

## LANGUAGE IN PERFORMANCE

### Poetry

Once people become aware of their language as a literary form, they give new attention to how to say things. While there is a long tradition of poetry performed in Sign, early poems were often translations or adaptations of works in English. Then in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the recognition by linguists of ASL as a rich language distinct from English, ASL poetry flourished.

Poetry stretches the limits of a language—the rules of the language must be understood before they can be violated or exploited for poetic purposes. This creative renaissance that coincided with the linguistic awareness of ASL has allowed Deaf poets to explore the creative possibilities unique to a visual-spatial language. As Sam Supalla says in his introduction, ASL poetry is a vibrant blend of imagery, rhythm, feelings and insight.

#### **“To a Hearing Mother” by Ella Mae Lentz**

Sam introduces Ella’s poem by explaining the deep-felt concern Deaf people have about the well-being of Deaf children. Approximately 90% of Deaf children have hearing parents. These parents have the responsibility of deciding what is best for their children, but they usually lack the experience to make such decisions. They may not have access to the Deaf community for guidance and insight, and instead are given advice by hearing professionals, who also lack first-hand experience of what it means to be Deaf.

The tension between the hearing mother and the Deaf community is artistically developed to a poignant resolution. Ella evokes the tension by using space not only to represent the hearing mother and the Deaf people, but also to draw attention to the differences between them in experience, values, and world view. She reasons that both have a role to play in the child’s life, for without Deaf people the child would wither and be left with no soul, no sense of self. But without the hearing mothers there would be no more children, and the great people and language would dwindle. Ella likens the Deaf child to a tree, then argues that if the hearing mother and the Deaf people don’t work together to create a loving, nurturing environment, their struggle over the child is like a saw that will bring down the tree.

The poem is both beautifully constructed and morally persuasive. How does its message influence your thinking about the survival of Deaf culture?