Black Telephone

Robert Long Foreman

Michael, you are gone, and in this house where you once were there is an antique telephone as black as your coffin. Heavier than it looks, it is as full as the hole the men dug for you, early one morning, as they talked about summer and things they saw on TV.

Old things weigh more than they look—dead, leaden things like you and the black telephone.

You have been gone three weeks, and now my mother is gone, too. When she left for Providence she left me here with Michael, whom you left behind like a copy of yourself when you went. He doesn’t ask where you are anymore. Instead he says, nine times a day, that he’s going to call you on his telephone.

He found it at the flea market where my mother took him, to take him off my hands and take me off of his.

When I’m not looking, he lifts the receiver and talks to you. He doesn’t say your name, and I don’t ask who is on the line. I know it’s you.

My mother calls three times a day, on the phone that works, and as she talks I lie there half-dead, half-leaden, one eye on the blank TV screen, the other on the ancient black thing in the corner with its ring of numbers 0 to 9 and what looks from where I lie like an astonished grin.

It is a relic from a past that isn’t mine, one that isn’t even my mother’s. I don’t like it.

Michael likes it. He asked if I would put it in his room, beside his bed. I said no.

I sleep on the couch, now. I don’t sleep in our bed. I wake sometimes in the night or the day to the sound of Michael speaking into your receiver. He is quiet. I don’t know what he says.

I fell asleep, once, to the sound of his voice, and dreamed I unscrewed the telephone’s mouthpiece, out of which climbed a black crustacean, like a black hermit crab, too fast for me to catch as it ran. From the earpiece I heard broken numbers in a voice I’d never heard.

I didn’t see where the creature went. I woke still wanting to see where it had run, with Michael curled in my arms.
I know you’re not in the ground, Michael, though I know that is where you are. I don’t know just what I mean, except that you’re not where I left you, and I couldn’t find you if I tried.

I know you’re coming back at the same time I don’t know it. I’m convinced of it even as I know it isn’t true. I would ask why you went but I know you do not know, and to reach you I would have to catch the creature who belongs in the black telephone and put her back where she was.

Michael asks what I’ve done with his telephone. I don’t tell him I buried it in the backyard when he was asleep.

I cried as I dug the hole I put it in, for I want to reach you just as he does. I know better than to try to find you in an ancient, broken thing. You are farther gone than that.

When he emerged in the morning to find his telephone gone, we didn’t talk about it. Not at first. He waited a while and mentioned it at last as he chewed his cereal. He asked where his direct line to your ghost had gone like he was asking if I thought it might rain later, as if he were not asking for something he wanted very badly, something the loss of which he regrets like the loss of you.

It is one more thing of yours I see in him, the need to come across like he needs nothing when he is most in need.

On the seventh day that followed my mother’s departure, the thirtieth that followed yours, you began to make your way back. You appeared to us on the edge of the night’s horizon, a second moon hanging in the sky that no one knew was you, not even me.

Michael saw before I did. Look, he said, pointing. I looked. I didn’t see. It’s the moon, he said. No, I said. That’s not the moon. The moon is there. I pointed at the moon, the right moon, at the other end of the night. Look, he said again. Now I saw: something hot and bright, like a distant, burning eye. It peered at us over the horizon, looking like a second moon we hadn’t seen before, one that wasn’t there when you were here.

We stood on the lawn, our son and I, in our baseball caps. We hadn’t bathed for days. There was no one to bathe for anymore.

It’s Dad, said Michael.

I almost hit him. I have never hit him.

See? he said.

Your dad’s gone, I said.
Gone is the word I use for dead, now that you are dead. 
Mom, said Michael. That’s Daddy.
It is not, I said.
He wasn’t listening. He was looking at the new light with tears in his eyes. I took him by the arm and led him inside.

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The next night, Michael watched out the window to see if you would appear where you had been. You did appear.
Michael insisted again. It’s Dad, he said. He’s here.
I should not have buried his phone, I thought. I should have told him more than half-truths of what had become of you. I should have used better words than missing and gone.
You were brighter than you were the night before. I said again that you weren’t you. I said you were a star gone supernova. I said you were a satellite, or the slowest shooting star. I said there was no way you were you. You might be a comet or a meteor, but you were not the man from Eugene who moved us here before he left us as far behind as one man could have done.
It’s not him, I said to the back of Michael’s head. He kept watching you through the window.
We’d left the TV on, though it showed only static on the three channels we once received through the antenna you attached to the roof.
I took Michael by the arm to the kitchen table and wrote your name, but not your name. I wrote DADDY in big letters on a sheet of paper.
This is what you called your father, I said. It isn’t what you call what’s in the sky.
I have done the dumbest things, I realized, when I saw the word I’d written, to describe what’s become of you, to not say the word I keep locked up in my mind, the word DEAD that I will write here but not say anywhere.
I went to the couch and waited for sleep. It was late. Michael ate something—he mostly feeds himself, now. I heard him eating, and in the morning he was curled asleep before the couch, like a dog you abandoned, the word DADDY beside him on that sheet of paper. Below it, in the night, he had drawn you bright and yellow, making your word mean a thing it should not mean.
I threw it in the trash.
It has been there since. There is no place, now, to take the garbage of the world, no one to haul it all away. In the inertia you’ve inspired with your return, in the worldwide loss of everything, all that there is remains where it is. There is no use for motion, anymore.
The phone that wasn’t buried stopped working on the day after the second night you saw us over the horizon. You never wired the house for access to the worldwide Internet.

There was nothing to tell us if the light we saw was you or not, or what it was. It grew brighter every night, and Michael watched, insisting on calling it Daddy. Soon I wasn’t correcting him anymore. Soon I welcomed his use of the word, and took comfort in it, as the new celestial thing came into being like a distant embryo, and I came to wish it was you, to hope it was you, until I said it was you just as Michael did. I addressed you in my mind as the light in the sky, and not the corpse in the ground, which I’d never believed was really you.

We slept when we could and ate what we had and did not venture out. We carried on. I don’t know how many days passed as you grew in the sky, a second moon surging up to greet us, crossing empty space in slow motion.

Then, one evening, the new family arrived.

They were a father, mother, and daughter. The mother wore a black kerchief on her head. She said later it was to hide her hair when they traveled by foot. Why her hair was what she sought to hide I never asked. Michael saw them emerge into the clearing, not by the road, he said at my bedside, but through the woods. They’re black, he said.

I was sick with a fever. I had been sick for days, but I pulled myself shaking to the window where I watched the people as they moved through the clearing, approaching our house reticently, disheveled like a family at the dawn of humankind and not its eclipse.

The mother and father wore backpacks, with camping gear. The mother’s skin was lighter than the father’s. The father was tall. The daughter was as dark as the father. She walked three steps behind them. I stood at the window and watched them watch the house with my shoulders hunched, the way they have been since you left, as if I am bracing myself for the next hard punch.

I went, shivering, with Michael, to greet them, or to do the nearest thing to greeting I could do. When I neared them I saw the man was not as tall as I’d thought. He was as dark as I’d thought. He said, You haven’t been evacuated.

I didn’t speak. Michael spoke. What? he said.

Is this outside where they’re evacuating? he said. Does the city know you’re here?

What city? I said.

The woman spoke. They’ve been taking people out of the city, she said. Because of that.

She pointed at you, burning on the edge of the dusk.

Why are they doing that? asked Michael.
The man and woman traded glances. We don’t really know, said the man. Except, when the news spread, things got bad. That was—

A couple of weeks ago, said the woman. She looked at Michael. She looked at me. We know we don’t have much time left, she said. But we had to leave the city. We couldn’t take the car, the roads were blocked.

We just left, said the man. On foot.

These people don’t understand, I thought. How could they?

Their girl was watching Michael watch her parents. Her face was smudged. Michael asked them, Are you staying here?

That depends, said the man. Could we set up here?

In the house? said Michael.

The man smiled. We’ll stay out of your way, he said.

The woman was petting her daughter’s hair. We’d like to stop moving for a while, she said. For as long as we’ve got left.

I was weak and swaying in the growing darkness. Sure, I said. Stay out here as long as you want. You’ve got a tent? I nodded to the man’s backpack.

Yes, said the man.

He would have said more. He would have asked for more than I’d allowed him, but I went inside with Michael’s hand in mine.

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I couldn’t let them into the house, not to stay. I couldn’t let them live in the rooms where I have lived in such grief, where I once lived with you.

Michael asked me if the family would stay out there.

Yes, I said.

Why are they here? he said. What happened to the city?

I said I didn’t know.

I went to the couch and lay there. Michael brought me a blanket. We should let them in, he said.

I didn’t answer. I watched him watch the new family out the window until I fell asleep.

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As I slept I dreamed of things the mother and father didn’t say. I dreamed a radio whined bad news into the morning, and men and women lost their minds with grief and fear. In another dream the world was already dead, and so was Michael. So was I, and so were you.

I woke, my mouth dry from dreaming, to the sound of birds singing. You would have known what sort of birds they were from their songs.

I rose, wary, my fever gone, and went to the sink for water. As I drank it I saw
the man and woman at the edge of the clearing, their blue tent at their backs, talking and gesturing. One, I knew, was convincing the other to come up to the house.

I watched the woman approach, then, through the grass that is taller now than it was in all the time you lived here. She wore dark jeans and a black shirt. With the kerchief off her head, her hair was a natural disaster. So was mine.

Hi, she said, when I opened the door.

I nodded. Her hair looked worse up close. Worse than mine.

She seemed to try to look past me, into the house. We haven’t had clean water in a while, she said.

Right, I said. A second passed and I turned away slowly with the door ajar. I filled a gallon jug at the sink.

We used to talk, you and I, when you were here. Now you’re gone I find I don’t want to talk, if I can help it. I can nearly always help it.

You’ve got running water, she said, standing behind me, now, inside the house. The water shut off in the city as soon as the news broke.

How long have I been here with Michael? I wondered. How long have you really been gone?

There’s a well, I said, the plastic jug nearly full. Do you need food?

I didn’t wait for an answer. I went for some saltines and cans of corn and peas. She looked in silence at the cans, when I put them in her hands, like they were the wrong cans.

Right, I said. I gave her the can opener.

A silence passed between us, until she said, Thank you, then nodded, like she wanted to say more. I nodded, too, and led her out.

When she was gone I lay on the couch again, my hands between my knees. My fever was gone, but my body was weak. Michael was drawing DADDY again. He had not missed a word of what had been said.

After a moment, he went to the window. They look like they’re fighting, he said.

They are fighting, I said.

Why?

They wanted more than what I gave them. He wanted her to ask for more than that.

She didn’t ask for more, though.

I know. She knew I’d say no.

Why?

Because we can’t give them everything.

Why not?

Because, I said, lifting my head to look at him. If we did, there’d be nothing left for us.
He looked back at me, and turned to watch the new family. I fell asleep.

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Some people aren’t used to asking for things, like the woman outside. She came to ask for more food later that day. She said she was sorry she had to ask again. I motioned her inside. I saw no reason not to let her in for a while. Like a behavior learned in another lifetime, we went to sit together at the kitchen table. Michael was doing something in the next room, listening to us.

She said they first heard you were coming on the radio. She didn’t say you were you. She didn’t know you were you, at least to us who lived in the house where you once were. I thought you knew what it was, she said, when we came here. I would have told you then, if I’d known you didn’t know.

She said you were the biggest comet anyone had seen. Big enough to ruin a planet and headed here. Which is close to how I might have described you, when you were living, had I tried to put you into words.

She said they announced at first that the new light in the sky would miss us by a hundred thousand miles, that it would be a close call. Later that same day, they issued a correction. You wouldn’t miss us.

Then all the radio stations went dead.

They closed all the schools, said the woman. There were suicides. A lot of them. We saw some of the bodies, on our way out of the city.

She did all of the talking, until I asked, What’s your plan, then? Long-term, I mean?

She swallowed. She looked at me like I was at the bottom of a well she couldn’t help me out of. There’s no plan, she said. Not anymore. There aren’t any plans left in the world, I don’t think.

She looked at Michael, who was drawing you again.

We were wondering, she said. She paused. It’s good of you to let us stay on your land.

My land?

She nodded.

You mean the yard.

Yes. That’s what I mean.

Okay.

The woman bit one of her nails. Do you think we could come in? And stay inside?

I didn’t speak.

It’s good to have a place to stay, she said. Outside, I mean. But you’ve got shelter. Running water, right? We’d like Kima to spend these next days inside,
and warm. Comfortable.
For a moment I didn’t know what she meant. What Kima?
Right, I thought then. Kima is their girl.
I knew that by the next days she meant the last days, as in the last days they
would ever spend. And by we she meant her husband. She wanted it as much as
he did, but he had asked her to ask me this. He had sent her in.
I don’t know, I said. It’s only me and Michael, here.
Did you lose an animal? she said abruptly.
Have I what?
My husband wanted to know. He found a dirt mound in back of your house.
He thought you’d maybe had a pet.
No, I said.
A silence passed between us.
You’ve been generous with us, she said. Since we left the city, we haven’t eaten
much.
I think I have some more cans, I said.
Do you have more than that? she said. Something else, I mean? She was shak-
ing. We’re very hungry.
I’ll get you a couple more cans, I said, and I did. I put them in her hands: one
can of black beans, another of kidney beans.
She looked at them grimly. I escorted her out.

Michael was silent for a while, after watching the woman leave, until he asked
again what had happened in the city.
He had heard what the woman said. Does he know what suicide is? I won-
dered. Did you tell him what it meant before you escaped down its narrow
valve?
I couldn’t tell him what it was. I didn’t have the words to tell myself what was
happening, to make myself understand there would not be days ahead in which
to eat the food I kept to keep me and Michael alive. There were more days left
in my mind than there were in the world.
Michael thought we should give away all we had.
He was quiet about it. Of course he was. He is yours. So much of him is you.
He was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and I was eating peanut but-
ter. He said, watching the family through the kitchen window, across the clearing,
They’re very hungry.
It was what the woman had said. He was only repeating what she’d said.
They’re okay, I said. They’ll be okay. We gave them food.
Michael glanced at me. We have more, he said. He sounded angry. He sounded
like you.
I didn’t respond. I didn’t look at him, but he looked at me.
I left the table and put my spoon in the sink, loudly. I busied myself, cleaning things that didn’t need cleaning. I changed out of my dirty clothes, into other dirty clothes.
I took a deep breath and approached Michael in the living room, where he was drawing you again. We need to look after ourselves, I said. No one else will. We have to make sure we have enough. I don’t know where we’ll get more food when what we have is gone.
Michael looked up at me from his drawing with that stunned look he gets when I speak to him like he is grown. He didn’t speak. My heart raced. He bent down and resumed his work.
From the kitchen table, where I went to sit, I watched him continue to draw with more vigor than before.
I don’t know if he learned his stubborn resistance from watching you, his means of silent rebuke, or if you gave it to him at his conception and it has been growing in him ever since. I continued watching him, my quiet dissenter, until he finally went into another room.
I looked out the window at the family, who had made a campfire.

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How long have we been here, me and Michael, living in this house without you? I thought it had been a month and a week. I think now it has been longer than that.
We never had a calendar. You didn’t wear a watch. We didn’t have a reason to count down hours and days, but we do now, with you glowing brighter every night and drowning out more of the stars. You’re nearer all the time, and you look like the end of the world.
Still, in the daytime, birds sing. The sun carries on as if you are not there.
In our stalemate, with the birds singing, Michael watched the family out the window. I didn’t know what they were doing. I lay on the couch and watched him watch them until I fell asleep.
I didn’t mean to sleep as long as I did, through the night that came and half the morning. Every hour was itself a day. It was as if time stretched itself, now that there was so little of it left.
When I awoke, from my eternity of sleep, I felt as if something had lifted off of me, like I was stepping out of darkness into sunlight. Like I’d awoken to the morning of the world, which is not what it was. Not at all.
I walked about the house that morning, blinking, stretching, until I saw dirt on Michael’s shoes. It told me he had gone out, when I was sleeping. I saw the
weedy clearing, out our window, a path beaten from our door a hundred yards to the tent where the family had hung some of their clothes.

More of our food was gone. Michael had taken them more of it, much more. Entire shelves were empty. I didn’t know where he was.

I went to the new family’s campsite in my slippers, and found Michael sitting beside the girl, her parents drinking coffee out of metal mugs. The father had a smile on his face. Their fire was still burning. Beside it was a frying pan.

Good morning, said the father.
Are you okay? I asked Michael.
Yes, said Michael.
Michael’s fine, said the woman.
I looked at her.
I mean, she said, he came out here this morning.
He woke us up, said the man.
He did? I looked at Michael.
We had breakfast, said the woman. Michael helped us make it.
We’re running low on food, I told them.

The man laughed an unhappy laugh. It doesn’t matter now, he said. When he saw the look on my face, he said, You know how close it is. Did you see it last night?

It looks bigger than the moon, said Michael.
It is bigger, said the man with something in his voice. Bigger than the moon. That’s what they said, before. It’s almost as big as us. As the Earth.
Not as big, though, said the woman.

The man laughed again.
I remembered a dream I had, in my fever, one that told me what Michael had said, what I already knew. You are the comet and the comet is you, come to take us from life just as you took yourself away.

I wanted to tell this to the family, but I knew if I spoke what was in my mind I would not believe it anymore. I wished my fever would return. This world had made more sense from inside its warp.

Will you sit down? said the woman.
I blinked a few times, still pulling myself out of sleep. I looked at Michael, who looked expectantly at me.

I sat between him and the girl. Michael climbed into my lap. He started crying, his face against my throat. He understood more than I did what scene we were in.

When I looked up, I saw that the man and woman were crying, too.
They wept a while until their weeping was done. As they cried, I didn’t cry. I had done all the grieving I could do.

After what felt like a long time, Michael asked, Will we see Dad?
Yes, I said. Of course we will.
Tonight, said the man, rubbing his eyes. It’ll be tonight, or tomorrow night.
He must have thought he understood what Michael meant.
The woman was holding her daughter, now, their faces buried in one another.
We’ll see you coming, then, I thought. We will be the ones you make contact
with, when you reach this world whose luck has run out.
Michael left my lap to sit beside the girl, and together they sat like what could
have been the last hope of the human race, the promise of renewal, if only you
would miss us as you crossed the sky. The youth of a world that was nearly
dead.
If the world weren’t ending, I thought, we could start over here. But the world
is ending.

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The world is ending.
I had known it. I had kept the knowing down where it could not climb out.
Now the words spilled across my mind and made it real. It was real.
Soon there would be nothing to hold onto anymore.
I clutched Michael in my arms and my arms trembled.

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What does it mean to be dead, when there is no one left alive? I know you don’t
know, but we will all know soon.
I asked the family if they’d like to come inside. I said I’d draw a bath for the
girl. The water doesn’t get very warm, I said. I’m sorry for that.
We should eat, I said.
We will do it, I thought, at the table where I once ate with you. When night
comes, we will go outside and watch you descend on us out of the night sky.

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I know what I’ll do for Michael when it’s time. It will soon be time.
I will wear a smile on my face. I may cry again.
With the shovel you left in the garden shed I will dig up the black telephone.
When you are so near I can feel your heat on my face again, at last, I’ll press the
receiver to Michael’s ear.
I will tell him to speak. You will hear his voice, if you have ever heard him,
until you’re so close he will no longer need the black telephone. You will be
here, and so will we, and together we will disappear.