

Dear Hozier,

I grew up believing in heaven. Not hell. In the theology of my old religion, there was no hell. At least, not the fire and brimstone type. More the perpetual solitary confinement type — I guess psychological torment for wrongdoers is more humane, even if it's less cathartic for all the Dantes of the world. Heaven itself was tiered, with contentment and peace beyond our imagination secured for the bulk of humanity, and slightly more contentment and peace going to real goodie two-shoes, and yet more contentment and peace set aside for the elite, the baptized. Just by getting dunked in a miniature swimming pool at age eight, I was told, heaven was in the bag. I'd have to really mess up to lose my first-class seat. Of course, the scope of what constituted a major mistake depended on the Sunday School teacher. It could be anything from outright genocide to masturbating without telling my bishop afterward. At the age when masturbation started to become a temptation rather than merely a curiosity, my bishop happened to be my father. Between eternal solitary confinement and telling him about my sexual fantasies, I chose hell, as many teenagers would.

Hozier, I don't like this song. It lights up the dread in me that I've never been able to shake, the kind that gets built in you when you're too young to feel the nails sinking into the soft parts of your flesh or the scaffolding rising, taking up space where your lungs should be. As a child I was told that I didn't have to fear death because there was something better beyond it. When you're small and anxious, it's nice to have one worry crossed off the seemingly endless list. When you start having panic attacks, when you're existentially unmoored, it's nice to think that even if it's real this time, even if you're dying like your body is so certain you are, well, dying's not so bad. But that's an old song. Religion wouldn't be worth the salt Lot's wife became if it wasn't at least comforting. And I gave up on that comfort when I gave up on church.

In my most lucid, logical moments, it's easy to accept a non-religious worldview, where sentience ends with death, however early or unfair that death might be, and there's no god behind the curtain, keeping score of anyone's sins. Maybe it's even better, I tell myself. I don't believe in retributive justice anyway. I don't believe the god of a world like this could be any kind of judge. But that's what I think when I'm strong. When the sun is shining and people are laughing and I'm not alone with my melancholy. It's when I'm weak, alone and panicking, that the planlessness of it all gets me spooked.

According to you, there's solace in atheism. There's freedom in the surety that we're careening through the universe unguided by any higher power. There is no higher power, no intellect beyond our ken. Our power, so unevenly divided, is all there is. And I get that. I understand, even, from a distance, the comfort of it. When you don't have to worry about divinity or cosmic purpose, you can practice a sort of existential mindfulness, focusing solely on here and now: life, and only life, however brief. If there are no deadly sins stacking up the levels of hell, you can allow yourself some measure of hedonism and enjoy pleasure for what it is. If there are no pearly white gates and infinite happiness beyond them, you can devote more of your time and attention to happiness now. If people die and we lose them, really lose them, then our relationships are all the more essential. In a way, there's more pressure there. But there's also less. Things just are what they appear to be. Meaning is what you make of it. And if *deus ex machina* is off the table, we have to work harder for the world we want.

There are two ways to go on a vacation. Either you have an itinerary or you don't. I refuse to accept the shades of gray between these extremes. A round-trip ticket counts as an itinerary, as does an itemized timetable of activities. And sure, I don't select restaurants ahead of time or

search for the best photo ops, but I believe in having a plan. Functioning without one seems both stupid and irresponsible. If I stretch my imagination, I can get to the counterpoints: flexibility and spontaneity are virtues too, right? But by some quirk of personality or upbringing, I would rather have the tickets than not.

I'm reminded of *The Brothers Karamazov* and Ivan's speech about returning his ticket. Essentially he says that he believes in God but doesn't accept Him: he can't accept a deity who would allow the sorts of horrors that he knows people, innocent people, suffer daily. He says that he thanks God for the ticket – for the plan, the itinerary — but returns it. We are left to interpret whether this is a sign of Ivan's empathy for the humanity around him, an intellectual power move against God, or categorically a sign of depression. Maybe it's all three. (Certainly, by the end of the book, you realize, it's all three.) But any way you slice it, Ivan is interacting with religion. No, not interacting – reacting. He's responding to it. He is rebelling, like the middle child he is, but that is itself an acceptance of God as a reality, the same as if he were obedient, like Alyosha. You can't reject your ticket unless you believe that the train itself exists. Does any of this make sense?

Do I make sense? Is this just a tangle, a Gordian knot of amateur theology and religious trauma? Am I even traumatized? Imposter syndrome gets in the way of really making that claim, which is a fancy way of saying that I don't want to blow things out of proportion. I want to joke. It's not that serious. It wasn't that serious. It was like how my parents forced me to take piano lessons for several years. Mostly annoying. Sometimes unpleasant. Sometimes very rewarding. A time-consuming chore, religion, but I never feared God anymore than I feared my well-meaning, somewhat impatient piano teacher. I knew I'd never amount to any kind of musician, I hated practicing too much, all those repetitive exercises and the unceasing stream of mistakes and the pressure to perform for an audience. But I loved hearing my teacher play. She was brilliant. She'd put in the work. She had it all figured out and knew how to get me there too, if only I listened.

I stopped going to church the same way I stopped taking piano lessons. I don't think my teacher was disappointed; probably she was glad to have an open time slot for a more attentive pupil. It wasn't intentional, really. I didn't like the work, I didn't believe it would ever be worth it, so I just stopped, and it wasn't hard. It was infinitely easy, which is why I still half-think I quit being Mormon out of laziness, not like other people I know, who wrestle with it, aren't afraid to put their intellects and their emotions on the line, aren't afraid to grieve for it. Their reasons are respectable, like Ivan's. They struggled. But I just surrendered. I'm great at performing my high-minded empathy for all the people the church has wronged, my liberal sensibilities about its inherent racism and sexism and homophobia, but the truth is that I never went to war for anyone, not even myself. I didn't wake up. I fell asleep. The part of me that loved God, that clung to the comfort of heaven, that pictured myself a part of a wise and important plan, she just stopped clocking in. I don't know where she went, if she's hibernating or if she's dead. If she ever shows back up, I don't know which of us will be the dragon and which will be the knight in shining armor. I don't know what either of us will be trying to save.

Sometimes my parents talk about heaven and I still believe them. I catch myself only in retrospect. I have to remind myself that I don't believe in that stuff anymore — or do I? I don't personally like the Mormon ideas of heaven and hell any more than I like the more mainstream Christian ones — the divine comedies — but it's not like a higher being would be catering to my preferences when they designed the cosmic schematics. If they were a tyrant, they wouldn't have catered to anyone at all. If they were democratic, there might have been a vote, and I

could as easily have been in the minority as the majority. I pirouette on this logic. There is no proof of God. There is no proof that there is no God. It is comforting to think of being at peace after I die. It is terrifying to think the cost of my peace is someone else's suffering. If you don't believe in heaven, you won't be disappointed when it's not real. However, if you believe in heaven and it's not real, you also won't be disappointed because you'll be dead. There is not an easy answer here.

I want a plan because my alternative is not yours. Where you celebrate freedom, I spiral into fear. You paint a pretty picture, and I envy you, but I just don't know if I believe you. I want to. I try to. I just don't know if that's enough to smooth out this carving on my bones. Was I born afraid of the dark or was that written into me? Does it matter? Keep singing. Maybe one day I'll be able to listen.

Dear Hozier,

I can't write about this song in a coherent way. It means too much to me, comforts an often tightly caged corner of my heart. This is the best offering I have:

*Blue bird, I know your beat, baby / But your secret is safe with me*

For a long time, I thought the lyric was "Blue bird, I know you're beat, baby." You're as in you are. Blue bird, I know you are beat, baby. I know you are tired.

My nephew who died, his name was Caleb Jay. When his parents picked the name, I noted that a jay was a type of bird, just like a wren – Caleb's brother's middle name is Rhen. Different spelling, but it was a nice doubling for the brothers. After that, Caleb developed a symbol. In our family lexicon blue jay = Caleb. There was a blue jay printed on his funeral program. There is a blue jay that nests at Caleb's cousins' house. My brother and sister-in-law have noted that they only see it when the kids are playing outside; Caleb visiting his cousins. I can't think about this too much or I'll start to weep, the type of loud and full body grief that bursts the capillaries around my eyes.

Obviously, this lyric makes me think of him. Blue bird, I know you were beat, baby. Caleb had a rare and difficult heart condition. His poor body was working overtime. He had four heart surgeries in four months. He must have been so very exhausted.

But me, I also think of me when I hear this lyric. My secret is that I, too, am exhausted. And I am angry, and I am afraid. My anger terrifies me. My fear exhausts me. My exhaustion enrages me.

*Honey, enjoy, it's getting' late / There's no plan, there's no hand on the rein*

My earliest memory of being in relationship to God was playing Barbies with my childhood best friend Alecia. I had this great four-story doll house in my room that she and I would play with, just the two of us. I was maybe six? Seven? As we moved our Barbies around their domestic scene I asked her, "Do you think God controls what we do?" Alecia, who would have been seven or eight at the time, fielded the question surprisingly well, though I remember her look of confusion like *why would she ask this?* Alecia answered, "No, I don't think God can even see inside our heads."

This was such a comfort to me, who at such a young age, already believed that someone was watching me. It's a paranoia I've carried all my life, something I know I should likely get checked out by a professional, but I almost forget about it these days. So common. Someone's watching, someone's judging, they can all hear what I'm thinking. I'll be on my best behavior just in case.

*Why would you make out of words / A cage for your own bird? / When it sings so sweet/ The screaming, heaving fuckery of the world?*

All through the aftermath, through the weeks that seeped through me like vomit through a cardboard box, I heard: He's in a better place. He's at peace now. He's with Jesus. He doesn't have to suffer anymore.

In my head I thought: But why isn't Earth the better place? Why does it have to be this bad here? And Caleb was a child, we know nothing about his internal state, peace or otherwise. And he shouldn't be with Jesus, he should be with his family. What right does Jesus have to him?

I didn't say any of this. It wouldn't have done any good. The people around me wanted me to comfort them, not the other way around. Death makes people uncomfortable enough; a baby dying made them desperate, unreachable. God was all they had, so I agreed.

I also didn't say any of this because God is always watching, right? And it's my responsibility to be good. To be kind and Christian, to believe and to forgive. To forgive even God and trust that the divine guides us.

If I had a quarter for every time my mother has told me "God has been good to our family," I'd be rich enough to build a cathedral.

These words and these sentiments are the little bricks and stained-glass windows I've stacked up around the blue bird in my heart. The one that, as this song puts it so nicely, sings so sweet the screaming, heaving fuckery of the world. Maybe we can thank generational wealth and our whiteness for our "luck," for our homes and our access to hospitals, but I don't know if we can thank God. I don't think I know God. I don't think I know His alleged goodness.

And as for Caleb's suffering. When people would say he wasn't suffering anymore, they'd mean he wasn't in pain anymore. I don't want to compare myself to my critically ill nephew, our illnesses and pains are not the same, but every time I heard it, every time I *hear* it, for I hear it still, I can't help but feel an extra barb in me. I'm sick. I'm in pain. Is the best thing I can do die? Is it easier to grieve for the sick than to love them, care for them when they are alive?

*Let it hurl, let the awful song be heard*

[here's where I'd just start screaming if our microphone could handle that type of noise]

*But your secret is safe with me / 'Cause if secrets were like seeds / Keep my body from the fire / Hire a gardener for my grave*

I am so afraid, all the time. Afraid of living. Afraid of dying. Afraid that if I don't say a prayer each night, I'll stop breathing in my sleep.

I don't know why I bother. The night Caleb died I prayed harder than I ever had in my life. I don't know what metric we use to measure prayer – teaspoons or liters, something fluid, or if prayer is more solid, something we'd weigh in tons. But that night I gave all the ocean I had to

beg for Caleb's life. I was bartering, offering myself up like Isaac. If there was some divine ledger, some pound of flesh to be paid, let me balance the debt. Take it out on my body. Give me pain and disease, however much of that equates to a single death, and I will suffer on his behalf. It wasn't good enough.

I wasn't good enough.

I don't think Caleb's death is my fault, I'm not quite that self-flagellating, but sometimes I look back and think, "You didn't pray hard enough. Maybe if you had."

So, the prayers stack up. My mom will say, "Pray for so and so." Caleb's parents will say, "Oh, please pray for so and so." And I will because I feel the weight of them in metric tons.

I hate them.

My secret, one among many, is that I am a small and pathetic creature. Whatever religious rituals I follow, I do so out of anxiety and guilt. We might go so far to say it's a church of obsession and compulsion for me. Even with a spiritual CT scan, I don't know if I could locate anything like belief. If it's there, it's so deeply buried, corroded, dehydrated by the fungal rot that comprises my soul.

Any gardener working on my grave would find themselves in charge of only poisons. Hemlock, nightshade, foxglove.

*What a waste to say the heart could feel apart / Or feel complete, baby*

I do want to believe. Or I think I do, and I think it might be in there. Belief. It might even be bearing fruit, I just can't see it, feel it, hear it beyond all the trappings. I am furious with a God that would allow my nephew to die, a God that would allow all the bad things that happen every day. Where is that God?

Yet, all I do is reach for Him. The world is chaos. When allergies have me by the throat, quite literally threatening to snap my airway shut like a book, all I feel is *God, please don't let me die*. When my niece goes to school, all I think is *God, please no shooters, please let her make it back home*. When the planet is on fire I beg, *God please send rain*.

But am I really just anxiety, top to bottom? Am I just constructing rituals, or is it real, this feeling I get when I see something exceptionally beautiful or joyful, and I start to believe that someone made a lovely home for us? Or, when I think about how a random series of events led me to the love of my life, is that coincidence being unusually kind, or did a gentler, more loving hand nudge me along?

More tellingly, when I shoot off one of those *Please, please, please* and I do feel better, is that simply the comfort of a ritual completed, or could it be the soothing touch of someone who *loves* me, fungal rot and all? Someone who would lovingly rub a circle on the back of my pathetic, furious, guilt-ridden, terrified soul. If God were like that, He'd be quite kind.

Is God out there? Why do bad things happen? What are we supposed to do in this life? What does it mean to be in relationship with God? I'm only thinking about what God does for me and not what I do for God. Have I done anything? Is there anything I could do for an almighty God? Aren't I just supposed to have *faith*? Maybe some good works? Have I done any good works? Do I have any faith to my name? Is Caleb in heaven? Could I get into heaven like this?

Would I want to get in?

*Your secret is safe with me/ 'Cause if secrets were like seeds/ When I'm lying under marble/  
Marvel at flowers you'll have made*

Sometimes I think it would be best if we did just dissolve. Into the Earth and nothing more. But then, what is all this inside me? All this feeling, all this humanity? Just another burden of evolution perhaps, the same as congenital heart defects.

If it was into the Earth and nothing more, I suppose the flowers I'd make would depend on where I was buried. For Utah, maybe yarrow.

*Why would you offer her name / To the same old tired pain? / When all things come from nothin' / And, honey, if nothing's gained / My heart is thrilled by the still of your hand / It's how I know now that you understand / There's no plan, there's no race to be run*

This song gives me a break, five minutes and thirty-one seconds long. I don't have to offer myself up to the same old tired pain of faith or lack thereof. What does it all mean? For five minutes and thirty-one seconds I can sink into the idea that it doesn't mean anything. And if that means no one "out there" or "up there" cares about me or purposefully brings good things into my life, at least it also means that no one "out there" or "up there" allowed all the horrible things to happen. They just happened, and in a convoluted way that comforts me. It allows me to be still.

I think it's quite obvious I could use that.