

Sally: Dear Hozier,

Emily: Dear Hozier,

Sally: I hate painkillers.

I loathe them. I hate anything that numbs me. I have mild to severe chronic pain (depending on the day) and I hate painkillers. I think figures like your angel of the codeine scene, whether they are condemned or celebrated, are a big part of this. Let me explain, if I can.

Emily: My first of two confessions is that “Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene” isn’t one of my favorites. Of course it’s as beautiful and poetic as the rest of your work. I will also argue that it’s thematically similar. But despite knowing that it fits, for me, this song lacks the *je ne sais quoi* that I find elsewhere. Songs like “From Eden” and “Like Real People Do” make my heart ache as though from overuse. This one doesn’t.

Sally: Pain. How to write about pain? Metaphors, right? Has to be. I’m good at metaphors for pain – a needle pulling an unknotted steel thread through my eye to the back of my skull. My neck is Atlas’ neck, so weary, the nerves not built for this weight. My uterus is the loyal collie, barking to alert me when there is trouble in the well of my own sick body.

Emily: As the second song on your first studio album, this sets the stage for many of the themes present in the rest of the album and perhaps your discography as a whole. It’s sandwiched between “Take Me to Church,” a song that evokes fervent melancholy, and “Jackie and Wilson,” which reaches the height of euphoria. Based on title alone, it’s the most coyly sexual song -- “small death” is a euphemism for orgasm, after all, from the original French “le petit mort” -- but in terms of lyrics, it’s neck-and-neck with “Cherry Wine.”

The music itself, though. What a beat. What a rhythm.

Sally: Metaphors are a good coping mechanism when I’m lying alone in the dark and pain is bouncing between my joints like balls in a pinball machine, but it always dissatisfies me. My pain is not a metaphor. My body is not a metaphor. Some days pain is the only real thing in my life. But you can’t *describe* pain. “It hurts” means nothing. So, we use metaphors to write around the things our language cannot reach. Trauma, war, pain. Love, lust, the universe.

Emily: The song’s sexual undertones (or overtones, if that’s your preference) are just the beginning. The “codeine scene” in the title and the chorus refers to prescription drug use; a later song in the album explicitly references heroin, and the central metaphor of “Sedated” is, obviously, a sedative. Every facet of drug use is explored throughout the album, but in “Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene” it’s framed right next to sex in its addictive power as well

as in its capacity to provide salvation. After all, the lover in this song is an angel. Angels do a lot of things, but first and foremost, they save.

So what does the angel of small death and the codeine scene save you from?

Sally: Today I am in a lot of pain. I don't want to be. I know that should be obvious, but sometimes I worry that I do want the pain. That I don't know who I'd be without it. Then I remember. It hurts.

All the same, I don't like painkillers. I don't like relying on them. I don't like the miserable, spiking realization that they haven't worked, like they haven't today. I don't like how they fuzz the edges of me, turning me into a non-body. I have spent my years in a non-body, thank you very much. I have served my time not noticing how the days run together and I am only breathing, not living or even surviving. Just breathing because it is reflex, and I wouldn't spare the time to think of my own life because nothing mattered to me so little as my own wretched life. I woke up from this miserable foggy right around the time my head started to explode once or twice a week. Correlation? Maybe. Causation? No. The timing was not my nor my head's decision, but all the same I learned to know my body when it's sharp. Pain is my lighthouse.

Emily: The song has a narrative. In the first verse, the narrator seems to be watching his peers "shaking the wings of their terrible youths," interacting with each other and the world on a fine tightrope "between love and abuse." The rhyme of the first and third lines are "boyful" and "joyful." It sets a scene where the narrator's "kin" -- perhaps in a literal sense but more likely in an umbrella-ish way, "kin" being other people, other humans -- are thoughtless, flighty, and free. They lack both physical and emotional constraints.

Sally: I don't say this to romanticize pain, only to try and convey my own experience. Pain. Fucking. Sucks, Hozier. I'm crying as I write this because it *hurts*. But the pain does guide me towards better behaviors. Like drinking water. I wouldn't be so religious about my hydration if dehydration didn't trigger headaches that linger and linger. And linger. My dislike of pain killers doesn't have anything to do with loving the pain, but I don't want to spend any more time on that, because if you don't want to believe me then you won't no matter what I say. I have plenty of experience to know what others think of my pain, and how little they actually think on it. Their judgement is a reflex, just like breathing.

Emily: The narrator, however, has until recently been trapped in a "frozen devotion." While his kin have wings to shake and voices to prompt the narrator to join them, the narrator can only stumble, stray dog-like, into company, "no more alone," uncharacteristic of his usual pursuits ("or myself could I be"). The narrator is so hurt or so numb that he lacks discernment or selective power. He doesn't choose who to be with. He goes straight to "the arms that are open."

Sally: How does this all connect to your angel of the codeine scene? Well, she's a trope, dear lad, practically an archetype. And I hate her.

The beautiful woman who is dangerous, but fragile (never too powerful of course). Who is damaged and messy but oh so beautiful. Who is thin and mellow and chained to some substance, but the man can't help loving her for this weakness. Besides, the pills, or whatever it is, *do* mellow her out, make her stop feeling things, make her *real* because her pain is too much to bear. Yet somehow, through her unbearable pain, the man ends up feeling more alive.

Emily: However, the arms in question belong to not just anyone but to the angel of small death and the codeine scene. We get exactly four descriptors for her: first, she has "sweetened breath," perhaps due to drug use. Her "tongue so mean" could be referring to cruelty or it could be referring to the fact that it is seldom used. Or, in a sexual context, it could be both. Pleasure and denial exist side by side, after all. Thirdly, the angel has straw-blond hair, which humanizes her in a way that sex and drugs can't. Angels typically have golden or silver hair. Hers is straw-blond. The visual is pastoral and plain and endearing. Fourthly, she has arms hard and lean. She has physicality. She has strength.

Sally: I've taken my fair share of pain meds whether I like them or not. Sometimes pain is too much to bear, and in those moments, I'll admit I am grateful for one sliver less of pain biting into me. But I am not mellow. I am high strung, and I don't want to stop feeling things. When I tell people I am in pain, even the people I love the most in this world, will ask me what I've taken for it. As if to say, "Pain should not be a problem for you. Kill it. Get high. Get mellow." There is never any space for my pain. There is only the assumption that I, too, should be an angel of the codeine scene. Women, the consensus appears to be, should never dare inconvenience the world with their pain.

Emily: In the second verse, the narrator has recovered somewhat from his numbness and neediness and "feels more human." Human enough, and addicted enough -- and don't those two adjectives fit so neatly together? -- to lay his heart at her feet. This verse is rich in alliteration and in imagery. You can almost smell it. The pile of bloody, raw hearts offered up to this woman. Remember *Take Me to Church*? Pagan-like, worship and sacrifice are synonyms to you. Horror and beauty exist side by side.

Sally: Studies have shown time and time again that doctors don't believe women about their pain the way they believe men. Generally speaking, doctors don't do great with pain at all. *Everyone's just after painkillers*, the doctors assume. Not all, surely, but enough. There are enough doctors out there like the doctor (female) who I went to see in college when the pain in my foot was so unbearable and stomach turning that my mom drove me to the instacare, both of us pale and

miserable. I could hardly walk. My *mom* was with me. The doctor told me I was fine, that she couldn't do anything for me, couldn't give me any pain medication.

Emily: The pastoral freshness of the second verse also contrasts with the return to urban sterilization in the bridge. In this verse, we're "fresh from the fields," which are "feter and fertile." In the bridge, however, the narrator "wanders the concrete," again invoking the imagery of a stray dog by calling himself leash-less. That second verse is the high point of the song (pun intended), the crest of sexual desire, of devotion, of fertility. One chorus later, and it descends. However, the narrator still has his capacity to reason and to judge and to ultimately declare "I'm alive." Through an unusual medicine of sex and drugs, the angel has saved him. Whether he stays with her or departs is ultimately not the question. The epiphany of the song is that recovery is possible.

Sally: I sobbed in the parking lot. I'd never been so ashamed – of myself, of my feet, of my pain. I didn't want painkillers. I wouldn't have even taken them, most likely. I still have the same bottle of 800mg Ibuprofen I was given five years ago, because I've taken them so sparingly. All I wanted from this doctor was for her to use her eight years plus of medical school to tell me why I *hurt* so much. But to her I was not a person. I was an angel of the codeine scene seeking. Hungry and seeking and using my beautiful and worried mother to mine her instacare for painkillers.

Eventually, I found out I had peroneal tendonitis caused by the particular structure of my foot. My older brother helped me figure this out, because he'd also had chronic tendonitis and was one of the only people who believed me about how much pain I was in.

Emily: "The Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene" argues that it doesn't take the Platonic ideal of romance or a meeting of soulmates to pull someone out of their loneliness and their pain. Physicality, sensuality, are as redemptive as "true love." I agree with that. I agree that the world is a chemical swamp, that the channels of my brain are bayous. I believe I'd need more education to understand it fully. I only got a B minus in high school chemistry. But I know that Tylenol can dull my headache. I know that orgasm can dilute my anxiety. I know that those moments feel a lot like salvation.

Sally: I truly do not care what other people put in their bodies. It is not my business. My business is my body, and I am tired of defending it against those who say be the angel, and those who shut me out because they assume I am the angel.

Emily: I know this too, my second confession, if you're reading closely (and usually I confess so much more): I resent being saved by anyone other than myself.

Sally: I'm not an angel (most women aren't, by the by). I'm not a metaphor. I'm not something to be pitied. I'm not half a person. I'm just a person in a lot of pain most of the time. Bloody and raw but I swear I am sweet.