Dear Hozier,

From where I sit working most afternoons, I have a view of the neighboring apartment complex's parking lot. It's neither beautiful nor particularly interesting scenery; I can't see into anyone's windows to spot a murder-in-progress, and the only regularly occurring dramatics are car alarms and dogs nosing the sidewalk. I do, however, catch frequent glimpses of a pair of Mormon missionaries, very young men in white button-down shirts and ties, their name tags paired these days with cloth face masks. It's possible they live in one of the apartments; missionary housing is not usually above the standard of, say, college sophomore living. It's more likely that they're visiting someone or multiple someones. In suburban Utah, this is a small miracle. People here can't be caught by religious sneak attacks; they're familiar with the state's predominant religion, and if they're not already holding to the iron rod, they're firmly rooted in the great and spacious building. That's a joke, see, that no one but other ex-Mormons will get. I mean that here in Utah, if you're not already a member of the Church, you steer clear of it.

Take most of my friends, for example. In a sample size of four, all of whom were born in Utah or Idaho, the two states which make up the bulk of Mormon Country, one was raised without religion and remains an atheist, one attended Catholic school but no longer practices, one has a father who's a Jehovah's Witness but is otherwise unaffiliated, and one is, like me, an ex-Mormon. Though his entire family seems to have left the Church; most of mine is still entrenched. The four of them represent the usual range of attitudes toward Mormonism: there's a sense of superiority, a lot of contempt, a healthy dose of morbid curiosity and skepticism, and anger. You can't blame them. They live in a place where church and state are inextricably tied together, meaning that their lives are heavily influenced by someone else's faith. Many of them were bullied or ostracized in their public school years because they were members of the minority. Contempt is a hard-won defense mechanism. When they want to rail against how unfair it is, I stay mostly silent. Until fairly recently, I was part of the majority group myself. In a way, I feel like I haven't earned the right to anger yet.

When I look at those missionaries crossing the parking lot, I don't feel irritation or an instinct to hide the way my friends would. Maybe hiding isn't the right word; it implies fear, and I know they're not afraid. Only, if you're not Mormon and you let a missionary get within speaking distance, you've got to gear up for the in-person equivalent of a telemarketing call. It's bound to be emotionally exhausting. Polite refusals sometimes aren't enough; if you say you're not interested, they'll ask, "Why not?" because they're looking for an opening. You have to deal with their verbal poking and prodding at potentially sensitive areas, and the whole time you have to deal with the shitty poker faces of two nineteen-year-olds. If you say you don't believe in God, you see their judgment written on their faces.

If you asked me now whether I believe in God, I'd be afraid.

I grew up on the other side of the tracks, as it were, church on Sunday in shoes that pinched my feet, youth activities on Wednesdays, prayers every night kneeling next to my bed, scriptures in my backpack. Surrounded by a cloud of latent pressure, from peers and adults alike, to share

my testimony, to profess my religious beliefs, at any given opportunity. To walk a narrow line without detours or pauses -- there's that iron rod again -- all the way to its predetermined destination: a nametag pinned to my blouse, maybe. A wedding in a white castle, definitely, to a man -- of course a man. Then a lot of confusing and joyless penetrative sex, until I became pregnant. And after that it was all a blank; the only thing I could see in the crystal ball was my mother's face. Not a bad face. Not an unhappy face. But not my face.

So I don't feel contempt when I see the missionaries because I so easily might have been one of them. I wasn't. When I thought of pinning on a nametag and traveling, of asking strangers whether they believed in God and whether they'd like to believe in My God, I felt no excitement, only a sense of dread. Of imposition. It occurred to me that if anyone in this hypothetical other country really wanted to become acquainted with my God, Google was at their fingertips. Oh, it might tell them the bad as well as the good, but I was a proponent of informed consent long before I knew what that meant. And anyway, even then I didn't like the idea of handing anyone a Book of Mormon and telling them it had all the answers. It definitively doesn't. I'd have been more comfortable passing out Crime and Punishment, which at least felt like a better guidebook for practical religion, but Dostoyevsky's not exactly short-winded. If I'd tried it, carrying a dozen copies of a Russian novel, I would've pulled a muscle. And probably also been -- well, whatever the Mormon missionary version of a court-martial is.

I don't regret my decision. Sure, it could've been an interesting travel opportunity, but I'm now better acquainted with the long and awful history of missionary work, and I'm happy I never added my name to that list. I know about the Spanish missions now, the forced conversions of Native Americans and enslaved Africans, the Catholic boarding schools where priests and nuns tried to scrub children's cultures and legacies off their skin. I know now how patriarchal it sounds to say that one's faith is better than anyone else's. Claims of religious supremacy are written in blood. I am a pacifist. It's a joke, in my family, that I lack the competitive spirit shared by everyone else. They're right. All three of my siblings went on missions, and when we play cards, I'm the first to fold.

I still occasionally tend church functions -- or I did, before the pandemic, and probably will again when it's safe to do so -- not out of faith but out of obligation. If one of my parents or siblings is speaking in a meeting, in front of a congregation of hundreds, I will add my face and my support to the crowd. It's jarring but familiar. The ease with which I can slip back into old patterns is frightening. During those meetings, we are passed the sacrament -- small pieces of bread and small cups of water to represent Jesus's body and blood, a ritual not unlike Communion. You're not supposed to eat the bread or drink the water unless you're what the church calls worthy. That doesn't have to mean you're a practicing member, but when I tally up my various sins, skepticism among them, I know I should abstain. I don't. I hardly even think about it; it's too automatic, reaching for the bread, placing it on my tongue to melt and congeal into a pebble of preservatives, slimy when it goes down my throat. I was taught that this is an offense worthy of punishment in the afterlife, that taking part in this sacred ritual when I don't actually believe it could save me is an insult to God. But I keep doing it. I don't know if I'm daring God to try it or if

I just don't want my mother to see how I pass on salvation like it's a dish at a restaurant I'm not interested in trying.

"Foreigner's God" is about a woman, like most of your songs are, this one pagan and wild, in the tradition of "Take Me to Church." You say she "Moves with shameless wonder," and that line always makes me ache. I want to be her, you see. I don't want the shame I carry; who would? I like to fantasize about the land she comes from, "godless and free." I like to daydream that I was raised there.

But I wasn't, and when I listen to "Foreigner's God," I can't help but identify with the narrator, whose "heart is heavy with the hate of some other man's beliefs," who can't provide safety to his lover because he was born into a religion of conquest. He might be a skeptic now, but the "liar's thunder" is still his birthright, his inheritance. His damage, his empty parts are secondary to the reality that the God he cries out to automatically in pleasure or in pain is the same God who made him empty in the first place.

My language is my own. In America, I'm part of the dominant caste in that I'm white, and in the region where I live, I have been part of the dominant religious caste, the Mormon church. To be Irish, as I understand it, is to know that Catholicism, the nation's predominant religion, was installed by invaders and colonizers. Mormonism is a little different. The colonization is ongoing, and it is annoying rather than outright violent due to its small scale. Line up all the boys in girls in their white shirts and name tags, and you will count many fewer than 100,000. It simply isn't possible for them to wreak damage on a widespread level. The damage, then, is more personal. It's how I have to live with the knowledge that if I ever make love to a woman, I will have to reconcile with the part of me that was taught to be disgusted by love that, to me, should feel natural and glorious and *good.*

In medical terms, there's such a thing as a foreign object. This can be run of the mill, like a piece of grit in your eye, or comedic, like a lightbulb inserted via the rectum, or as serious as a stab wound. The goal in medicine, as I understand it, is always to extract it without further harming the patient. If religion is a foreign object, I have nearly a decade to prove that it's not possible to remove entirely. Splinters remain. Shrapnel embedded in the lungs. You just hope it turns up in X-rays, that it's visible to someone other than you.