

Personal Liturgy #4: P-a-r-a-d-i-s-e

After journeying through this semester
And having the absolute pleasure of
Encountering Toni Morrison's *Paradise*
I struggled to understand what Paradise actually meant
To the beautiful women from the Convent who I had come to admire
And whom I saw as extensions of myself.
Each of the women had such a unique impact on my understanding of the novel
And the discreet messages Ms. Morrison was essentially trying to convey.

I am so grateful for each and every one of them,
For Mavis's tenacity,
For Gigi's confidence,
For Pallas's bravery,
For Seneca's vulnerability,
Each of them represented a piece of me,
And I never knew how connected I would feel
To a novel that was entirely about women,
But through their trials and tribulations,
It was clear that each woman eventually made it to Paradise.

But what is Paradise for me, you may wonder?
Or maybe it is just me who wonders,
I think about it all the time.
An eight-letter word that speaks so many volumes,
A three-syllable word that encapsulates incredible significance,
Yet I am still unable to discern what Paradise looks like,
Or even feels like.
Maybe this is a good thing,

Maybe I am not supposed to feel or know the meaning of Paradise,
Maybe I am already living in it but I am just unwilling to accept it,
Or maybe Paradise is all a dream.

Maybe each of the Convent women were lied to about Paradise,
Especially since the audience was never provided with a concrete answer.

Wait, Malik – stop jumping to conclusions!

I know exactly where Paradise is.

It is within us.

Within every piece of us, every inch of us,

It's in the color of my eyes, the length of my fingers, the strength of my hands,

It's in the agility of my legs, the stability of my feet, the resilience of my smile,

The gentleness of my laughter,

The ease of my walk,

The optimism of my growth-based mentality,

The way I pray each night for God to watch over my loved ones.

Paradise resides within us.

It is not for us to completely understand,

It is not even for us to fully harness.

Paradise is achievable because it has been achieved.

By being Malik,

By embracing every aspect of Malik,

By valuing every piece of Malik,

I am embarking on my own version of Paradise,

And confidently leaving a legacy and path for those to follow behind.