through the indigenous culture. The structure of tribalism always told him exactly who he was. But our situation is different, and to say otherwise is stupid. And if you know the cultural thing inside out, then you know that we are literally creating a *nation* and that cultural structures are as important as economical and political structures. Without cultural structures we will not know which way to go. And since culture is dynamic/living it will be a revolutionary culture if we are revolutionary.

Etheridge Knight's comprehension of the complexity and the all-encompassing role of culture in the making of people and civilization is the most revealing aspect of his intellectual growth. He was now going subsurface to find answers that were more often than not unsettling, difficult, and contradictory. His poetry began to embody a clean leanness; he made every word count, infusing each line with a hard realism that required most readers to reconsider what a poem is supposed to do as in "To Make a Poem in Prison"

It is hard
To make a poem in prison.
The air lends itself not
To the singer.
The seasons creep by unseen
And spark no fresh fires.

Soft words are rare, and drunk drunk
Against the clang of keys;
Wide eyes stare fat zeros
And plea only for pity.

Pity is not for the poet;
Yet poets must be primed.
Here is not even sadness for singing,
No birds are winging. The air
is empty of laughter. And love?

Why love has flown,
Love has gone to glitten.

Yes, it would be if poetry, the language closest to music, that Etheridge Knight would find his voice. Speaking to the penetrating contradictions in Black life he writes in "The Warden Said to Me the Other Day" of the deep hopelessness that existed among many of the older inmates.

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 nowheres to run to."

Racism or white supremacy is the deep, deep evil in America and much of the western world. Most Black prisoners had nowhere to go because they had so little sense of themselves. They had little knowledge of the where, how, who, what or when of their lives. Prison had become the final and sad answer for most of them, and Etheridge Knight had to fight this feeling of impotence every day of his life.

Upon the publication of *Poems from Prison*, with a preface by Gwendolyn Brooks, we knew we had a major poet among us. His poems "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminally Insane," "For Freckle-Faced Gerald," "The Idea of Ancestry," and "He Sees Through Stone" will live as long as critics, anthologists, scholars, and publishers are fair and honest in their assessment of the most important poetry of the twentieth century.

When *Belly Song and Other Poems* (1973) was published, Etheridge Knight had been out of prison a few years, in and out of his marriage to the poet Sonia Sanchez, and squarely back into the street life as well as the life, is there is such a thing, of a "working poet." It is clear also that drugs are integral to his existence. After recovering from an overdose he writes his "Another Poem for Me":

what now



what now dumb nigger damn near dead
 what now
 now that you won't dance
 behind the pale white doors of death
 what now is to be
 to be what you wanna be
 or what white/ america wants you to be
 a lame crawling from nickel bag to nickel
 bag
 . . .
 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

For the rest of his life drugs and alcohol would be central and a governing factor in his writing, teaching, and poetry readings. *Belly Song and Other Poems*, published in cloth and paperback, place Etheridge Knight unquestionably in the ranks of the nation's best poets. He was now reading his poetry throughout the country and his poems, "Feeling Fucked Up," "Belly Song," "For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide," "The Bones of My Father," and others were being read and recited among the young Blacks and whites in colleges and universities nationwide. His readings were generally electric and carried in them the bones of a man who had seen and tasted life many times over. To young students he was exciting, bold, hard-truth, and a bit strange. But wasn't he, after all, a poet?

Yes, he was a poet and an artist in the grand western tradition. Self-destructive but genius always on the verge of explosion. His raw and honest street poetry had broken new ground. He had become the poet of the unheard, a storyteller in verse, a writer confronting the nation's crippling secrets, troubling history, and horrors that affected all of us. Often he looked himself in the mirror and did not like what he saw, but there was this rough honesty about him and often his simple manners and smile made most people defenseless. He was a writer that reminds me of Toni Morrison's definition from her book *Playing in the Dark*:

Writers are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most

representative, most probing of artists. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the best of their power. The languages they use and the social and historical context in which these languages signify are indirect and direct revelations of that power and its limitations. So it is to them, the creators of American literature, that I look for clarification about the invention and effect of Africanism in the United States.

So it is to Etheridge that I and thousands of others look for clarification about one's "Africanism" of the Black condition in America. His pain drove his poetry. Who knows the grief he experienced and the grief he caused? However, grief in America is like playing the lottery, with one major exception: most of us have the winning ticket. It is the poet in Etheridge Knight that endears him to us. His poetry which is essential and concrete is also blood on the page. He spared no one, including himself. The restlessness of his language, the utter originality of his images, the informed and callow intelligence of his lines, and the social, political, and cultural messages embodied in his best poems are only a few qualities that define Etheridge Knight's contribution to literature.

However, it was his capacity for self-destruction that gave him an edge and an insight into the human predicament that inspired him to "make" poetry that literally connected to non-poetry readers as well as other poets. His influence on poets as diverse as Robert Bly, Donald Hall, Lamont B. Steptoe, Sonia Sanchez, David Ignatow, Thomas McGrath, William Stafford and others is quite extraordinary. Robert Bly, writing in the *Painted Bride Quarterly* (Number 32/ 33, 1988) devoted to the work of Etheridge Knight, states:

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-the-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 marvelous 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 for hours on end. The language mind arches its back, goes into a trance, and doesn't care what is happening.

Other poems, equally marvelous, 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 insured 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 that we know are lies, or mostly lies, in gathering with our parents, or at speeches, or watching a movies. How sad and addicted our truth-receiver is, a bag-man, who spends the day without hope.

Mari Evans is probably one of the few poets Etheridge came in contact with who never "loaned" him twenty-five dollars. Not because she didn't have it; she knew him and Etheridge never asked her for money. He knew that she cared for him but he also knew that she refused to be conned into supporting him in his own destruction. She shared with me how shocked she was to see him still smoking after he had been diagnosed with throat cancer. That he was still smoking within months of his death is the American story of addiction and

dependency that most Americans understand because they've watched members of their own families display such addictive behavior. Even though Etheridge's addiction to cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol all contributed in shortening his life, it must be pointed out that he was surrounded by family, friends, and professional health care persons who cared for him, and most of them over the course of his life tried to guide, instruct, direct, and even threaten him into changing his ruinous lifestyle. His suffering most certainly is not because he was unaware of his actions. He is brutally honest as indicated in his poem "Cop-out Session":

I done shot dope, been to jail swilled
wine, ripped off my sisters, passed bad checks,
changed my name, howled at the moon,
wrote poems, turned
backover flips, flipped over backwards
(in other words)
I been confused, fucked up, scared, phony
And jive
To a whole / lot of people

Haven't you?
In one way or another?
Enybody else wanna cop-out?

Yet, in coming to a final understanding of Etheridge Knight, it must be empathically noted that he was essentially a love poet. But, he loved others more than he loved himself. Which is not unusual in America; however, this insufficient love of self does lead to complications that affect all other love. But, at the core the power of his poetry comes from the deep caring he has for people and we see and hear this most profoundly in "Belly Song," Part 1:

I
And I and I / must admit
that the sea in you
has sung / to the sea / in me
and I and I / must admit
that the sea in me
has fallen / in love
with the sea in you
because you have made something
out of the sea



that nearly swallowed you

And this poem

This poem

This poem / I give / to you.

This poem is a song / I sing / I sing / to you
from the bottom

of the sea

in my belly

This poem / is a song / about FEELINGS

about the Bone of feeling

about the Stone of feeling

And the Feather of feeling

At the center of his hear is the love that rings in “Belly Song.” This love permeates and is the spirit of most of his work. Unlike most addicts, as a poet Etheridge Knight had the benefits of both art and love. However, neither art nor love was able to keep him alive. I think that this was due, in part, because he was unable to or not strong enough to make the right decisions and choices in his life, even though he gave us the best prescription for life as in “For Black Poets Who Think Of Suicide”:

Black Poets should live – not leap
From steel bridges (like the white boys do).
Black Poets should live – not lay
Their necks on railroad tracks (like the white boys do).
Black Poets should seek – but not search too much
In sweet dark caves, nor hunt for snipe
Down psychic trails (like the white boys do).

For Black Poets belong to Black People. Are
The Flutes of Black Lovers. Are
The Organs of Black Sorrows. Are
The Trumpets of Black Warriors.
Let All Black Poets die as Trumpets,
And be buried in the dust of marching feet.

However, he did not truly believe that America worked for Black people. And, if one had a history of prison life, he was sure that his days were numbered. During his stay at Indiana State Prison he witnessed the color changes of the incarcerated population from majority white to majority Black and Brown. And just as there was little help on the outside, he understood that the prison systems in America were, indeed, part of the shame of a nation that only those men who had been inside could really identify with. Prisons were just holding cells until you left or died. He gives us

some glimpse of this in “Rehabilitation & Treatment in the Prisons of America”:

The Convict strolled into the prison administration building to get assistance and counseling for his personal problems. Inside the main door were several other doors proclaiming: Doctor, Lawyer, Teacher, Counselor, Therapist, etc. He chose the proper door, and was confronted with two more doors: Custody and Treatment. He chose Treatment, went in, and was confronted with two *more* doors: First Offender and Previous Offender. Again he chose the proper door and was confronted with two *more* doors: Adult and Juvenile. He was an adult, so he walked through that door and ran smack into two *more* doors: Democrat and Republican. He was democrat, so he rushed through that door and ran smack into two *more* doors: Black and White. He was Black, so he rushed – *ran* – through that door – and fell nine stories to the street.

Like millions of others in America he succumbed, all too early, to his own weaknesses, contradictions, and inconsistencies. Yes, in many, many ways Etheridge Knight was a mess, a complex mess – not a true hero or a final victim but a generous soul and good and kind listener with a great ear, fabulous smile, and large heart. He saw poets as “natural meddlers.” This meddling in other peoples’ lives and in the world was his way of researching for his poems. But he felt that a “poet’s meddling is loving concern.” Everything else, as he states it, is “bullshit.” He saw light where there were shadows; he saw possibilities where others saw little hope; he painted memories with words that few could duplicate; and in doing so he gave to us answers to some of the complex questions that still confront us today. He was a genius with no place to go, a Black walking book full of unmade poems in an America that said “no” so often that he felt it was part of his name. How shall we encase his memory?

Much of the magic is remembering the clear moments of this wordkeeper



remembering that he poets-poems, he
poets street & fish & southern cotton,
poets Tran, Dolphy, and Nina Simone,
poets Langston, Brooks, Baraka and simply Sonia,
poets cheap wine, coke, cocaine & complete misery,
poets to women, mothers & short skirt coeds,
poets to stone, rocks & the wilderness of white allies.

& it is in his surrendering
of all that was special, antique & new
that this poet was unable to
govern or completely master the ideas & secrets
that saved his second life,

& now in Black America
consumed by the freedom of self-destruction
he is
quiet, calm & gone
never again to smile, love, borrow money
or
make poems.

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