ON ELDRIDGE CLEAVER BY KATHLEEN CLEAVER

I FIRST MET ELDRIDGE CLEAVER in Nashville, Tennessee, at a Black Student Conference held by SNCC at Fisk University in March 1967. I was then SNCC's campus program secretary and Eldridge was an invited speaker. What startled me most about him—a brilliant writer, an eloquently lucid speaker, as well as a tremendously handsome and magnetic person—was that he referred to himself as a "convict." Seeing him at the conference as he moved about with supreme confidence, an ease that approached elegance, and a dignified reserve that all combined to give him an air that could best be described as stately, it seemed hard to conceive of this powerful man as a "convict." He exuded strength, power, force in his very physical being. To think of such a man caged up and designated for the dungheap of history was impossible. In my blissful ignorance, Eldridge Cleaver seemed as remote from prison as the moon; he walked the earth like a king. On board the plane from Nashville to Washington, D.C., I wrote a passionate love poem to Eldridge called, "My King, I Greet You," my answer to his Open Letter to All Black Women from All Black Men titled: "My Queen, I Greet You."

My bliss far outlasted my ignorance concerning Eldridge's relationship to prison. Shortly after his arrival in Nashville, the nature of his status vis-à-vis prison began to come to light. He didn't explain to us what being on parole meant, but he couldn't leave Nashville for any side trips during the conference because he didn't have permission from his parole officer. And he couldn't stay any longer than 15 days without returning to California to get a new permission slip signed.

After the student riot broke out in Nashville on April 7, Eldridge was ordered by parole authorities to get on a plane and fly back to San Francisco immediately or be arrested by the Nashville police and have his parole revoked, meaning he would be returned to prison. The authorities' relentless attempts to cage Eldridge, whether by prison or parole, against his own driving determination to challenge them with his freedom—over the next two years I saw these two forces clash in irreversibly mounting, violent conflict.

Eldridge Cleaver's political career had begun in prison and his prison activities had won him the undying enmity of the officialdom of the entire state penitentiary system long before he became a target for higher state officials. After spending the first four years (from 1956 to 1960) of his last sentence in San Quentin's honor block, Eldridge left the favored conditions to join the Black Muslims. His friend Booker became the Minister and Eldridge the Assistant Minister of the San Quentin Mosque. Their efforts to organize and educate the black convicts in San Quentin were so explosive that by 1963, the prison officials had plotted their destruction. Booker was attacked by a group of white Nazis on the yard and while Eldridge was trying to protect him, the guards in the gun tower fired at them—the bullet went over Eldridge's shoulder and killed Booker.

Eldridge left the Muslims when Malcolm X was put out and then organized a political group called the African-American History and Culture Class to follow Malcolm X's teachings. Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter, later a Deputy Minister of Defense of the Black Panther Party who was assassinated at UCLA on January 17, 1969, was his second-in-command while they were in Soledad together. During a conversation last year, Bunchy told me that Eldridge essentially was held as a political prisoner the last five years he spent in prison. The only reason he was denied parole was his political activities. Eldridge could have stayed in the honor block for a couple of more years, kept silent, and gotten out on the streets with little trouble. But because he moved to deal with the problems of black convicts and black people, because he refused to submit to the well delineated role of slave, he became a victim of the most degrading, dangerous and destructive form of repression this society has devised—that sadistic, insane torture that prison officials visit upon the inmates with complete impunity. It was only Eldridge's tremendous strength which prevented him from being destroyed and broken in prison like the vast majority of convicts. When Malcolm X began to become nationally prominent, a federal directive was sent out to all prisons to watch out for Malcolm X types and destroy them. The prison officials attempted to give Eldridge shock treatment to destroy his mind, but he would fight them off and get dragged to the hole.

Once released on parole from Soledad on December 12, 1966, Eldridge immediately became a "special study case." He was required to see his parole officer once a week and all his movements were carefully watched, circumscribed and reported. The prison authorities had no intention of allowing Eldridge to live in peace nor to remain on parole for long; the only reason they finally agreed to release him was because they knew—or rather they thought—they could lock him back up whenever they decided to.

A parolee has no privacy, no rights, no independence. Eldridge's parole officer could enter his residence at any time for any reason. He had to submit "monthly reports" on his place of residence, his job, how much money he earned, what kind of car he drove, and so on. He had to receive permission to buy a car. He was not allowed to get married until he had been on parole for six months, and then he had to get a form signed restoring his civil right to marry. Their perversions and their control, both subtle and blatant, were endless. I soon had abundant opportunity to see why Eldridge had referred to himself as a convict when I met him.

ON JANUARY 16, 1968, ABOUT THREE A.M., the morning before a scheduled Panther rally, the San Francisco Tactical Squad kicked down the door to our apartment, barged in with drawn guns, and ransacked the place. We took that as a warning from the pigs. From then on the harassment of the Party intensified. And with Eldridge's role becoming increasingly important, especially in the Party's collaboration with the white radicals in the Free Huey movement, the focus of the pigs on Eldridge became sharper and clearer.

On April 6, Eldridge spoke at a rally on the Sproul Hall steps at Berkeley. I remember we were walking up Telegraph Avenue toward the campus; the sun was shining brightly and as I looked at Eldridge, with his black leather jacket gleaming in the sun, his black sweater, black pants, black shoes, black hair and black sunglasses, walking deliberately and thoughtfully up the street, he seemed to be cloaked in death. I felt an overpowering sense of dread that I could neither explain nor articulate; the thought flashed through my mind that this was the last time I would ever see Eldridge. But I quickly pushed the thought aside. Of course, we knew that death could come at any minute and we were always prepared to face the ultimate. Any minute Eldridge could be whisked back to the penitentiary—anything could happen.

That night I was waiting for Eldridge to come get me from a friend's house in Berkeley. We watched the 11:00 news and a report came on about a shoot-out with the Oakland police, but no names, no time, no location was given. I remembered my earlier premonition and shuddered, but I pushed it out of my mind again. I fell asleep on the couch by the phone. Many people tried to call me that night but I slept through the calls as if I were drugged. At five a.m., I finally awoke to receive a call from attorney Alex Hoffmann. He told me that Eldridge was in San Quentin and Bobby Hutton was dead.

I finally saw Eldridge at 11:00 a.m. on April 7 in the Vacaville, California, Medical Facility. He was in a wheelchair, completely covered with burns, bruises and cuts, and his foot was bandaged. Since the last time I had seen him, he had been trapped in a burning house on 12th Street in Oakland while a 50-man police assault filled it with 1000 rounds of ammunition; had seen the pigs shoot Bobby Hutton five times in the head and chest after he had surrendered with his hands in the air; had been arrested and beaten in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. He was treated for immediate wounds, whisked from the hospital, made to lie on the floor at the Alameda County Jail while he was perfunctorily booked, then rushed to San Quentin where the guard at the prison hospital refused to lift him up the stairs, threw him on the steps and told him to walk before he was admitted to the hospital. Then, early that morning, he was spirited off to Vacaville and placed in solitary confinement under maximum security. His face was bloated from tear gas and his eyes were swollen out of shape. His hair and beard were matted. The guards wheeled him into the attorney's room from his cell. I watched through the glass windows as he was wheeled down the hall—he looked like a captured giant, a battered war casualty, a caged king. During the past few months Eldridge had begun to refer to himself as the Minister of Information, but here he was, again a convict.

He was so drugged that he could hardly keep his head up or his eyes open. I was reading the reports of the shoot-out to him from the Oakland Tribune and his head kept falling down. I put my arms around his shoulders to support his neck, and every time his head fell on my shoulder, I would kiss him lightly on the forehead. This incensed the guards watching outside; they came in and forced me to sit on the other side of the table. In prison, even a kiss from a wife is against the rules.

After our visit, Alex Hoffmann managed to get Eldridge transferred from solitary confinement to the hospital, where his wounds could be treated. But there was always the fear that while he was in that prison hospital, the pigs could do something to him or give him something to destroy his mind. Vacaville is where men are turned into vegetables. During his entire stay in prison, Eldridge was kept in the Reception and Guidance Center at Vacaville. Usually, a convict is just processed there and then shipped out to another joint. The restrictions concerning visitors, possessions and communication are tightest during this period, and Eldridge was kept there for an indefinite time in order to isolate him from the Party and his friends. Not even an outside doctor was allowed, a privilege we attempted to secure to protect his life.

The two months Eldridge spent in Vacaville were a torture beyond recall. I seemed to live the entire time in a state of suspended animation, more dead than alive. Getting Eldridge out of prison was my sole concern. Chaos ensued in the Party. We were lurched into another dimension in time; Martin Luther King had been assassinated April 4 in Memphis and Bobby Hutton had been murdered April 6 in Oakland. Eldridge Cleaver had been wounded and returned to prison.

We initiated a mass campaign to get Eldridge released from prison where he was now confined as a parole violator, facing four years of his last sentence and life imprisonment if convicted on the new charges: three counts of assault with a deadly weapon and three counts of attempted murder. His parole had been revoked by telephone from Sacramento on the demand of the Oakland Police Department. There was no official written revocation of parole for days afterward. On May 8, the Adult Authority finally came up with the charges: possession of a gun, association with disreputable characters and refusal to cooperate with his parole officer. The first charge had yet to be decided in his court case in Alameda County; the last two were transparently spurious—the "characters of ill repute" were members of the Black Panther Party; the refusal to cooperate with his parole officer consisted of a phone call Eldridge allegedly didn't make to his parole officer in April to inform him that he had returned from New York. No date for a hearing with the Adult Authority was set and, apparently, none was even considered.

In May, however, a court hearing was obtained on a writ of habeas corpus filed by attorney Charles Garry. The hearing was held in the quiet, sunlit courtroom of the Solano County Courthouse. In contrast to the massive pig presence in the Alameda County Courthouse, where Eldridge was brought to court in an armored car with a motorcycle guard and accompanied by numerous armed guards, in Judge Sherwin's court he was accompanied by only three prison guards.

To the shock of everyone involved in our campaign to release Eldridge, Judge Raymond Sherwin granted the writ of habeas corpus on June 11, 1968. Paul Jacobs, Dr. Jane Aguilar, Godfrey Cambridge, Dr. Phillip Shapiro and Ed Keating were all there to assist with the $50,000 bail. The bonding company allowed us to put up $5000 in cash and accepted these people's signatures as collateral for the rest of the money.

To me it seemed as if this were a dream. I couldn't believe my eyes as I watched Eldridge being processed for release by the Solano County Sheriff's office. They brought him down the hall where a crowd of people waited to witness this unprecedented event. The sun in the valley had tanned Eldridge to a crisp reddish brown; he was very lean, having lost weight in the penitentiary, and his beard and mustache had been shaven. He looked ten years younger, and as one friend put it, rather "newborn." We drove back to San Francisco and held a brief press conference-celebration in Garry's office. When asked by reporters what his immediate plans were, Eldridge replied, "I want to get reacquainted with my wife."

On June 14, the Adult Authority held a secret meeting to plot their next move against Eldridge, now that their first ploy had been foiled by their own state courts. Huey Newton's trial began on July 15.

THE OPENING OF HIS TRIAL marked the culmination of all our intense efforts on every level toward mobilizing mass support for Huey P. Newton. Once the verdict was in, it would be clear exactly what course of action we would have to take.

Eldridge had staked his life on saving Huey from the gas chamber. He had said and written many times that Huey P. Newton would go to the gas chamber over his dead body. He meant every word of it.

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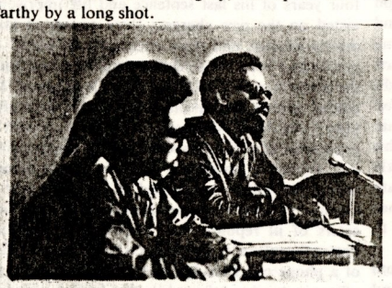
Every day following the 15th of July was a day closer to the showdown. The Adult Authority was working behind the scenes and in the courts every day to get Eldridge back behind bars. The local pigs, the FBI and the CIA were watching, listening, plotting and lurking around us in all kinds of guises. Eldridge wore the tension like a suit of mail, so heavy it jangled every time he moved. He was in constant motion, never relaxed, never off-guard for a second. He drove many different cars, stayed in many different places, was always on the way from one meeting or conference or appointment to the next, never stopping to rest. Wherever he passed out, he slept; wherever he was at mealtime, he ate. When he needed to change clothes, he'd buy them if he didn't have any with him. This had been Eldridge's pattern of living/organizing/surviving since the day Huey was shot, but now it was escalated to a fantastic pitch.

He traveled all over the city, state and country, demanding the release of Huey and the liberation of the black colony. Outside of working toward these goals, he had no life. His past was prison; his future was prison; the only arena Eldridge could work in was the present, the moment, the immediate reality. From being the key organizer and spokesman of the Free Huey movement, Eldridge moved to become its key victim. The brunt of the retaliation against the Party and against the mass movement involving thousands of people was being taken out on him because he was the most vulnerable, as well as the most valuable, motivator.

The courtroom drama unfolded week after week; and each week Eldridge was drawing larger crowds across the country in support of the demand that Huey P. Newton be set free.

In August, the presidential conventions were held. The parole authorities banned Eldridge from attending either the Democratic or the Republican Conventions, where he was to be sent by RAMPARTS as a journalist; it was only after threatening a major court battle that he was allowed to attend the Peace and Freedom Convention in Ann Arbor. Eldridge Cleaver was overwhelmingly voted in as the party's presidential candidate, defeating Dick Gregory, Dr. Spock and Eugene McCarthy by a long shot.



The nomination was added ammunition for Eldridge. Speaking engagements became even more numerous. Eldridge went everywhere he could get permission to go—to every state that had a Peace and Freedom Party or a Black Panther Party or a university where students wanted to hear him speak. Wherever he spoke, the demands for black liberation were articulated, elaborated and developed with passion, precision and the profound sense of commitment that made Eldridge Cleaver a giant in the land of midgets.

Since his release from Vacaville, Eldridge's speeches and manner of presentation had changed. Before he was sent back to prison, Eldridge was always the polite political organizer, speaking in terms of concepts and programs about the coalition and the machinery needed for revolution. After he was released from Vacaville his delivery became more passionate and personal; he spoke of his feelings, his experiences, his loves and hatreds, as well as the political concepts of revolution. It was after Vacaville that he started cursing in his speeches, cutting through a lot of intellectual bullshit to talk in the simplest terms about the basic reality confronting people.

Eldridge came out of Vacaville with a new awareness and a new sense of urgency. Huey's trial catapulted that awareness and urgency to the very brink. But most important, he came out with a new sense of connectedness to the people—everywhere, every kind, not just members of his own elite group. Eldridge spoke to the people about the people from the most universal and simple point of view, laying bare the hypocrisy created by the system to hide the truth. More and more people everywhere were listening to him, demanding to hear him, thinking about what he said, reading his book, supporting him. And this, more than anything else, is what made him dangerous to the establishment. For in the months following his release, Eldridge began to emerge clearly as a true leader of men across this country. His supporters could not be confined to a handful of Panthers or white radicals; they could not be limited to the college students or potheads: all of these and more, from every segment of society, from every ethnic group, could relate to what Eldridge was talking about on some level and agree with him on some points. He had begun to build an alternate source of power in the masses of his followers. For a black man to exercise this kind of genuine universal leadership was not only revolutionary for this country, but unprecedented.

The verdict on the Newton trial came in on September 8: guilty of manslaughter. It was a compromise verdict, but the basic objective of keeping Huey out of the gas chamber had been won. It was a resounding defeat for the establishment: even the jury rejected the official version of the pigs' story.

BEFORE THE DUST COULD SETTLE from the storm of Huey's trial, the California establishment created another issue to ram down the throats of the people and to vilify the Movement. A group of students and faculty at the University of California at Berkeley, the Committee for Participant Education, invited Eldridge to lecture on racism in a small experimental course, Social Analysis 139X.

Social Analysis 139X became the most controversial class in the history of the University, and it made Eldridge Cleaver a nationally celebrated victim of Ronald Reagan. Reagan, Rafferty and the state legislature couldn't wait to idiotically condemn the most socially acceptable endeavor in which Eldridge had ever participated.

Too much had happened in Berkeley and Alameda County for the governor to remain silent; the white youth had shown their mettle not only on the campuses but also at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The fight against radical white youth, for whom Berkeley was Mecca, and against revolutionary black youth, for whom Eldridge Cleaver was a saint, was on. The newspapers were filled with the ramblings of high-placed officials about the sanctity of education and the wisdom of age. The youth answered in the streets.

In the heat of the UC controversy, the final bombshell exploded. On September 27, the day Huey Newton was sentenced and spirited away to Vacaville, the State Court of Appeals rendered its decision on Eldridge's release from Vacaville: he had 60 days to return to prison. The verdict here was no less political than the Newton jury's verdict—and no less of a compromise. Giving Eldridge a 60-day notice to return to prison was an admission from the courts of their fear of locking him up as well as their fear of leaving him on the streets. It was as if the state had given him 60 days to get out of town.

The decision, which I had been prepared to hear ever since Eldridge was released, left a deadened feeling in the pit of my stomach. There was no question in my mind about Eldridge's returning to prison; not only would it have been, as he said, the trip that breaks a man, but the trip would have destroyed me. I could not possibly be a witness, an accomplice in the total degradation and planned assassination of my husband which would have resulted from his return to prison. Committing suicide would have been easier. We both knew Eldridge could never go back to prison, could never negate all he had ever done and said, the life he had begun to live so fervently, so passionately, so dynamically, and most clearly of all, so completely revolutionarily.

It was impossible to conceive of returning to prison. The only question was how and when to move—but somehow, neither of us could accept the 60 days as a serious threat. If the state wanted Eldridge in prison, there were easier and more certain ways of getting him there. It was clear from the nature of the decision that their next move would be dependent on Eldridge's response to their threat.

What went on in Eldridge's mind once he heard the decision, I never knew; he rarely discussed it. We could not discuss it. We could only act. What Eldridge wanted was to precipitate a final showdown with the Adult Authority. If he hadn't been ambushed that April 6 and had his parole revoked, he would have been eligible for a discharge from parole in December. Now he had to return to prison on November 27. Regardless of whether or not we discussed November 27, it was the overwhelming reality that cast a pall over everything. Truly, the pigs had set a deadline on Eldridge. Our life became more chaotic than it had ever been, so chaotic that the tremendous chaos which had preceded the September decision now seemed like a joyride.

I watched Eldridge daily grow increasingly tense, harassed and paranoid. I saw less and less of him as his schedule became tighter, his time shorter. One day he bought himself an hourglass with pale blue crystals for sand which ran completely through in approximately ten minutes. He appeared drained and exhausted. The pressure that was being exerted upon him could not be shared; it was a solitary burden, for no one else was named in the order to return to prison. No one else could go with him. The thousands and thousands of followers he had couldn't keep him out of prison, for the Movement had not advanced to such a position of strength.

Eldridge's hair became greyer; his face became haggard; his shoulders began to sag. It was horrible to see the look of defeat begin to creep into his eyes, something I'd never seen in Eldridge as long as I'd known him. He became a man tortured night and day by a fate too deadly to accept, too real to ignore.

But it only seemed to spur him on to ever greater activity. He continued to lecture at Berkeley, and he accepted speaking engagements all over the country. He spent more time at RAMPARTS, working on his writings, and he initiated the *Biography of Huey Newton* by Bobby Seale. He began to spend more time with the Party, teaching political education classes and tightening the security apparatus within the organization. I wouldn't see him for days on end. When he did come home, it would be in the morning to bathe, change his clothes, sometimes eat, and then leave. He became totally preoccupied with the work which he loved, and which he soon would have to stop.

IT IS PAINFUL TO RECOUNT THESE DAYS, so painful my mind refuses to come up with the details. We lived a life with the beauty and joy of our love and work daily being crushed out and drained away by the pressure of the deadline. October drew to a close; November came. By November I was so exhausted, both mentally and physically, emotionally and psychically, I was convinced I would be dead by the end of the month. Eldridge would never say what he was going to do other than refer to a showdown. But as glorious as the idea sounded, in reality there weren't enough forces to make a successful stand. There could only be a massacre, no matter how heroic.

We had lived on the brink of death for so long, our life, since Huey had been shot, was so consumed with political work, that we had practically lost the ability to think or act on a personal basis. The personal was political, the political was personal. I knew if Eldridge didn't disappear he would be murdered in prison or killed in the streets. I silently begged him to leave; hundreds of friends and co-workers also hoped he would move to protect himself, and some openly told him he had to split. Only a sadist or a fool could have wanted him to return to prison.

Before I met Eldridge, I had read his "Letters from Prison" in RAMPARTS; what astounded me was the tremendous strength he demonstrated in recreating himself in prison. If a man can grow and develop as Eldridge had, subjected to the conditions of prison, if a man is not broken by these conditions, but instead becomes a profoundly beautiful and sensitive man, then nothing can break him.

When I met Eldridge at the Fisk conference and got to know him a little, I was surprised by his tenderness. Expecting him to be harsh and cold from his experiences, I found Eldridge to be amazingly warm, kind, gentle and sensitive. And as we came to know each other well, fell in love, began living together, got married and began working together, I watched Eldridge continue to grow, to develop, and to improve himself. His capacity for regeneration seemed boundless. And his dedication to the liberation of black people, in truth to the liberation of humanity, is total. One of Eldridge's greatest talents is the ability to see another person's latent strengths

and abilities and bring them to the surface, making that person stronger and more competent than he ever thought he could be.

But to describe Eldridge is not my task here. Suffice it to say that his return to prison would not only have killed him, but would have killed me, and even more important, it would have killed everything that humanity strives to reach. The attack on Eldridge was launched not on him as an individual, and not on him as a black man, but on him as a leader expressing the aspirations of millions of people everywhere for the freedom of humanity.

As the deadline of November 27 came closer and closer, most people were too stunned to know what to do. A small handful decided to set up a vigil outside our home on Pine Street to protect Eldridge from the pigs; the pigs came anyway, infiltrating the vigil, trying to act like our friends. But in spite of everything they did and said, Eldridge Cleaver slipped away and hasn't been heard from since. Thank God.

The end of Eldridge's Affidavit No. 2 about the Oakland shoot-out, written April 19, 1968, says it all: "Why am I alive? While at Highland Hospital, a pig said to me: 'You ain't going to be at no barbecue picnic tomorrow. You the barbecue now!' Why did little Bobby die? It was not a miracle, it just happened that way. I know my duty. Having been spared my life, I don't want it. I give it back to our struggle. Eldridge Cleaver died in that house on 28th Street with little Bobby, and what's left is force: fuel for the fire that will rage across the face of this racist country and either purge it of its evil or turn it into ashes. I say this for little Bobby, for Eldridge Cleaver who died that night, for every black man, woman and child who ever died here in Babylon, and I say it to racist America, that if every voice is silenced by your guns, by your courts, by your gas chambers, by your money, you will know, that as long as the ghost of Eldridge Cleaver is afoot, you have an *enemy* in your midst."

When people ask about the $50,000 bail and want to know why Cleaver doesn't pay it since he has so much money from his books, I can only look at them. I can't even argue, although all the money from his books, which hardly amounts to $50,000, is being held in lien by the Internal Revenue Service on the pretext that they have no guarantee that the taxes will be paid. Eldridge Cleaver's debts have been paid with his blood, with his suffering, with his work, with his life. When will others begin to pay? Must Eldridge also pay the salaries of his tormentors, his would-be murderers, his enemies? What more can be taken from him that has not already been freely given to the people's struggle?

He said, "Eldridge Cleaver died in that house on 28th Street with little Bobby. . . ." Kathleen Cleaver died in that house on Pine Street when Eldridge walked out for the last time, driven away from the life and people that he loved as he had never loved before. . . . What's left is the mother of Eldridge Cleaver's child, more fuel for the fire that has set this country aflame, and of this country I say with Robert Williams, "Let it burn, let it burn."

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