

A REVOLUTIONARY ACT By Craig Washington

This is a commemoration, an appreciation at the cusp of my 20th year of life with HIV. There is a proverbial mixed blessing entailed in feeling like I do and having AIDS. I love being as healthy as I am. I have not yet lost the thrill of living that many of us lose long before we die. I feel fully immersed in the stream, the flow of life. Particularly I love the physicality, the carnal aspect of living. I love being in my body. I am learning to worship it without shame or apology. It is not just a mere vessel for me. While it is not my essence, it is certainly an essential part of me. I have got to love it. Because everyday the HIV that lives in me, threatens to slowly, imperceptibly, nest and divide, to weaken and kill this body of mine. I will not let that happen. And if viruses possess some form of intelligence as some admiring virologists suggest, then I suspect that this virus, my virus understands that. We have reached if not an agreement, then at least an impasse. I cannot get rid of it and it can't get rid of me. We have a very dysfunctional mutual respect for each other.

But because I have been spared many of the severe manifestations of this disease I still have to remind myself to remain vigilant. To get my bloodwork done, to call and find out what my viral load and t-cell counts are, to continue to set up appointments with my case manager. My long-term wellness has made such precautions seem less urgent. Yet I know better. I know that the insurgent that occupies my territories is clever, its patience inexhaustible, its stealth, its greatest weapon. So I must not fall asleep on my own watch. I do things to ensure my survival, informed by both intelligence and, lately far more frequently, instinct.

For instance, I love my body quite tenaciously these days. Remember Baby Suggs soul stirring sermon on the mount from Toni Morrison's "Beloved"; how she admonished black people to never ignore our flesh. "Love it," she commanded. "Yonder," she warned, "they do not love your flesh." Well, I am feeling her these days. I indulge my body in certain disciplines and certain pleasures. To eat...dessert, to sleep late, to run, to exercise, to stretch, to feel the weight that I push against or pull upon, to inhale, to drink, to lick, to suck, to sweat, to smell, to exhale, to touch, to feel, this is to Live. This is life in the body. Each body is as divine as unique as the color Purple and I think it piss God off when we can dwell in our body all the live long day and not "see" it. So I find myself sometimes smelling myself between my own legs. I taste the salt of my own tears. I touch the viscous tissue of my own pungent cum. I listen to the sound, hug the abrupt quake of my own laughter. This is what I will recall when those angels ask me about the beauty of it all. What was it like down here below.

If my focus is highly erotic, it is because the Erotic, like nothing else, reminds me of the animal that I am. I am constantly discovering the differences between the erotic and the sexual. During a recent men's retreat, I met a kind and honest brother who asked to spend the night with me without having sex. I agreed but, as there was a mutual attraction, I was afraid that I would not be able to resist the temptation of his body laid up

next to mine. How fortunate then that I managed to refrain from any sexual touch and still hold and be held by him in a manner that left me more naked than many of my sexual encounters. I felt safe and loved in the snug and warm wall of his body. I felt no lack or regret and even though I was excited by his touch I felt no need to do anything other than be touched. I never felt more alive or fully open.

I once believed that the erotic and the sexual were one and the same, or that anything considered erotic must serve as the prelude, the invitation to the inevitable sexual act. Without this all-important consummation, then the erotic is in and of itself, a worthless tease, a ruse not worth getting hot and bothered about. Erotic is the appetizer that whets our appetite for the main course, sex. And sex of course means intercourse; anything else is foreplay; and sex must culminate in ejaculation. Somebody has to come or the deed has been left undone. My boyfriend S and I enjoyed hours of delicious sex sometimes without penetration or climax, yet when I shared this with friends, several of them claimed that this was not real sex. Our culture, true to its Judeo Christian roots, not only enforces a thick, dark line between sexuality and spirituality. It also reduces the erotic to serve the singular agenda of the sexual act of intercourse.

One of the reasons why homosexuals are so feared and reviled, is because our sexualities are often not legitimized by procreation, marriage, or monogamy. The values that define sexual pleasure outside of such constructs as base and immoral are the same values that, in these United States, frame the bodies of women; black and brown people; and gays as terrains of unbridled desire and decadence. These bodies must be covered because they are profane; sanitized because they are hopelessly dirty; punished or imprisoned because they are criminal; lynched, raped, mutilated or otherwise destroyed because they are evil and threaten to subvert the dominance of white men or sully the purity of white women. When the voluptuous Janet Jackson flashed her breast before millions unsanctioned by white media moguls, it was a transgression for which she was swiftly punished. When the virile, dark-skinned 17 year old Marcus Dixon had sex with a 16 year old white girl in Rome, Georgia, it was a transgression for which he was imprisoned with all due haste. When I sucked another mans dick last night, then rode it way into the midnight hour, it was a transgression for which I could be consigned to eternal damnation or at least dispatched from this life like Sakia Gunn.

Knowing that I am an outlaw by dint of my skin, my sexuality and my serostatus, it is crucial that I celebrate my day-to-day survival in a land that rejects me as if I were an infection it has discovered and hopes to wipe out. But I know that I belong here, triple offender though I may be, that despite the odds, I have managed to survive here. It is my birthright “bought and paid for” by my African ancestors and their American progeny; and my homosexual forebears. Those whom endured and those who perished so that it would be considerably more difficult, though not impossible, for me to be killed or jailed for eyeballing a white woman or balling a man of any color. I am compelled to celebrate.

As black men who love men, we tend to carry heavy loads of shame often masked by addictions and distorted self images. We are usually served by well-intentioned organizations who don't have a clue about how we see ourselves and where our power

and resiliency lies, that we are not merely walking pathologies that are served by catchy messages with hop hop soundtracks or mud cloth graphics. How do we reach the sensual salvation we seek when we are forced to love on the minefield that the brilliant Charles Stephens characterized in the seminal anthology “Think Again”? It is, I think, an unanswerable question and yet we must ask it. One of the most powerful ways for me to exalt the improbable triumph of my drawing breath is to fully embrace my own body. To kiss and trace every warrior mark whether or not it was earned or deserved. As a teenager, I often felt embarrassed by my desires and what or who, either innocently or deliberately, aroused them. I did not wait to relinquish that shame before I started having sex with men. But no paramour however skilled or compassionate could hope to love away the stains engrained beneath my skin. This is my work and I am so commissioned for life.

There was a point, shortly after becoming infected, when sex was no longer sexy to me. After all it was the very thing that got me into this mess. I was afraid to pee much less to have sex. I was so preoccupied with the fear of infecting someone, or someone finding out, or not getting hard, that the first time afterward I could not perform. Well I met this one brother who told me that he was positive as well. And we did it. And it was good. It was so good that the morning after, I fixed him an exceptional breakfast including apricot jam and toast as Nina Simone suggested. And after he left, I took the day off so I could take time to reflect on the experience. I didn’t want to let go just yet of what had just happened and act as if nothing had changed. I wanted to savor it. I was not in love. I do not even remember his name. But I remember that he gave me something precious. He reminded me of my right to life, to a corporeal, sexual life. My flesh. I have got to love it. Do not forget to love your flesh. Just love it.

“Black Men Loving Black Men Is The Revolutionary Act” --- Joseph Beam