

Dear Hozier,

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My siblings and I have joked about getting matching tattoos. We're a fairly close family, and a tattoo would be a visual representation of that closeness, more permanent than the ring my brother gave me, the only one I regularly wear, or the clothes me and my sisters habitually pass up and down and around to each other. But really, the subject of matching tattoos is hypothetical at best, designed to make each other laugh; I doubt it will actually come to fruition. The religion that all four of us grew up with and that some of us still follow, to varying degrees, is anti-tattoos. I'm the only one who actually has one and plans to get more.

Run. Run until you feel your lungs bleeding. There's so much else this song is about – it's lyrically dense and rich with images that keep unfolding, getting bigger and bigger until there's all of Ireland before us. There's so much else this song is about, but I get stuck on the imperative of the title and the chorus. Run – the word snags me like a briar and tangles, tangles, tangles. Run. I can't.

But in the alternate universe where we're all comfortable with tattoos, we joke that we should get our parents' "celebrity couple" name. You know how when Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were together, the tabloids called them Brangelina? Our parents are named Chris and Becky, so when we refer to them as a single entity, it's "Crecky." "Are you going to Crecky's house for dinner on Sunday?" "What did Crecky say about that?" "When do Crecky get back into town?" It's a good inside joke. If all of us were as flippant as I am about body modification, "Crecky" would be a solid tattoo choice. It's a conversation starter. You could pick out a really heinous script for it, something like the cursive that you always see in "Live, Laugh, Love" signs in middle-aged Christian white women's kitchens. You could place it subtly on the ankle or the lower back. It cracks me up to think of any of my siblings with this tattoo.

I feel like I can trace my life with the times people have asked me to run. In youth soccer, which I played from ages 6 to 10. As the game got more complex, I eventually settled into playing defense because it meant running just a little bit less and even then, it required too much movement. I'd hear my coaches on the sidelines yelling at me to chase the ball. Move. Run, Sally. Run, run. But I couldn't – my heart would be thundering in my chest, my lungs bleeding and my body wouldn't respond to my coaches' instruction or my own desperate plea to just *move* so that I wouldn't be the thing everyone was watching, wondering why she was so lazy. My mom let me quit soccer that year because I hated it so much. I hated the stress of needing to perform in order to play, of needing to be good and muster up a competitive spirit when all I wanted from the start of the game through the end was just to rest.

When we're a little more serious, we acknowledge that a better tattoo -- one that we wouldn't have to explain with varying levels of embarrassment every time we went swimming -- would be an outline of our family's house. It's where my parents still live. It's where we gather for

Christmas or Sunday pot roasts or late-July barbecues. It's a 22-year-old house; I was six when it was built. It's got this classic East Coast symmetrical silhouette that's totally out of place in our suburban Utah neighborhood, but my mom's a Philadelphia girl and wanted the red brick, black shutters, colonial look. It's a pretty house, even if it is a misfit. It's two stories, solid and rectangular; no strange angles to contend with. It used to be one of the biggest houses in the neighborhood, but lately developers have been building massive multi-million dollar homes just around the corner, the types of houses that have racquetball courts in the basement and double-story picture windows. My parents' house seems like an antique in comparison.

In seventh grade, when they strapped heart monitors to our pubescent rib cages to measure our heart rates as we ran the mile in gym class. They were teaching us about heart rate zones – what was healthy for our age and what heart rate we should aim for when we exercised. My heart rate, as I trudged around the sidewalk that encircled the soccer fields would jump up beyond what they told me was healthy. These were the same soccer fields where I played just a few years ago; my middle school was right behind them and used the fields for gym class. I'd think about how I "failed" out of soccer as a "failed" to run the mile in the time that was expected of a thirteen-year-old. I tried, I tried so hard to push myself just that bit further, but I had to stop constantly. My heart thundering in my chest, my lungs bleeding, gasping for air like a dead fish. My gym teacher would then tell me about the importance of cardio exercise to being healthy and maintaining a healthy weight.

I'm writing about my childhood house because I think "Run," the second bonus track on your first album, is quintessentially about home. It's shrouded in the trappings of myth and metaphor, and there's nothing so clear as the word "home" in its lyrics, but isn't it about Ireland? The "she," of the "hungry eye," the "ancient soul," the "punishing cold," the "ancient misery," that's Ireland. And the only "lover worthy of her," the only entity to claim as many souls as she, that's the ocean. The sea that surrounds her. I mean, good God, man, you quote James Joyce: it doesn't get much more Irish than that.

Your work is often thematically if not musically Irish; I don't know enough about Irish music, I'm afraid, to know how it compares. This album is saturated with your love of the land, of this land specifically; it just happens to be most direct in this song. I admire your commitment to, your passion for, your homeland. It's remarkable, more remarkable because of how alien it is to me; it's something I've never felt, only really read about in books. Maybe that's surprising, given how American schoolchildren, including me, are taught patriotism alongside arithmetic, and I suppose there might have been a time where I tried to learn it as well as everything else, tried to get a good grade in being American, as though that's something possible or desirable. But it's been a long time since I've been foolish enough to be proud of this country in a political sense, and America is too broad a place for me to feel entirely rooted here.

My gym teachers convinced me I was out of shape, overweight, dangerously unhealthy if I couldn't run a mile in twelve minutes – or whatever the time was. I don't quite remember. So I'd start an exercise regimen...and eventually quit it because I hated the way my body felt when I

exercised. Hot and sweaty, weak and faint, muscles trembling, chest burning. I never felt like I was getting stronger or that my heart rate was getting better. Not even the summer when I would run/walk a mile every morning with my best friend who lived across the street. Not even the summer when I could run three miles a couple times a week. My body was performing, objectively, and yet my heart was always going, going, never slowing.

I'm not from Ireland, obviously. I've never even visited, though I want to. I'm sure you have complicated feelings about it the way I have complicated feelings about America. I'm sure it has failed you in a lot of ways, because no one's homeland is perfect, not when they're filled with people, and people struggle so hard to be kind neighbors. Ireland has a long, bloody history, rich in story and culture and legend, and I guess the weight of that is sometimes more important than how you feel about any single part of it. To me, "Run" really captures the feeling of being weighed down by where you come from. It's difficult to walk, let alone run, when you're carrying that much. The song is a command -- "run to me" -- but the music itself can't seem to find a rhythm to set your falling feet to. How could anyone run to a beat that discordant? But then, how does anyone find a way out from under their past?

I carried this idea of myself as out of shape, overweight, dangerously unhealthy through high school when, in tenth grade, my brother was my gym teacher. I remember vividly how we had to run a few laps around the track and my heart sank, before it went thundering off, because I knew I wouldn't measure up to all the other athletic kids in the class and I would be an embarrassment to my brother. He was the picture of an athlete, a marathon runner, and here I was struggling and wheezing through a few laps. He shouted encouragement to me, which I'm sure he meant kindly, but I burned with the shame of it. I was already so clumsy and awkward, struggling through games of kickball and badminton. Why couldn't I just *run* the way everyone else did?

The architecture of my childhood house rings of my mother's nostalgia for the place she grew up. I've always liked that. I've liked feeling connected to a place that exists, now, only in her family's collective memory. Their house in Pennsylvania has long since passed to new homeowners, and surely it's been renovated beyond recognition. I don't know. I've only been there once, and it was years, a decade or more, ago. When I visualize it, carefully not looking at the sketch of it that still hangs on my nana's wall, it's our house that comes to mind, the red brick, the black shutters, the wide front porch with the swing that my late grandfather built. I picture it in summer, with more lawn than any of us know what to do with, enough to keep my mom busy on her bright orange riding lawn mower. The back garden half-dead in the heat or choked with fast-growing weeds despite our resentful efforts to keep it clear. I picture it in winter, blanketed in snow, the red-ribboned wreaths hanging on each of the windows, electric candlelight glimmering against the glass. I used to fall asleep to the sound of those velvety ribbons rustling in the wind, hitting the windows like malevolent tree branches.

I carried this idea of myself as out of shape, overweight, dangerously unhealthy through college when, in my third year, I pushed myself to do one of those Couch to 5K running programs and injured a tendon in my foot. The shame of this boiled in me as I cried in the parking lot of an

urgent care because the doctor didn't see anything wrong with me. They thought I was seeking pain pills. I thought, once again, how I couldn't even do something as simple as run without hurting myself.

My dad's from Seattle. Our house looks nothing like his childhood home; I'd know because I've visited it so frequently. I loved that house when I was a kid, always damp, always smelling of bread dough rising, its odd nooks and crannies, its floorboards creaking a staccato bullfrog song to the rhythm of my grandma baking at 5 a.m. I'm familiar with that house the way I'm not at all with my mom's childhood house, but then, I know my mom loved her old house, and I wonder if my dad feels anything about his. My grandpa is selling it soon. They are packing it up, doing god knows what with the old furniture, with my grandma's knick-knacks and infinite supply of cookie sheets. I don't know how my dad feels about that, if he's being stoic for show or if it hasn't occurred to him that mourning a loss of that magnitude is something he's allowed to do at any age, even in his fifties.

I carried this idea of myself as out of shape, overweight, dangerously unhealthy through most of my life, until I learned there was a syndrome that made people's heart rates spike when even just standing up. The syndrome often caused low exercise tolerance – or exercise *intolerance*. The more I read about it the more I saw myself in these symptoms: light headedness when you stand up, near fainting, spikes in heart rate. I asked my doctor about it. She said I was just deconditioned, should exercise more and lose some weight. I convinced myself she was right until a few months later when all these symptoms got even worse. I did more research and learned about the heartrate monitoring tests they did to make a clinical diagnosis. I performed the test on myself with my Apple Watch and more than met the criteria to be diagnosed. It's not the most accurate, I know, but I repeat the test often and continue to meet the diagnostic criteria. I also stand by these types of self-diagnoses because medicine fails people so often.

When I hear the word "home," I still think of my parents' house. How could I not? I lived there continuously for twelve years, then on and off again for another five. It's the backdrop to the vast majority of my childhood memories, the site of so much shared history between me and five of the most important people in my life. It's a monument to our privilege, both financial -- didn't it used to be the biggest house in the neighborhood? -- and emotional, the six of us staying together as though through our own effort, though really I think it's more dumb luck than anything, and maybe our resistance to talking about things seriously. I've laughed a lot in that house. I've cried too. I've eaten thousands of meals there. I still know where my mom hides the chocolate chips. I can find the dent in the wall from my brother's head -- he's fine, he's had worse -- and the tape marks on the walls of my old bedroom where I hung posters and photographs. I know every crack in the linoleum floor of the laundry room. I could probably show you every place in the house I've had to kill a spider. I know which spot on the couch is best and that the ceiling fan doesn't work anymore and that if you go too fast down the stairs while wearing socks, you're almost guaranteed to slip on the old carpet.

After these additional months of research and heartrate tests, I finally accepted that this is probably what's happening (I retain the "probably" since I am on a waiting list to get tested by a cardiologist who has better equipment than an Apple Watch, just to be safe). I was reluctant to let go of the narrative I've been fed for so long, because surely if so many different people had told me I just needed to get in shape, they couldn't all be wrong? But they were and then, again, they weren't. It wasn't a moral failing, a failing of willpower, but it was because of an unhealthy body. It wasn't something I could treat with more exercise; it was something I needed treatment for to be able to exercise at all.

There's a watercolor painting of my childhood house hanging on the wall above my dresser. I know already that I will pack it carefully the next time we move and hang it just as carefully on a wall in that new place. I know that it will last through every move, that it's the type of thing I'll have all my life, like that pencil sketch of the old house in Pennsylvania, still on my nana's wall. I know that I carry my old home regardless of whether I ever have it inked on my skin, and I know that when my parents one day sell it, I will mourn for it and carry it still.

These days I come to my parents' house more reluctantly than not. It seems like every time I walk through the door I regress to my teenage self, or maybe it's that I turn into the person I've always been in my family's eyes, and I don't know how they feel about her, but I don't particularly like that person. I'm still trying to figure that out. I'm trying not to be someone who shifts their entire personality depending on where they are. I'm trying to carry the weight of my home gracefully, not dragged out behind me like Old Marley's self-wrought chain. I'm trying to convince myself that home isn't a place I have to run toward or away from. Home doesn't -- or shouldn't -- make demands, and I guess in exchange I shouldn't make demands of it. Stop telling it to change to fit the story I've been telling myself about it and just let it be what it is. Just let the red brick bake in the afternoon sun. Just let the porch swing creak. Just let the front door stand open, waiting.

Run. Run until you feel your lungs bleeding. I have, so many times in my life. I can feel all those instances pile up as I sit here, unmoving as I write. The body has memory, after all. But at least I can talk to the version of me who lived through all these runs and tell her, with all the kindness I can muster, that soon we'll figure it out. We'll have names for it – orthostatic intolerance, dysautonomia – and these names will help us learn to be kinder to our body. We won't need to measure it against its ability to run anymore. We'll lose the possibility of, and the need for, that metric and we won't be sad to see it go. We'll learn how to create exercise regimens that do actually feel good for our body. It's not always easy. Sometimes there's grief because – between this and the connective tissue disorder and the pain – we'll never be anyone's athlete, and sometimes we would love to run, possibly through a field of flowers or something. That always looks so romantic when they do it in the movies. But the grief abates because we're learning the slow and steady practice of redefining. Redefining what it means to be healthy, to be productive, to be active. For me these all look different than what they look like for my brother, the marathon runner. It's hard but we're learning. There is grief in the redefining, the loss of what I thought my

body should be and should be able to do, but there's also peace. The peace of never needing to run again. I haven't attempted to go running in over a year. Though this has been the sickest year of my life, this is one way in which my body has felt good over the last year.