

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives
A Portable Paradise – *Roger Robinson*

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A PORTABLE PARADISE

Roger Robinson

Brief Summary

A Portable Paradise presents a speaker recalling **wisdom** from his grandmother about how to carry an inner sense of paradise with him, no matter where life takes him or how difficult things become. She advises him to keep this internal **“paradise”** hidden and personal so others cannot take it, and to use it as a source of comfort by tracing it in his pocket, smelling its scent, or humming its **“anthem”** whenever life feels stressful. The poem ends by encouraging the reader to shine a light on this private paradise and hold onto that vision until sleep comes, suggesting that peace and **resilience** can be found within oneself even during **hardship**.

Synopsis

- The poem opens with the speaker introducing **“paradise”** as something his grandmother taught him to carry within himself, rather than a physical place.
- She advises him to keep this inner paradise hidden and personal, so it cannot be taken away by others.
- She suggests that during moments of stress, he should quietly **connect** with this paradise through small actions, like touching it in his pocket or remembering its scent and sound.
- When stress becomes constant, she advises him to go somewhere quiet and imagine placing his paradise in front of him.
- The speaker explains that when life becomes overwhelming, he has been taught to actively imagine unpacking his inner paradise in a quiet, private space, laying it out carefully as if it were something physical.
- The poem finishes with the speaker concentrating on this **imagined scene** until he falls asleep, showing the paradise being used as a practical **coping habit** rather than just a comforting idea.



Context

Roger Robinson

Roger Robinson is a **British-Trinidadian** poet whose work often explores everyday wisdom, memory, and emotional survival. His poetry is reflective and accessible, using simple language to show how people cope with pressure and uncertainty. *Portable Paradise* reflects a **contemporary** poetic approach that values quiet guidance and personal reflection, presenting poetry as a source of comfort rather than drama.



Family wisdom

The poem reflects the importance of advice passed down through family members, particularly elders. In many cultures, grandparents play a key role in sharing guidance, stories, and values through spoken language rather than written rules.

Robinson's use of the grandmother's voice reflects this **oral tradition**, where **wisdom** is shared informally but remembered deeply. The poem presents family knowledge as something personal and shaped by lived experience.



Imagination and memory

A Portable Paradise connects to a wider **literary tradition** that treats memory and imagination as sources of comfort and stability. Instead of escaping physically, the poem reflects how people return to mental images and **sensory memories** to steady themselves emotionally when the outside world feels difficult or beyond their control.

The title “A Portable Paradise”

The title immediately challenges the traditional idea of paradise as a fixed, distant, or perfect place. Instead, it suggests paradise is small-scale, mobile, and ordinary, something that can exist alongside everyday life rather than separate from it.

The word 'portable' implies deliberate protection and control. It suggests the speaker chooses when and how to access this paradise, which links to the grandmother's advice to keep it hidden so it cannot be damaged, taken, or judged by others.

A Portable Paradise

The title also hints at practice rather than escape. A “portable” paradise is not a fantasy people run away to, but something they actively use in moments of pressure, suggesting the poem is about coping strategies and emotional survival rather than idealism.



Perspective and Tone

A Portable Paradise is written in the **first person**, giving the poem a personal and **reflective** voice. The speaker shares advice passed down from his grandmother, which makes the poem feel **intimate**, as if the reader is being let into a private family teaching rather than a public statement. The **tone** is calm, reassuring, and quietly hopeful throughout. Even when the poem refers to stress and pressure, it avoids **urgency** or **despair**, instead offering gentle, practical guidance. The comforting tone suggests that resilience comes from learned habits and inner reassurance, rather than dramatic escape, and remains consistent from beginning to end.



A Portable Paradise

The poem begins in medias res with “And”, creating a conversational tone and suggesting this wisdom is ongoing and inherited. Paradise is immediately defined through the grandmother, showing comfort and survival knowledge passed down through family.

The repeated conditional “And if” creates a gentle instructional rhythm, as if the grandmother is calmly preparing the speaker for hardship.

Sensory imagery grounds paradise in small, ordinary actions, showing that comfort can be accessed quietly and discreetly, even in public.

The empty room represents intentional solitude, not loneliness. The list (“hotel, hostel or hovel”) removes class boundaries, showing that peace is not dependent on wealth or comfort.

Light imagery symbolises clarity & reassurance while the simile linking it to “morning” suggests renewal rather than escape. The final instruction is quiet and sustained, implying that resilience comes from holding onto calm over time, and that inner peace helps the speaker endure (rather than run from) difficulty.

And if I speak of Paradise,
then I'm speaking of my grandmother
who told me to carry it always
on my person, concealed, so
no one else would know but me.

That way they can't steal it, she'd say.

And if life puts you under pressure,

trace its ridges in your pocket,

smell its piney scent on your handkerchief,

hum its anthem under your breath.

And if your stresses are sustained and daily,

get yourself to an empty room - be it hotel,

hostel or hovel - find a lamp

and empty your paradise onto a desk:

your white sands, green hills and fresh fish.

Shine the lamp on it like the fresh hope

of morning, and keep staring at it till you sleep.

Describing paradise as something carried “on my person” makes it feel tangible, while “concealed” suggests inner peace must be protected from the outside world.

The vague pronoun “they” implies an unnamed external threat, making the advice feel universally relevant rather than tied to one situation. This line reinforces paradise as private, not decorative, suggesting emotional safety must be guarded rather than displayed.

The verbs “trace”, “smell”, and “hum” suggest control and calm, turning imagination into a practical coping method.

This line acknowledges long-term pressure rather than a single crisis, making the poem emotionally realistic.

The extended metaphor continues as paradise is “emptied” like an object, reinforcing the idea that imagination can be organised, examined, and controlled.

The list of natural imagery is deliberately simple and balanced, suggesting clarity and abundance rather than luxury.

The absence of people makes the scene feel peaceful and restorative, as if paradise exists outside social pressure.



Structure

Opening in medias res

- The poem begins mid-thought and **in medias res** with *“And if I speak of Paradise”*, which immediately places the reader inside an ongoing idea rather than at a clear starting point.
- This creates a **conversational**, reflective feel, as if the advice has already been lived with for a long time rather than newly discovered.

Free verse

- The poem is written in **free verse**, with no regular rhyme scheme or metre, allowing the advice to unfold naturally and gently.
- This **loose structure** mirrors the calm, reassuring nature of the guidance, making it feel flexible and adaptable rather than rigid or instructional.

Expansion of imagined space

- The structure gradually **widens** from something small and concealed (carrying paradise on one’s person) to something spread out and fully examined (emptying it onto a desk).
- This expansion reflects increasing time and focus, showing how the speaker is encouraged to slow down and dwell on the imagined space.



Quiet, sustained ending

- The poem ends without **dramatic resolution**, instead lingering on the act of looking and holding the image *“till you sleep”*.
- Structurally, this creates a soft, **circular close**, where the poem settles into rest rather than action, reinforcing its calm, reflective shape.

Language and Imagery

Metaphor of “paradise”

Robinson uses an **extended metaphor** to present *“paradise”* as an **inner state** rather than a real location. Describing it as something carried *“on my person”* makes comfort feel almost physical, as if it can be held, worn, or protected. This turns paradise into a **private possession** made from memory and imagination, not geography. Because it can be carried anywhere and kept concealed, the **metaphor** suggests that peace and reassurance are internal resources the speaker can return to whenever life becomes difficult, rather than something dependent on external surroundings.



Object and tactile imagery

Robinson presents paradise as a physical object that can be carried, hidden, and unpacked, using **object imagery** to make an **abstract** idea feel practical and personal. The instruction to carry paradise “**on my person, concealed**” turns comfort into something portable and private, suggesting it is a form of quiet protection rather than escape. This is reinforced through **tactile imagery**, as paradise can be “**trace[d]... in your pocket**” or “**empty[ied]... onto a desk**”, making memory and imagination feel touchable and real. By encouraging physical interaction with this imagined space, Robinson shows how comfort can be actively handled and controlled, rather than passively wished for.



Natural imagery

Robinson fills the poem with peaceful **natural images**, including “**white sands, green hills and fresh fish**”. These images suggest calm, simplicity, and abundance, creating a strong **contrast** with the pressures of everyday life mentioned earlier. The clarity of these images helps the reader **visualise** the paradise clearly, as if it can be carefully examined.

Light imagery

Light is used **symbolically** to suggest clarity and reassurance. The instruction to “**shine the lamp on it**” compares the imagined paradise to something that can be **illuminated** and focused on. The **simile** “**like the fresh hope of morning**” reinforces this, linking light to **renewal** and calm rather than escape or fantasy.

Instructional voice

The language throughout the poem is calm and reassuring, often taking the form of **gentle instructions** such as “**carry it always**” and “**get yourself to an empty room**”. This instructional tone reflects the grandmother’s guidance and makes the poem feel nurturing and supportive.

The **refrain** of “**And if...**” structures the poem as a series of responses to difficulty, suggesting steady preparation for **hardship** and reinforcing the idea that comfort is something the speaker can return to whenever life becomes overwhelming.

Themes

Inner resilience and self-protection

The poem explores the idea that strength and safety can exist internally rather than externally. The “**portable**” paradise represents a mental space the speaker can carry anywhere, suggesting resilience comes from within. This **inner refuge** cannot be taken or damaged by outside pressures, making it a form of emotional **self-defence** in difficult situations.



Inheritance and intergenerational wisdom

The grandmother plays a central role as the source of knowledge and guidance. Her advice shows how survival skills and coping strategies are passed down through **generations**. The poem values this **inherited wisdom**, suggesting that family teachings can shape how individuals handle stress and uncertainty throughout life.



Privacy and ownership of identity

The **instruction** to keep paradise **“concealed”** highlights the importance of privacy. The poem suggests that some parts of identity and comfort are safest when kept personal rather than shared. This theme reflects the idea that inner peace is something owned by the individual and protected from outside interference.

Imagination as a coping strategy

The poem presents **imagination** as a practical tool for managing **stress**. The act of mentally unpacking paradise during moments of pressure shows how **visualisation** and **sensory memory** can calm the mind. Imagination is not **escapism** here, but a deliberate way to regain balance and control.



Comparisons

In a London Drawingroom – George Eliot

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems respond to urban environments and suggest that modern city life can feel restrictive or emotionally damaging. Robinson implies pressure and stress in everyday life, while Eliot presents London as joyless and oppressive, describing a place where there is “the lowest rate of colour, warmth, and joy”. Each poem contrasts this urban world with an alternative sense of fulfilment. Robinson offers an internal refuge made from memory and imagination, while Eliot contrasts London with an unspoken ideal of freedom and vitality that the city lacks. Both poets encourage readers to question what makes a life meaningful, using setting to reflect emotional states rather than simply describing place.
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A Portable Paradise</i> is ultimately comforting and hopeful, offering a solution through inner resilience and imagination, while <i>In a London Drawing Room</i> remains bleak and critical, offering no escape from the city's emotional emptiness. • Robinson uses sensory and gentle imagery, such as "white sands, green hills and fresh fish", to create calm and reassurance, whereas Eliot's imagery is harsh and lifeless, shown in descriptions like "a long line of wall" and "monotony of surface". • Structurally, Robinson's free verse feels personal and intimate, reflecting private coping strategies, while Eliot's more controlled structure mirrors the rigidity and confinement of urban life.
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Thirteen – Caleb Femi

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems show individuals responding to pressure and threat, exploring how people cope when the outside world feels hostile or unsafe. Robinson focuses on emotional pressure, while Femi presents direct danger through policing and suspicion. • Each poem highlights the importance of inner strength. Robinson's speaker turns inward to imagination for calm, while the boy in <i>Thirteen</i> mentally returns to childhood memories as fear builds. • Both poets use simple, direct language to make serious ideas feel immediate and personal, helping readers connect emotionally to the speaker's experience.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A Portable Paradise</i> presents coping as gentle and nurturing, guided by a grandmother's advice, whereas <i>Thirteen</i> is tense and unsettling, shaped by fear and power imbalance. • Robinson's tone is calm and reassuring, ending with rest and peace, while Femi's tone becomes darker and more disturbing, ending with the image of "dying stars / on the verge of becoming black holes". • Structurally, Robinson's poem moves steadily and calmly towards comfort, while <i>Thirteen</i> uses fragmented pacing and second-person address to mirror anxiety and loss of control.



England in 1819 – Percy Bysshe Shelley

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems respond to difficult external conditions and question how individuals survive within broken or oppressive systems. Robinson addresses personal pressure, while Shelley attacks political and social corruption. • Both poets suggest that hope must come from alternative sources when the world fails people. Robinson finds it in memory and imagination, while Shelley imagines renewal after collapse. • Both poems challenge the idea that power structures provide security or wellbeing, encouraging readers to look beyond authority.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A Portable Paradise</i> is quiet, personal, and reflective, focusing on individual emotional survival, whereas <i>England in 1819</i> is loud, angry, and public, directly criticising institutions like monarchy and government. • Robinson's imagery is soft and sensory, such as "shine the lamp on it like the fresh hope of morning", while Shelley uses violent and decaying imagery like "mud from a muddy spring" to express national rot. • Structurally, Robinson's free verse feels intimate and soothing, while Shelley's sonnet form is tightly controlled, intensifying his political argument and sense of urgency.

