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## Blood

Pamela Mills

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## B L O O D

*"Blood" is an excerpt from the late Pamela Mills' memoir Kamastone: One African Woman's Search for Her Ancestors. Before dying of cancer in 2004, Pam requested that Maria Brandt use her personal journal to write the memoir's introduction and then seek its posthumous publication.*

### Blood

At ten o' clock I walk through the last layer of mist to the mission house. A young woman stands before the door, her wet hands held up and away, so I let her in and follow the solid columns of the red unwall'd verandah round to the back of the house.

Down a path past a garage and some outhouses are two camps: in the left, two pink pigs and a big black sow with her six piglets; in the right, nine ewes. On the open grass between the two, a group of men and young boys are slaughtering some sheep.

They have just begun. Two sheep lie collapsed on their sides with bright red bibs. A spade still lies by a pile of red soil where a hole has been dug to catch the blood which already laps at the lip of an oily trough. I have missed the kill, the moment of death.

The men go to the pen to catch the next two. The sheep huddle closely, each movement synchronized to prevent separation. They make no sound. Only their hooves thump in their quiet struggle to escape. Quickly the young men pin them, embrace them tightly, wrapping desperate hands in their wool. They drag them like that to the red hole, make them lie down on their left sides at the edge. They must smell the blood, the raw flesh of their fellows, but they lie there without sound or struggle, quite quiet, waiting patiently for the knife. They seem to accept death. For the first time I understand what it means to lead a sheep to slaughter.

Then a man hefts his knife and stabs deep into the woolly neck and rips forward to the front of the throat, while a hand gently cups the

nose. A gob of blood instantly spills out, and the men move to position the throat over the hole. He pulls the head back and saws the windpipe. A bloody tangle of flesh spews blood in thin arterial spurts and girls and boys dance to escape the spray. The esophagus glistens whitely. The sheep gurgles for breath.

The men step back. For a moment the animal lies still, then suddenly the legs begin to jerk out its life. Now it is the men's turn to wait. They cannot cut the body, the spasms are so strong. They stand about quietly, hands hanging by their sides, looking down at their work patiently, waiting. Death imposes a propriety. It takes strength and effort to slaughter, and runnels of sweat course down the men's faces. The eye of the sheep does not seem to change in death. It does not glaze or become blank. It does not show absence. Only once, when an enlarged pupil caught the light at a certain angle, did it glint a light iridescent turquoise in an olive brown ring, unexpected and alien. A dull kick yields no response. Hands tighten around handles and the cutting begins.

A team of three men and three boys works on each sheep. A slit which connects with a transverse slash to open the breast and belly is made down the inside of each leg to above the joint. Slowly the skin is picked back from the flesh. When a good beginning has been made, the men stick their balled fists into the opening and punch down while pulling the wool hard away, and the skin peels smoothly. Eventually, the carcass comes loose. They sever the head. The men hold the legs up and open so they don't drag in the dirt. The naked belly rolls loosely. They make an incision in the breast, stab the blade deep where the ribs meet and prize them open, slit the belly. The organs slosh easily over each other in this boat of bones. They interrupt their cutting only to strop their blunt blades on other blades or on stones. The stomach, a blowzy lavender balloon, they remove first, and the boys bear it off to clean out its grass. Heart, lungs, and liver get flung in a basin. The two emptied coats lie open on the ground to receive parts of the entrails. Links of small intestine wind into another basin. They pull the long tube of large intestine through the anal cavity, squeezing out its contents. Finally, they rip through the perineum and open the pelvis. The empty frame they turn over the hole to allow the trapped blood and bits of fat to trickle out before pinning it on the fence.

Bare, headless bodies ride the barbed wire, dripping blood like some macabre nursery frieze. A young woman encourages me to touch these

peeled pearls, the shucked flesh full of sheen. They are still warm, so recently stripped of their shells which, smeared and bloody, lie bare side up, abandoned. "They're not good to eat like this. They must stand all day before they can be cooked." Flies buzz around the blood. It lies like molasses on the ground and does not seep into the soil. A tan bitch with black markings round the ears and eyes slinks along the fence, darting in to snatch a scrap of fat and wolf it down. "*Voetsek!*" shouts a man as she grows too bold, waving her off. The pink pig sprawls in the dust, while the piglets scuffle round a tractor tyre trough, scratching themselves; only the black sow shows interest, snorting along the fence and sniffing the air.

As the slaughter continues, the basins fill to the brim and are borne off to the kitchen to be emptied. Boys dodge back and forth, bloody with their work. They are excited, hungry for their reward, and they begin to build a fire of crumpled newspaper and mimosa twigs to roast the duodenum and a pocket of stomach, which they sprinkle with a few drops of bile. They like the bitterness. Women begin to bundle the skins and collect the heads—their wool will be singed off and the scoured yellow skin then scrubbed with Sunlight soap and cooked and eaten with the eyes. There is no waste.

Among the slaughterers, there is one who stands out, who knows most surely how and where to cut. In the middle of ripping open a belly, he pauses, straightens to rest a moment, and smiles broadly at me: "I think I must find you a husband here, one of my sons, and you must stay here at Kamastone forever, and live with us!"

"I don't think my husband would think much of that idea," I reply.

"You've got no rings!"

"We never got around to it."

"No, man, a married woman must have an engagement and wedding ring. Leave your boyfriend in America, and marry one of my sons."

We start to laugh, and he comes over to chat. He is a farmer. When he discovers my family name, his eyes widen. "My father knew them well!" he exclaims. "Cecil used to come here often. My father could tell you a lot about them, but unfortunately he's dead."

At the end, he goes to each carcass and breaks off the feet at the joint. Boys pile the amputations to take to the kitchen.

The kitchen is a slop of entrails. A warm buzz of women crowds round an aluminium-topped table in a festival of raw flesh. A girl nibbles

on a piece of fatty duodenum, as two women empty the small intestines, squeezing with the right hand and pleating the folds of skin and sinew with the left. The farther the grass is from the large intestine, the less solid, until a fetid khaki liquid splashes out. Streamers of concentric circles are sliced open and more solid tubes pressed out. Warm pasture and sour flesh commingle and rise in waves in a slick stench of death.

The farmer enters the kitchen. "You should hear what these women are saying. They are saying you need to find a husband," he teases, roaring with laughter. The women snigger and shoot each other looks.

As I leave, the minibuses are starting to arrive.

"Koleka didn't think you were coming," my uncle says as if it were too much to admit he missed me. "I said, 'Well it's a half day.'"

"I've been watching the slaughtering."

"You're a bloodthirsty thing." He smiles wolfishly. "What do you want to watch that for?"

"Do you see what they did to my window? Look here." He shows me a broken pane and the bottom strut of the bars that has been bent out of line. "I had to fix that this morning, a terrible mess. Don't touch it it's wet." A fresh patch of concrete imprisons the ends of the bars. "They didn't quite manage to pry it loose but they had a damn good try. More effort than it was worth."

Koleka is going through a checklist of things my uncle has packed for the weekend.

"I don't care what you forget as long as you remember your pills," she declares.

"Don't you want to visit me over there?" he asks slyly, jerking his head in the direction of the graveyard. "I didn't take my pills last night. That's why I feel so much better!" His eyes glint, but she doesn't rise to the challenge.

I went home and wept.

Why did I stop to see the slaughter? To watch eleven animals mutilated into meat?

Yes, I had misconceptions:

1. I expected them to bleat at the entry of the blade.
2. I thought "slit" meant a smooth slide through skin, superficial really, but enough to let out the blood.

3. I imagined such a significant act demanded a more considerable weapon than a penknife. This was not string or fruit.

4. The shock of that first gush of blood never lessened.

I know we did it for the meat. We should have been justified; but this was no hunt with the victim full of fright (although they had once felt fear) or run down with exhaustion.

It seemed unnatural. Other animals squeal or bellow. Why did they stay silent? I could have stood it better had they cried out.

But once they had been wrestled to the ground, smoothed on their sides, each quieted, as if they had suddenly entered the storm's eye and all was calm within, all rage without. From peaceful orb they looked out steadfastly on our struggle to kill them. They had mastery of us with our puny knives and bloodied hands; even as we ripped out their throats, they remained inviolate. Such acts should have defiled their innocence. They defiled us instead.

And here is the mystery: by what contract of surrender did they offer themselves up?

Willingly they participated in their own deaths as if they knew something we didn't: it was *their* sacrifice, not ours; and in silence I cried out for us as we bled on the altar of their bare bodies.