

TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*:... 'AND THE PAST ACHIEVED FLESH'

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ANGELS CARABI: In *Beloved* you move back into history and you plunge in the period of slavery. It seems that by writing about that period, you bring up a collective pain that had been silenced within the Black community but that was always there, kept as an unspoken burden, almost as a ghost-like presence.

TONI MORRISON: Yes, I thought that in the folklore and in the songs and in early poetry or lyrics, there was never much mention of the 'middle passage.' The poems that I know about this period are recent –after the 60s–, so there was a part of history, of that journey from Africa to America, that Black people themselves had never spoken about.

I quite, quite understand that omission because to dwell on it would perhaps paralyze you to the point of not being able to get on with the business of every day life, of not knowing how to survive the daily experience. It was too painful to remember and I had the impression that it was something that needed to be thought about by us, by Afro-Americans. With *Beloved*, I am trying to insert this memory that was unbearable and unspeakable into the literature. Not only to write about a woman who did what Sethe did, but to have the ghost of the daughter –that she believes is her daughter– return, as a remnant, a trace of a period that was unspoken. It was a silence within the race. So it's a kind of healing experience. There are certain things that are repressed because they are unthinkable and the only way to come free of that is to go back to them and deal with them.

A.C.: Memory has a dual function. On the one hand, to remember painful periods generates suffering. But on the other hand, remembering has a healing quality; suffering provides information and ultimately offers self-knowledge.

T.M.: Oh yes, absolutely. And then that makes it possible to live completely. Part of you is dead if you don't remember. Part of your mind is vacant, so it is not complete. So the pain is worth it because the healing is great.

A.C.: Beloved's arrival stimulates Sethe's memory.

T.M.: Some of it. Paul D is there before, and at least, Sethe begins to think about certain things... the plantation... Beloved comes after Paul D and she is like a catalyst. She opens up everybody's vulnerability.

A.C.: I see Beloved as an individual character, also as a ghost—I think she could be both— but also as a representative of all the women that went through 'the middle passage' whose stories have remained silent.

T.M.: She is a child, a girl. But she is also the men and the women... all those people. When she tries to remember what that slave ship was like, she remembers the man lying on top of her, the woman that she was identified with... all these myriad people. But in addition to that, she retains the image of the women working in the community, how vital they are as the repository of history, in a certain domesticated sense of what a community and a family is.

A.C.: Beloved makes her presence be felt from the very beginning of the novel, but it is only when Paul D. tries to chase her spirit away, that she achieves a body.

T.M.: Yes, before, she is just a presence that they summon; they want her there. Denver needs her, Sethe needs her, even Baby Suggs can deal with what is happening in the house—which may be their own invention. They long for the baby that was killed, but Paul D doesn't, and he exorcises it. So, there is no room for the imaginative presence and then, Beloved is incarnate. She takes flesh after Paul D gets rid of her and has to become a person. It's like history moving inside the house, sitting down at the table, so now you cannot avoid it. It's not playful any longer.

A.C.: Can the fact that Beloved has 'new skin' be associated with the 'birth' of memory ('soft and new') for the Afro-American people?

T.M.: It could be. I wanted a baby in human body, without past or future, having been killed so young and also to be the embodiment of the past. It is indeed what she says, a brand new segment of the history that has been un-lived and unattended to. And also fresh, and therefore, because it is so new and fresh, much more painful to handle.

A.C.: Can the fact that she has this demonic quality be associated with the painful aspect of remembering?

T.M.: Oh yes, not only with the painful process of remembering but with the act itself. She was violently disremembered. It's not that she wasn't mourned as a child in the metaphorical quality of the book, but it's like the history of 'the middle passage.' All those people who threw themselves into the sea had been violently ignored, no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, nor in the

United States nor in Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace and there is not one monument, anywhere, to pay homage to them because they never arrived safely on shore. So it's like a whole nation that is under the sea. A nameless, violent extermination.

A.C.: Can her redeeming quality be associated to the fact that she provokes understanding of history among the people that are around her?

T.M.: Oh, yes. She makes them face up to the things they have been avoiding. They have, in a sense, to grow up in her presence. Her physical presence is so persistent that she cannot be ignored any more, so they have to deal with her.

A.C.: On the ship there is no air, no water and no space to move in. This brings echoes of death, of a living death. Were you trying to establish a close association between death and the ship?

T.M.: Between the ship and the grave. When she talks to Sethe or Denver, they think she has come back from the grave. And they ask how it was like over there. Her language fits into their conception of life after death. And since it was a death, a grave, a dying place, I wanted the association between the physical journey on the slave ships and the grave to be very strong.

A.C.: Can you talk about the water imagery in the novel? Sethe breaks water when she gives birth to Denver, and her bladder 'fills to capacity' when she meets Beloved (maybe as a reenacting of a birth ritual). Beloved comes out of the river and her 'mother' jumped into the ocean... 'the middle passage' is also associated with water. There is a recurrent water image.

T.M.: Well, I wanted Sethe obviously to be reexperiencing birth and, as you say, she loses her water when she sees Beloved. The other part has to do with the African conviction regarding reincarnation. It is believed that, particularly, children or young people who die uneasily return in forms of members of your family and come out of the water. The water is interesting but also a dangerous and a haunted place because spirits dwell in it.

A.C.: Sethe is also a woman who was abandoned by her mother and she remembers her as a woman in the field. So she has also experienced the loss of her mother.

T.M.: Yes, and that makes her fierce with her children. The fact that she was abandoned, or that she feels abandoned—she doesn't know her mother—, destroys a normal parent-child relation. Her horror is that, maybe, her mother was trying to escape without her. When she has children, she is excessively ferocious about keeping them with her, a kind of reaction to her own feelings of abandonment. So it makes her gesture, her infanticide, much more powerful, because she thinks that she can kill her children, and kill herself, and go to a place of eternity where all could be together again without pain. Death would not be termination, it is just a change into something else. But she is impacted by the feeling of abandonment.

A.C.: When Sethe was living on the plantation she did not have other women to

talk to, women who would tell her how to take care of her children. Her impulse of killing Beloved comes out of a woman who is used to taking decisions on her own. Would it have been different if Sethe had a community?

T.M.: Oh yes, she would have been different if she had had a community. The problem of the house at the moment is that it is isolated. When Sethe commits the act, the community rejects her. She is uncivilized in the woman sense of the word. She doesn't know how to negotiate certain levels of pain because she has never been advised. If Baby Suggs been there, she would have understood her heartbreaking, everytime she had to tie her children to the well so she could work and watch them, make sure they weren't hurt. Sethe has less than a month of neighborhood life, that's all she ever knew of a community of her peers. Her independence is such that, when she leaves the house after the act, the women recognize that solitary excessive pride and reject her. It's only when Sethe feels so beaten down and that excess has gone the other way, that they come and rescue her.

A.C.: Sethe is the only child conceived in love; she was named after her father. Her name is one of her own, a name that was conceived out of a loving relationship; like Denver, who gets her name from Amy Denver of Boston. Can you talk about the relevance of having a name of your own, given with love and tenderness? Slaves did not have names of their own.

T.M.: Did not use to. If they came with their own names they were ignored. People just named them anything they wanted to. Their purpose was to keep the families separated in order to control them, and gave the slaves the last name of the master, as property. If I give you another name, then I own you; this is why Black people had nicknames, names that they gave themselves. Stamp Paid is a very classical example. He's born Joshua and he does something that is memorable. He changes his own name to Stamp Paid. Paul D's name for instance –all these letters– is a sign of contempt. So it's rare and very delicious to have a name that is given to you by a parent, based on a love relationship or maybe given by somebody in your family. Then, you earn your name and it's not just a name of a white person attached to you. Baby Suggs is another example. Her name is Janey Whirlow but Janey she does not recognize, and Whirlow was the name of whoever owned her; but she was married to a man named Suggs and he used to call her Baby Suggs. So that's her name. It's her resistance.

A.C.: When Sethe tells her story to Denver and Beloved she recovers her Ma'am's language which she thought she had forgotten. Can you talk about the relevance of recovering the original language?

T.M.: It is a suggestion that all these languages, including cultures that had been wiped out, can be recovered only through an active effort of the will. Sethe is in fact telling a story and, by narrating it, she sort of talks herself into being. She doesn't talk about the past ever, she just warns Denver, but her daughter does not want to hear either. When Paul D comes, she begins to think a little bit about the past; when Beloved appears, she has to tell them more, a little more each time and, suddenly, certain things

from her childhood just come back; and even though she can't really remember the language, she remembers what it said. She remembers what she understood and that becomes a reclamation of a past. I don't know how many people, except maybe Sixo, could remember the language. I don't know how many Afro-Americans could speak these other languages. That disruption of history is very very painful but we can reclaim ourselves by narrative, by active effort, by telling.

A.C.: Something which is very interesting is that, even though Sethe does not remember the language, the African past is unconsciously being retained through the image of the dancing antelope that she relives before giving birth to Denver. This image is associated with Sethe's mother's dance. So part of the African past is transmitted through images.

T.M.: Through images and with the help of *Beloved*'s presence. If *Beloved* had not shown up, could this ever have been remembered by her? It would have been lost. But the past comes back. *Beloved* is the past and she comes back. So Sethe can gather bits and pieces of a life when she was a little girl. I think she's lucky because she is made to remember by herself. It would be interesting if she could pass this on to Denver. But I have the feeling that Denver goes out to college and forgets about it all (Toni Morrison and myself laugh heartily).

A.C.: Africa is seen as a place where women gathered flowers in freedom and played in the long grass before the white men arrived. It is freedom that brings the idea of Africa as a lost paradise.

T.M.: Yes, that's right. It was theirs. Whatever the difficulties were, they were 'their' difficulties and not somebody else's. No one could possibly tell what the place would have been like if the white men would have never arrived there. You don't know it because it was beaten up so early. If they had been left alone, maybe they would have stayed agricultural. It may be a little too romantic to think about Africa as a kind of Eden, a place before the fall, before corruption, the cradle of humanity. And sure enough, it was a place where there were confrontations, but whatever it was, it was not a conquered place where other people's imagination began to work on it, instead of their own imagination. But nevertheless, what she remembers before she was captured is a picture of something that was community, harvesting. Something pleasant and without fear.

A.C.: Sethe experiences her husband's loss as well as her sons' loss. Yet these losses seem less than that of her mother and daughter. Is there an indication that the bonds between mothers and daughters are stronger than the relations between mothers and sons?

T.M.: Well, she doesn't know whether Halley is living or dead. He could always be possibly alive. The loss of her sons is painful, but they are boys and boys always leave, anyway. But the fact is that she hit the boys with the shovel and cut the baby girl's throat. I could have made the baby a boy. So I am not sure that I intended to say anything special about the bonds between mothers and their sons or daughters.

A.C.: Sethe's sense of guilt turns her into Beloved's victim and their roles reverse. Does Sethe feel that she deserves to be forgiven by Beloved? Can she?

T.M.: No, not by Beloved! (Toni Morrison laughs). No, she is insatiable. She could never give her enough. She represents 350 years of indifference so it would take her 350 years to fill her up. Sethe gives her life to her to the exclusion of Denver. It's herself she cannot forgive. She tried very hard to say: 'This is the right thing to do.' And she was not repentant at all but, in the face of that child, not the neighbors', not Paul D's, but in the face of that child, she would have to explain, and explain and she could never explain enough. It's herself she can't forgive; so now she is not so sure of her deed. With Beloved's presence she feels happy and is able to tell herself: 'See, she came back, and I don't have to explain a thing.' She is the one left to forgive herself. Her lover can't give her that.

A.C.: I don't find this sense of guilt in Eva—in your novel *Sula*—when she burns her son alive. What's the difference?

T.M.: He is not a baby. He is grown and he is going to be a burden to himself and to her. And Eva is very arrogant, she names everybody (Toni Morrison laughs).

A.C.: At the end, when Sethe tries to kill Mr. Bodwin it seems to me that she exorcises the past addressing her anger against Mr. Bodwin, instead of against her children as she did in the past. Does this reflect a change of attitude in Black people—instead of self-mutilation, addressing the anger at the source of their misery?

T.M.: Maybe, but she can't kill her daughter a second time (Toni Morrison laughs). She just directs her fury at the person whom she thinks is going to destroy her. She is in love with her daughter now; if she loves her daughter, the woman Beloved, she loves herself. Then she can turn her head and direct her anger at the source which she thinks is the cause of her misery, rather than escape it by doing something violent.

A.C.: Sethe must confront her past to achieve self-knowledge to save her best thing which is herself. When this past is assumed Beloved can disappear. Would you agree with this?

T.M.: Beloved has no place there now. Sethe is now going to concentrate on taking care of herself, the beloved that is inside her which is her. 'She' is the beloved, not the child. The past is returned and buried again or gone.

A.C.: Is the past gone or assumed, incorporated?

T.M.: The book, at the end, assumes it is gone. Sethe doesn't, maybe. The last part of it suggests that they will not get rid of the whole thing. It's there, somewhere. The least gesture, the least look. I don't know, maybe Sethe will be able to put both things together. The past, admit what she did, and go on from there. Maybe I'm more optimistic about her than about the whole race. I was traveling around the United States after *Beloved* came out. Everywhere that I would go, there was a picture of a confederate soldier on a horse in the middle of the town. Everybody has a monument to every little thing... there is a huge wall to all the veterans... but there is not one bench

where we can sit down and think about those people. There is now some effort to do that, but it's like you don't have to pay respect to your ancestors. They are just waiting there for you to ask them to do something but if you don't know them, don't honor them, don't think of them or mourn them, or praise them, then you are like a cripple. A public monument or a private monument is needed, not just to the ancestors –grandparents, great-grandparents– whom we know, but to all those we don't. That's a big gap, a disjunction in the history.

A.C.: Is this then 'a story to pass on'? But if it is, then wouldn't the burden of the past unnable the possibility to live the present?

T.M.: It's both. If you dwell, if you just dwell on the past you can't go forward. If you confront the past there is a possibility to move on. So I said that this is not 'a story to pass on' but it's like a warning to Black people. This is not a story to pass on, to give to the next one, but the irony is that it is not a story to pass by. So it has both meanings.

A.C.: All right. Can you talk about the role of the community in *Beloved*? In fact, it is the community who increases Sethe's isolation.

T.M.: The community makes judgments. It's like a chorus. The survival of the individual is dependent on the community. Sethe makes a valiant effort to live without the community. And she can't. They reject her too because she's behaving in a very proud way. She is saying to the community: 'I'll get along without you' and they know she's saying this, so they let her try. And then, when she is beaten down enough, they don't kick her out; by and large they support her.

Baby Suggs was a very big part of the community. When she dies, Sethe is all alone leading the solitary life of a widow. This is pride of outrageous exaggeration, so the community lets her know that they think she is proud, too proud. When Denver finally leaves the house, it recognizes that she can't do everything by herself and then, they know that there is no pride. Sethe learns the lesson and makes it possible for the community to come. They exorcise what they considered the demon of the past which is that what has happened to her in the past has hurt her beyond endurance. Maybe they have a sort of thermometer (Toni laughs) to measure how much misery a person can take (we both laugh heartily).

A.C.: Are you implying then that the community does not reject her for her deed but because of her pride?

T.M.: The community does not reject her because of the killing of the child. They think that it is a bit outrageous but this does not cause their rejection. It is how she responded to that murder. She did not come home and weep and say: 'Oh my God, look at what I did!.' She didn't say: 'Help me.' She didn't say: 'I don't know why I did that.' She just walked out of the house with her head up, went to jail, got taken out, came home, got a job and went on living like that. And even when she comes out of the house, they are watching her. They sing but they don't have any words. They recognize the beginning of that arrogance and that keeps them away from her.

A.C.: Let's move on to Paul D. He brings the past to Sethe's house and, in a way, he redeems her of a haunted past, leads her into the present. At the same time he's helping himself because he's been wandering for so long.

T.M.: Yes, he's been going from place to place and when he finds Sethe he can help her, he can inhabit her body, fill it, which is what you don't do when you are very busy, when you are tough and independent. And at the same time, he finds a home, a place to be. Because they have shared memories, their past is very much alike, it's a segment of their lives that nobody else knows but them.

A.C.: Let's talk a bit about Baby Suggs. A basic sense of wholeness is achieved through Baby Suggs' celebration of the body. She reconciles the disassociation between body and mind. The people that went through the 'middle passage' were trying to leave their bodies behind. Beloved feels that she is dismembering herself as well as Sethe when Paul D is bathing her.

T.M.: You know, this disassociation of the mind from the body is a very special western notion; the idea that there is the mind/the spirit and then, the body, which will betray you. The body has to be closed down, or else, there is sin and contradiction. But in other cultures, people dance and don't feel the contradictions of the body because it is not related to sexual sin. I don't mean they don't have regulations about sex but there is a fuller acceptance of the body. And the devastation of slavery was not that explosion and implosion of the family, but also the disassociation of the self, the breaking of the self into bits. Paul D runs around the country trying very hard not to love anyone because it is too much.

A.C.: Yes, Ella says: 'Don't love nothing.' And also in the book, fear for loss generates a hunger for love. Beloved is so hungry for love that she destroys Sethe. I think that you are also implying that if you become possessive about the person you love you end up destroying him or her.

T.M.: One of the major, major, profound devastation of oppression is how love is distorted. If you love something too much you'll kill it. Or you love it too little because you are afraid you can lose it. You don't enjoy, you do it slyly, like when Paul D is in prison; he can't even love nature, just a little bit of the moon because if he would love it too much, he would lose it, and you need a little bit of leftover for the next step. So you become emotionally stingy, aesthetically stingy for fear that it too, like everything else, will be taken away. Pain affects one's personal life, like in abused children or whole nations that have been tormented and then, it is very difficult to start believing, feeling or trusting, because you can't go through that pain, so you just withhold the emotion.

A.C.: Freedom meant the possibility to love.

T.M.: Yes. Exactly.

A.C.: You seldom include the presence of white people in your books. In *Beloved* there are Amy and Mr. and Mrs. Garner who are understanding people within the limitations of belonging to a slavery society. There are also Schoolteacher and the

nephews who embody an ultimate form of evil. So you are very careful presenting a variety of people.

T.M.: Slavery meant lots of losses and lots of prohibitions. But you know, there were many people, white people, who hated it and thought that slavery was diminishing to them. They felt as if they were less human and that they were called upon to be hateful. And there were others that had a good time, who loved it because they could feel powerful; in order to continue living and doing what they wanted, they had to make sure that the people they were abusing were not really people. There were Quakers who were anti-slavery, there were lots of people who just refused to own them and looked down on people who did. Sometimes they bought slaves to free them, or even to insure that no one else could buy them. People do all sorts of things and some of them are fine and noble. Mr. Bodwin was the apogee of what the abolitionists would be like, spending a lot of time, a lot of money, a lot of efforts to mitigate those circumstances. Whereas somebody like Schoolteacher just had a good time and felt that he was doing God's work.

A.C.: He is presented as a very rational person who studies the slaves' behavior from a scientific point of view.

T.M.: Yes. You see the Age of Enlightenment was at the same time, the age of racism. In the United States, the Constitution is full of all these wonderful things about freedom and equality but, at the same time, they were able to accommodate slavery. There is this fundamental contradiction in 18th century philosophical thought because the same people who were going on about Christian love and the beatitude and the rights of man, were also slave masters who didn't carry their philosophy all the way through. I use the name of Schoolteacher because racism is scholarly pursued. Racism was taught in theology, in anthropology, in biology, in the Darwinian theory of evolution... was taught in everything. All that was in the middle of what the West calls the Age of Enlightenment, political enlightenment, the rise of the individual, the innate, natural rights of man, so they had accommodated something that would mean its own destruction. Therefore, they had to make special provisions for the people that they did not want to be associated with. This would mean Blacks and women. They were talking about the rights of man and they certainly didn't mean blacks, they meant white men. The white men distributed the rights to themselves except for white people who didn't have property and couldn't vote either. So the poor people, the Black people, the Native American people and the women had nothing to do with what they were establishing at the foundation of the country. Somebody like Schoolteacher in 1850 or 1855 would be very much in line with the mainstream thought. The aberration, the eccentric one would be Mr. Bodwin.

A.C.: And the whole thing is even more pernicious because it was socially accepted.

T.M.: Exactly.

A.C.: Can you talk about the role of music in *Beloved*? Paul D is a singing man,

Amy's soothing song for Sethe when she is in pain, Sethe sings to her children a song that Beloved recognizes, the women sing.

T.M.: It's a summons. Music is a powerful magical tool. Singing is soothing, it gets you through a difficult period but it has a greater power than that which is, like poetry, it allows you to articulate what you are feeling. Paul D makes a song about his relationship with Sethe. The women in *Beloved* avoid the house, they stand outside but when they get serious, they burst into song like a religious exorcism. By song you can make things happen. I heard a woman who is a very beautiful singer who said that, during the Civil Rights Movement, when Black people would get ready to go out and demonstrate—to permit themselves to be humiliated—, they would have meetings and you couldn't get them to do anything unless you would start with a song. And then, they understood that it was a call, a clarion call. Music gives you the information you want, it raises your courage, it gives you clarity, it gives you focus. Then, you are able to go forward into a dangerous situation.

A.C.: Some of your characters make an effort to 'beat the past.' Sethe beats the dough in the mornings as a way to beat back the past. Paul D has this tin heart.

T.M.: It's always threatening to break out. Memories are always threatening like dreams. Whatever you are not thinking about in the daytime would come out in your dreams. It's always there. If you are serious about not wanting to remember, if you try to contain it, hold it back, it takes activity; you have to work at preventing the past from coming through. If you don't work hard, it will come out in distorted ways. You can't let those memories come back until you are strong enough to deal with them.

A.C.: Some isolated points in the book that I would like to ask you about. Sethe's tree on her back reminded me of a family tree like the words the woman warrior has carved on her back in Maxime Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. She carries the family history on her back.

T.M.: Well, I used to look at those pictures of people with scars. Sethe is not able to see her tree on her back. She does not feel anything but she is marked by the history of slavery. The history of slavery is written on her back.

A.C.: Beloved watches two turtles copulate. Is it a love act?

T.M.: (Toni laughs) I don't know. I wanted her to look outside herself for a moment. After she leaves the clearing they walk back and I wanted her to see something that was not hers. She sees the sexual act, a copulation. The reason I chose turtles was because of the contradiction between these big shells that are impenetrable and rough and unromantic, but there are two heads coming out and they are so vulnerable and tender. The female head pops out and pats the male's head as he mounts her. In between these two vulnerable parts, there is this hard shell. Beloved's seduction of Paul D to get him out, to get rid of anybody that Sethe might be interested in. That scene takes place before the seduction, before she tells Paul D 'Call me my name.' She moves him out of the house; so, I wanted to introduce sexuality and sensuality in her mind and, of course, there is a hint that she's been reared by somebody who used her sexually.

A.C.: A prevailing sense in the book is a sense of loss.

T.M.: And possibilities. Loss in the overwhelming pain and then, cut through it in small ways, there is the possibility between Sethe and Paul D of regaining life. After going through all the trauma, he comes back. He's horrified because of what Sethe did but, even though knowing that, he comes back to the house to look for her. He really does love her. So with a man like that, and a woman like that, there is a sense of possibility. Things go on. We did get through it.

A.C.: Does *Beloved* play a cathartic role for the Afro-American people?

T.M.: Yes, the book in general is a kind of way in which we can approach these things. I think there should be a lot of things written about all this, about 'the middle passage.' We can't just wipe it out. There is a lot in there. And art can do it. Songs, music, paintings, poetry or novels could concentrate on that period. And it is our job, it is not the white people's job. This one is ours. Black people have to do it.

A.C.: Don't you think that white people could write about the period of 'the middle passage' as well?

T.M.: Maybe yes, from their point of view. I would love to see a book by a white person in which the author imagines the situation. A captain on a slave ship, a person that makes it intelligible to me, instead of rationalizing it and defending it. Asking 'What was it really like?.' I would love to see a contemporary novel by a white woman revealing what it was like to be a slave owners' mistress. But to write about it honestly, not in a grandiose way or a glamorous way, but in a way that explores the interior life. In fact there is a book that has been written called *The Middle Passage* which I haven't read yet but that I'm very interested in, not because of the historical data which I don't care about, but because of the interior life.

A.C.: And how this affects the present, how the past can be clarified.

T.M.: That's right. There will always be a stumbling block not just racial subknowledge, if you try to forget all that. But nobody wants to do it. Nobody wants to go back and try to remember all that stuff. You think that you might go under, that you might be devastated. When I was writing the book I thought that some parts were going to be too difficult to deal with them. But in those moments, I kept saying to myself: 'All I have to do is to think about the people who lived there, who lived through it. They could live it, I could write about it.'