

Touchless, Loveless

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prelude

Human beings were born to be touched. As a young adult blossoming in isolation, I've decided to write down a few of the things I feel about this dangerous state of lovelessness.

Trigger warning: self-harm

I was seventeen when I first listened to the song.

Some track from a hit Broadway musical that debuted fifteen years ago, made known to me thanks to the hundreds of bootleg gifs and funny shit posts I saw on Tumblr and Instagram. It could have been that, or it also could have been the precise online search term "musicals that have rebellious themes" that led me to the original cast recording on Spotify. I'm not sure. But what I'm certain of is how it wasn't difficult to grow infatuated with the electrifying themes of teenage angst and deviance, coursing through my veins with its indie-rock and folk-infused score -- the epitome of nonconformity. Perfect for an age when my confused teen spirit was clawing for something to define me.

When social code and circumstances oppressively restrain someone from the natural course of their self-discovery and exploration, what happens? Why, Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik's Spring Awakening has much to sing (and in the Deaf West revival, much to sign) about the destructive consequences of such a scenario.

But disaster isn't what I want to speak about here, no. We've had enough of that already.

There is a quiet scene, the fourth song from the finale. The reprise of the song was initially written off as comedic relief; a short-lived chance to rouse a giggle from the audience and nothing more than that. Sure, I was one of those who laughed when I first heard it three years ago, taking it as a lighthearted and momentary release from what I thought were the real problems of the story.

Yet, looking at it now after all these months in isolation, I think I'm just beginning to understand what it wants to tell me. Or, rather, what it wants to ask:

"Haven't you heard the word of your body?" Hanschen sings the question in a voice soft yet passionate, his eyes never leaving Ernst's.

I always loved the 2015 Deaf West production of the musical more than the original one in 2006. Other than granting accessibility to a whole new demographic of theatergoers, incorporating American Sign Language into the choreography brought about an entirely new sensory dimension to the stage: touch.

Returning to the scene, what place does the intended comedy have when tactical language brings about a deeper sense of catharsis? It becomes irrelevant, so it fades into the background; stepping out and moving to make space for the characters' hands. They reach across the chasm between them, bearing a beautiful, profound message that can't be communicated in any other way. Maybe it's ASMR, maybe it's empathy: When one lays a palm on the other's chest, I somehow feel all lovely and warm right at the same spot on my own. When one draws the bruise on the other's forehead, I somehow feel a ghost's finger tracing a delicate line on me, from temple to temple. And when one kisses the other...

I wonder if these phantom sensations are the words my body wants to say. If they are, then I hear them.

But what, then, do these illusions of close contact mean for me as I live in a time restrained by social distancing measures? In a time when we all live in constant fear that everything and everyone we touch is infected?

I'm a rather careful person. I can count on both my hands the number of times I've been out of my house since March 10, 2020. Only one hand is needed to count the number of times I've met up with my friends face-to-face. As for how many occasions I've met any of my college batchmates in real life, I don't even need to count at all; it was only one person one time during an open house, but that was in February before the quarantine began.

I'm careful because I want to keep safe. I'm careful because I want to keep others safe. And I must be honest, during the first few weeks, this kind of carefulness wasn't much of a big deal to me.

As someone who, throughout her high school life, would choose to stay home all alone instead of being in the company of my peers, there wasn't much to lose. When I was in high school, on Fridays after the last bell, I'd be the fastest one in the halls; dodging groups who ambled glacially or individuals who stood in the corridors along the classrooms where they waited for their friends to be dismissed from their classes. These groups and individuals were all waiting for someone. But like the first bus home I was hurrying out to catch, I wasn't waiting for anyone. Plans of crashing at this person's place or hopping over to that bar flitted about, but the eye of my mind was set on the comfort of my own home. Fridays were meant to be spent in my safe space between four familiar walls, snuggled under the blankets of my bed, and accompanied only by a steaming bowl of instant noodles and my laptop ready to stream some online series of which I know I'll never see the end.

When quarantine began, for the first few weeks, every day was a Friday.

loveless in dreamland I

A young girl, 18. At the party of someone else who just turned 18. Someone Faceless, someone her age, sits next to her. Their legs dangle off the balcony, their toes Wade in the shadows that shroud the chaos sprawling below their soles; creatures of the night, inebriated and interwoven, swallowing each other's identities only to gag it out by sunrise: young strangers, young friends, young lovers. Faceless puts their arm around the girl's shoulder.

GIRL

Belonging is a myth. After years of uselessly hopping around and trying to draw myself into social circles, as powerful as they may seem from the outside, I've seen how manufactured they are from within. How pitiful it is for people to build themselves founded upon others!

She blushes in the warmth of her companion.

FACELESS

You are not just some fleeting passerby. Everybody has a heart. Everybody wants to belong somewhere. And the truth is that we belong to one another. So, why do you resist?

The girl quietly pretends like she's in flight. Little did she know she didn't have to pretend. Anything is possible in dreamland.

GIRL

How can you say that when you aren't even real?

FACELESS

I'm more real than you think. When you wake up, you'll still feel me and my flowers in your ribs and your lungs wishing your capillaries were my roots and wishing that I was still inside you. But they will only wilt and you will have to wait before you can breathe in my sweetness once again. Maybe it won't even be my saccharin. Maybe you'll be coughing on someone else's saliva.

alone, lonely

In statistics, non-mutual exclusivity is a term that refers to two events that can happen independently and simultaneously. This is represented visually by two circles whose edges intersect at two points, creating a sliver of a marquise cut where the shapes overlap. Back in high school, teachers liked to use the diagram of non-mutual exclusivity in their presentations to explain the differences and similarities between two ideas, that way the concept gets across more easily for the self-proclaimed visual learners among their classes. They'd have us copy the figures into our notebooks during lectures, or even have us draw up our own; like in guidance class when "getting to know ourselves," or at the back page of final exams in pursuit of scoring five points.

My circles were always imperfect. Especially the second circle, because not only did I have to make up for the crookedness of the first, but there was also the pressure of drawing the circle at the right distance so that the area where it would intersect with its partner wouldn't be too big or too small. It always came out as either of the two in the end.

But at least they met somewhere, right?

There's something remarkable about things that touch one another. If it's not the sentimentality of Venn diagrams on flimsy notebook paper, then it's on the clock at the end of my bed every midnight, when I squint my eyes through the dark to watch the hour and minute hand become one. It's during the rare occasions I wake up before dawn and walk outside, waiting for the sun to peek above the rows of concrete blocks and iron sheets just to watch the first rays of daylight kiss the sky and set off a blushing gradient of blues. It's in the middle of online lectures when I avert my gaze from the screen, looking out the window to unexpectedly make my acquaintance with a white butterfly, fluttering in the gentle breeze to softly land upon one leaf among thousands of others crawling up the lot's back wall — nature's greenest embrace of banal urbanity.

Or it could be found in more poignant moments. Like when my laptop monitor bows to meet the keyboard, and when my body immediately gravitates onto the bed at the end of another virtual school day. Perhaps I'm living the dream of my younger self -- no more running through halls and dodging people to catch a bus to get home. No space traveled, no time wasted. I've turned into a singularity that constantly exists between the same four familiar walls. A consistent density, no different than the person I was yesterday. Yesteryear.

Being alone, always. Is this the dream I sought for?

The answer came to me in the form of something feathery-light. As I lay prone on the bed, a finger's caress, somewhere on my forehead near my hairline. My eyes snapped open. Nobody was there. *Ghost* was my first thought, but I also saw the electric fan pointed directly at me — maybe it was just a stray hair that brushed against my skin.

Alone and lonely used to be two different things for me, but I suppose they are non-mutually exclusive after all. Because there I nestled in the heart of the marquise, wide-eyed and confused by the hallucination that elicited a real response, real words, from my body. And the words weren't whispered, they were howled: in the unconscious manner I slightly but certainly leaned into the phantom touch of warmth, and in the fleeting yet comforting sensation it earned me. The fraction of a second that, after a long day of interacting with pixelated identities on a screen, I believed someone was really, physically there to love me.

loveless in dreamland II

In her bedroom, within her four walls. She is sick of those walls. But her walls recede until she no longer feels she is inside, because he is there, him inside her room, and his flowers inside her lungs. He has adopted a face now, one she knows but one she doesn't want to remember. All of these go unsaid. He lays down and stretches his long legs on her bed where she sits across from him.

HER

Time is an utter joke in this realm. You both look the same and different from when I last saw you on the timeline. Why are you here?

HER (CONT'D.)

I want to thank you for the day you forgave outside the office on that sunny day, on the day our year ended – it felt like a dream. I needed to jump off somehow, because that's what happens when you come to an edge – but it only felt like a dream.

HER (CONT'D.)

I want to thank you for hugging me after the fall, though my body was a crippled embarrassment, covered in hot tears and in dirty blood. You might have been able to scrub your skin clean in the bathroom, but the blood on my uniform resists the bleach. I bought new clothes, I no longer wear uniforms, but I when I see the stains that hang at the very edge of my wardrobe, I pause and I remember: nothing and no one else has yet to make me feel the way you made me feel. No one else made me feel more special, although, to you, I know I was just a fleeting passerby.

HER (CONT'D.)

You know how the maxim goes: “Reject me so I can move on.” You have rejected me. But I haven’t moved on. And I am tired. We’ve taken different paths, and it’s getting harder and harder to hear you. My world has grown quieter, but with all the noise in my mind and my body, I suppose you understand why I feel this way. Do you understand why I feel, even though you are not real anymore?

The words dissolve in the calm and comforting air. He unfurls his right arm on the too-empty space beside him. She stays still, pretending not to notice. He mumbles something.

HER

What did you say?

HIM

Do you want to be held? Only if you want to.

She inches closer.

HER

Of course I want to. It's what I've been thinking of, too.

in the cosmic arena



We were once a singularity. At the beginning of our Universe story, the matter that makes up everything known and unknown was birthed from one tiny, dense fireball, imagine an infinity unbroken, where space and time still did not exist to divide us — we were intact, perfect, forever. It was real. There was a time when the goosebumps on our skin were indistinguishable from stars, when our necks were made of the same cold, circulatory matter of galaxies, when every breath we drew was tantamount to the immensity of nebulae. The love radiating from that faint, twinkling star you see in one corner of the hazy 2:00 A.M. sky must have taken millennia to cross the void and reach you again; but do you remember the night when you embraced cheek by jowl? Here we stand, looking back at that night, 13.8 billion years later; it all seems unbelievably beautiful. There was

nothing else but our wholeness. Had we known what was ours, would we have drifted apart? Then again, it wasn't our choice to make. Expansion inexorable, division inevitable; our distance is a crisis and something that has been coming for a long, long time. The laws of physics caught us and sentenced our tender singularity to death by the cosmic guillotine, sending our parts of ember and frost flying in all directions known in existence, getting faster and faster and faster by the nanosecond, much too fast for me to muster up the courage to even kiss you goodbye. But fear not, my love, for even the infinity of space, somewhere, has an end. Nothing truly lasts forever. Everything has an edge we fear falling off

— into the abyss of uncertainty.

Just leave your mark on me.

Quickly. I can take the burn.

I can take any wound if it means that I can remember you, soaring through the dark.

Wherever the light finds me again, then,

I will sigh your name —

and you

will

hear

me.

loveless in dreamland III

She's touching me in so many places. None of them closer than what would be considered dangerous, but I wanted to risk it. I wanted to try it. I wanted to go there. And I know what I wanted, just as much as she knew what she was doing.

ME

What do you want to watch later tonight?

She laces her fingers with mine. On the bed, she embraces me whole.

HER

You. You, you, and only you.

ME

(laughing)

Don't you lie like that.

HER

In Dreamland, there are only truths. You'll see, when you wake up, I'll teach you so that I want will become all yours.

in our cosmic vessel



No matter how distantly I take my thoughts through time and space in search of another source of contact, words will always need to come from somewhere – what else out there but my own body may promise to speak, hear, and understand them? In imperfect symmetry, she breathes a pair of gracious lungs, she beats one tenacious heart. Inside her, she has what gives the only known intelligent beings in both Dreamland and the Universe the prettiest form, movement, blood; the fantastic, glittering assets of life, caged within a set of ribs that elegantly curve around her stars and gemstones to keep them safe and sound. She has established systems of transit and trade, of give and take, of call and answer between herself and the outside world; between herself and herself – how these complexities came to be is a rumor in itself, but human beings love a good mystery or two. In her words are whispers of raw hopes and loving lies, of carnal music and delicate yearning, and especially of the poisonous coffee cups she asks for to keep her awake through the deep night to keep creating the things that make her cry.

If it isn't in x-rays, it's in mirrors where, behind the droplets of condensation, she sees the fear-ridden eyes throwing sharp, daggerlike questions at her reflection that can't be dodged. She

doesn't recognize the reflection. When she does, she does not want to. Later on, she finds an asset of life glittering in winding rivers on her forearms and inner thighs, stung then diluted by the vapid tap water and salty tears before it swirls down the black hole of the drain, past the event-horizon, and then to nothing. Over there, in the dampest corner of her tiny, lightless bathroom, a flooded warzone and a body bursting with questions she can only fight, she curls in on herself at the center of the marquise: Alone and lonely all over again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

To this day, I see her battle sins and scars, no longer shimmering, now merely dull, faded mementos of the time she was on the very edge of life. I touch them sometimes, and under the pads of my gentle fingers, the skin is clean and supple, but the marks are unfading and ceaseless. She fears she will carry them with her until the end.

But I told her to never hide them from me, for her wounds are mine.

Her words are mine.

Her body is mine, and I'm teaching her that there are softer words that can touch us than our blades; that there are kinder words our bodies have than our questions.

I tell her the search is over, because the answers can be heard:

In our shared vessel of cosmic beauty, my love, too, can be hers.

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