

To care is to practice tenderness.



ONE

Denver

Love makes us feel more alive. (hooks 191)

Denver's care is characterised by her will to tend to her mother in a time of need. Despite fearing what goes beyond 124, 'Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help.' (Morrison 308) This act of bravery rebirths Denver into the community: a community eager to nurture those who have the courage to ask. She opens up about her mother's health to other women and their tenderness marks a milestone in her self-awareness as, 'she did not know it then, but it was the word "baby," said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman.' (Morrison 315) Through Denver's experience of care, we come to recognise the power of verbal tenderness. It is the tone and choice of words that can establish an awakening. 'All he did was smile and say, "Take care of yourself, Denver", but she heard it as though it were, what language was made for.' (Morrison 321)

Love is a language. And there are many types of love languages. One of which is *words*. Words have a power unmatched by touch or gifts or time because you can take words with you wherever you go. Words are boundless in time and space. Whenever you may need them, you simply have to close your eyes and find them. And yes, over time you may forget them. But even as we do, we may not forget the way those words made us *feel*. There is great comfort offered in verbal tenderness. It is sometimes verbal tenderness that can send you into another state of being; one where breathing is easier, where your smile tastes of salty water and you feel love so deep you beg yourself to remember to be just so kind to others hereafter.

When we are loving, we know that we're living.

And I have all the words in my vocabulary to take care of you.

TWO

Sethe

Love empowers us to live fully and die well. Death becomes, then, not an end to life but a part of living. (hooks 197)

Sethe's endurance of love and death characterises her capacity to be tender as 'the one who never looked away' (Morrison 15). With all she has survived, and continues to live through, Sethe understands the way that love can empower life. In her immediate experience of escaping hell on earth she found that, 'there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to.' (Morrison 208) Death does not match the horrors of her experience at Sweet Home, which informs her relationship between life and death, believing, 'it ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.' (Morrison 211) The tenderness of those around her enriches her life. When the thirty women come to fight back the past and aid Sethe, 'it was as though the Clearing had come to her, with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words.' (Morrison 333) It is Sethe's love ethic, with all her worldliness of death as a part of life, that measures her personhood so remarkable. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers. "Me? Me?" (Morrison 348)

What does it mean to die well? I guess we only *really* know that when the time comes. But to live fully? That is something to discover in the moment. The present. The here and now. And I am here. And I am now. Living fully is not easy. Easy is breathing, eating, sleeping, getting through today wishing it were already tomorrow. Well, actually, no. Sometimes even that is hard enough. But, living fully is like playing *Truth or Dare*. You let go of all the little things holding you back, just to throw yourself into feeling something just for one quick game. Life is not a quick game. To live fully you must be willing to play. You might find it's your new favourite. If you feed life, life will feed you. So feed it love. If life can be defined by death, and death can be defined by life, what defines love? Love is the one thing that connects it all. There's nowhere on earth that doesn't have a little room for love.

THREE

Paul D

Love knows no shame. To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending. The way we grieve is informed by whether we know love. (hooks 200)

Paul D practices tenderness in such a way that 'not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could.' (Morrison 22) Under the belief for many years that he would never see Sethe again, their reunion delivers an extraordinary opportunity to open up to each other both physically and intellectually. After learning of her ordeal during her Sweet Home escape, he embraces her while, 'his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree' (Morrison 21). Paul D's experience as an enslaved man has damaged his capacity to love freely, as 'the best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one.' (Morrison 59) He is characterised by a crushing sense of shame about his past that he holds down deep inside a rusted tobacco tin, in effort to protect himself from overwhelming grief. But this fails. 'His tobacco tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey' (Morrison 279). A tender soul, Paul D knows how to love better than most, shadowed by his grief, and perhaps in his mourning Paul D can find the heart to love again.

Shame. Grief. Sorrow. Isn't there something special in the way these feelings are characterised by their relationship to the past? To feel all this feeling is to know that something else came before it. That you felt something that the luckiest of us know as *having something to lose*. Something so precious, the concept of losing such a thing hurts just as much as actually losing it. And losing it is something you almost always do. Makes you not want to lose another thing again, huh? So, does that mean you go on with nothing? Even if you do, is *grief* nothing? It doesn't feel like nothing.

In these moments, who do you give the tender honour of seeing you cry? It is a privilege to bear witness to your monumental feeling, it reminds me we're still alive. She strokes your hair and rubs your back, *For the living and the dead. Just cry.* (Morrison 112)

FOUR

Beloved

Love is the only force that allows us to hold one another close beyond the grave. That is why knowing how to love each other is also a way of knowing how to die. (hooks 202)

Beloved's love for her mother is so strong it has powers of resurrection. Her relationship to her family as the ghost of 124 is overwhelmed by compassion and tenderness. 'Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on.' (Morrison 5) Even before their mother-daughter love manifests Beloved in human form, the tenderness of their connection beyond the grave is unwavering. Quoted in 'Black Women and Motherhood', Alice Walker lays bare that 'my child loves my face and would have it on every page, if she could, as I have loved my own parents' faces above all others' (Hill Collins 199) It is unsurprising then, that what Beloved craves is simply her mother's face. ' "What did you come back for?" Beloved smiled. "To see her face." ' (Morrison 96) The tenderness in the faces of those we care for has the power to connect us in life and death through love. 'I want her face' (Morrison 271). The way Sethe and Beloved love each other is magic. It teaches us that the way we love informs the way we encounter death and reminds us that 'thin love ain't love at all.' (Morrison 211)

If love is the shadow of death, then love is a ghost. Love is a phantom kiss on the head and a whisper of words uttered decades ago. If knowing how to love is knowing how to die, I wish there were a manual. A *How to Do This Thing Called Living for Dummies*. What I do know is my mother's face. How I know in my being that the phrase 'I want my mum,' will one day have the power to break me. Love is a ghost. A ghost that lived and died. Did it all. And still, she reminds me to love hard. *Live fully. Die well.* Oh, ghosts are tender beings. Tender to the touch. Tender to the bone. Tender to the heart. If love is a ghost, then come on. *Come on. You may as well just come on.*

FIVE

Baby Suggs

By learning to love, we learn to accept change. Without change, we cannot grow. Our will to grow in spirit and truth is how we stand before life and death, ready to choose life.
(hooks 205)

The capacity within Baby Suggs to nurture others with tenderness, and teach them to be tender with themselves, is awe inspiring. It is no wonder that ‘nine years without the fingers or the voice of Baby Suggs was too much.’ (Morrison 110) Despite her suffering, or perhaps because of it, Baby Suggs empowers others to take care and love themselves in a world that forbids them to. The community she nourishes at the Clearing are unjustly exposed to a life characterised by pain, death, and ‘far worse’ (Morrison 319) but ‘with Baby Suggs’ heart in charge, the people let go.’ (Morrison 121) With white people executing their power to ‘dirty you so bad you couldn’ t like yourself anymore’ (Morrison 319), Baby Suggs’ efforts to teach self-love is all the more momentous. ‘More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that are yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.’ (Morrison 113) It is through love and tenderness that we care to grow, maybe even *bloom*.

There is so much to learn: life is a choice; your heart is the prize.

It’ s astounding to find out that life has been a choice this whole time. Every day, you wake up, and you choose life. Living doesn’ t happen on its own.

Your heart is a prize. A gift. A treasure. But it is *your* prize. Your heart is *yours* to love. Don’ t waste time waiting for someone else to love it. It is your prize.

In our living, we are growing as we are dying.

So choose *love*. Always choose love. Love is a practice. As is tenderness. As is care. And I will have lived fully and died well if I can make that my purpose. Make that my *personhood*.

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