Veery

The next time they talked on the phone, she told him she had just started to come when she heard her daughter return home downstairs and call out to her. Falling from the bed, she ran across the room to close the door. As she ran, the orgasm caught up with her, the blood rushing from her head, her legs turning spongy, compressing beneath her. When she came, he knew, she often expelled a multisyllabic “Fuck,” and he could hear, though it was distant and

“Calling birds” refers to colly or collie birds.
“Colly” or “collie” means “black.” It comes from an older English word for coal. “Colly bird” is the European blackbird. Common in parks and cities in Europe, it looks like a dusky version of its cousin, the American robin. Both belong to the thrush family.
hollow with echo (in her haste she hadn’t had time to disconnect), the first fricative transmute to a plosive burst of greeting, a schwa-y “Whah,” closer to the first notes of her daughter’s name. The next time they talked, she would tell him how intense it was to be moving through the spasm, all inertia, entropic, irresistible, spilling as she spilled toward the door, her momentum carrying herself and the door forward to a slamming slam he could hear clearly. She said it was like a cartoon, the motion so suddenly staunched, her writhing, her worming. Her back turned to the door, and she slid slowly to the floor with the squeak of naked skin on enamel paint, one hand fumbling behind her head for the lock’s knob while the other, between her melting legs, tugged at herself, plucked out the minor-key tufts of sensation as she settled bare-assed, panting. In fact, the next time they were on the phone, the retelling of this last time was enough to take her over the edge again, the conjuring up of the sprint across the room, the throbbing pulses racing through her racing legs, turning the ground beneath her viscous. “Fuck,” she said distinctly in his ear. What he did not tell her about that previous time (the time she left the phone connected on the bed to rush to the door, coming while she ran) was that he continued to listen over the distance, hearing the padding feet and the grunting climax and the call and the slamming door and the puckered squeak of her skin on the door. She had been using a vibrator, one that plugged in, and it continued to hum, the sound dampened by the bedclothes. It nested near the phone, creating a humid, occluded silence, over dubbing the static hiss sparking off the wire. He too had been about to come when he heard her hear her daughter’s voice and start her stumble for the door. Had he come, he wouldn’t have uttered a sound, intent, instead, on listening to hear the “Fuck” slip out of her and positioning his release beneath hers, emitting a kind of melted sigh for her hard consonance to ride on. Now that she was gone, he slowed his stroking and continued to listen closely. There was a window open. It was late spring there, and he swore he could hear the percolating silence of the warming air as it infiltrated
the mesh of wire screen near the bed. He lived miles to the south where the spring had long ago turned torrid, his room closed up and dark. He rolled onto his side, insulating his ear away from the phone, encasing it with the pillow that filtered the baseline purr of the AC unit cycling outside. He heard her then, miles away, talking with her daughter through the door, the door acting as a kind of resonator, transmitting the mundane news that she’d been napping, asking for a moment to get dressed. The vibrator went dead. She unplugged it and pulled it to her, a clatter hitting the floor, the scrape of it as she coiled the cord, the vibrator’s hard plastic case stuttering across the sisal rug. He heard drawers of various timbres slide in and out, the little rattle of the swivel pulls against the plates. The jittery knickknacks disturbed in the haste. He heard her, he swears, dressing, her jeans on first, standing, the flat stoms as she skipped twice to balance, the stereo tramp of both feet finding the floor as she pulled up the pants. He listened for the zipper and heard it. Then the soft whisper as she rolled a T-shirt onto her arms, followed by that stopped-up, submerged sound as her hair, silk, slid through the abraded collar. She walked flat-footed to the door, brushing out her hair as she shuffled, the pitch changing as she stopped, then the sweep of all that hair over the top to brush from behind and below, currying the muffled mass of it back up over her bent, bobbing head. And then he heard her leave, the volume of her diminished in his ear, the distant, depleted report of her, calling her daughter’s name, descending as she descended the stairs. The silence settled out heavier than air. He pressed the phone closer to his ear as if to inject his own hushed self into the recently disturbed acoustic there, to detect any sonic smidgeon left in the mix. Her swallowing. A footfall. Those eyes blinking. He boosted the gain of his signal, attempting to catch her shallow-breath breathing. Instead, all he heard in the stillness, spilling in from the open window, was a birdsong, a slurred series of downward-inflected quarter notes. Each note tripped progressively lower in pitch, spiraled, cascading down a scale. It began again with a simple, noninflected cheep, ended with
a rolling trill. It was one of the thrushes. The hermit or the robin. He had told her at the beginning of the call that all the flocking robins in his neck of the woods had disappeared a few days before. I am sending them your way, he had told her as they began. A kind of foreplay, he had thought, releasing songbirds north to her along with the heat, the seasons turning, his own sprightly combination of suggestion. There it was again, a long lowering run, arranging itself into a fragment, a phrase, an adjectival clause that modifies a person, place, or thing, an intensifier that amplifies. Very. That sound like very. Very. Very like very.

Mockingbird

Their answering machines matched, and they started leaving messages for each other. Beige plastic boxes with a keyboard of buttons—play, fast-forward, erase, rewind. The tape spooled in a transparent cassette stored in a compartment inside. You could see the sprockets turning in the cassette as you listened to it play through a clear plastic window in the lid. Nested in the buttons, a red LED lit up a number indicating the number of calls. Depressing play released the message into the room through the low-fidelity speaker, wired in such a way as to make everything sound melancholy. They tried to keep each other’s tape filled with the magnetic imitations of each other’s voice. He would come home to find the machine’s number glowing, 21, say, or 25, 22 messages, only to find each one of the messages another piece of one long call from her, the machine starting, then cutting her off after a prescribed interval. Each new message contained another message about the message left just before, the procedures she endured to redial and connect, the transitional phrases of “where was I” and “oh, yes” linking all the calls together in the end, a long self-conscious apology for taking up all the tape with the series of calls and indicating that this was a very long and convoluted way to say something she should be able to say simply—that she loved him. She loved him. He was fond of leaving one long message on her machine. There was a setting in the
machines that allowed for varying the duration of the machine’s patience. He expected that he would have to leave a long message, and so he spoke extemporaneously, though sometimes from notes, and at length about his day, and at every transition point, he linked his mundane and ordinary activities with the phrase, “and I thought of you when . . .” or “that made me think of you . . .” or “I told myself to remember to tell her.” And then he would tell her, tell her the structure of his thinking as he thought, of his remembering as he remembered it. Both machines, doling out their seconds, initiated and terminated the time with a nasal beep, flattened bleat, the sound of which programmed itself, a concussion, into each of them. They dreamed of the beep, found that in the messages they would sometimes beep themselves, a charm to ward off the inevitable, rapidly approaching real beep. The sounding of it, the anticipatory silence before it, and the sound itself, and the other silent silence after, its punctuation. They started and stopped on the cue. On cue they entered the noisy space of their connection, and on cue they became again disembodied, distant, silent. They liked the old machines for the mechanical magic they conjured, playing the message, each other’s voice filling the room, evoked the other in three wraithlike dimensions that made the voices seem almost corporeal, an actual body solidifying around the skeleton of vibrating air. Each could be in each other’s next room, calling down the hallway around the corner.

As time passed, the messages began to be more complicated, each of them attempted to pack the other’s tape with more and more information. It started when one of them played a song in the background. A news report on the radio followed, a commercial on television picked up inadvertently by the tape. The sound from the street below, the dishwasher turning on washed over the string of words strung on the spooling, the unspooling tape. Soon, it occurred to both of them that they could play back to each other each other’s messages to the other. There, on the answering machine, was the new message and underneath it, in the background, the previous recorded message of the now-listener’s voice leaving a message.
The machine recorded the improvised duet of the caller and the person in the machine speaking in waffled mono that mimicked a stereo track, leaving a message and at the same time responding to a message that had been left. Those layers now recorded were then played when the next call was made. And the next message added another layer of past messages to the mix. More and more silent spaces on the tape filled with words, words turning to syllables turning to diphthongs and ligatures, turning finally into a deep layered mist, bits of alphabets, static murmuring, incomprehensible mass, but strangely intimate, ancient, prehistoric, preverbal. The acoustic of amniotic fluid. Warbles, squeaks, smeared thumps. It was a repertoire of sounds they stole from each other and then gave back as baroque, rococo, atonal fugues. All of the noise became a foil to the final track they applied, recording each other’s orgasms over and over again, the wall of auditory stimulus building up from a triggering beep, each other’s name burbled up as a downbeat, beating, the gulped hiccupping of breath backbeating, all percussion, cussing counterpunctually, attempting to fill in every iota of silence with any unsilent utterance, collapsing all the space between them into the compact sonic puck of the solid absence that mocks and mocks and mocks them both. The sound then turned liquid, sizzled, finally, like rain, like a tidal rush, a sound your own blood makes in your own ear when you hear it, when you hear it when you listen for it.

*Red-Winged Blackbird*

His room in the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel overlooks the Grand River at the point it is interrupted by an artificial rapid, a concrete stairstep that spans the river, symmetrical tiers tearing up the glassy flow, an organized baffle. Beyond the river, he looks down on the pie-wedge slice of the Gerald Ford Museum, its acute angle, a cursor, arrowing back to him in his cockeyed corner room. He teaches geometry and finite math to ninth graders in an Indiana junior
high and sells Amway on the side, but soon, he thinks, it will be the other way around. Everyone knows the money was not so much in selling the product—detergents and soaps and perfumes and vitamin supplements—but in selling people on selling the product and then selling them the product they would sell. He likes the geometric progression of the profits, the curving curve of results, the logarithmic rhythm of getting rich quick as his network of distribution compounds and compounds and compounds and compounds. As a numbers person, he understands this better than most, loves to diagram, for a prospective distributor, the trellised architecture of the scheme—names within boxes, networks of radiating beams of connecting emanations, doubling down the gridded yellow legal pad. He looks the part. The white poly short-sleeve shirt, the dark waffle-knit tie at his throat, the heavy glasses of glossy black plastic with the bitten end of the right temple ear piece. “It’s not rocket science,” he tells the prospective distributor, but his looks suggest it is. He’s an analyst from Rand, a grammarian of overflowing flowcharts.

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A woman in the lobby of the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel—not one of the conventioneers of Amway distributors checking in, nor a member of the native elect Dutch Reform who people the environs of the Grand River Valley of southwestern Michigan, but a buyer of office furniture from Philadelphia, touring the nearby Herman Miller factory—sees him and thinks without thinking that there’s a man who needs to get laid.

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Instead of getting laid he, the sober conventioneer, returns to his room to order dinner in, prop himself up in the king-sized bed blanketed with the scalloped sheets of notes from today’s sessions sorted into piles, his nest feathered. Along the river outside, he sees
the copses of rushes in the eddies, rafts in the backwaters along the banks. Perching blackbirds bow over the cattails. The birds launch themselves, dozens of them, intersecting and crisscrossing, squawking, he imagines, to settle once more, jostling on different roosts. From this distance they are dots, fluid punctuation, floating decimal points. He knows the hotel around him is full, its hundreds of rooms occupied with men and women unmoored, at loose ends, and most are here to make connections, construct a honeycombed armature of enterprise—one big hive, the whole ball of wax. The company anoints itself with the moral disinfectants of god and country, and the scrupulous cleanliness marketed in Grand Rapids comes backed by pious guarantees of godliness. But he knows that that filth, that ugliness, is as human as apple pie, that he and the company count on it. Hygiene may be the main business model, after all, but the company includes a line of euphemistically disguised lubricants, pheromonal colognes, and atomized herbal propellants in its catalogue, samples of which he now deploys upon his own body as he begins to masturbate, listening as he does so for the sounds of other humans all around him, all the rooms filled with humans, making love—the beat of the headboard, a howl from a hissing shower, the giggle that picks the lock of the connecting door, the spillage of dead weight onto the ceiling that’s also a floor. He comes into the sink, reaches beneath to the fascia board of the vanity for a tissue only to discover the built-in dispenser is empty. He pops off the chrome cover to get to the empty cardboard box behind it. The room is stocked with a replacement, along with all the other amenities, all Amway brands, of course. He finds hidden behind the empty box a Polaroid picture, the first of many he will find, of a couple having sex, or at least he thinks it is a couple since the pictures are all cropped down to cunts and cocks, lips and tongues, mouths and nipples, hair and hair. The first stowed behind the box spills out onto the faux-marble floor. It takes a moment for him to sort out the abstract angles and lines, the trapezoids and rhombi,
and when he does, he stares at the fleshy flesh before him, stares it back to the strange plane of the start—solid slabs of his first impression—so he can experience again the sensation of the optical illusion, fading out and back into focus. Now he senses these surround him, little treasures that are themselves a kind of treasure map. He finds more and more of them. One behind the notice tucked into the plastic sleeve tacked to the door. Inside the zippered upholstery of the armchair cushion. Beneath the desk blotter. Behind the pictures of the lake dunes. On the top of the television wardrobe. Inside the dry cleaner’s bag. There are three in the Bible. And each time he finds another, he starts to search for more. Within the folder of stationery. Under the coffee pot. There is a growing pile on the bed mixed in with his notes of projections and testimonials already there. He begins to put animated sequences together—four frames of a cock first disappearing inside a cunt, then further in, and then completely inside to only emerge, in the fourth picture, glistening, the sheen on the skin like the sheen on the still-undeveloped print of an instant photograph, the emulsion beginning its wet work, evaporating into the schematic of solid geometry, all pyramids, cones, cylinders, and spheres. Bounded space and its infinite absence. He shuffles the prints once more, deals them again onto the cluttered bed, a four-handed game. It is all chance, permutation: game theory results. How long it must have taken them, he thinks, to create the fragmentation, so many moments of passion—sets and subsets, intersections of oblong fields of Venn diagrams, x’s and y’s. Each reading of the cards promises a prediction of some future from the residue of a past. He thinks, then, of Christmas and the last day before dismissal. He has his classes listen to a scratchy record of “The Twelve Days of Christmas” and poses for them an algebraic puzzle to pass the time. How many presents in total does the true love receive? The one partridge and one pear tree multiply through the course of the round to twelve each. The two turtle doves covey up to twenty-two. There would be thirty French hens and thirty-six
calling birds, et cetera. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, through the whole progression of obsessed love. Outside now, the red-winged blackbirds below have left their perches along the river, launching from the cattails that then rebound, bristling. The birds levitate into a cloud around a much larger black bird, a crow or a raven, in full-flight fleeing the dive-bombing, tag-team attacks over the overly neat rapid rippling below. Another and another bird peels out of the cloud to intercept the distressed bird attempting to maintain a little altitude. It all takes place in silence, a harried sketch of vectors plotting velocity, gravity, and drag. Even to his trained eye, it is impossible to count them all. The red-winged blackbirds can't stop, continue to create this silent racket, persistent pantomime, suspended in the lowering sky.

Blue Jay

Both married to someone else, they were conscientious enough to call their spouses when they were away together, taking turns to dial home or receive a call while the other busied him-or herself in the bathroom of the hotel room, reading the local attractions magazine. But the room, big as it was, was not big enough to damp the half-heard half-conversation going on nearby, making both the participant and the eavesdropper self-conscious, so that the latter got dressed and left the room to take a walk around the property, to loiter in the lobby, or even have a drink in the bar, half-watching the sports spill from the television floating overhead, finally to call back to the room from a house phone in the elevator lobby and have the operator report, more often than not, that the line was in use, asking if you wished to leave a message. Leaving the room meant the one leaving had to get dressed, because most time in the room was spent undressed—fucking or relaxing after fucking, recovering from fucking, eating and drinking. Room service is ordered after fucking and received by one of them, wrapped only in a robe or
draped with a long nightshirt that will be stripped off before getting back into bed to feed each other and to talk about what each of them does when they are not together fucking, their lives apart from each other with their own other, who—soon after they have finished their salmon and salad, the warm white wine, after they have both come again—they will call and tell the person on the other end of the line what he or she had for dinner and how from the tower of this hotel you can see an endless parade of airliners drifting across the window on approach to the nearby airport, so slow as to seem they would almost stall, fall out of the sky altogether, one after the other, in the dusk, their lights strobing and the exhaust of their engines muffled, to be sure, but still registering a noticeable sound, a muted bellow that rattles, at the right pitch and harmony, the safety glass in the aluminum frames of the hotel’s windows. After many nights like this, over many different occasions, in many different airport hotels, no one gets dressed or strays very far from the bed when the other one phones home, instead the one not talking on the telephone fits him- or herself into the negative template of the body next to him or her, watches the muted television with the remote, scanning the channels in silence as the conversation continues, and the jets outside slide down the glide path, yawing, pitching, rolling, making that yawning roar, turning, as the time passes, into diffuse shade, then into simple pixels of a constellation, of pulsing lights that outline the now-absent bulk of the darkened, backlit shadow of the falling fuselage. A hand rests on a stomach, a leg is thrown over the other’s leg as the call continues, half-heard queries concerning that day’s mail, the children’s school, an appointment rescheduled, the changing weather. The half-hearted embrace proceeds in the midst of the phone call—the mumble at the ear, the other hand, scanning with the remote the blinking television—has evolved from the past’s position of polite neutrality, the mutual drifting separation, to this, this cozy, almost domestic, new intimacy with the lover who hasn’t, until now, shared this part of his
or her life and the lover who hasn’t, until now, wanted any hint of
that life overheard, now settling in with this new order of cobbled-
together proximity, shrinking distances over distance. The free
hand finds a trail of drying come along the belly or on the inside
of the thigh, and a finger begins to pick at the crust of it, flaking it
with a nail, and as the lover’s conversation with home burbles above,
the archaeology of the skin begun in starts and stops, almost as if
this patch here was sterile field divorced from the rest of the resting
body, starts to turn more serious, the touching now turning into a
shallow massage disguised as absentminded petting, as the voice on
the phone that has been so even and controlled spikes a slight fever,
a heightened pitch. They glare when they look at each other, hinting
at the hint of anger, both about the interruption of the phone
call and the phone call’s interruption, that gives way to the further-
ing of the sexual steps they have been perfecting in the hotel room,
the one on the line now barely putting together a string of non-
committal head-nodding affirmations to whatever question has just
come through, the conflicted look torn in two between the here and
there and the now and now, attempting to sort out the unimportant stimuli from the immediate noise and, at the same time, focus
the full attention on the far away, the evening of the evening on the
other end of the wire. His cradled half-hard cock rolls in her hand.
She holds his hand, his fingers inside her, hard against her to keep
them from moving. He shields his nipple, directs her kisses to the
rib below. She blocks her ear opposite the handset from his breath.
All completed in stifled silence. This end of the conversation kept
up. Fucking again, now, through the phone calls, silent, suppressed,
turned inward, listening hard to the rasping in the ear, the receiver
pressed hard against the head as if each of them, when it is their
turn, hangs on to some handle of sanity, anchoring their consciousness while the body below is being dismembered piece by piece. It
is a kind of sex toy, the telephone, vibrant but inert, innocuous, a
chunk of putty-colored plastic molded to the ear, enzymatic magic,
the fulcrum around which they turn, and turning, they both now want to say something, to speak, talk, to change the subject, bend it over something, move the conversation from the ear to the mouth, feeling the coming words come, emit the innocent protestations of longing, of feeling the distance and the night closing in, of missing you so much, of letting loose the shared formula of words developed over all these years of partnered arrangement to propel the change of the subject, to signal the desire for desire, speaking the cracked-open code to the loved one on the other end of the wire, “Let’s come. Right now. I am almost there already. I’ll wait. It’s late,” all the excuses of coaxing as the coaxing continues, the lubrication of the imagination, and when she comes, when he comes, the others over there, they come with a long report carried through the lines by means of jostled charged electrons, the lovers, embedded, ears glued to the phone, listen together, in love now with listening, connected and connected. And after the after, together, in the hotel bathroom, they brush their teeth together, heads down, avoiding the mirror, rinsing and spitting at the same time, getting ready for bed, for sleep. The hotel provides a box that plays a provided CD of ambient sounds taken from nature—the seashore with a running tide, a rapid waterfall scouring a rock ledge, wind in a stand of pine—all designed to cancel out the cascading turbulence of the landing jets, the climbing jets that, as they turn to their outbound headings, tear open the sky, ripping ripped cloth. This shouldn’t work, they both think on the edge of sleep, in the dark, their heads filled with a catalogue of auditory interference, this should not work, this empty glen, the oak forest in the background, the swish of wiregrass, the drill of a bird’s call. This should not work, the rough edge of a blue jay’s squawk filing down the aggregate of air oscillating at random and without end, all around them.