

Dear Hozier,

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This song hits a little differently in quarantine.

This song has me falling in love in the Greek Underworld. Two souls in the Fields of Asphodel, where to be alone is a physical, cosmic impossibility and so of course it would *feel good*, in every stripped-down version of that primal phrase, to be alone.

My life seven months ago involved so much more nearness to people than it does now. I know that's obvious. I know, also, that in this case, the obvious cannot be stated frequently or emphatically enough. Seven months ago, I spent the majority of my days near enough to other people to turn to them with questions or jokes. I used to hear their answers and their laughter free of tinny conference call filters. Seven months ago, I received hugs from my friends every time I saw them, felt their hands ruffling through my hair, and we sat around the same table, elbows bumping, as we played games or ate Greek food. We crammed together onto one small couch to watch Halloween movies. Seven months ago, I saw my family almost every week, held my nephew's grubby hand as he maneuvered down stairs, stood chatting with my father next to the barbecue while we waited for the salmon to finish smoking, playfully fended off my mother's embraces as an infringement on my dignity, my adulthood.

I would give almost anything, now, to hug and be hugged by my mom.

This image of the Underworld comes to me in flashes, matching with the beat, the baseline that pulls this song through the needle. They are puzzle pieces that don't exactly fit together – but isn't that the case when “bodies” become “a crowd?” Bodies don't fit together at the edges. Too much elbow, too much variation. But force our soft gray cardboard together and we are something like a whole. Some new creature we might call a crowd. The light around these flashes is red. Maybe that is imagination. Maybe that's the color the light was when we saw you in concert in April of 2019 and we leaned hard against each other to keep our bodies as separate as possible from the drunk and violent crowd swirling around, crashing into us. Maybe red truly is the color of the Greek Underworld, and only this song lets us know that secret of mythology.

I'm grateful for digital communication, but it only gets us so far. Some days the lag in text messaging or the feedback of multiple microphones in a video call with my family makes me so angry I go to bed gritting my teeth. The anger can't go anywhere, is directionless, but swims outward nonetheless, joins a tide of all the directionless angers like it and becomes an ocean threatening to sink us all. I don't even like T.S. Eliot, and I think “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” might as well be about an incel, but in this he was right. “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/ By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/ Till human voices wake us and we drown.” Some day, we'll wake up from this nightmare, those of us lucky enough to live through it, and we'll find that in our lonely sleep, all the emotions we had to store in

freezers or on the other side of walls to keep ourselves safe have nowhere to go but back into our lungs.

The first flash: *crude and proud creates baying*. What bays? Hounds bay. What stands guard at the entrance to the Underworld? Cerberus, a three-headed hound. Three heads: crude. Guardian: proud. There is that three beat repetition throughout *bum, bum, bum* like a heart beating three times for a beautiful beast with three voracious heads that need a heart's blood to help them think and help them feast.

Time alone used to be a luxury, a thing for weekends only. On some level, it had to be scheduled. Now it's as inevitable as the sunrise. I'm a solitary person by nature, and however much I resent my lack of choice, I know I'm better equipped to handle a lack of company than some. But in this particular loneliness, we're still suffering from all the negative effects of crowds. What you call "the anthems of rape culture" still "play loud" through every screen. It's not like I can log off Twitter or Instagram and be free of it, either. I hate that idea, that privileged white movie star idea, that taking care of myself by necessity means disconnecting. If I want to be a responsible person, I need to know what's happening in the political sphere, right? I have to stay informed. The people who are dying of this plague or who are losing their homes to the wildfires of ecological disaster or who are having their reproductive organs ripped from their bodies or their children ripped from their arms don't have the luxury of turning it off.

The second flash: *you don't know what hell you put me through*. Hell. Obvious, but there it is. I know it's not really fair to liken the Greek underworld to the Christian concept of hell. The Greeks didn't have a heaven and a hell. Everyone died, and everyone went to the Underworld. But I grew up with the concept of the cosmos that said hell is down and therefore under.

Oh, don't get me wrong, I'd love to "hide from our times." And in some ways, I am. Maybe I'm not a celebrity singing "Imagine" by John Lennon, as though imagination can actually stop dictators or take military-grade weapons from cops or convince an entire population to believe in science. But I'm not perfect. I turn my gaze from human suffering. Some days I feel like old Marley in "A Christmas Carol," forging my own chain link by link and yard by yard. I'll wear it when I die, look back on it and see in perfectly measurable, quantitative terms just how badly I've failed my fellow man.

Third flash: *to have someone kiss the skin that crawls from you*. Someone kissing your skin? Someone but not the speaker? Losing your love in the Underworld happened to Orpheus. In a way it happened to Achilles, to everyone whose lover went below before, giving their love unwillingly to Hades, or perhaps just to the rot. The rot of skin crawling off bone as the fully realized flesh body of your lover becomes less

than

that.

So maybe we're all both more lonely and more in need of solitude than we ever have been before, and maybe we won't be able to count the emotional cost of our new fractured existence until it's over, assuming, please God, that it's ever over. All I know is that being alone *with* someone is rarer and therefore more valuable than I could ever have predicted.

Would you kiss your lover as they rotted? I don't know if I could stand it. I don't mean the decay. I mean the knowing where they were headed and knowing that I'm not there waiting for them. A kiss would be a waste of time at that point. I would be long gone, down the dirt road to hell itself.

I have always enjoyed the company of my favorite person, even if we're going nowhere or doing nothing in particular. We sit at opposite ends of the couch, our fingers flying over our respective keyboards. Our rhythms have become so similar that we pause at the same time, our sentences rising and falling in harmony like breaths. We turn on a show we both watched in childhood and laugh at the same old jokes. We bother the cat, who can't resist our company even as he stares at us balefully, resenting how frequently we touch him. We go to the store, and I push the cart while she tells me which community aid items are most needed. We go through a drive-thru and order the same meals. I show her "Jurassic Park." She's not as impressed as I was when I first saw it, age 12. She yells at me not to walk like a muppet without looking, seeing me slip into an exaggerated, loose-limbed slouch out of the corner of her eye. She tells me it fills her with existential horror, but she's laughing. We're both laughing.

Fourth Flash: *See the way you hold yourself/reel against your body's borders.* Here the speaker can see their lover, which puts them somewhere in the Fields, we hope. For their sake. For ours. But it's the *reel* here that gets me, the double sound of it. Delicious and quick. Reel against your body's borders as if you are unsteady, the borders unknown. And yet again real against your body's borders as if you cannot be made less real by so small a fact as not having borders to your body. Real, *only* real, *most* real, as a ghost.

"To Be Alone" is, to put it mildly, a song about sex. The sly repetition throughout the chorus, "It feels good, girl, it feels good," leaves little doubt of that. Yet beneath that it is simply about the joy of being with someone who makes you feel more human, rather than less. It's about the druglike pleasure of someone's company. "It --" it being intimacy, closeness, sex, or something -- "is the god that heroin prays to."

Heroin is a depressant, and it is one of the most notoriously addictive drugs. I resent the idea of being dependent on anything or anyone, and I also resent the implication that a person's presence could be harmful if you fail to keep them at a safe distance. But in some ways, I understand. I want so badly to be calm. I want my brain to slow down long enough for me to fall asleep. I want my hands to find stillness, to stop grabbing at ephemera. I wouldn't do heroin. I tell myself that. But everyone tells themselves that. I suspect the only real difference is that even now, I lack for nothing.

Fifth flash: *I know that you hate this place/not a trace of me would argue/honey, we should run away. Oh, someday.* What else would Achilles and Patroclus do together in the Underworld but plan their escape? Swift-footed Achilles, with a love so strong it broke on the shores of Troy into a rage so unbearable it unmade him. Brave Patroclus, who crawled inside his lover's armor the way he crawled inside the man himself. Of course these two boys made of passion would try to run away together. But to escape the underworld, oh, what a feat. Orpheus tried, failed, and that aching "Oh, someday" hits that chord of the lyre, does it not? Maybe if he'd just waited for a century or two with Eurydice in the Fields of Asphodel they could have climbed out with more trust and patience and neither would have ever looked back. Or felt the need to. Maybe they'd have seen Rome, or Constantinople before it was Istanbul. Maybe they'd have met me and my Eurydice in the depths of a suburban Target as we pick out something new for the cat. But wait – she would be Orpheus, if only because I know she has all the talent, and because I know I would follow her anywhere.

Seven months ago, we had a habit of scheduling our time together. It was something that required us to sync our calendars, to pick a date, to buy tickets or make reservations in advance. That wasn't a bad thing. It was fun and special, and when the day comes that that avenue of togetherness is again available, I'll be the first in line at the box office. Tickets for two, please. But for now we're limited; or is that we've expanded? The world has narrowed to what some days feels like a sliver barely large enough to breathe in, but I catch my breath when I'm alone with her. The world slows, and I'm calm.

Sixth flash, final: *Now at least, the worst is over...It feels good, girl it feels good/Oh, to be alone with you.* The worst was separation, and that is over. Wherever we are now, be alive together at Target, or dead together in the endless Fields of melancholy ghosts. Wherever we are now, we are together. Together. Two who are gathered, and two bodies can fit together in small ways that the mass of bodies required for a crowd cannot. Two people can hold hands. Two people can kiss, and in the seething mass of life, or death, we can feel like people, alone.

"I know that you hate this place. Not a trace of me would argue," you say in the second verse. Like I said, it hits differently. When one leaves their home only once or twice a week, who could blame them for hating it, for "reeling against its borders"? If we could run away, we would, but we can't. If we could look away, we would, but we can't. If we could rid ourselves of these flawed and damaged bodies and our fear along with them and still go on living, we would, but we can't. All we can do is be alone and breathe.