

"This book is a brilliant love letter to those we lost and a message for all of us who remember. We must keep telling the stories for those who carry on next."

—LIDIA YUKNAVITCH,
author of *The Chronology of Water*



blood loss

A LOVE STORY OF
AIDS, ACTIVISM, AND ART

Keiko Lane

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BUY

blood

DUKE

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(*Heteros*), 1994. Blood on drywall, 96 × 72 in.

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For my families,
the living and the dead



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Each night we sit around this table in America,
two stones, the wooden bowl
at its center. When
you were gone
the bowl held plums and we wrote
our words addressed to wherever you were
though the letters would never reach you
come home.

The history of each of us
is a call across distance
trying to name so many wounds
until finally we call death
an absence
when nothing can name the absent
their constant falling from this world.

MAXINE SCATES, "THE BORDER"

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Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so, when we speak about *my* sexuality or *my* gender, as we do (and as we must), we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as *modes of being dispossessed*, ways of being for another, or, indeed, by virtue of another.

JUDITH BUTLER, *UNDOING GENDER*

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the problem of the story

WE WANT TO IMAGINE that there might be a time after. We want to remember a time before. There is no before. Even when we can call up some narrative of our lives before, there is no feeling that, in its recollection, is not refelt and reimagined through the anticipatory veil of what we have seen, what lives in our bodies and in the hollow echo of our stilted breath. We remember the first hospital the first hospice the first dying the first death the first memorial bonfire. We want to imagine that there will be a time after. But there won't be. Having lived through (though maybe not survived), there is no future in which this did not happen.



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CORY CALLED ME TO HIS HOUSE in the middle of the night during the first week of queer rebellion in response to California governor Pete Wilson's veto of AB-101, the 1991 queer housing and employment nondiscrimination act. Cory had been thrown to the ground by riot police, trampled, hog-tied, beaten, detained. Released, he was home again, alone, and wanted me.

He told me he had been hurt, but still I couldn't have prepared for the damage. I walked in the door of the darkened house and leaned up to kiss him. He turned his mouth away from me, and my lips ricocheted off his jaw and he winced. He had showered but couldn't bear to put clothing back on his wounded skin. He was standing naked in the dark living room. I turned on the light in the corner of the room to look at him closely. His skin was scraped raw along his arms, jaw, cheekbones, legs, and chest. His lips were swollen and split. His chest, arms, and back were blooming with deep purple bruises from the knees and clubs of police who had thrown him to the ground, pinning him down. "Oh, my love," I said, and reached my hand to his cheek. He caught my hand in his and said, "Gloves."

It felt like hours, like days. I held ice packs to the visible bruises, and to his shoulders, which had been badly wrenched while he was handcuffed. I kept fighting with the gloves, which were too big for my small hands, trying to roll the glove fingers tight against my fingers, the latex slippery with antibiotic ointment. Frustrated, I started to take the gloves off. "Leave them on," he said, clenching through the pain as I gently palpated his shoulders, trying to distinguish between the swollen, spongy texture of bruised muscles and the frayed-rope edges of torn ligaments, his nerves battered and pinched in the swelling tissue. I kept wiping away streaks of ointment and blood. "I can't feel what I'm doing," I said, trying to push back the excess latex pooling around my fingertips. I bandaged him the best I could, stanching the bleeding from the deeper cuts on his arms, and we crawled into his bed.

We fell asleep in our usual pose, his arm draped across my chest, his face against the side of my face, my hands laced through his hands.

I woke up in the still-dark of not-quite-morning, hot and itchy. I slipped out from under his arm and walked to the bathroom. When I turned on the light and looked in the mirror, there were thick streaks of dried blood across my forehead, cheek, and lips where his cracked lips must have bled in his sleep. I could taste the sour iron residue of blood against my tongue. The metallic tang made my eyes water. My arms and hands were covered in blood, and my chest was painted with patches of still sticky and drying blood

from the wounds on his arms, which must have reopened where I hadn't bandaged them tightly enough. He'd bled through his bandages and then through my shirt.

Back in the bedroom, I turned on the bedside lamp and reached for his arm. He groaned, still half asleep, turning his face away from the light and pulling his arm away from me. "Sweetheart, let me see," I said, and took his arm back. "No hospital," he mumbled, and closed his eyes. Immediately his breathing deepened back into exhausted sleep. I pulled off the soaked bandages at the incision on his arm that I couldn't see clearly earlier, couldn't feel with gloves. It was one small, deep gouge in the middle of a long scrape. I didn't think it needed stitches.

I went back to the bathroom to get gauze, tape, a clean, damp cloth. I used my arm to push my hair out of my face, trying not to touch my eyes with my hands. I made a decision. Without the too-large gloves I could feel the subtlety and depth of the wound, where it opened, where it closed. I could feel the boundary of the outer layer of skin protecting the inner layer of vulnerable flesh. I felt the edges of the wound, washed it, patted it dry, applied more ointment with the naked pad of my index finger, then wrapped it again.

He only stirred a little, his breathing steady and deep, as I taped the gauze in place and turned out the light. Back in the bathroom, I put the first aid supplies away, then stripped and got into the shower, where I washed the blood—Cory's blood—from my arms, my chest, my face, and scraped it out from under my fingernails.

Dried blood, when washed, doesn't rehydrate, doesn't thicken back to crimson viscosity, but flakes off, sticking to the shower floor like chips of black gold at the bottom of a snowmelt river.

Standing in the spray of scalding water, my muscles coiled tight, my anger building and boiling, my fists clenched. A few nights before, we'd been up all night as part of the night-watch security team at the encampment where Rob was on hunger strike demanding that the governor sign the bill, which he had now rejected. A cold fall night, we'd paced to stay warm, vision gritty with fatigue, watching for bashers who might come in the form of vigilantes from the conservative church down the coast, or in the form of the local police department. I slammed my fist hard into the shower wall. The week before that, we had been up all night with Robert in the hospital, waiting for test results we already knew would, if he was lucky, come back as *Pneumocystis*. I slammed my hand against the shower wall again. Frustration. That midnight blurring of grief and rage. Cory's bloody face flashing in front of my closed eyes. My fist hard against the wall. Then, not wanting to wake Cory, I

wrapped my arms around myself, containing myself within the boundaries of my own arms, trying to slow my breathing. I don't know how long I stood under the pouring water. I couldn't stop crying. As the water cooled, I felt the sting of it hitting my raw skin. I had dug my fingernails into my arms and broken my skin, dragging thick scrapes from my shoulders to my biceps. My blood, brighter red and still liquid, poured down my arms in the spray of the shower and swirled around the dried flakes of Cory's blood, and our blood ran down the drain.

Cory stayed asleep when I crawled back into his bed. I rested my palm against his chest, and his muscles twitched and trembled as they began to relax and let go of their tension. As the gray light of morning pushed through the window, I checked that he had not bled through his bandages again and pressed my lips to his forehead as gently as I could, feeling for fever. I used my unbloodied hands to push my hair back away from my face. My arms had stopped bleeding, the raw tracks in my skin covered by a worn-thin SILENCE = DEATH T-shirt. In his sleep-delirium, Cory rolled toward me and draped his now tightly bandaged arm across my chest.



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I'VE CARRIED THAT NIGHT in my memory, in my body, since October 1991. And I pause, stuck, every time I try to tell it. Mary says, "Just tell the story. It's a love story. Tell the whole thing." And Mary is right. It is a love story. And it isn't just the story of me and Cory, though it is that story. It is also a little of the story of Steven, of Robert, of Mary and Nancy, of Jeff and Pete. It is the story of a queer family, how we found each other, how we've loved each other and held each other through space and time. How we've failed each other.

The problem of the story is the problem of memory. Each flashing image is one moment in time: Cory. Me. A cottage in Echo Park set into the side of a hill. The middle of one night. One decision. One moment of intimacy. And it is also the story of thousands of queers coming together to rebel against systemic oppression. To rebel against erasure. It is the story of the violence done to queer bodies. That violence is at once specific—Cory's body, Cory's battered limbs, Cory's broken skin—and symbolic—the ways in which most of us have been beaten, body and psyche, by forces both named and unnamable. And it is also the story of blood and the fragile boundaries of skin, the permeability of the air around us, our insistent desire to touch each other without anything between us. It is the story of our plague, which has not ended.

And as I write this, I hear the voice of the Showman, that underworld guide from *Queen of Angels*, the last play Jim wrote before he died, declaring in act 1:

At the tym o the telun twaz a tayl withowt no indun
 4 the playg that wuz visatun wuz stil desindun.
 Thiz stowree thin iz kunsumin a man
 Hu luvd an lawst hiz fren 2 deth.
 An the lezun he lurnt wuz
 That he had not the kupasitee 2 breeng hem bak.
 Tiz the stowree so 2 speek o bekumun hewmun.¹

[At the time of the telling was a tale without no ending
 For the plague that was visiting was still descending.
 This story then is concerning a man
 Who loved and lost his friend to death.
 And the lesson he learned was
 That he had not the capacity to bring him back.
 'Tis the story so to speak of becoming human.]²

Some of these stories we've told. Some of these stories we tell together, trying to remember. Other stories happened in our private griefs and rages, and we've kept them hidden all these years, even from each other.

Mary says, "Tell the story, the whole story." But what is the story? It migrates, changes shape through the telling. I tell it, and it gets fixed in time. But in what time? And with what language? I tell it and wonder who the "I" is who speaks. The "I" who loved Cory, who loved Steven, who came of age into the fierce rebellions of ACT UP, has been changed. There is no way to travel back and tell it as it unfolded, as though it had not yet happened, and we had not seen what was to come. So, what did happen to us? To all of us who were there? The "I" who remembers and speaks now is the "I" who was created by the experience.

Does the process of remembering change the story? Neuroscience tells us that every time we remember and recollect and renarrate, we change the story, shift the point of focus, shape it to whatever image or feeling we are most driven by in that particular moment of telling. It isn't that we're lying, it isn't exactly that we're remembering something we had forgotten but simply that memory is a process of associations. We archive by association, and from association we call forth our embodied archives. We remember things not as they happened but as we felt them. Our lives move forward, collecting experience and feeling, and we drag our stories with us. We drag our ghosts into our imperfect, shifting embodied present.

Memory, like loss (or as loss?), as Jim's Showman tells us, is the process of becoming human.

In our queer world, things don't happen in order. We remember as we tell it, associating one moment to the next. When we all try to tell the story together, we are less of a chorus, synchronized, harmonized, than we are a quarreling murder of crows, cawing over each other, associating differently, asserting our singular, fragmented, discordant memories. Our singular, fragmented, discordant bodies.

We also remake our stories to avoid association. We want to forget as much as we want to remember.

We feel crazy when we convince ourselves that the story happened one way, but our bodies remember it another way.

There are so many ways the heart can be broken. And there are so many ways the body can be broken.

The great koan of AIDS veterans may be this: How is it possible for the plague to live in our bodies even when it doesn't live in our blood?

I won't be coy. I'll tell you that I came through the worst of the plague years seronegative, and I have stayed that way. I don't know how. The plague lives

not in my blood but in my sense memory. The way I curl my body around the absence of those I've loved and lean toward the ones who are still here.

Our queer family has become a space defined by absence. Those we've lost. The parts of ourselves we've lost along the way. When we rebuild, we're different. Maybe we're supposed to be different. Maybe that's the point of having loved. Of having lost. Of surviving still. Becoming human is one long story of love in the face of loss. And loss coming anyway.

The poet Carolyn Forché, who has documented the atrocities of the twentieth century through the archives of poetry, believes that when poets bear witness to the world, everyone they tell becomes responsible for what they have heard and what they come to know. What do we now know? Cory was a poet and a painter, his medium was words, and his medium was blood. Jim left plays. Steven, novels. They bore witness and did not survive. And those of us who witnessed their lives, who lived through them, with them, what is our responsibility? To the living? To the dead? The witness becomes a participant and is changed.

This story doesn't start at the beginning. It starts now, in the middle, radiates forward and backward in time, in feeling.

I'll tell you now what you've already guessed. In this story, Cory will die. Most of them will. That is neither the beginning of the story nor the end.

What we do to try to save each other, what we do to try to forget. The memories that won't be banished. That's the story.

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notes

THE PROBLEM OF THE STORY

- 1 Pickett, *Queen of Angels*, act 1, scene 1, page 2. An early draft of the play was gifted to me by the playwright in 1993.
- 2 Translation/interpretation by author.

THE BEGINNING

- 1 Olga Broumas, "Privacy," in *Perpetua*, 94.
- 2 Olga Broumas, "The Knife," in *Perpetua*, 89.

AN ARCHIVE OF IMPENDING LOSS

- 1 Karr, "AIDS-Phobes Make Me Puke," 2–4.
- 2 Auli and Karr, "Dear Crypta," 2.
- 3 Auli and Karr, "Crypta la Cockus," 4.
- 4 Auli and Karr, "Crypta Speaks," 4–5.
- 5 Gray, personal ad, 7.
- 6 Karr, "Queer AIDS Activist Free at Last," 3.
- 7 Duplechan, "BLK Interview," 17.
- 8 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 19.

WHAT LOVE IS

- 1 Meeropol, "Strange Fruit."
- 2 Meeropol, "Strange Fruit."

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