Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Annie Clark, Becoming “Kerosene”

Set me on fire. Or, “ST. VINCENT covers BIG BLACK at Bowery ballroom NYC May 22 2011.” As of April 6, 2013, the video registers 125,391 views on YouTube. Presumably, this represents at least 125,000 conflagrations. Annie Clark and her band set off through Big Black territory, covering not only the song, but perhaps the performance documented in another video on YouTube, “big black - kerosene.” This is a song Jerry Lee Lewis wrote before he killed one of his wives, Albini informs the crowd at the bottom of his breath, before he and his band angle into the performance. Albini appears to be covered in blood. His guitar is slung around his waist. Another guitarist walks in place as he carves out his part. Albini paces, hacking away at his dick. The bassist is all over the E string, winding the song. The drummer punches his drums. I was born in this town / Lived here my whole life / Probably come to die in this ____ / Lived here my whole life.

Ominous whine, murderous complaint. There’s kerosene around find something to do.

Someone is on fire. Someone is set on fire. Annie Clark carries her guitar higher on her torso, high on her belly, at her solar plexus. It is a shield, and it will become a badge. It is a shield for the song, shielding her from it. It is the shell of the song, encasing her. She is carving her stomach. She is scratching the chakra aligned with Survival Issues. Or it is Manipura, city of jewels, associated with dispelling of fear, and the power to destroy the world. Or create it. The solar plexus absorbs prana, or life, from the sun.

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4 Thanks to participants in two New School Graduate Writing Program seminars, DEEP SURFACE (fall 2012) and MAKING TEXT (spring 2013) — two discussions covered in this version.

5 329,726 views

6 or: The bassist marshals the E string, bearing the song.

7 Here the “town” (if not the town) disappears.

8 solar plexus, shield

9 So says Wikipedia.
Annie Clark is ablaze. She shakes her head, Bill Pullman/Balthazar Getty’s transformative Fred/Pete gesture in David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*. Before this moment, Greil Marcus might say the band is looking for the song, or playing it. Then the song plays them. The band is aflame, whereas Big Black is merely on fire. The precedent is a pack of boys, and one boy on fire. The latter is the voice of Kerosene.

If in both versions, Kerosene is girl and fuel, and in the former version, the boy sets himself on fire, or sets upon Kerosene, the only thing to do in this town, as all the boys have learned, St. Vincent is the apotheosis of Kerosene, not merely the living flame, but the singing flame. She is fire, is a flame, and as she touches the boys, she loses herself. This is her risk, her wager. Kerosene and the boys, the boy and the girl, becoming-flame. They consume themselves with otherness, and with the other.

The rest is two videos, a dancing pile of ash, flames in the eyes of the crowd.

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10 as all the boys have taught her