



Larry Rose
Brasserie Terminus Nord
PARIS 1988

GEOGRAPHY OF THE HEART

A MEMOIR

FENTON JOHNSON



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PRAISE FOR GEOGRAPHY OF THE HEART

"What can you say about a book that makes you cry on page three? That it does so again on page four complicates the reviewer's job further. Nevertheless, this is not a tearjerker. Johnson's memoir is a moving expansion of the genre. . . . This profoundly moving, painfully honest book is a remarkable testament to a short life and the enduring love that emerged from it. It deserves the widest possible audience."

—Kirkus Reviews

"A rare and moving memoir. . . . Johnson writes masterfully. . . . The level of compassion, understanding, and love between these two men is a testament to how humans could and should treat each other. . . . Anyone who reads this work will also feel lucky for having done so."

—Library Journal

"Poignantly, unflinchingly, and often with graceful humor, *GEOGRAPHY OF THE HEART* . . . tell[s] a story of reluctant rebirth; a soul cleansing, if you will, brought on by life's most wonderful accident: falling in love."

—Giselle Messier, *The Santa Fe New Mexican*

"Heartbreaking. . . . profoundly sad, yet somehow hopeful. . . . *GEOGRAPHY OF THE HEART* takes the shape and sudden trajectory of a novel."

—Bill Roorbach, *Newsday*

"*GEOGRAPHY OF THE HEART* is an extraordinary memoir of coming of age, of love, and finally of terrible loss. That such a story should ultimately be life-affirming is a surprise; that it should read so beautifully is not. Fenton Johnson, as he has demonstrated in *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, is a beautiful writer and a leading chronicler of the plague we are living through."

—Abraham Verghese, author of *My Own Country*

"It is wisdom, not rage, that enlightens, and in its wisdom *GEOGRAPHY OF THE HEART* has touched on an important and usually neglected aspect of the AIDS epidemic. Strangely, dare one say it, there is sometimes blessing in the midst of suffering."

—Gregory Hancock, *Boston Book Review*

It is late March—the Saturday of Passover, 1991, to be exact—and I am driving an oversize rented car through west Los Angeles. This side of the city I have never seen except in the company of my lover Larry Rose, who died of AIDS in a Paris hospital some six months earlier.

He was an only child, who asked more than once that I promise to visit his parents after his death. Youngest son of a large family and a believer in brutal honesty, I'd refused. I have too much family already, I told him. There are limits to how much love I can give.

Now I am driving along one of the lovelier streets of Santa Monica, San Vicente Boulevard, west from Wilshire to the Pacific. The street is divided by a broad green median lined with coral trees, which the city has seen fit to register as landmarks. They spread airy, elegant crowns against a movie-set heaven, a Maxfield Parrish blue. Each branch bleeds at its tip an impossibly scarlet blossom, as if the limbs themselves had pierced the thin-skinned sky.

Larry's parents, Fred and Kathy Rose, are too old to get about much. They are German Jews, who spent the war years hiding in a Dutch village a few miles from Germany itself. Beaten by Nazis before the war, Fred hid for three years with broken vertebrae, unable to see a doctor. When he was no longer able to move, Kathy descended to the street to find help, to see falling from the sky the parachutes of their liberators. After the war they married and came to California, promised land of this promised land. Like Abraham and Sarah, in their advanced years they had a single son; proof that it is possible, in the face of the worst, to pick up sticks and start again.

Fred greets me at the door of their small bungalow. Even in mourning he wears his customary suit and tie, but he seems smaller than in my earlier visits. In his bent and shrunken frame I understand how Larry was a shield against his memories, and now Larry is gone.

Fred, Kathy, and I sit to talk, but Fred is reserved; he does not talk about Larry with the women of his life—his wife or his surviving sister. No doubt he fears giving way before his grief, and his life has not allowed for much giving way. This much he and I share: a gay man who grew up in the rural South, I am no stranger to hiding.

Kathy always goes to bed early—partly by way of coping with grief—but this evening Fred all but asks her to retire. After she leaves, he begins talking of Larry, and I listen and respond with gratefulness. We are two men in control, who permit ourselves to speak to each other of our loss because we subscribe implicitly, jointly, unconditionally to this code of conduct.

Fred tells a familiar story, of the day when Larry, then eight years old, wanted to go fishing. The quintessential urban Jew, Fred nonetheless bought poles and hooks and drove fifty miles to Laguna Beach. There they dropped their lines from a pier to discover the hooks dangled some ten feet above the water. "Thank God," Fred says. "Otherwise we might have caught something." A passerby scoffed, "What the hell do you think you're trying to catch?" Fred shrugged, unperturbed. "Flying fish," he said.

I respond with my most vivid memory of my time with Larry. A wiser man than I, he spoke many times of his great luck, his great good fortune. "I'm so lucky," he said again and again. Denial pure and simple, or so I told myself in our first years together. AZT, ddI, ACT-UP, CMV, DHPG, and what I came to think of as the big "A" itself—he endured this acronymed life, while I listened and participated and helped when I could.

Until our third and final trip to Paris, when on our last night to walk about the city, we sat in the courtyard of the Picasso Museum. There under a dusk-deep sky I turned to him and said, "I'm so

lucky," and it was as if the time allotted to him to teach me this lesson, the time allotted to me to learn it, had been consumed, and there was nothing left but the facts of things to play out.

A long pause after this story—I have ventured beyond what I permit myself, what I am permitted.

I change the subject, asking Fred to talk of the war years. He speaks not of his beating or of murdered family and friends but of moments of affection, loyalty, even humor, until he speaks of winters spent confined to bed, huddled in Kathy's arms, their breaths freezing on the quilt as they sang together to pass time, to stay warm, to distract him from his pain, to ward off their fear.

Another silence. Now he has ventured too far. "I have tried to forget these stories," he says in his halting English.

In the presence of these extremes of love and sorrow I am reduced to cliché. "It's only by remembering them that we can hope to avoid repeating them," I say.

"They are being repeated all the time," Fred says. "It is bad sometimes to watch too much television. You see these things and you know we have learned nothing."

Are we so dense that we can learn nothing from all this pain, all this death? Is it impossible to learn from experience? The bitterness of these questions I can taste, as I drive east to spend the night at a relative's apartment.

Just south of the seedier section of Santa Monica Boulevard I stop at a bar recommended by a friend. I need a drink, I need the company of men like myself—survivors, for the moment anyway, albeit of a very different struggle.

The bar is filled with Latino drag queens wearing extraordinary clothes. Eighty years of B movies have left Hollywood the nation's most remarkable supply of secondhand dresses, many of which, judging from this evening, have made their ways to these men's closets.

I am standing at the bar, very Anglo, very out of place, very much thinking of leaving, when a tiny, wizened, gray-haired Latina

approaches the stage, where under jerry-built lights (colored cellophane, Scotch tape) a man lip-synchs to Brazilian rock. His spike heels raise him to something more than six feet; he wears a floor-length sheath dress slit up the sides and so taut, so brilliantly silver, so lustrous that it catches and throws back the faces of his audience. The elderly Latina raises a dollar bill. On tottering heels he lowers himself, missing not a word of his song while half-crouching, half-bending so that she may tuck her dollar in his cleavage and kiss his cheek.

"*Su abuelita*," the bartender says. "His grandmother."

One A.M. in the City of Angels—the streets are clogged with cars. Stuck in traffic, I am haunted by voices and visions: by the high, thin songs of Fred and Kathy as they huddle under their frozen quilt, singing into their breaths; by a small boy and his father sitting on a very long pier, their baitless fishhooks dangling above the vast Pacific; by the face of *su abuelita*, uplifted and adoring, mirrored in her grandson's dress.

Somewhere a light changes; the traffic unglues itself. As cars begin moving, I am visited by two last ghosts—myself and Larry Rose, sitting in the courtyard of the Hôtel Salé, transfigured by the limitless heart.

My life with Larry Rose came to this: The two of us driving down a country road in France, a river's silver mirror showing now broad and shining, now slivered into shards by limbs and leaves of yellowing willows and lindens. The autumn light fading too fast from the sky. The two of us consumed with love, and his dying.

I knew Larry slightly more than three years—we met in late summer 1987; he died October 17, 1990. Anyone who's had the good fortune to love and be loved for ten or twenty or forty and more years may doubt the significance of such a short time, and in light of those years I understand.

But love doesn't measure itself by the calendar (does a mother

love her child less because he is young?). It's possible to live a lifetime of love in three years—for so many people in these times, not only possible but necessary. What follows are stories from those years: how he, a teacher, taught me how to love; how slowly I learned what he had to teach.