

DEAF GIRL PLAYING

This is where I once saw a deaf girl playing in a field. Because I did not know how to approach her without startling her, or how I would explain my presence, I hid. I felt so disgusting, I might as well have raped the child, a grown man on his belly in a field watching a deaf girl play. My suit was stained by the grass and I was an hour late for dinner. I was forced to discard my suit for lack of a reasonable explanation to my wife, a hundred dollar suit! We're not rich people, not at all. So there I was, left to my wool suit in the heat of summer, soaked through by noon each day. I was an embarrassment to the entire firm: it is not good for the morale of the fellow worker to flaunt one's poverty. After several weeks of crippling tension, my superior finally called me into his office. Rather than humiliate myself by telling him the truth, I told him I would wear whatever damned suit I pleased, a suit of armor if I fancied. It was the first time I had challenged his authority. And it was the last. I was dismissed. Given my pay. On the way home I thought, I'll tell her the truth, yes, why not! Tell her the simple truth, she'll love me for it. What a touching story. Well, I didn't. I don't know what happened, a loss of courage, I suppose. I told her a mistake I made had cost the company several thousand dollars, and that, not only was I dismissed, I would also somehow have to find the money to repay them the sum of my error. She wept, she beat me, she accused me of everything from malice to impotency. I helped her pack and drove her to the bus station. It was too late to explain. She would never believe me now. How cold the house was without her. How silent. Each plate I dropped was like tearing the very flesh from a living animal. When all were shattered, I knelt in a corner and tried to imagine what I would say to her, the girl in the field. What could I say? No utterance could ever reach her. Like a thief

I move through the velvet darkness, nailing my sign on
tree and fence and billboard. DEAF GIRL PLAYING. It is
having its effect. Listen. In slippers and housecoats
more and more men will leave their sleeping wives' sides:
tac tac tac: DEAF GIRL PLAYING: tac tac tac: another
DEAF GIRL PLAYING. No one speaks of anything but nails
and her amazing linen.

When this collection came out I read the poems to friends and lovers: to be honest I was glad to get through the sex—too exciting—and on to the part where I was, sitting on one end of the bed, holding up Tate's book and saying, "Wait, listen to this!" "This is where I once..." It still seems gorgeous, the broad inviting sweep of the poem's opening, a gesture toward a place defined by an encounter with the other which is a (radically transformative) experience of self. Where communication fails, the poet suggests, everything falls apart (but the problem is not the girl's difference, it's how the speaker deals with it). Rereading this poem in the 21st century means dealing with the focus on a vulnerable subject, and facing the verb, "rape": "I might as well have raped the child" is a phrase that (re)sounds differently now—or you have to be "deaf," in the way we carelessly use that word, not to think so. Could we also say that Tate anticipates a consciousness we've come to, in his mapping of the swift slide from surveillance to imagined violence? If leaving your wife for a younger woman is a tedious reenactment of patriarchal privilege, the drastic consequences, and the speaker's sense of awed shame, are unusual. (And the wife's accusations seem probably well-founded.) The poem's careening slide of attention (from "girl" to money and on to a loneliness which is "like" vivisection), is enacted in rhythms both precise and off-kilter, and the details are wonderfully resonant (oh that grass-stained suit). I read the poem as an ars poetica making a fantastic claim for poetry's ability to disrupt a particular kind of society (suburban, heterosexual). That the "Deaf Girl" is a Christ / Dionysus figure seems obvious now and was lost on me then, I think. But the green space of "play" with its special god (the "girl" who cannot hear us, who we never see, except as sign[s]) stays in my heart ("tac tac tac"), echoing.

- Laura Mullen