contrast, constitutes a secondary act of sacrifice intended primarily to ward off mutual reproach and guilt, and accordingly Trip’s “apotheosis” remains subtle and incomplete. Nevertheless, the narrator not only calls him a seducer “greater than Casanova” (72), but also notes that he and his father look like “Krishnas” (74). Trip is, in short, a sex-god, to whom all women from the suburban community supposedly turn “like a thousand daisies attuning their faces toward the path of the sun” (69), and whose stature in the narrator’s account may not truly reach, but at least approaches the realm of the mythical.

Ritual, Rejection, and the Culture of Mourning

To say that the Lisbon sisters’ suicides on one level constitute the solution to a communal problem is, importantly, not to deny its painful and traumatic nature for the boys. Indeed, if one function of their commemorative rituals is continually to retell their mythical story in order to disguise the troubling nature of sacrificial violence, then on another level these rituals are simply an attempt to cope with trauma. Moshe Halbertal’s comments on religious rituals prove illuminating in this context, for according to Halbertal rituals serve to de-individuate the participants, who would otherwise have to face the overwhelming divine presence entirely on their own (15–16). Moreover, as a time-tested protocol for proper behavior, rituals provide supplicants with a sense of stability and security even in the presence of the sacred, and accordingly Halbertal describes them as procedures that allow believers to overcome the “anxiety of rejection” (18). Rituals, that is to say, symbolically express that one is not merely a forlorn individual, but instead part of a community whose members all suffer from the same fear: divine rejection and punishment.

Halbertal’s comments are pertinent to The Virgin Suicides because, for the boys, the Lisbon sisters’ suicides constitute an ultimate act of rejection by their semi-divine objects of desire. In the novel’s final sentence, the narrator movingly expresses the boys’ lasting sense of violation and bereavement:

It didn’t matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn’t heard us calling, still do not hear us, up here in the tree house, with our thinning hair and soft bellies, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together. (249)

The boys’ love for the Lisbon sisters may have been idealizing and voyeuristic, but nevertheless they did try to stay in touch with the Lisbons even after their parents had imprisoned them in their own home. For example, the boys eventually call the girls, barely saying a word but instead playing songs into the
phone that “most thoroughly communicated our feelings” (195). When the sisters respond by playing songs like “Alone Again, Naturally” or “Candle in the Wind,” the boys respond with “You’ve Got a Friend” or “Wild Horses” (196), trying to offer some kind of consolation. When the girls secretly invite the boys over to their home, pretending that they want to elope with them, the boys feel genuinely elated, not knowing that the girls will commit suicide while the boys are waiting for them, dreaming of their future together (212–213). It is therefore understandable that the boys take the suicides as a gesture that is directed against them personally, and they instinctively resort to the time-tested power of ritual to try and deal with the annihilating power of this ultimate gesture of rejection.24

If the precise shape of the boys’ ritualistic acts of commemoration nevertheless appears pathological – one of their “most prized possessions” is the “titillating” report of one of Lux’s gynecological exams (155) – then this may be quite simply because they have never been taught how to mourn. At school, for instance, during his speech at Convocation, the headmaster refers to Cecilia’s suicide only obliquely, acknowledging that “it has been a long, hard summer for some of us here today,” but also suggesting that “today begins a new year of hopes and goals” (104). Moreover, while the headmaster’s wife in time manages to convince most teachers that the school ought to schedule a “Day of Grieving,” her main argument for the project is that grief may be “natural,” but “[o]vercoming it is a matter of choice” (ibid.). In the end, the “Day of Grieving” proves a total failure, at least according to the narrator’s account:

Most people remember the Day of Grieving as an obscure holiday. The first three hours of school were canceled and we remained in our home rooms. Teachers passed out mimeographs related to the day’s theme, which was never officially announced, as Mrs. Woodhouse felt it inappropriate to single out the girls’ tragedy. The result was that the tragedy was diffused and universalized. As Kevin Tiggs put it, “It seemed like we were supposed to feel sorry for everything that ever happened, ever.” (104)

Not only is the day’s theme “never officially announced”; it is also an event that fails to include either the Lisbon sisters (who “kept asking to be excused to go to the bathroom”; 105) or their father (a teacher at the school who only learned about the Day of Grieving when it was already “well under way”; 106). As a result, “all the healing was done by those of us without wounds” (105), and it therefore comes as no surprise that the success of the event remained a matter

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24 See Bilyana Vanyova Kostova, who rightly notes that it is virtually impossible to decide unequivocally whether the boys should be seen as “bystanders, perpetrators or victims” (49).

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