

Dear Hozier,

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I like your music because it doesn't show me myself, but rather some other world. I find the rhythms and the lyrics generative, so I listen to you while I write or while I plan what I want to write. My current work in progress has been so influenced by your self-titled first album it might as well be stitched to those songs. So yes, I like your music because it shows me possibility, not reality. "Someone New" is, to date, the only exception to this pattern.

The first few measures of "Someone New" always make me think of ballet. I can't explain why, except that it has something to do with that bass, rhythmic twang and sense memory. There are certain smells that transport me to Scotland, and the taste of almond brings me back to New York. I listen to "Someone New," and suddenly I am eight years old, craning my neck to see the ballerinas.

The first time I began making the connections was some joke about both the speaker in "Someone New" and myself being like a golden retriever and loving everyone we see. It was meant to be a joke about how I had a lot of crushes in high school and college. *Thirsty*, the kids would say, but I never really thought of it that way. Not that there is anything wrong with thirsty, an adjective I openly embrace now, but to me it was more just the excitement inherent in new people and what they could be to me. It was fun; crushes are fun even if, especially if, they lead to nothing.

Every December until I was twelve or thirteen, my father purchased tickets to a local university's production of "the Nutcracker" for himself and his three daughters. My brother, the youngest of us, only went once or twice before the tradition tapered off. I don't remember my mom ever going with us, but that's not unusual: my mother savors solitude and eagerly takes any chance to enjoy an evening at home alone. She participated in that she dressed us up in our Sunday best and took photos of us in the front room before shepherding us into our dad's car. A field trip without her supervision was, for children who saw their father only in the evenings and sometimes not even then, thrilling.

But then I got older and I learned more things about myself. Like the fact that I am queer and that I take love rather seriously and that of the seven deadly sins I am most well-acquainted with lust. These things I found to be difficult to juggle growing up in a culture that could barely make up its mind whether it's worse to be gay or horny, and where people get married, devoting themselves to each other for all eternity, after knowing each other all of three months. My attitudes and desires were – are still – considered deviant. And it's taken me a long time to be comfortable with my attitudes and desires. A long time to own up to them.

My memories of those cold winter outings are both fond and colored by discomfort. I liked the ballet for a lot of reasons. I was mature enough to appreciate the raw power of the dancers' bodies and young enough to fill any gaps in the narrative with my own imagination.

Some of those musical numbers drag on beyond the capacity of even a patient and precocious eight-year-old's attention span, but that was alright. I had already conditioned myself to handle boredom privately. Spending three hours a week at church will do that. I'd learned to trust, more than I trusted anything or anyone else, my mind's capacity to entertain me. So I assigned little stories to every elaborately costumed character, and as they whirled across the stage, which I was only glimpsing around the adults sitting in the row in front of me, my narratives rose and fell and crescendoed with them. Sometimes that was enough to distract me from the fact that my clothes were itchy and my shoes were too small and my hair was falling out of its curls. I've never liked wearing dresses.

I listen to "Someone New" and I hear a basic, easy interpretation of the lyrics. It's the classic story of a man who can't commit due to his wandering eye. There are too many tempting strangers to love and to fuck to commit to any one love for an extended period of time. In this story when the speaker says, "You knew who I was with every step that I ran to you," the blame falls on their partner who thought they could "tame" this person, finally be the one who would make them "settle down." And when he wakes "at the first cringe of morning" his "heart's already sinned." Before the day even begins his eye is wandering to "the stranger the better." Some person to fuck who he doesn't know, doesn't need to care about. It's just physical, you know?

I can relate to the narrator of "Someone New" only on the most cerebral of levels. Yes, I too believe that there is no "right" way to love, though there are many, many wrong and hurtful ways. And I have enough imagination to find the people I see delightful and interesting, at least until they prove themselves otherwise. But I don't fall in love so readily or so frequently.

An old story, that, and a common one – or so the movies would have us believe. And yet I wonder at a deeper story that might exist there, one that I had to train myself to even believe could exist. It's a story of loving many people and wanting to do so without being shoved into the boxes of "cheating" or "refusing to settle down." In short, it's the story of polyamory. Or ethical non-monogamy, if you prefer that.

Desire is a complicated landscape, and we all have different maps. I feel want, or lust, whatever you want to call it, and I feel it indiscriminate of gender, but over the years I've learned that I don't feel it as strongly as other people do. As a teenager, I thought I'd eventually catch up, like there was some sort of starting line to sex that I just wasn't seeing. As an adult, I understand that the way I feel desire might shift throughout my lifetime but also that I might never reach the line that everyone else seemed to cross when they were sixteen years old. I understand that I don't need it. Ironically, desire isn't something I particularly want.

In this version of the story there's still a tragedy, but the tragedy is that the partner lurking at the edges of the song is struggling with the polyamorous aspects of this relationships. "Don't take this the wrong way/you knew who I was with every step that I ran to you," takes on the flavor of "don't worry at my attraction to them, it has nothing to do with my attraction to you, but you knew I was polyamorous when this whole thing started. That means I want to have relationships with other people, too."

But I find desire fascinating. As I've said already, it's a landscape, and while my map might only indicate a few points of interest, other people's maps are so much more detailed and rich. I like hearing about the discoveries they make as they explore. I love the myriad ways they encounter each other. When I hear that perfectly slanted, internal rhyme "the dark caress of someone else, I guess any thrill will do," I get a little shiver. Sex is complex and human and sometimes awkward and sometimes euphoric, and I can think all of that without wanting it for myself with any urgency. Isn't that remarkable?

When he says he wakes "at the first cringe of morning" and his "heart's already sinned," I read that as he wakes into a world that views his attractions as inherently sinful. Remember lust, dear reader? We aren't supposed to feel any sexual attraction outside the confines of heterosexual penetrative sex for the purpose of procreation. To want to have sex for *fun*? To want to have sex with *multiple people*? To want to have sex with *multiple people* and have that be accepted by *all partners*? Satan has a hold of your libido, hun.

I'm intrigued as I am by desire in general with the specific practice of non-monogamy. I believe in communities. I believe that children are best raised by villages. I believe that families aren't limited or even defined by blood. I believe that partnership with a single person is possible and can even be viable -- I've been lucky enough to see it work for my parents -- but I also believe it's a crapshoot. It fails as often as it succeeds. Aren't there other ways to express love and desire and commitment without hurting other people's feelings? We all provide different things for each other. I have only one biological mother but many maternal people in my life. I have many friends, not just one. I love so many people.

The lines that break my heart are "how pure, how sweet a love, Aretha/that you would pray for him" which alludes to Aretha Franklin's "Say a Little Prayer for You," which is about praying for the well-being of her partner throughout the day. It's very sweet and makes me very happy. But, as the speaker here suggests, the love in that song is taught to be only for the monogamous. Only for the cis-straight-date-marry-have-babies people. People don't pray for sinners to have nice days, or to be safe. They pray for sinners to change. They pray for sinners to un-become themselves. And that is so violent.

Yet in "Someone New," polyamory is portrayed as a sin. Or, at the very least, something the narrator believes to be a sin. As the song opens, he's defending himself to a romantic partner, and in the bridge he contrasts the way he loves with the selfless, saint-like, unending love in Aretha Franklin's "I Say A Little Prayer." I think that comparison is a false dichotomy. Aretha's song, originally sung by Dionne Warwick, is about a certain type of love, the all-encompassing, singularly focused love of a woman for one person. It's beautiful, the way the narrator goes about the minutiae of her day while a part of her is occupied with thoughts of her lover. It's beautiful, but it's by no means perfect. Her love is characterized in terms of intercession, someone holy beseeching God on behalf of someone unholy. Whether you're the narrator or her lover in that song, you're in an unbalanced relationship. To the extent that I believe in God, if I need something from Him or Her or Them, I'd prefer to make the request myself.

People don't pray for the speaker in "Someone New." And they don't pray for me.

Learning about ethical non-monogamy taught me that I could actually have everything that I wanted. Relationships that were all so different and so fulfilling and so gorgeous all at the same time. It taught me that I don't have to overburden myself and, more importantly, I don't have to overburden my partners. They don't have to be everything I need, which frees me up to love them more freely, more gracefully, and just *more*. It's not for everyone, I know, and that's fine. It's okay that the partner in the song might be struggling or if, ultimately, they aren't happy with a polyamorous relationship – but it's still sad that the speaker loses them. Monogamy isn't inherently *bad*. I just don't think it's *for me*.

I'm not Aretha. As I've already said, I think monogamy is a crapshoot. Speaking for myself, an overabundance of focus is just as likely to drive me away as total inattention. But I'm not the narrator in "Someone New" either. I don't fall in love every day. Frequently I fall in friendship or camaraderie or curiosity or joy or disgust or grief. I try my damndest to connect to other human beings, but for me, that connection isn't characterized by desire. For me, it is characterized by distance. I can't imagine the caresses of strangers. I've been caressed by strangers, and I've hated it. I am safest and happiest and most capable of benevolence when I'm standing a few steps back.

"Would things be easier if there was a right way? Honey, there is no right way."

And there's the rub. People aren't really on board with the whole multiple-partners thing. Well, lots of people obviously are on board and are actively engaged in healthy polyamorous relationships. But it's definitely not the majority, and definitely not something we see portrayed on ABC Family. The phrase is now kind of a joke among my friends, because I talk about it so often and do my best to challenge the dominant narrative of one partner – one lifetime. But it still floats around as a joke – the winning zinger in a Jackbox game, or some jab I have to roll with or defend myself against. It's a bummer, because it would be easier to say this is my partner and when I say that word it means exactly what you think it means, nothing more and nothing less, and there's never going to be a development in my relationship/*relationships* that will shock and confuse you. But that is not my reality, because it's not my right way. And there is no right way, and maybe one day people will believe that, rather than making jokes.

But that's alright, I suppose, because, as you've already said, honey, there is no right way.

When the speaker says "I fall in love just a little, oh, a little bit/every day with someone new," and "love with every stranger, the stranger the better," I don't see a lack of commitment, but an abundance of excitement. Because there are so many beautiful people in the world who have so much to offer in the way of love. And who ever said we had to pick just one?