

A Wall of Glass

by Laura C. Stevenson

PEOPLE OF my generation think of August, 1975, as the month in which Richard Nixon resigned as President of the United States. I think of it as the month in which I realized I was going deaf.

I had finished my doctoral dissertation the year before, only to find that there were no academic jobs available in Santa Barbara, California, where I lived with my two small children. I wanted to teach, so I fell back on what in my college days had been my second profession — the violin. I spent the summer honing the technical skills I'd let slide in graduate school, and I was pleased with the results. When I arrived at the auditions for the Ventura Symphony in August, I played a Bach partita with a fair degree of confidence.

When I finished, the conductor frowned. "You play well, but you're out of tune. Try it again."

I did try it again; it sounded fine to me. "Better?"

He shook his head. "Can't you hear it?"

I made a coward's excuse — I hadn't played an audition for years, I was nervous. He nodded and put me in the second violin section and that was that... except that I knew there was only one reason for a seasoned musician to play out of tune without being aware of it.

I also knew my own history: that I had trouble teaching in large classrooms, that I avoided large parties because I couldn't understand what people said to me, that when other people heard thunder, I did not. I'd mentioned these problems to my family and friends, but they had always laughed. I played the violin, the viola, the piano and the guitar; how could anything be wrong with my hearing? The argument had seemed irrefutable; but now my violin was refuting it for me.

Two days after my audition, I walked into the office of an ENT specialist I had previously known only as an amateur violinist. He had his audiologist run a series of tests. When the results came, he looked them over and whistled. "Good God!" he said. "You hear like that, and you can play the fiddle?"

I looked at the audiogram; it showed a massive hearing loss in the lower registers, with a slow rise to just below normal in the upper registers. My friend traced the pattern with his finger. My problem, he said, was called sensory-neural loss. Many of the nerves that carried signals from what I heard to my brain didn't function. My hearing pattern was unusual: most victims of sensory-neural loss heard no high-frequency sounds, but I heard no low frequency sounds. My ability to hear treble had allowed me to become a musician; and even now, although some of the "high-frequency" nerves had begun to degenerate, he said, there was no reason for me to give up the violin yet...

"Yet?" I said. "You mean it's going to get worse?"

He tapped his pen on his desk. "Nerve degeneration is difficult to predict. It might stop, or it might get worse for a year or two, then level off."

"What's to stop it from fading away altogether?" I asked.

He kept his eyes fixed on his pen. "Nothing."

And nothing did. In 1975, I stopped playing the viola. In 1976, I resigned from the Ventura Symphony. In 1979, I could no longer tune my guitar, even with harmonics. In 1980, when I moved east and took an academic job, I told nobody that I played the violin, because I no longer did. In that year also, I began to wear a hearing aid. I had gone back to classroom teaching, and I couldn't lead a discussion without it. But I could still teach, and I could listen to the music I could no longer play.

THEN SUDDENLY, in the winter of 1982-83, a great number of my auditory nerves simply ceased to function. It happened so quickly and with so little warning that I didn't notice until I went to a magnificent production of the Bach B Minor Mass in Boston. I knew it well; I had sung the alto part and played the first violin part, so I followed eagerly until, three-quarters of the way

through the performance, the chorus came to a passage I'd forgotten. All at once, I was lost; what I heard was indistinguishable from a chain saw cutting through a cord of wood. Stunned, I tried to find my way back to the score, but my efforts were futile until the final Amen reduced (or elevated) the audience to tears. *That* I could hear; but as I listened, I knew that what I heard was not what the chorus sang, but what was engraved in my memory.

That great, contrapuntal Amen was my farewell to all music. Within six months of the concert, I had ceased to be 'hearing impaired' and become deaf. To understand the difference one has to understand that there are two aspects to hearing loss. One is simple loss of volume, which people with normal hearing can simulate by putting on both ear phones and ear plugs; to a person with this sort of loss, a hearing aid (the equivalent of taking off the ear phones) amplifies sound to a level at which it may be interpreted accurately. The other aspect of hearing loss is distortion, and this a person with normal hearing cannot simulate. The closest approximation to it is listening to a poorly tuned radio, an analogy that at least makes one see that amplification makes the problem worse. The radio's distortion, however, is caused by static which masks sound. The distortion in sensory-neural deafness is caused by the uneven pattern of nerve degeneration. Sound eventually filters through whatever defective auditory nerves remain, but what arrives at the brain depends upon which nerves are working, not upon the frequency and volume of the sounds themselves. The resulting Babel is called "poor word discrimination." The sensory-neural deaf can hear noise, but not music, voices but not speech. What I lost in 1983 was not the ability to hear sound, but the ability to interpret it.

I had little time to grieve, for I was soon beset by a practical problem: the danger of losing my profession. In January, I could still lead a class discussion. By March I no longer could. In April, when I gave a talk at Duke University, where I was a candidate for a position in the history department, I found I couldn't take questions from the floor. Realizing in panic that deafness was closing doors my credentials had just opened to me, I went to a series of hearing specialists; but by June, 1983, I had amassed only a multitude of bills and a single verdict: "Your nerves are degenerating; we're

sorry, but there's nothing we can do."

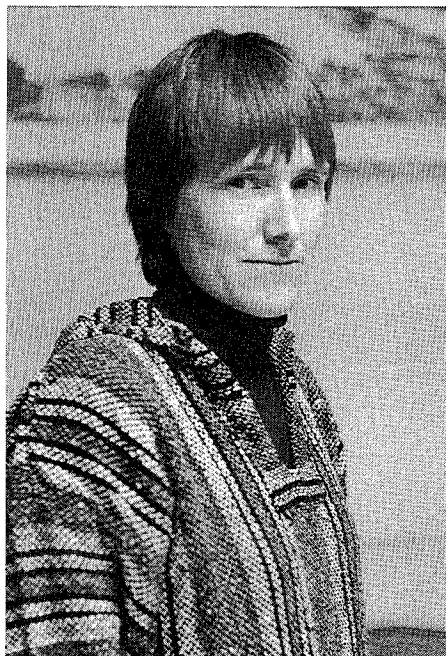
As I grew increasingly concerned about my ability to support myself and my girls, a strange thing happened: I became an isolated figure, shut off from the human community as if by a wall of one-way glass. I could speak, but I couldn't hear replies. I could hear the inflections of questions, but when I tried to respond I would cringe as I saw the expression that told me my answer had nothing to do with what had been asked. Seeing me struggle, my colleagues and friends mercifully talked to me only when they had to. Out of embarrassed compassion, my students stopped talking in class. Gradually, I lost the ability to understand any words not spoken directly to me; with the loss of peripheral hearing, I lost all sense of what was going on about me. Alone behind my wall of glass, I peered out into the world I had always known and saw that I no longer participated in it.

IT WAS THIS overwhelming sense of nonexistence, not the everyday problems of communication, that drove me to resign my teaching position in December of 1983 and move to my family's farm house in Wilmington, Vermont. There, for two years, I was as isolated in fact as I felt in spirit; looking back, I know I hoped that my life would fade away as my hearing had done. Fortunately, I had two daughters to whom my existence was essential, and I had no income. Forced into activity, I cleaned houses, drove children to school, to music lessons, riding lessons, pony club. But although Mom and the Cleaning Lady remained alive and functioning, the person I had once been retreated behind a wall of glass and disappeared.

Perhaps a better word is "changed." Sometime during those two years I began to write fiction again. I had written nothing but discursive prose since my sophomore year in college. In some ways, returning to fiction was a way of going back to the time I was 19 and starting my adult life anew. Gradually, more or less by accident, I rediscovered parts of myself I had long forgotten, talents I'd dismissed because I'd thought they were insufficient, perspectives I'd shunted aside because they were intuitive, not rational. Then slowly, with many glances over my shoulder, I discovered worlds in which I could move more comfortably, friends who were creations of my imagina-

tion, people who could talk to each other without excluding me. Miraculously, I was no longer alone. I shared a world with a host of characters who listened to my thoughts and begged me, in words I could always understand, to make them whole.

In their way, my fictive characters made me whole again. I began to think that perhaps my increasing skill at lipreading, along with technological improvements in hearing aids, might enable me to venture into the classroom again. Fortune favored me: Marlboro College —



the place where I had spent my childhood summers listening to Rudolf Serkin make poetry of a simple cadence — needed somebody to teach Modern European Fiction and Freshman Composition for a year. That was 1986-87; in the course of time, the College hired me as a teacher of writing, though I had been trained as an historian. The appointment reflected the change that had occurred behind my wall of glass. My public identity, newly defined, has come to depend upon the written word.

My gratitude to Marlboro's supportive community expresses itself in the enthusiasm I feel in the classroom and the affection I feel for my colleagues and students. In a sense, however, I continue to observe the community from behind my glass wall, loving it deeply but for many reasons unable to participate in it fully. I live in a different world from that of my colleagues and students. Drama,

music, ballet, film, television, radio — those entities that help form the collective consciousness of the community — are closed to me. My cultural life begins and ends with the reading and writing of books.

Then, too, the loss of language limits the capacity to enjoy sociability. Most people form social ties in day-to-day conversation over lunch or at parties; but these are situations in which the deaf cannot function unless they are with friends who sign. Lipreading is, at best, an iffy means of obtaining information; of the many different sounds in English, there are only 17 that one can see. (Look in the mirror and say "bay," "may," "pay" — they look exactly alike, which means one must see the whole sentence containing one of these words before one knows what it means. By that time, the speaker will have gone on to the next sentence, so one is perpetually behind.) Furthermore, people eat and drink at social occasions, which makes lipreading impossible. Finally, of course, there is the problem of noise. Any residual hearing that might allow one to interpret what is said at parties is useless in the roar of voices, the clank of silverware on plates, the scraping of chairs. The isolation one feels in these situations is profound.

The loss of language also determines the number and nature of my friendships. It takes unending effort to be intimate with a person to whom one cannot speak. If a friendship does develop, it frequently dies of exhaustion, for there is no such thing as a comfortable, companionable chat between the hearing and the deaf. Consequently I have come to find my friends among people with whom I do things, rather than people with whom I must converse. At Marlboro I am closest to the colleagues with whom I exchange manuscripts and critiques, in situations which involve mutual interest and a predictable topic of conversation. Outside the college I am closest to the people with whom I cut wood, ride horses or drive tractors, all things that can be done in companionable silence.

STILL, THE CURSE of every progressive degeneration, large or small, is that one can never make peace with one's condition and go on. My drawers are full of hearing aids that are no longer powerful enough, personal transmitters that no longer cut down background noise to a tolerable level,

amplified telephone receivers that no longer enable me to call my children. Each piece of expensive, now-useless equipment marks a different stage of loss, and each whispers quietly that in a few months, this year's solutions will go the way of last year's.

In preparation for profound deafness, I am learning sign language, but I have vowed that I will not rely on it. Doing that would confine me to the world inhabited only by the deaf, and I am deeply opposed to such confinement. I believe that in dividing ourselves into such groups as the hearing and the deaf, the black and the white, the male and the female, we cease to think of the humanity we have in common. As things are now, the hearing and the deaf rarely communicate with each other without interpreters. I hope to find the energy, and perhaps the technology, to form a bridge between them.

At present, my belief in the importance of communication expresses itself in my passionate dedication to the power of the written word. During the summer, I spend eight to ten hours a day wrestling with the complexities of sentences, paragraphs, symbols, plots and settings. During the school year, I turn my attention to Composition II, Elements of Style and Advanced Composition. These are not simply classes I teach to make a living; like my novels, they allow me to reveal and share the self that is invisible in every other context. What I am really teaching is not grammar, style or organization, but the wonder and difficulty of communication, the excitement that attends the understanding of words, the beauty and the cadence of the English language. Writing — the doing of it and the teaching of it — has become everything to me that the violin, the Bach B Minor Mass, the pleasures of talk, the joys of society, and the beauties of intimacy used to be. I have forgotten what it is to hear; I no longer hear music and words, even in my dreams. But I have not forgotten what language is or what it is for. It is the essence of culture, the essence of communication; it allows us to examine our common human problems without division and without fear.

Laura Stevenson teaches writing at Marlboro. Her second novel will be published by Houghton Mifflin next year.