

Dear Hozier,

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I'm getting sick of thinking about the end of the world. It's weird that it's coming up now; I think of "Wasteland, Baby" as your apocalypse album, and NFWMB doesn't cross over from the "Nina Cried Power" EP. Then again, the four songs on this EP are basically a scattershot of your favorite themes: "Nina Cried Power" is an homage to jazz and R&B musicians, "Shrike" uses grim imagery from the natural world as a metaphor for devotion, and "Common Tongue" is about oral sex. It's beautiful and poetic, but it's the blow job song, and I'm thrilled that those two realities coexist, but that's for another letter. This is about NFWMB and its – and your – preoccupation with the world ending.

Sing to me of my own wrath. Me, who is no one. Not Odysseus in disguise, not even the sheep under which he hid, certainly not Achilles, Peleus' son, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. I am no one. Truly no one, but angry enough for an epic. I am angry at everyone I know. I would chew them up if I could, and, saturated in my saliva, they might finally know the taste of my fear, the fear that they mock. I pace the walls of this wretched tower searching for things to break. There's nothing to satisfy the rage. Glass makes such a satisfying sound when you break it, as if you've crushed the bones of some ancient god – gods of sand, gods of fire. But it's not enough. I want to see my own bones peeking through the broken skin of my knuckles, singing razor hot *I'm not invisible. The cyclops chooses not to see.*

That's reductive. You don't have to tell me. "NFWMB" is much more about a certain type of person, a certain type of lover, who can face the world ending without flinching. The apocalypse imagery is just the first thing I notice, thanks to that Yeats reference in the first verse. The poem you're referencing with the phrase "to Bethlehem it slouched" is literally called "The Second Coming," and although the Biblically prophesied return of Jesus Christ can be viewed as hopeful, it's more frequently rendered in fire and brimstone. The Book of Revelations, from which Christians get most of their Second Coming foreknowledge, is grim and violent and more Cthulian than anyone likes to think about. The softer trappings of religion are pulled back and we're left with angels in their true forms, vast as skyscrapers, with endless eyes. I'm surprised Guillermo del Toro hasn't made a movie about that type of monster yet.

It's an old story now, but unlike the Odyssey and the Iliad, which are continuously retold and reshaped with loving, attentive hands, no one wants to hear this story anymore. COVID-19 variants, Influenza, Monkeypox, vaccines, boosters, masks, isolation. Put it all behind us, forget, forget, forget. Turn from Cassandra, burn Cassandra, whatever you need to do to make her just be quiet. Today my boss told me she had to stay at home all weekend because her truck was in the shop and that "it was like being back in COVID times." I sat there with a smile plastered on my face, wrath held fast behind my teeth, and didn't say that I stay home most weekends because COVID is now for me, as immediate and intimate as the blood in my veins, where the monocytes

(a type of white blood cell helping to fight infection) are teetering on a cliff, 0.2% away from meeting the clinical criteria for being too low. I have the vaccines, the boosters. I trust vaccines. I don't trust my body. My body, the abnormal, would find a way to turn a "relatively mild" COVID variant into a new unbelievable horror. And even if I was "fine," and COVID didn't hospitalize me, has anyone stopped to consider that maybe I just don't want to be sick any more than I have to be?

Yeats leans into that in "The Second Coming." The poem is about a lot of things, World War I and social anxiety, but it's especially about dread. It asks what the end of the world would look like for a world in which mass violence and widespread chaos are central to its everyday functions. Sure, there are a lot of ways it could get better, but the Bible promises us that first it will get worse, and some days that doesn't feel possible. It's a great poem. That opening line, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer"? That's killer. Yeats was a master of his craft, but the themes are as relevant in 2022 as they were a century ago. When you cite it, it's like you're rolling out a rug of all the dread and fear about the future that he packed into that poem and settling it on the floor of your song.

NFWMB is about the end of world, about the narrator's lover who stares down the apocalypse, laughs, that sort of can't-be-fucked-with behavior. They're impressive in their own way, as is the narrator in the song who loves them so dearly. Whether it's good to love someone in the self-sacrificial way the narrator talks about loving them – well, ultimately, it's not, though it makes for some great lines and is an impressive amount of feeling, at the very least. It is also, for better or worse, a feeling I understand. When you say, "If I was born as a blackthorn tree/I'd wanna be felled by you/Held by you/Fuel the pyre of your enemies" these lines vibrate through me, and I *get it*. What a marvelous gift, to have a use at the end of the world.

The music is ominous too. Low, percussive, minor key, and you're sort of whisper-singing. Maybe that's why I always thought of this song as a threat, before I really looked at the lyrics. I heard it a few times and didn't listen to it again, and the wrong words stuck in my mind. Instead of "Nothing fucks with my baby," I remembered, "No one fucks with my baby." So, sort of the musical equivalent of a shovel talk. It's got enough of the hallmarks that I don't think my misinterpretation is terribly off-base: the narrator of the song is possessive, what with all the "my baby" stuff, and then there's that line right after the Yeats reference: "the best of you, honey, belongs to me." And the song hinges on semi-religious devotion, in which the beloved is deified and their lover, the narrator, is reduced to a pagan sacrifice – literally, fuel for the fire. Which is great, and could make its own song, and maybe has, but ultimately I still got it wrong. It's not "no one." It's "nothing." Nothing fucks with my baby.

It's difficult not to think about the apocalypse these days, what with the oceans boiling and the gods turned from Troy the same as Ithaca. As for my friends and family, my so-called community, at the end of the world, I know they would leave me behind. They already do. They go to bars, go to Austria. They don't wear their masks. They walk faster than they know I can

walk, and even when I tell them to slow down, they only slow for a moment, before their body unconsciously moves past me again.

“Fucks,” like all great words, is multifaceted. It’s carrying multiple meanings, and it’s strong enough to stand tall under their weight. *Fuck* is a perjorative. It’s exclamatory. It’s sexual. It can be a noun, a verb, an adverb, an adjective, and a complete sentence. You’ve got to give it credit, the same way you’ve got to give Yeats credit. It’s all poetry. But in this song, in your song, to fuck with someone is to upset them. That seems to be the primary meaning. However, in modern slang, particularly AAVE, “fuck” is also a stand-in word for association. I don’t fuck with spiders means I steer clear of them: passive avoidance. It also means nothing on heaven or Earth could convince me to get close enough to a really spooky-looking one to kill it: active avoidance. There’s a slight but meaningful difference. And if you lay down both those meanings, one on top of the other, you’ll find they compliment each other, like primary colors. The lover, your baby, is both the subject and the object of the sentence; she is upset by nothing, and the whole world stays out of her way.

I wonder if the Minotaur was all that monstrous before they put him in the labyrinth. Some versions of the story say he ate humans and was then shut in the labyrinth, others skip over all that and put him directly in the labyrinth after birth, at which point he was sent sacrifices to eat. The second story feels more accurate to me, but maybe I’m projecting. Each day spent inside my townhome pulls me farther and farther from humanity. It’s the loneliness, sure, in a way. But there’s no crown shyness in this forest. It’s a tangle of dark, interlocking branches where you have to rely on the inhuman parts. The minotaur was half man, but what good could man do in that lonely, unlit labyrinth? Humans need community. Creatures live alone, and it’s creature behavior that saves in forests and labyrinths. Apocalypses. Eat only once every seven years. Drink muddy water off the forest floor. Live alone. Survive in the face of unending solitude.

And as for the solitude, how can you not help but eat the only people that you see?

There’s something appealing about that kind of person. You can see why the narrator of the song is in love with her and even why he would reduce himself to fuel in service to her. It’s reassuring to know someone who is so strong, so unflappable, that they are less a person than a pillar, designed to hold up under immense pressure, unlike the average human body, which can crumple and break after a missed step. I’m reminded of those stories of ship captains, back in the days when sailing was the quickest way to travel the world and the most intense form of warfare. Back in the days of cannons, not torpedoes, when soldiers died under the sky rather than in thick metal coffins. It would’ve been terrifying, trying to do the intense, backbreaking work of handling a vessel, a thing that can only be accomplished in synchronization with dozens of other people, with literal cannonballs being aimed in your direction. How do you unfurl a sail or weigh anchor or whatever other mundane everyday task when, for all you know, in the next instant you could be blown to pieces or die in some other horrible way? For all you know, the ship is sinking, so how do you find the strength to keep going? In those days, I understand, they looked at the captain.

It's a nice metaphor I'm making here, and a comforting one. But I'm not a monster, not a Minotaur. A Minotaur would be helpful at the end of the world. That type of strange strength and seven-year appetite would be a great tool in navigating an apocalypse. I'm just a human, though, just a disabled human who can't walk very far without rest and who needs medications that won't be available in the wasteland. You can't grow allergy medication from a seed. I know plants have the power to tend and mend, but only if the earth can grow them. And I don't know how far herbalism can go for me, the abnormal. I don't know anything. I can't trust anything. I'm afraid.

That was the trade-off, the difference between being a sailor and a captain. The captain didn't have to blister their hands with manual labor, but they had to remain calm even under fire. They didn't have to row the boat, but they had to keep time. The moment they start to panic is the moment everyone else panics too, and there's no saving a world that runs in tandem if every operator is trapped in their own microcosmic apocalypse. A ship is an analog engine, and the captain is the force that keeps the gears turning, the mechanisms whirring in congruity. It is so easy to make things fall apart.

In this song, the narrator asks, "Ain't it warming you, the world gone up in flame?" Through this framing – "ain't it" – it's implied that the narrator's as warmed as their not-to-be-fucked with love. The lover is the terrifying force that laughs and smashes their way through life, but the narrator is protected by that attitude, by virtue of being with them. There's a lot to be written about the relationship dynamics in this song, but I'm too tired for the analysis today. All I have energy for is the surface level affection and longing, that comes through in the way you sing this song. The narrator does love this person, and once again, I get it. This person is the kind you can put your faith in and trust to protect you, even if there are some stipulations. A god. A crossroads demon. Achilles.

I suppose what I'm describing is a quality of leadership, but I've seen non-leaders with that trait too. There's a Venn diagram there that I won't bother drawing. Suffice it to say that I've never wanted to be a leader, but a part of me has always wanted to be that type of person, and a part of me was, and a part of me still is. It used to take a lot to make me flinch. Now I jump straight to panic when I hear unexpected noises, like a shellshocked soldier. The only thing I've still got is my straight face. I'm great at looking calm in a crisis, even while, on the inside, I'm drowning. I suppose if someone needed to look to me for reassurance, they'd find it. I don't know where I'd look, though. And I'm well-aware that every mask breaks eventually.

I'm afraid and I want to be protected. I want to be a monster or a hero that can protect myself. I want to laugh through life like bricks through windows. I want to be warmed by the end of the world, but it freezes me. Robert Frost famously posits whether the world will end in fire or in ice. Maybe the element of the apocalypse depends on how suited you are for it. I am ice and when this boiling planet melts me down, my friends and family will drink every last drop.

I'm learning that unflappable people are generally unflappable because they're faking, like me, or because they feel they have no choice, like the captain of a maybe-sinking ship, or because they're deadened to the world. And that's not admirable, actually. A person who is affected by nothing needs nothing. They don't ever need help, but they also don't need you. Maybe that's their preference; on some level I see the appeal. Both sides of dependency are frightening; it's why I'm not cut out to be a parent and why I'm not cut out to be my parents' daughter. But healthy relationships, relationships that last, are give and take. It's not enough to give to another person, though that's necessary. You have to be willing to take from them too, to accept comfort, attention, care. That fuel-for-the-fire and fire-starter equation doesn't add up. On one side it's pure give; on the other it's pure take. What is the narrator of this song getting from it? As far as I can tell, nothing. They're just on fire.

Icarus, too, was imprisoned by the labyrinth. Trapped with his father, the labyrinth's architect, to hide the secret of how to solve the maze. Icarus was isolated. He couldn't go to bars, couldn't go to Austria. He spent every weekend at home, whether his truck was in the shop or not. Of course he, on that butter warm day when he finally went outside, flew to close to the sun, no matter the cost. Many days I want to do the same. I isolate myself to stay alive, but I imagine how sweet and total the joy would be, even as I fell, to have been in charge of where I went again, one last time. Today, Icarus is disabled. Tomorrow, Icarus will be one more burning thing in the ocean.

We're back to the apocalypse. So I'll say it, Hozier. This lover you're describing looks cool from a distance, but up close I hate their guts. Unflappability in the face of global disaster might be comforting, but I wouldn't call it admirable, and I sure as heaven and hell wouldn't call it romantic. What do you get when someone turns a blind eye to the apocalypse? Nothing. What do you get when a billion people turn a blind eye to the apocalypse? What do you get when a dozen billionaires turn a blind eye to the apocalypse? You just get the apocalypse. You just get fire.