

Meeting at the Pass

"I know sometimes it isn't easy being my friend."

--Doc Holliday in Lawrence Kasdan's Wyatt Earp

By Afaa Michael Weaver

Apples look like hearts. There are googles of heart shaped Valentine's candies. Chocolate is so much sweeter in a heart's shape. I don't think I would ever want to touch a human heart. Like most people, I'm satisfied to know I have one but not really interested in seeing it or anyone else's. I saw a horror movie once when I was in the third grade. This evil spirit snatched a woman's heart right out of her body, held it for a moment and then put it into her own body. I couldn't sleep for two months. It's enough to know we have this slippery thing that we occasionally feel as it beats inside us, and we know we should be nice to it, but now and then we sneak things like french fries and potato chips. A few won't hurt this mystery that sends blood to a zillion places.

The Treehouse was the third floor of a Victorian house owned by the Butlers, lovely people who fell in love in the third grade at home in South Carolina and had been married for fifty years, both of them in their eighties, spry and loving. My own marriage had failed, and I retreated to this apartment, the back of which was held in the thrust of leaves from maples three stories tall and more. The house was in Philadelphia's University City neighborhood, in walking distance of several nice coffee shops, including one called Chimes. I bought a computer and buried myself in writing. I was determined to have no secrets and began writing about my relationships. But sometimes your secrets know you when you don't know them. The summer was otherwise dull, and the winter, lonely, cold, and full of new feelings that come when things fail.

One day that following spring Roger Allen Jones came walking down my block stepping like Sporting Beaseley in his sport jacket and too big sneakers. He was a poet like none other and knew me by my book Water Song. I was on my front steps, and as he came nearer he sang out my name in operatic style.

"Michael S. Weaver." He was a tiny man with a lion's voice.

"How you doing? I am Roger Allen Jones, New American Poet. Lamont Steptoe introduced me to you. I sell used books at the

university." Roger was faithful to his sidewalk vendor business that, in conjunction with his own poetry, made him something of a Philadelphia celebrity.

"I'm alright," I said, smiling. "How you doin'?"

"I'm alright," he said with a hacking cough. "I liked your first book Water Song. You write any poetry lately?"

Roger lived for poetry like no one I have ever known. A native of West Philadelphia, he had been to Paris while serving in the Air Force but had never been to places near Philly, such as Cape May. Still, poetry was his passport to interiors and exteriors.

"Have you written your deathbed poems?"

I was stunned, but said I had not thought of it.

"Oh!" he said in his characteristic way, exhaling like a lion.

Roger had lots of time as he was semi-retired, so we started hanging out in the city's literary spots. We went to Chimes and hung out with Penn students. Time passed. Spring became summer again. I had been in the Treehouse for one year. After a trip to Boston to give a reading, I noticed I was having trouble breathing. One evening I developed a craving for cheese cake and decided to walk the three blocks to the grocery store that was also a writer's rendezvous. The three blocks took forever, and I felt like my torso was turning into cement. That night I tried to sleep but could not breathe unless I sat propped up with pillows. In an instant I remembered how my mother died of congestive heart failure following a heart attack, but I had never had a heart attack and so decided this was just a bad cold. It was Saturday night. The following morning I told Roger I was going to take a taxi to the emergency room to see about this cold.

My blood pressure was off the charts and my heart was in congestive failure. The nurse was adamant. "Get in that wheelchair. You are not going anywhere."

Hearts are supposed to be forever, like love, like the way I felt when my first love pressed up against me, the smell of her hair in my nose, her breath mine, two hearts beating together, and in my naïve adolescent way of seeing, two beating as one.

Hearts are the beautiful and petite things God holds in his hands before gently placing them inside us, and mine was now failing. My arteries were all clear, but my heart was swollen with heartache and the sadness of depression with which I had struggled for so long. There are secrets who know us when we do not know them. My heart held these secrets of the seeds of sadness.

I called family and friends, but the first person to see me was Roger. He came around the corner with a plastic grocery bag full of books and sat next to me in reverent silence, like someone gazing on a

funeral shroud. All of us who knew and loved Roger knew that he drank, but he sat there sober and silent, asking now and then if there was anything I wanted. I could think of nothing. Barely able to walk but with no outward appearance of being ill, I looked out at the window, unable to grieve, thinking now and then of what it is to sleep, to sleep away, sleep away from knowing and consciousness into some kind of universal sameness, an original verse or maybe just nothing.

Prognoses are not like apples or Valentine's candy because prognoses often stink. Mine stank. I had five years to live taking seven medications and with limited mobility. After that I would need someone else's heart in order to live. At forty-three that meant I would not live to fifty without a transplant. Rumors of my death began to spread.

Did you hear? Michael S. Weaver died. Michael S. Weaver? Who was he? I heard he was hit by a car. No, that's not it. He was with some woman and had a heart attack. That's what I heard. He was from Baltimore. Really? How did he get to Brown? He did go to Brown, didn't he? Well, I heard he had some kind of disease.

No, it was cheese cake, and yet I live.

In elementary school we played the game of news gossip. The teacher would give one person in the room a fact which then traveled one by one throughout the class. The last person to receive it would tell the whole class the fact as he or she heard it. This final telling was always miles away from the original story. I wonder who buried me prematurely. I wonder who was quietly celebrating my move into the space of nothing. Literary friends are all too often less than genuine. People who really know and love you are sometimes the few who live outside the world of literary gamesmanship.

Home from the hospital, I arranged my various bottles of medicine on the end section of my futon bed so they looked like a small city. The large trees outside the window were a lovely canopy that helped me forget the gunfire that sometimes came in the evening time. Roger and I would time our forays in the neighborhood so that we traveled in safer times, when the stickup artists were likely resting. The first week or so in any given month was usually safer due to the higher cash flow. Roger had to be admitted to Detox just after I came home from my one week stay at HUP. He was annoyed, of course.

He announced, "I asked the nurse if I should eat bananas."

"What did she say?"

"She said Mr. Jones, you need to eat a boatload of bananas."

"Roger, they can get you a new liver, like Mickey Mantle. You know they want to give me a new heart."

Roger would call my full name for emphasis or to subtly express

the emotional fact of me having gotten on his last nerve.

"Michael S. Weaver. They will never make a Frankenstein out of me."

"That was the doctor, not the monster."

"Whatever. It's your life, Michael S. Weaver, your life. You live the way you want to live and die the way you want to die. I'm gonna die right up there in my apartment and be there for a week before they find me. That's how I'm going."

Hearts must have ears. I have no idea of what they look like, but hearts can hear us. With that faith I began talking to mine in an apologetic tone, vaguely hiding my sense of disappointment. It then occurred to me that perhaps my heart was fed up with me, with my stubborn determination, the long road of rocky relationships, pushing my body and mind beyond limits in the factories for fifteen years and now trying to break records for tenure at Rutgers. I didn't know who was angrier or who should be. More importantly, I still had a distance to go in firmly believing that the apple shaped loveliness that drove endless gallons of blood to where they were needed to go inside me was in fact as much me as I was it. I am my heart, and my heart is me. We are going out together.

When I took the catheterization test I had a chance to see my heart. Lying on the table in the tech room of the hospital, one of the doctors announced that my heart was visible on the screen. I peeped but was only able to bear it for three seconds. It was nothing like candy or apples or the candied apples we craved as children growing up in Baltimore. There was nothing as good as candied apples, although they could break your teeth. But this reality check was nothing like the dreams of the thing. I had worn out the thing that feeds my poetic being.

"Mr. Weaver, you have the heart of an old man."

Yeah right. I was born old.

I was given a list of things not to do, including driving for over thirty minutes at a time, so I immediately disobeyed, rented a new Ford Taurus and drove Roger to Cape May. It was his first time. We parked near the section of the beach near the old Christian Admiral Hotel. I walked slowly along, shooing seagulls. Roger just sat and studied the water. It was a clear and blue day, with an occasional dolphin spinning in the distance.

"How do you like it, Roger?"

"It sure beats watching television."

The doctors did not think exercise would help, but I returned to Taijiquan and the aspects of Chinese medicine it entails, especially cultivating the bioelectric Qi. As soon as I could take the train I went to

Baltimore to see my old teacher, Shifu Huang Chien Liang. I had trained faithfully for six years, up until I left Baltimore to attend Brown's writing program. Entering academia, I fell away from regular practice, sometimes doing nothing for months at a time and then only practicing minimally. Roger was amused that I was doing gongfu and no amount of explanation would change his perception. It was all some attachment to a Bruce Lee machismo in Roger's way of seeing things.

We had an easier common language for machismo in westerns.

Roger was a tiny man with the voice of a behemoth "Hey Cisco! Let's go to the movies."

"Roger, I'm busy."

"Oh, I see. You doing your Taiji again. Well, call me when you get finished. That stuff won't help you. Better buy a good pistol."

"I'll call you when I finish."

"Okay, I'll be over here drinking."

Little by little I increased my exercise and range of walking, despite the doctor's warnings. Several other friends helped, including Ted and Emma, longtime friends from West Philadelphia. My cousins Curtis and Catherine were on standby, as they lived only a few minutes away, and the Butlers were always there. One night I had uncomfortable feelings in my chest, and I called downstairs to them at four-thirty in the morning. Mr. Butler came up and sat with me and convinced me to go to the emergency room, but there was nothing wrong. My heart was struggling to regain a normal rhythm.

One day the young cardiac resident who attended me called with good news. "Mr. Weaver, your heart has regained a normal rhythm."

A friend in California whom I knew only in cyberspace had taken care of her diabetic father with his congestive heart failure gave me supportive advice, including that she thought I had a much better chance than most with this affliction.

"For the rest of your life, it will be medicine, exercise, and heart appropriate eating. Accept that but do not accept all the doctors say. They don't know everything."

Roger's time was more limited than mine, and we both knew it, although we tried not to talk about. However, it was his will that failed before his organs. We went to lunch one day at a pizzeria restaurant around the corner on Baltimore Avenue, where I had a salad and ordered a roast beef sandwich for him. He would not eat.

He said, "I'm not happy anymore. But you listen to me. I want you to stop getting married all the time and settle down and enjoy your poetry and your teaching. You are the poet. Take care of your heart and let the women alone for awhile. When you get older good things will happen for you. But I'm done."

That fall we went to a benefit at Robin's bookstore. Larry Robin was struggling against Border's. Larry had been a friend of poets and writers for years and is a Philly cornerstone. We went down by bus as I do not own a car. We moved so slowly that after the bookstore event Teddy Harris helped us get onto the bus. I felt so old and worn and thanked Teddy for helping two old men get on the bus. He chuckled.

A year later, in the summer of ninety-six, I moved to Boston as I entered into a relationship with an Italian woman kind enough to encourage my exercise, especially the walking. Once during a trip to New York she encouraged me to walk from 125th Street to mid-Manhattan. I was wearing the prescription sunglasses I had to have as the Lasix made my eyes vulnerable to the sunlight. We walked for most of the afternoon. The relationship did not last, but she gave me the courage to walk a longer mile.

Roger would call and joke with us until he could no longer pay his phone bill. I left Boston to move to Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and be poet-in-residence at Bucknell's Stadler Center for Poetry, where I called to check on him as often as possible.

It was the spring of ninety-seven, the year I took the name Afaa as given to me by Osunye Tess Onmueme. Afaa is Ibo for oracle.

Roger stopped answering the phone. I was worried and decided to go see him. It seemed he had been on the bus stop waiting to go buy a video player so he could watch his movies. Two stickup boys robbed him and pushed him around a little. I was distraught. A week later I came back. When I opened the door he was on the floor wrapped in a blanket, shivering. It was a warm day in May, a week or so before his birthday. He asked me to go get him some liquor.

"Roger, why don't you let me take you to the emergency room?"

"Why you want to do me that way? Can't you just do what I ask?"

It was not the liquor. He was asking to be granted his wish, to make his exit from this life in the way he often talked about, quietly in the space of his own home. I came back with a six pack of beer as the state stores were all closed. I could not get his cherished vodka. I used my keys again to open the door. He was still shaking.

"Thank you, Boss Hoss. You going back to the college now?"

I was choking. "Yeah, you know I'm teaching over there for a minute. Gotta pay these bills from the last marriage."

"You just remember what I told you about your poetry. Alright?"

"Roger, I'll be back in a few days."

Behind him was the darkness of the room, his face lit only by the candle. We went back to the language of the westerns.

He looked up and said, "I'll meet you at the pass."

I hung there in the silence for a minute. "Come on Roger."

"No, I'm done. Go on now."

"Meet you at the pass, partner."

When I came back the following weekend there was a towel at the door. A rod of fear went straight through me. I knew he was gone and the towel was there to cover the odor as he had not been found for several days. I knew all this but knocked on the door of a neighbor, who told me the same. I went in to say a goodbye in the space where we had talked about poetry, the death smell thick in the air. Roger was fifty-two.

African-Americans say an old black man is a miracle.

At fifty-three I am now one of Shifu Huang's Dao disciples. My health has gradually but steadily improved to where my heart functions normally with only two medications as opposed to the seven I was taking. Competing in martial arts competitions I have won gold, silver, and bronze medals. With help, I confronted the wounds of an abusive childhood and found the seeds of my sadness, the secret my heart had been holding, what it knew of me and kept until I could listen, even as the secrets took it into failure. Still I know I must live what one doctor described as a hygienic life.

In medical poetics my heart gave me what another doctor said was a limited insult. In other words it was a grave warning, all puns intended.

After convening an international conference on Chinese poetry in ninety-four, seven years after Roger died, I took a trip to China to meet some of the poets who attended my conference. I was in Hai Nan at a beach resort with Wang Xiaoni and her husband, speaking in Chinese about my motivations for holding the conference. As I explained that I wanted to give something back to the culture that gave so much to me, Wang Xiaoni, one of the most prominent poets in China, looked at me with deepest sincerity and said "Thank you."

Some vision formed itself in my eyes. On the beach I could see Roger sitting, gazing at the ocean, rocking a little the way he liked to rock with that lion's heart and voice that beat inside that tiny body.

"It sure beats watching television."

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