Chapter 4 ~

Strength and the Battle Ground of Slavery II.

Survival Beyond Survival: The Price of Strength in *Beloved*

In *Annie Allen* (1949), Gwendolyn Brooks describes her protagonist as "taming all that anger down" in response to a series of mythical scenarios of romance and love from which dark-skinned girls like herself are usually excluded. This control mechanism enables Annie Allen to swallow her anger and disappointment when her "man of tan," home from World War II, deserts her and their children by disappearing into the arms of another, lighter-skinned woman. She must move her anger aside when the man of tan returns to her, broken and dying. She also tames all that anger down in trying to raise her children alone in a society that does not value them. She speaks of "fighting" before "fiddling," but she is finally merely "polite" and looks to ancestors for guidance. If Annie Allen, who is in many ways an acquiescing, unassuming, self-effacing, and sometimes deliberately weak female character, nonetheless gathers the emotional forces necessary to tame all that anger down, then even more so is that the case with black women characters whose strength and determination are their foremost characteristics. For fictional black women who survive slavery, such as Toni Morrison's Baby Suggs and Sethe Suggs, Sherley Anne Williams's Dessa Rose, and J. California Cooper's Always, taming the anger down is perhaps more important than the occasions on which they explode with rage, for they can explode.

Controlling rage is understandably a survival mechanism. I do not refer here simply to the expected anger that might ensue from beatings, rape, or other personal injury that an individual might receive during slavery. I also include the rage that is quietly attendant upon watching the beating or sale
of a loved one, in knowing that the master is planning to sell one or one's child, or in knowing that slaveholders control one's life so effectively that the very air smells like slavery. That is the kind of rage that Baby Suggs and Sethe Suggs experience in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). They are contrasting portraits in taming the anger down versus letting it explode. In both cases, their characterization as strong black women is the key to understanding them and the strategies they adopt for survival. An older woman, Baby Suggs has been in slavery much longer than Sethe, and she has understandably had more opportunities during which to develop strategies for surviving the assaults upon her humanity that were daily accompaniments to her enslavement. With Baby Suggs, questions that logically warrant asking are, how much can a human being take before she says "No."? Or, "I give up. I quit. I'll take my own life"? How much loss, suffering, and dehumanization can an individual endure before she breaks?—if she breaks? The answers to these questions are contained in the fact that Morrison imbues Baby Suggs with the same characteristics inherent in many of her literary ancestors. With strength as her primary virtue, Baby Suggs—for most of her life—is not allowed to give up. Even when she ostensibly quits, strength remains the defining feature of that decision.

Physically, Baby Suggs is not an extraordinarily large woman; certainly no size comparable to Mama Lena Younger or Mammy Barracuda is implied. She is presented more in reference to injury and loss than to physical size. Her strength, as with some of the literary women before her, might in fact be characterized by a deformity. Just as Miss Thompson in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) has a sore on her leg as the indication of her moral strength in saying no, and just as Sethe carries a "tree" of whip scars on her back to mark her resistance to the institution of slavery, Baby Suggs has a deformed leg that conveys a similar message. We learn that, at Sweet Home, she is "exempted from the field work that broke her hip and the exhaustion that drugged her mind"; the hip injury has left her with a walk "like a three-legged dog" (141).

A woman without a romantic partner, Baby Suggs takes the defining part of her name from her "husband," who, according to the pact upon which they had agreed, took his chance to run away from slavery and never looked back. It was he who taught her to make shoes. He cannot find her, she surmises, if she resorts to using the name "Jenny Whitlow" that Mr. Garner points out is on the bill of sale. She defines herself, therefore, by a romantic absence, a lack, one that highlights her keeping on in spite of the apparent (and understandable) desertion by her husband. Some readers could view her retention of the name as a positive attribute, for by insisting upon "Baby," Baby Suggs defines herself in a way that the slaveholders cannot control. Even when they persist in calling her Jenny, she knows that she is Baby.