

## 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