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Elizabeth Gordon McKim

These poems will be included in McKim's new manuscript entitled: ELIZABETHERIDGE and the Necessity of Motion. The poems are inspired by her relationship with African American poet Etheridge Knight, from the time she met him in Memphis in 1978 until his death in Indianapolis in 1991, when he died in her arms.

ELIZABETH GORDON MCKIM

**Memphis
Entry January 7, 1991**

Yesterday we drove from Memphis
to Raimer Tennessee on the Mississippi line
in a rented silver caddy
to pay respects to E.K.'s daddy

Etheridge Bushie Knight
1905-1950

We stop at the general store for directions
deer up to two hundred pounds weighed here
irs refunds paid here
chaw/tobacco/beef jerky
double/bubble/whisky

We find the cemetery
cross the tracks
past the creek
up the hill
to the part reserved
for colored
(white folks portion
of the boneyard
distracted
and closer to the traffic)
This the quiet place
which looks out on
a pond in slumber.

Cows graze here in summer.
The stone is large and dignified.

Etheridge Bushie Knight
1905-1950

Eth moves near
 but not too near
 bows his head / slant
 feels what he comes to feel
 does what he comes to do
 then we get back
 in the silver caddy
 and drive back to Memphis
 in the bitter rain
 Eth now in deep
 and unremitting pain
 his hand on his burning liver
 and his mind on his daddy

*gotta watchout/gotta watchout
 gotta watchout/ for the ol' liver*

We crawl into bed
 at the days inn
 hold tight and shiver
 watch the senate hearings
 on the gulf war
 press on and on
 we finally drop to sleep
 close to the Mississippi
 in Memphis Tennessee
 where the thin light screams
 and dread is in the air we breathe
 We breathe we breathe each other into dream

***Bushie crossed the Tennessee/Mississippi
 line he crossed it on a mule to court Belzora***

***Bake a lil' bread/tote a lil' water
 Mama Mama can I marry your daughter***

Sampson Snake Root

*"I'm gonna take you out to lunch
where you ain't never been before—" you said
"And make it good—" I said
You took me down beside the Frosty Tap
where weary men and women wait
for Meals on Wheels and a prayer
for precious lord and we got lunch*

***and now you're on the way
to some place far away
so when you get there
find a place for me
and make it good.***

Today is Monday
the day I was supposed to go
to Puerto Rico
to visit my Jenny girl
and here i am
in Indy town
the war still
raging.

Yesterday we went to Miss Belzora's for lunch
I took a long walk down North Dexter and Harding and beyond
in the surprising February thaw.
People out washing cars. Kids on bikes.
Guys calling out from street corners.
People sitting on wide front Indiana porches.
Etheridge is sleeping almost full time now
except for meals.
I talk a long time to his mama.
She tells me of auntie and her medicines

***tansey root/ peach leaves
cherry bark/palm lilies
sampson snake root
from the tree's north side
and the special dark mixture
for the bad disease
a man gets from a woman
or a woman from a man***

We come home to the nickel
watch custer's
last stand on tv
fall asleep early
while the war still rages

***sampson snake root
sampson snake root***

**** My daughter Jenifer McKim lives in Puerto Rico and works as a journalist for The San Juan Star.***

****We called the Housing Project 555 Massachusetts Avenue where we lived the triple nickel or sometimes just 'the nickel.'***

Shoot Ten Times

In the Triple Nickel
555 Massachusetts Avenue
Indianapolis
Indiana
Parker your ol' buddy
always greets you the same way
and you always greet him the same way:
**“Shoot ten times 'fore you cock it
Shoot ten times 'fore you stop it
Hold it level /you can shoot the devil”**
Then you both take aim at each other
and pull the trigger.

You are falling away
falling away from me now
The sun shutting down Indy town
We /free/ peoples be
the ice so thin and precarious
precious/ days/ daze
the ice skidding into my dreams
we do not scramble for
time we have had a whole
amazement
in time
a placement test
a packet
a pocket full of rhyme
some things done
some things not done
we turn and tremble
we ramble
we stumble
we give ourselves over to the rumble
the long journey home we began
we begin again
over and over
full circle
eth looks young
his eyes bright not
vodka **dark eyes**
and morphine- delaudid
dull eyes
but clear across and
over and dark so dark

in the middle black and
baby - blue milk rings
around the black and
the scar on his leg
the one from being run over in philly
after he left the homeless shelter in ny
the one
which was ropey and mottled
and looked like the carapace of a rhino
is now smooth and flat
completely different than it looked
a few weeks ago

***and what is unfinished
is always unfinished
and what is finished
begins again***

The Knife

Once I bought a knife
a beautiful enamel- handled razor- sharp paring knife
Bought it in Chinatown in San Francisco at a poetry gig
(the one you missed 'cause you were too messed/ up /to come
/down/ and over and across)
the enamel handle painted with delicate embellishment :
curling red blossoms and smoking blue dragons and curving green vines
I put it in my blanket drawer for safe keeping

Then I noticed it was missing I
knew you had taken the knife
to arm yourself for the forays
into the projects to get the rock
you were blowing your life away on

**blow / blow/ all the way
to crownhill/ cemetery/ in napland
blow away boston blow away philly
blow away new york memphis toledo minneapolis chicago
blow away mississippi
blow away baby**

*"I aint one of them suicide poets "
poetry is about revolution
and celebration
and freedom seeking*

truth is
you is
truth is
you
aint

Old School Ties And Other Synchronicities

In the early fifties she was going to the oxford school for girls
 and her daddy's rule was golden in hartford connecticut
 under the sign of eisenhower and the travellers umbrella
 and she was wearing a grey flannel blazer
 emboldened with a school insignia
 and optimistic cheer
 while his streets were blazing
 with fury and fear
 when she was memorizing edgar allen poe
 he was in big windy chi/ca/go
 staring at the world from a flophouse
 or an abandoned car
 or living at the taft hotel
 with a big blues woman big may-
 belle and may was singing at the crown propellar
 and may was hooked and so was he
 while she was being permed and girdled tamed and taught
 to do the waltz to sing false notes he was already
 displaced and dancing to another drummer learning the ropes of penal farms and county
 jails and copping dope, while she was babysitting little blond kids through hot new
 england summers and filling dance cards with serious pale boys weighting to fill full
 their father's shoes, he was runnin' round town forging checks and dodging more
 dangerous news more serious blues ricocheting off staccato bebop sound while she was
 jitterbugging and conjugating french verbs and she didn't like elvis on account of his
 pelvis and she was bringing in tollhouse cookies for the over sixties club downtown and
 she was readying for college
oh she was earnest and longing for love
oh he was earnest and reaching for life
 he ran with a knife upheld to keep the heroes back
 he was gaining on some sharper knowledge
 in the joint his old school and when
 graduation came round she wore a white organza gown
 and carried twelve blood- red roses while his black
 blood was flowing underground
 with no guardian angel to respond
to his black sound
comin'/round.
say no guardian angel
to respond to his black sound
comin' round.

Pop of Blossom

February 2, 1991

pink buds and gardenias
i want the pop of blossom
eth's hands mesmer-
mesmerize/rise
sculpt the air
in no despair
a wisdom we can
trust
lies and mis/demeanors
violations and manipulations
minor and major thefts
curl and uncurl
in the tidal times
and the winds pick them up
and blow them out to sea

a long time ago
after the first time
we made love you
said to me
i could ride the river with you lady
all the way to the sea
and you are a man who knows the river
and I am a woman who knows the sea
I grew with it
it taught me when I was a little girl
it rose and fell with me
I know its storms and calms
its grey days its calms
its bright sun penny mornings
i know ancient tide pools
little wonder/worlds

where chinaman caps/ barnicles/periwinkles
sea urchins/mussels/kelp
sleep in a strange realm
i study the granite rocks
their steadfast postures
their scars and creasings
their warnings
their strange earth alphabet
I watch wordlessly
the tides pull in/ and out
as you walk
beside the old river
mississippi
you learn the streets
and small towns and backwoods
and the highways
the corners
where you shine shoes
and shake off insults
and grin into the blank
sun you tell the tallest tales
of running and ambling
milling
I leap over the shadows
between the rocks

the space between

Unfinished Sestina For Elizabethetheridge

We're off to Minneapolis
and I'm scared, Eth,
Look, I'm taking the air
in great gulps, I'm tasting fire,
I'm lifting off from earth,
I'm not wasting a single breath

and for me everything is breath
because we're going to Minneapolis
(in my mind it's India or the end of earth)
Let's hope you'll be there to meet me, Eth,
Don't fuck up or I'll snuff the fire
and forget about taking the air

Though you know I love this fair,
this festival between us, this magic breath,
or I wouldn't be enroute to the fire
in our room at the Holiday Inn, Minneapolis,
and to you, K, tracer of lost persons, Eth, Ether-
idge, nudging me back to the black belly of earth

The deep rich return to earth
(forget about air)
Now it's in the flesh of me Elizabeth
and you Etheridge in our breath
that's why we're off to Minneapolis
that's why we have chosen fire

which makes and breathes more fire
which can not always warm the earth
which is why I have flown to Minneapolis
which is why we have to take care
of what we make, which is ours , elizabeth-
eridge, this wise and excellent Elizabethetheridge