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From the Selected Works of Debra Marquart

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Debra Marquart, *Iowa State University*



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NARRATIVE

STORY OF THE WEEK



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Buried Voices

AN ESSAY

BY DEBRA MARQUART

1. Gayle McCormick

Baby, It's You. The high point of Gayle McCormick's career—when the song she recorded with the band Smith reached number five on the charts—is also where her path becomes obscured. You've probably never heard of her. But if you were alive during the fall of 1969, some cell in your body retains a sliver of her voice.

McCormick performed "Baby, It's You" with Smith on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in October of that year, sharing the night with Joan Rivers doing stand-up; Topo Gigio, the Italian puppet mouse; and Cyd Charisse dancing to an instrumental version of "MacArthur Park."

Onstage dressed in jeans and a long-fringed vest, McCormick stands close to the camera, foregrounded, while the drummer, guitar players, and organist—also wearing fringed vests and striped bell-bottoms—appear small in deep background, looking more like a straggling fan club than her bandmates.

Tall and willowy in cool bones, a subtle hip switch to the beat, McCormick has broad cheekbones framed by a long fall of white-blond

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hair. Moving through the first two verses, the band solid beneath her, she lays back honey-voiced, restrained, a thin layer of gravel topping off the notes as she pushes high into her register for the second chorus.

The song is about a woman sitting alone at night and crying while her lover is out with others, about the whispers of *cheat* in the air when they walk into a room together.

What can she do? In the chorus, each time she builds toward the helpless admission—*don't want nobody, nobody*—her voice climbs to the top of its range. Having sung herself to the edge of a cliff, she has no choice but to retreat to the lower octave for the hook, “Baby, it’s you.” Chastened, a prisoner of love.

But after a short instrumental, with the Hammond B-3 shrilling vibrato chords through an oscillating Leslie speaker, McCormick reenters for a third try. Again, she builds through the chorus, but when she reaches the hook this time, around 2:42 on the track, the band hits the break, and she roars the hook into the silence, “Baby, it’s you.” Immediately, the Hammond reenters, casting a single-note stinger line into the wake of the scream, and the drums and chunky syncopated guitars start up again, churning in a businesslike way toward the end of the song.

The outro is a vamp with McCormick returning with bold declarations of love and helplessness, begging, “Don’t leave me alone.” This song—listening to it then, listening to it now—is enough to start goose bumps at the top of my hairline traveling down my face, throat, along my arms, into my heart and stomach.

And that singing scream coming from a woman’s body in 1969 was enough to propel me, a thirteen-year-old farm girl growing up in the forgotten middle of nowhere, out to the Quonset at the base of our hill, the high-ceilinged aluminum storage barn where my father kept our wheat and barley, along with his tools and empty gas cans, the old cars

he was restoring, and the broken tractor parts.

That summer the aluminum Quonset and the land around us for miles resonated nightly with the practice sessions of my brother's band, the Mystic Eyes—the male singer's shouts, the drumbeat, and the electric guitar jangling. But sometimes in the quiet afternoons if I was lucky, I could sneak to the Quonset, where the band's gear was left set up, and I could pretend behind the mic stand—my hand grasping the dead microphone, my voice amplified by the Quonset's flattering aluminum echo chamber, belting out, "Baby, It's You," to the mice in the grain bins, the ants in the sandy dirt outside, the rust in the fenders.

GAYLE MCCORMICK was born in 1948, a naturally talented girl, in the suburbs of Saint Louis, singing first soprano in her school choir, eventually joining a Saint Louis band bearing the unfortunate Southern name The Klansmen from 1965 to 1968, before heading to Los Angeles. There she was discovered by Del Shannon of "Runaway" fame playing with the band Smith in North Hollywood at the Rag Doll Club. Her 1969 rush to stardom was followed by more albums with Smith, then a solo career, all of which received neutral receptions before she abandoned music and disappeared in 1972.

Whatever gossipy details that can be gleaned from fan blog posts about the decades that followed allude to drug problems, a hospitalization from a nervous breakdown, a brief marriage to a mechanic, and a move to Hawaii, followed by McCormick's returning to Saint Louis in the late '70s to care for an aging mother.

Rare sightings of her over the years at various turns have her working at Sears, selling men's clothes in a local Saint Louis store, working at a Macy's in the Northwest Mall in Saint Louis, which has since closed, and briefly enjoying a Cardinals-Pirates home game in the stadium's

Redbird Club in 2012.

Ky Colonel, the commenter who supplies this information, admonishes her adoring fans (the several dozen other posters who are begging her to return to singing) that “she cherishes her privacy” and that “we all have to realize that she’s 63 years old now, and not the beauty queen she once was.” Jim Lekas, who claims to have dated McCormick back in the day in LA, confirms: “She has absolutely no voice left . . . two packs a day for many years. A sweet lady, I still melt when I watch her old videos.”

But for a short time, between July and October of 1969, Gayle McCormick’s version of the Burt Bacharach song “Baby, It’s You” sold more than a million copies, shooting it to number five on the charts, outperforming both the Shirelles’ and the Beatles’ versions of the hit.

Quentin Tarantino revived interest in McCormick in 2007 when he included “Baby, It’s You” on the soundtrack to his film *Death Proof*. McCormick died in March of 2016 in suburban Saint Louis after a battle with metastasized lung cancer. She was sixty-seven years old, the obituary states, and she never had children.

2. Clare Torry

The keyboardist for Pink Floyd, Rick Wright, composed the chord progression for the song that was to appear on the album between the songs “Time” and “Money,” but the band arrived at the studio without lyrics or a melody for the track. Alan Parsons remembered this session singer he’d worked with, Clare Torry, and he called her into the studio. They gave her only abstract dynamic hints—a bit louder here, maybe quieter there.

“It’s about dying,” they told her. “Have a bit of a sing on that, girl.” Mostly, they said later, what they wanted was a woman screaming

orgasmodically in the background.

At first Torry took them too literally, tried to sing, “Ooh, baby, baby” and “yeah, yeah, yeah,” until they told her, “No, no, not that.”

Then, she says, Parsons gave her a good headphone mix, a nice balance of echo and ambience, and she had this thought, *Maybe I can just pretend my voice is an instrument*. And with that idea, she closed her eyes and sang, in one take, the wordless vocal track for “Great Gig in the Sky.”

She was paid £30 and given a writing credit on the album. In interviews Torry admitted she left the studio thinking, *That project will never make it to vinyl*.

Months later she walked by her neighborhood record store and saw the album in the front window—*Dark Side of the Moon*—the only album in history to hold a spot on the *Billboard* album charts for 741 consecutive weeks.

Thirty years later Torry sued for a half-share copyright ownership of the song and received a settlement from EMI and Pink Floyd for an undisclosed cash amount.

3. Ruby Starr

Jim Dandy to the rescue. She’s the woman who screams, “Go, Jim Dandy, go!” during the chorus of the hit song by Black Oak Arkansas. They say Jim Dandy discovered her in a club in Evansville singing under the name Ruby Jones.

In the ’80s I first saw Ruby Starr play the Zodiac in Moorhead, Minnesota, with her band, Grey Ghost. In the album cover photo, shot from a low angle, she’s posed badass, arms crossed, leaning back in tall leather boots, tight blue jeans, and a tank top. Live, she was a firecracker in teeny tiny satin hot pants, her curly red hair bouncing behind her in a

fine mist. During the punches in the songs when she wasn't singing, she'd do high kicks or cartwheels. If I do the math, I see she was thirty-two at the time, but she didn't look twenty. I was twenty-four with my own band, hanging with those dark beards who lurked in the far back corner of the Zodiac, taking notes.

All her players were tall and big-haired. One dressed in a white top hat and tails—no shirt underneath, just white suspenders. When the lights came up, they all stepped forward, flanking Ruby like bookends.

The tall one on her right chattered at the crowd, introducing songs. Ruby stayed silent, except to sing—as if she couldn't be bothered to speak to the audience. Like, *I got people to do that for me*.

Oh, how I watched her. Not many other women out there singing on the road. The memory of Joplin hung over all of us—the bad example we dared not follow.

If our band found ourselves playing in the same town as Grey Ghost, we would sneak out of our club during breaks and race across town to catch a bit of their set.

She was born in Toledo in 1949 as Constance Henrietta Mierzwiak. She started performing at nine, singing Brenda Lee covers under the name Connie Little. After her big break with Black Oak Arkansas, she stayed on the road with Grey Ghost until the early '90s, then moved to Vegas, played the Riviera, the Stardust.

Hovering always on the edge of fame, she opened for The Who, Black Sabbath, and Edgar Winter. She died in 1995 at forty-four from lung cancer and a brain tumor. No one probably remembers her. But if you put the album on the turntable, even now you will hear a voice, original and distinctive—like chunks of chocolate sprinkled with caramel, topped with tiny bits of razor blades.

Somewhere deep inside her every note a vibrato whirrs like the spinning teeth of an unattended bandsaw blade.

That nervous hummingbird trill is how you can always tell it is Ruby Starr singing.

4. Koko Taylor

The story doesn't begin until the van breaks down, I always say, which is how my band ended up opening for Koko Taylor at People's Bar and Grill. The real warm-up band lost the wheels on their van somewhere around Minneapolis, we were told, which is how my band got the call that late afternoon in 1993.

We had only hours to think about it. I'm ashamed to say now we hardly knew who she was—this great Chicago blues singer. In the dressing room, while planning our set, we agreed to avoid anything sounding remotely like the blues. All these idiot decisions worked in our idiot favor.

Her band members were nice to us, introduced themselves—JJ on bass, Eddie King on guitar, and Mike "Dynamite" Robinson. Immediately we wished for cooler blues names.

Once my band got started with our opening set, her band members sat in the front row, listening. They whistled and clapped after every song. I can't remember a thing we played, except maybe an acoustic version of "Sweet Child o' Mine," which I thought I could rock out pretty good. *Where do we go? Where do we go now? Where do we go?* We must have looked just too young and too stupid and too white to know better.

When we finished, removed our congas and acoustic guitars, her band sauntered onto the stage, slung on their instruments, clicked out their drumsticks, and started up a blues progression—1, 4, 5—just going around and round.

Koko's road manager took to the stage and grabbed the mic. "The Queen of the Blues is here!" he yelled. "Get ready for the Queen of the

Blues!” The audience roared.

Then she appeared out of nowhere on the left side of the stage. Must have been tucked away in the dressing room. I’m too mortified to think now she was backstage listening the whole time.

Her road manager delivered her to center stage with a gallant left hand tucked under her elbow. In his right hand he carried her handkerchief, which he made a show of presenting to her once she got to the microphone. (All these years since, all I’ve ever desired was someone willing to carry my hankie.)

She wore a sequined top with a blue-and-silver butterfly emblazoned across her chest that lit up when the spotlight hit it. She had one gold tooth in front that glinted when she smiled.

The band circled the progression one more time, getting louder, and again the road manager yelled, “The Queen of the Blues! The Queen of the Blues is here!”

Then she took the mic and started with *I cried like a baby*, holding onto the “i” in *cry* for about ten long seconds in that raspy *grazzo*. The whole house broke down, and we just fell out of our bones sitting there in the front row, listening.

She did “I’d Rather Go Blind” and “Let the Good Times Roll” and “Wang Dang Doodle,” the song Willie Dixon gave her to record in 1962 to help make her famous.

Koko and the band were slated to leave for a tour in Japan the next week, which impressed me enough to remember it all these years later, but mostly I remember that hour and a half as one long education, especially when she announced, after four hankies and sixty minutes of tears and sweat and grit, that she was finally going to get around to singing the blues.

“And now, we’re gonna go down into the basement,” she announced and took a long drink of water.

5. Merry Clayton

The infamous stories of backup singers often begin this way. Some famous band is in the studio—say the Rolling Stones—when they hit a lull in the song. Say it's the middle of the night, and the producer, someone like Jimmy Miller, who's famous for producing bands like Blind Faith and Traffic or the song "Gimme Some Lovin' " for the Spencer Davis Group, says, "I hear a girl on this track. Get one on the phone."

This is what happened, according to Mick Jagger, who also writes, "She came with her curlers in, straight from bed, and had to sing this really odd lyric." Merry Clayton's is a voice you've probably heard, but you might not know her name. Except for the twenty-six seconds in "Gimme Shelter" when she sings, *Rape, murder, it's just a shot away. It's just a shot away.*

Merry Clayton, whose name was misspelled Mary in the album credits, sang this lyric three separate times near the end of the song. Some people call what happened to her voice a "break" in the note, but it's a technique, something like what jazz saxophonists do when they get right on the edge of the reed and the note squawks sideways. In Merry's case it was more of a squeal, but you can't listen to the track, even if you listen to it ten times over, and not get chills.

It starts at 2:43 on the track, after the instrumental. The first time through, she sings it straight—to establish the baseline—then she goes for the variation. Second time through, she sings harder, and on the second *shot away*, as she's pulling her lower register, the modal voice, as high as it can possibly go, something slips and a small squeal comes out on *shot*. It's like an engine revving its RPMs too high then slipping out of gear, something maxing out its limits.

The third and last time through, she chooses to come in one and a half steps higher than the melody on the word *rape*, and at 3:01 her voice breaks in a squeal—you won't miss it—on the word *murder*, like the kind of involuntary scream you might hear come out of woman in a horror film, and then Jagger goes “who” in the background, which feels like pure authenticity, like something that would happen in a live performance. Hard to know if it happened in the moment in the studio or was inserted later. Hard to know what she was paid for it.

Merry Clayton performed the song live with the Stones, just as she went on to perform as the lead Raelette for Ray Charles's backup group, just as she sang backup with Joe Cocker, just as she sang backup for Carole King on *Tapestry*. Seems like I've been listening to her voice my whole life and never knew her name.

Never knew too that when she was pulled from bed to sing the backup part on “Gimme Shelter,” she was pregnant. Never knew that by the time she got home that night, something had gone wrong with the baby, something seriously wrong. And although she was rushed to the hospital, she suffered a miscarriage, lost the baby that very night.

6. When Joni Goes

It's going to be bad, the worst. Until it happens, hard to anticipate how painful it will be. Perhaps as bad as losing my father. Even though with him there was time to prepare (the high blood pressure, the stroke, the heart attacks, the ICU). Still, when it happened, the giant maw opened. One moment walking on solid flooring, the next, stepping into the open air of an elevator shaft.

Same with Joni. The decline, a long time coming, the weird public silences. Her reclusiveness, her phobias and strange illnesses, self-reported and widely known—panic, depression, Morgellons syndrome.

And now the mystery surrounding her present state after the aneurysm.

She's brain-dead, lost to us, David Crosby announces. "It was a long time before someone found her."

No, others insist, she's in physical therapy, walking but not yet talking. Still others say she's recovered, attending concerts, going to pre-Grammy galas on the arm of Cameron Crowe.

What to do but watch and worry? Her strange insistence on chain-smoking well into her seventies, yet complaining that her voice is shit. The way she hunches her arms around her stomach now in rare interviews like she's nursing a grudge, holding the cigarette constantly close to her mouth as she speaks.

Her long golden hair piled on top of her head like some half-undone bird's nest. Still beautiful, iridescent, but looking more like my bitter great-aunt Anna, who dared to divorce a husband in the 1920s, than the lithe spirit who released album after album during my important growing-up years—1969 through 1977—sending out roughly once-a-year missives, detailing ways that a young woman with unsayable desires, unvoiced ambitions might move through the male world.

She was from a cold northern place. She left her lover at a North Dakota junction. She had a high soprano voice, better for choir than the barroom. She got on planes, abandoned home and family, mired down with regret, homesickness.

She sat on a park bench in Paris wondering if her California lover would take her back even though she was strung out on another man.

She traveled to Amsterdam, Rome, lived in Laurel Canyon, hung out with the Mamas and the Papas, with Crosby and Stills. She had famous lovers whom she wrote songs about, who wrote songs about her in return.

She sat in diners and had long, morose conversations with old friends named Richard about life, mortality, and how it all comes to nothing.

She went home with haunted strangers and then sat up all night watching them sleep.

She missed Woodstock, watched it on TV, then wrote the song that explained its cultural and cosmological significance. Talk about the voice of a generation. She once said about Dylan, “I like a lot of Bob’s songs. Musically, he’s not very gifted.”

She bit the hand that fed her, critiqued the commodification of her own stardom, praised the talent of a busker playing for free on the sidewalk as she proceeded to “velvet curtain calls.”

At twenty-six she folded warnings about pesticides, endangered bees, and the criminality of paving over paradise into the bright wrapper of a song, then performed it with high, light laughter.

And didn’t she step onstage with Robbie Robertson and the members of The Band and all those rock-and-roll legends in *The Last Waltz* and play guitar in her strange open tunings (later copied by all the rock guitarists), singing about Coyote, the horny devil she met on the road who wouldn’t stop hitting on her.

And didn’t I watch that bright spectacle of a film in the dark protection of the Lark Theater in Fargo in 1978 and see it as an affirmation of my own decision to drop out of college the year before and join a rock band. *You’ve just picked up a hitcher, a prisoner of the white lines of the freeway.*

Jesus. What didn’t I learn from her? I’ll admit to being a little possessive at times, not to the point of trespassing onto her property or breaking into her house as others have done (the reason she’s afraid of the dark).

But obsessed enough that I once made a painstakingly accurate charcoal sketch of the album cover of *Hejira* featuring a gaunt, cheekboned Joni in a black cape and beret—her blond hair waving like a flag, the long lines of a highway superimposed on the dark wool of her

cape.

And I'll confess that I felt a little white heat a few years ago when a fellow musician, a much younger woman, told me that she imagined herself to be a young Joni Mitchell when she was coming up, learning piano, writing songs. *No, you can't be*, I thought, the blood rising in my face.

Didn't she visit my every bedroom, from farmhouse to dorm room to apartment to home to hotel. Not as a mother or sister—I have those in abundance. Not as a crazy aunt or wanton best girlfriend. But as mirror, sage, companion. The one who goes before. Let me call her by the name she gave herself, Don Juan's Reckless Daughter.

What I didn't know, what few knew, was the child she bore at twenty-two—the secret she kept from her parents even after the baby's biological father abandoned her. After trying to raise the child, penniless and alone in Toronto for months, she eventually gave up the baby for adoption. The story is encoded in “Little Green,” a delicate folk song included on *Blue* in 1971. *So you sign all the papers in the family name / you're sad and you're sorry but you're not ashamed.*

How could I have missed this? Even Timothy Crouse, reviewing the album for *Rolling Stone*, dismissed the song as a “lesser cut.” He wrote, “The pretty, ‘poetic’ lyric is dressed up in such cryptic references that it passeth all understanding.”

What no longer passes my understanding, what no longer seems cryptic, is that Mitchell holds the song's final word, *sorrow*, for six full measures as the guitar arpeggios glitter away to the end of “Little Green.” Six measures. About as much breath as any singer can hold in her body. Was it enough to sing the sadness of a lifetime?

In the mid-'90s, Mitchell's old art school roommate sold the story of the secret pregnancy to a tabloid newspaper, which led to public disclosure and the reunion of mother and daughter. By many accounts,

it hasn't gone as smoothly as hoped.

But in a later interview Joni Mitchell revealed that after establishing a relationship with her birth daughter, she lost all interest in songwriting. There was no longer a point.

Turns out she was always singing to an audience of one. The blessing of her music is that we all got to listen.

7. Morphine Hands

The CD was mostly finished. The stringed instruments and drum tracks, keyboard parts, harmonies, and most of the vocals were done. My guitar player and percussionist headed back to Iowa, but I stayed behind in Chicago to finish one last vocal. *Do you remember the first time, the last time, you really messed up my face?* A quiet song about my first husband's violence.

*Lover, what have you done
with those morphine hands?
Broke my jaw that night.*

Victor the engineer fed the track with the recorded instruments to me through the headphones in the stripped-bare, soundproof room. The Neumann microphone dominated the center of the room, suspended on a boom in its shock mount. A circular mesh pop screen stood between me and the microphone like a confessional to filter out any plosives or inadvertent sounds my voice might make while singing. Plosives are consonants like *p*, *b*, *t*, *d*, *k*, and *g*, which can explode in unexpected ways in the mouth or nasal passages and ruin an otherwise good track.

*Take the fleece from the lamb.
then you sew together, sew together,*

all the people that you break.

To form a plosive, the tongue or soft palate must block the vocal tract and cease airflow for a moment, and the occlusion of air announces itself as a consonant that bursts in the front of the mouth.

When speaking, we make these sounds instinctively, and the naked ear disregards the excesses. But *p*'s and *b*'s, formed by a pop of the lips, are notorious culprits around microphones. (*D* and *t* are also problematic, made when the tip of the tongue percusses against the back of the front teeth.) Singers train to reduce these bursts in sensitive electronic environments, but the Neumann listens well, hears more than everything.

The song should have been easy—a simple melody, low in my vocal range, nothing acrobatic. But the tone that I heard in my head, what I wanted to create on the track, was a balance between a whisper and singing. Something old and deep finally surfacing, ten years buried in geologic layers. Gone but never forgotten, looked on now with a wary reptilian eye.

Some stories take a long time to surface. For years I had not written or spoken about the violence of my first marriage to one of my guitar players. One line of poetry in my first book—*Remember to keep the angle of your vision wide when he comes swinging*—was the advice I gave to the woman who came after me, the next wife.

“It won’t happen to me,” she’d assured me. Yes, I’d believed the same thing, even after I learned early in our relationship that he had threatened his first wife, the one before me, with a knife. *It won’t happen to me*. So much shame that I’d let it.

IN THE STUDIO the immediate problem with “Morphine Hands” was maintaining the whisper voice—a hint of a sung note without

ramping up into full-throated singing. Things fell apart at the end of the song during a descant line after the words *all the people, all the people, that you break*.

The word *break* was to be held for four measures, sung in a descending cascade of notes that crosses over the *passaggio*, the rupture zone in the vocal tract where the head voice transitions back down to the chest voice.

In live performances, with the chatter of the audience, tables scraping, and beer bottles being dropped into the garbage, I could power through the lines, but in the rarefied atmosphere of the studio, each time I crossed between registers I ran out of breath or the whisper tone rose into full singing to preserve the note, or the whisper held but the note deteriorated, ruining the effect.

After each take Victor soothed me over the headphones from the control room, counseling me on pitch, timbre, phrasing. As the takes wore on—just this one thing to finish—I sat in the new darkness, in the chair that Victor supplied, with some reluctance (another possible source of noise).

The Neumann, waiting. The soundproof padding lining the walls, like a deprivation chamber, like an asylum, an interrogation.

The hitting began before we were married while we were on the road. That night in a hotel room bathroom outside Bozeman, my body wet from a bath. All those hard, slippery surfaces to crack your head on. Trying to keep my feet under me as he grabbed, slapped, threw me. The shower curtain coming down around us.

The red to yellow to purple bruises on my left eye and cheekbone the next morning over breakfast. The sunglasses. The sharp blue thumbprints like ripe plums on my biceps from where he held me down. The rest of the band eating silently.

Or that day in the car in Fargo when I reminded him it was April 15

and that he needed to mail his tax extension, and he flung out his left arm and smacked me in the mouth with the back of his hand as I drove the car. The salt of blood on my lips. What frightened me most was the lack of hesitation. No thought. Just one wrong word, and he'd bulk up, bristle, step toward me. The hand would go up, the grab, the slap, the strike.

His crying afterward, disbelief over what he'd done. I'd be the one to console. His father beat his mother and him when he was a boy. What could he expect? I learned to grow small in his presence, silent. What word, what movement would set him off next? Eight years this went on. Bruises covered up. And then I married him.

IN THE DARKNESS of the soundproof studio between takes—*finish this fucking thing*—silent, dripping tears, quiet nose-blowing. Victor's voice through the headphones, suggesting that we break for the day, try again in the morning.

"No," I said, "we won't get back here again."

Six months into our marriage after I'd decided to leave, I came home one night from secret apartment hunting. He was waiting on the couch, angrier than I'd ever seen him. Was it my hidden happiness? Somehow he always knew.

For a year I'd been taking tae kwon do at the dojo, already a brown belt. For general self-defense, I'd claimed, but the idea was that I would be able to protect myself when the time came. I'd just walked into our apartment, still standing in the doorway, when he rose and charged, pinned my spine against the doorjamb, his hands clasp my throat. I lifted a knee. He angled his body away.

On the wall of our living room hung an eight-by-sixteen-foot oil painting my husband had done of Conan the Barbarian scaling a pile of

vanquished corpses. I caught a glimpse of that image—the rippled back of Conan heading to the top of the heap, a bloody hatchet in his hand raised to kill the last living enemy—when we rolled to the floor, pushing, kicking.

He was so strong when he was angry. Soon he surfaced on top and straddled my chest, pinned back my arms under his knees. His grasp—those powerful fingers I’d first loved for what they could do on the neck of a guitar—now threaded around my neck. His fingertips lined up along my vertebrae like saxophone keys. His thumbs pressed into my Adam’s apple.

My throat a small timber in his hands. No breath.

A powerful singer, I always thought I could scream to save myself. Scream so the neighbors would hear. But no breath. Like that dream where you try to run, but your feet won’t move. Where you try to scream, but no sound comes out. Seconds passed. No breath.

All around me grew calm. The only sound I could make was two consonants spat out between clenched teeth. *Do it.*

Something stopped him—the suggestion of what he was not prepared to do. I saw him considering, then he lifted himself up and brought his full weight down as if for a strong finish, drove his knee into my sternum. A bone cracked deep in my chest, the sharp click in a place no doctor would ever find.

Even now, decades later, I can summon that audible crack. It sounds sometimes in my dreams or upon waking when I feel threatened or unsafe in my present life. A psychologist tells me that trauma has no half-life, no decay. It lives timeless and dormant in the body, ready to resurface to full potency when conditions ripen.

Mysterious, how the body keeps a record. Just as I can recall the roars, alien and unhuman screams, that rose from my throat as soon as he released me and I breathed again. My feet kicking him away once he

rolled off me. My freed-up hands, now involuntary, slapping, slapping him.

Calm down. The neighbors will hear. He smothered me. *Just calm down.*

That space between whisper and scream is where I've learned to sing, between the barely audible and the unearthly shrill. No sound is pure noise; all sounds are necessary in their moment. A crack hides somewhere still in my caverns, I know. The silence that could have been.

