



Beloved Synopsis and Early Draft

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BELOVED

Synopsis

Beloved is three novels. Herein described as Book I, Book II and Book III. Each one will be titled Beloved, but each will have a different subtitle. At the moment I believe 300 pages for each one will suffice.

The first novel grows out of a story that appeared in Leslie's Weekly, and elsewhere in February of 1856, describing a slave woman Margaret Garner arrested in Ohio for murdering her infant daughter. She had tried unsuccessfully to kill all four of her children: two she hit in their heads with shovels; the baby she could not "get to" before she was stopped. When asked the reason, she said she loved them too much to let them be returned to the plantation she had escaped from to go through a slave's life as she had. (See attached.) Following this event (which abolitionists made much of) she lived with her mother-in-law and children in the outskirts of Cincinnati.

The first Beloved will be the imagined life of the child who had its throat cut by its mother. This child, called Beloved, (which is the single word on its grave marker), returns to her family as an adult knowing how it had died, remembering how it felt, but wondering why? Beloved's relationship with her mother and with her sister, Denver, who survived, is the stuff of the first part of the book. Her sojourn

in her mother's house is a combination of vengeance and yearning. She wants an answer from her mother to the questions: "Since you have not died and cannot know what it is like either to die or to be dead, why did you assume it was preferable to life of any sort, and if it was preferable (that is if you were convinced that it was) why didn't you join me? And further, if love of me, your beloved, was what motivated you to separate my chin from my neck, why didn't you love your other children equally as well and finish off their lives too?"

Rett Garner's answer comes in terse pieces and focuses on the life she had lived in the South before 1856 which is distinctly different from life on the outskirts of Cincinnati in 1881, the year of Beloved's appearance. She also describes the nature of maternal love under the duress of inhuman circumstances. It is an unsatisfactory answer for Beloved and she manages an exquisite punishment for her mother.

Beloved's relationship with her sister Denver is a combination of rivalrous rage and unconditional love. Denver is seventeen and enchanted by and dependent on Beloved. She was the baby her mother could not "get to" in time to kill when the slave catchers came (the other two, boys, were smashed in the head with a shovel, but did not die). She is already broken by her attempts to make a life from the shambles of a family stigmatized by the mother's notoriety. She is very much in love with her older sister who is beautiful, wise and "other" with all sorts

was popular among Black people then, and the item comes from Van Der Zee's

of special knowledge about the "other side." She is ripe for seduction and manipulation by Beloved.

Beloved: Book I is essentially a confrontation between the living survivors and the triumphant dead.

While Beloved is a true ghost, she is very much a flesh and blood character: attractive and fascinating. What is scary about her is not her ghostliness, but her humanness. As a ghost she is quite funny (and fun) and like most of the dead, doesn't know much more than she did when she was alive. At the conclusion of Book I, Beloved has in fact learned something important (but too late) which only life (not death) can teach.

In Book II Beloved is involved with another family in a later time: New York in the twenties. It continues the examination of feminine self-destruction in its many disguises. Just as Book I tells a story about the murder of the self through the destruction of children, so Book II is about the slaughter of the self for sexual love. It grows out of a story about a woman named Claire who so loved a man that when, overcome by jealousy, he discovers her dancing with a rival, shoots her, she refuses to identify him as her assailant. It is based on a vignette accompanying a photograph James Van der Zee took in the early thirties in Harlem of a pretty girl in a coffin. (Coffin photography was popular among Black people then, and the item comes from Van Der Zee's

collection in The Harlem Book of the Dead). The story Van Der Zee tells is that while this young woman was dancing at a rent party, she slumped suddenly and seemed terribly ill. Her girlfriends helped her into the bedroom. As they lay her down, they saw blood and realized she had been shot. Upon being asked "who shot you?" she said (and kept repeating) "I'll tell you tomorrow. I'll tell you tomorrow." She was hoping her killer-love would have time to get away. He did.

Beloved is a friend of Claire's. She is also a participant in and witness to the love affair, all of which takes place in the wildly provocative Uptown twenties life. The moment when Black music became "modern" (or rather when that which was "modern" took its cue from Black music). Once again Beloved is exposed to self-murder. But this time it is based not on maternal needs (as with her own mother) but on sexual ones.

The third and last Book finds Beloved connected with a modern family in a contemporary version of self-destruction. Not the maternal or sexual self-abdication of the nineteenth century or the early twentieth century. This time the self-sabotage is for personal fulfillment within marriage and the good middle class life.

The wife in this 1982 family hires Beloved as a servant in her household. By this time--a hundred years after she first became incarnate back in

Cincinnati--Beloved is an old woman, finally adjusted to the weight of flesh and the hurt of bold color. Her presence in this family is gently disruptive. The husband is uneasy with her in the house; the children alarmed by her. Only the wife likes and defends her. Beloved does or causes to be done the same kind of mischief she caused in her mother's house, only less gross and less obvious. The impact she has on this family is devastating, however, as she tries to prevent another self-murder: the wife who betrays her own self--which is to say the innocent self, the "real" self, the deserving, beloved self which she misunderstands to be the "child" in her nature, the vulnerable, incorruptible and virginal self that she believes must be sacrificed in order to make it in the world and to be the "responsible adult."

Beloved's function in this woman's life is to put to her the same old questions: Why? Why do you kill me, me who is also you; Why do you kill yourself which is a way of killing me? It is clear to Beloved, as it becomes clear to us, that we all do what her mother did: destroy, repress, deny, alter or erase the best part of ourselves in order to "save" it from pollution or grief, or to maintain the idea of it beyond and above temporal law, or to annihilate it because it prohibits what we call "maturity."

Only the 1982 woman understands Beloved's questions and is able to answer them. She alone knows that Beloved and by indirection none of us,

was never simply a child; that the "innocent self" we destroy, betray or preserve in amber is neither vulnerable, childlike, nor innocent. And because the 1982 woman discovers this, she is able to let her own beloved self live, and our Beloved can rest in peace. pages of the "Beginning."

These themes, and their progression, wordy as they seem here, will be executed, of course, dramatically--not by exposition. The dialogue is extensive in the last Book, during a time when people are certainly more chatty, if not more articulate. Book I people tend to talk less and say more; Book II characters tend to talk like the verses of the Black music that was popular then: a kind of bloody romanticism--at once lyrical and fatalistic.

Beloved's aging through these Books is slower than real time: she is twenty-five in 1881; about 40 in 1927 and in her seventies in 1982. The people she encounters however are subject to real time and "real" life responses. Only her family, in Book I, know her for what she is: the others do not although the reader does.

I hope to make each book a vivid recreation of the time and place. But as lived through and perceived by Black women and Black men, it is not the late nineteenth century mid-west, or roaring twenties, or mid-eighties as perhaps traditionally viewed. In addition each has its own plotline which serves the themes I have touched on with the

Beloved: I

character Beloved connecting them all.

Draft

I suspect I will write them in chronological order, but I am not sure. At any rate, I have copious notes for Book I and herewith a few pages of the "Beginning."

They lived alone there because the males had gone and left by the time they were thirteen years old. As soon as merely looking in the mirror shattered it, (That was the signal for Bugler) and as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (That was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettle-- full of chick peas cooking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the door sill. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods. The weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. Each one fled at midnight--the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. Within two months, both Bugler and Howard had run off to the dead of winter, leaving their Grandmother, Baby Suggs, Hattie, their mother, and their little sister Denver all alone in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. It didn't have a number then, because Cincinnati didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had survived only seventy years of a troubled statehood when first one brother, and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes and crept away from the lively spine the house felt for them.

Baby Suggs didn't even raise her head. Free her sick bed she

Beloved: I

Draft

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. Rett knew it and so did Denver. They lived alone there because the males had gone and left by the time they were thirteen years old. As soon as merely looking in the mirror shattered it, (That was the signal for Bugler) and as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (That was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettle--full of chick peas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the door sill. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods. The weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. Each one fled at once--the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. Within two months, both Bugler and Howard had run off in the dead of winter, leaving their Grandmother, Baby Suggs, Rett, their mother, and their little sister Denver all alone in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. It didn't have a number then, because Cincinnati didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had survived only seventy years of a troubled statehood when first one brother, and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them.

Baby Suggs didn't even raise her head. From her sick bed she

heard them go but T.B. wasn't the reason she lay so still. It was a wonder to her that her grandsons took so long to realize that there were houses whose hatred of their inhabitants was not so conscientious as 124. Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn't get interested in recuperation or expiration, let alone the fright of two creeping-off boys. Her past had been like the present--intolerable and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy God had left her for pondering color.

"Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't."

And Rett would oblige her with anything from fabric to her own tongue. Winter was especially rough if you had an appetite for color. Sky provided the only drama and counting on a Cincinnati horizon for life's principle joy was reckless indeed. So Rett and the girl Denver did what they could, and what the house permitted, for her.

Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of their home; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air. For they understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light.

When Baby Suggs died with no interest in it whatsoever, the two of them decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views could help. So they held hands and said "Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on."

The sideboard took a step forward but nothing else did.

"Grandma Baby must be stopping it," said Denver. She was ten and very respectful of older people.

Rett opened her eyes. "Couldn't be," she said.

"Then why don't it come?"

"You forgetting how little it is," said her mother. "She wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even."

"Maybe she doesn't want to understand."

"That's probably it. But if she'd only come, I could make it clear to her." Rett released her daughter's hand and together they pushed the sideboard back against the wall. Outside a driver whipped his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124.

"For a baby, she throws a powerful spell," said Denver.

"No more powerful than the way I loved her," Rett answered and there it was again. The welcoming cool of unchisled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tip toe, her knees as wide open as any grave. Pink as a fingernail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips. Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free.

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible--that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, really) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what

she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. She thought it would be enough, rutting among the stones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it new. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more policeman, face one more newspaperman, one more abolitionist speaker and a town full of disgust.

Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage. Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but, those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil.

"We could move," she suggested once to her mother-in-law.

"What'd be the point?" asked Baby Suggs. "Not a house in the country that ain't packed to its rafters with some dead nigger's grief. We lucky; this ghost is a baby. My husband was to come back in here? or yours? Good God! You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful. I had eight. Everyone of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil." Baby Suggs rubbed her eyes. "My baby. All I can remember of him is how he loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that?

Eight children and that's all I remember."

"That's all you let yourself remember," Rett told her, but she was down to one now--one alive that is--the boys chased off by the dead one and her memory of Bugler was fading fast. Howard at least had a head shape nobody could forget. As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. She would be hurrying across a field, running, practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water. And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting every last bit of sap off--on her carelessness in taking a shortcut across the field just to save a half mile, and not noticing how high the weeds had grown until the itching was all the way to her knees. Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes and although there was not a leaf on that plantation that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in arrogant beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was probably a very pretty place too. Fire

and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacey groves. Boys hanging
from the most beautiful sycamores in the world.