

Foreword

Many of the books published by deaf writers fall loosely into the “inspirational” category; the writer shows how he or she overcame the challenges of being deaf. A perfect example of this is the books by Miss America 1995 Heather Whitestone (now McCallum), who explains how she rose above her deafness with God’s help. Such authors write the kind of books Heuer spoofs in “The Age of Digital Boob Magic”:

*The Great Grand Blah-Blah of Silence,
Hands of Gosh-Wow Wonder and
Their Ears Heard No Snap-Crackle-Pop
Of Jesus.*

Christopher Jon Heuer is no Heather Whitestone. His poems are in no danger of being optioned for a line of Hallmark cards.

The poems collected here inspire in an entirely different way, by expressing even uncomfortable truths. For art to be true to itself, it needs to be allowed to express a full range of human emotion and experience. In “Rules for Fathers and Suns,” the poem’s narrator is a spaceship who doesn’t want the sun to “scream *why can’t you draw something people want!*” What people want in art is something with no real message that is easy on the eyes, like sofa art chosen for its ability to complement the décor. It should be bland and easily digested, and it definitely should not express anger or otherwise be disturbing. Heuer’s poetry is frequently angry and often disturbing, both when he writes about deafness and when he writes about more general human experience.

This willingness to express anger is an important step. In her essay “When We Dead Awaken,” Adrienne Rich argued that the anger expressed by women writers was a necessary step in confronting and moving past oppression. Anger is a human emotion, and to deny its expression is to deny the full range of

human experience necessary for art. The anger is not surprising; they should be angry! However, there is the pressure to be “nice,” to please the (male) audience. The deaf writer faces a similar burden not to offend hearing readers—who might be our bosses, teachers, parents, children, or publishers.

In the opening poem, “If,” Heuer draws attention to the importance of this anger, because anger is a motivator and catalyst to change. In this poem, and more obviously in “Visible Scars,” Heuer brings up the need for deaf people to have their own civil rights movement, and recognizes that equality is harder to fight for when others do not see the oppression. He makes the anger, and its causes, visible.

Heuer also writes of the pressure to suppress this anger. For instance, his poem “Diving Bell” describes the incredible pressure for the deaf person to conform to the hearing world, to appear as though one is getting along just fine, even when one isn’t. The diving bell provides an apt metaphor for what it is like to be a deaf and surrounded by hearing people. The empty non-communicative exchanges, the being “alone among familiar faces” is frustrating. Or, as Heuer puts it, “I choke in the bell, I kick myself dead./ The fish watch, and say that I am angry.” The fish—hearing people—seem to wonder where the anger comes from, when what they should be surprised about is that the deaf person performed so well under so much pressure before cracking. But they aren’t surprised, because they don’t recognize what a feat it is.

The flip side of deaf people working to adapt is that hearing people don’t. An example of how Heuer shows this is “Koko Want,” which is layered with insight. It includes an Anthropologist who stands in for all of the professionals who study (and “help”) the deaf from their hearing paradigm. Then there is the use of Koko (the signing gorilla) to stand in for the deaf person trying to order a fast food meal. It is a common deaf experience to be looked on as an exotic species—or a trained monkey—for daring to sign in public. Koko displays well-developed communication skills—pointing, writing, and using head gestures

(yes/no); responding appropriately, and trying new strategies until successfully making the order. Then finally, at the end of the poem, the fry cook signs “Thank you,” clearly pleased with him/herself for being able to communicate with “the noble primate,” and showing no comprehension that Koko is the one who performed the communication miracle.

As Heuer finds much to say about a simple attempt to order fast food, so he finds much to say about other elements of life, both deafness related and not. He writes about relating to women, about having an alcoholic parent, philosophy, the arbitrariness of life, Zen and God. Some of these poems are angry. Some of them might make you angry. They should make you think—about deafness and about life—and help you see things.

Tonya Stremlau

Rules for Fathers and Suns

I think that if I could choose a new form
I would be a spaceship. I would work out an
agreement with the sun, my own established
orbit. All the things we could and couldn't
do would be spelled out. The sun could not

pretend to be a stranded woman in
a spacesuit and melt my inevitable
rescue craft. It could not dump beer over
my helmet. The sun would have to say I
was a good spaceship, like it was supposed

to, and all the pictures that I drew of
myself would go into frames. The sun
could not rip paintings of old barns from the
walls and shove them in my face, it couldn't
scream *why can't you draw something people want!*

because there are no barns in space, and no
farmer-fathers clinging to the asteroids,
popping open their faceplates to drink beer
and spit juice while comparing what their
children drew for them. I'd color pictures

on the floor. All the beer bottles standing
around me would become robot sentries
under my command and march off the coffee
tables. I would be a spaceship, the sun
would be the sun, and I would surrender

to that. I would let down my force fields. I
would turn off my laser rays. The sun could
burn me if I got too close, but we would

have had that understanding previously.
It would have been perfectly all right.

Visible Scars

In my dream the old black woman
said *“my but ain’t you an uppity nigger
for a white boy,”*
and threw a copy of the Americans with
Disabilities Act at my chest.

She said *“what whip were you ever under?
What land did you ever lose?”*
Then she showed me her back, tugging down
the heavy brown sweater that protected
her oppression. Her scars were black

in the way that skin visibly shudders
when ripped open, black in the way
that melanin reasserts itself in fury.
I reached for my ears but could not pull them off.
I felt in my ears but nothing was there.

I wished for scars like hers.
I wished to stand up and scream *“look!
look, look, look!”*
I wanted proof to show her, I wanted
centuries of songs to the Lord. I wished

for a hearing overseer
with a whip, I wished for rows of deaf men
in the cotton fields, singing in the sun.
I wished for the hearing man you could see,
so that I could point and shout

“look, look, look!”
She said *“don’t bring your anger here to me,
white boy,”* and pointed at the door.

I left the interview with a deaf man's guilt,
because I had no proof.