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After years of speaking, I am without a voice.

They have stolen my voice, so to speak. So, to speak I must steal the voices of others. Or borrow. My own voice leaves no imprint so I know that it's gone. Doctors and nurses exchange my pulse for pills, and, asking how I am, receive responses in tones taken from television or radio. I am as likely to say, 'I'm fine' as Larry King as I am to say, 'not so good' as Oprah Winfrey. Needless to say, the disembodied then re-embodied voices I use for face-to-face conversation are useless over the phone. Doubly thefted, not even my own mother would believe me if I called and said, 'Hello mom, it's me.' So the telephone is no escape from the ward. I'm no prisoner, but to leave would be to enter a world where no one knew my malady. At least here everyone knows I am the victim of a crime, even if no one admits it.

I don't understand what was so important about my voice that they needed it, needed all of it. My accent betrays no geography. My range is average. My singing is amateurishly pleasant, if slightly off-key. Could it have been a random purse-snatching sort of heist? I doubt it. Anyone as desperate as that would have cut my throat to get it, but...no scars.

I have listened for it to no avail. It occurs to me that as hard as I have listened for it, I have not actually looked for it, and don't know the first thing about a visual search for a voice. Needless to say (yet because my voice has been stolen I need to say it), calling out to it is useless. How would my voice know it was me?

Of what is my voice made? Could I rebuild it, approximate a working model for contingent use (assuming the genuine article to be, ultimately, irreplaceable)? When the voice is not voicing what is it doing? Does the voice have a role in the construction of silence beyond absence or restraint?

If my voice called out to me, I might not recognize it. One's voice taped and played back is nothing like one's voice heard inside the mouth or head. How will we know each other?

I am not without a plan. My investigations into my purloined voice have already been extensive. I've probed every place I've ever noticed vocal residue: telephones, television, records, tapes, compact discs, even letters. But especially the radio. Sometimes, in the intense exploration and nonstop navigation, I mistake constellations for coastlines: when I turn on the television, I get messages off my answering machine. Sometimes, when I rotate the needle up and down the FM dial, I accidentally pick up the mail.

One annoyance of my loss of voice is the rearrangement of body-related platitudes to other parts. Instead of nervous butterflies in the stomach, my Eustachian tubes flutter so that I have butterflies in my ears, making it impossible to hear anything. At full occupancy with

lepidoptery, the ringing in my ears has moved to my calves, so at times I cannot walk steadily and am confined to bed. The stars formerly in my eyes are now in my ass, causing immeasurably inconvenient sensations (though not all unpleasant). The cat has my tongue, and a great deal else.

It's possible I've simply forgotten not just how to speak but to make noise. It's possible that my voice is waiting for me, by turns patient and frantic, hoping I'll remember.

It's also possible that it's all in the remembering. In the forgetting no trace is left, and the vocal smoke dissipates in the winds of amnesia, taking a long time to fade.

Wednesday mornings I refuse to sit. From dawn to dusk I stand. It keeps me from going crazy, keeps me sane and rational. I stand. I stand to reason.

Wednesday nights I maintain a silent vigil, trading my status as the universal receiver to float unnoticed up and down the hallways. I float on a magic carpet, taking Polaroids of the tops of people's heads. Silence is fuel. The magic carpet goes without saying.

If the voice is a part of the body, I could clone it. Even the slightest shred of skin is a blueprint of its corpus. So even a whimper, whisper or strangle-cry could engender my whole voice.

If the voice is a part of the body, I could clone my whole body from it. To get my whole voice back I'd need only clone my whole body, but there's no guarantee the voice I could borrow from the cloned body would emanate from the real me as the voice I hear inside when I speak. It could emanate from inside as the voice I hear outside, and then the outside voice wouldn't sound like me to others and I'd be right where I am now.

Now, would I rather be me without my voice, or be not me with my voice? The catch-22: to get my voice back, I have to give up me. I have to give myself up. If the voice is a part of the body.

Today I awoke with a thought so horrible and grotesque in its novelty that I could hardly revise it for the consideration of my senses: what if my voice has not been stolen at all? Worse: what if I have not misplaced it? (Discounted long ago, I know, but ultimately in this search we reject nothing outright.) Worst of all: what if my voice has left me? Wilfully, willingly, what if it has packed up its things and skedaddled?

By this afternoon I had relegated that hypothesis to the back burner. After a careful search with a penlight and one of those tiny dentist's mirrors, I concluded there was no evidence to support this. Not even after forcing myself to vomit several times could I find a good-bye note.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Alexandra Keller.*