

Kate Lebo

The Loudproof Room

AN EARMOIR

I WAS BORN WITH A STRAWBERRY HEMANGIOMA SPLASHED OVER THE BOTTOM half of my right ear and two inches down my neck. The sort of red that has purple trapped inside it. A swollen, shocking hue. For the first year, I had no hair to disguise it. The sight of me made strangers uncomfortable.

My birthmark was so red and angry and I cried so murderously when my parents bathed it that it became, as I grew, the explanation for a lot of things. Why I was teased in school, why I cried easily. Why I couldn't hear conversational tones out of my right ear.

By the time I was ten the skin faded to a mottle of mostly normal looking tissue. It looks enough like a burn scar that no one asks what happened. Mostly I forget it's there. When a new friend asks me "what's up with your ear?" I need a second to remember what she's talking about. My father and I were in a motorcycle accident when I was five, I say. It tore my ear half off. When she looks sorry for asking, I tell her I was born this way. Which isn't exactly the truth. If it was, I'd still have a stoplight for an ear.

Until my family began to comment on how deaf I was—when my back was to them I didn't respond to direct questions, didn't know they were being asked—I didn't know my hearing was going. I'd gotten so used to having a half-deaf ear that it didn't occur to me the aural slips I'd been experiencing might be the fault of the other ear, the good one going bad. I booked an appointment in the otolaryngology department at city's biggest hospital. The nurse who took my vitals said "you're the youngest person I've talked to all day" in a way that was supposed to make me feel better but didn't.

Dehiscence is a word botanists use to describe a flower bud that's about to burst into bloom.

Otolaryngologists use *dehiscence* to describe two spots in my skull, one over each superior canal of my hearing organs, that have thinned to two tiny gaps. The gaps leak sound waves into my body and allow body noises to echo too loudly in my ears. To diagnose me, the doctor asked if I could hear myself blink. Yes, I said. Can you hear your heels when you walk? Yes. He rapped a tuning fork on my ankle. Can you hear that? No. That's a good thing, he said.

My pulse, my flexing knees, my neck bones as I turn my head on the pillow, my teeth as they crunch into chips, all these sounds are louder than the conversation of the person sitting next to me. Now I understood why I could sing on key but never hold a tune: when I make a melody with my body, it mutes the music that's outside my skull.

The doctor said my superior canal dehiscence could be cured with minor surgery that involved a night in the ICU. That doesn't sound like minor surgery, I said. Nothing to worry about, he said. When would you like to schedule your pre-op? I wouldn't, I said.

The next doctor I visited was the teacher of the first doctor. He was cautious, patient, uneager to cut me open. I liked him immediately. He said my condition represented "multiple pathologies"—a stiff stapes bone, a collapsed eardrum, dehiscence, possibly something else. My symptoms muddle the identity of each individual malady. What mattered, what wasn't a mystery: I had significant hearing loss in both ears. We decided to try hearing aids first. If they worked, I would wear them the rest of my life.

I preferred this decision. It is reversible. You see, half sensibility has benefits. Not knowing what I'm missing can be a different kind of knowing.

OPEN THE WINDOW

My friend, I'll call him Carl, was born with one ear. Once, while sleeping with his hearing side buried in the pillow, he slept through the burglary of his home. Just woke up the next day to find his guitar, stereo, and TV missing from the living room.

Hearing aids augment hearing organs, they don't replace them, so they can't help Carl's condition. When we talk about this, we have to face each other and position ourselves a bit to the right so we can speak into each other's left ears.

I have another friend whose son is functionally deaf. When he doesn't wear hearing aids he retreats into his own world, she says. Though he's fluent with sign language—communication isn't the issue—he's distant, hard to reach in a way that he isn't when the world can get at him through an amplifier.

In my semi-sentient state I'm a champion sleeper, a binge reader. The world is easy to tune out when its volume is low to begin with. What I miss in overheard bons mots I make up for in dreams, I tell myself. I'm sincere, but I'm lying. It's a pain in the ass to ask *what?* all the time. Often I only pretend to know what people are saying. This feels easier than repetition.

Nearly as often, a few beats after nodding my assent, I figure out what the hell it is I've just agreed to.

When I used a hearing aid for the first time, I finally understood what my friend meant: it's like someone has taken the wrapping off the world, and I'm in it, closer and more profoundly immersed than I thought possible. What I hear is so mundane: footsteps, conversations at reception, an intercom, air conditioning. It feels like I've dipped my head in a public pool—I'm in this water, making these noises, soft within a busyness. This is beyond healing.

My audiologist says that when people go too long without hearing a certain frequency, the ear can forget how to hear it, that mechanical augmentation can't navigate that "dead zone." She uses the word "forget," implying that cochlea have memories, that those memories are refreshed by the nerve signals a sound-wave sets off in the hair cells. I imagine there's a more specific, scientific word to

describe what's actually happening, but after panicking over the other doctor's medical jargon, I think the precise word will obscure the diagnosis. When my new otolaryngologist says everyone's ear has three windows and that at least one of those windows must be closed to maintain balance and prevent vertigo, he turns my eardrum into a breezy little house. I'm grateful to him for speaking my language.

THE SKIN OF THE LINE

Difficulty creates sensitivity. If a hearing test asks me to listen and repeat words, I will score higher than a person with normal hearing.

In conversation, this sensitivity is an inept but beautiful translator. "Messing with my students" becomes "wisteria in tents." A "reef of dead metaphors" becomes a raft of them. "*The Skin of a Lion*" (an Ondaatje novel) is "the skin of the line" and "a silk lawn." I hear them almost simultaneously, the fantastic phrase bursting through the door just ahead of the intended one. These interpretations don't decode the meaning of the intended phrase, but they do create new phrases whose strangeness invites me to interpret them figuratively. When the misheard accompanies the heard, a conversation about classroom manners can shelter an encampment of flowering vines.

Through poetry writing, I attuned my eye and ear to these mishearings and came to love how the actual phrase, which is often prosaic but easy to interpret, echoes under the figurative magic of the misheard phrase. In other words, the poet gives us a surprising turn of phrase whose resemblance to cliché helps us interpret it. I might write "I pay my hills" instead of "I pay my bills" because the word "bills" is expected. With "pay my hills," I have the figurative riches of what paying a hill might mean while the reader and I hear "pay my bills" underneath. If the phrase were to go the other way around, I would hear "bills" but never think of "hills." In a way, it's the best of both worlds—surprising language that echoes on multiple levels and is coupled to an interpretive strategy. The sense within nonsense that keeps a line lively.

A PRIVATE VOLUME

Hearing aids are just amplifiers. After a year of wearing one, I think of mine as a jealous speaker. It doesn't like talking to other speakers. It needs distance from sound makers to maintain a clear, intelligible tone.

In the car with my music turned up, the hearing aid crackles, a delicate plastic-y sound that wraps the beat in subtle static. On long drives I store my hearing aid in the center console and *always* forget it there. Panic when I touch my empty right ear. The aid is dime-sized. It costs more than my car.

If I whistle, a high note triggers feedback. A harmony that pierces my sinuses and jaw, trills down my spine. My voice was already the loudest thing in my head. Now I'm a chorus only I can hear.

When a man cups my face with his hand and kisses me, the gentle pressure of his fingers against my ear sets the speaker off. His face is so close I'm sure he

hears the screeching, but he's oblivious. While he lunges for the light-switch I rip the hearing aid out, hide it in my purse.

Because everything within my body is louder than it should be, a symptom hearing aids can't mute, eating provides a kind of privacy. A bag of chips, a bowl of cereal, a crisp apple—I enter them like private rooms. Loudproof. The easiest pleasure comes from surrendering to the noise and giving up on any other experience I might have had while eating. This makes it difficult to eat during dinner parties, difficult to speak during family supper. If my plate is clean, I haven't been listening.

Hearing aids make this symptom worse, delivering deafness via meaningless crunching. They do this constantly, with smaller noises, in less irritating but more insidious ways. What sounded like clarity when I first tried them is, I know now, just the volume turned up. On everything. This lack of focus is disturbing. What I'm missing now isn't conversation. It's the impossible quality of natural sound and the ear's ability to create foreground and background, to cut static. To tune into my beloved's voice as he speaks from across the divide of a table, the dinner in front of me cooling with every word.

THE LOUDPROOF ROOM

I am tired of leaning closer, of watching faces for meaning. Though it sparks an easy intimacy with conversation partners. Though it is, by now, integral to the way I interpret and how I am perceived.

I want to hear.

If surgery goes well, a stapedotomy will restore 90 percent of normal hearing range without cutting me open. The deeper cut, the one I'm avoiding, would have addressed the dehiscence. I'll preserve those holes and keep my internal chorus.

My desire to hear has been rivaled, for years, by a fear of losing my sensibility. It is a part of myself that only I understand. My secret. Plus a deeper, colder fear: of going deaf altogether. A slipped knife, a wrong cut.

Disability can create sensibility. My disability is invisible, my limitations are aesthetic. They make art and they make mistakes, reminding me constantly that the way I sense and experience the world is different. At a slight angle, as Forster said of Cavafy. Which is a reminder that difference isn't unique to me. That's why listening creates a conversation. That's how reading creates a poem. It's terrifying to lose your senses. Then, sometimes, it's a pleasure.