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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words "the powers they apply to them in retrospect." If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

GIRLS INTERRUPTED

Two new memoirs by poets Lavinia Greenlaw and Sarah Manguso.

by Carla Blumenkranz

The Importance of Music to Girls, by Lavinia Greenlaw. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $23.00

The Two Kinds of Decay, by Sarah Manguso. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $22.00

Few writers are memoirists by profession, and it's hard to imagine what the qualifications might be. A compelling and even awful life history helps (Mary Karr), but it's not really necessary or a guarantee. Exceptional success in some other field (Barack Obama) also creates basic narrative interest, but a talent for politics, for example, doesn't always translate into a talent for meaningful reflection.

What does seem to distinguish many great memoirists, though, is an almost supernatural intuition with language: the ability to take recollections that have personal resonance and make them echo for readers in written sentences (Joan Didion, Jamaica Kincaid, and Elie Wiesel). In comparison with this gift, experience seems almost beside the point.

It's no surprise, then, that poets so often write memoirs, and that they take to the prose form so naturally. Karr is the blockbuster example of a contemporary poet-memoirist, but other young poets who have written in the form in recent years include Nick Flynn and Paisley Rekdal. Most recently, both Sarah Manguso and Lavinia Greenlaw have written memoirs that press on the boundary between poetry and prose and affectingly describe, in intentional fits and starts, the poets' tumultuous girlhoods.

Sarah Manguso was 20 when she was diagnosed with chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy (CIDP), an obscure neurological disorder. Manguso describes what happened to her in about 80 discrete sections, each focused on one character or moment and none longer than two or three pages. The paragraphs, or perhaps stanzas, tend to be short and are separated by one-line breaks that function like intakes of breath. Manguso's writing is similar to poet Paisley Rekdal's in that, as one reviewer wrote of Rekdal's memoir *The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee*, the writing is poetic "not in its dictions but in its elisions." Like Rekdal, Manguso tends to let the most significant moments in the text fall in the line breaks between thoughts.

At the same time, in what she chooses to describe, Manguso is strenuously precise. Most often, this is the facts of her illness and treatment, and how both physically felt. For example, when Manguso explains that she had a central line implanted into her chest, she writes that she would like the reader to know exactly how the cold blood infusions felt. She would like to invent a metaphor, she writes, but instead it seems most accurate to say that "it felt like liquid, thirty degrees colder than my body, being infused slowly but directly into my heart, for four hours."

Memoirs of sickness are common; what is remarkable about Manguso's is that it conveys more subtle developments. The years she describes as nothing were, as she slowly explains, not entirely empty. They were also the moment when an incessantly driven young adult had to pause, and so look around her, and start becoming a writer.

Lavinia Greenlaw was lucky enough not to suffer physical crises so early in life. Instead, her adolescence in Essex, England, in the late 1970s was characterized by intense but more benign influences. Her most formative experiences involved pop music, and she writes her memoir by describing her first encounters with it. Like Manguso's memoir, Greenlaw's *The Importance of Music to Girls* is written in short sections that often verge on poetry.

Greenlaw takes 56 of these sections to describe how she went from being a small girl who danced on top of her father's feet to the type of young mother who has an ex-boyfriend and a Public Image record with her on the day she takes her daughter home from the hospital. Greenlaw often casually plays with chronology, but at the same time she remains intensely aware of the contradictory and painful aspects of her adolescence. Greenlaw recalls being at a school dance where she "shrank and veered, and felt in any given situation that I was wrong—standing in the wrong place and making the wrong shapes, the wrong noise." The song for this is David Bowie's "Laughing Gnome," and it echoes how Greenlaw adapted to her new surroundings. "I looked around, took note, and changed. I was a small person in a small place. I developed a small voice and a small laugh ha ha ha, hee hee hee." Here and elsewhere, Greenlaw uses music not only to situate her young adulthood but also to convey exactly how it felt.

Greenlaw studied the charts, got a transistor radio, and acquired her first tastes from listening to John Peel. The sounds she heard acted upon her as though she were "a cloud struck by lightning," and these were not only music but also the church bells in the village, the singsong and interruptions of dinner conversations, siblings' arguments, and the murmur of her parents' medical language. It seems natural that Greenlaw's imagination also led her to poetry. The ping of the typewriter was everywhere, she writes, "the ratcheting revision of the carriage return."

In almost any memoir by a writer, there is a way that, by the end of the story, the author seems to have found his or her calling. The process of becoming a writer isn't treated directly in Greenlaw or Manguso's memoir, but it is constantly present in the example they set with their language and in their shared emphasis on growing powers of attention. Their young lives have so little in common except, it turns out, the powers they apply to them in retrospect.

Carla Blumenkranz has written for *Bookforum, n+1,* and *The Village Voice*. This article first appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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