



## HE KNOWS ME AS THE BLIND MAN KNOWS THE CUCKOO

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*If there's one thing you can't lose, it's that feel.*

—Tom Waits

It's the first day of spring. A male Cuckoo in his prime bursts into the open fen, hollering as he sails over its weeds, scrubs, and dikes. He lands in a shady spot, firing the sound of his father and his father before him—all those males he's never met.

*I want a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad*, he sings, imagining a marriage that probably took place in this same fen one spring before, with an earlier variation of his own, famous descending third: *cu-koo*.

The sound of his voice does the same work as the titmouse's puffed-up chest; it's a bird-to-bird hint about what he's got going for him, genetically. The strength of the cry, its resonance, even the pitch of the scripted *cu* and *koo* are all a product of important organs—those that handle breath and digestion. So, when one lady Cuckoo lies in the brush, listening, she doesn't just hear his song. She listens to the parts of his body that will help build a better, stronger baby Cuckoo, one genetically equipped for survival in this rough-and-tumble fen.

Perhaps she thinks of his blaring cry as evidence, a clean bill of health: *cuckoo*. It's as simple and ham-fisted as a John Bonham drum line. And because it's brave to make that much noise out here in front of God and everybody, it's a sexy sound as well. The wail of Gene Vincent, the bay of Howlin' Wolf. Prince letting loose at the end of "When Doves Cry." Because sex is loud and sex is rhythmic and sex is absolutely dangerous, be it in a fen, a brush, a thicket, or any of Nature's seedy dives.

Thus, the lady Cuckoo knows her man's thin, alto cry is more than birdsong. For her, it is *cuckoo-as-roar*. As wingsaws. As green-eyed

plume and as corona mane. As leisure suit. As chest hair. As pelvic thrust. As hustle. *Cuckoo* as lyric; *cuckoo* as rock-and-roll. *Cuckoo* as *Cuu? Koooo!* 'Cuz I speak of the pompitous of love.

We've heard about these vocal stylings in the Vedic texts, in Aristotle, in the lyrics of Cole Porter. Chinese Shu folklore includes the fable of banished Emperor Wang, who seduces the wife of a constituent, abdicates the throne, and then transforms into a bird that flies around the countryside, repeating the lament, *to return!* Any human who mimics that *du-yu* is said to vomit blood soon after. In parts of India, a *cuckoo* is a harbinger of rain, and incessant *cuckoo*-ing brings the monsoons. Milton compares the lines of careless poets to a Cuckoo on repeat. And the book of Leviticus simply calls the "cuckow" *an abomination*. For millennia, we've compared the call and its governing body to clocks, to crazies, to crooks, to carelessness. As if to say, who would dare sing about living a life like that?

With a bowed head and a low-wing lean, he pops a hairy caterpillar into her mouth: an entreaty. *My place or yours?*

She responds: a twitter. *Well, I'm actually kind of between places right now.*

*That's cool, baby,* he says: a strategy. *Cu-kool.*

He is ash-gray and stocky, with a wild orange eye. Joe Pesci in a feather boa. Not much to write home to Mom about, save that ratty *cuckoo* and the pattern of white shingles on the underside of his wings. He cuts a nasty turn, displaying the shingles like a matador cape, all the while repeating his simple song without a resting measure. The lady bird blinks back at him. She doesn't *cuckoo*, because female Cuckoos cannot. Stuck with a name that describes a call she'll never utter, she considers responding with her own tuneless, bad-karaoke burble. But then she thinks better of it. Instead, she raises her wing in a come-hither switch, almost bending over, but not quite. This feathery Mae West shoulder roll makes him sing even faster; then he hops on her back and, still singing, rides her into the reeds: *cuckoo* as *tonight's the night! It's gonna be alright 'cause I love you girl. Ain't nobody gonna stop us now.*

And then, a rustling in the thick of it as all Creation respectfully pans back. For epochs, Cuckoo couples have eluded even the most attentive scientists who, try as they might, have never seen two wild Cuckoos in *flagrante delicto*. Who knew a bird this loud could also be this shy? So, we must imagine a Do Not Disturb sign slung over a twig—though we can still hear our male Cuckoo singing, his quarter notes rising to eighths, perhaps even dotted sixteenths at the moment of his little death. Maybe. Or maybe not. All we really know is that, by the time the female is ready to lay, her lover has flown, and his singing has stopped.

This next step—the laying of Cuckoo eggs—is perhaps the reason we associate Cuckoos with insanity. Days after their brief tryst, the female Cuckoo finds some other bird’s nest and lays her own egg there, abandoning it forever. This nest, already cozy with its own rightful brood of eggs, is not one of her own species, but of a totally different bird, usually those types that rear their young in pairs. Our she-Cuckoo spied this reedy doorstep long before putting herself on the market for love.

So she backtracks to that foreign nest, removes an egg from its entitled spot and lays her own in its place. Then, less than a minute after landing, she splits, her beak wide with the filched egg of a matched set of reed warblers, meadow pipits, or pied wagtails. This quick switcheroo is the only touch a young Cuckoo will ever feel from his birth mother, and science has yet to figure out whether bird babies can feel anything in that sturdy shell.

For centuries, we have considered this practice, called “brood parasitism,” unthinkable. We’ve squawked like harpies at the concept: lady Cuckoo as deadbeat mom. *Thou rewtheless glotoun!* rants Chaucer. *A monstrous outrage on maternal affection, one of the first great dictates of nature*, sneers the normally calm naturalist Gilbert White. The abuse continues into more recent memory, often marrying the sins of the mother with the voice of the father. In southern England, mothers warn their children to run away from the male Cuckoo’s cry for fear

that the female's irresponsible attitude is contagious. Shakespeare, who once flew the coop in Stratford himself, wrote a song for *Love's Labor's Lost* about how, every spring, the sound of the Cuckoo ridicules husbands. And according to Ogden Nash, *Cuckoos lead bohemian lives. They fail as husbands and as wives. Therefore they cynically disparage everybody else's marriage.*

Darwin is one of the first to stick up for the Cuckoo in print, calling her egg-laying *aberrant* rather than abhorrent. In the eighth chapter of *The Origin of Species*, he celebrates the beauty of her ingenuity, reminding readers of the perks of delegating responsibility in the unforgiving lowlands of Europe. A go-getter Cuckoo can, Darwin points out, lay a dozen eggs per season in a dozen different nests. Since Cuckoo fathers don't stick around to help raise their young, pawning off the babies gives the mother time to fly farther each day in search of her own food, while sparing herself the considerable costs of parenting. She can migrate to the Sahara, where she winters, long before the first frost, keeping herself healthy enough to pepper the nests of the fen with even more foundlings next spring. Further, when a bad day in the fen might wipe out an entire nest of unhatched babies, it's much less risky to put her eggs in more than one basket.

And, after all, this is what Nature tells her to do. Altering her delinquency is as impossible as changing that fercokta warble she spits from her beak. So she listens to instinct, she lays her egg, then she gets the heck out of Dodge.

This is not to say that she isn't concerned about the baby she leaves behind. Though guided by the urge to hack her own way through the world, she also wants her foundling to fit in with the other kids. For this reason, Cuckoos change the color of their eggs to match those of the nests in which they lay them. French Cuckoos lay brown speckled eggs just like their pipit neighbors, while the Scandinavian Cuckoo lays an egg that is misty blue, like the redstart's.

Sure, it takes generations for these palate shifts to set in, and should really just be chalked up to the random wonder of natural selection, but it's more fun to think that female cuckoos have learned to work their own kind magic. Though tone-deaf with a forgettable cry, female cuckoos are the mockingbirds of ovulation. Cuckoo as Pimp My Egg. Cuckoo as *étude* in blue.

And if lady Cuckoos can change the workings of their seventy-five-gram bodies to paint their eggs in the latest colors, who knows how else they use the minutes between sex and nesting to influence their offspring? Imagine that the egg's interior walls are painted, too—not in eggshell colors, but with reams of instructions: maps pointing South, operations manuals, One Hundred and One Cuckoo Jokes. A little light reading for the baby as he builds his claws, throat, and beak. *Cuckoo as my mamma done tole me when I was in eggshells.*

And perhaps these are written in the language of the papa Cuckoo, too? *Son, this world is rough, and if a man's gonna make it, he's gotta be tough, and I knew I wouldn't be there to help you along.* This would explain why our male Cuckoo wouldn't stop singing on the afternoon of his quick tryst. He wanted to underscore this tiny conception: *cuckoo* as Muzak piped into speckle-shell walls. At the time of his departure, the sound was only a one-note line, but he knew it would surely split inside his lover and become a Cuckoo concept album. He knows that every major work must have its guiding theme, so here it is: *cuckoo* as two-tone cell division—the *cu* and the *koo* splitting exponentially, riffing and coding like a jazz run that sticks to every strand of bird DNA.

There, inside the egg inside the nest, the abandoned baby feels that cellular *cuckoo* bounce around his pad. A few days after his eyes form, he traps the sound in his beak, swallows it. It pinballs down his baby gullet, pounding steadily as it descends. Once inside of him, the ephemeral *cuckoo* is a nonstop, hook-bowed *basso profundo*. A week later, the same sound wills him to punch his way through the shell and out into the world. *Cuckoo* as cannon fire. *Cuckoo* as “Halleluiah Chorus.” *Cuckoo* as the theme from *Rocky*.

Finally on the outside, the little Cuckoo writhes around the warbler nest, bald and naked, with oblong, alien eyes that don't work yet. He feels the bump of the unhatched, legitimate eggs with his still-soft skull. These eggs all whirr with a song other than his—maybe a

warbler “We Will Rock You.” Just then, a voice inside this just-hatched, featherless booger of a bird orders him to head-butt all those other eggs out of the nest. It takes him hours to do it, his claws embedded in the nest’s walls for support. He tips his head, nudging each egg onto his back, then heaving it overboard. Grip. Butt. Roll. Heave. Splat.

It’s his first day on Earth, alone and weird: Cuckoo as only child.

But let us pause to sing the sad song of the surrogate mothers who, on hatching day, return to their rightful nest and find they have been cuckolded. It’s hatching day, and this warbler’s nest contains not a handful of hungry little mouths to feed, but one gigantic mouth. In place of a half-dozen one-note cries, a single beak, poised for dinner, squeaks a sextet of voices in tremolo: *sisisisisi*. Confused, the warbler brings home food for six and gives it all to her oversized baby. She has been tricked by mother and son alike.

Since these adoptive mothers are significantly smaller specimens, young Cuckoos don’t fit into their foster homes for long. Fluffy, disoriented, and sporting the wild eyes of their fathers, they spill over the sides of their nests like Taft in his bathtub. Our Cuckoo is so big, in fact, that, a few days into his life, the mother warbler must stand on his back to feed him. She may be baffled, but she’s fascinated: he is her only boy, her hulking *bete noir*.

*Eyes only a mother could love*, she thinks, launching a caterpillar toward her baby’s sprawling beak, careful not to fall into it herself. In the evenings, she sings him the one lullaby her mother taught her—a wobbly, Helen-Reddy-style weeper about survival, the change of seasons, and six white speckled moons shoved out of the sky.

The baby Cuckoo listens to her, to the surrounding nests, to the free radio of the fen. He’s unable to sing along; his pipes still need time to grow and calcify. So he pays attention not just to his adopted mama, but to every note of music around him as he waits for his body to catch up.

He imagines each noise in the world as the song of something, the voice of something. The wind is the reeds’ *cuckoo*. Love the *cuckoo* two creatures howl into the night. Lawnmowers and doorbells the *cuckoo* of landlocked giants. Thunder the *cuckoo* of the rain.

After a few days, our Cuckoo feels ready. He takes an important breath, bouncing air through his belly to see where the sound takes root. Things feel right when he forces together his syrinx—the two hardening tubes in his chest, one tube attached to each lung—and blasts a spurt of air so sharp that it squeaks, like lips whistling on a blade of grass.

The life around him hears a series of atonal farts: *cugh. kyiid. oof*. But the music inside him is already functioning on all cylinders. Biologically speaking, it's well-oiled and beautiful. These days of his life are, literally, instrumental, like a violin learning to tune up: *cuckoo* as A440. Or, better still, Cuckoo as Stradivarius, for he strings himself, hangs his sound post, then hairs and rosins his own internal bow.

Weeks have passed since the day he was conceived. In the nests around him, other reed warbler families bid their legit chicks goodbye (*and when I awoke I was alone. This bird had flown*). But the foster Cuckoo stays put, practices his scales, and keeps an ear open for one particular song that always cuts through the white noise of the fen. This two-note call opens doors inside his brain (flashes of shaking reeds, orange-eyed winks, and white wing shingles) only to have them slammed shut by the *tchit-tchit-tchurr-tchurr* of his surrogate mother.

And then, one day, the noise just falls out of his beak: *cuckoo*. Tiny, flat, devoid of style, but a *cuckoo* nonetheless. The foreign cry baffles him; it's as far from *tchit-tchit-tchurr-tchurr* as *enchanté* from *howdy*. He stares at the place where the sound hit the air as if it had made a speech bubble. But he still isn't ready. He first must learn to play with the parameters of his inherited song—pitch, tone, melisma. He must carve out his own call, one that, while still a *cuckoo*, can be distinguished from any of his neighbors'. Even cranky Gilbert White marveled at how, to set themselves apart from fellow suitors in his fen, Cuckoos began their call on C, C-sharp, D, or somewhere in between. Our hatchling knows he can still call himself a Cuckoo if he stutters the vowels a bit—punching the double “O” like Buddy Holly: *cuk-hoo-hoo*. Or he can bend the second half of the last note as it blasts from his beak, a la Son House: *cu-koeee!* And there's rhythm to play with: a chugging, James Brown one-two, perhaps, or a Jerry Lee Lewis

boogie-woogie. Catch the throat on the consonants like Roger Daltry, or mush them around the back of the beak like Joe Strummer.

He thinks he might like to wait a beat before the second note. A lurid gap between establishment and resolution—*cu*

*koo*—that'll make the chicks scream.

The young, fresh Cuckoo practices alone, fighting the static of crows, bullfrogs, bees, and foxes. He's nearly an adult now, reviewing his song in secret, avoiding his squaresville warbler folks, and raging at them when he gathers the gumption: *your moms busted in and said, "What's that noise?" Aw, mom, ya just jealous!* And that's when it happens.

The moment testosterone starts to grease the pathways between his syrinx and his brain allows him to utter his first functional *cuckoo*. In that instant, all the pretty chickens of the self—the physical, the chemical, the spiritual, and the communicative—join forces in one fell swoop. Sure, the song is modest to put it mildly, but it still *thrills*. It's simple, but he can tell that every ear in range knows that call is something. A couple notes are all you need to make a statement, which the young Cuckoo understands. We get this as well: there are, after all, only three chords in "Wild Thing."

Our Cuckoo boy celebrates this, as should we. We all could stand to champion the process of conjuring a voice from inside ourselves. To inhale the outside world, marinate it in the viscera of our genetic pedigree, then juice it with a rush of hormones and shape it into important, telling sounds. Speech is everyone's opportunity to celebrate the Word made flesh, and the flesh made ephemeral, portable. But in order for said flesh to feel it, to acknowledge it as a voice, that word must shake, it must pulse, it must rock: *cuckoo* as mojo rising: as *bildungsroman*: as birthright.

He puts that *cuckoo* in his pocket and holds it like a membership card, and keeps listening to the world around him, hunting the pauses in

nature. He pinpoints the resting measure where, after adulthood fills his brain receptors with a bank of testosterone, he will holler out his hard-won cadenza and fly into the fray. He will abandon the warbler sound altogether for something kinky, something cocky, something with a little swing to it.

And why the hell wouldn't he want to *cuckoo* the song of the parents who left him? Sure, warblers are responsible, hearty, and resilient, but no Swiss craftsman ever mastered the art of the "warbler clock." Russian peasants don't believe that a redstart can sing out how old you'll be the day you die. The *London Times* has not, for the past two centuries, happily printed the first *tchit-tchit-tchurr-tchurr* of the season, and no One ever Flew Over the Pipit's Nest.

Our kooky young man, having just hummed the first few bars of the song that made him preternaturally famous, must also feel that he is part of that story, that namesake: himself as lazy, as carefree, as forthright, as bananas, as gambler, as fortune teller, as harbinger of spring. As a complex, storied identity in two sparse notes.