

the ⁱⁿ life.

A BLACK GAY ANTHOLOGY

edited by
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New Introduction by James Earl Hardy

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In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology

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*for my parents,
Dorothy and Sun F. Beam
for loving*

*for Kenyatta Ombaka Baki
for believing*

*for Addie and Charles
for our future*

JOSEPH BEAM

Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart

...what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.¹

I know the anger that lies inside me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It is easier to be angry than to hurt. Anger is what I do best. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning. Easier to crucify myself in you than to take on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting that we are worth wanting each other.²

I, too, know anger. My body contains as much anger as water. It is the material from which I have built my house: blood red bricks that cry in the rain. It is what pulls my tie and gold chains taut around my neck; fills my penny loafers and my Nikes; molds my Calvins and gray flannels to my torso. It is the face and posture I show the world. It is the way, sometimes the only way, I am granted an audience. It is sometimes the way I show affection. I am angry because of the treatment I am afforded as a Black man. That fiery anger is stoked additionally with the fuels of contempt and despicability shown me by my community because I am gay. *I cannot go home as who I am.*

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is

my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply.

Almost every morning I have coffee at the same donut shop. Almost every morning I encounter the same Black man who used to acknowledge me from across the counter. I can only surmise that it is my earrings and earcuffs that have tipped him off that I am gay. He no longer speaks, instead looks disdainfully through me as if I were glass. But glass reflects, so I am not even that. He sees no part of himself in me—not my Blackness nor my maleness. “There’s nothing in me that is not in everyone else, and nothing in everyone else that is not in me.”³ Should our glances meet, he is quick to use his *Wall Street Journal* as a shield while I wince and admire the brown of my coffee in my cup.

I do not expect his approval—only his acknowledgment. The struggles of Black people are too perilous and too pervasive for us to dismiss one another, in such cursory fashion, because of perceived differences. Gil Scott-Heron called it “dealing in externals,” that is, giving great importance to visual information and ignoring real aspects of commonality. Aren’t all hearts and fists and minds needed in this struggle or will this faggot be tossed into the fire? In this very critical time everyone from the corner to the corporation is desperately needed.

...[Brother] the war goes on
respecting no white flags
taking no prisoners
giving no time out for women and children
to leave the area
whether we return their fire
or not
whether we’re busy attacking each other
or not...⁴

If you could put your newspaper aside for a moment, I think you, too, would remember that it has not always been this way between us. I remember. I remember the times before different meant separate, before different meant outsider. I remember Sunday school and backyard barbecues and picnics in the Park and the Avenue and parties in dimly lit basements and skateboards fashioned from two-by-fours and b-ball and ... I remember. I also recall secretly playing jacks and jumping rope on the back porch, and the dreams I had when I spent the night at your house.

But that was before different meant anything at all, certainly anything substantial. That was prior to considerations such as too light/too dark; or good/bad hair; before college/army/jail; before working/middle class; before gay/straight. But I am no longer on the back porch; I want to play with my jacks on the front porch. There is no reason for me to hide. Our differences should promote dialogue rather than erect new obstacles in our paths.

On another day: I am walking down Spruce/Castro/Christopher Street on my way to work. A half block away, walking towards me, is another Black gay man. We have seen each other in the clubs. Side by side, and at the precise moments that our eyes should meet, he studies the intricate detail of a building. I check my white sneakers for scuff marks. What is it that we see in each other that makes us avert our eyes so quickly? Does he see the same thing in me that the brother in the donut shop sees? Do we turn away from each other in order not to see our collective anger and sadness?

It is my pain I see reflected in your eyes. Our angers ricochet between us like the bullets we fire in battles which are not our own nor with each other.

The same angry face, donned for safety in the white world, is the same expression I bring to you. I am cool and unemotive, distant from what I need most. "It is easier to be furious than to be yearning. Easier to crucify myself in you..." And perhaps easiest to ingest that anger until it threatens to consume me, or

apply a salve of substitutes to the wound.

But real anger accepts few substitutes and sneers at sublimation. The anger-hurt I feel cannot be washed down with a Coke (old or new) or a Colt 45; cannot be danced away; cannot be mollified by a white lover, nor lost in the mirror reflections of a Black lover; cannot evaporate like sweat after a Nautilus workout; nor drift away in a cloud of reefer smoke. I cannot leave it in Atlantic City, or Rio, or even Berlin when I vacation. I cannot hope it will be gobbled up by the alligators on my clothing; nor can I lose it in therapeutic catharsis. I cannot offer it to Jesus/Allah/Jah. So, I must mold and direct that fiery cool mass of angry energy—use it before it uses me! *Anger unvented becomes pain, pain unspoken becomes rage, rage released becomes violence.*

Use it to create a Black gay community in which I can build my home surrounded by institutions that reflect and sustain me. Concurrent with that vision is the necessity to repave the road home, widening it, so I can return with all I have created to the home which is my birthright.

II

Silence is what I hear after the handshake and the slap of five; after the salutations: what's happenin'/what's up/how you feel; after our terms of endearment: homeboy, cuzz, "girlfriend," blood, running buddy, and Miss Thing. I can hear the silence. When talking with a "girlfriend," I am more likely to muse about my latest piece or so-and-so's party at Club She-She than about the anger and hurt I felt that morning when a jeweler refused me entrance to his store because I am Black and male, and we are all perceived as thieves. I will swallow that hurt and should I speak of it, will vocalize only the anger, saying: I should have bust out his fuckin' windows! Some of the anger will be exorcised, but the hurt, which has not been given voice, prevails and accumulates.

Silence is a way to grin and bear it. A way not to acknowledge how much my life is discounted each day—100%

OFF ALL BLACK MEN TODAY—EVERY DAY! I strive to appear strong and silent. I learn to ingest hatred at a geometric rate and to count (silently) to 10 ... 10 thousand ... 10 million. But as I have learned to mute my cries of anguish, so have I learned to squelch my exclamations of joy. What remains is the rap.

My father is a warm brown man of seventy, who was born in Barbados. He is kind and gentle, and has worked hard for me so that I am able to write these words. We are not friends: he is my father, I am his son. We are silent when alone together. I do not ask him about his island childhood or his twelve years as a janitor or about the restaurant he once owned where he met my mother. He does not ask me about being gay or why I wish to write about it. Yet we are connected: his past is my present, our present a foundation for the future. I have never said to him that his thick calloused hands have led me this far and given me options he never dreamed of. How difficult it is to speak of my appreciation, saying: Dad, I love you. *I am here because of you, much deeper than sperm meeting egg, much deeper than sighs in the night, I am here because of you.* Our love for each other, though great, may never be spoken. It is the often unspoken love that Black men give to other Black men in a world where we are forced to cup our hands over our mouths or suffer under the lash of imprisonment, unemployment, or even death. But these words, which fail, are precisely the words that are life-giving and continuing. They must be given voice. What legacy is to be found in our silence?

Because of the silence among us, each one of us, as Black boys and men maturing, must all begin the struggle to survive anew. With the incomplete knowledge of what has gone before, our struggles to endure and maintain, at best, save us only as individuals. Collectively we falter and stumble, covering up our experiences in limp aphorisms: Times are hard! Watch out for the Man! This is the depth of the sage advice we offer each other—at arm's length. We must begin to speak of our love and concern for each other as vigorously as

we argue party politics or the particular merits of an athletic team.

Daydream: 29 April 1984

Today was the first beautiful day that I have not had to spend at work. Precisely the kind of day I want to share with a lover: gazing at the blue sky; making love in the western sunlight on the brown-sheeted bed; massaging each other with the musk oil that warms on the window sill. We'd shower together, and return to the bed to dry in the sunlight as we had sweated when we made love.

Today, I think also of Bryan, and of myself as the hopeless romantic that I sometimes am. How can I be so taken with you, boy-man, who I met only two weeks ago? Why is it that I want to share all my waking moments with you? Share my world with you? Protect you? Tell you things no one told me when I was 22. You are like the little brother I never had; the playmates I was not supposed to touch. You are the lover who is considerate; the son I will not issue, eyes bright and inquisitive. I want to hold you the way my father never held me. I want to know your face, the oily brownness of your skin: its shadows, the darkness around the elbows and under the buttocks. I daydream of brown-on-brown-on-brown.

I am at a poetry reading. The brother at the podium is reading a poem about his running buddy who was killed in Vietnam. At the gravesite of his dead friend, the poet reminisces about the big fun they'd had, sharing the bottles of wine and hanging on the corner. Only when everyone has gone and he stares at the mound of dirt that covers his homeboy, can he utter: "Man, I really loved you. I really, really loved you."

Why does it take us so long?

I, too, have been there. Two good high school buddies died within a year of our graduation: Chris in a charter plane crash on his way back to college; Steve of a heart attack while playing basketball. We were all nineteen and assumed life would go on. There seemed to be no rush to speak of how we cherished one another's friendship. I was away at college when they were both buried; I will always regret that silence.

We have few traditions like those of Black women. No kitchen tables around which to assemble. No intimate spaces in which to explore our feelings of love and friendship. No books like *The Color Purple*. We gather in public places: barber shops, bars, lodges, fraternities, and street corners, places where bravado rather than intimacy are the rule. We assemble to *do* something rather than *be* with each other. We can talk about the Man, but not about how we must constantly vie with one another for the scant crumbs thrown our way. We can talk about dick and ass and pussy, but not of the fierce competition for too few jobs and scholarships. We can talk about sporting events in amazing detail, but not about how we are pitted, one against the other, as permanent adversaries.

Dream: 15 February 1984

We have all gathered in the largest classroom I have ever been in. Black men of all kinds and colors. We sit and talk and listen, telling the stories of our lives. All of the things we have ever wanted to say to each other but did not. There is much laughter but also many tears. Why has it taken us so long? Our silence has hurt us so much.

III

Dreams are what propel us through life, and allow us to focus above and beyond the hurdles that dot our passage. Medgar, Martin, and Malcolm were dreamers. And they were killed. I dare myself to dream. If I cannot vocalize a dream, which is the first step toward its realization, then I have no dream. It

remains a thought, a vision without form. I dare myself to dream that our blood is thicker than difference.

In the fall of 1980, I did not know that one of every four Black men would experience prison in his lifetime. Nor did I know that my motivation for writing to prisoners arose from a deep sense of my captivity as a closeted gay man and an oppressed Black man, rather than as an act of righteousness. Finally, I had no idea that such a correspondence would become an integral part of my life and a place for dreaming.

Ombaka and I began writing to each other under unusual circumstances. I had been writing to another prisoner named Morris, who had been transferred or released, but, in any case, had vacated the particular cell, which was to be Ombaka's new home. Ombaka found my last letter to Morris, read it, and responded. He apologized profusely in that first letter about how contrary it was to prison etiquette to read someone else's mail and even ruder to respond to it. Almost four years, and forty letters later, it seems ironic that this friendship, one of the most important in my life, is the result of such a chance occurrence. More ironic and sadder is that we probably would not have met any other way; we are that different.

I am gay and from the north; he is straight and from the south. I'm an agnostic; he's a Muslim. When I was attending prep school, Ombaka was busily acquiring his street smarts. While I studied in college, he was finishing his stint in the Army. When I was beginning graduate school, he had just begun his prison sentence. Under other circumstances these differences might have separated us. What could have been used as weapons of castigation became tools of sharing.

Our initial letters were filled with the tentative gestures one employs with new friends, the shyness, the formality, and the small talk. We searched for common ground for dialogue and the soft spots to be avoided. We spoke of the advantages and disadvantages of street smarts versus formal education. We talked at length about sexuality and how we became the sexual beings that we are. We discussed our use of language: I greatly

admired his rural tongue with its graceful turn of phrase, which seemed more natural than my stilted style, which he respected. He told me of his experiences as a Muslim and as a father; I related tales from college and gay life in the big city. We talked and talked about our differences, but we also gave each other permission to dream and to speak of those dreams. What an exciting yet fearful prospect, dreaming in the open.

Black dreams are dashed as assuredly as Black dreamers are killed. We are allowed to dream of being athletes, entertainers, and lotto winners. These are the dreams which have been dreamt for us to maintain us just where we are. How little support there is, from one another or from society, for dreams borne of personal conviction and desire. I dare myself to dream.

Astronaut Guy Bluford and I grew up on the same block. It was no secret that he dreamed of being an astronaut, but in the early sixties it was difficult for little Black boys to imagine being anything other than what we had seen. And we had seen no Black astronauts nor Black mayors of major U.S. cities. We all thought Bluford was crazy, but his dreams became a reality. We can dream the dark, the seemingly impossible.

Ombaka and I dreamt of being writers. During the course of our correspondence we *became* writers. Several months ago he sent me a 260-page manuscript of his first novel, and I am beginning to work on a major writing project (this anthology). I am extremely happy that our friendship was not lost to anger, or silence, or perceived differences. I dare myself to dream.

I dare myself to dream of us moving from survival to potential, from merely getting by to a positive getting over. I dream of Black men loving and supporting other Black men, and relieving Black women from the role of primary nurturers in our community. I dream, too, that as we receive more of what we want from each other that our special anger reserved for Black women will disappear. For too long have we expected from Black women that which we could only obtain from other men. I dare myself to dream.

I dream of a time when it is not Black men who fill the

nation's prisons; when we will not seek solace in a bottle and Top papers; and when the service is not the only viable alternative to high civilian unemployment.

I dare myself to dream of a time when I will pass a group of brothers on a corner, and the words "fuckin' faggot" will not move the air around my ears; and when my gay brother approaches me on the street that we can embrace if we choose.

I dare us to dream that we are worth wanting each other.

IV

Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties.

At eighteen, David could have been a dancer: legs grown strong from daily walks from his remote neighborhood to downtown in search of employment that would free him from his abusive family situation. David, soft-spoken and articulate, could have been a waiter gliding gracefully among the tables of a three-star restaurant. David could have performed numerous jobs, but lacking the connections that come with age and race, the Army seemed a reasonable choice. His grace and demeanor will be of little importance in Nicaragua.

Earl is always a good time. His appearance at parties, whether it's a smart cocktail sip or basement gig, is mandatory. He wakes with coffee and speed, enjoys three-joint lunches, and chases his bedtime Valium with Johnny Walker Red. None of his friends, of which he has many, suggest that he needs help. His substance abuse is ignored by all.

Stacy is a delirious queen, a concoction of current pop stars, bound eclectically in thrift store threads. His sharp and witty tongue can transform the most boring, listless evenings. In private, minus the dangles and bangles, he appears solemn and pensive, and speaks of the paucity of role models, mentors, and possibilities.

Maurice has a propensity for white people, which is more than preference—it's policy. He dismisses potential Black friendships as quickly as he switches off rap music and

discredits progressive movements. He consistently votes Republican. At night he dreams of razors cutting away thin slivers of his Black skin.

Bubba and Ray had been lovers for so long that the neighbors presumed them to be brothers or widowers. For decades their socializing had been done among an intimate circle of gay couples, so when Ray died Bubba felt too old to venture the new gay scene. Occasionally he has visitors, an equally old friend or a much younger cousin or nephew. But mostly he sits, weather permitting, on the front porch where, with a can of beer over ice, he silently weaves marvelous tales of "the life" in the thirties and forties. Yet there isn't anyone who listens.

Bobbi, a former drag queen, has plenty of time to write poetry. Gone are his makeup and high heels since he began serving his two-to-five year sentence. He had not wanted to kick that bouncer's ass; however, he, not unlike the more macho sissies clad in leather and denim, rightfully deserved admittance to that bar. Although he has had no visitors and just a couple of letters, he maintains a sense of humor typified by the title of a recent set of poems: *Where can a decent drag queen get a decent drink?*

Paul is hospitalized with AIDS. The severity of his illness is not known to his family or friends. They cannot know that he is gay; it is his secret and he will expire with it. Living a lie is one thing, but it is quite another to die within its confines.

Charles is a ventman with beautiful dreads. On days when he is not drinking and is lucid, he will tell you how he winters on the south side of the square and sleeps facing the east so that he wakes with the sun in his eyes. He is only an obstacle to passersby.

Ty and Reggie have been lovers since they met in the service seven years ago. They both perform dull and menial jobs for spiteful employers, but plan to help each other through college. Ty will attend first. Their two-room apartment, which is neither fashionably appointed nor in a fashionable neighborhood, is clearly a respite from the madness that awaits

outside their door. They would never imagine themselves as revolutionaries.

Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties, not only because sixties' revolutionaries like Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and Eldridge Cleaver dare speak our name; but because as Black men we were never meant to be together—not as father and son, brother and brother—and certainly not as lovers.

Black men loving Black men is an autonomous agenda for the eighties, which is not rooted in any particular sexual, political, or class affiliation, but in our mutual survival. The ways in which we manifest that love are as myriad as the issues we must address. Unemployment, substance abuse, self-hatred, and the lack of positive images are but some of the barriers to our loving.

Black men loving Black men is a call to action, an acknowledgment of responsibility. We take care of our own kind when the night grows cold and silent. These days the nights are cold-blooded and the silence echoes with complicity.

NOTES

1. Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals*. Argyle, N.Y.: Spinster's Ink, 1980.
2. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984.
3. Baldwin, James. *Village Voice*, vol. 29, no. 26, p. 14.
4. Blackwomon, Julie. *Revolutionary Blues and Other Fevers*. Philadelphia: self-published, 1984. (Distributed by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, P.O. Box 908, Latham, New York.)