



# Give Me A Microphone

an essential fiction by JoNelle Toriseva

Nothing in my childhood made noise. Conversation did not exist on our ranch. Only in the movies, did people talk. WJHI 89.4 — the country music station had no sound, no matter how I waggled and jiggled the knob. The stars arrived for a Fargo concert: June Carter Cash's mouth opened, her hips swayed, the fringe around her knees shook and no wail came forth. Johnny's lips kept moving, but the tone seismograph lay on its side like a sleeping coon hound. We proceeded without words.

Sometimes I forget and think I grew up with a soundtrack. That my growing up occurred in *Paint Your Wagon* or *Oklahoma* or *Rawhide* or *Cat Ballou*. But no. Those are my mixed-memory times. And to cure crossed radio wires: I shake my head, chug a glass of milk and melt ice cubes in my bra. I wait until the 4/4 music, the cotton skirts and hands hooked in belt loops kick step out the ends of my fingertips.

First to sixteenth year, I acquired the knowledge of how to survive and prepare for the winter and fatten cows without anyone ever uttering a word. There, things happened in circles, the steps always the same. The snow arrives, we feed the cows at six in the morning, go to school and return to feed the cows at 6 at night. We always give them the same thing: hay, corn silage, grain, and then roll out straw for bedding. We go inside and eat supper. Later the snow melts, we help the cows deliver calves. Then, green shoots up everywhere and we plant and harvest clover, alfalfa, corn and oats. We can and freeze the garden. Soon, brown shrivels green and we dance at the Pow-Wow, feet beating the circle, and snow arrives. I learn everything by stare, stance and subtle signal. My father pointed at the bales I was supposed to haul. My mother stirred the pickle brine and gestured about which cucumbers to pack in the Mason jars. The neighbors communicated to us in eyelid motion. Saturday night at the barn dances, there were guitars, banjos and mandolins with no music. At church, the words in the hymnal, typed below a splatter of dots and lines, did not translate into air. Neither "In My Father's House" nor "Onward Christian Soldiers" ever spiraled in the shell of my ear. I looked at the man by the altar. I looked at the feedstore owner sitting in the pew ahead of me, my father's arm pressed into my side. They knew this all by heart. They didn't need to hear my female voice to survive. Life and cattle and crops could go on without me. I was sensed, not heard.

I longed for one word. One small, tiny three-letter word. At dances, I would stomp around, tripping on somebody else's pointy-toed boots and would scream things out like: Syncopated Hate. Trapped Suffocation. The words flew out of my mouth and hit my partner on the forehead and made her smile, him smile, them smile, the whole row of line dancers in front of us would wiggle their shoulders from the strange sensation.

One time a woman did speak to me. My strange slow aunt spoke. She held my hand and took me walking with her...we went up and down the gravel road and she spoke in long highway sentences populated with 10-ton double-wheel words. The sound vibrated up and down my breasts, the tones plucked at my ribs. Ping. Pong. Pung. Pling. Pling. Pling. Smiling at her, I signalled that I had received sound. My mouth turned O, U and V. Sucking in air and pushing air out, my throat strained to syllable. Alas, unable to find my volume dial, no sound waves traveled back to her. All the people in my North woods life, even my father, regarded my aunt (his sister) as strange. Talk was something they did in other places, like Minneapolis, like the movies. Talk wasn't wanted, wasn't used, wasn't welcome in the country. He, and the other ranchers, farmers, tribe members deemed conversation as superfluous in one single silent nod. Their voices didn't need to travel the path they knew so well. They wallowed in the peace of the place with no sound. There was a reason they had found silence and rooted in it.

Once, when I was imagining my life had turned into the movies, I thought I was my mother speaking to me: Riding on the back of the hay wagon, the axle churning me away from my mother, I think I see her mouth moving, but no sound breaks out to me. As we turn out the driveway, I grab the wood for balance, the slivers prick through my fuzzy yellow chore gloves. She waves at me, legs spread, her brown cowboy boots planted firmly in the garden soil. I wanted to make my life like the movies. I yearned for a response to the things that I could say. The women in my life were strong. I see my mother's broad back as she chops wood, my older sister's strong thighs ripple as she hoists up hundred-pound gunny sacks of potatoes, my grandmother's arm muscles glisten and shake as she hoes the garden. Being women, our physical presence was desired and essential, our verbal presence was not needed.

## **My size invited my world into wordlessness.**

I tried to act like they did in the movies. I tried to say to my mother, "You are so strong." I wanted to ask her, "Will you always love me?" My grandmother silently pressed recipes to my lips as I longed for her to hear "Don't ever leave me. I will love you forever" from me. But they lived in this place so they could do without words, without hearing, without the tug, yank and tear of chat. Due to the conversational constraints, I stepped out of rurality and landed in the place where movies are made: the city. I was ready for full-blown sound, Bonanza, Miss Kitty, Laura, John Wayne, Ma and Jane Fonda. I had my words loaded, I had my sentences tied into my holster and ready for action. I talked, conspired, negotiated, fought and seized all moments with my mouth. I had tongue interactions. I sorted experiences through my vocal cords.

Then, silence welcomed me again. My size invited my world into wordlessness. Suddenly it began here. My shape changed and people found me inaudible. Hips stretching, my heart pumping my breasts larger and larger, my thighs dimpling like a cloud, my stomach rounding. The bigger I became, the softer my voice grew. People would glance away from me, smiling nervously, and give no indication they had heard the rumble of my shoulders. My lover looking only at that narrow square around the heart, rejected the mass of me. She shrugged and expecting me to read only symbols, stopped talking to me, began dancing with that smaller version of myself, the cut-up woman. That skinny boy woman in the magazine, that Miss South Carolina on the television, that mono-image movie star, that certain super model smiled at me and her hand nudged the volume. Turning me down, turning me off. Eliminating sound from my life.

As silence beats my eardrum, my hand searches for my controls. Grasping the volume button, I tweak, I turn, I snap the sound on HIGH.

Give me a microphone. Hear what I say. Get ready, this world is going to rock apart. Both of us have a part in this movie. Here's your cue: Start talking. Start talking to me. ✨

