Dusting the Phone

SUMMARY

The speaker keeps thinking about all the ways things might go wrong. The speaker admits this is a bad habit; surely, they'd be better off focusing on all the wonderful parts of being in love.

Yet if the phone rings, the speaker assumes it's bad news. Its ring sounds to the speaker like sirens wailing. And if the phone doesn't ring, the speaker assumes that's *also* bad news (and the speaker still thinks of the sound of sirens). If the phone were indeed not to ring, the speaker wonders who, then, would call them to explain the bad news. It's a mystery.

The speaker uses a series of metaphors as they imagine what a future with their lover might involve: they envision a hand wearing a long glove, an empty glass, marriage and a busy house, or maybe one night each week spent in a stranger's bed.

The speaker's lover tells them not to think about the future or talk about love, but the speaker can't help but do so. The speaker practically attacks the mailman in their eagerness to find out if their lover has sent them a letter. They hope their lover will send them flowers. They constantly replay memories in their mind of time spent with their lover.

Right now, the speaker sits by the phone, waiting for their lover to call. They treat the phone like a distinguished guest, polishing it and dressing up to impress it. The speaker will give it more if it will just ring with their lover's call.

But, frustratingly, the speaker only receives prank calls, misdials, or, even worse, calls from people who bore them. Meanwhile, their lover's voice gets lost in the speaker's lonely bed sheets.

The speaker feels stuck. All they want is to be with their lover, all of the time. The speaker feels terrible; all they possess of their lover is a photograph. The speaker curses the lover: "For god's sake, call me, or I'll do something about it." But what could the speaker possibly do about their situation?

They have no idea.

THEMES

THE UNCERTAINTY AND ANXIETY OF NEW LOVE

In Jackie Kay's "Dusting the Phone," a first-person speaker waits nervously by the phone, hoping that their new lover will call them. As the phone doesn't ring—or worse, only rings with unwanted calls from "boring people"—the speaker gets more and more anxious and uncomfortable. The poem suggests that love isn't always the positive experience it's made out to be: because it offers so much possibility for both joy and pain, love can drive people a little crazy, too!

Newly in love, the speaker isn't "going over the best that has been happening" but fretting about it all going wrong while hovering over the phone, waiting for their lover to call. The speaker spends their time "imagining the worst that could happen," suggesting that being in love makes them terribly anxious. Their new love feels so precious to them that they're constantly aware they could lose it.

Whether the phone rings or not, the speaker believes it "herald[s] some disaster." If the phone stays silent, then they might not hear from their lover again; if the phone rings, its bells make the speaker think of sirens signaling a terrible accident. In other words, the speaker's mind focuses solely on what might go wrong with their new relationship, whether that's a tragic death or just a devastating breakup.

Such anxieties, the poem suggests, are all part of the uncertainty of new love, which offers as many opportunities for fear as for hope. This new relationship could turn into just about anything. The speaker fantasizes about having a happy "marriage," and a "full house" (that is, a house full of children). On the flip side, as the speaker's worries suggest, it might all end in "disaster." Love, in other words, is a leap into the great unknown.

Love—and the uncertainty that comes with it—thus makes the speaker feel trapped and frightened, not happy and liberated. Stuck by the phone waiting for their lover to call, they're searching for confirmation that their love is solid and will last—confirmation they just can't have. The phone thus becomes an object of obsession, the speaker dusting and polishing it, as if keeping it happy will somehow make the lover more likely to call with good news. Alas, it only offers torture, sending "hoaxes, wrong numbers [and] calls from boring people." The speaker thus feels suspended in doubt and paranoia.

Worse still, the speaker feels completely powerless over their situation. Frustrated by the mocking phone, they even curse their lover for not getting in contact: "Come on, damn you, ring me. Or else." But the "or else" is an empty threat: as the speaker admits, they "don't know what" they'd do if their lover didn't call. With dark humor, "Dusting the Phone" thus suggests that new love can be more nervewracking and anxiety-inducing than delightful.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

I am spending ...
... tell? Nobody knows.

The first stanza of "Dusting the Phone" introduces its anxious yet self-aware speaker. This speaker has recently fallen in love—something readers *might* expect would fill them with warm, fuzzy feelings. But instead of thinking about all the good times they've had so far in this relationship, the speaker spends all their time "imagining the worst that could happen." They catastrophize, concentrating on all the ways this new love could all go wrong.

The speaker knows this isn't healthy. They say that it's "not a good idea" to obsess over worst-case scenarios and that they'd be better off reveling in the warm glow of "being in love." Still, the speaker can't help it. The heart isn't always a rational creature, the poem implies, and the early stages of love can be marked as much by pain as joy. The parallel phrasing of "spending my time imagining the worst" and "spending my time going over the best" creates antithesis, evoking the way the speaker swings from one emotional extreme to another.

The second tercet then introduces the phone mentioned in the poem's title. Readers can envision the speaker waiting by this phone, willing it to ring. And yet, they fear that, whether the phone rings or not, it spells "disaster."

The speaker has convinced themselves that if their lover calls, it'll certainly be with bad news (the speaker fears their lover will call only to end things, maybe). But if this lover *doesn't* call, that's also bad news (because it means this lover doesn't want to talk to the speaker). In a moment of dark humor, the speaker then reflects that, if their lover doesn't call, there's also no one around who could call them to "tell" them what's really going on. They'd be stuck in limbo.

The parallelism of lines 4-5 emphasizes how either scenario means the same thing to the speaker in their agitated state:

> The phone rings heralding some disaster. Sirens.
> Or it doesn't ring which also means disaster. Sirens.

The speaker hears "sirens" wailing either way. In the early days of love, these lines imply, everything can feel like a full-on emergency.

The poem's form itself also helps to convey the speaker's uncertainty and anxiety. "Dusting the Phone" is written in free verse, and the lack of any regular meter or rhyme scheme allows its language to feel urgent, intimate, and unpredictable. The multiple caesurae in the second tercet create a halting, plodding rhythm as well. Those firm full stops after "disaster" bring the poem to an abrupt halt, as do the frequent end-stops in this stanza and throughout the poem. The jarring, fragmented rhythm conveys the frantic pounding of the speaker's heart, which seems to stop cold whenever they think about their love being unrequited.

LINES 7-9

The future is ...
... sheets. Forget tomorrow,

The speaker imagines what a future with their beloved might look like using a series of metaphors that alternate between scenes of romance and domestic strife:

- The future, the speaker says, is "a long gloved hand," an image that suggests elegance, courtship, and romance (think of the gloves worn in period dramas like *Downton Abbey*). It's also "An empty cup," which might be a metaphor for the empty feeling they get when they're not with their lover. On the other hand, this could be a little detail from an imagined domestic scene—a cup on a bedside table, perhaps, or a wine glass held in that "gloved hand."
- The speaker also imagines a future defined by "marriage" and a "full house," likely a reference to having children. "A full house" is also a good card of hands to get in a game of poker. The speaker hopes that life is going to deal them a good hand, too.
- On the flip side, the future might involve "One night per week / in a stranger's white sheets." The speaker might be imagining a scenario in which their lover keeps them at arm's length, seeing them only once a week and thus remaining a "stranger." Alternatively, the speaker imagines a future in which their lover cheats on them, spending time away from that "full house" to sleep with a "stranger."

Asyndeton speeds up the list of metaphors, which come at the reader thick and fast as the speaker abruptly jumps from one scene to the next. The speaker simply doesn't know what's going to happen with their lover and bounces from scenes of intimacy to icy distance. The full-stop caesurae between each scenario make the list feel choppy and even frantic, evoking the speaker's erratic state of mind.

The stanza then ends on a note of tension and irresolution: "Forget tomorrow." As a sentiment, this phrase is completely at odds with the rest of the stanza, which obsesses over "tomorrow." The comma after "tomorrow" indicates that this phrase is incomplete, however, and pulls readers onto the next stanza.

LINES 10-12

You say, don't ...
... together, re-read them.

The fourth stanza begins by completing the sentence begun at

the end of the previous stanza:

> [...] Forget tomorrow,
> You say, don't mention love. [...]

This daring enjambment from one stanza to the next suddenly and unexpectedly introduces the lover's voice into the poem. From this phrase, the reader gets a clearer idea of the relationship's dynamic: the speaker is desperate for security and commitment, while their lover is more impulsive and standoffish. The lover is essentially telling the speaker to go with the flow and live in the present.

As the rest of the stanza points out, the speaker finds this advice impossible to follow. They "try" it, but "it doesn't work." The speaker's too far gone! Instead, they spend nearly every moment anticipating contact from their lover or going over their memories in order to find clues about what will happen next. In line 11, the poem uses hyperbole to dramatize this obsessive, over-the-top behavior:

> I assault the postman for a letter. [...]

The speaker doesn't *literally* attack the mailman. This is a moment of dark comedy, the speaker conveying the frantic urgency with which they approach the mailman in order to find out if their lover has written to them. The speaker is also on the lookout for "flowers," a romantic gesture from their lover. They want some sign that their lover is thinking about them.

In the absence of any contact from the lover, however, the speaker is left to replay memories of the times they've shared. The fact that this speaker describes this process as "re-reading" memories (rather than simply *remembering* them) suggests that the speaker approaches such memories with intense concentration. The speaker turns these recollections "over and over" in their mind, inspecting them for any signs that their lover feels the same way that the speaker does.

Note the anaphora of these lines: "I try [...] I assault [...] I look [...] I go [...]." The short, clipped phrases, repetitive language, and full-stop caesurae add to the poem's frantic, jumpy tone.

LINES 13-15

> *This very second ...*
> *... for your call.*

In the fifth stanza, the action snaps back into the present. The phrase "this very second" captures the agony of new, uncertain love. Every moment feels charged with tension that can only be relieved by that precious phone call from the speaker's lover.

The speaker thus treats the phone with comically absurd reverence. The speaker puns on the word "waiting": they're "waiting on the phone" to ring, and they're also "waiting on the phone" as though it were a distinguished guest.

The speaker offers the phone "Silver service," paying it the same fastidious attention that a waiter would to a diner in a high-end restaurant. The speaker "polish[es]" the phone (and dusts it, according to the title), as if keeping it pristine will make the lover more likely to call. The speaker even claims to "dress" for the phone, as if impressing the phone will also increase the chances of that sought-after phone call. They promise to "give" the phone "extra in return for [the lover's] call."

Notice the similar grammatical construction in lines 14 and 15:

> Silver service. I polish it. I dress for it.
> I'll give it extra in return for your call.

This parallelism and anaphora also convey the speaker's obsessiveness: they ("I") constantly do something ("polish," "dress") to the object of obsession, the phone ("it").

LINES 16-18

> *Infuriatingly, it sends ...*
> *... lonely cotton sheets.*

Despite the speaker's best efforts to treat the phone well—dressing up for it and providing "silver service"—it still won't provide what the speaker wants: a call from their lover. (Of course, that's because the only thing/person with any agency in this situation is the lover themselves; it's got nothing to do with the phone!)

In fact, the phone does the *opposite* of what the speaker wants: it rings with calls from people who are not the speaker's lover. It becomes a kind of newfangled torture device, constantly tempting—and disappointing—the speaker. It sends "hoaxes" and "wrong numbers," as if mocking the speaker's anxiety. Worst of all, it rings with "calls from boring people." Nothing—and no one—compares to the speaker's lover, rendering everyone who isn't the lover dull and irrelevant.

Without a phone call, the lover's voice "disappears into [the speaker's] lonely cotton sheets." The lover's voice grows distant and faint, in other words. The speaker's sheets are "lonely" in the lover's absence.

The poem features a rare enjambment between lines 17-18:

> [...] Your voice
> disappears into my lonely cotton sheets.

In a poem marked by frequent, halting caesurae and firm end-stops, this moment stands out. Enjambment pushes readers from line 17 to line 18 without pause, making the "disappearance" of that "voice" all the more sudden.

LINES 19-22

> *I am trapped ...*
> *... don't know what.*

In the poem's final tercet, the speaker laments their situation and curses their absent lover. In short, jerky sentences, the speaker complains: "I am trapped in it. I can't move. I want you." This anaphora—the "I" at the start of each sentence—highlights the speaker's intense loneliness. This "I" is all the speaker has for company.

The speaker "can't move" until the lover puts them out of their misery. They've been reduced to a state of pure, frustrated desire: "I want you / All the time." The speaker maintains the self-awareness to know that "This is awful" but they have no power over their situation. All the speaker possesses of their lover, apparently, is a "photo," a single object to remind them that their lover is real.

The speaker is so desperate to hear from their lover that they turn to making threats—albeit empty ones:

> Come on, damn you, ring me. Or else. What?

The "Or else" sounds comical, almost childlike, and the speaker immediately follows this fragmented sentence with the rhetorical question: "What?"

In a formal twist, the poem answers this with a single line set apart on its own (its lonely look on the page mirrors the speaker's own isolation). The speaker admits that they "don't know what" they can do about this situation. In truth, the speaker is powerless and at the mercy of their desire. They can't *make* their lover feel the same way, nor even give them a quick phone call.

The poem thus ends in the same atmosphere of obsession and irresolution as it begins. Nothing has changed since the start, meaning the poem comes full circle. The speaker ends feeling exactly the same as they did at the beginning: lovesick, frustrated, and anxious.

SYMBOLS

LONELY COTTON SHEETS

Bedsheets normally represent comfort and intimacy—two things the speaker would love to have in their romantic life! The speaker wants their absent lover to come over and share these bed sheets with them.

Of course, the speaker has no such luck, and those cotton sheets instead symbolize the speaker's romantic isolation. They demonstrate the speaker's loneliness, reminding them that their lover is not in their bed. Those sheets cover an empty space in which the lover's voice—or the speaker's *memory* of that voice—echoes and then fades away.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "Your voice / disappears into my lonely cotton sheets."

POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

Caesura plays a major role in "Dusting the Phone." The speaker is hardly cool and collected, and neither is the poem's language. The speaker jumps from one worried, obsessive thought to another, and the poem's fragmented sentences help to convey their anxiety and unrest.

Take a look at stanza 2, for example, where the speaker bounces between disparate images as they imagine the future:

> The future is a long gloved hand. An empty cup.
> A marriage. A full house. One night per week
> in stranger's white sheets. Forget tomorrow,

This stanza is also marked by asyndeton, the lack of any conjunctions between these images making them feel even more fragmented and disjointed.

Note, too, that most of the caesurae in the poem are full stops. All these periods, combined with the poem's frequent use of firmly end-stopped lines, prevent the poem from ever gaining a fluid rhythm or momentum. The poem's form thus evokes the speaker's sense of stagnation: the speaker is stuck, unable to do anything but obsess about hearing from their lover.

This is particularly clear in the last tercet:

> I am trapped in it. I can't move. I want you.
> All the time. This is awful—only a photo.
> Come on, damn you, ring me. Or else. What?

These caesurae have a claustrophobic effect, trapping the poem's words into small spaces. The frequent caesurae thus help to create the sense that the speaker is "trapped," unable to escape from their obsessive thoughts and desires. They can't move forward until they hear from their beloved.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "idea, and," "love, I"
- **Line 4:** "disaster. Sirens."
- **Line 5:** "disaster. Sirens."
- **Line 6:** "tell? Nobody"
- **Line 7:** "hand. An"
- **Line 8:** "marriage. A," "house. One"
- **Line 9:** "sheets. Forget"
- **Line 10:** "say, don't," "love. I," "try. It"
- **Line 11:** "letter. I"

- **Line 12:** "together, re-read"
- **Line 14:** "service. I," "it. I"
- **Line 16:** "Infuriatingly, it," "hoaxes, wrong"
- **Line 17:** "worse, calls," "people. Your"
- **Line 19:** "it. I," "move. I"
- **Line 20:** "time. This," "awful—only"
- **Line 21:** "on, damn you, ring," "me. Or else. What?"

HYPERBOLE

The speaker's obsessive desire for the lover frequently spills over into hyperbole. The speaker says numerous things that aren't *literally* true but which illustrate just how anxious and restless the speaker feels.

In stanza 2, for example, the speaker declares that whether the phone rings or not, it would spell "disaster." Of course, there is no *real* disaster here; the speaker is being dramatic. There are no actual "sirens" wailing down the street on the way to the speaker's house; the emergency is only in the speaker's mind.

Similarly, when the speaker confesses to "assault[ing] the postman for a letter," they're not admitting a real crime! They're exaggerating in order to illustrate how eager they are to hear from their lover. The mention of waiting by the phone "This very second" also feels somewhat hyperbolic; the speaker is no doubt glued to the phone, but the phrase "this very second" emphasizes how slowly time ticks by as the speaker waits on their beloved. They "can't move" not because they're literally "trapped," but because they don't want to risk missing the lover's call.

All this hyperbole paints the speaker as desperate and unable to think of anything other than that next meeting with their lover. Of course, the speaker is self-aware enough to know that this obsessive thinking "is not a good idea"—they would probably be the first to admit that they're going a little bit overboard!

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "The phone rings heralding some disaster. Sirens. / Or it doesn't ring which also means disaster. Sirens."
- **Line 11:** "I assault the postman for a letter."
- **Line 13:** "This very second I am waiting on the phone."
- **Lines 19-20:** "I am trapped in it. I can't move. I want you. / All the time."

REPETITION

The repetition in "Dusting the Phone" emphasizes the idea that the speaker is stuck in a mental feedback loop, unable to think of anything other than their lover.

Take the parallelism in the first stanza, for example:

> I am spending my time imagining the worst that could happen.
> [...]
> spending my time going over the best that has been happening.

The language of these lines is almost exactly the same, except for the fact that line 1 focuses on "the worst" and line 3 on "the best." These lines are also an example of antithesis, and they add drama to the poem. The speaker swings between opposing scenarios, suggesting that there's no in-between when it comes to love: things are either amazing or they're terrible.

The repetition in the second stanza works similarly. Lines 4 and 5 feature epistrophe (both feature sentences that end with the word "disaster") followed by an identical, one-word sentence:

> The phone rings heralding some disaster. Sirens.
> Or it doesn't ring which also means disaster. Sirens.

This repetition reiterates the fact that the speaker can't help but imagine "the worst." If the lover calls, the speaker assumes it'll be with bad news (i.e., they're calling to break up). If the lover doesn't call, it's also bad news because it means they don't love the speaker back. Whether the phone rings or not, the epistrophe underscores, the end result is the same: "disaster." The speaker hears "Sirens" (wailing in response to this "disaster") either way.

"Dusting the Phone" is also filled with frequent anaphora as the speaker starts sentences again and again with the word "I": "I try," "I assault," "I look," "I go over," "I polish," "I dress," and so on. All of this anaphora makes the poem's language feel choppy and blunt; the speaker is too anxious to smooth or vary their sentence structure. It also calls attention to the fact that the speaker is not with their lover. There's no "we" or "our" in the poem; everything the speaker does, they do alone.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "spending my time imagining the worst that could happen."
- **Line 3:** "spending my time going over the best that has been happening."
- **Lines 4-5:** "The phone rings heralding some disaster. Sirens. / Or it doesn't ring which also means disaster. Sirens."
- **Lines 7-8:** "a long gloved hand. An empty cup. / A marriage. A full house."
- **Line 10:** "I try."
- **Line 11:** "I assault the postman for a letter. I look for flowers."
- **Line 12:** "I go over and over our times together,"
- **Line 14:** "I polish it. I dress for it."
- **Line 15:** "I'll give it extra in return for your call."

- **Line 19:** "I am trapped in it. I can't move. I want you."
- **Line 21:** "What?"
- **Line 22:** "what."

APOSTROPHE

The use of apostrophe emphasizes the fact that the speaker's lover is not by the speaker's side. The speaker doesn't know when they'll next hear from this lover, either.

Take the final stanza, where the speaker boils the poem down to its essence: "I want you." The intimacy of the phrase again highlights that the speaker *isn't* there. This results in the speaker making a hollow threat:

> [...] I want you.
> All the time. This is awful—only a photo.
> Come on, damn you, ring me. Or else. What?
> I don't know what.

Apostrophe contributes to the poem's vexed, anxious tone. The "Or else" implies that the lover will suffer some kind of consequences for not calling—but the rhetorical question undermines this threat immediately. The question admits that there is only one person with any power in this situation, and that's the lover. All the speaker can do is wait for the call and, in the meantime, talk to someone who isn't there.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "I want you."
- **Line 21:** "Come on, damn you, ring me. Or else."

METAPHOR

"Dusting the Phone" uses figurative language to help convey the speaker's frantic and frazzled state of mind.

In the third stanza, for example, the speaker deploys a flurry of metaphors that offer various visions of the future with their lover. Some of these seem hopeful: the future is "A marriage" or a "full house," which might refer to a home filled with children or to a winning hand in poker. "One night per week / in stranger's white sheets," by contrast, might be a version of the relationship in which the two lovers remain at a relative distance—or cheat on each other.

The future being a "long gloved hand" or an "empty cup" are more ambiguous metaphors. A "long gloved hand" might suggest glamor and courtship, the speaker picturing themselves being wined and dined by their lover as part of a ritual of romance. "An empty cup" could speak to a simple domestic scene, a cup left empty on a bedside table (in the lovers' "full house," perhaps). Alternatively, it could represent emptiness: a future in which the speaker's life feels hollow because they're not with their lover.

There's another subtle metaphor in line 12:

> I go over and over our times together, re-read them.

The speaker describes the act of going over one's memories as "re-read[ing] them." Reading, rather than just remembering, implies a greater level of attention to detail. This captures the obsessiveness of the speaker's behavior.

The poem also uses metaphorical language when describing the relationship between the speaker and their telephone. The fifth stanza puns on the idea of the speaker "waiting" for the phone call, taking "waiting" to mean not just killing time but acting like a waiter in a restaurant. The speaker personifies the phone, providing it with "silver service" (that is, butler-like attention) and even dressing to impress it. The personified phone refuses to give the speaker what they want, sending only prank calls, wrong numbers, and "calls from boring people."

This personification emphasizes that the phone is the closest the speaker can get to their lover (because it's where the call will come from). The speaker's devotion to the phone reflects their intense desire to hear from their beloved.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "The future is a long gloved hand. An empty cup. / A marriage. A full house. One night per week / in stranger's white sheets."
- **Lines 13-18:** "This very second I am waiting on the phone. / Silver service. I polish it. I dress for it. / I'll give it extra in return for your call. / Infuriatingly, it sends me hoaxes, wrong numbers; / or worse, calls from boring people. Your voice / disappears into my lonely cotton sheets."

VOCABULARY

Heralding (Line 4) - Signalling/announcing.

Sirens (Line 4, Line 5) - Loud sounds that are meant to warn people about or signal something.

Silver Service (Lines 13-14) - Formal, high-end restaurant/event service, in which waiters transfer food directly onto guests' plates from silver serving dishes.

Waiting (Line 13) - This is a pun. The speaker is both "waiting" for a call and "waiting" on the phone as though it were a guest at a restaurant.

Hoaxes (Line 16) - Fake/prank calls.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Dusting the Phone" is made up of six tercets (three-line stanzas) followed by a single line on its own at the end. It subtly echoes a villanelle: an intensely repetitive poetic form consisting of five tercets and a concluding quatrain, plus two refrains that repeat throughout the poem.

While "Dusting the Phone" poem doesn't follow the strict rhyme scheme of a villanelle nor use any refrains, it's still an extremely repetitive poem. The use of parallelism, anaphora, and blunt phrasing make the poem feel circular and even claustrophobic. The speaker obsesses over the same things again and again and essentially ends the poem where they began: waiting for their lover to call.

Note, too, that setting the poem's final line on its own, separate from the prior tercet, emphasizes the hollowness of the speaker's threat to take action against their lover for not calling. Really, there's nothing the speaker can do in this situation. In placing the sentence "I don't know what" on its own, isolated line, the poem closes on a note of frustrated, lonely defeat.

METER

"Dusting the Phone" uses free verse, never settling into a regular meter. Instead of using a steady, predictable rhythm, the poem's language sounds choppy and fragmented. That's thanks to the combination of blunt sentences, frequent end-stopped lines, and plenty of full-stop caesurae.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Dusting the Phone" doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. The *lack* of rhymes suits the poem's anxious tone, keeping things as unpredictable as the speaker's romantic future.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Dusting the Phone" is someone with a terrible case of the lovesick blues. They long to hear from their lover and are glued to the phone in case they call. Instead of thinking about all the good times they've shared with this person, however, the speaker can't help but imagine worst-scare scenarios and envision "disaster." Their desire seems to be driving them a little mad, in fact; they make hyperbolic declarations about "assault[ing] the postman for a letter," being "trapped" by their longing, and wanting their lover "All the time." The intensity of their feelings illustrates the drama and uncertainty of new love, which, here, is an utterly overwhelming—even "awful"—force. The speaker is someone totally at the mercy of their emotions.

SETTING

"Dusting the Phone" takes place while the speaker is anxiously awaiting a call from their lover. The speaker is alone, and it seems like they're at home, too (note the mention of bedsheets). They look out for the postman, hoping for letters or flowers. They sit by the phone, desperately willing it to ring, even treating it like a distinguished guest. All in all, the poem creates a claustrophobic atmosphere: the speaker is stuck inside, "trapped" by their desire and unable to "move" until their lover calls.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Acclaimed poet Jackie Kay was born in 1961 to Scottish and Nigerian parents. She was subsequently adopted and grew up in Glasgow, and she wrote about these experiences in her debut poetry collection, *The Adoption Papers* (1991). She has published numerous books, won several awards, and served from 2016 to 2021 as the Makar (a.k.a the Poet Laureate of Scotland).

"Dusting the Phone" appears in Kay's second collection, *Other Lovers*. The book takes a wide-ranging look at love, examining both romantic relationships and family ties using Kay's characteristic humor (which is on bold display in "Dusting the Phone").

Kay describes two main sets of influences on her writing: Scottish poetry and jazz/blues music. As a child, she attended traditional Burns night celebrations (which celebrate the work of Scottish poetry legend Robert Burns and would later visit Edwin Morgan in his nursing home to discuss poetry. *Other Lovers* includes a sequence about blues singer Bessie Smith, about whom Kay published a biography in 1997. Kay was also in a long-term relationship with Carol Ann Duffy, another major voice in contemporary poetry in the UK. Both poets use humor and surprising imagery to explore themes related to desire, identity, and womanhood.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Dusting the Phone" was published in 1993, well before most people had cell phones. As such, the speaker is both "trapped" by their obsessive desires and quite literally "trapped" inside by the landline; were they to leave their house, they might miss their lover's call!

This was also a time before people had internet access in their homes. Without email, the speaker must rely on the "postman" for letters. There's no social media for them to stalk, either. They have "only a photo" by which to remember their lover.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- About Jackie Kay — Learn more about Kay's life and listen to the poet read some of her work aloud. (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/jackie-kay/)
- Kay as Scotland's Makar — Read an interview in which Kay discusses what it means to serve as Scotland's Makar (Poet Laureate). (https://www.scotsmagazine.com/articles/jackie-kay/)
- Jackie Kay Out Loud — Watch Kay a video of Kay reading six of her poems. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvztYIml-Ps)
- Kay in Conversation — Check out a conversation between the poet and Nicola Sturgeon, the current First Minister of Scotland. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ju0BaLIKDvM)

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