***When I Listen to Music, I Think of People*** inspired by ***When I Look at a Strawberry, I Think of a Tongue***

When I think of myself, not much comes to mind. I think of myself in the moment rather than as a collection of my past. I often forget about my past, and when people ask me what my childhood was like, subconsciously, I have to ask myself the same question—I often don’t get a response. I’m floating through time where I watch everyone leave trails of memories behind them, but when I turn behind me and squint my eyes there’s nothing but a couple of blurry spots. The best I can do is make out a giraffe trying to nibble on my hand. Maybe this was a dream or a story I was told about myself—I will never know. I have friends who love me. Despite this, I can’t help but question my loneliness. When I listen to music I think of people. To sit down and do nothing but listen goes against my nature, yet there’s nothing better than bathing in each note. I like to dream about being far away—near the beach, I am driving with music on the radio and my arm out the window. In a loft with closed eyes, I sit attentively with a glass of rum at my side. Interludes and instrumentals hovering around me, a dragon, or maybe a pegasus, with its eyes locked on me as I stare back, sends gusts of wind that tackle me. “Two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl” they whistle. Or maybe the off-key strum of an acoustic guitar. I have loved. I have not cared. I have chased. I have failed. Certain songs make me feel sick. Sometimes it's the melody, maybe the chorus or the lyrics, or sometimes the name of the song itself. My stomach drops and, instinctively, I look back behind me. A fiery ignition, movies soar toward me in perfect clarity. Larger than life, they tower over me as I float helplessly. I panic. I flap my arms as if to swim away. But as I wobble and flail, I realize my vulnerability. Subject to the wandering of my mind, I decide to bask in my powerlessness. They say that each day they’re still a memory is another day you’re losing. They say “good memories, bad people.” They weren’t bad people, maybe just misguided. Maybe it was bound to happen. Maybe this is the better ending. Complacency is my worst enemy—like a painting with eyes tracking your movement or the feeling of eyes on the back of your head, it haunts me. Without tangibility, it lurks ready to tear me down without remorse. As it pounces, almost frozen in time, a slow leap towards me, everything stops as its hands finally creep over my shoulders. Like a child wandering his way through a haunted house, he’s engulfed in terror as he turns the final corner. As I float further through the void, I can see each moment it lunges toward me. I watch it leap as he stands ahead with his back turned—completely unaware. I call out to warn myself. I call out, so I won’t have to call out again. He can’t hear me and never will. I am on a boat. My hair is blonde and salty. Music, curated from years of preparation, hums softly as the sun sinks beneath the water. Painting the sky with a rich orange and purple, I realize solitude in my loneliness. My company is the breeze on my face, gritty with sea salt. To die spontaneously would be to live a life to completion. With the gentle currents brushing past my ankles and my focus piercing through the waves, I look back and make out when this was an impossibility. A daydream. An escape from my reality. An experience to tell my kids. A reason to keep trying. A reason to not give up. I watch films to meet new people. I’m sitting on my grandparents’ living room couch. Three in the morning, I am lying on the sand with my eyes locked on the stars. One with my chair, I feel a tug on my fishing pole. In the corner of my eye, they’re there. Trails appear behind me with an aura I’ve never experienced. An eclipse where the future is watching—reminiscing on my past as I sit between it. Bright rays shoot past my head blinding me as their light sweeps over my peripheral. Between my legs and around my back, they radiate with ecstasy. As I turn back, each memory builds the tsunami. A wave crushing my every self-doubt. My loneliness never existed. I like to be lost in my thoughts. There’s nothing worse than thoughts clouding my vision. Without shoes, I stroll across the boardwalk. As I look out at the sea, I notice them calling out to me as they run towards the water. They didn’t know how to swim, now their hair is light with sea salt and there’s sand in their ears. Barefeet meeting warm sand is the reason I’m here. I think about what they’re doing right now. Maybe in class, reading, listening to music. I imagine what they’re listening to. I wish, but I doubt. I occasionally look at old songs and wonder if they might be doing the same. Genuine art has meaning—its meaning becomes even richer with imposition. I look to my left, I see their trail, and I see glimpses of myself in it. I look ahead of them, and I get nervous. It feels wrong, but it’s inevitable—how could I not? A whirlpool of emotion opens below to consume me—I dive to avoid it. I escape, but it gets stronger and deeper waiting to eventually take me under. I can’t look at them. Sometimes when someone calls my name from behind me I intentionally ignore it. I wish I could hear the calls from in front of me. When I look around me, I see our paths diverge. I want to see our paths cross again. I look around and see only a few floating along with me. I’m lucky to have met them let alone have them here with me. As we sail together, the void becomes a white canvas painted with our dreams. Filling the canvas, our paint marbles. My ears ring when I hear them say my name. I become weightless when their arms wrap around me. Together, we sit in silence. A thin layer of water sits over the sand. Their eyes reflect the sky—a rich orange and purple cover the brown and blue that sits beneath. When I think of myself, I think of them. When people ask me to describe myself I look around at the canvas that’s been painted around me.