

Dear Hozier,

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I am an extremely superstitious person. At least, we'll call it "superstition" for the sake of this letter. Sometimes I worry it borders on, or is in fact, obsession and compulsion, but I have no idea how to bring up the possibility of OCD to my doctors or therapist when it would mean embarrassing myself, opening up all the irrational things I do to professional scrutiny. They already put me under a microscope, look and look and draw as much blood as they want to (more than they are entitled to). So I keep this within me for now. For now, we'll call it superstition.

I don't know much about arson. I know what I've seen on TV, of course, and read about in books, that the compulsion to commit arson is considered serious by psychologists, that it's one of a triad of behaviors that might indicate future violence. I know that there's a difference between the innocuous, often survival-based act of lighting a fire and the criminality of arson. It would be easy to say, I think, that one is about creation and the other destruction, but I know enough, at least, to know better than that. We sometimes, God-like, set forests ablaze to maintain the balance of an ecosystem; is that an act of creation or destruction? I don't think even God could tell us. Maybe it's both. Maybe that's the appeal.

The earliest one of my superstitions that I remember is making patterns in the ceiling of my grandparents' house. The ceiling was made up of square tiles, so that I (age 5 or so) could make out a pattern that looks vaguely like an X – two squares on top, separated by one in the middle that wasn't part of the pattern, a connecting square in the middle (below the one that wasn't part of the pattern), and then two on the bottom, separated by one that wasn't part of the pattern. My grandparents' house was a terrible place to be. Stressful, abusive, and I think I thought if I could just find the pattern enough times, lose myself in the invisible drawing of it, then I too would be invisible. Or maybe that's me trying to impose meaning on it, 21 years later, so that it feels more like a superstition than a compulsion. Because I drew that invisible pattern on the ceiling so many times that it's probably the thing I remember most about that house.

We all set fires. Oh, sure, I couldn't do it the old-fashioned way, rubbing sticks together or even with flint and tinder, despite my long, grudging stint in the girl scouts, but I can pull the trigger on a lighter. I can light a match. A few months ago I lit the candles on my mom's birthday cake. It was a careful balancing act between efficiently managing the tiny fire and managing my curious, three-year-old nephew and his soft, reaching hands. One of the other adults in the room – there were five – could have stepped in to take over one task or the other, but they didn't. That's not a recrimination. I understand now, as I understood then. There's this unbreakable moment of stillness when the first candle wick catches where everyone just freezes, except, I guess, socially unattuned toddlers. I don't know if it's reverence or anticipation or hypnotism or something else. I guess fire and ambiguity go hand in hand.

The pattern had a neat number of squares – 5. The number 5 stuck with. I continued to (and continue to) draw that X pattern with my eyes wherever there are squares. As soon as I learned how to draw a star, connecting 5 dots with 5 lines, I drew them everywhere. On school papers, in the air, by clicking my teeth together in 5 points to make a star in my mouth. It's become such a habit I don't even notice I'm doing it with my teeth anymore, except every once in a while, when my jaw hurts. I'd tap my fingertips against my thumbs, pointer through pinky and then back again, feeling my 5 fingertips. I caught myself doing this with my fingers just today. I was an extremely anxious child. Everything scared me, worried me, stressed me out. I could barely function with it. I faked sick at school so I could go home so frequently during my first few years of grade school, that no one believed me when I actually was sick, not my teachers or my parents. But I hated being there – there were so many chances to get things wrong, so maybe people that expected things of me. Counting things of 5 – squares, stars, my fingers – helped me survive another few moments of this constant weight of worry.

The ancient Greeks understood something profound about fire, which is that it also goes hand in hand with humanity. Look, we all like setting things on fire. Sometimes it's necessary, but it's also recreational, whether we're talking about marshmallows or love letters from an ex. And maybe Prometheus didn't have bonfire parties in mind when he accepted the risk of being disemboweled by a malevolent eagle for the rest of eternity, but I can't imagine that would've changed his mind. If it's intrinsic to human survival but also a banger form of entertainment, isn't that just another selling point? Sure, Zeus was worried about humanity advancing to the point that we could overthrow the gods, but also, what a buzzkill.

My mom, bless her, bought me a pack of worry dolls in a desperate attempt to help me. Worry dolls originate from the Indigenous Maya Tribes of Guatemala, from the legend of a princess who received a gift from the sun god which allowed her to solve any human problem. Worry dolls are small, usually under 2 inches (I had several that were half an inch and one that was 2 inches tall), and they are made of wire, wool, and other textiles (usually scraps). The dolls are dressed in traditional Maya clothes. Wikipedia is telling me, "Worry dolls are given or lent to brooding, anxious, or sorrowful children." I think I qualified as all 3 of these things. You are supposed to tell your doll about your sorrows, fears, and worries and then hide it under your pillow at night. You then relinquish all those worries to your doll during the night and by the next morning you're supposed to be able to move forward, everything having been taken away by your worry doll.

Defining arson, then, is less about why someone sets things on fire and more about what they burn. "Arson" is a legal term; it's shorthand for a particular method of destruction of property. Someone else's property, that is. If I choose to burn my belongings, that's my business, up until the moment when the fire escapes containment, but then it's less about arson and more about reckless endangerment. So I guess what I'm wondering, Hozier, is whose shit are you burning?

I loved my worry dolls. I still have some of them. They didn't replace my friendly fives, but they became a new ally. I would put them under my pillow, and I would also take them to school with me during the day, always carefully placing them in the front pocket of my backpack. I thought if I just had them, then surely things would be okay. So, my biggest thanks to the Maya people for sharing this beautiful bit of your culture with me. Those worry dolls helped me survive so many hard days. I wonder if worry dolls help brooding, anxious, or sorrowful adults? Or do they have their hands full with children?

I know that's not the point of the song. I know that fire is as much a metaphor as it's not. Maybe you really did experience phantosmia as a teenager, smelling gasoline on your clothes, but the song's not about setting real fires; or so, at least, we'll say for any narcs who might be listening. "Fire" is another word for determination, for drive. In the chorus, you sing, "All you have is your fire/ And the place you need to reach." That's a lovely way of talking about ambition. So is the reference to ashes in the last verse; it makes me think of rebirth, of phoenixes. Who or what will you be when the smoke clears, and more to the point, will it be enough?

The relief of the worry dolls didn't last, though. My mom had to start new tactics – a small rubber penguin, which also took up place in the front of my backpack, and eventually actual mustard seeds placed in my sock at 6:30am. This came from the Bible, which implores us to just have the faith of a mustard seed. My mom would tell me I just needed to have that much faith that the day would go well, that I would pass my test or do okay on my presentation, whatever thing I had fixated my worry on that day.

I have no ambition. I don't mean that I have no *ambitions*, no desires or wishes or aspirations. I mean that whatever drives people to pursue their goals, I don't have it. I don't miss it, at least until I'm forced to wonder where it went and why. Was I born without it? Maybe. I was always a daydreamer, as a kid, and I was also a stubborn bastard when I wanted to be, asking my parents for a dog for five Christmases straight until they caved. I wanted to be a writer, so I started writing and didn't let myself stop. But there's a difference between a child's dreams, a child's work, and an adult's ambition. I can work hard, and I do, but it's not because I want to advance in a career or because I want a pay raise, enough money to one day buy a house in an economy increasingly set on disenfranchising anyone who doesn't have a trust fund. I work hard because I don't know how else to work.

Some of the childhood superstitions feel hazy. I'm taking my guess at what I was thinking they would accomplish if I could just do them in the right order. The older I get in my memory, the more I can track the intended effect of these superstitions. I had a necklace that was my grandmother's. I had to wear it every time I took a test at school, or I was going to fail. And before you ask, yes, this was in addition to the mustard seeds and the rubber penguin and the worry dolls. I had to check the front door every night before we went to sleep, but it wasn't just checking that it was locked. I had to check each lock on the door a specific number of times. If I didn't, surely the house would get broken into and my family would die. I do the exact same

thing today with the front door and garage door in our townhome. Emily has named this “security check” which I do every night, accompanied by our cat Tybalt (also anxious, sorrowful, and brooding), but I’ve never told her, wonder if she knows, that I check each lock a specific number of times, in a specific pattern, and some nights I have to get up and walk down two flights of stairs to check them again, a specific number of times in a specific pattern, before I can sleep believing our house won’t be broken into and my family won’t die.

Why aren’t I ambitious? When I’m in a melancholy mood, I’m likely to blame it on childhood trauma. Too used to disappointment. I wanted my dad to be home for my birthday, and for years, he wasn’t, called away to an annual work conference that always took place in late September. I wanted to be prettier, like my friends, but I persisted in resembling a sentient scarecrow, and for years I was told that the only reason boys steered clear of me was because I was, quote, too smart, as though my pretty friends weren’t also some of the cleverest people I knew. I wanted to be good at something, at anything, but my body’s uncoordinated stiffness rejected athleticism, and my mediocre eyes and ears rejected music and art, and my parents wouldn’t even let us buy a GameCube so I could get good at Zelda. I worked, but maybe not hard enough, and I prayed, but maybe not hard enough, and after a while, maybe it was just easier to not want anything.

The most recent of these superstitions, the most dangerous, is fire. Well, actually it’s candles, but that’s just the mechanism for the flame. I came to the flame the night my niece Zoe was born. She was born premature at 23 and a half weeks, and no one had any idea if she would live or, if she did live, what the rest of her life would look like. I’d never felt more powerless in my entire life. We could only pray, but I didn’t have the energy to sit in focused prayer all night. My mind kept wandering. So I lit a candle, having some half formed sense of all the candles in all those old cathedrals. There was something of prayer in them, right? And I thought it might count as I murmured “please save her,” to myself, to God, to any and everything that would listen. I stared into that small flame and, as you say so neatly, “Something in it had a power.” I lit all the other candles we had in the house, and I stared into those flames for most of the night.

When I’m feeling more fatalistic, I suspect that I’m not special. Maybe most grown-ups feel this way, working because work needs to be done, not because they want to be the best in their field, pursuing hobbies because they’re fun and not for any other reason, living because that’s just what you do. Most of the adults I know just want to get through the day. They want to be happy, not important. They don’t need to be powerful, as long as they’re free. Do they feel broken like I feel broken? Or am I different in a more subtle way? Is it my inability to feel proud of my accomplishments or excited about the future that makes me strange?

Zoe lived. She had a hard first few months of life, but she lived. She’s two years old now and doing so well. When my nephew Caleb was born with a serious heart problem, I once again turned to the flame. I lit every candle we had. He lived through his precarious birth. He lived through his first surgery, his second, his third. I knew he was sick, so so extremely sick, but

every time I lit candles and watched them for the hours and hours while Caleb was in the operating room, he would live. I took too much comfort in the candles. I thought it would be okay if I only kept the candles lit during surgeries...I had lost touch with the child that needed five superstitions and six comforts to get through the day. Maybe I should have kept them lit all day, every day. On the night that Caleb died, I received a phone call from my brother (not Caleb's father, the other brother) that Caleb was having a bad night, that they had to call 911. It wasn't the first time they'd had to call 911 with Caleb, so I didn't think much of it. I didn't light any candles after that call. Maybe I should have. What if I had? I had Emily light candles after I fled the house, desperate for the ritual, desperate for the flame to bestow life as it had all those cold years ago during the ice age. It was too late. Why didn't I light any candles after my brother had called me? I know it wouldn't have changed anything, but I *feel* that maybe it *could* have.

The magnitude of a person's ambition is intrinsic to our world's success stories. We think of Alexander as great not just because of what he did but because of what he wanted. When we talk about scientific and mathematical discoveries, we talk about the self-sacrificial drive for understanding, Einstein's sleepless nights, Galileo's trial for heresy, Marie Curie's radiation exposure. Our favorite artists and musicians died young, as though burned from the inside out by a fire too hot to live long. Mediocrity sustains the world, but we talk so much less about it, as though it's an embarrassment to the species, even though if Alexander had been a little less great at world-conquering, the world might have been left happier; or, at least, the people he killed or enslaved would have been. We talk so much about greatness, in our stories, our histories, our poetry, our art. We talk less about goodness.

I can't stop my brain running back to this proof. This horrible proof that I have to do the rituals or something else horrible *will* happen. I know enough to know the rituals, the superstitions, the obsessions, the compulsions are dangerous, especially since I attach so much power to them as to wonder if it is my fault my nephew died. I know. But what do I do without them? All I'd be left with is the worry. So when you say, "Don't you ever tame your demons, but always keep 'em on a leash," it hits right at whatever organ holds our deepest truth. I don't feel that I can tame this demon because I rely so much on it to be able to function at all, but I will try to at least keep it on a leash. And one day, maybe I'll be ready to ask for help from something that isn't a candle.

I'd call you a success story, Hozier. I'd also call you a great musician. Your music is remarkable for its quality as well as its popularity. You were selling albums in your early twenties, when I was still struggling for an English degree. I'm happy for you. But I can't help but wonder if the phantasmia is the only autobiographical part of this song. What about "My peace has always depended on all the ashes in my wake"? Because there's something tragic about that, Hozier. People should be able to be happy, to be at peace, even when they're in stasis. You don't always have to move forward. You don't always have to self-immolate to make room for the next version of yourself. But this song and that line in particular say that we have to destroy the old in order for new things to grow. And maybe the animals living in the forests we've burned to make

way for new forests would agree. But I wonder about the trees. I wonder when we stop thinking of them as trees and start thinking of them as firewood.