

Janis Joplin Visits Cheerleading Camp

How dare you take my songs,
blast them out to the world,
then make up little routines—
precious steps, turns, tossing
sleek hair back to mock my frizz,
your sneakers and shirts matching,
skin burnished, suntan bright.
I'd like to take a piece
of each one of your hearts,
ripping them out so you know
how it feels to be voted
ugliest man on campus when
you're a girl from Port Arthur, Texas,
the kind of girl shunned during
proms, parades, tailgates, hayrides.
You girls don't know the howl
I hear in my head is Bessie's howl,
a black woman's sound coming out
of a white woman's mouth,
unruly growls your mothers would not love,
calling me dirty, not worth a dime.
I'm worth a whole lot more dead
than you all are alive, voice stronger
than all yours together, my clothes
the clothes you are silly enough
to pay big money for, calling them
your slumming clothes—velvet,
swirling cascades of scarves and beads,
fringe and feathers you play in,
not knowing their passion, power.
The world called me Pearl,
what will it call you?

Allison Joseph

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