

A painting of a narrow street scene. In the center, a man in a dark suit and light shirt is floating in the air, his arms outstretched. Below him, a crowd of people in dark clothing and hats stands on a cobblestone street, looking up at the floating figure. The buildings are tall and narrow, with various window shapes. The color palette is dominated by warm, earthy tones like reds, oranges, and browns, with a cooler, greenish-blue sky above. The style is expressive and somewhat abstract, with visible brushstrokes and a sense of movement.

February 2021

# ABSINTHE

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Trent's Alternative Press





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# BLUE

Aditi Sharma

I don't remember when or how I learned this, but somewhere in between the swirls of memories and trinkets from my childhood, the one thing I have always remembered is how blue is sad. Now that I think about it, my English lesson may have been when we were learning about idioms. I am not too sure. Lately, I am unsure about a lot of things.

Sadness, as I have found it to be, is perpetual. An endless, bottomless pit of bright, fluorescent blue. Too bright. Too tiring. Too overwhelming. Always. It is relentless. I remember writing once about how sadness latches on to you and over time etches itself into your bones, never letting go. It is always there, ever-present, stubborn, with a lot of attachment issues. But it is not that when you're blue, you're only sad. There are bursts of yellow sometimes, happiness, mixing with the blue to make green, some kind of feeble hope. There's seething red, seeping to make purple, wise, there, teaching you lessons about people and relationships. But then, there's always blue, lurking and eventually evading all the yellows and greens and reds and the purples. It is sad. Murky. It makes you want to curl up in a ball and cry to sleep. And often, that is precisely what you do. It leaves you helpless.

Blue is also everywhere. It is the colour of the sky and the basis of most paintings I make. It is the colour of my bedsheets and curtains and the walls of my roommate's room. It is in the pattern of the sweater I am wearing as I write this, and it is in me. Bruises and veins, that again, seep red but look blue. Blue is yet also perpetual. Relentless.

*Tiring.*

Blue



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# THREE LEGGED CREATURES

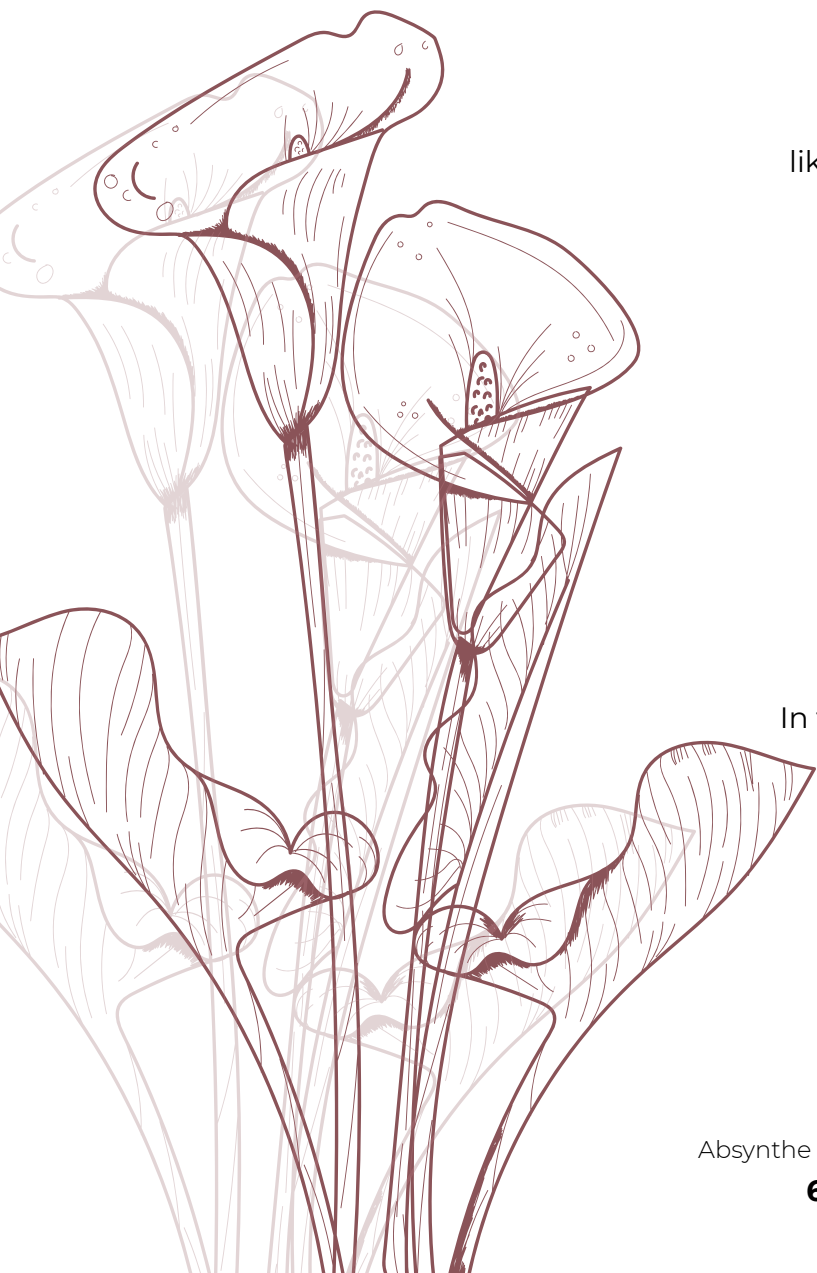
Connor Frazer

The bricks bark like angry dogs  
concrete nipping at my feet  
as if my shoes are cheese  
and it's hard dull thud the sound of rats  
slowly chewing them away

Feet now scabbed and bloody  
each step a painful reminder  
blood stains soak my socks  
like the thoughts of you cloud my memories  
I see you in disappointed faces  
three legged creatures  
and crusty scars

I feel you in the creases of my skin  
in the breathes I take  
and the hips of other women  
the smell of perfume, sincere laughter  
and the most painful of silences

In the lone starling picking amongst my yard  
the smell of dew upon mighty cedars  
and atop my broken back  
no longer able to pick myself up  
regrets like wet sand in my lungs  
hate like lead weights tied to my feet  
left to rag doll with my emotions  
over a vast canyon of infinite nothing



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# GRACEFUL ADMISSION OF A PASSERBY

Spencer Wells

i see the fear  
perpetual, grinding lust  
enemy of contentment  
contention of peace  
lie to me like you always have  
now see the world in forms  
that are so ungodly, ridden  
your "trust" is a fallacy  
and you will fall  
see as i have seen so often  
how the wind carries through  
the vast nothingness  
on the empty streets  
people, too  
i prefer not to be seen  
if i can help it  
i wear black on sunny days  
like a message in a withered book  
collecting dust in a smoky room  
vacuous intentions, or so i have sought  
to belittle my own character  
for the benefit of nobody  
other than myself  
my mind, a chimera of value  
in regret, promise, and anguish  
over all things good and bad  
to see the light of a screen  
and that of the sun  
peering ever so gently  
through the cracks of my blinds  
this pale, dark room is my home  
all that is left in the crumbling shell  
are the fading memories  
laughter, cries, and respite

my dreams ever more so  
lifting out of the crevices  
howling through wrinkles of time  
as i find myself tossing and turning  
yet again in perpetual discomfort  
it is now in this very moment  
the lines on my skin  
start to crack and wear  
and though i have yearned for escape  
so many years of my life gone to ruin  
i find that no matter where i go  
it will never be released from me  
an accursed reminder  
these blessings are momentary  
my blood shivers in the morning  
clutching onto the phrases  
recited thoroughly like lullabies  
crying louder each and every moment  
life is a formless disaster, an effect  
reaping the rewards of privilege  
all things are trivial, everything  
considered  
my blood flows even now  
behold, the stagnation of promise  
may your life be more fruitful than mine  
you are exactly where you belong  
dear stranger, somewhere you are loved  
if not now, wait  
life is no comforting cradle  
the dead of night is no place  
for someone whose heart still flutters  
to the sight of beautiful things  
still left in the grayness  
of this world

your words are still unspoken  
save them for those who will hear  
and lend your heart  
to those in the cold demise  
the insurmountable turmoil we feel  
is never as great as the manifestation  
of a world that we so often imagine  
our fears coming into fruition  
do you wonder about paradise  
in the same veil of ignorance

or do you laugh at the ideas  
of your own transgressions  
molding your clay psyche  
disembodied into mush  
does it matter any less  
make good use of your breath  
for nature spares no gift  
upon them, who have ravaged  
with sinful lust and pride  
that the treasures of all, should be theirs.





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# BECOMING

Kelsey Guindon

In the dark, my furniture and plants cast silhouettes that remind me of your body coming to meet me in bed.

I felt so safe feeling your warmth against mine. your heart beat was a metronome that both lulled and intoxicated me. My cheek would press against your back and I could not quite figure out where my body ended and yours began.

You were always so silent; you never spoke much. But your eyes told stories that took me places no book, no uttered words, no films, ever could.

The silence had a coldness that did not make me shutter away; it was more like a breeze that I needed on a cool day. Your silence was not lost in the loudness of the world; it was strength and solidarity and assurance.

But now the figure in the darkness is not a guiding one. The coldness is not one that I feel against my neck and run down my spine- exhilarating. The coldness is the empty side of the bed that I now fill with pillows and blankets, so it does not feel so empty-

So, I do not feel so empty.

I have come to learn where my body ends and yours begins. My own body feels much more apparent in the world and I've explored my arms, and my legs, and my lips and I have declared residence in this unknown land.

You planted trees on my ribs and buried things into my chest and they are landmarks-

But seasons change and although you were the landscaper, new life alters these things, these things you left, and makes them new.

All my crevices, the bruises from your lips, the ghosts

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## Becoming

of your touch, are still there- but they are not stuck. They are evolved, changed.

And yes, the bed may be half empty, but why does that mean I need to be?

I am femininity, I am a storm, I am like a rocket leaving the atmosphere- breaking to become stronger.

The silhouettes in the shadows may not be yours anymore but still, I will dance with them and let them become my safety, let them discover me.



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# IT'S OK TO BE AWKWARD

Julien Nakamoto

A young man, awkward in his mannerisms as if learning to use his body for the first time, steps onto a crowded bus. He wonders if he should verbally greet the driver or just opt-out for the classic Head-Nod of Acknowledgement like he usually does. This is an all too familiar dilemma that he's learnt to endure over the years, of which he never ends up actually saying anything. Maybe this time it'll be different.

He steps on and mumbles a quiet "thank you" with the uneven voice of a teenager. The driver doesn't hear him but the others waiting at the front definitely do. This is already bad.

A few minutes ahead is his stop. A woman stands next to him, hers is probably the one after. As usual, his music is up halfway and he can't hear a thing. She turns to him, pointing to his phone as her lips mouth what seem like familiar words. He's too nervous to ask her to repeat herself, and she points once again to his phone which for some reason is in the palm of her hand. This is when he realizes that he must have dropped it.

What a close call. The last thing he needed was to lose his new phone.

He thanks her and takes it, but to his surprise, she won't let go. Like, she *really* won't. There's a strange look on her face and he realizes that it's... not his phone. It's the same colour, but it's not his. His phone is still playing music through

his headphones, safe in his pocket.

It wasn't my phone.

It's an inconvenience we constantly endure throughout our lives. Darting eyes. Staring at your feet. Pretending to check your phone for notifications (you have none). Words jumbling together or not forming at all. Worst of all, the silence between you and the other.

I've spent a good majority of my life fearing the dreaded Awkward Moment—social anxiety disorder means that every social interaction is placed under analysis to that of a science experiment.

The hypothesis? It's gonna go bad.

The result? It went bad.

Conclusion? Maybe don't do that, like, ever again.

It's no surprise that this pattern of thought impacts your ability to maintain and initiate social relationships. It's easy to ramble about how quirky it is to script out all foreseeable outcomes of any social interaction, or to have your primal instincts set off by the mere tone in someone's voice—but believe it or not, social anxiety is pretty exhausting. And the truth is, I'm getting a little sick of it. Just a little. I'm questioning what exactly it is that I along with many others actually fear. Is it being judged? Being perceived as awkward? Not fitting in? It's all of it, really.

## It's OK To Be Awkward



It begs another question: why should we be ashamed of something that comes as natural to us as laughter—an experience that virtually everyone is familiar with?

Who ever said that awkward people can't make it?

(Don't actually answer that.)

The other day I went to Otonabee for a poutine, but with COVID-19 safety measures in place, there was a screen separating me and the kind woman taking my order. I already have a quiet voice, but my mask evidently didn't offer much support as it took a full minute of repeating my order because she couldn't hear anything I was saying. I haven't been back there in a month in fear that someone would recognize me. Totally logical.

Realistically, I doubt anyone gave a shit. Not like I did. At worst, they were inconvenienced by the hold up. It's likely that someone before or after—also plagued with a quiet voice or simply a mask in a noisy environment—had the same ordeal. And this made me realize that COVID-19 forced a particular awkwardness onto everyone, forcing us all into the same stage with the same set of rules. These barriers in speech and hearing and sociability are normalized to the point where the awkwardness that results is only natural. I don't shake hands at job interviews anymore and no one expects me to, and every time I walk past another person, we both consciously repel each other as though allergic to human connection.

But why stop there?

Awkwardness was always normal. I'd argue it's impossible to erase—based on nothing, of course, but even cavemen must have had awkward encounters with their cave-bros. So, instead of trying to avoid these dreaded moments, start by changing your approach.

For example, I view awkward moments as initiations—I can either leave feeling terrible, or I don't. It's often the former. Fear of the Awkward Moment is a lot

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## It's OK To Be Awkward

like being afraid of the dark—it's fear of the unknown. However, once you turn the light on and see it for what it is—it's just an empty room. Maybe with a few scary things, like spiders. But it's usually normal. And if awkwardness is a normal, if not slightly inconvenient part of human life, then what is there to fear? In the end, someone is always doing something far more humiliating than you.

What helps me contextualize this into a more comprehensive manner is the way in which awkwardness is portrayed through entertainment. Quarantine has given me the opportunity to re-watch a variety of TV shows and movies, and I began to notice a totally-not-coincidental pattern in the content of which I became enamoured: awkward comedy. *The Office*, *Peep Show*, *Nathan For You*, and *Borat* are a few examples where humour is extracted from 'everyday' awkward scenarios which are then thrust to its utmost extremities and absurdities. Where one would expect a laugh track, there is only silence. The awkwardness is the comedy. You are forced into an uncomfortable situation as these caricatures make an already bad situation much worse.

This all seems irrelevant, but the point I'm trying to make is that we enjoy laughing at things that we would otherwise dread. These characters represent traits which, I assume, are the last things in the world that we want to be perceived as. Not many people can truly relate to Michael Scott or Borat, at least I hope so—because they are the extremes of our insecurities. Most of us do not want to be the socially awkward, offensive outcast who lacks enough self-awareness and humility to get into these situations, and what these comedies do is contextualize these insecurities so that the viewer can

find humour in discomfiting everyday scenarios that we can all relate to. Personifying our insecurities as absurd caricatures who are far more extreme than we could ever achieve can help us survive our own daunting yet more underwhelming Awkward Moments.

In fact, whenever I find myself in an Awkward Moment, I like to imagine I'm on a more lukewarm episode of *The Office* and a distant camera is doing a close up of my face as I gaze into its lens. Once the moment is done, I (try to) carry on as if my shift is over for the day.

In other words, is being awkward painful? Definitely.

Should you laugh at it anyway because it's a common enough inconvenience? I'd recommend it.

I'd also recommend watching cringe-inducing content that makes you feel better about yourself.

Or maybe I'm just trying to comfort myself after the friendly Starbucks barista confused me for my friend and consequently attempted to start a conversation with me, and in my split-second freeze-frame of panic, I debated as to whether I should correct him and potentially put *him* in an awkward spot, or simply take the bullet.

And thus, the embarrassment bullet entered my gut and I carried on with my order, pretending to be someone else the entire way through.

In hindsight, it was pretty ridiculous. My friend and I couldn't stop laughing when I told him.

I think I just think too much.

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# CREATIVE ARTS = LYRICS FOR FUN

Odette Llacuna



It's almost Christmas and we are still in our homes distancing ourselves from others that are not in our personal bubble. The news channel always telling us to stay 2 meters apart, wear mask, always wash your hands for 20 seconds or more, try not to be in a place where there are a lot of people and more information that I cannot remember at this moment. Is this what life is supposed to be like? Would this be temporary? Or would this become our "new normal"?

In my perspective, for some reason I always look out of my house wishing I were outside, not stuck here. When I look out of my window, I see a road that leads to a bunch of houses and no people at all. I also see a few cars parked here and there and more snow covering my lawn and driveway. It's a pretty cold and depressing scene, don't ya think? Anyways, during this pandemic, I'm slightly sane which is pretty hard to do nowadays. Honestly stuck at home doing the same old routine over and over again.

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## Creative Arts = Lyrics For Fun

To stay sane, I stay busy and distracted. That isn't a hard thing to do when I got a lot of assignments to finish, I have exam preparation that I have to do soon for the upcoming exams. Also, I have teachers telling me to balance and maintain my mental health when they keep piling up more work to do. I have my mom constantly shouting in my ear to clean the house and do something, it's not like I do nothing at home. Cleaning my desk here and there and annoying my dog, Blizzard just to pass time. What else can I do?

I'm not much of a creative person, but when I'm in the mood or the scene, I write lyrics of how I feel with the environment I am in. It's not much, I'm just an ordinary girl trying to pass time without going insane with university or the future of the world.

Lyrics for a song that I might work on in the future somewhere, not now though. Fun fact about me, I can't multitask, it really sucks. When the winter break comes, I can learn how to make beats for a song, but so far, let's stick to lyrics first. I write lyrics about what I experienced, mostly about love though. I think I tried writing about death or dying, couldn't do it because it was too sad.

Honestly, I don't usually convey my deep thoughts and emotions to anyone since I feel like I'm giving them a burden, so I try not to tell them anything. When they found out, they keep telling me to get a therapist or help, but I felt like that isn't me. I don't need help, sometimes I just need people to talk to but reaching out is my problem. So, to me, writing lyrics is a healthy way to distract myself from everything that is happening in my life. It somehow makes me even connected with my self, an attempt to self care.

Writing lyrics is almost like a break for my mind and I really enjoy it especially if it's for fun. Anyone can do song writing, to me it's like poetry but with beats and more of a free range of words that flow through a piece. Sometimes if I'm not in the mood, I paint or write journal entries just to exercise my mental health and brain.

Anyone can try what I'm doing, just drop everything for a bit and take a breather.

# JUST FOR TONIGHT #2

Odette Llacuna

## CHORUS:

Just for tonight, sleep here with me  
Close your eyes, keep me company  
When you wake up, you go back to  
reality  
I will be right here, sitting alone  
In this bed, waiting for you to come  
home

## VERSE 1:

When I wake up, I wake up alone  
Wishing our memories can stay alive  
Already hoping you would stay  
I know you will go back to her  
But why do I feel so sad?  
You seem to be happier with her  
I wish you can look at me that way



## VERSE 2:

I found you looking at her  
I told you to make it up to her  
Had a fight, you're always on the fault  
(remember that)  
I told him to apologize first (go for it)  
Then they found each other all over  
again  
He was gonna thank me later (hey...)  
But I walked away, back to my house  
Back to being alone again

## VERSE 3:

5 years later, I saw you again  
You look happy with her  
I saw a ring box behind your back  
Then I saw the way you look at her  
I wish back then that you would look at  
me like that  
But it's okay, you didn't have feelings for  
me (I understand)  
It's okay, I'm just down but it's good that  
you're going to be happy with her  
Treat each other with love (bye...)

## BRIDGE:

But I really wish I didn't tell you  
My feelings were some nonsense  
It didn't matter anymore  
It wrecked everything within us  
Our friendship was worth more  
But I really hope she treats you well  
I hope you look at her with same love  
that she does  
I wish you the best... (bye for real)



# LOVE YOU

Odette Llacuna

## CHORUS:

I caught goosebumps every time  
I see you look at me with those eyes  
Time seems to slip away  
Whenever you're with me  
Even if you are young and a child  
(sometimes)  
Our memories together are too precious  
I love you Eeyore

## VERSE 1:

Time doesn't matter, our love does  
Distance doesn't matter, our bond does  
Oh, I wish we could stand side by side  
Forever in my life  
I want to see that smile on your face  
Till I'm tired of it, but I know that's im-  
possible (never)  
I hope I can help you with anything  
Let me in till I'm home with you

## VERSE 2:

I don't care if we're old or young at heart  
Be the same person I always loved  
Don't ever change, stay as the fun one  
Even if we fight (that's rare), we still  
remain the same  
Others might say that we fight like an  
old married couple (do we?)  
That's okay, at least we look like a couple  
I would make sure that we can still be  
together  
No matter what the struggles we might  
face  
Let us both depend on each other  
Then fate will take its place

## VERSE 3:

Our eyes met, everything about you is all  
mine  
Perfect for me so stay this way  
Don't ever change cuz I love the way you  
are  
Even though you act childish (ya, that's  
true)  
Sometimes acts like my sibling  
We would always come around  
And give each other big hugs  
Honestly, you give the best hugs (do you  
really?)

## BRIDGE:

I would always love you and be there  
Whether you need a friend or someone  
to hug right now (I'm right here)  
I will be there waiting for you  
With open arms for you to run to  
Embrace you until we both smile  
internally  
Until we are fully content with this  
warmth (that's right)



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# THE DRAW OF VIOLENCE

Spencer Wells

Welcome to the Greatest Show on Earth. Where the Rolling Stones plays in the background of an empty street with a light drizzle under those familiar orange lights. The lonesome disgrace of a man who was once enveloped in the beautifully warm glow of creativity now resorts his few minutes of free time towards experiencing the wonders of the unknown. His father once reached him by letter to search out a classic hit of his generation – a seeking of a bond that he longed for many years his son was too young to appreciate. The perpetual gaze of darkness, and the raindrops that gently distort his glasses as he continues on his endless, wandering journey.

He fears in some things and mostly ignorant towards the rest. He is privileged in many ways yet vulnerable to all of life's greatest mysteries and unknowns. Leaping into that loose wrath of the night for the trillionth time. Empty minds make for the perfect canvases for something amazing. Taking advantage of opportunities deliberated under the weirdest of circumstances. All of these words appear to him under a violet veil, and nothing needs to make any more



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## The Draw of Violence

sense than the complexities of his many hours of work he has accomplished under his belt. And even then, the jeans start to rip at the hems near his boot as he walks ever more. The salt stains on his boots – a gift from a generous Christmas long ago, he knows he won't grow any taller or bigger for many years to come. Under those stains are the dirt accumulated as he mistakenly walked over patches of mud after the snow melted.

He remembers the Guns n' Roses' song November Rain as it appears to him at the month's eve. Wonderous revelations that form their own contexts under unfamiliar circumstances. It doesn't seem to evade him, and he retains this promise throughout the rest of this evening. The beautiful gift of certainty. The Draw of Violence appears to him in some form of quick emotion – for the most definitive moment of his life, he feels at peace with the world. To be alone in his own little crevice, materializing the very passions that once put bread and wine at his table. The best things in life, really. To discern upon the expectations, he is so often inundated with, and to relinquish his admonitions towards the world and her constituents. How great it must feel to feel nothing other than happiness, contentment.

He saw in a dream the company he so desired for decades. Realizing the things, he strives for and clearing the fog of his conscious. The Draw of Violence becomes less of a manifestation and more of a recollection of the past – a burial of the past he foretold to himself. For any person who harbors hate in their soul knows not of the passion of ignorance. They are cursed by it, that inane prevalence consumes them like a grotesque swamp monster under an overcast midnight moon.

The Greatest Show on Earth is your own life. It always has and always will be, for so much can be expected and so much can be impressed upon those moments where they are not. At what point do you ask yourself is it really worth it to concern yourself with the business of others, when they have no business with you? Is the pursuit of fame worth the sacrifices?

All fame is derived from self-affirmation. Or rather, sourced.

Perhaps Kanye was up to something.



# THE INFLUENCE OF A TEACHER

Paige Emms

Growing up, I used to think that the life I lived sort of disqualified you from having mental health issues. My family is white, middle class, and my parents are still together and happy. Not that there weren't issues - my life wasn't *perfect* - but I had no understanding that mental illness did not discriminate.

When I was around sixth grade, I began to experience things that I didn't know how to identify or have a word for. I knew that how I felt was not a nice feeling, but I couldn't describe it or label it. I later learned that it was the beginning of my anxiety getting worse than it had ever been. However, when I was about to begin seventh grade, I moved to a new school, and my mental health got a lot worse.

I felt like I had no one to rely on or talk to. I mean, I had people who would have listened to me or tried to give me advice or fix the problems if I had trusted them or gone to them for help, but I didn't feel like anyone truly understood what I was going through.

When seventh grade began, I had no idea how much it would change me. I had always loved music, but my love for music exploded when I met the music teacher at my new school. Her passion for her job inspired me to get as involved as possible in the music department. I joined every choir and vocal ensemble and put all my time and energy into learning about music and listening to all different music genres. It allowed me to distract myself from whatever was going on in my head.

After a while, the teacher, who I will call *Mrs. K*, began to ask for my opinion on the choir's songs. She asked me because she wanted us to perform songs that the students were passionate about. I think she saw how much I wanted to learn about music mechanics and anything else I could get my hands on; she basically took me under her wing.

Simultaneously, as I was diving into music, I was pushing everyone away as much as possible, but *Mrs. K* was someone I always felt like I could



## The Influence of A Teacher

talk to. While I was trying my best to distance myself from anyone who cared about me, she became someone I trusted. She checked in with her students and made them aware that she was there for them. I knew if I needed to talk to someone, I could talk to her. Although, I never thought that I would speak to anyone about how I was doing. In fact, I was not even planning to be around for much longer.

I felt so alone in the world, and I didn't want to feel that way anymore. I was miserable and felt like such a burden to my family and friends. I was so tired of being sad all the time. I just wanted to stop being in so much pain all the time, with no way out of it. I just wanted to die. Death felt like the only solution to the feelings of loneliness and isolation I was feeling. I felt like I often wanted to climb out of my skin and experience what it felt like to be truly happy.

When I decided to take action, my family was supposed to be out of the house. I was going to go home after choir and figure out what to do then. However, my night did not go as planned.

Mrs. K happened to be staying late after choir that night. Something told me I had to say something. I was caught off guard because I had experienced feelings of desire to tell someone before, just to see what would happen. Would it actually help? Could they help me to find something that would make me feel better? However, up until that moment, the thoughts were just thoughts. I had never felt so compelled to actually trust someone and see what would happen.

So, I did it. After being partway out of the school, I went back to the music room and knocked on her door. Mrs. K waved me in. I could tell that she immediately knew something was wrong. I couldn't even talk; I was so scared. I opened my mouth, and nothing was coming out. I'd never been so terrified in my life.


Finally, I spoke and couldn't stop for a couple of minutes. I could only get myself to tell her the bare minimum: about how sad and lonely I had been feeling and that I didn't know why. Even just telling her that much was like a giant weight fell off of me. I was crying, and then she started crying. She hugged me, and I felt so relieved to have finally told someone how I was feeling. Her embrace made me feel like I had made the right decision. At that moment, I felt safe and like I was going to be okay. Maybe I felt like she understood, or maybe she didn't understand at all, but when I stood in front of her, I knew without a doubt that she cared about me being okay, and that was something I hadn't felt in a really long time.

It has been eight years since I first met Mrs. K, and I'm in my second



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## The Influence of A Teacher



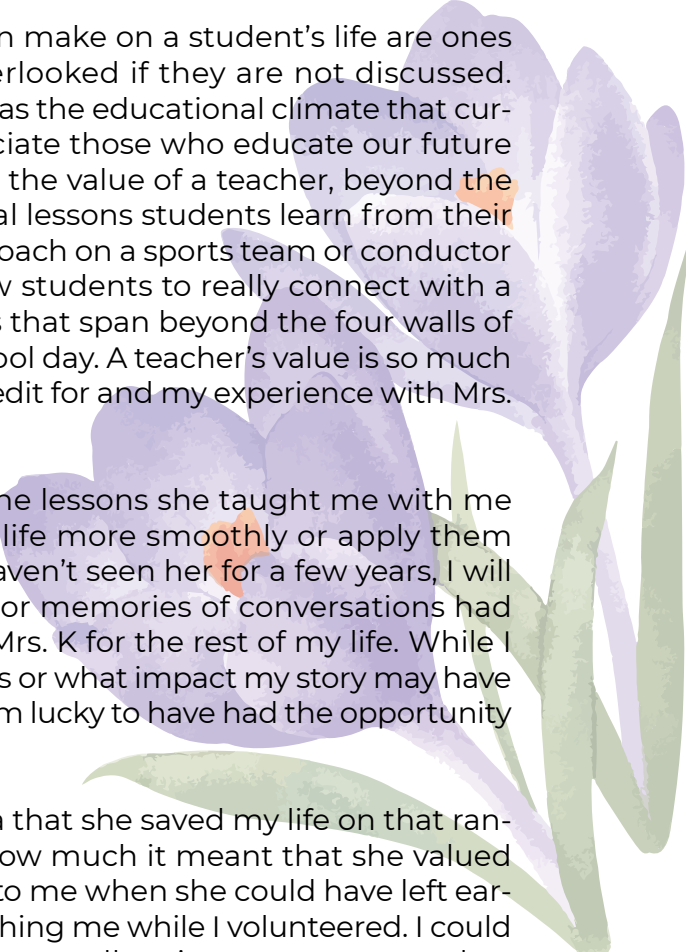
university year. I am now working toward becoming a teacher myself. While I pretty much always knew that I wanted to be a teacher, Mrs. K definitely solidified that idea. I want to use my experience with Mrs. K to give my future students the same voice that Mrs. K gave to me that year.

For several years after meeting her, I continued volunteering with Mrs. K at the schools she worked at, and she continued to impact my life. I learned a lot about life and teaching from her, and I really value those moments of real conversation and genuine mentorship. I aspire to be the kind of person and teacher that she is, and I will carry the lessons that I learned from her with me into my life as a teacher and as a person.

The impacts that a teacher can make on a student's life are ones that can be quickly devalued or overlooked if they are not discussed. Particularly during trying times, such as the educational climate that currently exists, it is important to appreciate those who educate our future children. While people may question the value of a teacher, beyond the classroom and the school day, the real lessons students learn from their teachers can be when they are their coach on a sports team or conductor in a choir club. Those moments allow students to really connect with a teacher or teachers and learn lessons that span beyond the four walls of a classroom. Beyond the six-hour school day. A teacher's value is so much more than most people give them credit for and my experience with Mrs. K embodies that.

For my entire life, I will carry the lessons she taught me with me and use them to move through my life more smoothly or apply them when I make decisions. Although I haven't seen her for a few years, I will think back on memories from choir or memories of conversations had one where I was really impacted by Mrs. K for the rest of my life. While I don't know how much she remembers or what impact my story may have had on her, I know in my heart that I am lucky to have had the opportunity to meet her.

To this day, she still has no idea that she saved my life on that random school night. She has no idea how much it meant that she valued what I talked about enough to listen to me when she could have left earlier after school or not spent days teaching me while I volunteered. I could never thank her enough for that, as small as it may seem to other people.



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*A multi-page bulletin was found, nailed not tacked, on the noticeboards in both of Urban Shade's property's lobbies, as well as generously taped to the back of all four benches surrounding the conjoining courtyard's fountain. The bulletin reads:*

# ATTENTION URBAN SHADE!

Dante Pettapiece

Fellow Urban Shade tenants: are your children afraid at night? Their fear is well founded, but we must all do our part to comfort the young, even when faced with a fiercely murky danger. No doubt we've all heard by now the chatter in the hallways, the whispers in the elevators, regarding the illusive blight facing our community. We, the diverse medley of families that call Urban Shade (Apartments Ltd.) our home, are a close group of tenants, each one of our neighbours being lovelier than the last, and must place faith in our ability to come together, trusting each other to be vigilant in the face of fear, to brave such horrific threats united.

Unfortunately, our reaction is dependent upon our knowledge, of which we had none until the inaugural incident. Poor Ms. Rampersad! Those long hours that her work demanded no doubt left her at a disadvantage. She claimed for some weeks prior, as she returned from those houses she attended to in our city's East York, late in those lunar hours that city transit whisked her back to us, that there was a shadow looming beneath our center courtyard's lone sweetgum tree. While the ground's shape shuddered beneath the tree with each gust of Novemberly wind, a figure stooped unshaken, silent and without detail, just beyond what little light our courtyard affords. Ms. Rampersad thought the figure she saw resembled a stone bench — long, slender, backless and holding tight to the ground — and since her day had been a long one it was quite reasonable to assume a bench had been installed under the tree during her workaday absence (though, how our extremely close and vocal community could ever allow such an ornamental installation without the timely evaluation of each and every tenant's weighted approval would, of course, be a mystery to us all).

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## Attention Urban Shade!

In the morning, however, she peered out of her window, twenty floors high, to see that our beautiful, communal Urban Shade courtyard had been left unchanged, with its tranquil rolling lawn of radiant green, its young south-western tree, the ever-dense north-eastern shrub, and our focal fountain surrounded by its cozy wood-backed benches abiding where they'd always been. Ms. Rampersad assumed exhaustion had gotten the better of her, pushing the anomaly out of her mind. That was until she walked through the courtyard some days later, on a particularly cold night, stalking (it was quite windy) toward the North building's double-doors only to freeze upon hearing a deep groan, what could be called a growl had it more rasped than purred, clean and smooth, its baritone bawl rumbling down her spine as she turned her head in time to see a puff of steam ascending the tree trunk and dissipating through the sparse burnt umber of its waning leaves. Keisha, Ms. Rampersad's only daughter, relayed this experience to the property manager — our beloved Mr. Abhijit — several days later, on that distressing morning after her mother suddenly failed to come home. We all miss Ms. Rampersad very much. Local police conducted their search briefly with Urban Shade's Property Management Team before ceding the investigation, in perpetuity, to USPMT, whose round-the-clock work shed regrettably little light on the disappearance. How tragic it is! The Urban Shade community will continue to look for Ms. Rampersad for a long time to come, I have no doubt, until we all have closure on the matter. Our hearts are with little Keisha.

Word of Ms. Rampersad's disappearance took little time to spread throughout the building, and before long the courtyard looked a desolate husk of its former self, inert and barren, without even the hushed laughter of Urban Shade's great many beautiful children to give it life amidst the first snowfall's tender dance. Tenants left for work, or to get groceries, but did not linger upon their return at night, either making a solo sprint for the door, key-cards in hand, or vigilantly guarding each other's neighbour via our in-house buddy system, skillfully organized in blocks of time (broken down by the minute) and posted on both bulletin boards (thank you again, Abhijit, for being so thorough!), until everyone was known to be safe inside their locked units, patiently waiting out the night until the liberation of morning light.



---

## Attention Urban Shade!



Us Urban Shaders felt a little bit safer, though circumstances like these are, of course, a breeding ground for rumours. Even my own daughter, as I was speaking with her about the dangers of playing in the courtyard, confessed to me (the innocent thing) that she'd seen the creature herself when she'd eagerly snuck out in her galoshes one morning to meet a playmate, who lives in our building's twin, across the courtyard, and caught sight of what she thought was a "big puppy" crawling down inside the fountain's maintenance hatch. "It was lying underneath one of the benches," she told me, "and looked just like a great big puppy, with fur so pale it almost looked like skin! I got so excited because I thought I might be finally seeing a Great Dane . . ." [she briefly chides me for not allowing her any pet bigger than a goldfish] ". . . but then it moved to the fountain, and I didn't think it looked like a puppy so much anymore. It didn't move like any dog I'd ever seen, and I should know because Charmaine's parents let her have three big ones and I always play with them!" Her story continues like this for some time; however, I miss much of its detail, awash with relief that my little girl hadn't been harmed. My concern had more to do with her going out without my knowledge, of course; her punishment was swift and persuasive. Regarding what she claims to have seen, however, I know my daughter's imagination can be overactive, especially when it comes to our damned, darling fountain.

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## Attention Urban Shade!

Should I believe what she claimed; could it have been the same animal as Ms. Rampersad saw? Surely a dog is a dog, no matter its motion, and no feral dog could have pulled off such a clean, evidenceless disappearance of its prey, if that was to be Ms. Rampersad's fate. Surely, the culprit couldn't have been some pale dog. Only a few short hours after hearing my daughter's confession did the sound of shattering glass bring myself and many other attentive neighbours down into the lobby where we found the minced body of an adolescent tenant — one of our Urban Sons — writhing and feebly clawing at the wall opposite the floor-to-ceiling window that was no longer whole, its shattered pieces jutting out all over the young boy's bloodied body. He'd been walking home with his buddy (making Mr. Abhijit and us all very proud) when his companion had ostensibly slipped and fallen, only for them to seemingly continue falling, being violently dragged back through the courtyard, towards the fountain, the snow red where her body had been towed, screaming, and as the young boy ran for help he heard a muffled galloping close behind, then a bodily force unlike anything he'd known brought him past the glass and flat onto our lobby's marble floor. We wish young Mr. Huang the best of luck in his extensive reconstructive surgery.

In light of this recent incident, trips out of Urban Shade at night have since been halted until further notice, with a strict curfew of 6:00pm being enforced for all tenants, without exception. As a representative of Urban Shade's Board of Directors, I want everybody to know that we are doing everything possible to curtail future incidents, and are currently partnering with multiple delivery services to ensure that any takeout orders will be safely delivered, by drone, to your unit's window, for only a nominal service charge! We apologize for any inconvenience these incidents may have caused. Future developments in the Urban Shade family of Living Complexes and Vertical Communities will take this complicated data into consideration, in order to prevent future occurrences of a similar nature.

Have a Merry Christmas,  
Urban Shade Apartments Ltd.

# MAGGIE

Shuan Phuah

I am awake. It's late and my room is dark, except for lines of pale grey moonlight coming through the closed curtains. And there is a horse beside my bed. I can't move.

The horse is large and unmoving. Most of what I can see is its silhouette in the dark.

"Maggie," someone says. "Move closer. I want to have a closer look."

The horse doesn't move, and my eyes follow the source of the sound.

"Maggie, you're too far. I can't get a good look."

I see the movement now. There is a man's face growing out of the horse's side. It is a smooth face, devoid of all hair. No eyebrows or eyelashes; his eyes big and staring out. He is just half a head jutting out from the horse's thigh. There are folds of skin like a pug's head that ripple out from the face; a puddle of loose flesh.

"Maggie. Move closer to him." His voice is clear. He is not bothering to whisper so late at night.

I'm trying to move my body but I'm stuck on my back with my arms to my sides.

The face moves slightly in the folds of skin. His eyes meet mine.



"You're awake?"

I'm trying to say something, but my mouth won't open.

"Maggie, he's awake," the face says, "I want to be there for him."

The horse doesn't move.

Its head faces the windows while its backside is by my head.

"Maggie, please, get in closer," the face says.

I am trying to move my body but I am stuck, my body feels stitched to the bed.

The face starts squirming like a caterpillar that's been sprayed with an insecticide, side to side, bending the folds of skin here and there.

## Maggie

"I'll do it, Maggie. I'll do it if you don't listen."

The horse doesn't react.

The face opens his mouth and stretches as far as he can down the horse's thigh and bites down hard. He gnaws away, moving his half a head from side to side. The horse groans. It sounds like a person in discomfort, a low moaning sound like someone with a hurt stomach. The horse starts to move backwards so the face is closer to me.

There's a mumble that's growing in the back of my throat. Some sound that's starting to materialize, trying to push past my vocal cords as the face inches closer.

The face lets go of the horse's thigh, and says, "That's good Maggie, I'm getting closer."

The sound pushes past the folds of my throat and I say, "You're making her uncomfortable!"

"What was that?" The face asks.

"You're scaring her. I don't think she likes that."

"Oh... no. You don't understand--she's used to this."

"What are you doing? Why are you here?"

"I wanted...I wanted to say goodnight. Give you a good smooch goodnight is all."

"That's okay," I say, "I don't need a kiss goodnight. I was sleeping fine already."

"Oh..." the face says, "but I ought to give you a smooch anyway. It makes it so nothing bad can happen to you, only good dreams."

"I never remember my dreams anyway."

Maggie backs close enough to me to where I can feel the face's hot breath on my forehead now, and he says, "Okay Maggie, that's enough, you can stop now."

The horse begins to move a leg back, and the face stretches back to the thigh and bites down again to make the horse stop. I can see the indents of his teeth in the horse's flesh. I can see the old bite marks too, some of them scarring over, a web of soft tissue.

The horse stops with this second bite, and the face is right next to mine now.

"I told you I don't need a good-night kiss."

"That's okay, I'm already here anyway," the face says.

He moves his lips forward and they're warm and wet against my forehead, and he's giving me long kisses up and down my face, leaving a messy snail's trail of saliva as he does so.

"Goodnight," he says, kissing me up and down, "goodnight, hope you have sweet dreams. Goodnight, I love you, goodnight."

I can hear Maggie crying. Deep long sobs and I can see the horse's body vibrating with every deep inhale.

---

# ARE YOU OK?

Diya Shah

## 7:15 AM

My mom texts me every morning,  
*"Are you okay?"*

I don't know, am I?

Recognizing my okayness (Glad I'm the writer here because that's definitely not a word) is a daily struggle because it's not a yes or no question, it's a spectrum. Yes I realize she's my mother and her question comes from a place of love and worry, but I'm on a roll here so just go with it. How am I supposed to wake up at dawn and immediately judge my level of okay? What are the parameters? Blanket scrunched up on the side rather than on my body - not okay today since I woke up as a frozen mess. But blanket nicely placed horizontally and vertically, covering all of my surface area - sunshine and rainbows. Dark room, no alarm, waking up naturally - beautiful day, unicorns everywhere. That one ray of sunlight burning my right eye and the alarm blaring in my left ear - hot mess of a day, eruption of lava from the ground.

## 10:00AM

My roommate just asked me,  
*"Are you okay?"*

Why? Because I'm wearing the same clothes from two days ago and I think there's a chip somewhere in my hair? IT'S A SPECTRUM. See, this is the way it works. I only had old clothes and an older chip in my hair - that qualifies as the higher middle end of the spectrum. However, if I had old clothes, a chip in my hair, eyes so dilated you cannot tell the actual colour, and dark circles all the way to my chin, that would probably qualify as the lower middle end of the spectrum.

## 1:00PM

My professor just asked me,  
*"Are you okay?"*

---

## Are You OK?

Granted, he asked the whole class and it was probably a rhetorical question and he probably doesn't actually care about my answer, but with respect to you, Doc, I am on the very high end of the spectrum (yes, okayness on the spectrum is also subjective to who asks). Are you telling me that after eight assignments in a week, out of which six were from your class, you expect me to put you on the lower end? No, you're on the low end. You're in the take-one-more-step-and-fall-into-the-ocean-from-a-mountain end. Are you okay professor? Are you getting a good night's sleep knowing someone is probably murdering you in theirs? Yes? Sounds great.

### 6:00PM

My friend from my hometown just asked me,  
*"Are you okay?"*

Word had spread about my evil rant on the professor (I may have downplayed it a bit in the last paragraph), and now my friends think I am having a major meltdown. This is not even worth placing on the spectrum. Gosh, can one not have some good-natured evil thoughts about plotting their teacher's murder while eating the old chip from their hair with just dilated pupils for eyes? How is that even significant enough to be placed on the spectrum?

### 1:00AM

I ask myself,  
*"Are you okay?"*  
Wow, you too, huh?



---

# ACCOUNTABLE

Kavya Chandra

nectarine coconut lips  
a boy glaze in this body with tits

misuse my borders like yesterday  
was a dream and today you are a dreamer

cradle my intestines onto your arms  
as worms eat my words and spit them out

i envision a lust for feeling my worth  
encumbered by stranded bloodlines

how can i find ancestral peace  
when none of my Gods offer their services

foreign diamonds in a noose around my neck  
the world tattooed on my back

\

if nerves could extend into the Earth  
like fish swimming inside soiled ground

if love had many faces  
in-spite of comfort in safety  
if my sustenance recovered my skin

digesting care with no intention

maybe the cursed could find a ringing truth  
when our bodies are only bodies with nothing  
to hold

/

secure my tendons in place  
i am to be leashed onto my wrath

destruction is a saviour  
for self-preservation- a churn in my belly

when you hear about the magicians  
think of us, swimming with no waterbody on  
our limbs

extend my boundaries, tear my eyeballs  
somewhere someday somehow i will find an-  
ger again

until then i must seal these limits, burn off the  
hair  
until then i must reclaim & i must reclaim & i  
must reclaim.



---

# GRIEF

Kavya Chandra

a fickle body

night shivers

bad breath

choking on uncommitted sin

sweet honey on the cusp of a dagger

bodies driving in distaste of a love

my tender tongue seeking the sharp knife

bodies in denial of remedy

medicine sits in my belly- killing what little I sustain

tough split brown skin

vomiting at night

concealed whores

naked in our coats

ingenuity as my skin proceeds my words

a staked claim on my body

recipes made only for the fair tongue

a staked claim on these assumptions

the horrid looks slit our throats

worn-down clothes

sewn at war

in stolen land

collective anguish

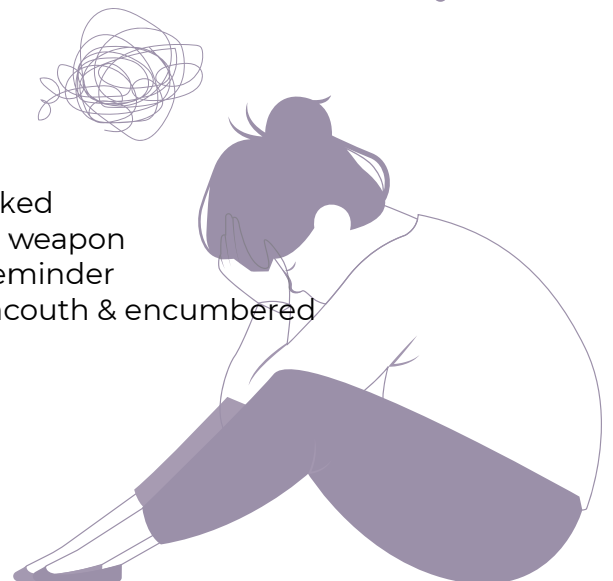
elixir of life in broken bonds

digest my state unprovoked

naming my love a weapon

digest my temper as a reminder

this diaspora is uncouth & encumbered





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# OVERDUE A LONG TALK

Mel Dudley

**Dean:** bald, big-eyed undercover FBI agent. His real name is “John Hawthorn.”

**Tommy:** short mafia henchman with a yellow-stained beard, right-hand to Sonny.

**Sonny:** tall, foreboding mafia head of Queens, NY.

**Ron:** low-level mafia henchman.

**Louie:** low-level mafia henchmen.

## SCENE 1

*Setting: a table at a pub closed for the night.*

*Dean enters. Tommy's already sitting down.*

**Dean:** So what you wanna talk about? Why'd you bring me here, Tommy?

**Tommy:** You know this family?

*Tommy slides over a black and white photo of Dean's wife and sons. Dean sits down and looks at the photograph. He's stunned.*

**Tommy:** What's the matter? You know 'em or not? Sonny gave me this.

**Dean:** You don't know 'em?

**Tommy (to Dean's relief):** No, how should I know? Sonny gave me the photo and told me to show you. He said you might know 'em. Do you?

**Dean:** He say anything else?

**Tommy:** He's got somethin' in the works, that's all. He just wanted me to see if you knew 'em. So you know 'em or not?

**Dean:** No, I dunno who they are. What's he plannin'?

**Tommy:** I already said I don't know. All I know's the family's in Tucson.

**Dean:** Tommy, he didn't say what's he's-- he's, uh, doin'?

**Tommy:** Jeez, Louise, you got ants in your pants? What's wrong with you?

**Dean:** I'm just askin', Tommy.

**Tommy:** Seein' as you don't know 'em, you don't care what happens to 'em, right? Right. Right? What, you wanna be part of the hit or somethin'?

**Dean:** It's a hit? What? What did these people do?

**Tommy:** I mean, these are just some people off the street in Tucson. Arizona! You don't want nothin' with Arizona. On the other side of the country--other side of the world for all I care. Never been there. You ever been down to Tucson?

---

## Overdue A Long Talk

**Dean:** Listen, Tommy, I don't know 'em, but what do they have to do with anything? That's a woman and kids. Sonny couldn't want anything with them. They didn't do nothin'.

**Tommy:** No, no. Sonny told me they got mixed up with somethin'. They know somethin' they shouldn't and now they gotta get whacked. That's all I know. Sonny's gonna take care of it. I think we both know what that means, but who knows, maybe Sonny's gonna have a change of heart cuz it's kids involved, I dunno.

**Dean:** Where's Sonny? Where is he now?

**Tommy:** Slow down, cowboy. Take a sit. You think you're on Wall Street or somethin'? Nothin's open. Sonny won't be talkin' to you. He's gone home.

**Dean:** Sonny's at home?

**Tommy:** I dunno, did I say that? I don't think he's home. *(Shrugs)* I mean, he might be. But *(he checks his watch)* it's early yet. He might be out drinking. Or on

an errand. Watching over a clip. You know Sonny. Making sure it's done right, you know.

**Dean:** Shit, that reminds me. I gotta go.

*Dean stands up and heads for the door across the room.*

**Tommy:** Where you goin'?

**Dean:** I gotta take care of somethin'.

**Tommy:** What is it?

**Dean:** I forgot to do somethin' Sonny asked for.

**Tommy:** Alright, well--your jacket! You left it on the chair!

**Dean:** Keep it, I'll grab it tomorrow!

*Dean walks out and the door shuts behind him.*

**Tommy:** There's no tomorrow for you, friend.



## SCENE 2

*Setting: a Victorian mansion on a dark street with few houses.*

*Dean parks his car a block away from the mansion. He takes a revolver out of the glove-box and tucks it into his jacket pocket. He walks towards the mansion, hands in his jacket pockets. He doesn't get more than a few steps before a Cadillac, driving in the opposite direction, pulls in front of him, blocking the sidewalk. Four men step out of the car and quietly point their guns at him.*

**Tommy** (*exiting the driver's seat*): Dean, take your hands out of your pockets and get in the car.

out of your pockets and get in the car. You don't have enough ammo for all of us.

*Dean doesn't move.*

*Another two men step out from the hedges, and ahead, Dean can see four men under the light at Sonny's mansion.*

**Tommy**: Nothing'll happen to your family if you do as I say.

**Dean**: What's going on, Tom? What's this for?

*Dean (a.k.a. John) takes his gun out of his pocket and gives it to Tommy, and is promptly stuffed in the middle of the backseat.*

**Tommy**: John Hawthorn, take your hands

*The car creeps away.*



## SCENE 3

*Setting: the interior of the Cadillac. Dean is blindfolded. Tommy drives.*

**Dean:** Where are you taking me, Tom?

**Dean:** I don't know, man.

**Tommy:** Keep quiet.

**Tommy:** Who's your boss?

**Dean:** If I'm dead anyway why does it matter if I know where we're goin'?

**Dean:** I can't tell you or I'm fired.

*Silence.*

**Tommy:** What'd they say to do if you got in this situation? Take a cyanide pill? C'mon, Dean. You gotta know something.

**Dean:** You make no sense.

*Silence.*

*They drive in silence for some time. Then Dean feels the car slowing down by the side of the road, near a payphone.*

**Dean:** Call the operator.

**Dean:** I guess this is it.

**Tommy:** The fuckin' operator!

**Tommy:** I guess it is. Ron, give him a hand.

**Dean:** That's all I know, Tom. That's all I got.

*Ron escorts Dean out of the car. Dean doesn't try to run or fight, just stands still without prodding, like an obedient dog.*

**Tommy:** Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! God help me--

**Tommy:** Take the receiver.

*Tommy trails off as a dishevelled old lady approaches on the sidewalk, pushing a cart. She gives Tommy a stinkeye as she passes.*

**Dean:** The wha--

**Tommy:** Lift up your hand, and take the receiver.

**Old Lady:** God help you, indeed! Your manners will turn no favours from Him! *(She turns to Dean).* You! Are you in trouble?

*Tommy places the handset in Dean's hand, who holds it upside-down. The two other henchmen look at one another while Tommy picks out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket.*

*Silence.*

**Tommy:** What's the number for the FBI?

**Louie:** Dean.

**Dean:** What? How should I know?

**Dean:** Me?

**Tommy:** You work for 'em.

**Old Lady:** Yeah, you. Why've you got a blindfold on?

Overdue A Long Talk



**Dean:** Oh, it's just a game. I hurt my eyes.

**Old Lady:** Is it a game or did you hurt your eyes?

*Beat.*

**Dean:** I hurt my eyes.

**Old Lady:** Did these men hurt you?

*Dean "looks around" casually, as if assessing the situation.*

**Dean:** Them? No.

**Old Lady:** Alright, well, it's getting late, and the streets are empty. You're best to keep moving if you don't want to invite trouble.

*Silence. The men watch the old lady go.*

**Tommy:** Alright, I'll dial the operator. (*He notices Dean's holding the handset wrong*). You got the fuckin'--you got the piece upside-down.

**Dean:** What?

**Tommy:** The thing! The thing!

**Louie:** The handset, Dean.

**Dean** (*Flipping the handset around*): Oh.

**Tommy:** Yeah. I'm dialing now.

*Tommy drops a dime in the lock and dials the simplest number to spin: 0.*



# BROKEN PAGE, BROKEN MIRROR

Julie Musclow

Looking between the lines of a blank page  
Looking at myself trapped in a cage  
A box made of the lines I write  
Four blank corners I try to fight

This page is a mirror, and these lines my reflection  
I am the cracks of my body's dissection  
A foolish idea to hide behind your image, a picture that's paper thin.  
You keep yourself "together" and try to blend in  
Spending all your time analyzing every inch of your skin

So no wonder you feel alone, you spend your life holding others beauty, but never  
your own  
As a result you are falling, it's all you've ever known

---

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