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Interlude 1

On (Almost) Passing

Brenda Brueggeman

3. Reasons you cannot be deaf

You don't sound funny.
You don't talk too loud.
You have such a nice voice.
You're so normal.
You can wear hearing aids.
You can turn up your hearing aids.
You can try harder.
You don't have any trouble hearing me.
You can do better if you try.
You can hear anything you want to hear.
You can try harder.
You can never really learn sign language.
You didn't grow up deaf.
You didn't go to a deaf school.
You tried to pass as hearing.
You try to pass as hearing.
You don't fit in.
You don't get the jokes.
You don't understand the language.
You don't understand the language.
You just don't understand
the language.
Reasons you can't be hearing:
You can't hear.

—Ilene C. Caroom, *"Like Love, This Choice of a Language"*

It is much easier to pass as hearing than it is to feign deafness. To be hearing, you can try hard and harder, sound a little funny, talk a little too loud (and often, and fast), wear hearing aids (and hide them)—and you will, for the most part, pass well enough. I should know; I've done it all my life. If I were to write it, my brief biography would read much like Ilene Caroom's, the author of my epigraph: "Although she has a progressive hearing loss, Ilene C. Caroom was raised hearing, with hearing aids, and taught to lipread. She has a B.A. in English from Hollins College and a J.D. from the University of Maryland Law School."[1] While some particulars part us, the sum of our experience looks much the same: to hide my deafness, to pass as hearing, I've tried hard and done quite well. The reasons, as

Caroom herself outlines them and unreasonable as they may seem to the hearing world, abound for why I cannot be d/Deaf.

It was not until I had embarked on my "coming out" as a deaf person that I considered my rites of passage and dwelled on my acts, both deliberate and unconscious, both past and present, of passing. Because my coming out was a midlife event, I had much to reflect back on and much to illuminate ahead of me. This passing through an identity crisis, and the rites of passage involved in uncovering the paths of my lifelong passing as "hearing," took place in a hall of mirrors. Later I would come to know this place as the art and act of rhetoric.

I think I first saw myself mirrored in several students I met at Gallaudet University. I was thirty-two and finishing my Ph.D., writing a dissertation—that quintessential act of literate passing. What's more, I was finishing it by doing an ethnographic sort of study on deaf student writers at Gallaudet University; thus, I was using the guise of an academic grant and a Ph.D.—producing project as a professional foil to make a personal journey to the center of Deaf culture.

I was always good at finding a way to pass into places I shouldn't "normally" be.

So, there I was, doing time as a teacher and researcher at Gallaudet, collecting data for my study, taking a sign language class, living with a d/Deaf woman and faculty member at Gallaudet, going to Deaf gatherings, tutoring some of the students. Mostly, I was just trying to pass in ways that were both familiar and unfamiliar to me: to pass (unfamiliarly) as d/Deaf—and doing a lousy job of it—and to pass (more familiarly) as h/Hearing and thereby pass through this last of major academic hoops.

In this passing, I spent a good deal of time watching—an act for which I had, as a hard-of-hearing person, lifelong experience and impeccable credentials—watching myself, watching the students I was doing case studies of, watching everything in the ethnographic scene of Gallaudet Deaf culture before me. I kept seeing myself in and through many of the students I worked with in the "basic English" classrooms. They were the mirror in my ears. These students often had volatile, if not violent, histories of passing—especially academically. Most of them, by virtue of finding themselves "stuck" (there is a powerful sign for that—two fingers jammed into the throat, a desperate look on the face) in English 050, were still floundering mightily, struggling violently, to pass at basic English literacy. Having negotiated that passage rather adeptly I now, oddly enough, found myself struggling to squeeze through another doorway as I was myself engaged in a mighty, violent struggle to pass in basic d/Deaf literacy.

I don't think I ever got it right. Almost, but not quite. I couldn't be deaf any more than I could be hearing. I was hard-of-hearing; and therein I was as confused and displaced, in either Deaf or Hearing culture, as this multiply-hyphenated term indicates.

The mirror in my ears threw back odd images—distorted, illuminating, disturbing, fantastic, funny—but all somehow reflecting parts of me. It put my passing in various perspectives: perspectives of tense and time (past, present, future); perspectives of repeated situations and relationships in my personal and academic life; and perspectives about the ways that stories are told, identities forged, arguments made. These are but some of the things I saw as I passed through, by, on.

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For some twenty-five years of my life, from age five on, I went to the movies. And while I think I always more or less got the plot, I missed everything in the dialogue. For twenty-five years I sat, passing time with a Three Musketeers candy bar, some popcorn, a Coke. I sat with my sisters as a grade school child on weeknights when my Mom had to work and my Dad was running the film from up in the little booth (both my parents had two jobs). To be sure, we often didn't sit so much as we crawled the aisles, playing hide-and-seek quietly in an always near-empty theater. Sometimes, more sensibly, I went to the lobby to do some homework. Through some films, though—the Disney classics and the cartoons that opened and closed each feature film—I did try to sit, to listen and watch. I don't think I had a conscious knowledge of it then, but now I know that I heard nothing, that I was a pro at passing even back then.

I got better, too, with age and the requisite social agility that becomes most junior high and high school girls. On weekends in my very small, very rural western Kansas town, the theater was the

only place to go, the only thing to do. Past the Friday night football or basketball game, the movies beckoned; we'd often go to the same film both Saturday and Sunday night. Going to the movies was the only date possible in Tribune, Kansas.

I dated. They took me to countless movies, and I never heard a word. What's more, in the dark of the movie theater, with no hope of reading my date's lips as he struck up conversations with me, I nodded and feigned attention, agreement, acceptance all the more.

It now all seems so ludicrous, if not painful. For years I have listened to my friends—especially my academic friends—rave about movies, past and present. For years I have shifted back and forth on my feet at parties, smiling, nodding, looking genuinely interested in the discussion of this film or that. Not that I felt left out of their discussions. I just felt somehow disoriented, out of step—not quite passing. Like many deaf people, I not only saw films but enjoyed them. What I didn't know in all those years of adolescent pretense, but know so well now, is that I tend to enjoy films differently than hearing spectators do. I came to know that while they were concentrating on clues to solve the mystery, say, in the dialogue between characters, my eyes, a little more attuned to detail than theirs, would see in the background the weapon of death or notice the facial tension and odd mannerisms of the guilty party.

Take one example: in my early years of graduate school, one of the last years I still let dates take me to movies, I saw David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. Just recently I had a conversation with my husband about that movie; it was a conversation based on memory, and on memory in different contexts since we had not seen the film together or even remotely in the same place. What I remembered, what I talked about, were vivid visual details of the movie: the ear lying in the grass that opens the movie, the color of Isabella Rossellini's lips and the way they pouted and quivered, the tenseness in her body, the vivid surreal scenes splashed like canvases in a museum of modern art. And while he himself pointed out how visual the movie was (as indeed most movies are), what my husband remembered most clearly were the conversations. He knew that the severed ear in the grass belonged to Rossellini's husband, that the husband had been kidnapped, and that her actions throughout the movie were done as ransom to keep her husband alive (plenty of reason for body tension and quivering lips). My husband knew this, of course, because they talk about it in the movie.

But I didn't know this. I thought the ear was a symbol of all the scenes of eavesdropping that appear in the film, nothing more, nothing less. I thought the severed ear and the blue velvet forged some artistic link to van Gogh and to Picasso's blue period. This was the sense I made with one sense missing.

So, when the pieces began to fit together and I began, late in my twenties, to understand that I understood precious little of movies beyond the roar of the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* or the catchy little tunes of the latest animated Disney "classic," I just stopped going. I had better things to do with my time than hog down a Three Musketeers and bad popcorn. There were other options for dates—especially since my dates now preferred to actually talk about the movie after it was over with, trying out their latest readings in critical theory on the poor, defenseless film over coffee, a drink, dessert. I couldn't hold up my end of the conversation, so I let it stop before it could begin.

I could not always stop conversations before they began, though. (If a genie were ever to grant me three wishes, this would definitely be one of them.) And more times than enough, I found myself pressured into passing and then greatly pressured by my passing. Some days, you see, I could pass; some days I could *almost* pass; some other days the rug almost got yanked out from under me.

My first high school sweetheart was, now that I look back, a real sweetheart; when he could have yanked, he didn't. He let me pass, and he let me do so with grace, saving my hidden deaf face, as it were.

What first attracted me to him was his gentle manner, his quiet, soft-spoken demeanor. It was that demeanor, of course, that doomed our relationship. He was a senior, I only a sophomore—and although I felt enormously comfortable around him (maybe because he didn't talk much, so I didn't have to listen much?), I wanted greatly to impress him. Apparently I did so, because a short month after dating several times, we were cruising main (the only option in Tribune besides "parking"—which

only bad girls or longtime steadies did—or going to the movies) and Steve asked me to go steady with him, to wear his gigantic senior class ring. Actually, he asked three times. I didn't hear a one of them. But by the third time—even across the cavernous distance of his big Buick's front seat in the dark of a December night—I could *see* that he was saying something, trying *hard* to say something.

So I said the words that are surely the most common in my vocabulary: "What? Hmmmmm? Pardon me?" (I don't recall exactly which variation it was.)

Now Steve could have been mighty frustrated, out-and-out angry (and I would have not been surprised, since this response is all too common when we are asked to repeat something)—but instead he smiled in his gentle way, the way that had attracted me to him in the first place. He pulled the car over to the curb on main street right then and there, and he shut it off. He turned to face me directly and I could read his lips then. "I said," he still barely whispered, "would you wear my class ring?"

It was a bitter cold, blustery, snowy December night on the western Kansas plains. But I was hot, my face burning. Shamed. And shamed not so much at having not heard the question the first three times, but also in having myself, my deafness, so thoroughly unmasked. It felt as if someone were holding a mirror up to the sun with the reflected sunlight piercing through me. The mirror in my ears hurt. And it hurt even more because in that one fleeting instant in that big Buick at the age of fifteen, I realized, too, how DEAF I was. And I knew I would have to say "no" to soft-spoken Steve, his gentle ways, his giant class ring. I was not hearing enough; he was not deaf enough. And although I couldn't voice it at the time, I knew even then that this was more than just a sheet of glass between us, more than a barrier we could "talk" to each other through.

And I think—in fact, I'm sure—that he knew this, too. But still, instead of saying "never mind" or "oh, nothing" to my "What?" (the other most frequent responses) he let the moment play through, let me have the benefit of the words I had missed. He let me play at passing, let me play it as if it could really be, our going steady, our promise as a couple. He could have ridiculed me with taunts of "Gee, you just don't hear *anything*," or worse, in its "innocent" ignorance, "What's wrong, are you DEAF?" Those, too, are all-too-common responses to my requests that statements be repeated.

So, the moment passed. Steve and I didn't go steady. Nearly a decade later, when he and I were both married (to different persons, of course) we recounted this scene for our spouses; we laughed, they laughed. For a moment, Steve and I locked eyes—and I read it all there: he had known then, as he knew now, that I was indeed deaf. But neither he nor I, then nor at the present moment, would say the word. We let it pass. The conversation went on elsewhere.

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When I began talking and working with deaf students at Gallaudet University as part of my dissertation research project, however, the conversation always went there directly: how I, how they, how we, coped with our deafness in personal relationships, especially with lovers and other significant others. We were trying out our mirrors on each other, trying to see if these multiple mirrors would help us negotiate the difficult passages we always encountered in relationships.

One student, David, an older nontraditional student, had mentioned several times in the course of his interview with me that his wife was far more deaf (in strict audiological terms) than he. It came up most strongly when I asked him directly about how much time he spent with hearing people and in "Hearing culture" as opposed to with deaf people and in "Deaf culture." His answer hinged on his relationship with his wife: "I have a little bit of a struggle with my wife over this issue. She isn't comfortable socializing with hearing people she doesn't know or with my hearing friends who don't sign. So I would end up having to interpret for her or stay right with her to keep her company. So I would either go alone, or go with her with a group of deaf people. I didn't have problems with either group [deaf or hearing], but she did have a problem with the hearing group." I mentioned, smiling, that were he asked, my husband might say some of the same things. We left the issue at that, and I went on to other questions. But at the end of the interview, when the videotape was off and the interpreter we used had left the room, David turned directly to me and in both spoken English and sign language, asked, "I'm curious. You said that you and your husband have similar communication problems in

hearing situations since you are hard-of-hearing and he isn't. How," David paused, with genuine pain on his face, "do you work around this?" I could see that this was a sore spot, a blemish on both our mirrors. And unfortunately, I didn't have any particularly inspiring answers—no secret passageways to divulge and to help us both thereby solve this mystery more neatly, more quickly. We were (and are) both just stumbling and groping, looking for light switches in the often dark hallways of our deafness within relationships.

In the past, too, I had looked to others, more deaf than I, to help illuminate my way through the relationship with my new husband. When I first came to Gallaudet in 1991, I became good friends with a woman some ten years older than I. She had become late-deafened; her gradual deafness was probably genetic and the result of auditory nerve degeneration; her intellect, acumen, wit, and passion amazed me; she liked simple food and good beer and wine; she was the heroic single mother of four teenagers; and she enjoyed the company of men thoroughly. In the fantasizing way, I think, of adopted children who often feel as if they never quite fit with their own parents, and in this time of substantial identity shifting for myself (I was, you see, trying to come out in my deafness), I fantasized her as potential role model, a mentor, a long-lost mother—or maybe sister—of sorts. I held up the mirror to myself and saw her in it; I held up the mirror to her and saw myself in it.

What I watched most carefully in that mirror was my own just-married relationship with a hearing man and the various reflections of my newfound friend, whom I'll call Lynn, in her relationships with men, both deaf and hearing, past and present. It was not always a pretty sight—on either side of the mirror. What I saw in watching Lynn and in sharing many conversations with her about the dilemmas of life with a hearing man or life with a deaf man was as inspiring as often as it was scary. Either way, the specter of dependence, never really tangible in that mirror, always lurked: to marry a deaf man meant she (we) would be the one(s) that might be most depended on (especially because as late-deafened and exquisitely literate persons we had skills and experience well worth depending on)—and this, then, would leave us little room for the sometimes necessary dependence of our own; but on the flip side (the magnified side of that mirror?), marrying a hearing man might well mean we would come to be too dependent and would, therefore, put at risk our ability to pass on our own, as our own.

When the woman is deaf, in a culture in which the woman is still seen as typically more "dependent" in a male–female relationship, her further dependence on a hearing partner can dangerously diminish her autonomy. Yet at the same time men typically depend on women in certain specialized areas; as Bonnie Tucker has written in *The Feel of Silence,* her controversial autobiography about her deafness, men expect their female partners to carry out an array of social functions that demand precisely the kind of communicative competence that is challenging for the deaf. Women generally mediate between the home and the world in arranging the social obligations and daily domestic duties of (heterosexual) coupled and family life. This calls for speaking with many people, a high proportion of them strangers, both in person and by telephone (in stores, offices, schools . . .), in contexts in which the conversations can't be carefully anticipated or controlled. Discussing her own earlier marriage to a hearing man, Tucker sees the disruption of these cultural norms in the social parameters of male–female relationships as largely responsible for the fact that successful relationships between hearing men and deaf women are few and far between.

Within Deaf culture, there is more at stake than the bounds of the intimate relationship: to marry either deaf or hearing marks one, proffers one a pass, in the eyes of Deaf culture. Often immediately after the initial identity-confronting question that greets one—"Are you deaf or hearing?"—comes the next test: "Is your spouse deaf or hearing?" In the strictest of cultural terms, to marry deaf is to be Deaf; to marry hearing is to be Hearing. Of course, these strict terms constitute far more an ideal than a reality. Many deaf—and even Deaf—persons I know have nondeaf partners. Still, according to surveys conducted by Jerome Schein and Marcus Delk, over 68 percent of deaf people marry endogamously, with 86 percent expressing a desire to do so.[2]

To marry one or the other, then, is to pass as one or the other. Yet another reason why I have *al-*

most, but not quite, passed: when Deaf culture seeks to identify me, it holds up the mirror and sees my husband, a hearing man. He is a gentle man, a generally soft-spoken man—like the Steve I didn't go steady with. And yes, I must often depend on him in ways I'd much rather not—asking him to make phone calls for me, asking him to interpret or relay bits of conversation I've missed in social settings, asking him to repeat what one of my own children has said, asking him to help me bow out of uncomfortable social situations, asking him to order for me at restaurants, asking him to pronounce with exaggeration words I'm not sure of, and often, most difficult of all, asking him to just intuitively know when I want to pass on my own and when I want to depend upon him.

It isn't easy. Sometimes I feel like shattering the mirror: it shows me as "crippled," as "disabled" in my dependence.

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It was a young woman, a new and very much struggling student, that I met at Gallaudet when I first went there and was so engrossed in my own coming out, so obsessed with my own identity, who first showed me and let me feel the shards of that mirror. She had been a student in the English 50 class I was a teaching assistant in; I had also tutored her individually and she had served as one of my in-depth case studies, meeting with me weekly for interviews and videotapes of her in the process of writing. We had come to know each other well. And although she looked, figuratively or literally, nothing like Lynn, the older deaf woman I now know I fetishized, I think the mirror drew us to each other—in the way most of us can hardly resist glimpsing ourselves, can hardly resist turning to stare at ourselves, when we pass by any reflective glass. This younger woman (whom, interestingly or conveniently enough, I had assigned the pseudonym "Lynne") turned to me as her model and mentor—me the mainstreamed, academically and somewhat socially successful woman, who had married a hearing man and got along, so it seemed, rather well in the Hearing world.

I hadn't realized how much she had turned to see me in her mirror (and I, in that way that we do when the mirror flatters us, not only had let her but had probably encouraged her)—I hadn't realized until toward the end of the semester I received several desperate long-distance phone calls from her mother in Nebraska. Lynne was not doing well at Gallaudet. It wasn't just her grades, although those were bad enough, to be sure. (Lynne was one of those lifelong products of mainstreaming—now found in abundance at Gallaudet—who arrived as a college freshman with little sign language skills and found herself immersed, even drowning, in Deaf culture and the precedence of sign language—yet another language now, in addition to English, that she didn't quite get.) Lynne was failing miserably in the Gallaudet social arena: she was lonely, depressed, even cast out. She just didn't fit. And her mother suffered for her, with her.

Back home, it turns out, Lynne had a hearing boyfriend. In righteous anger, her mother wanted her out of the "meanness" of Gallaudet, and so she had begun contacting me to seek my counsel on both the meanness and on getting Lynne out. Essentially, she wanted me to talk to Lynne and encourage her to abandon her long dream of studying at Gallaudet. Lynn's mother, understandably, wanted her back in the hearing world. It was mean there, too—but I think her mother had forgotten about that for the moment. What's more, she wanted Lynne married to a hearing man.

In a bit of conversation that jarred my very bones, her mother asked me if I was married. "Yes," I replied tentatively, not sure why this question had come up.

"Is he hearing?" she probed further. And then I knew just why the question had come up and where it was headed.

"Yes, he is," I confirmed.

"Are you happy—married to him?"

I sputtered a little, I remember, not quite comfortable with the suddenly personal tack that this conversation with a stranger some thousand miles away had taken. But I didn't know how to turn either back or away (mirrors are like this). "Yes," I answered simply.

"Well, good—then there's hope for Lynne, too. Would you tell her that? Could you tell her that she could be married—and happy—with a hearing man?"

I don't know what I said then. Stories and memories are selective, and, as Benedict Anderson has written, "all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias";[3] mirrors simply cannot say and show it all. But I do know that I felt deeply the pain of a shattered mirror—the pain of trying to be Lynne's inspiration, her role model, her fetish, her whatever. I could barely get it right for myself, could barely pass either as clearly and securely "d/Deaf" or as "h/Hearing"—how could I ever show someone like Lynne which, if any of those, to be?

I felt very much nailed to the threshold with several tons of doors, from both sides, closing on me.

* * *

When I get to feeling this way—trapped, nailed, stuck in between overwhelming options—I tend to get frantic, nervously energized, even mean. And my will to pass, to get through and beyond at all costs, kicks in ferociously. Some animals freeze in fear, shut down in fright; I run—harder, faster, longer. I run until I pass—until I pass on, or out.

And that running always seems to lead me to stories. I have always been a storyteller, a writer, a talker. These "talents" pass me off as "hearing" even as they connect me to "the Deaf way." "The Deaf way" revolves around narrative, around sharing stories—and the narration itself is, in Deaf culture, far more than incidental to the experience. Using sign language, Deaf culture prides itself on its "oral" and "narrative" nature. And for Deaf people, *who* tells the story and *how* they tell it is every bit as important as *what* the story is. The narrator, then, is in control of the experience instead of vice versa.

I tend to control conversations. This is not always a truth I am proud of, but it is the experience I present, the face I show in the mirror. I can talk a lot. I ramble, I chatter—especially on the phone and in one-on-one conversations. It is safer this way: if I don't shut up, if I keep talking, then voilà, I don't have to listen. And if I don't have to listen, I don't have to struggle, don't have to ask for repeats, don't have to assume any of the various appearances that I and other deaf/hard-of-hearing people often appear as—stupid, aloof, disapproving, suspicious. If I keep talking, I pass. I thrive and survive in perpetual animation.

But in situations in which animation affords me no control—in social settings with more than two in the conversation, for example, or as a student in the classroom—I resort quite rhetorically to another strategy: I disappear to what my mother and sisters called "Brenda's La-La Land." I just fade away, withdraw from the conversation. Here it is safer not to speak at all. For if I do, I am sure to be off-topic, three steps behind, completely out of sync with the others. Or even worse, if I speak, someone might ask me a question—a question I would struggle to hear, would have to ask to be repeated (probably more than once), would fail then to answer with wit, intelligence, clarity, quickness. Passing is treacherous going here, so I usually choose not to even venture out, not to cross over the mythical yellow line that marks the divide between d/Deaf and h/Hearing.

When I do venture out or across, I've been trapped more than once—have talked myself right back into the deaf corner. You see, when I talk, people sometimes wonder. "Where are you from? You have quite an accent," I have heard times too innumerable to count—and usually from near strangers. The question is, I suppose, innocent enough. But my answer apparently isn't. For many years I used to pass myself off as German; it was easy enough since my grandparents were quite German and I, as the child of an army family in the 1950s, was born in Germany. Of course, having grandparents who once spoke the language and having lived there, attached to the U.S. Army, for only the first four years of my life didn't really qualify me as a native speaker, complete with an accent. But my interlocutors didn't need to know any of that; when I said "German," they were satisfied. "Oh yes," they nodded, completely in understanding.

But some years ago, as another act of coming out, I stopped answering "German." First I tried out a simple, direct, "I'm deaf." But the result was too startling—it rendered my audience deaf and dumb. They sputtered, they stared at me speechlessly, they went away—fast. It quite unhinged them.

So I have softened the blow a bit and begun to respond, "I'm quite hard-of-hearing." To this I get a split response, which probably fits those multiple hyphens in my identity—they will both smile and

nod an affirmative, "Oh yes, I understand now" (although I know that they really *don't* understand the connections between hearing loss and having an "accent"), and they will also back away rather quickly, still reluctant to continue a conversation under these circumstances.

I didn't like passing as German, but I'm never sure I like their response to my real answer any better. When I see the fright in their eyes, the "oh-my-god-what-should-I-say-now?" look that freezes their face into that patronizing smile, I feel cornered again. I feel scared, too, for the way it reflects back on the way I saw myself for many years. I wish I had just stayed mute.

For all that it frightens me, though, when I get cornered and I see my scared, caught-between-the-hyphens, hard-of-hearing face in the mirror, something comes of it. This happened to me first, and I think most significantly, at my first successful academic conference. I had just finished my first year of graduate school and had journeyed to give a paper at the Wyoming Conference on English. I had attended the conference the summer before as well, but I had been in my silently passing mode. This year, however, I was animated by everything from a very positive response to my own paper on the first day, to the glitter of the featured speakers, to a headful of theory-stuff mixed near explosively with my first year of teaching college freshman in a university principally composed of minority and Appalachian, first-generation college students. I was primed. I was talking a lot.

On the third day of the conference we were having a picnic lunch up in the mountains; at a table with one of the conference's biggest stars, I was feeling lit up, I guess by the glitter he was sprinkling on me by showing genuine interest in my own projects and things I had said in earlier sessions. I was telling stories about growing up in western Kansas. Everyone was listening, engaged, laughing.

Then a woman across the table, slightly to the left of me, wearing a tag from some small place in Louisiana, I remember, asked me, point-blank, "So, how long have you been DEAF?" (And that word, especially, went echoing off the mountain walls, I swear.) The question did not fall on deaf ears. The table, full of some sixteen people, went silent—awfully, awesomely silent. They waited.

"A-a-all my life." Silence again. Eons of silence. Echoes of silence.

"Wow," said the star, and he touched my arm—a genuine touch, a caring touch, a you-don't-have-to-feel-bad touch.

But I felt plenty bad. I excused myself under pretense of wanting some more potato salad. Instead I went behind a giant pine tree on the other side of the chow table and tried to breathe, tried to think of how I could make it past those people, to my car, out of here, out of here, out of here.

I know that in this telling the incident may all sound quite melodramatic. But in that moment, I learned, if nothing else and quite melodramatically, that I am the narrator of my experience. I learned that there was a price for passing, that the ticket cost more than just a pretty penny, that the fear of always, at any moment, being "found out" was far worse than just telling at the outset. (Like telling a lie and having to remember who you told it to, who you didn't.)

And what was I so afraid of in the first place?

That moment in Wyoming, at the dawn of my academic career, shortly before I entered my thirties, was the first time I think I asked myself that question. And when I began asking it, I also began taking care and charge of narrating my own experience and identity. I began coming out. At the age of thirty, I took my first sign language class. And I cried mightily on the first night at the sheer thrill of not having to sit in the chair at the front and center of the classroom so I could "hear" the instructor—cried for the simple freedom of choosing my own seat. I also dreamed up a dissertation project, rhetorician that I was, that would take me into "deafness"—my own and others—and to Gallaudet University, to the "heart" of Deaf culture.

If nothing else, I could always write about it, read about it. I had been doing literacy, and doing it well, all my life as yet another supremely successful act of passing. In all those classrooms I disappeared from as I drifted off, when my ability to attend carefully was used up and I wafted away to Brenda's La-La Land, I made up my absence by reading and writing on my own. If nothing else, I could always write about it, read about it.

> At Grandma's family gatherings for the holidays, Brenda was always in the other room, away from the crowds, reading. Nine times out of ten, when Brenda's high school friends went out for lunch and to quickly cruise main, Brenda went to the high school library and read (or wrote one of her crummy poems). The summer before she was to start college, Brenda spent her lifeguard breaks at the noisy pool in the corner of the office, plowing through a used introduction to psychology textbook she'd gotten from another older friend who was already at college. As it turns out, this plowing was what saved her when that fall she found herself in the cavernous intro to psych lecture hall with some three hundred other students—thankful that her name alphabetically allowed her to sit near the front, but still yearning to be an A so she could optimize the lecture from the choicest chair.

And she read. She bought or checked out a dozen more texts on psychology, biology, the skills of writing an essay. She took copious notes from each of them, recorded and memorized key vocabulary from them, read over those notes and her own in-class lecture notes (which she didn't trust) carefully each week, adding notes on top of those notes.

She spent most of her freshman year in the all-girl dorm holed up in her room, writing, reading, taking notes, passing. She went swimming—a silent, individual sport—for a "social" life. After that first frightful year of college it got better. The initial panic of failing, of being found out, subsided. She even skipped class now and then, forgot to study scrupulously for each and every test. She still passed quite well. She took a job—a safe one—lifeguarding in a tall, antisocial chair at the university pool on nights and weekends. She kept writing and reading, but now found her interests were far beyond ingesting college textbooks and taking careful notes; outside of her homework, she started working her way through Russian literature (don't ask me why) and writing short stories.

She avoided bars and parties—sooner or later a young man would come slosh a beer on her, ask her something, and not having heard him, but not wanting to appear any of those dreaded things, she would just nod "yes." It was not always the answer she meant to give.

Books were far easier to control. When she didn't understand a text, it didn't seem to mind her asking for a repeat. She could stare hard, be aloof, acquiesce without embarrassing consequences, speak out of turn, and question a book again and again. It didn't seem to mind. She wasn't deaf when she was reading or writing. In fact, she came to realize that we are all quite deaf when we read or write—engaged in a signing system that is not oral/aural and is removed from the present.

How many times must she have written—to herself or to someone else—"it's easier for me to write this than it is to say it; I find the words easier on paper." On paper she didn't sound deaf, she could be someone other than herself—an artificer (thus fulfilling Plato's worst nightmare about the rhetorical potential in writing). On paper she passed.

* * *

Through the years, although I've become more confident in public speaking and far more willing to unmask myself, my deafness, before others have a chance to, I've always been better at writing and reading than I have at speaking. In graduate school, I was given a prestigious fellowship—principally for my writing skills—and thus my colleagues, both the faculty and other graduate students, expected me, I think, to be a class leader, to speak often and well. I didn't. In fact, I later came to know that many interpreted my silence in the classroom as negligence about the reading, or just arrogant indifference. Negligence about reading was never a crime I was guilty of, although I might own up to some indifference. How could it be otherwise, when only two of my graduate school professors spoke loudly and clearly enough for me to understand more than half of their mumbled, head-down, lifeless, eyes-stuck-on-the-page lectures?

Mostly I was still afraid of myself—still scared of what I saw when I stood in front of the mirror and spoke. As long as I had a written text—something I had worked on and rehearsed in order to smooth out my odd "accent," my tendency for fast talk and illogical progression, and my tonal infelicities—I could be comfortable speaking from and through it. But just to speak well extemporaneously—this was risking breaking the mirror, seven years' bad luck. Writing smoothed the blemishes, softened the sharp edges.

Even when I teach, I teach from and with writing, thereby maintaining control. I avoid, at all costs, leading large group discussions that involve the whole class, discussions in which students might speak from the back of the room—from the places where even my hearing aids on the highest setting won't go. I put them in small groups for discussion and then I walk around, lean over their shoulders, sit down with a small group for a short time. Then I bring one group to the front of the class to help me lead the whole class through discussion, branching out from what they were talking about in their smaller groups. In this way, the students take charge of receiving the questions and become interpreters for me and each other. I like to argue that in this process they gain a new kind of responsibility and learning that they might not have had before; but I know, truth be told, that it's mostly just a matter of getting *me* past some of the more difficult parts of teaching.

My premier pedagogy for passing is, of course, writing. My students, even in the more literature-based classes, write a lot. They always keep journals; they always write too many papers (or so it seems when I'm reading and responding to all of them). And my students, for sixteen years now, are always amazed at how much I write in responding to their journals and papers. For here is a place where I can have a conversation, unthreatened and unstressed by my listening limitations. They write, and I write back.

Writing is my passageway; writing is my pass; through writing, I pass.

Notes

1. Ilene Caroom's poem and her brief biography appear in Garretson, *Deafness,* p. 8.
2. These figures, to be sure, are likely somewhat outdated; see Schein and Delk, *Deaf Population of the United States,* pp. 15–34.
3. Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* p. 204.