

Prompt: How would Toni Morrison view the COVID-19 pandemic/quarantine?

When I was four years old, my mother drove our 1967 Ford station wagon into Atlantic City to grocery shop. We lived in a white shore community two miles north. The shopping district in Atlantic City was predominantly black. Whenever we crossed the bridge into the city my mother would instruct me to leap over the front seat and double-check that all the back car doors were locked.

“I see one!” she would say, her eyebrows raised and her hands tightening at the wheel. What I typically saw was a black women pushing a baby stroller, or black teens shooting hoops, or an older black man at a corner newsstand buying a paper. My mother’s panic was real, and confirmed each night on the local and national news — blacks could at any moment turn violent and inflict serious harm. It was inevitable that a defenseless four-year-old white boy would absorb his mother’s fears.

“Part of Morrison’s genius had to do with knowing that our cracked selves are a manifestation of a sick society, the ailing body America, whose racial malaise keep producing Pecolas,” writes Hilton All in *The New Yorker Magazine* just two month’s before our nation would be shuttered from the COVID-19 pandemic. Al’s story celebrates the 50th anniversary of Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*.

“Stop thinking of saving your face!” Morrison states in her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in 1998. “And tell us your particularized world. Make up a story!”

So, the rest of my story is for you, Professor Morrison:

The little white boy in the car with his scared mom, grew up some and found himself living in Nyack, not far from your Rockland County home. After

your death, he entered an essay contest at his local library, a library he joined the day he submitted this story. He thought long and hard about the continuing pandemic and the quarantine that showed little sign of ending soon. Since your death there has been little poetry in the natural world - fires destroying millions of acres in California, a stubborn virus whose spikes kill thousands a day and disproportionately so for people of color, and there was a presidential election where one candidate was accused of being a white supremacist, and the other was telling us the soul of our nation was at stake. Just last week the nation learned there will be no justice for the death of a black woman - who had no criminal record- shot in her own home by police.

Then it happened.

I saw the ghost of Toni Morrison sitting on a park bench chatting with a young student. They were sitting just west of Broadway about a half block south of the Carson McCuller's House. From what I could eavesdrop I heard fragments of conversation with bits of "Black Lives Matter", and "It's crazy and it feels crazy," and "Quarantine is a time of self-reflection — from Mr. Floyd comes the dawn of change." She paused for a moment, collected her thoughts and continued: "Write about you. Climb out of your mama's '67 Ford. She love you too hard. Miss Marie says 'Something in this country loves hate.'"

Then, the student was gone. It was McCullers now with Morrison. The two flew up into the air, and I'm not sure if I saw wings or a jet propulsion on their backs. Their flight continued up Broadway to Sixth Avenue and past the Hopper House where Hopper himself joined them. The three flew west above Midland Avenue to the Nyack Cemetery, where they momentarily hovered gathering Hayes, Hecht and Cornell. These writers and artist flew high, out of Nyack, Rockland County, up into the thinning ozone layers and into the dark, but ever expanding universe.