

Dear Hozier

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This song, of course, makes me think of the animals in my life. Most often on my mind -- and currently on my lap -- is Tybalt. I won't say that we've "had" Tybalt -- the ownership of cats being so often disputed by the cats themselves -- but he's lived with us for two and a half years now, the roommate who contributes least to the logistical functioning of the household but who represents the gooey marshmallow center of our emotional equilibrium. To say that we picked him at the animal shelter would be a misrepresentation of the facts: in reality, he reached his paw through his cage as I walked by and snagged the hem of my sweater. When we were led to a private room to see how he'd react to our presence, he allowed us to pet him and purred as loud as a chainsaw.

My dog died this year. His name was Duke. He was my brother's dog first, but I named him. Several years before he was born, actually. When my brother mentioned wanting a dog, I said he could name it after Duke, his favorite college basketball team. A few years later I drove up to Idaho with my brother to pick Duke up from a breeder. My brother specifically wanted a husky, so he bought a puppy rather than adopted. There's nothing I can say against this, because Duke was the perfect dog. Knowing what I know now, after being lucky enough to call him ours for ten years, I would have emptied my bank account in Idaho Falls in order to bring him home with me.

That's a sweet, tender story, but knowing Tybalt now, I doubt he meant it that way. It probably wasn't that he wanted to be taken home by us but that a button on my sweater gleamed at him, and he wanted to examine it more closely. It was less a "take me with you" gesture than "hold on a minute." He's a curious, contrary creature, like all cats, and his affection is inherently selfish. He doesn't provide comfort; he receives it. He doesn't entertain; he is entertained. He snuggles not for love or nearness but for his own warmth and sense of safety.

But that's all animals, not just cats. We assume a great deal about their personalities and interior lives; we impose and project our own ideals about family and loyalty onto them because it's comforting to us. We're all selfish in that way. I won't say that pets don't ever love their owners or even that Tybalt doesn't love us, only that they do so in their own peculiar ways. I think it's a kind of love, the way Tybalt goes to sleep at night midway between our bedrooms, so he can hear both of us breathing. I think his outrage when we stray from our routines is a kind of love. Since he's a cat, not a human, I don't have to question his motivations and desires too closely. He can't abuse us or neglect us or miscommunicate with us; he's simple. He's a fluffy receptacle for our affection, a houseguest who we had to invite in, like a vampire, and who doesn't drink our blood but does occasionally bite. His thoughts and feelings are as much a mystery to us as ours are to him. That we've found a way to cohabitate regardless says something about humans and something about animals; I'm just not sure what it is.

I was sixteen when I rode with my brother to pick up a puppy. I remember because we spent time on the ride up to Idaho Falls talking about my college applications. My brother has always been my biggest supporter, maybe even more so than my mom. Of course my mom is always there to comfort and encourage and help, but my brother always feeds the flames of my ambition, and my ambition is almost dangerous. A snake in the grass. I want to accomplish. I want to be impressive. I want to do more, do the best, be the best, climb higher, higher, higher. My brother supported my sixteen-year-old dream to go to college at some place like Duke or Stanford or Harvard, and on that ride up to Idaho Falls he helped me think through some of the logistics of the application process. This was such a kindness, and such a waste of time. Ultimately, financial concerns prevented me from applying anywhere but the two colleges in Salt Lake City, but my brother helped me with those applications, too. He came on one of those tours with me, helping me ask the right questions and look for the right red flags. Such kindness. Later, it would be him who encouraged me to study abroad, who encouraged me to pursue academic research, who encouraged me to move to New York, who would read my cover letters, teach me how to interview over the phone, teach me how to negotiate salary, support my writing, support my podcast, support everything. I hope now we are more friends than mentor-mentee, but there is still a refrain in the family “that seems like something Perry Goodger would know.” Practical, wise, worldly, tech-savvy, generous with his input and his time. Yet, on that warm day in July, we were cutting through the colorless fields of Idaho chasing an impractical dream of his. Silly, really, to drive that many hours for a puppy. Silly to pay that much for a puppy. Silly. Foolish. Self-indulgent. Giddy. Beautiful. Necessary.

The only other long-term pet I’ve had is our family dog, Otis. He’s a shih tzu, about the size of a one-year-old human child and, in his younger years, he was fluffy and adorable. Now he’s fourteen or fifteen years old, going gray and getting fat, stubbornly smelly, his vision clouded and deafness encroaching. He’s been a nuisance all his life, unable or unwilling to understand the concept of dog doors or the basic tenets of house training, prone to barking hysterically whenever anyone approaches the front door, making messes, and running away to explore my parents’ suburban neighborhood whenever the opportunity presents itself. I can’t count how many times in the last fifteen-odd years one of us has looked around and said, with dread and resignation, “Where’s Otis?” forcing us all to embark on a quest to discover which of the neighbor’s yards he’s gotten into. Or maybe he’ll be wandering down the middle of the street, heedless of cars. Or maybe he’ll be barking at someone mowing their own lawn. The possibilities are endless and all of them humiliating.

Otis has become something of a punchline. Not one of us would say that he’s a good dog in the traditional sense; he misbehaves despite all attempts to train him, he doesn’t particularly like to be petted or held or walked, and he’s loyal only to my mother, who feeds and pampers him. It’s an ongoing, morbid joke that my older sister has been counting the days until his death for a decade. My father ignores him until my mom’s out of town, at which point Otis and he, abandoned by themselves in a huge house, suddenly form an intense and affectionate kinship which evaporates as soon as Mom returns. When my parents built a pool in their

backyard several summers ago, we all began calling it the Otis Memorial Swimming Center, despite the fact that Otis persisted in being alive. He is still alive, as I write this, which isn't all that surprising but feels like a medical marvel when you look at him.

The breeders were kind enough. I don't really remember much except for their kitchen and how I thought my brother seemed so confident as he chatted with them and paid for his puppy. He was twenty-three when we did this. Having been twenty-three, I realize he was probably nervous, maybe even anxious, and still kind enough to bring his kid sister to watch him. The puppy Perry paid for was called Bandit, I think it was, because he had black markings around his eyes like a Zorro mask. He lost most of that coloring as he got bigger. They breeders took us outback to get the puppy we would rename Duke, and we were introduced to Duke's parents. Duke was part husky, part Alaskan Malamute. Duke's father was the biggest animal I've ever seen, more like a bear than a dog. He seemed sweet enough, though, and I wonder if Duke got his disposition from his dad. Perry and I still joke about Duke's dad – I suppose he must be dead, too – and it's still so sweet to me, to share that joke with my brother.

I've seen Otis only two or three times in the last year. The pandemic has kept me away from my parents' house while they've adhered less strictly to CDC guidelines than I have. Still, we've talked virtually, and Otis is a frequent topic of discussion. My mom thinks his health is declining; he has a hard time hearing and moves less than he used to. He sleeps a lot and sometimes needs help climbing the stairs. I had to nag her to take him to the vet; she was afraid they'd say he needed some sort of expensive surgery or treatment and that she'd then have to make an upsetting choice. Finally, though, several months into the pandemic, she took him to get checked out, only to find that there's nothing particularly wrong with him; he's just old.

Still, it's obvious to my mom, the only one who spends significant amounts of time with Otis anymore, that his quality of life is decreasing and that he's becoming more difficult to take care of. In terms of pet ownership, that means euthanizing him is on the horizon. And I could write a whole other letter about that because I have a lot of thoughts. But here's what's relevant now: My mom doesn't want to make the decision about when to end Otis's life -- the same way she didn't want to take him to the vet. She hasn't outright said that I should do it, but that seems to be her prevailing thought. I've tried to tell her that it's not up to me; I'm not Otis's caretaker; I haven't been for a decade. I've told her repeatedly that it's her choice and that I'll respect it. She doesn't seem to hear me.

I was one of the first members of our family to touch Duke, and I wonder if something like an imprint happened. Because, odd as it might be to say, I believe Duke loved me in a different way. Some bigger way. Perry was always his favorite, of course, but Duke and I...understood each other, I guess. He listened to me when he wouldn't listen to anyone else. He would spend hours just standing next to me or lying at my feet. He was always just a bit more excited to see me, and Duke was always excited to see everyone.

I understand why she doesn't feel equipped to make that choice. I understand, also, that her own mother is old, disabled, and chronically ill. And while neither of us would outright compare my nana to a dog, emotions are messy things, and sometimes you project what you feel about the people you love onto animals. And I understand that Otis has been her constant, smelly companion as all four of her children have left the house, as her father -- always more open in his affection toward dogs than his own family -- died, and as her life has changed in sometimes dramatic and unpleasant ways. I understand that despite that, she has a hard time thinking of Otis as her dog, when I was the one who, as a lonely teenager, begged for one. I was the one whose bed he slept on, whose possessions he destroyed, who took him outside late at night. And when the time comes, in a cold and sterile veterinary clinic, I imagine it will be just me and my mother there with Otis, soothing him when he's scared, holding him so he won't be alone, loving him, and at once lying to him and telling the absolute truth when we tell him he was a good dog. The best dog.

He lived with Perry and Perry's wife Melissa for about five years, but then my oldest niece was born, and Duke got a little aggressive around the baby and Perry and Melissa were going to have to give Duke to a shelter. I don't know exactly how the line of communication worked -- I was in college at the time and not around much -- but I heard how Perry called my other brother crying, devastated. My other brother, Ian, called my mom to beg that she take Duke so that Perry didn't have to send his beautiful, necessary, self-indulgent dream to live in a shelter and go to someone else. My mom said yes, of course. It wasn't even a question. Duke wasn't going anywhere else but to a Goodger household. He was family. This incident with my niece was one of maybe three times in his life that Duke was "aggressive," and who knows why his behavior changed in that moment. Threatened, maybe. Confused by such a small and pale little thing as my niece was. As Duke got older and my niece got older, he couldn't get enough of her. He would follow her around when she was at my mom's house, trying to steal opportunities to lick her face. One of my favorite pictures is of them lying on the couch together, watching tv. I actually have one where they are in focus, and one where they are blurry because Duke has whipped around trying to lick her face yet again. He was the same with my nephew -- just a big, fluffy guy who wanted to play nanny like he was the dog in Peter Pan.

I am so much better equipped to deal with the losses of human loved ones than I am pets. I hope that doesn't make me sound like an awful, callous person. But when my grandma died last year, I didn't cry because I knew that, throughout our relationship, we'd managed to understand each other on some level. At the very least, she'd died knowing that I loved and valued her, because I told her so in every thank you card and every phone call. I didn't have regrets, and I still don't.

Duke spent the second half of his life living with my mom. My mom is very indulgent when it comes to pets, so Duke got fat and lazy in his old age, but god was he happy. He loved to lay across the hope chest in my mom's dining room with the window opened just enough for him to fit his nose through and smell the morning air. Whenever I would drive up to my mom's

house, he would fling himself off the hope chest to try and get to me through the screen. I couldn't do anything in that house until I'd knelt with him in the foyer to scratch his chest and kiss him on the forehead. Duke loved forehead kisses and my hands remember the exact shape and density of his skull, how to hold it just so, so I could press my lips to the fur covering his brow bone. Duke was also enthusiastic with his own kisses, a classic gentle giant unsure of his own strength. Sometimes it felt more like he was biting you than licking you, but it adored it. It made me laugh, so Duke kept doing it. I loved the way he smelled. I loved the many shades of black, white, and gray in his fur. I loved how soft and dense his coat was. I loved the responsibility of brushing out his coat in the hotter months, so he didn't shed all over our lives; it's a beautiful thing to take care of another living creature. I loved his beautiful, kind brown eyes. I loved how he would let me rest my head on his ribcage so we could lay down together. I loved Duke more than I have ever loved any of my pets. That's probably bad to say, and it isn't that I didn't love all my other pets deeply and tenderly, but Duke was just different. Again, the love between us just felt bigger than any other love I'd felt with an animal. Oh, Hozier, I can't even tell you how much I loved this dog. He was my best friend.

When Otis dies, I don't know if he'll understand that I love him. Thinking of it, writing about it, actually, is making me weepy. You can't tell an animal, not in any way that matters, that even though it's scary and confusing now, you're trying to do the right thing for them, trying to diminish their pain. Will the last thing he feels be betrayal? I can't stand that. Scratching his ears, telling him I love him, that's as close to a shared language as we can get, and I don't know if it's adequate. It doesn't encompass what really matters: how having someone to hold when I was a teenager, when being a teenager was the hardest thing I had ever done, saved my life. How his warm little body, his steady breathing at the foot of my bed, kept me sane back when the panic attacks were bad. How all my life, even when coming home was something I dreaded, I always knew at least he'd be happy to see me, and every time, that made me open the door.

Your song, "It Will Come Back," is a metaphor. I understand that. While the first verse and subsequent lyrics explicitly use the language we most commonly apply to wild animals, those are just comparisons to the narrator's affection-hungry heart. It's at once a warning of his own neediness and a plea. "Don't let me in with no intention to keep me," you sing. Meaning, in other words: if you do let me in, if you do feed me and show me kindness, then don't turn me back out into the cold. And considering the longevity of humans, that's a great deal to ask.

I didn't get to say goodbye to him. He had a stroke in early January. We aren't sure exactly when, only that within the course of a few days he went from his normal happy, snow and sunshine loving, aspiring nanny self to lethargic and all but non-responsive. Duke was always too big and excitable for my mom to take him into the vet (Duke was many things, but good on a leash was not one of them), so my mom has a home visit vet. His name is Dr. Packer, which is odd in a way, because my brother Perry has another dog now. Her name is Packer – not named after the vet, but after the Green Bay Packers. Dr. Packer put Duke down in our front room on January 3, 2021. My mom held him as he died, which comforts me, but I wish I could

have been there at the end. I feel like I let Duke down by not being there. I was there when he came into our family, but I wasn't there when he left. I betrayed all the promises we'd silently made to each other by not closing out the circle. I couldn't go because at the time my sister-in-law, who was living with my mom, wasn't following as strict of COVID regulations as I was, and my family was trying to protect me. I had an upcoming doctor's appointment that I'd been waiting almost four months for. In hindsight, this was such a stupid reason not to go and say goodbye to my best friend. I regret it, god I regret it, even though I know Duke would never hold it against me. He was too full of love. I still get punched through with grief some days, because I miss him. Especially when I'm at my mom's house and I keep thinking I'll hear his feet on the wood floor or feel him come and lay down at my feet. I miss him so much. This makes me feel so silly to say, but Duke is a new reason for me to hope and believe in an afterlife, because I just want to see him again so very, very, very much.

I wasn't familiar with this song before this project. That might be obvious, given I've just turned it into a eulogy for my family's dog, who hasn't even died yet. It's not one of my favorites on the album: there's a difference, I guess, between a song in which a man says he'll "worship like a dog at the shrine" of his lover's "life" and a song in which a man all but threatens the object of his affections with stalking if she shows him the same courtesy she'd show a stray dog. I don't really want to pull on that thread; I don't want to untangle artistic intent from the societal reality that women sometimes can't risk being kind to strangers. I think that's probably already been covered on an episode of Law and Order: SVU or something.

So I'll leave you instead with this monologue about the animals I have loved. And I'll say that when we adopted Tybalt, I was prepared for the reality that we would almost certainly outlive him, that one day in the future we'll have to let him go. I didn't let myself even have that thought when I was thirteen and we brought Otis home. I didn't know better. I didn't know that he would track mud all over the landscape of my heart or that his simple existence would become a fixture in my life, a signpost indicating normalcy. I didn't know that I would mourn him even before losing him. But if I had, if I'd been that wise as a thirteen-year-old, I still would have begged my mom for a dog. It was worth it.