in the life.
A BLACK GAY ANTHOLOGY
for my parents,
Dorothy and Sun F. Beam
for loving

for Kenyatta Ombaka Baki
for believing

for Addie and Charles
for our future
Contents

And We Continue to Go the Way Our Blood Beats..., by James Earl Hardy / ix
Acknowledgments / xv
Introduction / xix

Coming of Age, Brad Johnson / xxv

Stepping Out
The Boy with Beer, Melvin Dixon / 2
With My Head Held Up High, Gilberto Gerald / 14

Cut Off from Among Their People
On Not Being White, Reginald Shepherd / 24
Beautiful Blackman, Blackberri / 35
Don’t Turn Your Back on Me, Stephan Lee Dais / 37
Cut Off from Among Their People, Craig G. Harris / 40

Creating Community
Why a Black Gay Church?, James S. Tinney, Ph.D. / 46
A Light That Failed, James Charles Roberts / 62
Sister Lesbos, Donald W. Woods / 68

Brother/father/lover/son
Isn’t It Funny, Essex Hemphill / 70
Better Days, Essex Hemphill / 72
Cordon Negro, Essex Hemphill / 74
Discharge USN ’63, Oye Apeji Ajanaku / 76
Protest Poem, Brad Johnson / 78
The Buddy System, Brad Johnson / 79
Getting Your Rocks Off, Melvin Dixon / 81
Serious Moonlight, Essex Hemphill / 82
Subway Trilogy, Donald W. Woods / 84
19 a poem about Kenny / portrait of a hard rock,
    Jerry Thompson / 87
I Want to Love You, Craig A. Reynolds / 89
The Hitter, Brad Johnson / 91
Weekend Plans, Craig G. Harris / 92
Etymology: A Father’s Gift, Melvin Dixon / 100
A Father’s Need; A Parent’s Desire, A. Billy S. Jones / 101
When I Stopped Kissing My Father, Philip Robinson / 109
Color Him Father: An Interview, Joseph Beam / 110
A Poem for Eric, Donald W. Woods / 114

**Speaking for Ourselves**
Emmett’s Story: Russell County, Alabama, Joseph Beam / 116
Blackberri: Singing for Our Lives, Bernard Branner / 125
Samuel R. Delany: The Possibility of Possibilities,
    Samuel R. Delany and Joseph Beam / 139
Bruce Nugent: Bohemian of the Harlem Renaissance,
    Charles Michael Smith / 162

**Stepping into Tomorrow...**
For My Own Protection, Essex Hemphill / 174
By the Year 2000, Max C. Smith / 175
Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart, Joseph Beam / 180
Risin’ to the Love We Need, Assotto Saint / 192

Contributors’ Biographies / 199
Resource Listing / 205
Updated Biographies / 206
Permissions / 219

About the Editor / 223
1986. Ronald Reagan was in the middle of his second term as president, and while he and his wife, Nancy, were advising teenagers and unmarried adults to “just say no” to sex, a diminutive, Jewish psychosexual therapist named Dr. Ruth Westheimer gleefully encouraged them to say yes. Apartheid was the law of the land in South Africa and its most formidable foe, Nelson Mandela, was in year 23 of what some (incorrectly) predicted would be a life sentence. The American public was warming up to the videocassette recorder, the personal computer and the compact disc (remember those clunky foot-long boxes they were encased in?). *The Cosby Show* was the No. 1 series on television for the second straight year, and *The Golden Girls* shocked the naysayers who doubted “a sitcom about four old broads in Miami” could be a hit. Spike Lee made his feature film debut with the low-budget, black-and-white sex comedy, *She’s Gotta Have It*. Run D.M.C. planted the seeds of hip-hop with “Walk This Way,” their collaboration with Aerosmith, while “Miss Jackson if you’re nasty” took Control of her career.

And *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, edited by a gent in Philly named Joseph Beam, was published. To say that it was groundbreaking would be an understatement: In a cultural milieu where black was misrepresented by welfare queens and crack addicts, and gay was only discussed in the context of AIDS (and that face was a white one), there was little to no acknowledgment of the existence of people who were black and gay (unless one counts Eddie Murphy’s homophobic rants).

Into this void, *ITL* stepped. But Beam’s goal wasn’t just to counter our invisibility, but give us permission to be ourselves—and free ourselves. The conspiracy of silence surrounding and religious condemnation of homosexuality in black America; and our social tokenization, political marginalization and racist objectification by white gay
America made too many of us feel that we didn’t belong, that our lives had no value, that our opinions didn’t matter, that we were alone. But we did belong, our lives did have value, our opinions did matter, and we weren’t alone. And ITL provided the proof.

I became a believer in May 1987. I was a bespectacled, spindly college junior from Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant who had just ended my own masquerade of playing it straight, searching for something that would help me figure out what being a black gay man was/is/could mean. As I entered A Different Light bookstore in Greenwich Village, my eyes zeroed in on ITL’s subtitle: posted at the very top in black block letters, it proudly announced that it was here—and that it was for me. At that moment I finally knew what folks meant by my heart skipped a beat. I purchased it and, that night, devoured it in one sitting. I was “The Boy with Beer”: standing outside the bar, anxious to go in but unsure of what and whom I’d find inside. I longed to experience the kind of oneness with another brother explored in the poem “I Want to Love You.” I learned of Bruce Nugent and Samuel Delaney, confirming my suspicion that the black gay literary canon did not begin (or end) with James Baldwin. I sighed, shouted, sang amen; and shed tears of anger, sorrow and joy.

The twenty-nine poets, songwriters, essayists, critics and journalists assembled didn’t have a way with words; they had their way with words. These literary warriors challenged the codes we followed, the cool poses we struck, the masks we wore, the smiles we forced to get along and go along. Here were men who celebrated the beauty of black gay life, black gay love, black-on-black gay love. Men who knew it wasn’t a crime to be. Men who weren’t ashamed or afraid to state something so obvious yet rarely declared in public: we are.

And I was not just one of them but a part of them. Another black man, a congregation of black men who were not related to me, called me brother—and my soul exhaled. I didn’t know any of them, but they knew me; they spoke my name. There
was such a thing as a black gay community—and I was a member of the tribe.

Earlier this year, I revisited the collection; it was like reconnecting with long-lost friends. I was somewhat surprised to discover just how the work has stayed with me. I mentally or verbally finished certain phrases, stanzas and statements, as if I had just read them a moment before, not decades ago. But it shouldn’t have been a surprise: I’ve been able to sustain and persevere, to stand up and stand down, to embrace my Negro homo self thanks to the insight of these men, who provided comfort and strength in the form of a tight, warm embrace. Like angels, they were always there.

That ITL was out of print for a day is a crime considering its influence and impact. It paved the way for every black gay male anthology that followed, from *Here to Dare: 10 Black Gay Poets* and *Shade: An Anthology of Fiction by Gay Men of African Descent* to the recent efforts *If We Have to Take Tomorrow* and *Best Black Gay Erotica*. Several of ITL’s contributors became members of Other Countries, a black gay men’s writing collective in New York that released its first journal of prose, fiction and poetry in 1988. Essex Hemphill (who also co-edited *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, ITL’s sequel, with Beam) appeared in Marlon Riggs’ 1991 award-winning documentary, *Tongues Untied*, which brought the unfiltered voices of black gay men to the screen, and then dropped his own brilliant collection of commentary and verse, *Ceremonies*, a year later (it, too, has been resurrected for new generations to treasure).

And I stepped out on faith in 1993 and put my journalism career on hold to write *B-Boy Blues*. Other writers have a similar testimony, heeding the urgent call of Beam and company to bear witness and continue telling our stories.

In this post-9/11 era, some may view ITL as an artifact whose time has come and gone. They’d be wrong. No question, the profile of non-hetero black men has bumped up: E. Lynn Harris is one of the top-selling black male authors in history;
Noah’s Arc and The DL Chronicles made their debuts as TV’s first sitcom and drama series that revolve around us; Omar Little—the Robin Hood-esque gangsta on HBO’s The Wire, brilliantly portrayed by Michael K. Williams—has carved out a new place for black gay characters outside of the stereotypical sissy box, not to mention winning over hetero fans like presidential candidate Barack Obama; Emmy winner Paris Barclay was elected first vice president of the very lily-white Director’s Guild of America; Lee Daniels produced Monster’s Ball, which turned Halle Berry into Oscar’s first black Best Actress winner; Rodney Evans (Brother to Brother), Kirk Shannon-Butts (Blueprint) and Maurice Jamal (The Ski Trip and Dirty Laundry) have created searing, heartfelt cinematic snapshots of our past and contemporary lives; rap artists like Tori Fixx, Tim’m West and Shorty Roc are destroying the delusional notion that hip-hop and homosexual are mutually exclusive life stations, while neo-soul sensation Donnie defied industry convention and publicly came out after the release of his sophomore CD, The Daily News; John Amaechi became the first (former) NBA player to reveal he is gay, and Gay Games gold medal winner Demarco Majors has truly brought sexy back on the basketball court, on the runway at New York’s Fashion Week, and in music videos; Phill Wilson established the Black AIDS Institute, which has enlisted churches, civil rights organizations, health agencies, and celebrities to end the AIDS pandemic in black America; Cleo Manago is credited with introducing the increasingly popular Africentric alternative term Same Gender Loving (SGL) into the alphabet identity soup; Keith Boykin is one of the nation’s most recognizable and revered gay activists; Karamo Brown (MTV’s The Real World) and Ray Cunningham (BET’s College Hill) have transcended the novelty of being the first openly gay brothers on their respective reality shows and emerged as tireless advocates for black SGL youth; and, with the advent of three dozen black gay pride celebrations and the blogging explosion on the Internet (led by trailblazers J. Brotherlove,
Clay Cane and Rod McCullom), the idea of “the black gay community” is turning into a global reality. But a more noticeable presence and the access to more spaces and channels to explore and express ourselves doesn’t mean the isolation, anxiety and self-hatred have disappeared.

It’s not that we need *ITL* more now or more than ever, although a case could be made that we *do*: a recent Centers for Disease Control survey suggests that nearly half of black gay/bisexual/queer/SGL men in five cities could be HIV positive (a frightening irony: that’s roughly the same percentage of *ITL* contributors we lost to AIDS); the sensational, simplistically stupid media coverage of “the down low” (stoked by a clueless Oprah) has clouded any rational discussion surrounding sex and sexuality in Black America, demonizing all black SGL men in the process; a very misguided and pathetic posse of black preachers and political puppets have joined the homophobic chorus of the white religious wrong, using language and ideology eerily and disturbingly similar to the white supremacist bile spewed by neo-Nazis and the KKK; and ragging on the fags is (still) a staple in hip-hop, while homo death chants are a rallying cry in reggae/dancehall music. And the threat of being attacked and killed for who we are is always present, as the bashing of dance music maverick Kevin Aviance, the grisly murder and dismemberment of Rashawn Brazell, and the Internet hook-up robbery and Howard Beach-style vehicular death of Michael Sandy sadly illustrate (even our elders are targeted: 72-year-old Andrew Anthos lost his life to a metal pipe-wielding punk after he had the gall to publicly admit that he is gay). Fact is, the more visible and vocal we are, the more vigilant and vicious the forces turn to not only deny us our rights but the right to be (see the imbecilic Tim “I hate gay people” Hardaway for reference). Some are determined to erase us from history. Some, from everyday life. Others, from the planet.

So we can not take how we’ve arrived at this place for granted; the spirits of Beam, Hemphill, Donald Woods, Craig
G. Harris, Melvin Dixon and Assotto Saint demand it. A generation before the phrase became a hollow hip-hop mantra, they were keepin’ it real. They blessed us with a legacy that must be preserved and honored, that is the bridge we’ve all traveled over to arrive at today. And, it doesn’t matter if one is “post-gay,” “homosexual,” “homo thug,” “DL,” “bi-curious,” “bi-questioning,” “trysexual,” or “just a freak”—ITL still speaks for those brothers who are so terrified of coming out they choose to live in a vault, who are held hostage by addictions, who sacrifice their lives for conflicts started by white men in the White House, who have been thrown out like trash by relatives because they are “that way,” who can’t reconcile their sexual selves with their spiritual selves (a la Donnie “pray the gay away” McClurkin). It still provides the armor we can wear, the blueprint we can follow, and (dare I say) the Bible from which we can derive spiritual enrichment, hope and the courage to be in the life and in this life. For while the century, the identifiers, and the battlefronts may have changed, the need to be affirmed and the struggle to be seen and respected hasn’t.

In ITL’s closing essay, Beam wrote that “Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties.” It was in the nineties, too. And it still is in the twenty-first century. Let the revolution continue...

—James Earl Hardy, March 2008

James Earl Hardy is the author of the best-selling B-Boy Blues series, which chronicles the relationship between a Buppie from Brooklyn and a homeboy from Harlem. The novels include: B-Boy Blues (1994), praised as the first gay hip-hop love story; 2nd Time Around (1996); If Only For One Nite (1997); The Day Eazy-E Died (2001); Love the One You’re With (2002); and A House Is Not a Home (2005). His first short story collection, The Freak Filez: An Erotic Anthology, will be released in spring 2009. A 1993 honors graduate of Columbia University’s School of Journalism, his byline as a feature writer and cultural critic has appeared in Entertainment Weekly, Essence, Newsweek, Out, VIBE, the Source, and the Washington Post. Born and raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, he now resides in Atlanta. He can be reached at james.earl.hardy@gmail.com.
Acknowledgments

In the Life is a reality because of the willingness and faith of its contributors. I thank all of them, particularly Essex Hemphill, Craig G. Harris, Charles Michael Smith, Assotto Saint, Max C. Smith, and Sidney Brinkley. I also wish to thank for their love, support, generosity, and kindness: Ricky B., Kenyatta Ombaka Baki, Dorothy and Sun F. Beam, Clyde Beardsley, Cei Bell, Frank Broderick, Bob Bruton, John Cunningham, Pam Freeman, Darlene Garner, Ed Hermance, L.D. Hoshall, Arnold Jackson, Isaac Jackson, Lawrence “Kenya” Jenkins, Pearl Kimberg, Ray Melrose, Arleen Olshan, Colin Robinson, Skip Strickler, Jim Tharp, Stan Ward, the staffs of Giovanni’s room and Allegra II, and others too numerous to mention. I am indebted to all of you.
...it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth...

Audre Lorde
in *The Cancer Journals*
Argyle, NY: Spinster's Ink, 1980
Foreword

Being first black and then gay, these words express things that I have experienced, things found in the black gay culture that are unknown to many. It makes me proud that these writers and artists have found a place to express our feelings and experiences. Many passages were so real to me and will be real to you as well. At times I cried just remembering how it is to be both black and gay during these truly difficult times. But here we are, still proud and living, with a culture all our own.

—Sylvester
The word-of-mouth, oral tradition of the African-American community often makes it difficult to locate the etymology of a word or phrase. *In the life*, a phrase used to describe “street life” (the lifestyle of pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, and drug dealers) is also the phrase used to describe the “gay life” (the lives of Black homosexual men and women). Street life and gay life, at times, embrace and entwine, yet at other times, are precise opposites. In this context, *in the life* refers to Black gay men.
INTRODUCTION

Leaving the Shadows Behind

All the protagonists are blond; all the Blacks are criminal and negligible. By mid-1983 I had grown weary of reading literature by white gay men who fell, quite easily, into three camps: the incestuous literati of Manhattan and Fire Island, the San Francisco cropped-moustache-clones, and the Boston-to-Cambridge politically correct radical faggots. None of them spoke to me as a Black gay man. Their words offered the reflection of a sidewalk; their characters cast ominous shadows for my footfalls. I called a personal moratorium on the writing by white gay men, and read, exclusively, work by lesbians and Black women. At the very least, their Black characters were credible and I caught glimpses of my reality in their words.

I was fed by Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, Barbara Smith’s *Home Girls*, Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, Barbara Deming’s *We Cannot Live Without Our Lives*, June Jordan’s *Civil Wars*, and Michelle Cliff’s *Claiming an Identity I Was Taught to Despise*. Their courage told me that I, too, could be courageous. I, too, could not only live with what I feel, but could draw succor from it, nurture it, and make it visible.

More and more each day, as I looked around the well-stocked shelves of Giovanni’s Room, Philadelphia’s gay, lesbian, and feminist bookstore where I worked, I wondered where was the work of Black gay men. I devoured *Blacklight* and *Habari-Daftari*; welcomed *Yemonja* (which later became *Blackheart*); located and copied issues of the defunct newspaper *Moja: Black and Gay*—but they simply weren’t enough. How many times could I read Baldwin’s *Just Above My Head* or Yulisa Amadu Maddy’s *No Past, No Present, No Future*?
In April 1984, I approached Alyson Publications with the idea of an anthology of writing and art by Black gay men. By August, we had worked out the contractual details and I began soliciting manuscripts.

When I began soliciting manuscripts and portfolios, via press releases to the gay media and the Black media, I knew of only a handful of Black gay male writers and artists. I feared that there would be few men willing to be so visible. I felt that maybe I was planning a party that few would attend.

That fall I wrote in the Philadelphia Gay News (10/25/84):

Visibility is survival.

It is possible to read thoroughly two or three consecutive issues of the Advocate, the national biweekly gay newsmagazine, and never encounter, in words or images, Black gay men. It is possible to peruse the pages of 212 Magazine’s special issue on Washington, D.C. and see no Black faces. It is possible to leaf through any of the major gay men’s porno magazines, In Touch, Drummer, Mandate, Blueboy, or Honcho, and never lay eyes on a Black Adonis. Finally, it is certainly possible to read an entire year of Christopher Street and think that there are no Black gay writers worthy of the incestuous bed of New York’s gay literati. We ain’t family. Very clearly, gay male means: white, middle-class, youthful, nautilized, and probably butch; there is no room for Black gay men within the confines of this gay pentagon.

There are many reasons for such Black gay invisibility. Hard words come to mind: power, racism, conspiracy, oppression, and privilege—each deserving of a full-fledged discussion in gay history books yet unwritten. But that is not my point here; I’ll leave the discussion of “isms” to rhetoricians and historians.

Oddly, such lack of recognition and general invisibility of Black gay men may be advantageous at
times. We have yet to become a market of conspicuous consumers, to which everything from beer to Maseratis is pitched, as is the case for white gay men. On the other hand, Black gay invisibility can be problematic. Because so little is pitched our way, concerns of critical importance, like AIDS, seem directed only at white gays. Similarly, Black gay history, not recounted by white gay media, compounds and extends our invisibility. Transmitting our stories by word of mouth does not possess archival permanence. Survival is visibility.

Initially, the manuscripts arrived slowly. There was no existing network to tap into, no writers' guild to contact. The first deadline came and I had hardly enough material for a pamphlet. But by the final deadline, I had been inundated with over 100 manuscripts and portfolios from as far away as London. I was extremely pleased but felt, quite literally, overwhelmed by the enormoseness of the task before me.

Not only was I an editor, but often was a confidant and friend to the brothers who submitted their work. I listened to their stories of failed loves, tales of looking for employment, and offered suggestions for moving past writing blocks. Time after time, their letters and phone calls catapulted me past moments of lethargy and depression. We supported each other.

Together we are making history. As Black gay men we have always existed in the African-American community. We have been ministers, hairdressers, entertainers, sales clerks, civil rights activists, teachers, playwrights, trash collectors, dancers, government officials, choir masters, and dishwashers. You name it; we’ve done it—most often with scant recognition. We have mediated family disputes, cared for and reared our siblings, and housed our sick. We have performed many and varied important roles within our community.

Together we are creating and naming a new community while extending a hand to the one from which we’ve come.
We are bringing into the light the lives which we have led in the shadows.

Together, we, the contributors gathered here, have co-fathered a child—and it’s a boy. He is strong and healthy and eager to be in the world. But as A. Billy S. Jones reminds us in his essay, “A Father’s Need; A Parent’s Desire”: a father performs the biological function of producing a child; a parent actively participates in the rearing of that child in terms of nurturing and sharing. Our task, which is not simple at all, is to nurture this manchild.

This is not an easy time to be a Black man, nor a Black woman. Just recently, Philadelphia city officials led by Black Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode served an eviction notice in the form of a bomb which killed eleven Black men, women, and children who were members of the “radical” sect known as MOVE. And, as I write these words, the tensions and death toll rise in apartheid South Africa. We are dying in prisons, on drugs, in the streets, by the hands of the state and by our own.

It is a most difficult time to be Black and gay. Isaac Jackson, writing in Yemonja, wrote:

Being a black man who loves men, black men, is a radical statement in these United States in 1981. I think many black men have been discouraged from developing a community. Just as identifying with Africa was taboo at one time, two black men loving each other is too much for a lot of people to handle.

In 1985, we are still radicals. Because of our homosexuality the Black community casts us as outsiders. We are the poor relations, the proverbial black sheep, without a history, a literature, a religion, or a community. Our already tenuous position as Black men in white America is exacerbated because we are gay. We are even more susceptible to the despair, alienation, and delusion that threatens to engulf the entire Black community. Poet Essex Hemphill, in “For My Own
“Protection,” writes:

I want to start an organization
to save my life.
If whales, snails, dogs, cats
Chrysler, and Nixon can be saved,
the lives of Black men are priceless
and can be saved.
We should be able to save each other.
I don’t want to wait for the Heritage Foundation
to release a study saying
Black people are almost extinct.
I don’t want to be the living dead
pacified with drugs, sex, and rock-n-roll.
If a human chain can be formed
around nuclear missile sites,
then surely Black men can form
human chains around Anacostia, Harlem,
South Africa, Wall Street, Hollywood,
each other.

In the Life is the beginning of that organization. The words and images here—by, for, and about Black gay men—are for us as we begin to end the silence that has surrounded our lives, as we begin creating ourselves, as we begin to come to power. We are survivors and have come to tell our stories of men loving men.

We speak for the brothers whose silence has cost them their sanity.
We speak for the brothers behind bars whose words, at the very least, must be liberated.
We speak for the strange fruit hung from trees.
We speak for the brothers who drowned in alcohol, and whose spirits were pierced by needles.
We speak for the brothers who have never been allowed to dream.
We speak for the 2500 brothers who have died of AIDS.
We speak for the brothers killed in Nam, Grenada, South Africa, on street corners, in neighborhood bars.

The bottom line is this: We are Black men who are proudly gay. What we offer is our lives, our love, our visions. We are risin’ to the love we all need. We are coming home with our heads help up high.
We stand here listening, and are aware of night as it awakens in us the remembrance of dreaming earlier this day when the birds in our woods signaled our eyes to open and our nostrils to twitch from the sting of first inhalations.

Some birds do, indeed, sing through the night of all we can remember, temperature gaugings at the site of our earliest emergence revealing that all was cool then, after the fire of earth’s displacements and the cathartic pains that grew out from our hairy backs.

Now we attempt to stand upright, our fingers craving the touch of skies and the tops of trees as we climb, scarring thighs, to witness the birth of suns and revel in that heaven in our mind that seeks to reveal itself to us in all its brilliance during the multitudinous writhings of whatever metamorphic pilgrimage we must make during this era of darkness and human folly.

We must emerge again as warriors and wage a battle of love as a legacy to those birds in our woods and to ourselves.