Quickdraw

SUMMARY

The speaker describes an interaction with a lover as though the two were in a stand-off in a Western film: the speaker's cell phone and landline phone hang from their hip pockets like guns in a holster. The speaker is alone when their lover calls, something the speaker compares to swiftly drawing a gun from their own holster and firing. The lover's voice is the metaphorical bullet, which makes the speaker groan.

The speaker's been hit. The next time their lover says something, the speaker twirls the phone in their hand and then fires off their own words in response—but these words don't land how the speaker intended. Their lover then shoots the speaker right through the heart (i.e., they say something that cuts through the speaker).

The speaker says that's what love is: the sun at its height in the sky, sudden disaster, drinking liquor in an old, familiar dive bar. The speaker holds their cellphone in the air for the sheriff to see (i.e., in surrender), but they have another one hidden in their boot.

Their lover texts both phones at the same time, making the speaker lose their balance and fall to their knees, where they grasp clumsily for the phone. Each text message is a magic bullet that cuts through the speaker's defenses. *Take this*, they seem to say, over and over again.

THEMES

THE PLEASURES AND DANGERS OF PASSION

"Quickdraw" suggests that passion can feel at once delectable, ridiculous, and dangerous. The speaker, sitting by two phones at once waiting impatiently for a lover to call or text, imagines they're a gunslinger in an old Western: their longing feels as potent as "hard liquor," and their lover's words, when they finally arrive, hit them like "silver bullets." Their obsessive, passionate longing for messages from their lover feels both exciting and risky: through the images of phones as guns and messages as bullets, the poem hints that passion can wound! The Wild West metaphor suggests both a kind of enjoyable melodrama and a real anxiety that passion can just about kill you—or at least make you feel ridiculous and exposed.

Describing a lover's calls and messages as shots fired in a Wild West gunfight, the speaker suggests that there's something deliciously intense about fresh passion. The speaker imagines their two phones, "the mobile and the landline," as "guns, slung from the pockets on my hips," weapons they can "quickdraw" as fast as a gunslinger when their lover calls. But these guns seem to be the lover's weapons more than the speaker's: the lover's voice becomes a "pellet" (or bullet) that enters the speaker's "ear," making them "groan." This image evokes the speaker's almost painful pleasure at hearing their lover's words. Indeed, every "kiss" the lover sends the speaker over the phone hits like a "silver bullet[]," piercing the speaker with overwhelming pleasure that borders on being too much.

But passion comes with risk: feeling this strongly means you can be hurt, and the gunfight metaphor suggests there's already danger here. The lover's words might be delicious and longed-for, but they also "blast [the speaker] / through the heart" and "wound[]" them. This again implies that extreme pleasure can easily turn perilous. Making the speaker feel so good gives their lover power over the speaker's "heart," which can feel wonderful and frightening at the same time. In other words, feeling this strongly leaves one incredibly vulnerable. The Wild West metaphor, summoning up clichés and melodrama, also suggests that such passion borders on cheesiness: swept up in obsession, the speaker runs the risk of appearing or feeling silly.

Intense passion, the poem (and metaphor) suggests, is thus at once desirable, dangerous, and a little bit ridiculous. "And this is love," the speaker says, "high noon, calamity, hard liquor / in the old Last Chance saloon." This suggests the sheer intensity of each encounter with their lover: every emotion and every phone call feels like a "Last Chance" and a "calamity." The slyly campy Wild West metaphor suggests that this intensity might also feel pretty silly sometimes—and that that's all part of the fun.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I wear the ...
... hear me groan.

"Quickdraw" begins with a simile in which the speaker compares the two phones in their pockets to "guns" in hip holsters. The simile plays off of the poem's title, which refers to the kind of gunfights often depicted in old Western films: two gunslingers face each other from a distance, their hands hovering over the guns at their hips until one of them quickly

unholsters, aims, and fires at the other.

Picturing the speaker with a phone hanging from each hip, bracing as though in a Western movie stand-off, feels at once silly and serious. The fact that the speaker compares these phones to weapons, however, also suggests that there's deep anxiety here. The title implies that whatever game the speaker is playing as they wait, "phones" at the ready, is a dangerous one—or at least that it *feels* dangerous.

Soon enough, it becomes clear that the speaker is waiting for a phone call from a lover. And when the phone finally rings, the speaker compares it to the lover metaphorically drawing their gun first and firing. Their voice becomes a small bullet in the speaker's ear and makes them "groan"—a word conveying pain, pleasure, or possibly both at once. The ambiguity of whether the speaker is feeling pleasure or pain suggests that passion itself can be almost too much to bear. Perhaps the lover has said something that makes the speaker weak in the knees; perhaps they've said something that breaks the speaker's heart.

Notice the use of internal rhyme throughout this stanza: "phones," "alone," "groan." These rhymes add intensity and musicality to the language. Notice, too, the use of enjambment across lines 2-4. This creates momentum early on, drawing the reader deeper into the poem.

LINES 5-9

You've wounded me. ...
... through the heart.

The speaker says that their lover has "wounded" them. They've beaten the speaker to the punch, it seems, and said something that hurt.

The speaker apparently hangs up after being "wounded" by their lover. The "Next time" their lover calls, the speaker says, they "speak after the tone." This "tone" might refer to the beep before a voicemail (i.e., the speaker *doesn't* pick up and the lover is leaving a message). It's also possible that this "tone" refers to the phone's ringing (which stops when the speaker *does* pick up).

Either way, the speaker "twirl[s] the phone" while listening to their lover speak, as though they were a gunslinger showing off their skills. The speaker then says something in return, firing off their "tongue." The speaker's aim isn't as precise as their lover's, however. While their lover's words hit the speaker hard, the *speaker's* words are far off their target; they don't land how the speaker intended. This might suggest an imbalance of power and/or love between the two. That is, the speaker is more vulnerable, perhaps because they feel more strongly for this person than this person does for them.

Indeed, the speaker says that their lover "choose[s their] spot" and proceeds to "blast" the speaker "through the heart." This is ambiguous; it's unclear if the speaker has been overcome with pleasure or if their lover has just broken their heart. Again, though, readers get the sense that this is a dangerous game the speaker is playing.

The poem continues to use subtle rhyme throughout this passage. There's an internal rhyme between "tone" and "phone" in line 6, for example, and a slant rhyme between "mark" and "heart" at the ends of lines 7 and 9. These rhymes keep the poem's language feeling intense and exciting. The rhyme between "mark" and "heart" also emphasizes that the lovers' targets are each other's hearts.

Notice the use of /t/ alliteration and consonance throughout these lines as well ("Next time," "tone," "twirl," "trigger," "tongue," etc.). This makes the language feel crisp and sharp, echoing the idea that the lovers' words are weapon-like.

Finally, the enjambment across the stanza break creates some dramatic suspense:

> You choose your spot, then blast me
> through the heart.

LINES 10-13

And this is ...
... concealed.

The speaker goes on to say that this back-and-forth "is love" itself, a high-stakes mixture of passion, pleasure, and pain. The asyndeton of "love, high noon, calamity, hard liquor" creates a smooth, quick rhythm. The speaker is rattling off clichés that appear in Western films: the "quickdraw" almost always occurs in or outside in the town "saloon" where men are getting drunk at "high noon," when the sun is at its zenith in the sky. The whole thing is a "calamity"—a sudden disaster or catastrophe.

The speaker continues to play with Western tropes, saying that they "show the mobile / to the sheriff"—just as a gunslinger would hold their gun up in the air when approached by the "sheriff," indicating their surrender. But the speaker has "another" phone hidden away in their "boot." In other words, they have no real intention of surrendering; they're slyly planning on yanking their other "gun" out when the time comes.

The extended metaphor continues to imply that although these lovers are enjoying their phone exchange, they are also both nervous about the consequences. Neither one of them, it seems, entirely *trusts* the other. They're both still trying to get the upper hand.

Notice the use of enjambment across lines 10-13. Several enjambments in a row evoke the breathlessness of the lovers' passionate exchange, while also building momentum that carries the reader into the last stanza.

LINES 13-16

You text them ...

... this... and this...

It turns out that the speaker isn't as clever as they think they are. They've pretended to surrender, holding their "mobile to the sheriff" while keeping another tucked away in their "boot," but their lover isn't fooled: they "text both" of the speaker's phones at once.

The speaker "reel[s]," stumbling dramatically as though shot. This suggests that the speaker's lover has said something unexpected, although the speaker's feelings about it are ambiguous. They might be "reel[ing]" from the shock of pain or from overwhelming pleasure.

The poem concludes with the speaker "Down on [their] knees," an image that suggests begging and also has sexual connotations. After losing their balance, the speaker says they "fumble for the phone." This alliteration highlights the speaker's powerlessness in this final moment; once again, their lover has the upper hand.

The speaker "read[s] the silver bullets" of their lover's "kiss." A "silver bullet" refers to something that seems to magically, instantly solves a problem. Whatever the lover has said, it's made the speaker forget any arguments or disagreements that existed before. Now, they fall into this hail of "silver bullets," overcome by passion.

Epizeuxis (the repetition of "and this") and caesura (the pause created by the ellipsis between each repetition) adds to the intensity of the poem's final moments, dragging them out. The speaker has lost this gunfight, but that's kind of a good thing! The caesura also creates a softness that implies this act is ultimately a tender one. The speaker's voice seems to trail off, as if pleasure overrides their ability to speak.

SYMBOLS

GUNS AND BULLETS

Guns and bullets in "Quickdraw" symbolize love's dangerous power.

In comparing their phones to "guns" and words to "bullets," the speaker raises the stakes on these conversations with their lover. The lover's voice is "a pellet" in the speaker's "ear," a sharp blow that wounds the speaker—indicating that the lover has said something hurtful. The speaker responds by "squeez[ing] the trigger of my tongue," again metaphorically comparing words to bullets fired at a target.

This language conveys both the excitement and sheer terror of romantic passion. The speaker is tensed and at the ready for their lover's words, which hit them like a "blast" right "through the heart." Love, all this Wild West imagery implies, imbues language with treacherous, thrilling power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I wear the two, the mobile and the landline phones, / like guns, slung from the pockets on my hips."
- **Lines 3-4:** "quickdraw, your voice a pellet / in my ear"
- **Line 7:** "then squeeze the trigger of my tongue, wide of the mark."
- **Line 15:** "read the silver bullets of your kiss."

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The whole poem is based on an extended metaphor comparing a passionate phone exchange between lovers to a showdown between gunslingers in the Wild West.

The poem's title introduces this metaphor. "Quickdraw" refers to a competition between two people wielding guns: whoever unholsters and fires their gun and hits their target the fastest wins. The rest of the poem then builds on this metaphor, treating the speaker and their lover as the gunslingers, their phones as the guns, and their messages/voices as the bullets.

Through this extended metaphor, the poem conveys the intensity, passion, and danger of the relationship between these people. Both have the power to seriously hurt the other. Indeed, in the first stanza, the speaker says that their lover draws first; the "pellet" (or small bullet) of their voice makes the speaker "groan" in pain, pleasure, or both. The speaker has been "wounded," the implication being that the lover has said something devastating.

The speaker fires off their own words in response, comparing their "tongue" to the "trigger" of a gun. Yet their words are "wide of the mark"—they miss their target, suggesting that the speaker isn't as good at this game as their lover is. This, in turn, might suggest the lover has more power in the relationship than the speaker.

Indeed, the speaker says that, after they miss, their lover "blast[s]" them "through the heart." This could again be interpreted as a description of either pleasure or pain, but it again illustrates just how powerful, and dangerous, passion romantic passion can feel.

The speaker says that this melodrama, this mix of intense pleasure and equally intense pain, "is love." By equating "love" with the cliché of the old Wild West—"high noon, calamity, hard liquor"—the speaker seems to acknowledge the way love itself is riddled with clichés: falling in love can feel cheesy, wild, serious, ridiculous, and intense all at once.

What follows is a scene seemingly straight out of an old Western: the speaker holds their cellphone up in the air where the "sheriff" can see it, apparently surrendering their "weapon." But really they have a second phone "concealed" in their "boot."

In other words, the speaker is playing dirty: they want to win this game! But their lover once again gets the upper hand: they "text" both phones "at once" and the speaker "reels" and "fumble[s]" after their phone, "read[ing] the silver bullets" their lover has sent them.

A silver bullet refers to something that instantly, and seemingly magically, solves a problem; the implication is that whatever the speaker's lover has just said has broken past all the speaker's defenses and fixed whatever tension has been bubbling between them. Instead of firing back, they appear to give in. The poem ends with the speaker being metaphorically riddled by bullet-like kisses, suggesting that their lover has won the game—the speaker is overcome with pleasure.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

SIMILE

The poem uses a simile in lines 1-2 that helps set up the poem's extended Wild West metaphor:

> I wear the two, the mobile and the landline phones,
> like guns, slung from the pockets on my hips. [...]

This is a funny, almost cartoonish depiction of the speaker. At the same time, however, it suggests some real unease. After all, the speaker is wielding "phones" as if they were weapons, suggesting that the lover who calls them is their nemesis, someone they will face off against in a "Quickdraw." So while the lovers' conversation may be pleasurable, it's also a bit of a power struggle between two people who don't want to get hurt. The fact that the simile is both humorous and laced with real discomfort suggests that passion itself is a double-edged sword: it feels exciting and dangerous at the same time.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I wear the two, the mobile and the landline phones, / like guns, slung from the pockets on my hips."

EPIZEUXIS

The speaker uses epizeuxis in the poem's final lines:

> read the silver bullets of your kiss. Take this...
> and this... and this... and this... and this...

The repetition of this phrase evokes the image of the lover's bullet-like kisses hitting their mark over and over again. The steady rhythm is sensual and suggests that the speaker is completely overwhelmed by their lover's text messages. At the same time, because the metaphor of a gunfight has rendered this whole exchange as a competition or fight between the lovers, this ending implies that the speaker has lost the game. Their lover beat them to the punch, so to speak.

It's also worth mentioning the ellipses which separate each "and this." The caesura created by each ellipsis has a softening effect; after all, the speaker is describing passionate messages between lovers, not a real gunfight. The rhythmic repetition combined with the softening caesura suggests that the speaker is finally surrendering to their lover's words. They've been "conquered," so to speak, but losing this fight is its own kind of pleasure.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "and this... and this... and this... and this..."

ASSONANCE

"Quickdraw" is filled with assonance. The poem might be written in free verse, without a regular meter or rhyme scheme, but it's still extremely musical thanks to its many repeated vowel sounds. Assonance often combines with consonance to create internal rhymes, elevating the poem's language even further and conveying the intensity of the speaker's passion.

In the first stanza, for example, there's the quick, short /uh/ assonance of "guns, slung," the full rhyme of "ear"/"hear," and the repeated long /oh/ (and /n/) sounds of "phones," "alone," and "groan." All this sound play makes the lines feel rhythmic and exciting.

The next stanza then picks up on the long /oh/ and /n/ sounds with "tone" and "phone," while the long /ay/ and /r/ of "mark" echo in "heart," calling readers' attention to the speaker's sudden wounding. The music continues throughout the end of the poem: listen to the rhymes of "noon"/"saloon" and "concealed"/"reel," the round /oh/ assonance of "show"/"mobile," and, finally, the hissing rhyme of "kiss"/"this." This assonance/sibilance rings out as the poem draws to a conclusion, lingering in the speaker's ear.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "phones"
- **Line 2:** "guns," "slung"
- **Line 3:** "alone"
- **Line 4:** "ear," "hear," "groan"
- **Line 6:** "tone," "phone"
- **Line 7:** "mark"
- **Line 9:** "heart"
- **Line 10:** "noon"
- **Line 11:** "saloon," "show," "mobile"
- **Line 13:** "concealed," "reel"
- **Line 15:** "silver," "kiss," "this"

VOCABULARY

The mobile and the landline phones (Line 1) - A cell phone and a non-wireless home phone.

Slung (Line 2) - Suspended or hung, like a gun in hip holster.

Quickdraw (Line 3) - A name for when two people with guns compete to see who can unholster, fire, and hit a target the fastest.

Pellet (Lines 3-4) - A small, lightweight bullet.

Wide of the mark (Line 7) - The speaker is saying that they missed the target.

High noon (Line 10) - The middle of the day, when the sun is at its height in the sky. Traditionally, this is also when gunslingers in Western movies would agree to face off.

Calamity (Line 10) - A sudden catastrophe or disaster.

Saloon (Line 11) - A kind of bar in the Old West (in Western movies, these are often where the final showdown between two gunslingers occurs).

Reel (Line 13) - Falter or lose one's balance.

Fumble (Line 14) - Clumsily reach for something.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Quickdraw" consists of 16 lines of free verse, which are split into four quatrains (or four-line stanzas). The simple, regular stanza form keeps the focus of the poem on the *action*, which proceeds quickly and efficiently, like a scene in a Western film. Frequent enjambment also pushes the poem swiftly down the page, building tension and excitement.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't follow a set meter. Most contemporary poetry, including Duffy's, is written in free verse. The absence of meter allows the poem to feel modern, conversational, and *intimate*. This makes sense, seeing as the speaker is addressing their lover directly; the reader, then, almost seems to be eavesdropping on a private exchange.

RHYME SCHEME

As "Quickdraw" is written in free verse, it doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. That said, the poem does use lots of internal rhyme! For instance, in the first stanza, "phones," "alone," and "groan" all rhyme, adding some music and intensity to the poem's language. These rhymes are inconsistent and unexpected, though, which keeps the poem feeling fresh and exciting throughout.

SPEAKER

The reader isn't given a whole lot of information about the speaker. For instance, the poem doesn't reveal the speaker's gender, race, nationality, age, etc. In this way, the speaker might be anyone at all.

What *is* clear is that the speaker feels very strongly about the person they're waiting to hear from. This person makes them "groan"—seemingly in both pleasure *and* pain, seeing as the speaker is "wounded" by their words. And while the speaker attempts to "fire" back by "squeez[ing] the trigger of [their] tongue," they ultimately fall short of their "mark." This suggests that the dynamic between the speaker and their lover isn't exactly equal; the speaker, it seems, is more vulnerable. This might suggest that the speaker's feelings for the other person are stronger.

SETTING

The poem's literal setting is vague. All the reader knows is that the speaker is waiting by the phone—two phones, actually: "the mobile and the landline." In other words, they're not certain how their lover will reach out to them, but they're sure not taking any chances: they don't want to miss this call!

Metaphorically speaking, the poem is set in the Wild West: "high noon, calamity, hard liquor / in the old Last Chance saloon." There isn't *really* any "sheriff," and the speaker isn't *really* wearing cowboy "boots." These are just part of the poem's playful way of depicting this over-the-phone encounter between lovers.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Scottish-born Carol Ann Duffy (1955-present) is the first (and so far, the only) woman to serve as Poet Laureate of the UK. A working-class writer and an out lesbian, she brought fresh air and new perspectives to a laureateship historically dominated by (mostly) straight, white, middle-class men.

"Quickdraw" was published in *Rapture*, Duffy's 2005 prize-winning collection exploring love, grief, and loneliness. Duffy's poetry is known for being straightforward yet effective, accessible yet insightful. She often writes in free verse and uses relaxed, conversational language. She's also known for her love poetry.

Duffy's influences include modernist poets like T.S. Eliot, Romantic poets like John Keats and William Wordsworth, and free verse poets like Sylvia Plath, whose exploration of women's interior lives would prove foundational to Duffy's own poetry. In turn, Duffy has influenced (and championed) writers like

Alice Oswald, Kate Clanchy, and Jeanette Winterson.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Quickdraw" was published in 2005 but draws heavily from clichés found in Western films, which take place in the so-called "Wild West" of the mid-to-late 1800s. The protagonists of these films tend to be gun-slinging, liquor-drinking cowboys or drifters, who very often have a shootout with a criminal outside a "saloon" at "high noon."

Hugely popular from the silent film era through the mid-20th century, traditional Westerns presented a heavily romanticized (and heavily white-washed) vision of life on the American frontier. They also celebrated a very stereotypical kind of masculinity. While Westerns have inspired countless (and more diverse) subgenres, traditional Western heroes were strong, stoic, macho men.

While the speaker of "Quickdraw" is anonymous, the poems in *Rapture* are generally considered to reference the dissolution of Duffy's 15-year relationship with fellow Scottish poet Jackie Kay. In this way, Duffy subtly subverts the Western tradition by using its tropes to explore the wounding power of love—and queer love at that.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Not Your Typical Poet Laureate — A Daily Mail article regarding Duffy's appointment as first woman/LGBTQ+/Scottish Poet Laureate of the UK. (https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1176509/The-bisexual-single-mother-53-poem-banned-glorifying-knife-crime--Shes-new-Poet-Laureate.html)
- The Poet's Life and Career — A Poetry Foundation biography of Duffy. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- The 50 Greatest Western Movies Ever Made — A New York Magazine rundown of the genre that inspired "Quickdraw." (https://www.vulture.com/article/50-best-western-movies-ever.html)
- Duffy Reads the Poem Aloud — Listen to "Quickdraw" read by the poet herself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwJfzQnbN74)
- The End of the Affair — A Guardian review of Rapture, the collection in which "Quickdraw" was published. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/07/featuresreviews.guardianreview19)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Anne Hathaway
- Before You Were Mine
- Circe
- Death of a Teacher
- Demeter
- Education For Leisure
- Eurydice
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- In Your Mind
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Aesop
- Mrs Darwin
- Mrs Lazarus
- Mrs Midas
- Mrs Sisyphus
- Originally
- Penelope
- Prayer
- Recognition
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- The Good Teachers
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well
- Work

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