

I am 14 and I am cast the role of 'passer-by' in a school play. My character is a witness to a street stabbing. This act of violence will not be performed literally, our teacher explains, she does not want us to dramatize. The perpetrator and the victim will walk towards each other, meeting in the centre of the stage, and, as one body folds into the other, the audience will know what is happening by the reactions of the other characters. It is my job to scream.

In rehearsals I try to do what I am supposed to. I try to embody my character, to imagine what she sees and react reflexively, but I cannot. The scream does not come.

I can shout – that's easy – an AAAHH sound that comes from somewhere in my head. But it lacks urgency, landing, instead, flat and dry on the floor in front of me. Shrieking also comes readily, a high-pitched song, shrill and shallow in my throat. But the room is too big, it pulls the sound up and away from me, and what is left is thin, false and not at all convincing. Screaming is something different altogether, I understand. Screaming comes from somewhere else.

As a group we run through the scene over and over, and each time I stall. I cannot reach down my throat and into my body to locate the sound that is being asked of me.

From somewhere at the back of the theatre, invisible behind a screen of stage lights, my teacher instructs me to go louder, again, come on, we want ear splitting volume, bigger, again from the top, I want you to picture what you're witnessing here, think about what you're seeing and embody it, come on, again, bigger, make it as big as you can. With each run through I sense impatience around me, shuffling dark at the edges of the stage. Under the heat and the glare my body shrinks, imperceptibly.

Eva, she says, you need to practice your scream. That is your homework.

But where does a 14-year-old girl go to scream?

At home alone I try to do it, but the house is so quiet. I cannot draw it out of myself to break the silence. I try to psych myself up by playing music on the highest volume, but each time I get close to the edge the scream does not come. I think of neighbours knocking on the door, concerned faces peering through the window, questions or raised eyebrows or even phone calls to the police.

I understand the implications of screaming between walls. I decide to try something else.

One afternoon on the walk back from school I enlist my best friend for moral support. It being the hour when teenagers outnumber grown-ups on the streets, we agree that this is a good time to try. We walk slowly, letting ourselves fall behind the group, people peeling off home in groups of twos and threes. When the uniforms have thinned and the street is almost ours, she turns to me. Now, she says, do it now.

I breathe deep, straighten my shoulders, tilt my chin and release – a murmur that grows into a screech, piercing, travelling up through my belly and out, ripping through the street around me. She looks at me, eyebrows raised, not sure what to say, before she opens her mouth and joins in, doubling the volume and the weight of what is being unleashed. Her pitch reaches mine and we carry on like that, walking beside each other, passing it between us only to take gulps of air, until our jaws ache and our breath runs out.

A car drives past us, slow, and we stop walking and look at each other, waiting for something to happen.