

Dear Hozier,

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Ah, the inherent romance of decomposition.

At least, that's what I imagine you thinking while writing this song. What could be a greater expression of love than bodies intertwined in death as they were in life? It makes me think of those two corpses they unearthed in Pompeii. Presumably, as the ash cascaded around them and the sky seemed to fall, the last act of these two people was to wrap their arms around each other. One's head rests on the other's chest, perhaps a last expression of comfort sought and given. Always believed to be two women -- the Two Maidens, they were called, because the word "maiden" implies youth, implies virginity, negates the need for scientists to categorize the nature of their embrace -- CAT scans have since revealed that the skeletons inside the plaster are both male. I imagine the consternation of various historians and scientists and have to laugh. It's much more difficult to infantilize a relationship between two men. Instead of the Two Maidens, are they now the Two Bros?

The stomach acid of vultures is exceptionally corrosive, which allows them to digest corpses infected with things such as botulinum toxin, hog cholera, rabies, bubonic plague, mad cow disease, foot and mouth disease, and anthrax, among others, and safely remove these types of deadly viruses and bacteria from the environment. Most pathogens do not survive in the stomach of a vulture but would be lethal to other scavengers. If some other scavenger, say a rat, ate some bubonic plague infected flesh, the bubonic plague stays with the rat, spreadable, and there goes Europe, again. If a vulture ate some bubonic plague infected flesh, its stomach acid kills the plague, and that bit of plague is removed from circulation, not killing anymore humans, rats, dogs, cows, or any other of God's lovely creatures. In this way, vultures -- of which there are 23 distinct species living throughout the globe -- are crucial to maintaining a healthy ecosystem. They are, as bird nerds affectionately call them, "nature's cleanup crew."

It makes me think, also, of the ending of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, in which the famous -- or rather infamous -- Heathcliff and Catherine wander the moors as ghosts. They were never together in life and so turn to each other in death. It's a nice thought -- ghosts are usually such solitary creatures, made ghosts by their separation from loved ones rather than reunions with them -- unless you've read the book. I haven't since the twelfth grade. I remember Catherine and Heathcliff as insufferable, petty, selfish, toxic, harming each other repeatedly. I was troubled by the conflation of pain with passion then, and I still am today. It's why I can't watch sitcoms like *Friends*. I know that romantic happiness involves work and that work sometimes involves conflicts and, inevitably, misunderstandings, negotiations, compromises. I am less willing to believe that the greatness of a love story must be precluded by totally avoidable suffering. Sure, everyone knows Romeo and Juliet's names, but that doesn't make them any less dead.

I do not have the bubonic plague nor mad cow disease (that I know of). I have an as of yet undiagnosed autoimmune disease, and I actually am not sure I love that phrase of “having an illness,” as common and easy as it is. I don’t feel like I own it, have it, am in control or possession or lordliness over my body or its illness in any way. If anything, the disease has me, and I’m begging it to allow us to coparent this musculoskeletal structure. That’s what I call it, honestly, the Disease, capital D, because I don’t know its name and I need to call it something in order to maintain the belief that one day I will wake up able to rip it out of the muscles and joints where it has settled like a phantom image of the thing they call Sally, only made out of thorns and barbed wire. I would keep it and tend to it; I just wouldn’t let it feed off me anymore. We’d find other things it likes. Sweet potatoes, lemons, spun sugar, traditional English trifle, maybe even anthrax and I could count it among my beloved vultures. The 24th species, newly discovered.

I do like this song. I’m as amused by its subject matter as I am genuinely touched by it. It’s just about the strangest song on the album, though “Like Real People Do” could give it a run for its money. You set aside all your usual imagery of religion and drugs to make space for the intensity of death and rot. It’s hard to pick a favorite line: “I have never known hunger like these insects that feast on me”? “We’d feed well the land and worry the sheep”? They’re all so good. They’re all enough to make my sister, listening as she drives the car with me in the passenger seat, DJing the music most likely to put my nephews to sleep, pause and say, with a note of horror, “Wait, what IS this?”

But I cannot, and will never be able to, rip the Disease out of my body. That’s the *chronic* part of the *chronic illness*. I’m lucky, I suppose, in that I have another chronic illness that was diagnosed two years ago and started to manifest seven years ago. Before that I was a sick teenager and a sick child who had ulcers in high school and mono in fourth grade and one terrifying and desperate test at five years old to see if I had leukemia because my nurse mother and doctor father saw too many bruises happening too easily on flesh that seemed too pale. I didn’t have leukemia. I’m just sort of naturally weak and sick and resemble the ghost of John Keats if you stare too long. Never had chicken pox, though, so that’s one W in the column. Point being, I’m better suited to cope with this new development than the average healthy 25-year-old. I’m familiar with tracking my triggers, I’ve accepted that there are just certain foods I can’t eat without painful consequences, I am decent (and getting ever better) at taking my medications on time as directed. I’m also very privileged when it comes to insurance, finances, family and friend support – all those things that matter so much when a health crisis comes around. So, I really should be handling all this better. I really, really, should. But. Maybe I’ve reached a threshold of illness and I’ve looped back on myself to become that 5-year-old kid who is too fragile, bruising too much. I can barely cope with this Disease. I can barely get out of bed in the mornings and not just because I’m groggy for four or five hours after waking up.

I understand that “In A Week” can be read as a metaphor. It isn’t necessarily about two corpses literally rotting side by side. Perhaps it is about a man who once saw something like

what the song portrays -- whether in Pompeii, in the moors, or in a field like the one described here -- and is proposing to his lover what he imagines to be the kindest death imaginable. Perhaps it is about two people who have just had sex. Death, of course, is sometimes a euphemism for orgasm. As they lay together post-coitus, tired but content, maybe they're just thinking what we all hyperbolically think sometimes, especially after a long day: It would be nice to never get up again.

Something about this Disease is different than the other one. The pain is different, certainly. More extreme. More constant. Always sharp and shocking. Each time it strikes I need a few minutes to recover, which is hard when it strikes three hundred times a day. Medicine names this "chronic inflammation" which means my body is constantly attacking what it thinks is something harmful -- but what it thinks is harmful is actually just itself. A metaphor in that somewhere, I suppose, though a reminder that my body is not a metaphor. It's my reality. But it's not just the pain. With this Disease I am so much more aware of the fact that I am *sick*. Not temporarily, not in a ha-ha-make-jokes-about-my-poor-immune-system kind of way, not in a curable way. I am *sick*. I will always *be sick*. There is something wrong with the body that I have to live with for the rest of my life. I am so much more aware of the fact that I am going to die one day, and I fear the Disease controls that timeline more than any god. I thought I had made peace with being chronically ill with the first diagnosis, but that diagnosis was too easy to get. My doctor was too good, too kind, told me everything I needed to know and didn't leave me wondering or worrying.

I make no judgments on the song's reality or unreality because I don't think they need to be made. The lyrics are a tool to express something, more poetry than prose. This song is about a physical closeness to another person that transcends this mortal coil. I find that difficult to relate to. I'm not, in the usual parlance, a touchy person, even with people for whom I feel a great deal of love and affection. I don't know if it's natural or if something a long time ago broke me of a desire for physical touch. I don't think about it much because it doesn't bother me much. It especially hasn't bothered me for the last nine months, when I've so rarely been in touching distance of those people whom I love. It's always just been a joke amongst my family and friends: I'm the most awkward hugger there is, all elbows and hesitation. Most people cope with it either by asking careful permission before they initiate contact or sweeping me into it like a sneak attack, before I can brace myself. I apologize every time. I want to say, I'm sorry, I can't help it, but that's not helpful because it's not rational. Mentally, emotionally, I do not at all mind being embraced by loved ones. It's my body reacting, not me, and that's a little troubling. My body seems magnetically opposed to other bodies.

I've been waiting on a diagnosis for this new Disease for five months, and there's no end in sight. But there is the Internet. It's not advised to read about medical issues on the Internet, but what else is there to do when knowledge is the only power I have? I read about autoimmune diseases generally, curious about causes and treatments, and I have to reckon with facts like: autoimmune diseases can shorten your lifespan; certain autoimmune diseases can cause organ

damage – heart disease, liver failure, kidney failure, lung issues; there are certain vaccines you might not be able to get because of your out of whack immune system which leaves you vulnerable to lots of things; you might have to go on immunosuppressant medication, which helps repress that whack immune system and prevents the body from eating its own kidneys, or whatever. It should be the liver failure getting to me (and don't worry, it is), but what I really can't stop thinking about is having to go on an immunosuppressant drug in the middle of a global pandemic. What if it makes me more susceptible to COVID? What if it reacts poorly with my other medications which I rely on to make the other illness bearable? And what if I have to stop those medications, being faced with the miserable choice of my organs or my quality of life? What if...it doesn't work? I did a small course of prednisone this summer as part of the diagnosis process. It was an absolutely fucking miserable 12 days and it did nothing but make me gag violently. I've also tried all the over-the-counter anti-inflammatory meds I can get my hands on. Those don't do anything either. Prednisone isn't the only immunosuppressant and there are other anti-inflammatory drugs to try, I know this. Logically I know so many things like I'm probably not going to die any time soon, my doctors probably won't start my treatment plan by jumping straight to immunosuppressants, I'm sure we can figure out another constellation of medications that will help me if I have to drop one, my body is beautiful and worthy even though it is sick. I know all these facts. I just don't live all these facts.

So I guess if I try to apply the imagery in this song to myself, it's with a sense of resignation. That type of closeness might literally not be possible unless I'm unconscious or dead. Now, to find someone who's willing to share an open-air grave with me.

I'm joking. Well, half-joking. When I think about dying, I'm disgusted by the idea of embalming, of being locked in a box, rendered chemically less able to do what should be natural and rot. I understand the Western preoccupation with so-called sanitized death and burial because I've read books on the topic, but that doesn't stop me from longing for Tibetan sky burial. Maybe decomposition is ugly and smelly, but Western culture has conflated the Christian notion of evil with the physical realities of ugliness and smelliness. Zombies aren't real, and what is dead will not return to claim us. What is dead will sustain us, because that's just how it works.

So, to finally get to the song, *In a Week* calms me down in a way it never has before. To imagine death in such a peaceful way that is deeply organic (as opposed to the stark, sterile hospital that is always making nightmares in the back of my mind). To slowly decompose in a field surrounded by damp grass and farm animals. To feed the foxes and the land. To have my judgement at the hands of a raven. For the vultures to eat away the Disease so it can't hurt a single thing ever again, not even my corpse. I would be beyond content if I could give my body to scavengers.

I don't know what I'm trying to say here. Except maybe I agree with you about the inherent romance of decomposition. I think it's lovely that the process of death is like a love

letter to life. I don't consider myself a tree-hugger in the militant sense -- I eat meat probably more than I eat vegetables, I forget to recycle all the time, and I'm bad at staying up to date with nature preservation and conservation efforts. I'm terrified of spiders and the places where spiders might live -- I know, it's everywhere, shut up, don't remind me -- and the thought of going on a hike fills me with dread so visceral that I might have to lie down. But despite all that, I love the Earth, if from a distance. I recognize its role in my existence, in the existence of everyone I know and love. Giving myself to it when I die is perhaps the only way available to me of expressing my gratitude, small as it is in the scope of things.

And I'd be dead. It wouldn't matter. It would just be going home.

Oh, but here's the kicker, dear lad. Do you know what was responsible for the death of literally tens of millions of white-rumped vultures in India? A decrease in their population of 95%? It was an anti-inflammatory drug. Granted, it was an anti-inflammatory drug used in livestock (cow gets the medicine, cow dies, vulture eats the cow, vulture dies), but the unfairness of this fact shocks and burns like too much spearmint toothpaste. It shouldn't matter, but it does. I should be able to spit some of it out so what I'm left with is bearable, but I can't. I cannot bear the idea that the drugs in my body would kill such a beautiful creature, even if this, too, is unlikely. I can only hold onto the fantasy of giving myself to the scavengers when I listen to *In a Week* and you reference *buzzards* more generally than just *vultures*. That is a big kindness you have given me.