

Deborah Levy, BLACK VODKA (2013)

PLACING A CALL

You are telling me something I don't want to hear. You are telling me the honest truth. We are standing in the garden and it is dusk. There are rain clouds in the sky and midges and someone is planting a rose bush in the garden next door. The telephone is ringing.

The telephone is ringing. I run into the house and pick up the receiver. The telephone is pressed against my ear, someone is calling and I am answering. I am saying hello into hard black plastic but I hear the dial tone and the ring tone happening at the same time. Someone is missing. Someone is trying to get through. And then I remember there is a bird in the garden that imitates a telephone when it sings. I can see it now in the tree in the garden where you are telling me the honest truth. It is singing in an

old-fashioned ring tone, it is singing like a land line.
I run back into the garden.

We are standing in the garden and it's autumn
and there's a bird in the tree that imitates a tele-
phone when it sings. Your hair is silver but you
are not old. Under your soft silver hair is your
skull with your central nervous system inside it.
It is dusk and it has started to rain. The roots
of the eucalyptus tree that grows in the garden
are spreading under the house. Our daughter is
sleeping inside the house under a photograph of
the sea. She is covered in a thick blanket. Her bed
stands on a green carpet. There are two stains
on the carpet.

You are wearing a white shirt and a suit and under
your soft silver hair is your skull. While you speak
the honest truth I am thinking about the time we
ate horse steaks in Paris. The waiter served the dish
of the day and the dish of the day was horse. It was
like eating a unicorn in the twenty-first century. My
iPod was playing a song we'd never heard before.
You untangled the headphones and pressed them

into your ears and you lifted my fingers and pressed
them into your mouth.

But now we are standing in the garden and
the telephone bird has stopped making calls no
one answers. The car alarms and police sirens have
stopped too. Silence is cruel in cities where missing
people need to hide in noise. But we are standing
in the garden in the rain and you have not stopped
telling me the honest truth and I wonder if the
telephone bird will one day learn to sing computer
start-up sounds.

Your silver hair is wet. Our daughter is pretending
to sleep inside the house under a photograph of
the sea and she's listening to the rain which always
makes sorrow bigger and hard things softer. I walk
towards you, bumping into things on the way.
Kissing you is like new paint and old pain. It is
like coffee and car alarms and a dim stairway and
a stain and it's like smoke. I am looking into your
eyes and I can't get in. You have changed the locks
and I have an old key that doesn't fit and our
daughter is making her way across the garden
towards us, holding her thick blanket. You are
telling me you are dead, and I say yes, I know

you are. We miss you and since you've gone I've forgotten all my pin numbers, I can't remember the code to my gym locker or where the honey is or where I put the blue pillowcase – and could you tell me, again, where exactly the sea is, in that photograph?