

SALLY: Dear Hozier,

EMILY: Dear Hozier,

It is, at the time of writing, March 23rd, 2020. Your 30th birthday was six days ago, at least according to Google. I'm 26. A Libra. You're three and a half years older than me and eleven inches taller. You're Irish. I'm American, in the sense that I was born here. We were both raised in religious households; in an article by David Smyth -- Smith spelled with a "y" -- appearing in the Evening Standard, you say your parents raised you as a Quaker, having rejected their own Catholic upbringing. My parents are Mormon. They were raised Mormon. They raised me and my siblings as Mormons. I'm the only member of my six-person family who doesn't go to church anymore.

SALLY: It's easy to say that "Take Me to Church" is a delicious and slippery language reversal of the standard religious condemnation of carnal pleasures. "In the madness and soil of that sad earthly scene/ only then I am human/only then I am clean."

What a couple of fucking lines, eh?

Sin makes us dirty, UN-clean -- so say the religious -- but here in the soil of the earth we become clean through our carnal humanity. Through our hungry, starving, insatiable bodies when we offer them to each other. We also become human through the cleanliness that only comes from putting your body made of carbon and water into the soil of the planet that cradles you as you rocket through an empty universe. I can't remember the last time I plunged my hands into the soil, but I long for it. That feeling, of dirt on my skin. Can you feel it? That gritty, drying clean that says, "Yes. Human. Yes. Human."

EMILY: The unmatched timelines of our lives continue. In 2013, you released your first single, Take Me to Church, to popular and critical acclaim; 2013 was my first year at a state university. It's odd. I have memories of hearing Take Me to Church on the radio frequently, annoyingly so, every time I got in the car. But I didn't have a car when I was in college. Maybe what I'm remembering is that summer, the summer my grandfather died. Between the spring and fall semesters, I stayed at my parents' house; I worked two part-time jobs in a desperate bid to bulk up my savings account. The jobs were on opposite ends of town, with a five-minute drive

between them. I used to leave my first job, sticky and sweaty, get into whichever of our family cars were available to me that day, and change my uniform at stoplights. I kept the radio on to distract me from the notion that at any moment, a cop driving by might see me whip my black polo off and drive a few blocks in just my bra before I could pull on the navy polo. The last thing I needed was to be arrested for public indecency.

SALLY: I also like the lines above for their use of “madness” and “sad” – two words I so often hear describe the human condition. We’re supposed to transcend this suffering through God, but we won’t find our human selves in the celestial kingdom. How could we? Humans are not made for heaven. Why else would we die first in order to get there? Why else have bodies if not to use them and let them rot, fulfilled?

EMILY: But that can’t be right. According to Google, Take Me to Church was released in September of that year, five days before my younger sister was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, two weeks before my twentieth birthday. You were 23. And a half. So maybe I’m thinking of that winter. I stayed at my parents’ house again; I took back one of my summer part-time jobs for the three-week break. The other job, the one at the video rental store, had already shut down by then. But that can’t be right either because Take Me to Church always reminds me of heat like sunburn. So maybe it was the next summer. It was on the radio for a long time.

SALLY: But all this is easy to say. It oozes out of the music and the glorious sound of your voice when you beg, “Amen. Amen. Amen.” The people don’t need a lyrical analysis to know that “Take Me to Church” asks us to be partnered and to be feasting in the way all animals do. All us dogs, worshipping.

EMILY: It still is on the radio, actually. I heard it just a few days ago and thought it was a remix. It wasn’t, though. It’s just that I’d forgotten the rhythm, the speed. I confess that in its early days, I usually changed the radio station when it came on. It’s not that I didn’t like it. It’s just that I didn’t love it, and it was on too often. Just one of those things. And there’s the music video. To watch that video in 2013, when I was still attending church, was on the razor-edge of accepting

the vast spectrum of human sexualities and identities. That wasn't acceptable. The church I grew up attending states that marriage is exclusively between a man and a woman.

SALLY: It is also easy to say that there is a divine pagan female in "Take Me to Church" who, through her own empowered sexuality, empowers her lover to not only shed their shame, but revise it. For this point, I will quote the better part of the first verse:

"If the heavens ever did speak/ she's the last true mouthpiece/ Every Sunday's getting more bleak/A fresh poison each week/ "We were born sick"/ You heard them say it/ My church offers no absolutes/ She tells me "Worship in the bedroom"/ The only Heaven I'll be sent to/Is when I'm alone with you/ I was born sick, but I love it/ Command me to be well"

Here our divine pagan female (can I call her our DPF?) is presented antithetically to the Church, capital C. "*If* the heavens ever did speak," the lover says introducing a more nebulous worldview than that of the Church, capital C, that states confidently, "We were born sick." If. If. If.

If the heavens ever did speak.

If.

EMILY: The video, shot in black and white on a budget of 500 euros, according to the Sunday Times, follows two men who are in a romantic, sexual relationship. Their relationship -- or perhaps the sexuality of just one of the men -- is discovered, and a violent, homophobic mob wreaks destruction on his home, his family, and his body. His murder isn't shown, but it seems like a given. The video is well-known to be a condemnation of the state-sanctioned homophobia in Russia, though you might not understand that unless you're watching closely and see the brief flash of Russian on a television screen. It was, after all, 2013. To be beaten to death for one's gayness wasn't a fate exclusive to a single country back then. It's still not. In parts of America, it's an ever-present danger.

SALLY: She is a church, lowercase c, that "offers no absolutes," and yet, at the same time, is "the last true mouthpiece" of a heaven that may or may not have spoken. The truth the DPF brings is that there are no absolutes. The truth is that there is no Truth, capital T. There is nothing the Church, capital C, can tell us absolutely, certainly, without human error. Our beautifully

human DPF has no absolutes, and nothing to say of worship except, “Fuck me. Find the divine inside me, and I will find it inside you. We have only these bodies with which to access anything worth worshipping.”

I, too, wish I was alone with her.

EMILY: A warning flashes at the beginning of the video: Parental Advisory: Explicit Content. When I watched the video yesterday for the first time in six years, I raised my eyebrows at that. I didn't remember explicit content. And throughout the video's four minute and 16-second runtime, I remained alert to the possibility. At one point, the couple, the men who are the video's focal point, kiss each other passionately. They're shirtless, but you can barely tell. One's lying on top of the other, but there are no wandering hands, no sexually suggestive movements. Is this the explicit content? It doesn't seem, well, explicit enough. They're just kissing.

SALLY: Now, shame. Shame researcher Brené Brown defines shame as, “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” Brutal, right? In the first verse of “Take Me to Church,” Sunday's poison is being told that “we were born sick,” that something is flawed and unworthy about us (presumably that we are human and prone to things like desire and mistakes and imperfections), and we must correct this before finding love and belonging (presumably in the House of God). This sentence is fed back to us at the end of the verse when the lover says, “I was born sick, but I love it.” Here is shame revised through knowing this better, kinder love. Shame flipped on its head. Shame taken to church. There is nothing unworthy or flawed about desire, mistakes, and imperfections because there are no absolutes to define what these things mean on the cosmic scale. I don't want to speak for all us rotten humans, but I will gladly say I love being sick in this way. Desire is the least harmful of my chronic illnesses.

EMILY: Or is it the final shot of the video, when the surviving man watches the mob kicking, brutally, repeatedly, the prone body of his lover? There's a bonfire in the background. Everything we see, we see in silhouette. No blood, no bruises. No answers. Again, whether the man is dead or unconscious is an open-ended question. To me, this is horrifying but not explicit.

Is reality explicit? Am I numb to the violence that has happened, still happens, will continue to happen to people for the simple facts of their identities?

Here's a truth: I haven't suffered for my sexuality. I was accepted by my family, when I chose to come out to them. I was accepted by my friends. I have never been kicked out of my home or forced out of a job. I have never had to go to a so-called conversion camp. I've been called very few names by strangers, and I've never been assaulted. I have never been refused love, respect, or care.

Here is another truth: I have an excellent imagination.

SALLY: But again, these are all easy things to say. You are well-renowned for your portrayal of powerful, beloved women and pleasant, respectful, worshipful sexuality. I'm not saying anything particularly groundbreaking, because

What is not easy for me to say

What is not easy for me

Is that I do not yet feel human, even if I feel clean.

EMILY: But imaginary sufferings and endless chains of what-might-happen-ifs aren't the same as reality, and I know that. I continue to believe that my life is as charmed as a person's can be. I think I should take up gambling. I'm so damn lucky. I know I shouldn't take up gambling. There's an addict inside me. I've never met her up close, but I can see her in my peripheral vision. It's why I don't drink.

No, that's only half-true. I told you I was raised religious; the Mormon lifestyle is different than the Protestant Quaker lifestyle but not incomparable. Alcohol consumption is discouraged in both.

SALLY: I am not entirely sure why, but this song makes me know it. Makes it so I can't deny it. Reminds me how unfilled my rotting body is.

Perhaps it's because I've never begged, "Amen. Amen. Amen."

EMILY: Most forms of sexuality are discouraged in Mormonism as well. Gayness is a curse not just on you but on your family as well. Pre-marital sex is criminal. When I was thirteen or

fourteen, I sat through a church class where a middle-aged woman listed the acts that would require confession to a church authority. Words that I'd never heard before were used. We were told to not allow boys to engage in any of these acts with us. It was our job to guard both our virtue and the boys'. Boys suffered sexual compulsion to a greater degree than girls, I was told, and could get more easily carried away. Rape is underreported everywhere, I understand. I was also told what clothing was unacceptable, what type of swimming suit to wear, what type of underwear to buy. The degree to which my body, its femaleness, was deemed inappropriate was impossible. Somehow it was also holy. Once married, all those acts that had once been forbidden would suddenly be on the table. My body would be on the table. It would be divided into little, wafer-thin pieces for my husband to consume and thereby grow closer to God.

SALLY: Perhaps it's because I've so far ignored the parts of this song that truly awaken my imperfect heart. The divine pagan female is also a goddess who demands sacrifice, who sharpens her knife, who has a shrine of lies. Early I called her empowered, but to throw that word around we must parse out that notorious little word "power." Our DPF wields her power, and her lover yields to it, willingly, ecstatically, ecclesiastically. I don't want to speak for all us rotten humans, but I want power, and I want to exercise it over another. Not permanently, but for moments at a time. Enough to make them beg, "Amen. Amen. Amen."

Perhaps it is none of this at all.

EMILY: This is my body. Eat. Never mind that I'm starving.

SALLY: Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps.

EMILY: Never mind that I'm starving.

SALLY: Oh, command me to be well.

EMILY: I stopped going to church when I was 22. Hallelujah. Amen. Amen. Amen.