

# AUNT CHLOE

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## On the Passing of Toni Morrison

by Michelle S. Hite

Toni Morrison, in a 1989 *World Magazine* interview, offered that she wrote her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* to correct for the lack of commemorative sites acknowledging the devastation of slavery. "There are no places you or I can go," Morrison noted, "to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves." In considering the many forms that a memorial could take, Morrison reported that there was "no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300 foot-tower, there's no small bench by the road." The Toni Morrison Society joined the author in offering a corrective to historical omissions regarding Black history through its Bench by the Road Project. There are three such benches in Atlanta: at First Congregational Church, at the Atlanta University Center's Robert Woodruff Library, and at South-View Cemetery. These very benches beckon to us now as the urgency of losing Morrison intensifies the experience of confronting the aftermath of the violence in El Paso and in Dayton. A world without Toni Morrison seems bereft of grace and wisdom. And yet, Morrison's work, specifically *Beloved*, the book Morrison wrote as an act of witness, may serve this moment well.

*Beloved* fictionalizes the story of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who kills her daughter so that she would not be returned to slavery, through the lens of Sethe and her family. In the novel, the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter returns to the present and forces everyone to confront the devastations of slavery.

While it might be easy to turn immediately to the cemetery where the protagonist Sethe goes to contemplate the life she took from *Beloved*, her own child, as most urgent for our needs, the tooth extraction scene is better. "Oooh, didn't that hurt you?" *Beloved*'s sister Denver asks. Before *Beloved* answers, she considers all the ways she finds herself falling apart. In doing so, *Beloved* looks at the tooth and thinks, "'This is it.' Next would be an arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once." *Beloved*'s recognition chronicles the very familiar experience of aging. The startling near confusion of the moment we mark the body's transition from vibrant and impervious, to fragile and vulnerable. Giving voice to these private fears when we are new and fresh to this daily withering away, the novel highlights the singularity and isolation one might experience at the sight of their own demise. For her part, *Beloved* imagines the solitary sight of an unwitnessed catastrophe as she comes undone "on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left [when] she would fly apart." Being alone increases *Beloved*'s concern, her fear, and the dread that can accompany aging; and at the same time, she reveals the work composure requires when she admits that "It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached

to her hips when she is by herself." Hers is a reflection seriously worth considering. To what do we owe or attribute our composure in the unwitnessed, quiet moments of our days? Why don't we come undone when we can?

In this scene, the exchange between Beloved and Denver immediately following the tooth extraction suggests that we remain composed because we are unaware of what else might be done. To this very point, Denver inquires of Beloved, "Don't it hurt?" "Yes," Beloved readily admits. "Then why don't you cry?" Denver asks. And as if she had never considered this possibility, Beloved replies, "What?" "If it hurts," Denver explains, then "'why don't you cry?' And she did." Here, mourning becomes relief from our composure—from the strain of contending with the truth of our own falling apart. Communities—like those the novel emblemizes through the lens of these two sisters—remind us of the effort it takes to keep one's self upright and provide the necessary support for keeping the pieces together.

For Toni Morrison, the novel was a site and a source of ancestral wisdom. As such, she would have urged us toward the pages of her work as the balm for our despondency before a world that seems to be falling apart. She would have urged us to read and told us that in doing so, we were tending to the business of creating a better world. What the tooth extraction scene offers, though, is confirmation that wisdom makes room for grief. And so, in the days ahead, maybe we can take to those benches by the road in Atlanta. Maybe we can accept Denver's invitation to pay tribute to hurt, to loss, and to the daily effort made to maintaining our composure in a world that seems to be falling part. Maybe we can take to those benches by the road to take a moment to consider Morrison's passing as an avenue toward allowing ourselves to come undone.

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