

Evidence of V: A Novel in Fragments, Facts, and Fictions

Sheila O'Connor

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A lost and audacious girl's life story is reconstructed by the yearning child and grandchild she left behind in Sheila O'Connor's poetic and precise semi-biographical novel, *Evidence of V*.

In 1935, a fifteen-year-old girl with big dreams was discovered while busking on a Minneapolis street. Drenched in sequins and draped with promises and praise, she was pushed onto a nightclub stage, where the men of the city ogled her, "all hungry" for her now.

But the men who whistled at V as she danced, rather than foreshadowing her stardom, became party to her undoing. For the non-crime of becoming pregnant by a man twenty years her senior, she was committed to a home for wayward girls and given six years to become domesticated. Her daughter was taken from her and her future circumscribed; V came to worship "at the altar of lost things, her grief a second skin." And seventy years later, the cavity left by her absence in her family's life continued to ache.

This is O'Connor's biological grandmother's maybe story, "collaged from pieces that I paste into a girl." O'Connor works with limited available information to tell V's tale, the truth of which is mostly unknown. V is cobbled together via research and inferences, drawn out from blank spots in official files, approached through family habits and misgivings, and filled in by real accounts of institutional abuse—of girls subjected to ice baths, beatings, and shaved heads, exploited for labor and prompted, very often, to run.

The text distinguishes between the so-called social values of the 1930s, which rendered abused girls problematic and gave their male abusers a pass, and the inarguable and inexorable value of the girls themselves. It witnesses the ways that the girls were systematically broken down by adults who presumed to know better: "The state commits V as IMMORAL: an offense against society. An offense reserved for girls." V is raped, first by her stepfather and then by the doctor to whom she is paroled as a domestic servant; the novel asks why V is punished, when her thirty-five-year-old lover is not. It's a rhetorical gambit: page by wrenching page, the misogyny behind girls' institutionalization is reinforced. For V's "crimes"—vivacity and desire central among them—generations are made to suffer.

Based in truth, Sheila O'Connor's brilliant novel *Evidence of V* follows a granddaughter's ferocious search for her grandmother's precious, erstwhile girlhood.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (June 17, 2020)

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