

Judges' Commentary on "Ladylike"

by Alexis Nasonti

First Place Award in the 2013-24 Composition Program Writing Contest

Alexis Nasonti's first place essay, "Ladylike," resists easy summary. On the surface, the essay is about gender norms and the expectations set up by our individual and social contexts—you can see that in the title. But there's much more to the piece than just gender. The adaptive practices of birds; the life of Heinrich Himmler; the author's own experiences of gender; cultural uses of masks; and Michel Foucault's ideas of the panopticon and surveillance. Modeled after Susan Griffin's braided essay "Our Secret," which juxtaposes fragments about WWII and the Griffin's own personal history, Nasonti's piece collects both original and quoted passages to explore the ways lives and behaviors are molded by personal relationships and larger social pressures.

One key feature of Nasonti's work is that she assembles fragments that speak to their neighbors on the page in surprising ways. This, if you know "Our Secret," is a very Griffin-like move. More interesting, though, are the connections offered across pages. At one moment, in discussing Foucault's work on the close observation of prisoners through a centralized "panoptic machine," Nasonti writes: "prisoners internalize the rules enforced in the panoptic machine to the extent that it becomes unnecessary for an actual observer to be present." Several pages and many threads pass before we encounter this internalization in action, within Nasonti's own reaction to being monitored within the confines of a school.

Take the following as another example of distanced connected. In italicized text, we read, "White-crowned Sparrows will adopt the call of the Song Sparrow if forced to live with them rather than their own kind." Two pages later, Nasonti writes of being scolded for burping aloud at the family dinner table, after explaining that there was "no serious penalty for such an offense" when her brother belched. Without twisting a reader's arm, Nasonti hints that even when we expect our adaptations and mimicries to be met well, we may be told that our behaviors fall outside the prescriptions of a larger, orchestrating system.

Looking at the author's own life as an example both embedded in and in tense relationship with historical instances of control; using the lens of Foucault to examine Himmler, Griffin to examine Foucault; while still holding true to Griffin's stylistic guidance, Alexis Nasonti's "Ladylike" was clearly a form of mimicry that this year's judges had no intentions of suppressing.