

## Poem by Etheridge Knight

### *A Wasp Woman Visits a Black Junkie in Prison*

After explanations and regulations, he  
Walked warily in.  
Black hair covered his chin, subscribing to  
Villainous ideal.  
“This can not be real,” he thought, “this is a  
Classical mistake;  
This is a cake baked with embarrassing icing;  
Somebody’s got  
Likely as not, a big fat tongue in cheek!  
What have I to do  
With a prim and proper-blooded lady?”  
Christ in deed has risen  
When a Junkie in prison visits with a Wasp woman.

“Hold your stupid face, man,  
Learn a little grace, man; drop a notch the sacred shield.  
She might have good reason,  
Like: ‘I was in prison and ye visited me not,’ or—some such.  
So sweep clear  
Anachronistic fear, fight the fog,  
And use no hot words.”

After the seating  
And the greeting, they fished for a denominator,  
Common or uncommon;  
And could only summon up the fact that both were human.  
“Be at ease, man!  
Try to please, man!—the lady is as lost as you:  
‘You got children, Ma’am?’” he said aloud.

The thrust broke the dam, and their lines wiggled in the water.  
She offered no pills  
To cure his many ills, no compact sermons, but small  
And funny talk:  
“My baby began to walk . . . simply cannot keep his room clean . . .”  
Her chatter sparked no resurrection and truly  
No shackles were shaken  
But after she had taken her leave, he walked softly,  
And for hours used no hot words.

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*Etheridge Knight (1931 – 1991) began writing poetry while an inmate at the Indiana State Prison from 1960 to 1968. His first collection, “Poems from Prison,” was published in 1968 and was followed by “A Poem for Brother/Man (after His Recovery from an O.D.)” (1972); “Belly Song and Other Poems” (1973), for which he was nominated for both the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award; and “Born of a Woman: New and Selected Poems” (1980). His work was included in “For Malcolm” (1967) and “Black Voices from Prison” (1970) and was collected for “The Essential Etheridge Knight” in 1986. “A Wasp Woman Visits a Black Junkie in Prison,” from “The Essential Etheridge Knight,” by Etheridge Knight, © 1986, is reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.*

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