The Songs We Fought For

Heart-breakers sang at Rusty’s, the last bar north of Slaton. *Stand by yo’r man,* they sobbed to the swing of crystal earrings, or scowled and doubled up ring-knuckled fists and growled, *Ain’t gonna be yo’r honky-tonk woman anymore.* Their innocent, wicked faces were safe behind the same thick makeup, their nests of sprayed hair floated yellow-blue in spotlights and smoke of local men and women groping for their lives. It’s gone, torn down like the drive-in, two midnight places people went to get away from lives more boring than the plains. One young singer from Austin flirted with us like a school girl, sitting on every lap. Some yelled and tossed their hats, as if they’d stayed on a bull for ten seconds. Up close, her eyes flared wide, as if whispering *save me.* Billy Ray crushed a beer can in his fist, and foam shot out and splattered on the floor. Billy Ray stared at deer heads on the wall.

We knew she couldn’t last, trying too hard to be human. Those hard-voiced untouchable women gave us the tunes we wanted, the same old wailing on stage that made fist-fights and a dance enough to dream about all week in the saddle, roping another bawling calf to castrate and burn with a branding iron, touching our own bruised ribs and teeth, wincing and spitting blood.

WALTER MCDONALD