

Sally: Dear Hozier,

Emily: Dear Hozier,

I love this song and have a hard time expressing why. I know that to a certain extent, I like it just because I like it. Some music sticks in my head, and some doesn't. There is no universally beloved song, although I have to imagine that "Under Pressure" by Queen and David Bowie is as close as it gets. Everyone has different configurations of musical taste buds, and I find this song sweet.

If I could self-select an archetype, it would be the mystic. The oracle, the witch, the magician, the seer. Whatever you want to call it is fine by me, so long as it's grafted in some other reality. Half my mind (or more) there, and the rest here.

I know also that the relationship dynamics expressed in this song, certain lyrics, certain notes of longing, make me think of a few of my favorite stories. I have been bookish my whole life, more comfortable with pages than with people. I've learned to disguise my preferences; when my family goes out to eat, I no longer bring a book and read it under the table, like I did when I was thirteen. I'll never be an extraordinary conversationalist, but I'm a passable one. In the right situations, I am even charming, not because I want to be but because I'm a survivalist. But if life shifted to accommodate our pleasures and our comforts the way we wish it would, I'd be reading all the time.

This desire to be elsewhere when forced to be to be here is my oldest wish. It was planted and grown during a very, very lonely childhood when I was always the youngest and least interesting thing in the room. The commandments that defined family gatherings were "do not speak even if spoken to" and "children are meant to neither be seen nor heard." I learned the consequences of breaking these commandments early enough – it's *a look* or *a tone of voice*. It's the sound of disdain and annoyance on the sidewalk in front of my childhood home as I cry about my second grade daily oral language assignments, because they're just so *hard* and I'm always *so worried* about getting them wrong, and my father tells me he's cut people open before so there's nothing in grammar to be stressed or upset about. It's being yelled at in the grocery store for asking if we can get ice cream and feeling so terrified when I am told no that I say, "I was just kidding!" only for my mom to yell more, and louder. So loud the old man over there looks and I burn with something I don't know yet and can't name. It's the neighbors' mom laughing at me because I'm six and I like bologna sandwiches after school. It's my grandfather handing me a broom to sweep the front porch with the implicit *be quiet and be useful. Be quiet and be useful. Be quiet and be useful. Be quiet and be useful.* It's the mantra of safety. For that something that burns, that feeling of consequence is a bone deep memory that to this day still brings up the bile of lava hot shame that makes it difficult to say anything. Even now. Decades later. It's not better to say nothing, but it is certainly safer.

And then I think maybe it's something about the religious imagery that makes me love "From Eden." It's less potent than it is in "Take Me to Church" but pivotal to the song regardless. It's in the title, for God's sake; unless you have a baseline understanding of Christian theology, the lyrics are meaningless at best. I don't envy anyone their ignorance of Biblical lore -- some days I wish I could empty my head of religion and make space for things less unwieldy, less sharp-edged, less prone to draw blood. But I don't know if I'd trade this song for that space. I don't know what I'd give for my understanding of God.

For the child that was me, is me, escape was a wish so fervent it carried weight in our chest, like a flock of anxious songbirds. All we wanted was to be the type of creature that dogs and trees talked to, in the hopes they might say something other than *be quiet and be useful. Be quiet and be useful. Be quiet and be useful.* It's not unusual for lonely children to dream of friends, but I couldn't take the chance of dreaming of people friends. I'd tried humans already. They didn't seem to like me.

"Innocence died screaming?" No, not for me. Innocence, wonder, delight – whatever childlike feelings a child is meant to be entitled to – were suffocated under a thousand silent *looks*, a million subtle *tones of voice*.

Speaking of God and speaking of books. One of my favorite novels is Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov." It's thick and incredibly Russian, and there are a lot of jokes about Polish people that I'm sure made sense in the late nineteenth century but completely fly over my head now. I read it in high school and haven't gone back to it since. I think I'm afraid. In retrospect it's brilliant and life-changing, but maybe it won't be, a decade later. I don't want to lose that feeling of epiphany, of being wholly understood by a dead Russian novelist, a feeling which itself is linked to my connection with my father, now so damaged it's on life-support.

But why am I writing about archetypes? Because you're singing about the serpent, the devil, that creature that "slithered here from Eden," if anyone would check my analysis. And you also write about a hanged man, which of course calls up imagery of lynching (which I honestly don't know what to do with, dear lad), but also of Odin, who hung himself from the tree of life for knowledge. Tarot cards have hanged men and devils, and hanged men and devils are archetypal – trickers, usually of some sort. If we've learned anything from this project thus far it's that I have an associative brain that should be good for poetry but isn't because I'm too self-conscious for good poetry. That's what they give you when they rear you with a hand that cracks that fragile pottery at the center sense of self. Not a conscience, but a self-conscious that makes it impossible to see the metrics of good and evil when you are still just trying to find the metric of safety. In this way, I wouldn't be a good archetype either, really, much less a good mystic. Archetypes, mystics, poets, devils – all those folk deal in absolutes, and I can't remember a day when I felt absolute ground under my feet. When I wouldn't quadruple check the sky was blue if someone challenged me on it. And then spend the rest of my life checking, checking, checking.

Here's what you need to know about the book. No spoilers, I promise. The titular brothers are Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha. Dmitri, the eldest, is passionate, physical, prone to grand romantic gestures and foolish mistakes. Ivan, the middle son, is an intellectual, arrogant and isolated from the rest of his family. The youngest, Alyosha, is training to become a monk in the Russian Orthodox church. He's humble, spiritual, beloved by his family and, really, everyone he meets. When their father is murdered, Dmitri is the prime suspect, and all three sons have to come to terms with his violent end in their own ways. It's both a murder mystery and a courtroom drama, and that alone would be enough to secure my interest, but there's more.

While the murder is the core of the plot, the axis around which the story turns is an early conversation between Ivan and Alyosha. Here, Ivan justifies his atheism to his religious younger brother by arguing that a loving God could never allow the rampant cruelty and suffering in the world. But because he's Russian in the late nineteenth century, because he was undoubtedly raised in religion or at least in close proximity to religion, he understands that the problem of pain goes deeper than that. He knows the common Christian counterarguments, and he understands the idea that by God's grace, in heaven, all that suffering and all that pain, felt by innocents, felt by children, will somehow be rendered meaningful. That some kind of curtain will rise, and it will all make sense. All questions will be answered, all pain will be healed, and all crimes will be forgiven. He understands that idea and rejects it. He doesn't want to forgive the murderers of children, and he doesn't believe it's possible to make sense of those awful deaths. And if that's the inevitable destination, he says, he doesn't want it. "It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha," he says. "Only I most respectfully return him the ticket."

What I was unprepared for, what my life of quiet and useful made me horribly ill-prepared to deal with, was the anger. Shame, I know. Fear, I know. Small, I know. Useful, I know. But anger is not small, not useful, it gives shame the day off, usurps fear. It is all encompassing. A poison far too heavy that is eating me alive. I need it out, out, out like the damned spot it is. I need it off my skin. I need it to stop needling my brain and calcifying my heart. I need it gone, but there is nowhere to put it. There is nowhere I can set this fury down where it won't just chew its hole through someone else. I know this because I've tried, so many times, to get it to others, but I cannot do it. This gives me hope in myself, makes me believe they didn't actually ruin me at all. And if I can just believe that just a little bit each day ... if I can just believe that ...

Literary critics and casual readers alike love that part of the book, but I have yet to find anyone who shares my interest in another of the scenes in which Ivan grapples with religion. By the end of the book, his guilt over his father's death is driving him to a full mental breakdown. There's a sequence in which he talks to the devil. It's a hallucination, of course, but Ivan doesn't know that. The devil recites a short story that Ivan wrote when he was in high school, about an atheist philosopher who dies and is outraged to discover himself transported to the Christian afterlife. For his rejection of God's grace, he is sentenced to walk a quadrillion kilometers, at which point the gates of heaven will open, and he will be forgiven. He walks the quadrillion, still bitter and resentful, but when his punishment is complete and heaven is opened to him, he is so overjoyed

by what he sees -- whatever he sees -- that within two seconds of being in Paradise, he is rejoicing so loudly that the heavenly host is scandalized by his enthusiasm.

It's a charming story, and it betrays so much about Ivan, who values logic so highly, whose philosophical reasoning has driven him to nihilism. And at first you might think, it's just a story he wrote, another of the stepping stones to his ultimate conclusion that religion should not just be disbelieved but rejected entirely. But a scant few pages later, as we're caught up in the Law and Order-like courtroom drama of Dmitri's trial for patricide, Ivan bursts in, ostensibly to bear witness for his brother. But he's raving. In the time he's been off-screen, he's spiraled further. As the lawyers and the judges try to make sense of his incoherence, try to parse whether his story is a confession or even reliable, he cries, wretchedly, "I would give a quadrillion quadrillions for two seconds of joy."

Of course, if I cannot live with the anger and I cannot give it away, then the only option is forgiveness, and I have absolutely no idea how to go about that. Because I do not feel forgiving of the fact that I have to give to myself all the love and grace a child should have received. I do not feel forgiving that I have never once felt one hundred percent, without a doubt, worthy to be alive and to be loved. This is another reason I still hope for some mysticism to bless me. The animals and the mystics seem to understand, better than I do at any rate, the higher things in life, and the words of forgiveness might be easier to say in the language of blue jays.

I know it's a long story -- it's a long book -- but it means something to me. I relate to Ivan. I relate to his problems, to his trains of thought, to his internal struggle. I was raised believing in God; religion is still the most important thing to the members of my family. But somewhere along the line, I lost whatever faith I'd been fed. When my family talks about God now, when they express their belief that my recently deceased grandmother is in a better place, I am silent and standoffish. You see, I never stopped reading books under the table while the rest of them talk and laugh. Things change, but things also stay the same.

Yet a part of me longs for the belief I've lost, or maybe it's that I want, badly, secretly, to be proven wrong. Even as I tell myself that I want nothing to do with a god whose religion made me feel worthless, I know I would walk however many kilometers it took for proof that I'm not.

But blue jays do not speak to me. Trees are not my extra special friends, any more than they are friends to all of us. I don't get to enjoy another reality where things are magical and ethereal and the quietness I've been burdened with is perceived by others as something powerful, something to be revered. With none of that, all I'm left with in terms of forgiveness is myself. It's something I will have to discover without the help of an animal familiar or a ley line. Just me, my anger, my shame, and the quiet. There's something wretched about this. Something so precious about this.

"From Eden" is about the serpent who tempted Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. A single bite condemned her and the rest of the human race to, well, life. Lives full of misery, lives

full of evil, lives cut brutally short. In Mormon theology -- in the religion in which I was raised -- Eve is not weak or stupid or inferior for eating the fruit. Rather, because in Mormonism, God always intended the fruit to be eaten -- otherwise why create the fruit at all? -- Eve is a wise leader taking the next, crucial step in the human journey on behalf of all humans everywhere. Which is a nice spin, if you resent the misogynistic repercussions of the traditional story, but I still wonder about the snake. If Eve was actually just acting according to the script, was the serpent as well? Wasn't he actually doing something good? Or was he outmaneuvered, forced blindly into checkmate by God's omniscience? Or was he just doing what his nature demanded of him?

The quietness rears its ugly head as I write this, telling me how no one will be interested and that this is far too self-indulgent. It might be right, but if they don't want to hear it, they don't have to listen. That was the point of the whole serpent -- fruit -- Eve thing, right? Free will, or what have you? Free to hurt, or to heal. Though that hardly feels like a fair choice. But I'll take what I can get.

I was raised to think of myself as another Eve, and instead I find myself relating to the snake. I am well-versed in temptation, less familiar with salvation. I am Ivan, begging those around me to listen to reason even as I betray my desire to be wrong. I don't know when it happened or what went wrong or right. Innocence died screaming indeed. I am acutely aware of what I've lost, just as I can put what I've gained into quantifiable terms. But even knowing the numbers, I can't do the math. I don't know which way the scale falls and probably never will. I know that it is tragic, it is magic, it is wretched, it is precious. I know that it is nonsensical and also, sometimes, the only thing that makes any sense to me at all. I know that this song makes my heart break every time I hear it. Thank you for that. But also, a tiny bit, fuck you, and fuck Dostoyevsky. I mean that with love.