in shy light

the paint covers your body
charcoal on your forearms

as you throw yourself against the paper

wouldn't it be funny
to mark yourself
to a plane where a woman

owns her sexual organs?

Where you fly your own body out
as the nude

blissed and in terror

I watch my breath regulating
the air traveling in even waves

a daily swap with yoga
in a chair in the yard

who can say

in which direction we will turn.

~Melissa J. Buckheit

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Deaf, Dumb, Dance

Winner of the 1999-2000 Dafna Zamarripa-Gesundheit Memorial Fiction Prize

With too little oxygen in his blood (he has given so much away, blowing up these bright balloons one after another in selfless succession), Alan is standing at the foot of a noisy aluminum ladder in nearly the center of the gymnasium-cum-discotheque. He is enjoying what feels like close to a high, his head light as ascending passengers in an elevator.

Laurel is watching him, he realizes after a moment of immobility (he was floating in a kind of amniotic fluid flashback, weightless and content, his peripheral vision gone). She is waiting patiently for his descent into the now, waiting for him to hand her the umpteenth swollen balloon so that she, in turn, can tape it to the ceiling. This has been their wordless interplay, their assembly line give and take, for what seems like hours. Alan swallows most of any possible conversation: she will not get his jokes. She is efficient and prepared. She is the swift, odorless three-dimension of sign-language.

"I think we have too many blue and not enough red," says Alan, turning in a slow circle, slack-jawed. This will impress her, he hopes. This is how she thinks: in proportions, percentages, striving for even numbers and fairness in all things. The room is a circus of color, the perfect primary surfaces of balloons bobbing and swaying like so many heads in a crowd, ever so slightly alive. Laurel is climbing carefully down from her perch atop the ladder. She is not inclined at this point to offer even so much as one of her rare hmmmmms — so Alan, hating the quiet like a bare spot of gymnasium wall, continues, pointlessly: "It doesn't seem as though we've been working for so long. But look at it! We've done it!"

"We've done it," Laurel repeats, deadpan, setting her mouth attractively. She levels him with her monotone, both her feet on the ground.

Alan, giggling for reasons he does not understand, stares at Laurel with a huge grin and passes out.

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Alan comes to, like a lab specimen, distinctly cramped and cold
on a cot in the school nurse's office. The nurse sees that Alan is back and welcomes him, smiling and sympathetic, to the land of the living. She is a diminutive woman with gigantic fuchsia fingernails that Alan imagines must be useful in her day-to-day encounters with the students at Adleborough. At a high school for the deaf, one can never overestimate the value of eye-catching hand-adornments.

Laurel is sitting on a wide orange chair by the wall, bored, sucking on the end of her little finger. Alan finds this acutely arousing. He stares blankly at both of them, Laurel and the nurse, who is new and whose name he has forgotten. The clock on the wall behind them says four-thirty. Alan bolts upright on the cot (as if from a vision, a nightmare, an unfortunate sexual encounter), calculating in a panic the work they have yet to do in transforming the gym into the throbbing nightclub expected by the senior class when they arrive, decked out and silent, at seven thirty.

Laurel and the neon-clawed nurse peer at him with superior curiosity, like spectators at the zoo. Alan has not yet regained the knowledge to move his legs, so he looks back up at them both and smiles weakly.

"Too many balloons," he says, by way of explanation. Laurel rolls her eyes and then breaks the gentle silence in the room with a noisy sigh.

"Right," she says, "Well, if you're going to be okay than I'll just go back to the gym and finish up there." And without waiting for Alan's response she does a step-pivot and swish-swish-swishes out of the swinging door marked Nurse.

The nurse is not quite sure what the protocol is for ill faculty members. Certainly she shouldn't call his mother; he probably doesn't have any chart to speak of. Can she give him something in a cup and send him on his way? Are there legal ramifications for that? Or for doing nothing if it should (heaven forbid) turn out to be something more serious? She is new. What she does do is smile boldly at him as he gets up, offering an embarrassed "thank you" before making his way out of the room through the door, which hasn't stopped swinging yet from Laurel's forceful shove.

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Alan had arrived at Adleborough fresh from grad school, a petrified cliché with high ideals and a new leather satchel (a gift to himself, a gleeful extension of his middle finger at the debt amassed by his myriad student loans). Both the ideals and, predictably, the satchel, had since seen better days.

It was all about verbal language acquisition versus sign language immersion these days, he would say at cocktail parties, gesturing grandly with his wine glass so that some sloshed over the edges and made him forget what he was talking about. The unity of the struggle is gone from the early days, he might continue, vaguely, depending on how much wine was left in his cup.

There had been a 'welcome' luncheon the summer before Alan's first year. He had worn a rectangular sticker on his breast, HELLO, MY NAME IS and then "alan" written tightly and too small in green marker that bled.

"ALAN," he had had to keep saying, louder than necessary, to various people squinting at this chest. Laurel was wearing jeans amidst the summer dresses and linen pantsuits. She walked with a slight limp.

"How's it going?" he had said to her, in a miraculous single syllable, all cocky assurance and good humor. She leaned toward him and examined his name tag.

"Hi..." she said, sarcasm skirting her voice like a dancer," ... Dan."

Alan felt something hot wash over him, a baptism by fire. He shuffled his feet and wished his name were Dan. "Uh, it's, um... Alan," he told her. Then he repeated it, afraid she hadn't heard him. "Alan."

Laurel smiled, lips together. And with a noncommittal nod, she turned, not aware of him watching her, entirely unchanged by their having met. Her steps as Alan watched her walk lopsidedly over to the buffet table beat out time like a metronome, marking off the time between when he hadn't known her at all and, he knew, the rest of his life.

Alan found himself struck dumb at the sight of her, eyes narrow and hard as marbles. She wore orthopedic shoes. There was a rumor about a bad car accident and another about a bout with polio. Alan preferred to imagine her having been born with two contrary limbs, one shorter than the other, fundamentally imperfect and thusly perfectly perfect. Like two distinct people betrothed and forced into lifelong...
marriage. (This train of thought derailed him, leading always to a vision of Laurel's legs singing “Do You Love Me?” from Fiddler on the Roof)

“How are you?” he sometimes asked her, in the hall, in passing, hopping out into the middle of a frozen lake in the nude.

She had overcome completely the habit of moving her lips when she signed. It was as if she herself were a mask, a wooden doll, a tribal carving to hide the life and speech within. Everything but her hands was expendable. It slightly unnerved her students that she rarely looked them in the eye while speaking to them. Alan found her confus­ing, focused, and entirely impervious to the world outside of her field of vision.

She was exceptional with the kids. Patient, creative, firm but encouraging. A wellspring of soundless kindness. For their final art projects, she had had her seniors do paintings of hands forming their favorite words in sign. Alan had thought this brilliant. They hung on the walls of the administration building for weeks, where he would stare at them, his own hands hanging loosely, useless, at his sides. There was “Flying,” “Peace,” “Home,” “Friendship,” “Love.” There was a multi-paneled “Castration,” done with mischievous glee by Laura Berman and dedicated in tiny pink letters to her ex-boyfriend.

At faculty meetings throughout the fall, Laurel pushed hard for the inauguration of an annual Senior Ball. It was a travesty, she said, that the senior class would be allowed to graduate without all of the accoutrements of high school. She said this, with a furrowed brow, her voice strange and as low as a hum. They deserved all the trimmings, all the stupid but universal rites of passage that go along with being seventeen, being miserable, being alienated: hearing or no, she said. Alan, naturally, had rushed to join her in her battle against the staid administration. They wrote budgets, they dreamed of themes and doodled decorations. They brought it up (as a team, which thrilled Alan beyond all reason) repeatedly at meetings. Always with fresh enthusiasm, undaunted by the deaf ear of the administration.

They were trying to run a school based on liberal, experimental values, the headmaster would explain again and again, but it was by no means to be confused with a normal school. Their students had enough to deal with, why intentionally add into the mix any institutionalized pressures of adolescence? The fear, the anxiety, the fixed gender roles; faculty members with dimming but loaded flashes of their own teenage trauma shook their heads like synchronized swimmers. It's too much, they censured, as if something so tangible as deafness could disqualify someone from easier, everyday miseries. As if there were a quota of hurdles and sadness and disappointments in life.

Laurel sat silent, her body tense as a tuning fork, set off and shaking authoritatively.

Then, in February, there was an article in a journal (the kind Adleborough faculty could never make it into) about Music Therapy for the deaf. Suddenly everyone remembered that scene in Helen Keller’s journals in which she can feel music through the floor. And then, of course, it was a Brilliant Idea: of course there would be a dance - they would rent as many large speakers as would fit and play the music so loud that the ground would move and the walls would pulsate and the room would become an exercise in rhythm and the physical properties of sound. Curiosity then overwhelmed their sense of civic duty in shielding the students from rejection and insecurities: there would be a senior dance.
Looking around the gym at the crepe paper and the balloons makes Alan's knees weak again, so he sits on the bleachers with his head in his hands as kids begin to arrive, all nervous smiles and palpable disappointment that the gym is, in fact, still the gym. Laurel stands by the door with a corsage pinned to her dark dress, welcoming everyone with a sweep of her arms, saying come in, come in, complimenting the girls on their clothing, the boys on their good looks.

Speakers dot the room like cars in a showroom, heavy and out of place, their tangibility distracting and consuming at once. The kids circle them, slowly, wanderers around the golden calf, scared to get too close or touch, unable to move away. There is a DJ at one end of the gym, a bored middle aged guy in a bowler hat.

"Hey kids, are we ready to have some fun?" he bellows into his mic, apropos of nothing, sending waves of sound through the myriad speakers, making everybody jump. Laurel catches his eye and raises one eyebrow contemptuously. He is used to Bar Mitzvahs and weddings and Proms, never a deaf dance.

The three of them, Alan and Laurel and the DJ, are wearing clear plastic ear plugs. It sounds like being underwater. In grad school Alan had done exercises with his hearing temporarily taken away (a trip on a bus across town, movies with only subtitles) and then written papers about them. *The sensual world is heightened in volume...* he wrote self-consciously, thinking himself profound and sensitive. Afly ability to see and feel and smell reached new levels of intensity.

There is a cackle and a moment of stillness and then the music starts. The room twitches and Alan can make out in the din the tune of a top ten song, hideously overplayed on the radio. The kids freeze and stand, each solitary and isolated, rooted firmly to the ground, not exactly sure what to do with themselves. Laurel is by the door, looking around at everyone hopefully. Maybe half a minute passes like this; everyone looking around, some starting to giggle, the DJ jumping up and down and flailing his arms like an angry monkey.

Despite the extremity of the noise, the overwhelming pulse of the room, all seems frozen. Alan, absurdly, is reminded of "The Poseidon Adventure." In a flash he sees the overturned ballroom, the screaming passengers, the steely resolve of Gene Hackman, the wide-eyed courage of Shelley Winters (my god had she gained weight!). Disaster. He lets this strange association wash over him for a while, everything around him unmoving. Until, like a marionette in mutiny, he gets up from the bleachers, and walks into the middle of the gym, the ballroom, whatever. His head hurts and he feels like his heart has stopped and been replaced by the pumping of the music, propelling his blood through his veins in uneven time. Boom boom, boom boom boom.

He begins to dance. His eyes are closed and he moves to just the roar that comes ferociously from the speakers, there is nothing else. He does it in homage to Laurel, her own body sad in her dress by the door. It is the only way he can express how he feels, not that she can understand. He is speaking a language she does not know. He sees her look of astonishment, sees her yelling (he assumes she is yelling, although he can't hear any sound from her, can only see her mouth moving in exaggerated circles) what are you doing?

Everyone watches, disbelieving, as he jumps, swirls his hips, slams his limbs against invisible walls, motions grandly at Laurel to come join him. And she does, surprisingly, making her way slow as foreplay onto the dance floor where she begins to move hesitantly next to him. She dances embarrassingly (all ass) and a few kids laugh at the spectacle of it: Ms. Redmond and Mr. Weber, their eyes closed and brows furrowed in odd ecstasy, dancing in spasms to a primitive beat that is everything and nothing. But soon others suddenly let loose their bodies, casting off whatever tether kept them moored and still. They dance like they've been doing it forever, like its been done all the time. And then it's all of them, forgetting that they look stupid, full of music they cannot hear.

(The DJ, slack-jawed and motionless, thinks: what a story this'll make.)

And the music is a winged ship, translated in decibels and sine waves into an enveloping thump thump thump that lifts them, Alan and Laurel and two-hundred and fifty deaf teenagers, into the air beyond the anchor of their senses, beyond sound.

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Elisa Albert