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Right Along: The Cycles of Motherhood and Slavery in *Beloved*

"The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind." These words, spoken by Ella in response to Beloved's return, imagine the past as something that can be discarded, a burden that can be set down and forgotten. Yet Morrison's vision is far less forgiving. In *Beloved*, the past is never inert; it lingers, demanding recognition and reckoning. While the novel centers on the haunting between Sethe and her dead daughter, it also traces another, quieter relationship: the one between Sethe and her mother. Through Sethe's fragmented memories, Morrison reveals that the past cannot be left behind but instead endures within the body and the mindThis lingering past shapes how Sethe understands and performs motherhood, making it at once a repetition and a reaction to the maternal legacy of slavery she inherits.

From the opening scenes of *Beloved*, Morrison introduces breast milk and lactation not simply as a symbol of motherhood but as evidence of how completely that role defines Sethe's sense of self. In her first conversation with Paul D about her journey to Cincinnati, Sethe recalls, "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her ahead with Howard and Buglar." In this statement, we see a lack of possession, her selfhood and her body exist for giving to and supporting her children. Additionally, in the phrase "I hadn't stopped nursing," there is a sense of continuation, an action that persists even after separation. The past perfect verb ("hadn't stopped") suggests an ongoing state in the past, while the gerund "nursing," though functioning as a noun, carries the sense of continuous, active care.

This ongoing act of nursing, however, is not without consequence. She notes, “Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he’d see the drops of it on the front of my dress.” Her distinctive scent would have made her especially vulnerable to being tracked by hounds — a common method used to pursue runaway slaves. Beyond that, her appearance alone marked her as desperate and exposed: the milk staining her renders her highly visible, unforgettable to anyone who might encounter her. The image evokes not just physical exposure, but emotional unraveling. Sethe’s insistence on continuing to nurse Beloved — likely between twelve and twenty-four months old, and capable of surviving without breastmilk — may seem reckless, but for her it is a necessary act. It is not primarily about Beloved’s survival; it is about Sethe’s. Nursing becomes a way for Sethe to affirm her identity and reassure herself of her worth as a mother — a bodily act that grounds her in a role she refuses to relinquish, even at the cost of her own safety.

This interpretation of nursing as a means of recognition rather than nourishment is reinforced by Sethe’s following words: “Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn't have forgotten me.” Sethe insistence is not based on the logic that Beloved will go hungry but that without nursing Beloved will *forget* her. The act of nursing, then, becomes more than physical sustenance; it is the ritual through which Sethe’s identity as a mother is affirmed. If Beloved stops feeding, she risks breaking the memory of that connection. Sethe’s love depends on the continuation of that bodily exchange — milk as memory, milk as recognition. When she insists, “the milk would be there and I would be there with it,” she fuses her presence with the act of nursing itself. Her body becomes the vessel through which she is known.

Sethe's obsession with milk is a direct consequence of her mother's neglect. In her recollections, Sethe comments most pointedly on her mother's lack of milk. In one scene, she reflects on the circumstances of her mother's death: "Running? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am… would she? … Even if she hadn't been able to suckle the daughter … and had to turn her over to another woman's tit that never had enough for all." In this moment, we see Sethe's deep uncertainty about her mother's devotion. She begins with a firm declaration that her mother would never abandon her, but quickly slips into doubt, her conviction unraveling into a series of hesitant, interrogative sentences. The lingering question, "would she?", opens up a space of emotional distance and unresolved grief, suggesting how little Sethe truly knew about her mother's intentions or feelings. The final sentence of the excerpt — a fragmented thought that connects back to "Because she was my ma'am..." — reinforces that emotional disconnection. Morrison's choice to interrupt and delay the completion of that thought with so much questioning mirrors the fragmentation of Sethe's memory and her strained grasp on her maternal lineage. What ultimately emerges from this musing is not simply the absence of milk, but the absence of care. "Never had enough for all" becomes less a literal comment on breastfeeding and more a symbol of emotional deprivation — a pattern of neglect that haunts Sethe and shapes her desperate need to provide what she never received.

This interpretation of nursing as a stand-in for general neglect becomes even more evident in the conversation between Sethe, Beloved, and Denver about whether her mother ever combed her hair. Sethe begins by saying she doesn't remember her mother well, so perhaps she did. But the conversation quickly shifts to a list of what her mother *did* do — sleeping on Sundays, working in the fields — none of which involved directly interacting with Sethe. At the end of this list, Sethe notes "I sucked from another woman whose job it was." This line

reinforces the emotional distance between Sethe and her mother, who had to delegate the most intimate form of care to someone else. Finally, Sethe concludes that her mother "never fixed her hair or nothing." The phrase "or nothing" intensifies the sense of absence; she moves from referencing one specific act of neglect to issuing a sweeping judgment — that in her eyes, her mother did nothing at all for her. Her mother's failure to nurse her becomes the defining absence of her childhood; it is an absence that cannot be filled or substituted by another woman's care. In Sethe's world, milk becomes the one act of mothering that cannot be forgotten, denied, or undone.

The fixation on milk and nursing means that her breasts come to represent both her selfhood and the grief she has endured. This fusion becomes especially apparent in the scene where Paul D holds Sethe's breasts. In this moment, Sethe briefly experiences relief from the all-consuming identity of motherhood; his touch allows her to confront her deepest trauma, the theft of her milk, while momentarily reclaiming both her body and her present self. Yet this moment of tenderness cannot be separated from the physical mark that history has left on her. In order for Paul D to hold Sethe's breasts, he must also press his cheek against her scarred back. It is through this contact that he learns "her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches." In this image, Sethe's pain is likened to a tree — a symbol of endurance, family, and continuity, something that long outlives the individual. The phrase "the roots of it" evokes ancestry and origin, suggesting that Sethe's suffering is not solely her own but inherited, reaching back through generations. Morrison thus situates Sethe's sorrow in both bodily and historical terms, rendering trauma as something that is not only remembered but inscribed on the flesh. In doing so, she draws a direct connection between Sethe and her mother, showing how each woman's body bears the weight of a collective and generational history of pain.

Sethe's scarred back recalls a bodily lineage — a chain of marks that binds mother and daughter, intimate sites of violence, where maternal identity and abuse converge physically. This convergence is most clearly embodied in the moment when Sethe recalls her mother lifting her breast to reveal a brand. In parallel to the scene with Paul D, this too involves the lifting of the breast, but here the gesture does not lead to recognition or intimacy — it becomes a putting aside. For Sethe, acknowledging her identity as a mother requires confronting the scars on her back; for her mother, acknowledging the physical marks of her enslavement requires moving aside the symbol of motherhood denied. Unlike Sethe, whose entire being is consumed by the role of mother, her mother's identity appears detached from maternal care. She says only, "This is your ma'am. This." The vagueness of the word "this" suggests that the brand stands not only as a mark of identification, but as a symbol of all that slavery has imposed. The enclosure of "ma'am" between two instances of "this" signals the total containment of maternal identity within the violent structures of slavery. Moreover, the use of the verb "is" suggests equivalence: that her entire being is reduced to that brand. Another reading might suggest that this statement extends beyond the self — that the brand stands not only for her own dehumanization, but also for Sethe's origins: "This brand [and everything it symbolizes about the brutality of slavery] is your mother." It marks them both as nothing more than products of slavery. In this mirrored exposure of breast and wound, Morrison captures a devastating inheritance, a legacy in which mother and daughter are both stripped of identity, known not through love or care, but through the branded logic of ownership and pain.

Sethe's brutal confirmation that her mother was nothing more than slavery itself would have come had she found her mother's body among the pile of murdered slaves, her only defining feature the brand marking her as property. But that scene never occurs. Instead, Nan

yanks Sethe away and replaces that scene with a counter-narrative: “She [Sethe’s mother] threw them all away but you… Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man… The others she did not put her arms around…” Nan insists that Sethe was chosen, named, held. Not discarded. In this version, Sethe is not simply a product of slavery but of something like love. It is worth noting that Sethe does not recall Nan’s explanation until much later. The memory of being chosen, of her mother sparing her, is described as a “privately shameful” fact that “seeped into her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross.” The verb “seeped” suggests an unwanted emergence, a memory that crept in against her will. The slap recalls physical domination; the cross, cultural erasure through Christianity. Both symbols subtly mirror Sethe’s perspective of slavery as mother that is evident in her reconstructed recollections. Its placement “behind” the slap and the cross suggests this memory was buried beneath more easily processed narratives of abuse and abandonment. For Sethe, it seems that the idea of her mother loving her is more difficult to face than the memory of neglect. Because this love is complicated: Sethe was spared, but she was spared *into* slavery. Her mother let her live, but left her within the very system that was responsible for her own death. This stands in stark contrast to the logic that later guides Sethe’s own choices, where death becomes preferable to a life in chains. That her mother discarded the children “without names” casts new weight on Beloved’s lack of identity, turning it into a renewed site of loss. Sethe experiences the memory as “privately shameful” suggests not only the pain of recognizing her mother's own abuse and her decision to commit infanticide, but also a sense of personal indictment. Her mother’s decision to let her live, rather than kill her like the others, complicates Sethe’s own belief that death is better than slavery, a contradiction that lies at the heart of her struggle to define what it means to be a good mother.

The memory of her mother reshapes how Sethe relates to Beloved, unsettling the certainty that once anchored her actions. Until this point, Sethe has refused to apologize for killing her daughter, insisting that it was the only way to protect her from the horrors of slavery. Yet after remembering her mother, Sethe's conviction begins to waver. We see this wavering in Denver's discussion of Sethe's continued need to explain her actions towards Beloved, "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out." Sethe's need for rejection suggests that she has internalized the quiet judgment she felt from her mother. Her pleas to Beloved become a dialogue not just with her dead daughter, but also with the mother who could never answer.

"So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister." In this line, Morrison condenses the novel's entire vision of motherhood under slavery — the inextricable binding of love and violence. Milk, the symbol of care and nourishment, is fused with blood, the product of suffering and sacrifice. The phrase "right along" stands out for its unsettling casualness; its usual meaning of "without delay" or "smoothly" contrasts sharply with the brutality of the image. That tonal dissonance reveals the banality of the combination of violence and care. Denver, an infant acting only on instinct, becomes part of this cycle without choice or understanding. Her reflex to nurse mirrors how Sethe, too, inherited and reenacted the contradictions of her mother's love without ever fully choosing them. In this moment, Morrison makes the generational cycle complete: each daughter absorbs both milk and blood, both care and harm, repeating a history that flows, "right along," from one daughter to the next.