

Dear Hozier,

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My nephew Jack was born in the summer. At the time I was living in New York City, a place that I can't remember, almost three years later, without also recalling the immense weight of its heat. In New York it's this physical thing, another person in every room, sweat-damp fingers lingering near your throat. White collar workers have the reprieve of air conditioned office space, but I'd given up on that kind of job mere months after arriving in the city. I'd half-heartedly submitted a few applications, but I didn't expect them to go anywhere and they didn't. I'd already turned my attention to the more immediate problem of day-to-day survival.

I've taken to singing lines from "Jellicle Cats" from *Cats* the musical to our cat, Tybalt. I have no major fondness for *Cats* the musical, but something about owning strange, small creatures makes us pick up smaller, stranger habits. My go-to line from "Jellicle Cats," the one I bend my teeth around as comfortably as my own name, is "have you been an alumnus of heaven or hell?" I, again, don't have any feelings for *Cats* the musical beyond a few shared jokes with some friends, but I adore this lyric. It's evocative and absurd - what does it mean to be an alumnus of the afterlife? I don't just spit the lyric at my cat, I often mutter it to myself or even just think it over and over and over like a broken record.

I walked dogs, and I worked retail. Eventually the retail job shifted as my managers realized that I was better at organizing storerooms than talking to customers and that I was fearless when it came to climbing ladders or lifting things that a person as scrawny as me had no business lifting. Rather than building muscle, these jobs only made me scrawnier. When I returned home during the holidays, my dad would hug me, then worry aloud about how skinny I was. Pretty rich coming from a guy whose proportions resemble a beanpole. I stopped trying to explain to him that I was eating well enough, that it was the work making me harder to touch.

*Cats* the musical is a bad example overall, because I don't know anyone can really summarize or understand *Cats*, but generally this is how my brain processes information. I don't do well digesting the whole unit [insert book, song, musical, movie, television show, whatever you'd like] and I don't do well digesting new pieces of information. What I do marvelously is chew on the same small piece of information over and over and over again without ever breaking it down. This makes plot very difficult for me to follow and makes consuming new media exhausting and nerve wracking. What if there isn't a tidbit I can latch on to that will anchor it in my brain? Or what if, as has happened so many times, I'll talk to someone about the media and in that talking I'll realize that I not only misunderstood, but never came close to understanding at all?

I have been working since I was fifteen, usually in jobs that required at least some level of physicality and, until New York, without the threat of homelessness or starvation looming above my head. Even in New York, I had a safety net -- at any moment I could tap out and return to my parents' house on the other side of the country with no negative repercussions except, maybe, a

blow to my pride. Though my pride was already damaged by how my upper middle-class parents and my parents' upper middle-class friends and neighbors looked at me when they said, "Couldn't you walk dogs here in Utah?"

I could never tell them that the point of working in New York was not the work but New York. Or rather, the fact that New York was not Utah. I grew up surrounded by people I saw in church every Sunday, people whose business I knew too much about and who looked at me with either a patronizing kind of affection or consternation. I was a question none of them knew how to answer. I didn't know how to answer it either, but the crucial difference was that I'd given up trying. I went to New York because the city is so crowded, so noisy, that any question you ask will be swallowed up by the sound. I worked because work has always been the surest way to keep me from thinking too hard.

Two summers ago I was driving in Yellowstone with my favorite person and a song I'd heard at least 30 times came on the radio. She started to analyze the situation of the song in startling specificity. Dazed, I asked, "how do you know that?" And she responded a bit coolly that it was all there, in the lyrics. I was silent in response and am worried I offended first by asking and then by clamming up, but I was so embarrassed in the light of her quick and nimble mind. I'd never added all those pieces together but when I listened again it made perfect sense. This happens frequently with music, and with your music probably most of all. People will speak about meanings that have never stopped at the station in my head, or reference lyrics that I swear I've never heard even if I've listened to the song for years. I am self-conscious about this and probably always will be, always asking "what am I missing?" Because it's always something. I don't know why my mind is like this - it could be trauma or the dyslexia or it could just be that I was built to never see the forest for the trees.

I don't like to romanticize work. It is necessary and valuable, but our culture is one in which people are rated by how much they can work and the type of work they do. The most important jobs, the ones people have been doing since the dawn of civilization and without which civilization would crumble, are called menial. Unskilled. In most countries in the world, including my own, the people who do them are not paid a reasonable wage. This is the legacy of racism and the poison of capitalism, two "isms" which have always been intertwined, like a two-headed dragon.

With "Work Song", I have a harder time than usual trying to crack it open, because I can hardly ever make it past the first few lines. "Boy's working on empty. Is that the kind of way to face the burning heat?" This lyric - these lyrics? Where does lyric become lyrics? - pounds through my head all through the hot season, which thanks to global warming is becoming longer. One of my many body frailties is heat sensitivity. I don't do well when it's hot - I get dizzy, nauseous, flushed, confused, tired, excessively sweaty, headachy, cranky. When it's hot, it's like everything I consume vanishes, never converting to energy. So I trudge through the hottest months of the year totally empty. And is that the kind of way to face the burning heat? No, it

isn't. So I think about this boy, working on empty, and I think about him and I think about him and I think about him. I think I think about this burning heat and I think about it and I think about it and I think about it. And I never crack open the egg of meaning, I never attach this to the rest of the song. I just work at it like a tough piece of clay or a dog with a bone.

People have always been forced to work. How much it horrifies us is merely a matter of scale. We rightfully consider chattel slavery an atrocity, a blight in our history books -- our shame compounded by how few pages in those history books we allot to it -- but don't interrogate the notion that most of the employees in the grocery store or the fast food drive-thru have no choice but to be there, underpaid and overworked. I've been underpaid and overworked, so no, I don't romanticize it, and given the choice, I wouldn't go back for more. I wasn't Hercules, with his ten labors; there was no real risk, and I frequently enjoyed the work itself. But the punishment wasn't the work. It was the exile. If you find that romantic, I don't want to know how you'd define a love story.

This inability to see the forest has caused a lot of tension in my chosen fields. First, in college as I was attempting to analyze literature for my degree it would take me a dozen hours to articulate a coherent thesis for an essay. When I was writing my capstone project, each week my mentor would make me sit in her office and talk through ideas and pages that I wrote. She would grill me about my arguments, about what I wanted to say, and I came so close to tears each week because I didn't know how to tell her that I don't know how to make meaning. What I could do, over and over again driving us both to frustration, was highlight the parts of the novels I found curious and evocative and dangerous and compelling. But you don't get capstone credit for being compelling. I am grateful she sat with me those many hours for it helped me get better at making meaning, even if it was methodical and painstaking work for me. Eventually I could make a decent show of it.

You know about work songs, don't you? They actually constitute an entire genre of rhythmic, repetitive music that laborers used to stave off boredom and stay in tandem in an era before mechanical methods of time-keeping. There are subgenres. Sea shanties, which have made a resurgence in the last month due to a few viral Tik Toks, were used by sailors to adjust the rigging or weigh anchor or any other number of tasks that required them to pull or row in unison. Lyrically, they often complained about cruel captains and the harshness of life on the sea. In the American South, enslaved African Americans used field hollers and other call-and-response music to raise morale despite inhumane conditions, to preserve culture in the midst of diaspora, and to express anger, resistance, and hope. You have to know all this, because you pay homage to it in your song, with its rhythmic clapping and humming in the background, with its very first line: "Boys working on empty / Is that the kind of way to face the burning heat?"

That line ran frequently through my head in the weeks before Jack was born. June, in New York: muggy, malodorous. I only saw my sister once or twice during her pregnancy, which made me feel disconnected from the whole thing. I spoke to her throughout, but I didn't take part in any of the little rituals that people usually perform to welcome a baby. I didn't touch her stomach

to feel him kick or shop for clothes or help child-proof the house. I expected to love him, of course, but I didn't know whether that love would be obligatory. Distant. After all, I was on the other side of the country. I was busy.

Second, in my chosen career as a grant writer, I am responsible for securing and then ensuring compliance for hundreds of thousands of dollars in government funding. Sometimes, my fixation on detail makes me indispensable for fundraising – I carry around deadlines and email addresses and award numbers and contract clauses like I'm Frankenstein's monster of government bureaucracy. And then other times I'm asked to defend our funding ask in front of a panel of county officials and I can't formulate a single thought on why the program is important beyond that people deserve housing. (This should be enough of an argument, but that's another story.) I can't tell the story of agency, because I can't remember important things like how the programs work together or what the state of housing is in our county. I remember that one of my coworkers adopted two chihuahuas after he had a stroke, and they offer him emotional support. And I remember that the agency was founded in 1970. The county doesn't care about either of those things.

I'm not interested in having children of my own, and I don't really care for other people's kids. I was told so frequently throughout my childhood and adolescence that the pinnacle of femininity was motherhood that I think I accidentally squashed my maternal instinct in a fit of rebellion. Or I never had it to begin with. Either way, church was always awkward, and my neighbors rarely asked me to babysit. By the time I was eighteen, I was so terrified of pregnancy that it made me nauseous. I figured if my higher calling was really motherhood, God would have to knock me up himself because there was no way it was happening otherwise.

Finally, in my podcast work, I have sat myself down in front of a microphone roughly once a week for the last three years and analyzed chapters of a 14-book fantasy series. Why I agreed to this after breaking my brain trying to write a 40-page capstone paper, I'll never know. Well, I do know, it's because it was meant to be a fun project with my favorite person, and now thousands of people a month listen to me stumble around in the dark forest of language looking for meaning and the way to articulate it. It is still a fun project and, as with my capstone, I feel I've gotten better at making meaning; it's hard to find the time for painstaking work in a 40-minute podcast episode, so I've had to build up the muscles and train my brain to be just a little quicker and nimbler. Just enough not like itself to make a plausibly coherent episode. It helps that I don't do the podcast alone.

But I loved Jack from the moment I saw the first picture of him. It was overwhelming. I felt strongly that if anyone hurt him, I'd rip them apart with my bare hands. I know there are scientific explanations for this, the evolutionary instinct to protect the youngest members of a herd, but at the time it didn't feel scientific. I hadn't even held him yet, but I grinned at pictures of his squashed red face and cooed over videos of him sleeping and generally acted like someone I'd convinced myself I wasn't. I'm a person who cares about other people; I care very specifically

about the welfare of children and their rights to safety and innocence, but I was never going to define myself by my relationship to a few children in particular. I wasn't ever going to be Mom or Mama or Mommy. But all of a sudden, totally outside of my control, there was this kid, and I was his aunt.

Looking at all this I wonder if we all select work we are unsuited for, at least in some small way? Or am I misguided in my determination to make my life out of language even if it distresses me every time I fail so spectacularly?

Jack is a toddler now. He walks and runs -- he skipped crawling entirely -- and he speaks in mostly understandable sentences. He's obsessed with vehicles and can categorize anything with wheels by kingdom, phylum, and class. He assumes that all Subarus are driven by members of his family. He's curious and mischievous and stubborn. Loud noises make him nervous. Other children at the playground make him nervous. He says that: "I'm nervous, Emmy." He also says, "Silly Emmy," when I make faces at him and, in the commanding tones of a child tyrant, "I go down the slide with Emmy," when we're at the playground. That he looks around for my hand when it's time to descend the stairs or turns to me for reassurance is one of my life's greatest privileges. As he grows up, I hope he likes me as much as I like him, but if he doesn't, that's alright. Being liked is far less important than being trusted.

I'm a hard worker, and I am trying to find less meaning in that. It has been my foundation for so long, a survival technique really. Work hard and you will be useful, be useful and you will be loved. So, on and so forth. But I know more now, both about my inherent worth and the dangerous lies of capitalism. I also know that as I grow ever sicker, what work can look like for me might change drastically. So then I wonder what will become of me if I am not pushed by external forces to stop repeating the same lyric over and over again to my cat and think about the things that make life move forward. Feeding said cat, earning a paycheck, paying my rent, remembering to call my mom back. Because sometimes nothing feels real outside of this maelstrom of tidbits of information. Borrowing another lyric from "Work Song" - heaven and hell were words to me. If heaven and hell are just words, then how can I anchor myself enough to write that email, to call my insurance, to once again feed the cat?

I don't remember the first time I sang "Work Song" to Jack. Probably I was trying to put him to sleep and it was the only song I could think of that was both inside my vocal range and slow enough to constitute a lullaby. I don't know if it worked, only that it made me feel more competent. I have no idea whether he likes the song or even recognizes it. Singing it at all is self-indulgent. But the whimsical parts of child care are all like that, I suppose.

I went to New York to die. I don't mean that in an intentional, suicidal way but in the metaphorical, Tarot way. There was a part of me that the people closest to me needed to let go of. And I needed the space to grieve for it. I guess it worked because when I came back, I also came out, and people no longer assume that I spend my Sundays in church. I am still a question, but I've stopped asking it of anyone who doesn't really matter.

I've written the majority of this letter in the notes app on my phone while babysitting my two-year-old nephew, Declan. He likes to have me around, but he doesn't really want me to do much except sit near the wooden toy train track and be present, to love him without expectation or need or demand. So in between checking that he's clean and safe and fed and comforted and content, I've tapped out these thoughts with aching thumbs. If this letter doesn't make any sense, though, don't blame Declan. That blame lies only with me.

Why I left New York and my labor there is a complicated story, but at its heart, I left because of Jack and because after Jack there would be Will, and after Will there would be another, and maybe another, because I have two sisters, not just one, and a brother as well. I left even though it meant returning home, and until then, home was not something I'd have dragged myself out of the grave for. But this is just one more entry on the long, dramatic list of unlikely things people will do for the sake of love. Write it down, just above my latest addition: singing lullabies.