

Dear Hozier,

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This was the first song of yours that I liked. I say *liked*, not *heard*. I'm sure "Take Me to Church" was making the rounds already. I don't remember how I found "In the Woods Somewhere," if it popped up as a recommended lyrics video on YouTube or if I heard it on a television show or something. Maybe someone told me about it, though it would take a brave person to recommend this particular bonus track. It's so weird. Most of your other, shall we say, morbid songs are musically deceptive. It takes intent listening, and maybe a Google search, to realize that you're singing about decomposing in a field next to a lover or digging up a revenant or whatever. Also, those songs follow more conventional formats. They have verses and a chorus. The music builds to a peak and ebbs. In the Woods Somewhere, by contrast, is almost like a chant. The music is simple and repetitive. The lyrics are in iambic pentameter, and they relate a narrative more than your other songs. There's a story, however little it makes sense. Beginning, middle, end.

This song makes me think of my nephew. The one who died. His name was Caleb, though I hate that sentence. His name hasn't gone anywhere. Death can take so many things, but it can't take away what he is known as. I can say, "I'm thinking about Caleb," and the meaning holds. I don't have to say, "I'm thinking about my nephew who was called Caleb when he was alive." Yet I can't say, "His name is Caleb," even though that is still his name, because that sentence implies that he is alive. Which he isn't. 'Alive in our memory' and 'forever with me in my heart' are good sentiments and they are true in so many ways, but none of it means I can say his name is Caleb.

I read on the internet that this song came from a dream you had. I respect that there is probably some distance between you, the songwriter, and the song's narrator, but it's thin as a crescent moon. It's blurred further by the fact that the narrator himself seems to be dreaming, despite the insistence of the line "when I awoke" in the second stanza. He's feverish, after all, and the events of the song are perhaps too outlandish to be real. He follows the sound of a woman's scream into the woods but doesn't find a woman; it's an injured fox instead. He mercy-kills the fox or else is about to when a creature, never described except by its watching eyes and the panic it prompts, interrupts him, lunges at him, chases him. And then the song ends.

His name was Caleb, and I don't actually want to write this letter about him because – well, I'm not really sure why, actually. Because the more I write about him the more I feel like I'm using the whole situation for my own benefit. Because said 'whole situation' is really sad and miserable and I don't want to force the weight of it on other people when they didn't ask to hear about it, and also because I'm tired of putting trigger warnings on my life. Because this grief feels so private I can't even talk to my therapist about it except in phrases that have no beginning and no end because I don't know how I got in or how to get out. Because grieving is the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and every day I feel like I'm doing it wrong.

There are a lot of questions there to make me wonder if it's all a dream. I'm familiar, you see, with the ups and downs of dream logic. Most of my dreams are vivid. I remember them the next day. Often they're lucid, in that I know when I'm dreaming. Sometimes they're frightening. Sometimes they're just intense. Sometimes I wake up with scratches on my face, evidence of my own nails, which I try so hard to keep short. Does a fox sound like a woman? I've never heard one. I try not to think about animals sounding like people; it makes me think of the monstrous bear in the Natalie Portman movie *Annihilation*, that records its victims' last words or terrified screams and then mimics them, like an awful broken recording. I try, too, not to think of small animals screaming in pain. I get teary-eyed when I see roadkill. But I don't think I'd be able to mercy-kill a wounded creature, not in reality. I know I could in my dreams. In my dreams, I've killed frequently, though I suppose not as frequently as I've died. I don't know what that says about me or if it says anything at all. Dreams are dreams, and I disagree with Carl Jung. I think they only have as much power as we give them.

Because I am a coward. Because it is hard to think about and so much harder to feel and I don't want to do it. I'm avoiding it, the grief. I can feel myself flinch away from it whenever it surfaces, as if somehow, I can move far enough away from the feelings inside me that they won't be mine anymore. If you'll allow me the luxury of making your song a metaphor for my own situation, rather than anything broader and more applicable as I imagine you hoped: in the woods of my overgrown and abandoned heart, the fox I find there is both Caleb and myself. Whatever injured it is both the looming reality that horrible things happen in a world I want to believe is ultimately good, and it is also myself. The woman who screams is my brother and sister-in-law, Caleb's parents, who I want to run to and rescue, and she is also myself. The trees, observing and passive but also in the way, are the world I must keep living in, and yet they are also myself. The darkness, the moon, the fever – they are all part of the ecosystem of Caleb's death. They are all me, and I, like your narrator, am fleeing.

It's the same way with fear. It's only as powerful as you make it, or so I tell myself repeatedly when it feels like it's killing me. I have an anxiety disorder, never pinpoint diagnosed beyond that generalization because I've never sought a psychiatrist to do the leg work. If my medication were harder to get, I'd probably have to, but in my experience physicians give out anti-depressants like candy on Halloween. Or maybe it's just that every doctor who's ever looked at me has believed that I'm prone to panic. If that's the case, I have to admire them for it, because I've got a pretty good poker face. In the fight, flight, or freeze response, I tend to fall into the "freeze" category. I go internal. I withdraw, leaving behind the mask of my neutral expression to focus on the alarm bells ringing throughout my body, lungs that feel like they're not working, heat in my chest like my heart is pumping overtime, numb fingers, dry mouth, rising nausea. Eventually, if it gets very bad, I have to sit down or else surrender consciousness.

I don't want to say that my grief is all about myself and not about Caleb at all, but when the person you are grieving is gone, who else can your grief be about but yourself? I never thought funerals were important until Caleb's. I needed to be with other people who loved Caleb, or

loved the people who loved him, and I needed to cry with these people. Something about a funeral takes your feelings into the eddy of a crowd so they leave you and then come back in easy, maintainable, survivable intervals. Grief was easy, for just one minute, at the funeral where everyone was doing the same thing as me. I could put it down for second, because someone else was already holding it for me. It's a situation I'll never be able to recreate. Caleb will never have another funeral. There's no one else ready and willing to hold my grief, to hold me, because everyone else who is involved in the extended project of *grieving* Caleb, not just feeling sad about it every now and then, is just trying to survive it themselves. Everyone who can just feel sad about it cannot be pulled into the extended project of this grief by the nature of not already being in it. God, does that sentence even make sense? Does any of this even make sense?

God. I can't bring Him into this. I'm not ready for that yet.

People say panic attacks feel like dying. I wouldn't know. I've never died. To me it feels not like my body failing but like my body clinging to life long after I've given up the notion that living is the best of my options. It feels like persistence, wretched persistence. It feels like running a marathon against my will. It feels like everyone is looking at me, even though they're not, even though I'm so careful. I'm always careful about showing what I feel. It was a defense mechanism when I was small but in my adult life it's become a deficiency, that I don't know how to open my face and my body to show vulnerability, to show love. People have to take my word for it. I don't know what my word is worth, because I'm also so quick to say I'm fine when I'm not.

No God, no support system, the only thing I have in here is myself and the unimaginable horror that my four-month-old nephew died. My mom hates when people use the word 'unimaginable,' because, she says, she can imagine it all too well. I can't. I don't know where she's getting it from. Maybe I'm just too prone to losing my memories on purpose, but I can't even imagine it and I lived it. Am living it. There I go again with past and present tense becoming unreal. I'm running into the trees with empty hands. No weapons, no sense of time, no grasp on language. Just me, just me, just me. I'm worried I don't like myself enough to grieve with me.

I had my first real panic attack, capital P, capital A, in Disneyland. Isn't that so fucking funny? Disneyland. On a family vacation. I was twenty-one. In retrospect I know that I'd had panic attacks before that, but they were small. Noticeable and frightening, but I could dismiss them as something else. This was the first one I couldn't ignore because the vague fear that I might faint in public -- the *most* public -- suddenly became a distinct reality. I remember leaving one ride feeling sick. I remember lagging behind as we walked to the next ride. My siblings were talking and laughing. My parents were holding hands. As the rest of them got in line, my dad fell back with me and asked me what was wrong. He's always been the best at seeing through my poker face, because he's got one too. I had to tell him. I've never been able to lie to my dad when he asks me a question directly. Then he and my mom took me to an urgent care in Anaheim,

leaving my siblings in the park, splitting up our family, all for the doctors to run tests, shake their heads, and prescribe Xanax.

I never want to die, because I don't want to do this to the people who love me. That's a silly, childish statement, I know. Of course I'm going to die, and I hope I live long enough that my death isn't a tragedy, but I don't want to be the reason anyone grieves. I want to live forever just so that my friends are never sad, and my family never cries. It's not Caleb's fault that he died, obviously. I don't blame him for anything. I'm just stating my silly dream that I am the only person in the world who ever has to deal with this. If I could eat all the grief in the world, I think I would. Why not? What is an ocean more of water when you're already drowning? Maybe then I'd feel some purpose to all of this. My grief exists to prepare me, transform me. Give me bigger teeth and more room in my heart so I could eat through all the concrete and brimstone weighing people down when grief resides within them. Or they could invite me to all their funerals and I'd hungry-hungry-hippo my way through that collective whirlpool of tears. People wouldn't just feel lighter for a moment, they'd feel lighter forever. They'd leave the funeral and life would go on as before.

It's hard for me to think about what my family must have thought when I lost it like that. My considerations are fleeting, followed by quick retreat, like touching a hot stove. I've never asked them. We haven't talked much about it. I was so good at not talking about it, and I kept my poker face up so well that two years later, when the next family trip to Disneyland rolled around, no one noticed how horrified and betrayed I felt. It was stupid, or it felt stupid, to be afraid of a place, but I was, and no one thought to ask me if I was. I think that says less about my family than it does about me. It's not like I gave them any openings.

But I can't become a grief eating, healing sort of creature. Grief doesn't go away. Like a shaking, terrified fox deep in the woods somewhere, it exists to break our hearts. There could be any number of foxes dying in any number of woods on this planet at any given moment. The way I feel about that, the way I hope you also feel about that, is how this grief feels.

The problem is that I think if I start talking about my fears, the reasons that I panic, I'll never stop. Your narrator experiences something primal and visceral, but it's fleeting. Mine is just -- there. Always. I'm afraid of spiders. I'm afraid of thunder. I'm afraid of windstorms. Tsunamis. Climate change. A meteor striking the Earth. A sun flare that burns us all to ash. Gas leaks. My own fire alarm. Ebola. Covid. Untreatable disease. Zombies. Blood clots. Parasites. Death. Decapitation. That I have some incurable genetic disease that will kill me suddenly, without warning. Dying in a hospital. Dying in a car accident. Dying in a plane crash. Hydroplaning. All the lights on my car's dashboard blinking right before my engine explodes. My cats dying. My nephews dying. Sally dying. Dying. That my headache is actually an aneurysm that's killing me. That there's something wrong with my brain. That there's something wrong with my heart. That there's something wrong in my intestines. My lungs. My kidneys. My bladder. That all the soda I drink is actually killing me. That my teeth are falling out. That there's a man living in our walls.

That there's something under my bed. Home invasions. That there's no God. That there is a God. That when I die, I'll just -- stop.

I am more fear than human. One of my first memories is a nightmare. Isn't that awful? Yet I've had so little to be afraid of in my life. I think the only explanation is that fearfulness is my nature, and no amount of medication or therapy can fix that, right, so I'm just going to have to live with this. That's another thing I'm afraid of, that I forgot in my list. That I'll always feel like this.

I said I didn't want to write this letter about Caleb. I wanted to write about trees. Trees, which do all sorts of things better than humans. Living longer and creating less grief, talking to each other through shared root systems, sharing root systems in the first place. If I were a tree, I wouldn't have to mangle my thoughts and feelings as I try to put them into the words of this letter. You could plug right into them and get them direct (this assumes you are also a tree). If you wanted to that is, if any single thing on this planet hasn't heard enough out of me and wanted to listen. If I were a tree, I wouldn't need a funeral to find community. Everyone would already be there, barely a root's kiss away. Nothing but soil and the tiniest of fibers separating us.

When my panic attacks are really bad, I feel something that a person being physically tortured would understand: that I just want it to end, no matter what that means. I'm terrified of dying. I mentioned it like twenty times, remember? But I'm so much more terrified of my terror at its worst. It's not suicidal, because there's nothing like a plan in place; it's just wishful thinking. It's despair. Hozier, fear teaches me no lessons about the preciousness of my own life. Fear tells me over and over that I'm pathetic. Fear tells me that I'm the fox and that when something bad comes for me in the woods somewhere, I'll have no warning and no chance to run. I'll be the thing you kill for mercy. Fear is not a thing I carry that I can drop when I need to move more quickly. Fear is the weight of my own bones.

On the other hand, if I were a tree, I would have no legs with which to walk away. I could only stay in place and watch as mysterious creatures killed small foxes and as feverish men ran around with rocks in their hands. If I were a tree, I would need to be better at being still and serene, the type of thing that could process and abide whatever it observes in its many long years of life. I am too mercurial and mortal a thing to do very good as a tree. In my very un-tree-like state, I am also praying, like your narrator, that my mind be good to me. I hope I can learn to be still, to feel it, to feel my way through it. There's really no other choice than to bear it. My dearest love, his name was Caleb.

I like being alive. I like the sound of my nephew calling my name, eager to show me something. I like the warmth of a friend near me on the couch, their laughter close in my ear. I like the taste of chocolate. I like garlic. I like a well-cooked steak. I like the luxury of a warm bed on a cold morning and no alarm clock ringing. I like the excitement of a really good idea, the urgency of writing it down on the nearest slip of paper. I like how a good poem makes me feel, elated and bewildered and awestruck. What I'm saying badly is that I'm not suicidal or depressed. I'm afraid, which is different. I'm saying that if "In the Woods Somewhere" is a fable, a metaphor

applicable to people's lives, I'm still in the woods. On my worst days, I'm the fox, and I know I'll never leave them. On my better days, I'm the narrator, or I'm you, and it's just that I haven't run far enough yet to find my way to the end, or is it the beginning, or is it both? The fearsome creature is still breathing down my neck. Panic hasn't yet clarified into the moral of a story. The best I can do is repeat to myself, over and over, I'm not done yet.

I'm not done yet. I'm not done yet.