

On Meeting Joe Beam

I have to admit that when I first sat down to write about him I felt a little like Lillian Hellman writing her memoir *Pentimento*. (An unusual reference, I know.) The term is Italian for a phenomenon that occurs as the canvas of an oil painting ages. Sometimes the first charcoal renderings bleed through the painted images – a boathouse gives way to an evergreen, the fold of a woman’s skirt relents to a flower... it’s called pentimento because the painter ‘repented,’ or changed his mind before committing to an image. Hellman compared the act of writing her memoir to revealing the sketch beneath the painting, to remembering what was then in relation to what is now, and I finally understood her analogy. The more I grappled with the memory of meeting author/activist Joe Beam, the more it sidled into view.

Our paths crossed during the summer of 1987: two years before meeting Marlon Riggs¹, a seminal voice in the black, gay renaissance of the 90s, three years before co-founding Pomo Afro Homos² (Postmodern African American... you know the rest) with Brian Freeman and Eric Gupton and performing *Fierce Love: Stories From Black Gay Life* to critical acclaim throughout the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. I provide this bit of biography to suggest that, as a gay man of African descent living in San Francisco’s Noe Valley, I rarely encountered reflections of myself: rarely in pop media or literature or contemporary drama, and certainly not in my own neighborhood. Meeting a

¹ Marlon Riggs is responsible for several award-winning documentaries including *Color Adjustment* and the Emmy-winning *Ethnic Notions*; both were poignant exposes of the black stereotypes that pervaded pop culture and media. In addition, Marlon created, directed, and produced the experimental documentaries *Tongues Untied*, *Anthem*, *Affirmations*, *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* and *Black Is... Black Ain’t*, all inspired by autobiographical experience. Marlon’s work was brazen, unapologetic, and paved the way for many of us to tell our own stories. He was my mentor and friend.

² Co-founded by Brian Freeman, Eric Gupton, and myself in 1990, Pomo Afro Homos toured nationally and internationally with *Fierce Love: Stories From Black Gay Life* and *Dark Fruit* from 1991 to 1995. Our mission was simple: address the absence of three-dimensional black gay men in contemporary American theater. We wrote and performed characters that reflected our own experience. Additional group members included Marvin K. White, Timothy Riera, Tony Stovall and Joan Jett Black.

man who had the foresight to collect and edit our stories, and then to launch a national book tour promoting that collection was pretty surreal. And the invitation to read my poetry with him, which came from a source I honestly can't recall, was almost too much to bear.

Like everyone in my small circle of friends, I couldn't wait to meet the man captured in the black-and-white image (on the back cover of *In the Life*) that virtually radiated heat and passion. His eyes seemed to look right at, no right *through* you, and to broadcast empathy and compassion. The subtle furrow between those eyes implied a penchant for deep thought, and the cleft in his square chin resolved an impeccably chiseled face. Joe Beam was fine, okay?

But the man in the photograph was not the man I encountered as I walked into Walt Whitman Books in the Castro. Maybe it was the small crowd: predominantly white, predominantly male, and predominantly (no doubt) as curious as I was to see if the author was as fine as his photo. Maybe it was jetlag. Maybe it was the demoralizing pall of the cool fluorescent lights, but I was immediately struck by Joe's fatigue. His shoulders seemed to bear the weight of the world. And unlike the eyes in the photo, *his* eyes were dim and betrayed the warm smile on his semi-sweet chocolate face. We exchanged a tentative handshake, a guarded 'hello,' and I excused myself to pee to avoid prolonging our awkward introduction...

It was the summer of 1987, and I'd be remiss if I failed to mention that I met Joe just eighteen months after losing my father. And 'losing my father' is inaccurate. It's more accurate to say that he *passed away*, because one of the big questions on my mind that summer was: Does the soul transcend the body? Was my father *present* even though he had left the physical plane? And what exactly had he *left*? What was his legacy? There had been no insurance money or savings, no real property – just a massive Ford van in disrepair, a

family Bible, and a fistful of memories. Perhaps the biggest question of all was: Now that my father was *gone*, who – particularly among my family – would support my creative voice?

For nearly a decade I had oscillated between two vocations: one as a scientist, the other as an artist. My mother (not so quietly) supported the former; my father, a latent singer/songwriter, loudly celebrated the latter. And having a Libra moon I recognized the virtues and challenges of both. Despite my undeniable gifts for poetry and performance, I had earned a bachelor's degree in psychobiology, worked in a research laboratory, and even maintained (at one critically misguided moment in time) that I would become a veterinarian. The question that invariably froze me in my tracks was: Could I make a living as an artist? My father hadn't. And this fact (of course) fueled my mother's fervent argument.

However tentative my course, I had forged a fairly consistent practice of art making. With hands shaking and knees knocking, I had steeled myself long enough to share some of my lyrical writing at open mike poetry readings. And while working part-time as an administrative assistant, I had taken dance and writing classes at San Francisco State, attended weekly poetry workshops at Fort Mason with Devorah Majors (whose father was also a musician), and wrote theater reviews and edited a monthly poetry column for a local rag called "Coming Up!" Though the writing was on the wall (so to speak), I had been unable or *unwilling* to commit to one path or another. It seemed that movement in one direction or the other would dishonor one of my parents, and I was "educated" enough to know that not making a choice was indeed a choice. Besides, the thought of committing to my art, to my heart's desire, scared the shit out of me.

About a month before meeting Joe I had even attended a metaphysical church with my good hippie friend Aman (who has since died of AIDS) in hopes of clarifying my life's path. To my chagrin, I was subjected to a spontaneous psychic reading by one of its

ministers who said: “You’ve got this beautiful bouquet rising right up out of your crown chakra. It’s full of rhododendrons and hyacinths and roses and stargazers, but every time they’re about to blossom you reach up and push them back into your head. I don’t know what’s going on in your life, but you need to accept the blessings springing forth from your imagination...”

Thankfully, someone had the good sense to stall the reading long enough for the demographic to shift. The predominantly white, gay male audience receded as more and more brothers from Oakland and Richmond and Berkeley and San Leandro and Alameda and Bella’s and Cable’s and the Eagle Creek filed into the room. They may have even sauntered in from the old Blue and Gold down in San Francisco’s tenderloin. But as we’ve established, memory is relative.

I do know that it was my first experience reading for *family*, and my words resonated in a whole new way. I had the privilege of opening for the undisputed headliner, and reading from a collection entitled *Red Bandanas*. The poems were structured around blues and jazz forms, and were all about re-appropriating popular images of black men in the media and the subculture. Though I wouldn’t contextualize the work for several years, it was all about giving voice to the voiceless, all about validating our unique points of view as black gay men. And the work landed. Finally. The audience understood the rules of call-and-response, and gave as much as they took. Folk moaned and groaned and snapped and testified with a collective “mmm hmm” or “amen” or “well” or “chiiile” – it was ritual at its best. It was church.

However weary Joe had appeared at the outset of the evening, he verily shone as the night wore on. He spoke candidly about corresponding with brothers in prison, about reaching out to folks living in isolation in the rural south, and nurturing timid contributors to

write poems, essays, and short fiction for the book, many of who were telling their stories for the first time. There was a sense, as Joe read excerpts from *In the Life*, that he was gathering the troops, that he was elevating us. And our enthusiastic reception of his work seemed to elevate him. By the time he bowed humbly to a standing ovation, he was embodying the luminous man on the back of the book.

We gathered at my garden apartment the next day around noon: Brian Freeman, Colin Robinson, Joe Beam, me, and... this is where things get sketchy, where I comprehend the concept of penitence. I have to admit that I can't remember everybody in attendance. I close my eyes (and sort) of get a fix on Assotto Saint, Steve Langley, my friends Ron Mathis and Cornelius Moore. I squint and see scrambled eggs and scallions, croissants, plump bran muffins from Just Desserts (a landmark café on Church Street), and fiesta-ware full of strawberries and cantaloupe all lining a rich mahogany table. I listen intently and hear quiet jazz – Carmen and Sarah and Alberta and Lena, maybe some Billie – billowing from the living room to the biggish kitchen. And laughter and conversation bounces from the walls as we dish about writing and family and lovers and would-be lovers and brothers on the down-low (though the term did not exist yet), and sadly about how many of us had fallen during the pandemic – how many of us, unknowingly, would fall before it was said and done.

As much as Joe regarded *In the Life* as a work of literature, he regarded it as a tool for organizing and community building. He said that our silence was too costly to endure, that it was consuming our sanity and our lives. And he continued to speak out against that debilitating silence – in queer circles and black communities – until his death from AIDS-related complications in December 1988.

Perhaps the biggest gift of meeting him was finding fellowship. Through my involvement in that seminal anthology and its promotional tour, I began to recognize a community of like-minded men who shared my experience and isolation; began to realize that my work could connect us, and that it could ground and connect me. During the next few years, I would join the San Francisco Bay Area group Black Gay Men United (BGMU to those in the know), perform in Marlon Riggs's groundbreaking experimental documentaries *Tongues Untied*, *Anthem* and *Black Is... Black Ain't*, and tour nationally and internationally with Pomo Afro Homos, writing and performing my own stories to sell out crowds of every race, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic station. In the wake of my brief encounter with Joe, I would find voice and redefine family. I would find the courage to embrace the path that had been forged by my father and his thwarted musical career, and most assuredly by the handsome, compassionate brother who hailed from Philly... Joe Beam.