

Dear Hozier,

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Recently, the United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark case for reproductive rights. The court ruled that the government can (and, by implication, should) ban abortion. It devastated most of the women I know. Nationwide, it provoked an outcry of anger and disgust; polling shows that the majority of the country is against banning abortion, a disparity that many have pointed out. But our country has been a right-wing oligarchy for generations now, so I don't think that really comes as a surprise to anyone.

I've been trying to write this letter for weeks, but I keep getting tangled up in sounding cringey, full of platitudes, or, worse, sounding like a martyr puffed up on my own activism. I'm trying to find a way to write about activism, about community, about the work of making the world a better place that conveys the depth of my feelings about these things without self-importance. But it's hard. The work isn't about me, but this letter is about me. This is an internal project about what I think and feel, about how I interface with the world, so how do I find balance? I don't know. Maybe it's impossible when talking about these things, but here's my best attempt.

I don't need to dissect the ruling or point out its many, many logical fallacies and deficiencies or how transparently it reveals the true motives of a vindictive minority. Sufficient words have already been written; it is known. Neither do I need to list the facts about abortion that make the ruling so delusional, that legally banning it doesn't prevent it, that abortion is a necessity medically, economically, and personally, that the government's invasiveness is a kind of assault and now the product of that assault must be born or the bearer will risk prison time. It is written. It is known. I don't know what I can say.

I don't know what I can feel. That's an omnipresent question for me, the limits or, rather, the expanse of my emotional spectrum, because I think I'm missing parts of it, sort of the emotional equivalent of colorblindness. I wanted to express as much anger as all my friends and all the people on Twitter. I *do* feel angry. But in a muted, impersonal way. I feel guilty, for not being as angry as I should, not enough to cry or scream or protest, or even contribute to the avalanche of anger on Twitter. I do not feel outraged, because that implies shock accompanying the anger, and this doesn't surprise me at all.

Here's the truth: I believe the world can and should be better than it is, and I believe I have a responsibility to contribute to the making of that better world. The phrase "make the world a better place," has the feeling of an easy social media tagline, but it's something I genuinely believe in. I am relentlessly hopeful, obstinately optimistic. I believe it with the uncompromising zeal of a worshipper in the house of their god. The world can be free, it can be joyful, it can be unashamed, it can be just. In the words of Roger Taylor, "This world could be fed, this world could be fun, this could be heaven for everyone." I believe it. I know it. It's anchored to my soul like I've been possessed by a spirit of hope.

I want to be angry, but I'm not. I suspect this is wrong, my not-anger, but I can't know for sure. I suspect, too, that analyzing my emotions or lack thereof like they're options on a multiple choice test isn't right either. But I have never known any other way to do it. Feeling is dangerous. I must have learned that young. I can't pinpoint a single moment, nothing that traumatic. Punished one too many times for throwing tantrums, maybe, or else ignored in that well-meaning sort of way, that "let them cry it out" sort of way. Not the sort of thing intended to cause harm, but what is growing up if not growing despite a rapid-fire series of unintentional injuries? No one can predict the shape you'll take until it's too late for anything but pruning, and I grew into a neutral-faced, neutral-voiced sort of person.

It's not easy. Mariame Kaba told us "Hope is a discipline." It's not a feeling so much as it is a choice and a daily practice of believing a better world is possible. "Discipline" also reminds us that hope for a better world means working for a better world. You have to expend time and energy; hope alone, thoughts and prayers alone, are not enough to change anything. As you say, "It's not the waking, it's the rising." You work, you struggle, you return to your hope and your struggle again and again. No matter how many times they increase funding for the police. No matter what the Supreme Court decides.

Homer tells us that the Iliad is the story of Achilles' wrath. It's not an adventure or a romance or even really a war ballad. It's just the consequences of one man's anger, first because of the betrayal of his commanding officer – where rage is mingled with disgust at Agamemnon's incompetence and the probable trauma of a decade at war – and then because of the death of his beloved – mingled with grief, with self-disgust, with the horror of loneliness. When, after Patroclus's death, Achilles finally hunts down Hector and is on the verge of killing him, Hector requests that his corpse receive the traditional honor it is due. Achilles says, "There can be no covenants between lions and men." He says, also, "Would that my passion and spirit would drive me to devour your hacked-off flesh raw, such things you have done."

Those words sprang into my mind recently when I was reading a book about the American frontier wars in the late nineteenth century between the U.S. military and Native Americans living on the Plains and in the Southwest: the Sioux, the Comanche, the Apache, the Cheyenne, among other tribal groups. Of course it wasn't a happy book; I read it for work, to learn something, and I did. I learned a laundry list of war crimes and atrocities committed by a powerful government against an oppressed minority. The book ends with a chapter on Wounded Knee, just one of the military's wholesale massacres of adults, elderly people, and children – three hundred Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Lakotas, in this case – but probably the most well-known by the public. Near the end of the chapter, a survivor named Dewey Beard was quoted as saying, "I felt that even if I ate one of the soldiers, it would not appease my anger."

It's not easy. I'm a queer, disabled woman. My country wants me dead so they don't have to worry what twisted genes might crawl into my womb. It's not enough to say I don't want to have children. That's my choice and it has nothing to do with my genetic disorder and everything to

do with what I want my life to look like. But that's the exact thing: I don't get a choice. Lawmakers see no point to me if I'm not having white children for their white supremacist society, and yet they don't want my children who come with the risk of joints displaced, monstrous and feeble, and not within a lightyear of hale and hearty enough to be good bricks for the white supremacist house. In their eyes, I barely exist, which makes stripping my rights, or even killing me, a small thing. It's the same for anyone that can't and won't be or make good bricks for the white supremacist house. Disabled people, Black people, Indigenous people, poor people. How will they try to kill us next? Ah, but I'm forgetting sterilization of "undesirable populations," America's bedrock. America never stopped sterilizing those they hated, killing people and cultures without committing "murder" as the courts would see it. Not that the courts ever side against America.

I think about consumption as a mechanism for anger. Cannibalism, even the idea of it, is violent, visceral, upsetting. Mostly, throughout human history, it has been done to enable survival. But the thought of it, the threat of it, is a powerful way to express one's rage. Implied is that wrath like unto Achilles' would fuel you not just through the first grind of teeth through flesh, muscle, and blood but every bite after, up to the cracking of bones. Consumption is the ultimate reversal of powerlessness. When the worst conceivable thing has been done to you, the only appropriate revenge is to reduce your enemies to bite-sized pieces, grind them to mush, and shit them out. No covenants between lions and men? But who is the lion and who is the man? I'm losing track.

Do you see how it spirals, rotten to the very core? And this is just America, just one piece of a very large world with many other rotten cores. Hope is not easy, and I can't lie and say I've never been hopeless. Of course I have. Often, but never for long. If hope doesn't come back on its own, I go looking for it. This gets easier the better I understand that hope is made of many different things. A many faceted diamond, or, a metaphor closer to my heart, a Frankenstein's monster, patched together and given a will of its own. One part optimism, one part anger, one part love, one part struggle, one part rest, one part accountability, one part responsibility. Hope and I can find each other through any one of these parts, or any ones I've left unnamed. Some days I'm furious thinking about my nieces growing up in a world like this, and I want to make it better. Some days I'm so in love with the disabled community and the queer community that I would do anything for them. Some days it's an understanding of my privilege, because nothing matters in America more than being white; disability, queerness, or gender aside, my race will always offer protections other people don't have. Can I do any good with that privilege? Most days hope comes to me as a feeling of responsibility. Do my part. Do something today, anything, no matter how small, to change the world for the better.

Am I being too graphic? It's just that my anger isn't sustainable, not like chewing through tough meat. It comes in flashes of lightning. Here's one: My sister and I have to explain to my father and brother what an ectopic pregnancy is, despite the fact that my sister has had one, despite the fact that it traumatized her medically and emotionally. She keeps a cool face throughout as she tells my dad that had she not miscarried, she would have needed an abortion or else would

have faced a rupture in one of her fallopian tubes, internal bleeding, and imminent death. She's emotive, my sister, quick to laugh and quick to cry, but she doesn't cry telling this story, because she is on a mission to convince my dad and brother, who are always so convinced of the superiority of their own logic, of the necessity of abortion, and crying would only make them uncomfortable and dismissive. Just one more emotional woman. I radiate admiration and sympathy at her, hope she picks up on it. I think spear-like thoughts at my father: How can you not know this? Your daughter almost died and you didn't bother researching the mechanics of her potential death? I am angry enough, then, to stab him with a fork. But then I drive home and talk myself out of it – one more emotional woman – and by the time I walk through the door, I'm just tired.

I don't know where this feeling of responsibility comes from. It's like a living thing under my skin that starts to pace when I've been too inactive or complacent or self-centered for too long. I get restless, almost irritable. I've had this subcutaneous creature since I was a child forcing my friends across the street to make door hangers out of green cardstock imploring our neighbors to stop using eucalyptus products as it depletes koalas' natural food source (I don't know where I got this idea or even if it's true). It chased me into non-profit work – grant writing – because if I was going to work 40 hours a week for the rest of my life, I wanted to spend those hours helping, at least a little. It chased me to mutual aid and volunteering for hotlines and annoying all my friends and family.

Another flash: I'm listening to a podcast about medical history. This episode's about the so-called "Father of Gynecology," J. Marion Sims, and his experimental subjects, enslaved women who could not opt out of his painful, invasive, and repetitive procedures. He performed surgeries on twelve of them and undoubtedly examined countless more, but only three are named in his records: Lucy, Betsy, and Anarcha. In the space of four years, he operated on Anarcha alone thirty times. Lucy almost died of sepsis because he left a sponge inside of her. There was no anesthesia; the most these women could hope for was opium after the surgery ended. They had to endure it because they had no other options; many of them had literally been bought by this man, who believed, like all white people at the time and an embarrassingly high number of white people today, that Black people don't feel pain to the same extent that white people do. Until 2018, Sims, a loyal Confederate, was commemorated in a statue in Central Park. It read, "His brilliant achievement carried the fame of American surgery throughout the entire world." After all, who cares about the women screaming in agony, being forced to hold each other down through every operation, when America's fame is at stake?

I will almost certainly never need an abortion, because I will almost certainly never become pregnant. At one point in my life I thought parenthood was inevitable. I grew up in a conservative community, in which the emphasis on heteronormative nuclear family units makes anyone who doesn't fit the mold feel like a second-class citizen. Of course I thought I'd grow up, marry a man, have kids. Then I learned what pregnancy and childbirth were. I saw a birthing video in my high school health class. I caught a glimpse, as though from the corner of my eye, fluttering in and out of my blindspot, of a future in which that was my body being ripped apart

under the watchful, clinical gazes of medical personnel. I thought, I will never do that. I'd still become a parent, I figured, but I would adopt. I would care for foster children. That way I'd still fit into my church community, but I wouldn't have to suffer the humiliating invasion and ejection of a body inside my own. Easy solution.

Because I have been annoying about it, both when I was a kid and sometimes still. It's only in the past year or so that I've started to interrogate what this feeling of responsibility is and where it comes from. Not that I think it's bad, inherently, but it can be. What levels of it are coming from and/or threaten to be white saviorism? What do I do because I want to help and what do I do because helping other people makes me feel good? Do I think all my activism work makes me a better than other people? What role is ego/superiority playing? How does it sit that most of the things I can do that actually make a difference are things other people will probably never see, never attach me to? I hope the more I drill down on these questions, and face my genuine answers, the more I will be able to work authentically and have more and more days without ego or saviorism. I hope.

I remember I was walking, once, with a boy I thought of as my friend. I was twenty, old enough to feel infinitely more mature than I had at eighteen, young enough to still be an idiot. I had an inkling that this boy wanted to transition our friendship into romance. I had an inkling that, in his mind, perhaps we already had, and he'd just forgotten to inform me along the way. That used to happen to me a lot, boys telling me they liked me as though I had anything to do with it, like I was supposed to feel anything in response besides a vague sense of dread. I didn't, though, and I figured out why, eventually, but that was still three years away from the walk with the boy who maybe liked me, though he hadn't said so in clear terms. The conversation turned to the future. I said, honestly, that I had no plans to marry in the near future and that I didn't plan to ever have kids, not biologically, maybe not otherwise. I remember how he said, "Really?"

It makes me angry now, that "Really?" It used to make me sad, how he stopped talking to me after that walk, how he made no effort to spend time with me after that. I received the message loud and clear: he'd only ever been my friend in the hopes of shaping me into his plan for his future, which of course included a wife and kids; we grew up in the same neighborhood, the same church. Which, come to think of it, didn't make him my friend at all. It just made him a boy who was just as young and stupid as me. That part still makes me sad. I hope he's wiser now. I hope he hasn't damaged himself or anyone else irreparably. But still that anger, like lightning.

There's that word again: hope. I could continue to theorize about hope, but at the end of the day, no matter what purpose it serves or what it is, really, at its heart, hope is my friend. It comforts me and inspires me and helps me find purpose and joy and beauty. It sits on my shoulder when I hear the news of another school shooting and it reminds me the world does not have to look like this. Earth is 70% water; the human body is 60% water. Our world is not stone, brick, or steel. Our world is water, fluid and adaptable. It can take whatever shape we build for it. In this way it

empowers me and makes me brave. It is the stone in my sling, it is the lady of the lake placing Excalibur in my hands, it is Prometheus stealing fire for me right out from under Zeus' nose.

Anger is not the point of "Nina Cries Power." In fact, the point is that anger isn't enough. Feeling isn't enough. "It's not the waking; it's the rising." In other words, action is necessary for social change, and to tell ourselves otherwise is to enable the state to keep mandating violence against vulnerable people. "Nina Cries Power" comes from a tradition of Black gospel music. Of the many singers it references, most are Black, men and women who advocated for change, who worked to lift voices alongside their own. Mavis Staples, who contributed to this song, is a famous civil rights activist; her father was friends with Martin Luther King Jr. She's in her eighties and still has one of the most powerful singing voices out there, and God, has she used it.

"Nina Cried Power" is meant for so much more than this, but it is a balm to me. I listen to it and remember that people were fighting for a better world long before I was born and, realistically, will still be fighting after I'm dead. It reminds me I'm not alone, which is another facet of hope. There are so many amazing people around me, past, present, and future, who are working towards the same goal. It reminds me not to believe myself the center of anything, for who am I compared to Nina Simone? I'm just one drop in the ocean, but that's no excuse not to do whatever my small part is so that together we can change the tides. It reminds me of places I can improve upon the work I'm doing, be braver, sacrifice more privilege. Remembering that I'm not static, just as the world is not, remembering that I can change, too, that's also a part of hope. It all is, and hope is how I ground my uncompromising feet day after day after day.

This song makes me hopeful. It is the heir to a long tradition of demanding an equal share of power from the people who are hoarding it. It's loud and unapologetic. And it is a tribute to its ancestors, the ones who came before and helped write the blueprint. But this song also makes me ashamed of my stunted emotions, my inconstant anger, and above all my hesitation. If I cannot even summon the rage to draft a Tweet, how will I ever leave my house and *do* something? Am I emotionally agoraphobic? Am I even awake? Is it at all possible that the things I want to say but swallow and all the things I want to feel but bury are somewhere deep inside of me, growing? That one day they'll erupt? I think of lightning, tattooed somewhere on my body someday, thin lines intersecting and merging. I think of how this bolt of lightning, rendered in black ink, could as easily be the roots of a tree.