

Nicole Cooley

THE CATHERINE WHEEL

I. *Durnbach, The Graveyard*

When I walk over the graves, I find the other women
with my name and your three sisters,
Agnes, Agatha, Lucy, the girls named after saints.

I have come back to the country you left
to find the three sisters running over the field
in white dresses, veiled for first Communion,

prepared to be the brides of Christ. One by one
they will receive his body. Once blessed,
the priest says, the girls will be safe forever.

Later, the transport train will drag along the horizon.
Which sister draws her finger to her throat, a warning?
Which pretends not to see human hair blown

into the field? The three sisters were safe because they lied.
They claimed they witnessed nothing.

II. *Airline Highway, New Orleans*

When I walk the highway, men call out to me from their cars
under the moon's green light, the dazzle of neon,

the sign where a woman floats in a silver glass—
—*Beautiful Girls, Live Show*—past the Paradise

Motel where in each secret, interior room a woman will lie down
and give her body to a man she won't remember.

I am thirteen and you are three years dead.
But you were with me when I packed the overnight bag,

you filled my pockets with gifts: black beauties,
tabs of acid, your wedding ring on a chain around my neck.

You lined my lips with *Forever Red*, warned me never
to become anyone's bride, ever. You sent me on this journey.

The men call and call. Under a streetlight, I will scratch
your name in the skin of my wrist, in the alphabet your sisters

would not understand. I walk all night before my mother finds me.

III. *A Girl's Guide to the Saints*

You and I know this: the only way out is the wheel.

Agatha cuts off her breasts. Lucy offers her eyes on a plate.
The good sisters in their white dresses offer themselves as a
sacrifice.

Only Catherine is the bad girl who will strap herself
to the wheel studded with knives, the bride
of another kind of Christ. Dressed in a black robe,
his eyes narrow at the sight of her body.

One touch of her body and the wheel turns to dust.
One touch of her body and the men turn to dust,
and the tanks that roll silently through the city stop in their tracks.

The saints are beautiful girls but Catherine will live
with the knowledge of the terrors
the good sisters refuse to see, the silver knife
in her back, the men prepared to watch her death.

The three of us will be the witness.