

Dear Hozier,

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Wait, hold on, do I really have to write about blow jobs?

This song confuses me. Don't get me wrong. I'm not dense. I get that it's about blowjobs, yeah, yeah, yeah. Common tongue. Come on tongue. Message received. It's the rest of the lyrics that confuse me. I'm grateful there are people on the internet willing to do close readings of your work to tell me how you're writing about power dynamics in sex and how people in healthy relationships don't use power to degrade one another, about politicians and religious leaders and their hypocrisy around sex, about how nice it is that orgasm can distill reality into just that one moment, wipe away all the noise of being alive while the world is crumbling. I always understood the idea of a "moment's silence," but the rest of the lyrics slid past me, much to the disappointment of all my literature professors who taught me how to analyze. I'm on much steadier ground now, so thank you, Internet analysts. I've listened to this song plenty of times, so maybe I am just dense after all. Unable to get past the hypnotic, bluesy music to pay attention to the lyrics, I always get stuck on the "moment's silence."

Yeah, sure, sure, *oral sex*, the non-gendered, non-genitaled version, is more appropriate. You're a cisgender male singer, but that doesn't mean this song must involve a penis, either explicitly or implicitly or both, and baby, this song is all about both. In that spirit, I shouldn't become bogged down by either semantics or my persistent imagining – notice I say *imagining*, not *fantasy* – of someone putting their mouth on someone else's dick. That is my personal problem, if it is even a problem. Maybe it's just some kind of pillow talk, too intimate for the internet.

A moment's silence. I don't think I've had a moment's silence in my entire life. Certainly not where sex is concerned. I don't know how anyone can. There's so much noise around sex. Everywhere you turn in 2022, there's something or someone telling you what type of sex you should have and who you should be having it with, how often you should be having sex, why you should have sex, how you should treat your sexual partners, what you should do, wear, be in order to be sexy, what and who you should find sexually appealing, what sex acts you should desire, what sex acts you should deride, how to talk about sex, that you *should* be talking about sex, that you should be ashamed of having sex, that you should be embarrassed if you aren't having sex – it's exhausting. I feel like a fish in a pond used to dump industrial waste sludge. How do any of us see? How does anyone know what they actually *want*?

Except, wait, what is this project if not the personal made public, and if I've dragged my religious trauma, my mental illness, and my family dynamics through the meat grinder of iTunes reviews, why should my sex hang-ups be any different? I know: This is something I'm supposed to be coy about. It's published under my own name, legal and literal; my employers, present or future, might easily find it, though I think my staunch anti-capitalism might be more of a turn-off to them

than an itemized list of my turn-ons. My sex life is meant to be locked behind a door, the way you fuck behind locked doors, unless your door doesn't lock or you forgot or you thought your partner did it or who the hell cares about the positioning of mechanical tumblers when the world narrows down to the soft warm point of contact between your body and another's? I don't have a fetish that requires an audience. Exhibitionism is not one of my capital-T Things. So why drag it out into the open, into words, into my own mouth?

Maybe other people aren't exhausted. Maybe I'm revealing something about myself that I don't even see. But a few weeks ago my therapist asked me what types of people I find attractive and I said, honestly as one does in therapy, "I have absolutely no idea." I cannot parse what I actually respond to from what I and my body have been conditioned to respond to after decades of media messaging and social training. That's how it feels to me most days, like I've been trained like a small circus dog to jump through the appropriate hoops. You could name each hoop after a body part: tits, ass, abs, legs, arms, lips. Or you could name them after qualities: wealthy, healthy, able-bodied, physically fit, white, college educated.

The only reasons I can think of are to preserve my dignity, which I've long since dispensed with in the service of my ambition to become a kind of Shakespearean fool; to not offend the listeners' delicate sensibilities, which I don't care about; or to sidestep my old enemy, shame. That last one's the sticking point. I wish I was shameless; I'm not. Perks of growing up under the umbrella of Christianity, but you'd know all about that. You've grown out of it or despite it somehow. I can't imagine the chutzpah it takes to write a song comparing a rosary of pearls to semen, but that's the *point*. Isn't it? I don't know if the world is getting worse because, well, worse than what? There's never been a moment when everyone everywhere thought things were grand. Someone is always suffering. But some of the worst parts are crystallizing into spear points aimed at the soft underbelly of what's tender and good, and that's what the song's about. Politicians using cruelty and ignorance and their own egos to gather supporters. A society of conspiracy theorists reducing truth to a point of debate. Patriarchal religion. Patriarchal politics. Patriarchy, insisting that oral sex isn't a play of two actors but a sentence with a single subject and a single object. Power made anatomical. It's an old song. We both know it.

Sexual desire feels so manufactured and forced that nothing about the human body is appealing. I'm not alone in feeling this way, at least. In her essay "Everyone is Beautiful and No One is Horny," RS Benedict writes how we've all become so obsessed with being beautiful ourselves that we no longer experience desire. She uses superhero and action movies as the vehicle to explain this phenomenon – all our superheroes are sexy, but they aren't sexual. Their relationships are de-sexualized on screen. Nobody actually wants to fuck them, just look at them – but the same phenomenon is happening in everyday life. You see it all over social media. The perfectly styled, perfectly posed photographs of perfectly constructed bodies and influencers more than willing to tell you all the work and money it took for them to look like that. Benedict writes, "A body is no longer a holistic system. It is not the vehicle through which we experience

joy and pleasure during our brief time in the land of the living. It is not a home to live in and be happy. It, too, is a collection of features: six pack, thigh gap, cum gutters. And these features exist not to make our lives more comfortable, but to increase the value of our assets. Our bodies are investments, which must always be optimized to bring us... what, exactly?"

We've pinned shame to all the wrong things. I think that's what I'm trying to say. Sex, including oral sex, is not inherently shameful. Using it as a tool to assert dominance or a manipulation tactic or an act of violence is. But the dominators, the manipulators, the violent actors don't want to admit that, or they don't want to admit that it applies to them, so for now it's easier just to say that it's gauche to bring up blow jobs. Look, it's gauche to talk about a woman on her knees, anti-feminist, even. We'd have to talk about who put her there. Was it the man in front of her? Was it the crushing weight of societal expectations that she perform certain sex acts in certain ways? Was it somehow, miraculously, *her*?

Yes, what? What do I get when I finally arrive at beautiful? Nothing. As Benedict notes, in today's society, "We are perfect islands of emotional self-reliance, and it is seen as embarrassing and co-dependent to want to be touched. We are doing this for ourselves, because we, apropos of nothing, desperately want to achieve a physical standard set by some invisible Other." This quote is the part of the essay that hit me the hardest. Everything about it rings true. I do feel a constant pressure to be more beautiful than I currently am, and it has very little to do with attracting partners. My desire for intimacy, to be seen and loved and touched, even in non-sexual ways, is embarrassing to me. It feels needy and childish and unimportant, a want and need that I pack away, especially if it's not about sex. You're twenty-seven and you just want someone to hold your hand? Grow the fuck up. Becoming more beautiful isn't about attracting partnership, it just...feels like the right thing to do.

And god that pisses me off. I don't want to do anything to my body or my desires because some invisible power or social narrative tells me to. If sexuality is a circus and I'm destined to be a small dog or big cat or an acrobat, why don't I at least get to name my own hoops? How do I block out all the noise long enough to know what to name my hoops? Where's my moment of silence?

Here's the part where we talk about me, so skip ahead if your delicate sensibilities are already hanging on by a thread. I've never given a blow job. I am almost thirty and my sexual experience is limited, wobbling on the made-up line of virginity. This surprises you, because my voice is so sexy. Or it doesn't surprise you, because my voice is not sexy. I don't know what you've projected onto me, and actually your projections don't matter except to you, so lock them away for now. What matters is that I'm ashamed of this. It's antithetical. Us former Christians are supposed to be ashamed of our actions, our desires, our partners – not their lack. But I also live in a world in which sexual liberation is the pinnacle of independence, self-respect, enlightenment. That an adult endowed with either a sexy or a non-sexy voice can move through that world so caught up in the tangle of their own desires or non-desires that they remain

blissfully ignorant of whether they might themselves be at the epicenter of someone else's desire or non-desire is either a nightmare or a fairytale. I've lived it, and I assure you it's both. For a few years in my late teens, I kept ending up on dates that I didn't know were dates because it hadn't occurred to me that anyone would want to take me out – like, to dinner, not with a killshot. I can't tell if or when someone flirts with me, so I choose to believe I have never been flirted with. Once, a coworker told me that she wanted to sit on my face, and I still, to this day, believe that it was an auditory hallucination.

Benedict's essay, which can be found on Blood Knife, connects our insistence on physical perfection to nations feeling threatened. Focus on physical fitness spikes during wartime or political instability. Benedict writes, "It's about getting strong enough to fight The Enemy, whoever that may be." So, how many layers of noise are we up to now? One, sex saturates our media and our lives even though two, we're so focused on perfecting our own bodies that we don't experience much real desire anymore, because three, there is danger everywhere in 2022 and our governments want us strong enough to fight the Russians or protestors or the climate apocalypse or active shooters or – I'll stop there because we're back to the beginning. Our world is crumbling, our political leaders are liars and hypocrites who happily burn the world while the rest of us suffer through it, apparently relying on Pilates to see us through the end times.

Is this some kind of intimacy disorder? I don't know. I'm willing to admit that whatever's wrong with me is wrong enough to qualify as a disorder, but throwing the word "intimacy" around like it's nothing seems extreme. I do know I probably need therapy, so before you type up and send your unqualified diagnosis, rest assured that I'm well-aware. But here's my question: is it really a problem if I'm happy? I am happy, I think an average amount. I have bad days. I have anxiety. In the winter I sometimes feel depressed. But I don't feel strongly enough that I am missing out on something to actually rectify the situation. I called myself blissfully ignorant earlier, and that was tongue-in-cheek, which is a fun joke because a tongue in one's cheek looks like a blow job, but actually my ignorance is pretty blissful. Sex is a complication in the lives of people on TV. From that vantage point, the drawbacks seem about evenly matched with the rewards. So it's not just that I've never given a blow job; it's that I have no intention of giving a blow job. I can appreciate it in theory, as a manifestation of closeness between two people, of vulnerability, of making someone you love feel good in a physical, tangible way. But if I think about applying that theory, I just remember how the last time I went to the doctor with a sore throat, I gagged on the tongue depressor. I have the world's worst gag reflex, which does seem like a sign. If it was going to happen to someone, why not me, the person whose interest in oral sex is entirely academic?

Where does that leave us? Sex is everywhere, but we're not allowed to want it and we train our bodies to be unbeatable. We're left with power, I guess. Everyone wants to be in charge in the relationship, in one way or another, because then at least we're not the co-dependent one, we're not the one being vulnerable, we're not admitting we have needs. We don't have to be embarrassed, the other person does. It's a soulless approach to pleasure. And I'm exhausted.

I know this song isn't just fun wordplay for foreplay. It's about how we cope with a world that seems increasingly deranged and dangerous, hostile and hate-fueled. It's about the rebellion and revolution of bodies against religious strictures. It posits that what two enthusiastic adults do with their bodies is irrelevant to God even as it seems to be an obsession of God's purported representatives. It's about looking for that perfect mental stillness, when the ripples stop and the mind transforms into a sheet of water so unruffled it's like a mirror. For the people in the song, that moment is orgasm, but it's not for everyone. It's about transcendence, and it's about how love is a refuge, a sacred space as much as any temple, cathedral, synagogue, mosque. It's not just about sex; it's about good sex.

It's not totally hopeless. There are people using social media to show their real bodies, their beautiful, imperfect bodies. And every time I see one of them, I do feel a little more grounded, a little safer. There are songs like this that remind us that sex doesn't have to be about wielding our war-ready bodies as weapons against one another. Giving a blowjob can be an act of love. A lot of answers can be found in individual relationships. I know this when I can bring myself down to the level of reality that is my own life, rather than the level of "society" or "media." A lot of good can take place in individual relationships, and that's part of why the powers that be promote a toxic self-reliance. Isolated people are easier to extort, disenfranchise, force into military service, bring into white supremacist conspiracies. Individualism, Western and American individualism in particular, kills us.

What is it that shames me: that I can't relate or that I don't particularly want to? Or, rather, I don't need to? I don't wake up every morning or fall asleep every night longing for the excitement of romance, the titillation of flirtation, the apparently all-consuming and religious power of sex. Nor does the idea repulse me. It's not that the idea of giving head disgusts or terrifies me; it's just that there are some logistical issues I would need to work around, and that seems inconvenient and dull, for me and everyone else involved. It's just that I'm ambivalent. And ambivalence and sex aren't supposed to go together. You must scream yes or scream no. Anything in between suggests that your body might be a crime scene.

What am I trying to say with this letter? I don't know; it should be fairly obvious that this is the main thread. I don't know. I don't know exactly how we find pleasure today or how pleasure might help us survive, but there's something there. I think. For now, I'm just thankful that, as you say, there are some who know it lovingly. It – sex, pleasure, their body, their partners' bodies. All of it. And maybe at some point the noise will be so much that it becomes its own type of silence, and I can be one of those people.

"Common Tongue," this song's parenthetical title, its alter ego, is a pun. Split up the three syllables, play with them a little, and you'll get it. But it's also a reference to the shared language of love. That's obviously not French. I think you'd agree with me that it's not sex either, because sex is not universal, as I've just painstakingly pointed out, and to say your song argues that it is would be reductive, bad-faith. And I don't want to take this song too seriously. Or is that my inability to relate talking? Is it just that I don't want to be excluded from a good song? I don't

know. This song promises clarity, and I can't find it. There's too much noise. There's too much shame, and I'm losing track. Must I submit to oral sex to find what I'm trying to say? Can't I figure this out on my own? I don't want someone to solve this puzzle for me. I want to be both Theseus and Ariadne. I want to be the Minotaur too. I want the whole myth, the whole story, to be held within my body, my singular form. This is the only thing I want with any conviction. Self-love is a simple equation, I think, as simple as oral sex, which is not simple at all: You build a labyrinth, and you map it. You find the exit. You don't leave. You turn around and keep wandering.