

Technology's Strange, Familiar Voices

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Although they have no words or language,
and their voices are not heard

Their sound has gone out into all lands
and their message
to the ends of the world

THese days I check my email with some anticipation: I'm waiting, not for the news from an academic colleague, not for the latest conference notice, not for an announcement of a new online archive, not even for the news from the wheaten terrier fanciers. I'm waiting instead, for the "senior special": words from either my mother or my uncle, ages 66 and 71 respectively, and both wired.

My uncle's voice online is strange—he doesn't use paragraphs for one thing, and so all his thoughts flow into one long list. But he sounds particularly strange because I've never before seen his written voice. His wife is a prolific and disciplined letter writer and has long served as the family correspondent. My uncle has always been the handwritten brief postscript at the end of a letter or the voice on the other phone, the one somewhere in the basement that never seems to come in quite clearly. "She can't hear you," my aunt calls out. "Move away from the television, turn off your modem, hang up the other phone," all in that search to find some elusive, magical technological act that turns a faint sound into an AT&T's true voice. I'm beginning to understand that in any discussion of voice, we necessarily hear technology's inflections.

Even when she's on the wrong channel of her cordless phone, I recognize my mother's voice. I'm more familiar with it in all its incarnations because we've had a long history of spoken and written correspondence. When I was in fourth grade, I wrote a completely unmemorable story that impressed a heroin addict who was brought to our parochial school to give one of those "Don't end up like me" testimonials. When the woman asked me to send more of my stories to keep her entertained during the rest of her jail term, I was a writer

born. With audience found and purpose worthy, I penned a story, “The Purple Poodle,” which my mother stubbornly refused to send. Censored, and indignantly so, I stopped writing. I had no way of seeing what I do now: that it wasn’t the story-writing my mother objected to, nor the failure of this particular story (although a story about a purple poodle could hardly have been riveting reading for inmates). It was simply that as a mother, she didn’t want me deeply involved in the life of a deeply troubled woman. And, more importantly, she herself wanted to and was to become my audience.

At age 13, I started writing again, this time long, impassioned letters to my mother, mostly trying to persuade her to persuade my father to let me date an 18-year old young man who, I was convinced, was the only one who could possibly understand someone as mature and sensitive and deep as I was. My mother was never persuaded, so I eventually dropped the letter-writing campaign, but not before we had discussed many an issue dear to my teenage heart. It was for both of us a reminder of a childhood lesson: we heard each other when we wrote.

But not when we spoke. It was the early 1970s and the time of the infamous P.E.T. voice. From what I could tell, Parent Effectiveness Training relied on one phrase—“Let’s talk about it”—offered up in every circumstance, no matter how varied the occasion, emotion, or motive. I was caught smoking in the bathroom. “Let’s talk about it,” my mother said. I was caught sneaking out to meet my somewhat older boyfriend. “Let’s talk about it,” my newly effective parent suggested.

“Let’s not,” I said, shooting her a look, an exact copy of her angry or impatient one: left brow cocked like a loaded bow, right one arrow straight. Two people in the world can create such a look, and I—through the wonders of genetics—am one of them.

P.E.T., as its cute name suggested, was indeed pet training, and I resented it, more so because it was bad pet training. Even dogs can choose to disobey and are punished for the choice. No trainer makes them bark or whine or otherwise repeatedly give voice to the error. Still, P.E.T. was an even further cruelty because it fed on my mother’s natural affection for talk and her faith in the power of language. It transformed her into a psycho-voiced horror.

Thankfully, my mother is a woman of many words with a range of emotions and a slow-boiling temper. P.E.T., though she never admitted it, tired her as well. She needed to use words badly—a wide range of them. So, somewhat newly-widowed and about to be empty-nested, she enrolled in composition, literature, and fiction writing courses at the local community college and wrote intensely for a space of three or four years, the same time that I was finishing an undergraduate degree in English. During these years, my mother was as generous with her prose as I was with my juvenilia and teenage outpourings, while I, with my new college writing, was stingy and safe. She gave me drafts of her literary analysis of D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, a piece in which she tried to come to terms with something completely foreign and frightening to

her. The final version contained this instructor comment, "Good revisions, Chris. No philosophizing in this version!" I recognized the academic "don't get too close" rule. It was something I proved my mastery and love of when I gave her, in return for her disturbing, disturbed feeling drafts, a carefully constructed analysis of the same novel.

Undaunted, she gave me letters she wrote to my father—angry, unromantic letters to a partner who had in death deserted her. In return, I shared a class assignment analyzing the nineteenth-century narrative poem, "The Haystack in the Floods"—and, as I headed off to graduate school, my cat named after Morris's heroine.

Finally, my mother showed me part of her in-progress autobiography:

All of my childhood and young adult years, I lived in a New England city of 100,000 people. The homes were old, close together, close to the street and drab. Unlike my other relatives who lived in the Portuguese ghetto, we lived in a fairly nice area of town. Still, it was cramped and old and colorless—even to the black automobile my father drove—"the only way to drive." Our home was furnished with mahogany furniture, which had to be polished, always. There were starched white curtains at the windows. Any piece of silver or brass that was around had to be polished to gleaming. Beds were always made-tight and straight, hospital-cornered.

I wanted to live in a small town, with front lawns. I wanted a house not so scrubbed and shined that there was no time for living.

I did not give her one of my struggling attempts at autobiographical poetry (nor indeed, anything else with which I struggled):

FIRST COMMUNION

The first grade choir sang as we, their superiors, processed
white shoes
white lace
white veils
white prayer books with Corpus Christi embossed in gold.

But once seated, they disappeared
And it was just me
in white, sitting near the altar,
looking up at the gold stars on the blue-sky dome,
hearing not the priest
but a choir of angels chanting the processional hymn.

At home in the living room
family voices conflicted and rose in Jesuit mock debate
brought out on special occasions with the silver.

I left the living room to find my mother who had pinned and repinned lace,

caressed my hair into shape
in rooms without brothers and sisters.

I found her in the kitchen washing dishes.
"I'll never forget this," I whispered passionately.
But she had transformed, forgotten.

And I thought it was the dirty dishes, her aloneness in the kitchen.
I thought she must have heard and felt it just as I had.
But now I know

She heard the discordant voices of a first grade choir.
I wore white and heard angels.

This passion-play poem I kept hidden (and keep hidden still). Instead, I mailed her a *published* paper, which had a chilling effect on our writing swaps.

Or perhaps I'm reading too much in and it was simply life. My mother stopped writing and started living again: the new town became familiar, the

new job creative but demanding, her new friends rooted. "Write," I would urge her. But it was difficult for her to find the time—or the pain; she knew no other way to write. And while the P.E.T. voice never returned, an older voice did return with more intensity: her church voice.



First Communion

As a small girl, I remember the passion of my mother's Catholicism. Having survived Vatican II, she now was a passionate new Catholic, singing loudly to the wheat-and-honey guitar hymns, participating in the new liturgy and life of the church. She even worked there. And thus it happened that when I returned home from graduate school for visits, I found congregation members who knew intimately my life details. "This is my daughter who lives in Illinois," she'd say. And then I'd

stiffen, waiting for their very physical embrace and the usual refrain, "I feel as if I know you." Still more annoying, I sensed that they never knew the intimate details of her life. I was the post-Vatican II sacrificial lamb, and I knew where she learned the ritual: those writing classes at the community college with the Ken Macrorie textbook. As a Master Catechist (lay people now held impressive titles with their low salaries), she had brought writing to her church work.

What was worse, she too now had a professional voice, and it was mimicking the one I was apprenticing. "I always begin my catechist training sessions with journaling," she told me proudly on one of my visits home.

"You do what?" I say in a tone that should make her rethink this accomplishment. It does not.

"I have them journal," she repeats, pride still there.

"Journal," I say in my best old-fashioned English teacher voice, "is *not* a verb."

But for her it was. As I realized on my last visit home, she had been journaling since the time she was empty-nested in 1980 until just this year, filling on a fairly regular basis a decorative, hardback notebook a year, working at the discipline of it.

September 1980: Read my journal. Too many words. Like weeds in a garden. Choking-hindering-covering up the beauty. Is this what I do with my life too?

May 1985: Mea culpa, mea culpa! So long, so long—two weeks—since I took pen in hand, wrote in my journal.

April 1995: I am reminded of the importance of telling your story-how we tell it over again and again until it is right.

After I earned my degrees and began my probationary period for tenure, I longed for the exchange of our written voices. But she wasn't writing (or so I thought) and I was writing pieces I no longer reproduced for her. Secretly, I rewrote the ending for a short story she had sent to me some years back. She was dissatisfied with the conclusion, and I thought I might fix it and repair our writing relationship. But I realized almost immediately that editing and writing aren't the same. (It didn't help that the ending I wrote was also bad.) Instead, I asked her to begin a memoir for me, assigned it, so to speak. For a few years she was stymied. Then one day, while cleaning closets, she found some old photographs and began writing about them prolifically, with ease. When I returned for my biannual trips to California, she'd read sections aloud to me as I looked at photographs and listened. It was the relationship we had been practicing for.

Then I married and she remarried and our memoir project halted. For the past eight years, we haven't really shared writing at all. Instead, we've talked by phone about once a week. Superficial stuff, neighbor voice



Wedding

mostly, nothing like those moments when we were each other's private audience. Still, sometimes we spoke seriously—about my marriage, about her marriage, about pregnancies and miscarriages, about adoptions, about health, about distance.

And then her voice began to break, slowly at first. A word slurred here or there. A year later, the slurring grew more pronounced. Entire phrases tripped her up. In mid-sentence, she changed directions so she wouldn't enter the unspeakable. We tried to pretend like her words were all there. But they weren't, and they were leaving quickly. While she could somewhat mask the slurs in person, the phone lines were unforgiving.

Soon, the game was up anyway as the slurring was followed by coughing and then choking. "Allergies," she would say. But by now, we all knew it was more than pollen. *Testing 1-2-3. Modern medicine, can you hear me?*

After the diagnosis (A.L.S.), there was one entire month of silence in which I heard about my mother only through my brother's or uncle's online postings. The phone, which feeds on true clear voices, became obsolete. Enter new technology: my mother was persuaded to go online. Through email I can now hear her written voice again. Sometimes, she writes in a casual phone way, neighbor-speak: so-and-so called, your sister did this, we drove here. But other times I hear the voice of the letters to my father and her photo-memoir. Back we are, I think, to the old times. But these aren't the old times. It's not pen and paper, it's keyboard and modem. And of course, there's the crucial distinction: I'm grown now, a mother myself, and she's dying. Which is why, I'm sure, my mother still prefers, indeed insists on, old technology,

And there is no technology like a visit, which the distance between Kentucky and California frustrates, but an airplane or two and some rental cars make possible. This summer, I see her for the first time since speech left her. Although she has a hand-held Crespeaker, she takes it out mainly for show and for the grandchildren to play with. She does a little demo for me and my son: we hear a male voice, with mechanical inflection. It mispronounces the names of family members unless she misspells them. Instead of the "ee" sound in "Kira," it gives voice to a long "i." Instead of the "oo" sound in "Kuka" (my son's Americanized shorthand for "babushka"), it sounds out the first "u" in "cucumber." The technological voice provided by the Crespeaker is strange and slow—she must pick out each letter one by one with a stick. I look at her thumbs, A.L.S.-crooked now, and realize that typing and writing will soon end. The Crespeaker will provide her future voice, however foreign.

But for now, through a combination of pantomime and writing, my mother converses, electing out of some talk, initiating some, and inserting herself into some. I'm surprised at how easy it is to enter the rhythm:

"What's this wet spot on the floor?" I ask as my bare feet find a cold spot on the carpet. My mother is staying at my sister's: one child (mine), one toddler, one dog, one cat—the wet spot could be anything.

My mother fills her cheeks, and as she does, moves her top hand in an arch over her bottom one, which rests in her lap.

"Ah, the giant bubble-making machine," I nod instantly, smiling because the wet spot is really only soap and glycerin, but most of all, because we're in sync.

My son and I come to the visit, of course, bearing gifts. We buy her a Discman and some compact discs. I choose something light and whimsical—MGM musical hits. She listens to the first track, moves her head as if dancing, and then begins crying, all the time still dancing with her upper body. She tries to move to the next track but, thankfully, does not yet know where the right buttons are and hits the stop. We take the chance to give her the music my four-year old son has chosen: the soundtrack from one of his favorite movies, *The Secret of Roan Inish*, a film about a lost child, and about a seal, who transforms herself into a woman, a wife, a mother, but all the time longs to be free of her body. Eventually, she is freed as she gives into her longing, shedding her human skin and slipping back to the sea. After my plot summary, my mother listens to the music intently, thoughtfully. Her hands form a "T"

"That means thank you," my sisters tell us. Mom nods affirmatively.

"Make a 'T' for grandma," I instruct my son.

"No," he says with the confidence I lack, "I say, 'You're welcome.'"

He has no trouble remembering that she can hear, no inclination to pass over her in a conversation. He does not speak about her in the third person. His two-year old cousin cries when grandma claps, points a finger, and shakes her head; she hates to be scolded.

As my mother eats her lunch, she puts on the *Roan Inish* music to drown out the noise and distractions. And though I don't hear the music, I see distinctly two images: the woman from the film, looking out to sea, longing to shed her human skin, and my mother, concentrating on bringing the blended food from bowl to lips, collecting the extra with napkins, clearing with faint noises the minute grains which, despite their pureed smoothness, deposit in the folds of her throat.

"Look at my shirt," she writes in her notebook when she's finished. She hands the message to my sisters who keep close and quiet watch during meals. "I think I need a bib."

But she doesn't need a bib; she just needs my sisters to share the joke, which they do with both light and heavy hearts.

During this visit, because I am thinking a lot about my mother's writing, I also bring along as a gift a May Sarton journal with an inscription: "From one journal writer to another." She finishes reading most of it while I'm there. Several months earlier when my mother could still speak, she told me she had begun a journal about her illness, thought then to be a stroke. It was to be her recovery journal. I'm not sure if she continued the journal when progress clearly became regress. I haven't read—or been shown—a single entry. Still, she is not going unrecorded. Quite the contrary. When pantomime fails, my

mother grabs for her pen and notebook. It sits, like her walker and the notebook personal computer, within arm's reach. In it, she lends us her voices: practical ("Where's the TV control?"), trivial ("That dog's a pain"), thoughtful ("Here I am sitting a death sentence and your cousin is dead at 43. It makes no sense. At least I am not in pain. I live in fear of choking or suffocating, but I am not in pain."). At the end of each day, she has a record of everything she has said. At least theoretically.

"Do you need me to refresh your notebook," my sister asks, tearing out the notebook pages and wadding them for the trash.

All those words, I think. But, of course, my sister is right. No one has their every word recorded. It is only right that the everyday be weeded. And then, of course, there's the issue of privacy, which in my family, is not only a virtue, but a miracle. I know that I myself read several entries back on the page. Anything within view without flipping a notebook page is fair game. And if she naps, even a page flip or two is within limits. When my sisters enter the room, they check the notebook to catch up on anything they've missed. It saves having to recap.

"Oh, I see she didn't like lunch," one sister says to the other. "Next time I'll blend it with yogurt instead of cottage cheese." My mother nods her assent vigorously. Sometimes, my mother herself goes back a few pages and underscores or draws an arrow to save the effort of rewriting.

After lunch, my mother and son rest, she in my sister's guest bedroom, he in my mother's old room. I go with my son, ostensibly to rest, but instead of closing my eyes, I open them, wider than ever before. I do what I love best—archival research—scanning her bookshelf for clues, for words I might before have missed. And I find them—an assortment of her journals. I see her first journal, begun the year my brother, the last of her children, left home. She was preparing to move to a new city and take a new job, which she did, dutifully recording the change—the 1980 journal she devoted to looking back over her life; the 1981 journal she reserved for life unfolding. Then there are three missing years—years in which I know she wrote, the years we exchanged writing. I peruse the journals out of chronological order, as they appear on the shelf. I notice especially the references to me:

A nice end to a 12-hour day. I talked with Janet and she passed her M.A. competencies. But the joy was not limited to that alone. Someone asked her, "What are you going to do now?" and without thinking she said, "Call my mother!" After the blank stare, she realized that that wasn't what the speaker meant—they meant long term. But who cares! To still be #1 in her mind—to want to share her joy with me.

YIPPEE!! JANET IS COMING HOME!!

It's hard to not see your child for over a year—to touch her—to embrace her. The others can't take her place. Each is important—each loved but I can't love her by loving another.—The woman with the lost coin. The shepherd who loses one sheep. My God—the prodigal son.

This entry, I discover after placing them all in order, is from a period during which she centers her journals on her spiritual struggles. My mother, never one to miss a cultural movement, is heavy into meditation and for over a year records her efforts.

Meditating went well. I entered quickly and stayed with it. After some sensory exercises, I moved into painful memories to make sure that I wouldn't run or evade this important part of my meditation journey. I went to Bud's death and memories of the few days preceding. In retrospect, I realized he was dying then and going through the process and I didn't recognize it. He was abnormally upset because there wasn't enough taco sauce for Charles's

birthday dinner, he was upset because Janet had Paul over and he wanted him to leave, for the first time ever in our married life we couldn't make love. I stayed with the pain—went through the guilt, felt the loss and asked for help.

In 1985, she began recording and analyzing the spiritual significance of her dreams, a practice she continued for a full year. A few of the entries catch me:

4/2/86

I awoke (in my dream) to see myself in a mirror. I was amazed that as I slept, my hair grew. I was brushing my hair. The sun shone through it from behind. It was the color of gold. Somebody was watching me and we talked about my hair and how it shone in the sunlight.

Hair. My mother loves to have her hair brushed. It remains a pleasure untouched by A.L.S., one outside the disease's far reach. During my visit, I brush her hair frequently, following the strokes with my hands. Her hair is still thick. It still shines in the sunlight of her recorded dreams.

In her journals, I find her pleasures again and again, but it is the 1984 record of spiritual struggles that surprises me most. My mother has always struck me as someone who had faith, though now, A.L.S. has greatly shaken it. It is difficult to chant *lauds* and *vespers* with no voice, difficult to commune when host can't be swallowed, difficult to sway with a folk guitar when legs buckle beneath body, difficult to mingle with people when A.L.S. tears refuse to recognize restraint, difficult to find peace when A.L.S. ushers in anxiety. With no voice heard crying in the wilderness, the church congregation which enjoyed her labor, her words, for 15 years, has allowed her to lapse into silence.



Graduation

Instead of home visits, they dedicate a service to her. It is one of life's little ironies that her hairdresser continues to minister freely to her failing body with regular manicures, pedicures, salon cuts-daily massages; meanwhile, her spirit is left sparsely, sporadically attended.

So faith is collapsing, understandably. But the journals showed that she had struggled all along. I consider slipping the two volumes in my suitcase. No one besides me, I think, is interested in her as a writer. And then I look to the front of the 1984 journal—a year that might have been the one in which our exchanges ended, certainly one before our memoir project began. The 1984 journal is inscribed to my sister, Gerianne, who along with my oldest sister, daily feeds her, administers her medications, arranges her medical visits, sponge bathes her, moves her: “Dedicated to Gerianne in thanks for the gift of this book—and the gift of herself.” I put the book back on the shelf. There is so much I don't do and don't know. I can barely pronounce the names of the medications my sisters refer to with ease. I pack my suitcases, leaving all the journals in place. Instead, I take what I am certain my siblings don't want: a 10-volume set of short stories (at my mother's urging), and her underscored copies of Macrorie's *Telling Writing*, and Lyons's *Autobiography*. As an afterthought, I take her tattered *Morning Praise and Evenson*. One evening, home in Kentucky, I open the book, and two holy cards fall out, carrying with them the old order, the old sounds. I recite and chant vespers for her, singing the praises for August 15th, the (now unfashionable) feast of The Assumption.

V: Let my prayer come before You like incense.

R: The lifting up of my hands like an evening sacrifice.

1 ANT: Like a cedar of Lebanon I am raised aloft, / like a rosebush in Jericho.

2 ANT: Fairer is she than the sun / surpassing every starry constellation.

3 ANT: The king's daughter enters all glorious / her robes of spun gold.

Reading: I grew to my full stature as cedar grows on Lebanon, as cypress on Sion's hill; or a palm tree in Cades, or a rose bush in Jericho; grew like some fair olive in the valley, some plane-tree in a well-watered street. Cinnamon and odorous balm have no scent like mine; the choicest myrrh has no such fragrance. Perfumed is all my dwelling-place with storax, and galbanum, and onycha, and stacte, and frankincense uncrushed; the smell of me like pure balm.

ANT. ZACH.: Who is this that comes forth like the dawn, / beautiful as the moon, as resplendent as the sun, / as awe-inspiring as bannered troops.

As promised, my words, the very words I remember her chanting when I was child, rise like incense, assumed, body and soul, syllables carrying meaning, intention.

I couldn't have imagined chanting *lauds* and *vespers* as I packed away *Morning Praise and Evensong* on the last day of my summer visit. Instead I was thinking about her journals, about how I am not the prodigal son, but a married daughter, a college professor with classes about to begin, about how this is not a return, but a visit. And about how visits must end.

"I'll email you," I say upon leaving.

My mother nods affirmatively and moves her hand as if typing on a keyboard. And then she makes the other gesture, hand grasping imaginary phone to ear. She wants me to remember to call, as agreed on, once a week. It is the old technology she prefers, and the old gesture she uses. But it is a new form we must rely on.

"California Relay Operator #335. Please hold one second while I connect you to your party."

And then I hear a sound, a keyboard clicking. I picture her on the other end with a headset, typing intently. I wait until the sound stops. A stranger's voice, sometimes female, sometimes male, says "It's mom. Go ahead."

"Hi mom," I say, trying not to sound as if I'm talking in the presence of a third party, "How are you feeling? How was your visit at the specialist's? Go ahead." But we are speaking in the presence of a third person and all the family rules apply: no incriminating information, no emotion, just flat speech, facts, med-speak. Above all else, no tears, not in the presence of a third person—not when tears trigger choking.

My mother responds, but in the stranger's voice again: "I'm O.K. The home nurse will bring a respirator. They want to tube-feed me. Go ahead."

And so we continue, she through the strange operator, me estranged. "Go ahead," I say. "Go ahead," the mother/operator says. A treadmill of words, hard to get off.

"Well, I'm going to go now." A pause, "And your party has hung up. Thank you for using California Relay."

"Thank you," I say to the operator, and somewhat mean it.

I feel relieved. For a week, I know, my mother will be happy communicating with me by email and I will be happy to hear my mother's voice—the old one, the written one. But I know too, that after a week, she will request the T.D.D. phone, "Please call me this week. I want to hear your voice."



Illness

And I know that she means it. Because I want the impossible too: I want to hear her sing too loudly in church. I want to hear her neighbor voice. I'd even accept P.E.T. For the first time in my life, I want her to have the last word.

Before she died on December 17, 1996, my mother finished writing her memoirs. She left me her journals; she left me a better writing teacher.