

Dear Hozier,

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When I was five or six years old, my parents put me in a ballet class. I know how old I was because we have photographic evidence: there's this image of little-me wearing a frilly pink tutu and leotard, white tights and ballet slippers, and a set of bunny ears. The photo was taken before or after a performance. Presumably in our performance, the other miniature ballerinas and I were meant to be bunny rabbits. Hence the ears. This makes sense because your average six-year-old is not really capable of choreographed movement: hopping's about the most you can expect of them.

In the photo, I'm scowling. The corners of my mouth are turned fully, dramatically down. It's the kind of glare that wishes death upon the viewer. It's the Picture of Dorian Gray if the only sin Dorian Gray ever committed was occasionally sneaking chocolate chips out of the bag when his mom wasn't looking. It's evocative and hilarious: the contrast between my whimsical pink outfit and my expression. My family laughs at it because that is often how I look in old photos, minus the tutu. Little kids are frequently forced to be the subjects of photographs, and nearly one hundred percent of the time, I was cognizant of being *forced*. Photos, in my mind, were an imposition on my god-given right to blend into the background without being perceived, but I didn't have the words to express it then, and if I had, I'm sure I would have been ignored. Adults always ignore kids when they say something the adults don't want to hear. Aware of this, too, I took my revenge in the only way I could: making it as clear as possible that in the captured moment, I was not happy.

I have always been a duad – body and mind thinly connected by insufficient connective tissue, one entity in space (by a technicality), but operationally only as united as the needle and pencil of a geometric compass. They have the same head and move around one another, but you can't collapse the needle and pencil, can't collapse my mind and my body, into one. I've never had the mind-body connection that's supposed to come so naturally. This awareness, this sixth sense, that, as the Encyclopedia of Neuroscience defined it in 2009, "lets us perceive the location, movement, and action of parts of the body," is called proprioception, or kinesthesia. Wikipedia calls it "the sense of self-movement," which I like best. It's succinct, useable, and cuts right to the point. I do not know how to move myself. My proprioception has been shaved down to the bone.

I was not happy to have my photo taken. I don't remember if I was happy to learn ballet – or the version of ballet achievable by six-year-olds. I doubt my parents signed me up for classes if I wasn't interested, but I suppose they would have if they thought it was for my own good – if, for example, they wanted me to socialize or to challenge my body. Still, I have no memory of how I ended up in that pink tutu and bunny ears or how it felt to dance. The photo makes me laugh, and it makes me sad. The little girl in that photo felt things, fear and anger and sadness, so

hugely that she couldn't help showing them on her face. I wonder when she trained herself out of that.

This makes me clumsy and awkward, two overused words that don't capture what it's like to follow your oddly animated body through the world as it fails and fails and fails and fails to do the things you want it to. Objectively: I bump into things constantly. I drop things. I trip. I move too quickly or too slowly. I leave things behind. I step "incorrectly" and my hip dislocates. Subjectively: I set a goal – walk to the kitchen – and then I'm stuck watching through the natural sepia filter of a wildfire as my body burns through the architecture of that goal. We get to the kitchen, but we've moved too fast, faster than our mind knows we should, and our knees start to catch and pull. We hit the banister, our sweater gets caught on a drawer pull, we knock our hand on the counter and pain swells so much easier in our hands than anywhere else. We drop our spoon, and it rattles on the wooden floor loud enough to make our cats jump. What happened to our straight line? Point A to Point B? Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

It's clear from my old ballet photos that I always hated being looked at. At some point, though, my aversion to being perceived translated onto my body specifically. There's a moment in childhood when you realize that what people look at when they look at you is not *you* but your rigidly defined container. Maybe it is part of being a girl or maybe it is part of being me, but it seems that as soon as I came to that realization, I feared it. My body was not a thing I loved. It was a set of restrictions and inconveniences. It was certain clothes I had to wear on Sundays, scratchy and tight and terribly feminine; it was the haircut I had no choice but to have, the same as both my sisters; it was food I didn't want to eat but had to or else risk being laughed at or yelled at; it was the swimming lessons my parents forced me to take to overcome my fear of water. It was the way I walked, painlessly and naturally, which made my aunts and uncles point and stare and my mother take me to the doctor and the doctor put me to sleep. When I woke up, I was scarred, these twin rosy, bumpy scars that my sister said looked like earthworms. To my child brain, the cost of walking like everyone else were the marks showing that walking wasn't even something I'd been able to do right at first.

Impaired proprioception is one of the many symptoms, manifestations, gifts of the Disease. (It's a syndrome actually, another technicality, but I like the word disease better. It's a sonic preference mainly, *disease* has some punch that *syndrome* lacks – fitting since a disease is a definite thing and a syndrome is a cluster of related things that you can't always trace to the common element, the source of all the trouble). The Disease impairs proprioception and so I've never moved gracefully in my life. To be graceful, you need control, elegance, refinement. My body can't quite get there. I do my physical therapy exercises, my Pilates, my stretches, my walks. I focus on moving with control, with intention. I try to flood my awareness into every last centimeter of me, but the chasm is too wide. I end up with trickles of mind-body connection. I'll have it for a few minutes, then lose it. Or it'll come too late, and I've already hurt myself by moving "the wrong way."

There must have been a time, maybe in that bunny-ears photo, when I loved dancing. I don't remember it. My first memory of dancing is linked to self-consciousness, the certainty that I was doing it wrong, that everyone was secretly laughing at me. I never managed to shake that. To this day I don't dance; at a friend's wedding a year and a half ago, I stayed sedately on the sidelines, watching, conscious that even this decision was wrong: no one likes a wallflower. But I have no concept of how to move my body gracefully. I have no natural athletic ability and have never worked to obtain it. I am uncoordinated. I never quite figured out how to maneuver my long, bony limbs in concert with one another. My posture is awful. The list goes on.

If this sounds like a litany of self-pity, it is. Nothing's more pitiful than self-consciousness in a grown adult; it feels like something I should have left behind in adolescence, but hey presto, much of my problem is that I never stopped feeling teenaged: for Christ's sake, I still have acne. Staring at myself in the mirror at sixteen years old, I assured myself that it would be different in five, maybe ten years: my skin would be clear, my shoulders would be straight, and my baby fat would magically redistribute itself to the right places. Here I am, still with red spots, though fewer since I stopped wearing makeup; still with sloping shoulders; and wouldn't you know it, I am still flat from every angle, straight in at least one way.

In case I'm getting it twisted, let me clarify: my impaired sense of proprioception is not the reason my pain exists. I haven't just hurt myself, clumsily, stupidly, over and over again. When I say I've stepped "incorrectly" or "moved the wrong" way, I mean I've put my foot down at a somewhat odd angle or I've stretched my arms overhead. In a factory setting body, these things wouldn't matter much, if at all. It's not likely to incapacitate a person for three days. Using right and wrong to describe my movements is a matter of convenience, because there isn't a right way for me to move. Unless I could move through a world made of marshmallow, where my joints were always cushioned. (I'd belong there, since I am more like a series of toothpicks held together with melted marshmallows than I am like other people, made of carbon and iron and water). I've tried everything from mind-body awareness to strengthening my muscles to mobility aids to moving very little to medications to openly weeping and nothing makes the pain disappear. Some things make it better, like heat or ice depending on the day and type of pain. Some things make it worse, like the impaired proprioception. It's a horrible feedback loop. 1) A physiology that needs careful tending. 2) A body like a bull in a China shop 3) creating more injuries that need careful tending. 4) But pain infects the mind-body awareness and weakens everything. 5) So, we begin again.

Despite all my dissatisfaction and petty grievances against myself, I am immensely privileged. Because I'm white, I only have to worry that the ways I move naturally will be judged as awkward or silly, not dangerous or threatening. Because I'm thin and able-bodied, every part of the world, from seats on airplanes to the average menu at an average restaurant, is accessible. I'm so accommodated that I'm swaddled by society, so of course I feel ridiculous complaining about how I can't dance. It's terrible. It's also true. I don't dance, but you know what, if I really wanted to, I could. It might not be easy or fun on an emotional level, it might tax me physically, but if I went into the middle of a busy street right now and danced my ass off, likely the worst

thing that could happen is some light public humiliation rather than, say, imprisonment or murder. I'd get a TikTok video made of me, but in the comments of that video, no one would tell me to lose weight. That's privilege, baby.

Where does this leave me? Hate is so easy to pick up and put into this feedback loop. Hating myself, hating the Disease. I've done it. Still do it. Did it today, when I was trying to roller skate and my hips were ache ache aching and the virus of pain had worn my sense of self-movement down to a single silk thread. I've spent years building up the muscle memory to do a handful of skating tricks; today I could do half of one. The connection just wasn't there. It was infuriating, exhausting, demoralizing – a mental agony to match the agony in my hips. Roller skating is the one type of movement I genuinely *love* and I've clocked many hours attempting to become somewhat proficient. Today, all I could do was skate in circles. But the one upside of trying everything to improve the pain and not seeing great results is that I've developed a skill for acceptance. My body does the best it can, and I do the best I can to tend to it. Annoyingly, these two things don't always gel, there's more friction than you'd think possible between what is technically the same entity, but there's so little I can do about it. All that's left is to push away the self-hatred, the frustration, and skate in circles. It was fun once I accepted that's what I could do today.

Privilege is important to take into consideration when you consider your relationship with the rest of the world, because the thing about this world is that we're not alone in it. There are other people with different bodies – every body is different – and they're treated in different ways, and it would be the height of ignorance to, well, ignore that. But I consider privilege less when it comes to my relationship with my own body, which, again, is different than other people's relationships with their bodies, but is nevertheless *mine*: real and true even if it is saturated in self-pity. I may have survived my childhood relatively unscathed thanks to privilege, but nevertheless I still bear my few scars, especially the ones along my Achilles tendons. You know, I think I first read *The Iliad* and first fell in love with ancient Greek mythology because of those scars. Achilles may have been the pinnacle of athletic achievement, the envy of all the rugged, muscular soldiers and kings around him, but we have the same weaknesses: our ankles, our anger.

Where does this leave me? No one single place. The Disease is dynamic, it's different day to day and it's difficult to predict what each day will look like. A few weeks ago, I climbed to the top of the Acropolis in Athens and though I needed my cane, a knee brace, and lots of breaks, I did it. It made me tired, but it didn't lay me out. Last week, I went on a fifteen-minute walk on the flat track around our apartment complex (also braced) and my hips and knees started hurting so badly it made me nauseous and I almost puked in front of our neighbor and his Pitbull. I had to limp home and lay on the couch for an hour with two ice packs and 22 ounces of Liquid IV enhanced ice water. I would have guessed these experiences would have been flipped, but so it goes. Each day movement looks different, and I've had to grow into that uncomfortable space over the last three years.

I am trying to unlearn the beliefs that I carved out for myself in childhood and never quite got rid of: that I'm weak, that I'm graceless, that I'm not pretty – that if I danced, people would look at me, the thing I've always feared. I cut my own hair because messy, clumsy control is still control. I have dispensed with the dresses I always hated, drab and modest and uncomfortable: the few skirts I own now make me feel sexy and stylish. I favor soft T-shirts and sweatshirts and heavy boots. In summer I wear almost nothing, because I hate the feeling of sweaty clothes and because I love the feeling of sun on my long-deprived skin. These small things are the battles in the war I'm waging. I have learned it is impossible to stop people from seeing me, but that on some level I can like what they see. Still, I never got rid of that scowl of displeasure, my reflexive response to being perceived. On a toddler, it was cute; on an adult, it's just resting bitch face. Some things change, and some things don't.

Finally, then, we get to my embarrassing secret. When I listen to this song, *Movement*, I think of myself. The movement I'm most in awe of is my own. You sing, "When you move/ I can recall something that's gone from me/ when you move/ honey, I'm put in awe of something so flawed and free." And, I don't know, that just about encapsulates it. I don't move like I used to. That chunk of my mobility is gone from me, lost. But when I give my body what it needs, when I bring my cane along the path the ancient Greeks used to follow for worship, when I turn around when the walk is too much, when I let go of my skating drills and just roll as I am able, I am something flawed and free. I'm in awe of it, of me. I'm in awe of the self-kindness, the grace, the time I've put into finding the right tools for my body. I'm in awe of the hours of strengthening and physical therapy I've done to try and give my muscles and tendons the support they need. I'm in awe of how I continue to return to that practice of conditioning, day after day, when it mostly feels fruitless. Months and months of shitty workouts, but then suddenly I've walked all over Athens and nothing's dislocated. I've just got minor aches and pains, the kind that disappear with ice, Tylenol, and sleep. What kind, committed, generous seed exists inside me that I could give my body that gift? What part of me shows up to a grueling, time-consuming daily routine because she knows it helps enough in the moments that matter? I'm in awe of her and she is me.

I've been doing yoga for three years now, since the pandemic started. It was supposed to increase my strength, balance, and flexibility, and it hasn't by any perceivable metric. There are still numerous poses I'm simply incapable of doing. I keep trying anyway. I keep clicking on the YouTube videos and following along as the instructor tells me how to move, at each stage wondering if I'm doing it wrong. But I keep doing it, because it feels good. Moving to a rhythm that I control feels good. Focusing on my body, a thing I still usually ignore, feels good. Resting in corpse pose after exertion feels fucking fantastic. Alone in my room, unseen even by my teacher, I know I am learning more slowly than someone who dares to ask for help – but I am still learning. There are times when it even feels like dancing.

No one is ever going to think of me or talk of me the way you sing about the subject of this song. I don't possess the type of movement that *moves* other people. At most someone might quote you

saying I move “like an odd sight come out at night.” Like a monster, maybe, or a recluse. But I am out here in the daylight, covered in a misting of SPF 50, trying to build my most atrophied muscle – that mind to body connection that eludes and evades. This song is like a meditation for me. It helps me re-center that focus and reminds me that I show up for me. I care for my disordered mobility through all the obstacles of life. Mechanically, I move me, though the wires might get crossed. Emotionally, metaphorically, whatever the right usages is, I also move me. When I move, I’m moved.