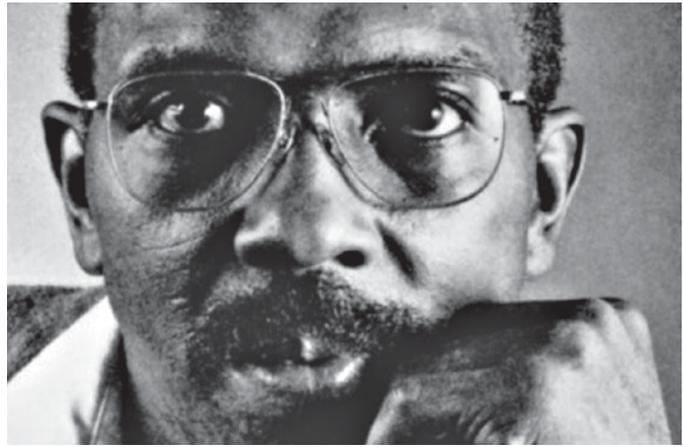


dedicated himself to reading and to expressing himself in poetry.

When he was sixteen, Knight dropped out of school, joined the army, and served in the Korean War as a medical technician. He was injured by shrapnel and subsequently became addicted to opiates. Knight's ensuing life of drug dealing and theft was a direct result of his need to feed his opiate habit. In the decade following his release from the army in 1951, Knight spent his time in pool halls, bars, and underground gambling parlors, where he was immersed in urban slang. He would take this ear for language into prison with him, where he began writing his poems in the early 1960s.

Knight began to see himself as part of a community of black poets, and he began correspondences with several accomplished poets, including Dudley Randall, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Sonia Sanchez (to whom he would be married from 1968–70). Impressed by Knight's developing talent, Randall arranged to have his first collection, *Poems from Prison*, published nearly a year prior to Knight's release from prison.

Upon gaining his freedom, and with the success of his poems, especially in live performances, Knight was in the forefront of the Black Arts Movement, along with writers like Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, and Sanchez. Their aim was to produce writing that would be relevant and important to a black audience. Several other collections



The poet Etheridge Knight.

followed *Poems from Prison*, and Knight served as editor-in-chief of an anthology entitled *Black Voices from Prison*.

It was only in 1977 that Knight made the decision to go on methadone in order to stop using heroin. In 1990 he earned his B.A. degree in American Poetry and Criminal Justice, and in the early 1990s, he took temporary teaching positions at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Hartford, and Lincoln University. In 1991, Knight died of lung cancer. Knight's obituary in *The New York Times* included a quote from him, in which he sums up the stages of his life: "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."¹⁵¹

SELECTED WORK: "THE IDEA OF ANCESTRY" BY ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

"The Idea of Ancestry" from *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, by Etheridge Knight, © 1986. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

1

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

