

AN INFERNO:

An Address to No One

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V

1. Depending on your edition of the Bible, when Jesus speaks, his words are written in red ink. I think that's supposed to represent his blood, but Christianity brings with it another death as well. Mythology is all but dead, now. Satan rules the Underworld, not Hades. Persephone is just a fable mothers told their children so they wouldn't play outside alone. When Demeter grieved, it was not over her daughter, but over me, naked and pink. She was not immortal, because I watched her die eighteen years later, when I met you.

2. The death of mythology in the Roman Empire officially began when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. All the gods and goddesses slowly faded into the ordinary, remembered now only because at one time, they were exalted.

3. Before this overthrowing of ancient Latin beliefs, your name did not exist in Rome. It was ushered in with the Bible, with the writers and the prophets and the judges. Your name, appropriately, is an echo of God's.

4. We move away from each other for college. I meet half a million people with your same name, babies and old men and replicas of you. A thousand or more replicas of you, but none of their voices sound like the color red. Their faces, just fractionally different than yours, so that only I notice, because I do not whisper their names to myself late at night. Only yours.

5. I am thinking of you right now and I am wondering if your palms get red when you are outside in the snow with no gloves. Do your cheeks turn color and chap with the winter wind, how flaky do your lips get, just a little or do they peel so much that they bleed? I have never seen you in the winter, never known you in the winter, but I think I might want to, naked and shivering in the snow—pink, like a newborn baby.

6. These are the kinds of thoughts I have before I remember that it does not matter, whether or not I want to.

7. It's one in the morning and I'm sitting in a bar trying to order a Diet Coke and thinking of you. I keep my notebook and a pen on the counter because my phone is dead and I need to not look as lonely as I feel. I flip open to a page that isn't blank and don't write anything down, except this sentence.

8. In the back of my wallet, I keep a polaroid of you from the night we met. You knew it was being taken. I told you it didn't develop correctly, that the whole picture came out white. You probably know this already, but the picture developed perfectly. Your face, in the little white frame, captured perfectly.

9. I don't know why I ever thought the kind of person willing to spend a birthday alone would want to spend any time with me.

IV

1. The Fourth of July explodes into ash above me the day I realize without your knowledge, I have made you a permanent fixture in my life. I do not see you the entire day but we talk, we text each other, and you are one-third of it all. Every firework that crackles in the sky and cremates itself over the lake is red, but never for longer than a second.

2. I wonder if it would make a difference if I told you that I love you hopelessly. No, I don't mean make a difference with you. I mean, I wonder if I said it out loud, what would happen. If you, a hundred miles away, still hear the tremble in my voice.

3. At some point, talking to you becomes so much of a habit that everywhere I go, I feel your absence. We are not physically together much at all. When I visit the clay river banks behind my grandparents' house, I squeeze a handful in my palm to abate the memory of your hand, which I have never touched. The clay smears red all over my skin and I debate throwing myself into it, a crimson baptism.

4. In my dreams, I track down everyone you have ever loved and ask how they could let you be alone.

5. I want to be an age in which I finally understand myself. I wonder if this age exists, for anyone. For me. I want to be able to pull my car to the side of the road at midnight on a Sunday and listen to crickets chirping *one more hill, one more hill*, even though there are indeed many more hills. I want you, skin pink, hip bones not yet fully formed so you are entirely slopes. A newborn, crying in my arms.

6. My mother always told me not to text and drive. I obey her until I realize that dying for love isn't always dying for a person. Sometimes dying for love is really dying for that feeling I get when your name lights up on my phone and I know that if I crash my car trying to figure out your favorite song, at least, one way or another, I will stop wondering.

7. I drive two hours to a mall near you and call it coincidence, say I was just in the area. You meet me for coffee which becomes lunch which becomes us, sitting opposite each other in a white-and-black checkered diner. I think about all the Exxon stations I passed getting here. I wonder if you know the real reason I am here, if it is written all over my face like a children's book. You stay for two hours, then tell me you have to leave—you have get home, your mother is making dinner and she needs you to stop by the grocery store on the way. I let you, because I have no right to ask you to stay.

8. I have never been to your childhood house, but you tell me one night beneath our respective blankets and in our respective beds, that it is brick, red brick, and how did I know that it was, because I did, Sam, I knew.

9. In a past life, in the life I had before I met you, I would carve into the tough flesh of my outer right thigh with a piece of glass when I got sad. What bubbled up then was red, a different red, a shade I had never seen before and do not expect to see again. It is not the color of anything related to you, not even the thin veins in your eyes.

III

1. You send me a three-second video of you sipping an iced coffee. It's cloudy with cream and your face is freshly shaven. You blink a total of nine times, which seems like a lot.
2. The view from the top of one of your historic downtown's abandoned buildings. I know this because of a gray stripe of text at the top of the picture that you typed out: *i climb up here when i want to be alone.*
3. A picture in reply to a ten-second video of me driving, listening to a song you recommended: "Two Weeks," by Grizzly Bear. Your face from a lower angle, lips pressed together in a jokingly scolding frown. The gray stripe, this time below your chin: *don't snap and drive!!!!!!!!!!*
4. Seven seconds of you shoulders-down, playing the guitar. Exact notes for "Blackbird" by the Beatles, but when I reply with the lyrics, the conversation ends.
5. Page 57 from a book you're reading. The words "*The Screwtape Letters*" ribboned at the top of the page in all caps. The familiar gray stripe, in the negative space of the page where the letter ends: *have you read this?*
6. Your face, blurred by movement, black and white. A dark windbreaker, collar open; old t-shirt underneath. You've drawn a squiggly red dot over each of your eyes. No text.
7. Ten seconds of you and your mother smiling, nodding along to a mixtape I sent you in the mail. I have never heard her speak, but still I imagine her voice—a soft lilt, like harp music. Like yours. No text.
8. Your ceiling, or what looks like your ceiling, little white popcorn pieces illuminated by incandescent light. In red, the letters of my name, drawn with your finger.
9. You, lying on your bed, hair mused, covers askew. Half of your face in the picture, unshaven. Blue eyes, like a chlorinated pool. A timestamp in the direct center reading 3:21 AM. The text, large and white this time—gray stripe gone—scrunched into the space between your jaw and shoulder: *night sleepyhead, see ya tomorrow*, even though we're still a hundred miles apart.

II

1. There is no evidence to suggest that ladybugs lived in ancient civilizations. The closest thing discovered is the Egyptian beetle, duplicated over and over again in reliefs and scarabs. These beetles were not circular and red, but oval and black.

2. It is Sunday the day I fall in love with the color red. We are sitting side-by-side when a ladybug lands on your shoulder. I don't know you yet, but I call it good luck, and you say thanks.

3. In ancient Egypt, scarabs were also considered good luck, a symbol of the rising sun. Rising suns are yellow, usually, not red. In American tradition, a red sky in the morning is a bad omen for men at sea.

4. Last year, I applied to college in Boston, right next to the water so sailing classes are offered as an elective. I don't know whether or not I got in, because I pulled my application before I could hear back.

5. In Chinese culture, red bats and red lanterns are both considered good luck. There are ladybugs in China, too. I don't know how they feel about the morning sky in relation to water.

6. I meet you waiting in line for a concert. You're sitting alone, hands in your pockets, behind three other people. I fall in behind you. Something tugs at me to talk to you, so I do. I have brought sidewalk chalk to decorate the pavement outside the venue. I offer you some. You say thanks.

7. You draw a feather in the most beautiful shade of red I have ever seen. When you scrape your finger pad over the cement to blend in your chalk, a dark hope bubbles in my belly for you to press down too hard and scrape the skin off your fingertip, just so I can see the exact shade of your blood.

8. You are my age and today is your birthday and for some reason I cannot name, I am close to tears at getting to spend part of it with you, a stranger whose last name I don't even know.

9. Whose favorite color, I don't even know. Let us talk, and I will find out.

I

1. I'm wearing a dress printed with poppies in all shades of red. Perhaps these flowers sprung from Persephone's blossoms, the seeds she scattered as Hades swept her away. The dress she was wearing that day was red, too. In grief, Demeter slaughtered all of nature as she searched for her daughter. In memoriam, she cast all the leaves in different shades of red.

2. Hades burned Persephone's dress as soon as he locked her away. When he reclothed her in white, she imagined blood seeping into the fabric, staining the whole dress.

3. In twelfth grade, I fail my final Latin exam. I recount every Roman myth using Greek names. The summer after twelfth grade, I meet you.

4. The following September, one of my college professors will ask the class what the word "quis" means in English. I will have brought one of my old Virgil workbooks to school but I will not have opened it, will not have translated Latin for five months. The class will be silent. I know now the answer is "who." In September, I will have forgotten that the answer is "who." I will be silent, and the teacher will give an exasperated sigh, and my ears will burn for the rest of the day.

5. Pluto. Remember. Proserpina. Ceres. Remember, remember. My head has been emptied of everything but you.

6. I will write this down so I do not forget. In Latin, one translation of the word "īfernō" is the masculine ablative singular of the adjective "īfernus," which means "of the lower regions," or, more aptly, "hellish." This means that the word "inferno" can be used to describe a masculine singular noun in the ablative case. Both the accusative case and the ablative case are used in prepositional phrases. Unlike the accusative, which is used with prepositions of "to," the ablative case concerns prepositions of "from."

7. "Amōrem īfernum": toward the hellish love. "Amōre īfernō": away from it.

8. If I were Hades and you Persephone, I would leave you in your field, sowing seeds; in your red dress, so you don't have to bleed. Maybe I could bleed for you instead.

9. All adjectives and nouns are broken up into declensions in Latin. "īfernus" is a first and second declension adjective. "Amor" is a third declension noun. Although they can be and sometimes are paired together, they will never truly match. Love is not meant to be hellish. It can be and sometimes is, but not often. I remind myself of this, repeatedly.