Etheridge's Cellmate

"It is hard
To make a poem in prison
The air lends itself not
To the singer"

- *Etheridge Knight, "To Make a Poem in Prison"*

Etheridge wasn't nothing but a junkie
when he showed up. Weak, from the weight
of his sentence. His biceps no stronger
after lifting a woman's purse from her shoulder.

He was quiet. Said it was the air
that kept him from talking.
Said it was too thick to disregard
& clogged his throat.

We thought he was just another poor,
black man. Etheridge thought that too.
But the words of Malcolm X & Langston Hughes
galvanized the nerves in his mind
& suddenly Etheridge didn't think the same no more

I heard him at night, mumbling
& writing. His voice was his pen
scratch. A lullaby in our concrete crib
that calmed the echo of faceless tears.

Soon, he sang as if the air had succumb
to his influence. He injected his words
into each inmates veins & they convulsed
without his song to soothe them.