

Dear Hozier,

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You probably know, because you're a social media-literate millennial, that people on the internet have taken to calling you "bog man." Obviously this song, the central metaphor of which involves a reanimated bog body, is to blame for that reputation, though it doesn't help that half your music sounds like it was written from the inside of a tree. I mean that in the best way possible. I also mean this in the best way possible: when I hear "bog man," I think of "swamp man," which makes me think of "swamp thing," which makes me think of the creature from the black lagoon which makes me think of that book series, the Bailey School Kids. I think I read all of them when I was about seven, after I got through the Magic Treehouse but before I got my hands on Redwall. The series is basically an aged-down version of Scooby Doo, though the endings are surprisingly ambiguous. Though each title states emphatically that "vampires don't wear polka dots" or "ghosts don't eat potato chips," it's unclear whether the titular Bailey School Kids' homeroom teacher actually is a vampire or just a scary Transylvanian woman.

Would you tell me, please, what it is you mean by 'real people?' I can gather that the speaker in this song is some sort of bog body revenant type creature dug up by some sort of witch – witch implied to me by the atmosphere of the song, the digging, the burying, the unearthing, the seeking, the mysticism. All our bog body revenant wants is to feel alive and human again, a feat accomplished by a kiss. They are not vengeful, unless the desire to be touched can be considered vengeance against their own undead, unearthed body. I don't think I believe it can be considered as such. They don't want to hurt themselves with a living touch; the song is tender, and it aches for connection. It aches to soothe the bog body's loneliness.

"Bog man" is a term of endearment, of course. It's a way of saying, "I'm in on the joke. Isn't it funny, isn't it oddly sweet, how this Hozier guy writes songs about the love between someone buried in a bog and the person who digs him up?" Your songs are more morbid than most, taking their cues as much from the mysticism of folklore as the jazz tradition, and that morbidity is sort of the elephant in the room. There's a cognitive dissonance, I guess, between our cultural discomfort with death and our love of romantic music. When they're woven together in the same space, well, you have to talk about it, don't you?

I have gathered that much, but, please, I am begging you to tell me what it is you mean, what you could possibly mean, by 'real people?' I cannot tell you how much of my heart hangs on the answer to this question. But this project is made up of letters, not questions, so I suppose I ought to try. I have talked and talked and talked about my body in these letters, which is only to be expected because I think and think and think about my body all day long just as you sing and sing and sing about bodies throughout this album. I say this in preemptive self-defense for anyone who might think, "There she goes again, talking about her body." I'm not sure anyone cares – cares in the negative, I mean, is annoyed – by me taking up this topic so frequently, but this is one of my new nightmares as I navigate the world on the teetering foal legs of a disabled

identity: that my body is too much and that those around me loathe the way it protrudes into every possible space. I call my disabled identity a teetering foal, because I've only recently begun to accept what it means for me. Besides, I've been fighting it for a long time and that type of labor against self which leads into surrender – I would call that a birth, of sorts. The fight was part imposter syndrome, part fear, part hate, part confusion, part repression, but mostly it was me believing I could beat my body. That, ultimately, not only could I win, but that I would win. The belief that I was not my body. That my body was impermanent, somehow illusory. I've never felt anchored to it until pain pulled me down, dropped this ship into the doldrums, and forced me to reconcile with a difficult truth: I have a body; it is in pain and it isn't going to change.

The thing about bog bodies is that they're such a specific form of death. Most Western cultures favor ground burial -- hence your much less jarring line about being laid "gently in the cold, dark earth" in *Work Song*. I don't know enough about history to say whether that's always been the case -- I suppose it's possible that in the distant past, the dead were regularly laid to rest in bogs. But that's not the case today, so a body pulled from a bog screams to us of something ancient, something primordial as witchcraft and as grim as murder. Indeed, one archaeological theory used to explain the prevalence of corpses in bogs is that these people were human sacrifices or else social outcasts, consigned to an isolated burial in the same way that they were pushed to their community's fringes in life.

So there's something intrinsically sad and lonely about bog bodies. The acidity of the water and the prevalence of peat in most bogs ensures that these corpses are not just recoverable but eerily well-preserved. Their surroundings naturally mummify them. In this way, they transcend our stereotypes about dead bodies: they're not rotten. They're not consumed by animals and insects, though you've romanticized that natural process as well. They are as close to living as dead can be.

Now, I look at my body and I still cannot see it as real. The visuals don't click unless I see myself with some outward representation of the pain. Wrist braces, taped fingers, a heating pad slung over my shoulder, the folding cane I bought at CVS for \$27.87. That is when I see myself and say ah yes, of course, *me*. There's a lot to be said about invisible illnesses and how much easier it is when they are made visible; you don't have to fight to get to the starting line of "I am sick and they will believe me." It's why, last week, I made first Emily and then my mom investigate my shoulder blades. They hurt so badly, and I was begging the invisible force of invisible illness for one of them to have slipped out of place and be protruding out of the smooth surface of my back. If something was out of place then I could say to myself, to Emily, to my mother, to a doctor that I am not making it up. But I could also look at this "deformity" and think ah yes, finally, that is much more accurate. I have tectonic plates for bones and I should be able to see their geography. These moments when the outsides match the insides – I am not naive enough to say it's better one hundred percent of the time. It's dangerous to be visually identified as disabled; I got a collapsible cane after all, which can be stashed in my bag both for

convenience and camouflage. But that's society, it's not me. These moments when the outsides match the insides, I feel small hot moments of relief like I am finally, finally cosmically aligned.

There's something about the space between. Not the song by the Dave Matthew Band, but I see how that's confusing, so let me rephrase: there's something about liminality. According to Oxford Languages, "liminal" is a word that means "occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold." As a grudging student of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, I appreciate the reference to thresholds. It makes me think of threshold guardians, the creatures in every story, humanoid or otherwise, that make leaving or returning home difficult. I always liked those characters. They're often subtle, even non-threatening, but to guard a threshold one must have knowledge of the threshold. To be trapped inside a threshold, though, to be buried in one and pulled out only when a benevolent, mysterious witch decides to get her hands dirty: that's a different story.

Once again, I have been running towards disability for a long time, and my heart knew it long before the rest of me did. My metaphorical heart, that is. Several years ago, I saw a comic on Twitter where one of the characters had to wear finger splints. I was so moved by them, these finger splints, struck to my very core at how glamorous and elegant they made the character look. Glamorous and elegant weren't how the character would describe herself necessarily – though the comic ended up being about adaptable, accessible fashion – so I thought myself insensitive and fetishizing with how much I ached for those finger splints. That was ridiculous, right? I was ridiculous. In the comments, the artist clarified that the character wore them due to her diagnosis. Three or four years later, I think I have the exact same diagnosis. I can't help but believe in fate when doctors say a possible diagnosis to me and, hey, I know that name from the internet comic that broke my heart and prepared me for the possibility of wearing splints. I need finger splints now. I know this, even if the doctors tell me I'm too young. My pinky fingers bend too much when I try to hold my phone and then they ache and ache and ache. Not sure I can do anything about the ache, but a splint to hold them in place would be nice, so that I don't have to one day watch my pinky fingers break.

There are so many questions about this witch, if she is a witch. Why is she in the bog? How did she know where to dig? What kind of person is she? And in those questions lies the central tension of the song: does it really matter why she pulled you from a grave so liminal it's prevented you from rotting away? She pulled you back across the threshold, so isn't that enough?

What I like about this witch is that she has a past as surely as the body in the bog. After all, we know hardly anything about our narrator either, except that he was buried and that she dug him out. As I mentioned already, bog bodies are suspected by archaeologists to be the products of ritual sacrifice or of execution. So perhaps he's the witch. Perhaps he's the victim of a horrendous crime or, more troubling, the perpetrator of one. But after so much time trapped on the threshold, is he any of those things anymore? The only thing that's certain is that he has a past and that she gave him a future.

I also need shoulder braces and probably knee braces, something for my hips, too. These braces that would hold me together, literally stop my bones and ligaments from sliding where they shouldn't, would they make me more real? If I feel real when I have something to show for the pain, why don't I feel real the rest of my life? I am too elastic and gelatinous, but at the same time too sharp and taunted. Like dying stars lightyears from one another in an infinite universe, there are enough pieces of me to make a whole, and yet, then again, there aren't. This is the incoherence of my every day, and it makes me shrink in on myself and try and pull in those protrusions I mentioned. I do not want to explode on my loved ones like a dying star, even though I know I am well within my rights to test the bounds of their love by asking for their care when I can't move, drive, or cook. It's a fear of being too much, and so I wonder if, in part, the outwards representations of the pain make me feel more real, because it makes me more acceptable, you know? The cane really does help my hips and heat really does soothe my muscles. Therefore, I'm fixing it, sort of. I can't make the pain go away permanently, but by reducing it I become easier to digest. I am not so feral, not so fatigued. I become easier to like. Easier for others to like.

There's nothing that feels more monstrous than having a past and nothing that makes you more human. I'm twenty-seven and still there are things back there, in time, that I wish I could scrub out. I haven't done anything worthy of being executed and thrown in a bog, nor has anything so heinous been done to me, but I still burn with remembered humiliations and that cruel thing I did when I was a teenager and stupid or that thing my mother said to me when she was tired and impatient. I fight my way through those cobwebs every morning until I can find the parts of myself that I like or, at least, can stand, and then I wear them like armor. It's not that I respect myself, either. It's that I can't stand the thought of being pitied. And do you know how many times I've revised and rewritten this paragraph, searching for a way to sound less pitiable? Do you know there's something in me so jagged and wrong-fitting that I can't remember a time in my life when I looked for comfort after crying? In the aftermath of devastation, my reaction, my only reaction, is hiding.

As for loving myself, that's still a project I'm working on, though really the pain does make it easier, in a way. I've learned I'm not going to beat my body and by extension, then, my body is not a battle and not a place for fighting. So, I don't like this body any more when it's not in pain than when it is. I will always use whatever aids or pain management tools are available to me, because I owe that to myself and not to anyone else, but I wonder what it would be like not to shrink? To let this disabled body be gelatinous and sharp, incoherent and aligned. Does that make me real? Does that make me kissable in the way real people are? I fear it does the opposite. I feel undesirable in all this pain and bloodwork and specialist visits and limited food choices. It's such an odd emotion, really. We can't control anyone else's desire, so how can we feel undesirable? In certain situations, sure, I can see feeling undesired, but as a whole, an odd way to feel. I digress, I suppose. More incoherence. But actually – no. Disabled bodies haven't been historically desired, and they haven't been seen as real. Something to gawk at, something to pity,

not *real people* by any means. So not entirely unfounded. This time it's not me, it is, in fact, society. That remains the reality today. So, will you tell me, what it is you mean by real people?

When I was in middle school and games of truth or dare were commonplace at girls' birthday parties -- the few I was invited to -- I remember being horrified by the question that was bandied about so casually: what's your most embarrassing moment? The obvious way to answer that question yet maintain one's dignity is to lie, to think of a true story that's really only moderately embarrassing or to tell something that happened to someone else. For some reason, that didn't occur to me -- I've never been great in interrogations. If someone asks me a point-blank question, I tend to answer it. Did you do your math homework? No. Did you like the movie? No. Are you gay? That's not really your business. But yes.

The really wretched thing about the most embarrassing moment question is that actually, really, I can't think of mine. Not because so many embarrassing things have happened to me that they've become commonplace but because it would require some really intense soul-searching for me to pinpoint the moment I've been most humiliated, and honestly, my sense of self-preservation is strong enough that my nightmares always end with me stabbing whoever's trying to hurt me, so why would I go back there? It happened once, whatever it was; I'm not going to relive it. Bad enough I have to live with the knowledge that it's in there, buried deep, a bog body I just don't have the courage to dig up yet.

Would anyone come looking for me in the bog? Would they be happy if they found me, even by accident? Would I get to exist, unquestioned, like the bog body and its witch, or will I always have to explain myself away? To my five-year-old niece when I can't run races with her. To my work when I have to take time off for specialist appointments at inconvenient times. To my friends when I can't go hiking with them or traveling with them or even out to eat with them unless I can set certain boundaries. To anyone who might want to kiss me when the pain is too hot in my body for desire to take root. Will I always be explaining? Will I always be unusual? Will I always be unreal to everyone, even me?

Honesty is romantic, but I think you and I can agree that just as romantic, sometimes, are the questions we don't ask each other. I carry the parts of myself that I wish I didn't know, and I wouldn't wish them on anyone else. They make me feel unreal. They make me feel less like a person than I do a monster, and I guess that's the point of the song. It's enough to see your monstrosity reflected in someone else. To meet in the middle, to kiss them anyway is to accept that regardless of where you've been buried, you're worthy of love. Thanks for that, bog man.