

The Book of Blood

Books of Blood, #1

by Clive Barker, 1952-

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The dead have highways.

They run, unerring lines of ghost-trains, of dream-carriages, across the wasteland behind our lives, bearing an endless traffic of departed souls. Their thrum and throb can be heard in the broken places of the world, through cracks made by acts of cruelty, violence and depravity. Their freight, the wandering dead, can be glimpsed when the heart is close to bursting, and sights that should be hidden come plainly into view.

They have sign-posts, these highways, and bridges and lay-bys. They have turnpikes and intersections. It is at these intersections, where the crowds of dead

mingle and cross, that this forbidden highway is most likely to spill through into our world. The traffic is heavy at the cross-roads, and the voices of the dead are at their most shrill. Here the barriers that separate one reality from the next are worn thin with the passage of innumerable feet. Such an intersection on the highway of the dead was located at Number 65, Tollington Place. Just a brick-fronted, mock-Georgian detached house, Number 65 was unremarkable in every other way. An old, forgettable house, stripped of the cheap grandeur it had once laid claim to, it had stood empty for a decade or more. It was not rising damp that drove tenants from Number 65. It was not the rot in the cellars, or the subsidence that had opened a crack in the front of the house that ran from doorstep to eaves, it was the noise of passage. In the upper storey the din of that traffic never ceased. It cracked the plaster on the walls and it warped the beams. It rattled the windows. It rattled the mind too. Number 65, Tollington Place was a haunted house, and no-one could possess it for long without insanity setting in.

At some time in its history a horror had been committed in that house. No-one knew when, or what. But even to the untrained observer the oppressive atmosphere of the house, particularly the top storey, was unmistakable. There was a memory and a promise of blood in the air of Number 65, a scent that lingered in the sinuses, and turned the strongest stomach. The building and its environs were shunned by vermin, by birds, even by flies. No woodlice crawled in its kitchen, no starling had nested in its attic. Whatever violence had been done there, it had opened the house up, as surely as a knife slits a fish's belly; and through that cut, that wound in the world, the dead peered out, and had their say.

That was the rumour anyway. It was the third week of the investigation at 65, Tollington Place. Three weeks of unprecedented success in the realm of the paranormal. Using a newcomer to the business, a twenty-year-old called Simon McNeal, as a medium, the Essex University Parapsychology Unit had recorded all but incontrovertible evidence of life after death.

In the top room of the house, a claustrophobic corridor of a room, the McNeal boy had apparently summoned the dead, and at his request they had left copious evidence of their visits, writing in a hundred different hands on the pale ochre walls. They wrote, it seemed, whatever came into their heads. Their names, of course, and their birth and death dates. Fragments of memories, and well-wishes to their living descendants, strange elliptical phrases that hinted at their present torments and mourned their lost joys. Some of the hands were square and ugly, some delicate and feminine. There were obscene drawings and half-finished jokes alongside lines of romantic poetry. A badly drawn rose. A game of noughts and crosses. A shopping list.

The famous had come to this wailing wall—Mussolini was there, Lennon and Janis Joplin—and nobodies too, forgotten people, had signed themselves beside the greats. It was a roll-call of the dead, and it was growing day by day, as though word of mouth was spreading amongst the lost tribes, and seducing them out of silence to sign this barren room with their sacred presence.

After a lifetime's work in the field of psychic research, Doctor Florescu was well accustomed to the hard facts of failure. It had been almost comfortable, settling back into a certainty that the evidence would never manifest itself. Now, faced with a sudden and spectacular success, she felt both elated and confused.

She sat, as she had sat for three incredible weeks, in the main room on the middle floor, one flight of stairs down from the writing room, and listened to the clamour of noises from upstairs with a sort of awe, scarcely daring to believe that she was allowed to be present at this miracle. There had been nibbles before, tantalizing hints of voices from another world, but this was the first time that province had insisted on being heard.

Upstairs, the noises stopped.

Mary looked at her watch: it was six-seventeen p.m.

For some reason best known to the visitors, the contact never lasted much after six. She'd wait til half-past then go up. What would it have been today? Who would have come to that sordid little room, and left their mark? „Shall I set up the cameras?” Reg Fuller, her assistant, asked.

„Please,” she murmured, distracted by expectation.

„Wonder what we'll get today?”

„We'll leave him ten minutes.”

„Sure.”

Upstairs, McNeal slumped in the corner of the room, and watched the October sun through the tiny window. He felt a little shut in, all alone in that damn place, but he still smiled to himself, that warm, beatific smile that melted even the most academic heart. Especially Doctor Florescu's: oh yes, the woman was infatuated with his smile, his eyes, the lost look he put on for her.

It was a fine game.

Indeed, at first that was all it had been—a game. Now Simon knew they were playing for bigger stakes; what had begun as a sort of lie-detection test had turned into a very serious contest: McNeal versus the Truth. The truth was simple: he was a cheat. He penned all his „ghost-writings” on the wall with tiny shards of lead he secreted under his tongue: he banged and thrashed and shouted without any provocation other than the sheer mischief of it: and the unknown names he wrote, ha, he laughed to think of it, the names he found in telephone directories. Yes, it was indeed a fine game.

She promised him so much, she tempted him with fame, encouraging every lie that he invented. Promises of wealth, of applauded appearances on the television, of an adulation he'd never known before. As long as he produced the ghosts.

He smiled the smile again. She called him her Go-Between: an innocent carrier of messages. She'd be up the stairs soon—her eyes on his body, his voice close to tears with her pathetic excitement at another series of scrawled names and nonsense.

He liked it when she looked at his nakedness, or all but nakedness. All his sessions were carried out with him only dressed in a pair of briefs, to preclude any hidden aids. A ridiculous precaution. All he needed were the leads under his tongue, and enough energy to fling himself around for half an hour, bellowing his head off. He was sweating. The groove of his breast-bone was slick with it, his hair plastered to his pale forehead. Today had been hard work: he was looking forward to getting out of the room, sluicing himself down, and basking in admiration awhile. The Go-Between put his hand down his briefs and played with himself, idly. Somewhere in the room a fly, or flies maybe, were trapped. It was late in the season for flies, but he could hear them somewhere close. They buzzed and fretted

against the window, or around the light bulb. He heard their tiny fly voices, but didn't question them, too engrossed in his thoughts of the game, and in the simple delight of stroking himself. How they buzzed, these harmless insect voices, buzzed and sang and complained. How they complained. Mary Florescu drummed the table with her fingers. Her wedding ring was loose today, she felt it moving with the rhythm of her tapping. Sometimes it was tight and sometimes loose: one of those small mysteries that she'd never analysed properly but simply accepted. In fact today it was very loose: almost ready to fall off. She thought of Alan's face. Alan's dear face. She thought of it through a hole made of her wedding ring, as if down a tunnel. Was that what his death had been like: being carried away and yet further away down a tunnel to the dark? She thrust the ring deeper on to her hand. Through the tips of her index-finger and thumb she seemed almost to taste the sour metal as she touched it. It was a curious sensation, an illusion of some kind.

To wash the bitterness away she thought of the boy. His face came easily, so very easily, splashing into her consciousness with his smile and his unremarkable physique, still unmanly. Like a girl really—the roundness of him, the sweet clarity of his skin—the innocence.

Her fingers were still on the ring, and the sourness she had tasted grew. She looked up. Fuller was organizing the equipment. Around his balding head a nimbus of pale green light shimmered and wove—She suddenly felt giddy. Fuller saw nothing and heard nothing. His head was bowed to his business, engrossed. Mary stared at him still, seeing the halo on him, feeling new sensations waking in her, coursing through her. The air seemed suddenly alive: the very molecules of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen jostled against her in an intimate embrace. The nimbus around Fuller's head was spreading, finding fellow radiance in every object in the room. The unnatural sense in her fingertips was spreading too. She could see the colour of her breath as she exhaled it: a pinky orange glamour in the bubbling air. She could hear, quite clearly, the voice of the desk she sat at: the low whine of its solid presence. The world was opening up: throwing her senses into an ecstasy, coaxing them into a wild confusion of functions. She was capable, suddenly, of knowing the world as a system, not of politics or religions, but as a system of senses, a system that spread out from the living flesh to the inert wood of her desk, to the stale gold of her wedding ring. And further. Beyond wood, beyond gold. The crack opened that led to the highway. In her head she heard voices that came from no living mouth.

She looked up, or rather some force thrust her head back violently and she found herself staring up at the ceiling. It was covered with worms. No, that was absurd! It seemed to be alive, though, maggoty with life—pulsing, dancing. She could see the boy through the ceiling. He was sitting on the floor, with his jutting member in his hand. His head was thrown back, like hers. He was as lost in his ecstasy as she was. Her new sight saw the throbbing light in and around his body—traced the passion that was seated in his gut, and his head molten with pleasure. It saw another sight, the lie in him, the absence of power where she'd thought there had been something wonderful. He had no talent to commune with ghosts, nor had ever had, she saw this plainly. He was a little liar, a boy-liar, a sweet, white boy-liar without the compassion or the wisdom to understand what

he had dared to do. Now it was done. The lies were told, the tricks were played, and the people on the highway, sick beyond death of being misrepresented and mocked, were buzzing at the crack in the wall, and demanding satisfaction. That crack she had opened: she had unknowingly fingered and fumbled at, unlocking it by slow degrees. Her desire for the boy had done that: her endless thoughts of him, her frustration, her heat and her disgust at her heat had pulled the crack wider. Of all the powers that made the system manifest, love, and its companion, passion, and their companion, loss, were the most potent. Here she was, an embodiment of all three. Loving, and wanting, and sensing acutely the impossibility of the former two. Wrapped up in an agony of feeling which she had denied herself, believing she loved the boy simply as her Go-Between.

It wasn't true! It wasn't true! She wanted him, wanted him now, deep inside her. Except that now it was too late.

The traffic could be denied no longer: it demanded, yes, it demanded access to the little trickster. She was helpless to prevent it. All she could do was utter a tiny gasp of horror as she saw the highway open out before her, and understood that this was no common intersection they stood at.

Fuller heard the sound.

„Doctor?“ He looked up from his tinkering and his face—washed with a blue light she could see from the corner of her eye—bore an expression of enquiry.

„Did you say something?“ he asked.

She thought, with a fillip of her stomach, of how this was bound to end.

The ether-faces of the dead were quite clear in front of her. She could see the profundity of their suffering and she could sympathize with their ache to be heard.

She saw plainly that the highways that crossed at Tollington Place were not common thoroughfares. She was not staring at the happy, idling traffic of the ordinary dead. No, that house opened onto a route walked only by the victims and the perpetrators of violence. The men, the women, the children who had died enduring all the pains nerves had wit to muster, with their minds branded by the circumstances of their deaths. Eloquent beyond words, their eyes spoke their agonies, their ghost bodies still bearing the wounds that had killed them. She could also see, mingling freely with the innocents, their slaughterers and tormentors. These monsters, frenzied, mush-minded bloodletters, peeked through into the world: nonesuch creatures, unspoken, forbidden miracles of our species, chattering and howling their Jabberwocky.

Now the boy above her sensed them. She saw him turn a little in the silent room, knowing that the voices he heard were not fly-voices; the complaints were not insect-complaints. He was aware, suddenly, that he had lived in a tiny corner of the world, and that the rest of it, the Third, Fourth and Fifth Worlds, were pressing at his lying back, hungry and irrevocable. The sight of his panic was also a smell and a taste to her. Yes, she tasted him as she had always longed to, but it was not a kiss that married their senses, it was his growing panic. It filled her up: her empathy was total. The fearful glance was hers as much as his—their dry throats rasped the same small word: „Please—“

That the child learns. „Please“—That wins care and gifts.

„Please—“

That even the dead, surely, even the dead must know and obey.

„Please—”

Today there would be no such mercy given, she knew for certain. These ghosts had despaired on the highway a grieving age, bearing the wounds they had died with, and the insanities they had slaughtered with. They had endured his levity and insolence, his idiocies, the fabrications that had made a game of their ordeals. They wanted to speak the truth.

Fuller was peering at her more closely, his face now swimming in a sea of pulsing orange light. She felt his hands on her skin. They tasted of vinegar.

„Are you all right?” he said, his breath like iron.

She shook her head.

No, she was not all right, nothing was right.

The crack was gaping wider every second: through it she could see another sky, the slate heavens that lured over the highway. It overwhelmed the mere reality of the house.

„Please,” she said, her eyes rolling up to the fading substance of the ceiling.

Wider. Wider—The brittle world she inhabited was stretched to breaking point.

Suddenly, it broke, like a dam, and the black waters poured through, inundating the room.

Fuller knew something was amiss (it was in the colour of his aura, the sudden fear), but he didn't understand what was happening. She felt his spine ripple: she could see his brain whirl.

„What's going on?” he said. The pathos of the enquiry made her want to laugh.

Upstairs, the water-jug in the writing room shattered.

Fuller let her go and ran towards the door. It began to rattle and shake even as he approached it, as though all the inhabitants of hell were beating on the other side. The handle turned and turned and turned. The paint blistered. The key glowed red-hot.

Fuller looked back at the Doctor, who was still fixed in that grotesque position, head back, eyes wide. He reached for the handle, but the door opened before he could touch it. The hallway beyond had disappeared altogether. Where the familiar interior had stood the vista of the highway stretched to the horizon. The sight killed Fuller in a moment. His mind had no strength to take the panorama in—it could not control the overload that ran through his every nerve. His heart stopped; a revolution overturned the order of his system; his bladder failed, his bowels failed, his limbs shook and collapsed. As he sank to the floor his face began to blister like the door, and his corpse rattle like the handle. He was inert stuff already: as fit for this indignity as wood or steel. Somewhere to the East his soul joined the wounded highway, on its route to the intersection where a moment previously he had died.

Mary Florescu knew she was alone. Above her the marvelous boy, her beautiful, cheating child, was writhing and screeching as the dead set their vengeful hands on his fresh skin. She knew their intention: she could see it in their eyes—there was nothing new about it. Every history had this particular torment in its tradition. He was to be used to record their testaments. He was to be their page, their book, the vessel for their autobiographies. A book of blood. A book made of blood. A book written in blood. She thought of the grimoires that had been made of dead human skin: she'd seen them, touched them. She thought of the tattoos

she'd seen: freak show exhibits some of them, others just shirtless labourers in the Street with a message to their mothers pricked across their backs. It was not unknown, to write a book of blood.

But on such skin, on such gleaming skin—oh God, that was the crime. He screamed as the torturing needles of broken jug-glass skipped against his flesh, ploughing it up. She felt his agonies as if they had been hers, and they were not so terrible.

Yet he screamed. And fought, and poured obscenities out at his attackers. They took no notice. They swarmed around him, deaf to any plea or prayer, and worked on him with all the enthusiasm of creatures forced into silence for too long. Mary listened as his voice wearied with its complaints, and she fought against the weight of fear in her limbs. Somehow, she felt, she must get up to the room. It didn't matter what was beyond the door or on the stairs—he needed her, and that was enough.

She stood up and felt her hair swirl up from her head, flailing like the snake hair of the Gorgon Medusa. Reality swam—there was scarcely a floor to be seen beneath her. The boards of the house were ghost-wood, and beyond them a seething dark raged and yawned at her. She looked to the door, feeling all the time a lethargy that was so hard to fight off.

Clearly they didn't want her up there. Maybe, she thought, they even fear me a little. The idea gave her resolution; why else were they bothering to intimidate her unless her very presence, having once opened this hole in the world, was now a threat to them?

The blistered door was open. Beyond it the reality of the house had succumbed completely to the howling chaos of the highway. She stepped through, concentrating on the way her feet still touched solid floor even though her eyes could no longer see it. The sky above her was prussian-blue, the highway was wide and windy, the dead pressed on every side. She fought through them as through a crowd of living people, while their gawping, idiot faces looked at her and hated her invasion.

The *please* was gone. Now she said nothing; just gritted her teeth and narrowed her eyes against the highway, kicking her feet forward to find the reality of the stairs that she knew were there. She tripped as she touched them, and a howl went up from the crowd. She couldn't tell if they were laughing at her clumsiness, or sounding a warning at how far she had got.

First step. Second step. Third step.

Though she was torn at from every side, she was winning against the crowd. Ahead she could see through the door of the room to where her little liar was sprawled, surrounded by his attackers. His briefs were around his ankles: the scene looked like a kind of rape. He screamed no longer, but his eyes were wild with terror and pain. At least he was still alive. The natural resilience of his young mind had half accepted the spectacle that had opened in front of him. Suddenly his head jerked around and he looked straight through the door at her. In this extremity he had dredged up a true talent, a skill that was a fraction of Mary's, but enough to make contact with her. Their eyes met. In a sea of blue darkness, surrounded on every side with a civilization they neither knew nor understood, their living hearts met and married.

„I’m sorry,“ he said silently. It was infinitely pitiful. „I’m sorry. I’m sorry.“ He looked away, his gaze wrenched from hers.

She was certain she must be almost at the top of the stairs, her feet still treading air as far as her eyes could tell, the faces of the travelers above, below and on every side of her. But she could see, very faintly, the outline of the door, and the boards and beams of the room where Simon lay. He was one mass of blood now, from head to foot. She could see the marks, the hieroglyphics of agony on every inch of his torso, his face, his limbs. One moment he seemed to flash into a kind of focus, and she could see him in the empty room, with the sun through the window, and the shattered jug at his side. Then her concentration would falter and instead she’d see the invisible world made visible, and he’d be hanging in the air while they wrote on him from every side, plucking out the hair on his head and body to clear the page, writing in his armpits, writing on his eyelids, writing on his genitals, in the crease of his buttocks, on the soles of his feet.

Only the wounds were in common between the two sights. Whether she saw him beset with authors, or alone in the room, he was bleeding and bleeding.

She had reached the door now. Her trembling hand stretched to touch the solid reality of the handle, but even with all the concentration she could muster it would not come clear. There was barely a ghost-image for her to focus on, though it was sufficient. She grasped the handle, turned it, and flung the door of the writing room open. He was there, in front of her. No more than two or three yards of possessed air separated them. Their eyes met again, and an eloquent look, common to the living and the dead worlds, passed between them. There was compassion in that look, and love. The fictions fell away, the lies were dust. In place of the boy’s manipulative smiles was a true sweetness—answered in her face.

And the dead, fearful of this look, turned their heads away. Their faces tightened, as though the skin was being stretched over the bone, their flesh darkening to a bruise, their voices becoming wistful with the anticipation of defeat. She reached to touch him, no longer having to fight against the hordes of the dead; they were falling away from their quarry on every side, like dying flies dropping from a window.

She touched him, lightly, on the face. The touch was a benediction. Tears filled his eyes, and ran down his scarified cheek, mingling with the blood.

The dead had no voices now, nor even mouths. They were lost along the highway, their malice dammed. Plane by plane the room began to re-establish itself. The floor-boards became visible under his sobbing body, every nail, every stained plank. The windows came clearly into view—and outside the twilight street was echoing with the clamour of children. The highway had disappeared from living human sight entirely. Its travelers had turned their faces to the dark and gone away into oblivion, leaving only their signs and their talismans in the concrete world. On the middle landing of Number 65 the smoking, blistered body of Reg Fuller was casually trodden by the travelers’ feet as they passed over the intersection. At length Fuller’s own soul came by in the throng and glanced down at the flesh he had once occupied, before the crowd pressed him on towards his judgement. Upstairs, in the darkening room, Mary Florescu knelt beside the

McNeal boy and stroked his blood-plastered head. She didn't want to leave the house for assistance until she was certain his tormentors would not come back.

There was no sound now but the whine of a jet finding its way through the stratosphere to morning. Even the boy's breathing was hushed and regular. No nimbus of light surrounded him. Every sense was in place. Sight. Sound. Touch.

Touch.

She touched him now as she had never previously dared, brushing her fingertips, oh so lightly, over his body, running her fingers across the raised skin like a blind woman reading braille. There were minute words on every millimeter of his body, written in a multitude of hands. Even through the blood she could discern the meticulous way that the words had harrowed into him. She could even read, by the dimming light, an occasional phrase. It was proof beyond any doubt, and she wished, oh God how she wished, that she had not come by it. And yet, after a lifetime of waiting, here it was: the revelation of life beyond flesh, written in flesh itself.

The boy would survive, that was clear. Already the blood was drying, and the myriad wounds healing. He was healthy and strong, after all: there would be no fundamental physical damage. His beauty was gone forever, of course. From now on he would be an object of curiosity at best, and at worst of repugnance and horror. But she would protect him, and he would learn, in time, how to know and trust her. Their hearts were inextricably tied together.

And after a time, when the words on his body were scabs and scars, she would read him. She would trace, with infinite love and patience, the stories the dead had told on him.

The tale on his abdomen, written in a fine, cursive style. The testimony in exquisite, elegant print that covered his face and scalp. The story on his back, and on his shin, on his hands.

She would read them all, report them all, every last syllable that glistened and seeped beneath her adoring fingers, so that the world would know the stories that the dead tell.

He was a Book of Blood, and she his sole translator.

As darkness fell, she left off her vigil and led him, naked, into the balmy night.

Here then are the stories written on the Book of Blood. Read, if it pleases you, and learn.

They are a map of that dark highway that leads out of life towards unknown destinations. Few will have to take it.

Most will go peacefully along lamplit streets, ushered out of living with prayers and caresses. But for a few, a chosen few, the horrors will come, skipping to fetch them off to the highway of the damned.

So read. Read and learn.

It's best to be prepared for the worst, after all, and wise to learn to walk before breath runs out.

