Photographs

Benjamin Steinberg

Girlhood. new haven, 2016.
Benjamin Steinberg

Will. new haven, 2016.
Benjamin Steinberg

Ron. new haven, 2016.
Benjamin Steinberg

Grain 1
Lingyuan Wang

Grain 2
Lingyuan Wang

Grain 3
Lingyuan Wang

Grain 5
Lingyuan Wang

Love's Not an Obstacle
Hazal Özgür

Night Owl
Hazal Özgür

Art
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(The text of this issue parsed as raw CMYK values)
Isaac Morrier
The Parts That Made It
Caroline Kanner

Every morning on your way into the world you behead the wilted flowers in the window box, where the stem meets the stalk.

You don’t tell me what you do while you’re out, besides that the work is deeply important.

Home alone, I set five fans around me in a wide circle, lie on my back in the center, and sing until sunset. It is deeply important that you do not know this.

Sometimes you call to remind me that when nobody’s speaking on the phone, the signal stops transmitting.

Sometimes you take your dinner alone, up on the roof.

Finally, you read me to almost-sleep on the porch. The way I’ve arranged our seats and the timing, the dryer is always laboring between us, its clunk clunk clunk a net that catches most of the poem in mid-air.

Just so you know, here are the parts that, last night, made it through:

and more wires apart the round and pointed promised undergrowth

I write them down and they become new poems.

If you were one to notice these things, you’d notice—the geraniums have spilled over the sill and are right this moment crawling away across the lawn.

Revenge Fantasy
Rachel Calnek-Sugin

Each time the gun goes off, the girl digs her nails into her friend’s pale arm.

On another channel, two women sit
on a striped couch. The stripes could be anything. The girl’s head slips so effortlessly onto her friend’s shoulder.

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In an odd fight, the other girl’s father insists she wear a bra with that shirt. He says it’s as obscene as if he took his dick out of his pants and wore that to dinner. The mother gets involved, uncertain whose side she’s on. The girl envisions her own bloated body as the thing her father flings at her mother, which knocks the wind out of her but does no lasting damage. Her father unzips his pants and takes out his penis to demonstrate he has a penis. What seems most tragic is that this is inside her bedroom.

Why did she have to inherit her mother’s breasts? Why here, amongst the books and the bears?

***

Their first exuberant morning together, the girl takes so many unnecessary trips from the bed to the kitchen, simply to be watched while naked.

Having a body can be so luxurious when one wants it.

***

The mother, of course, has no issue with it; she simply can’t imagine her daughter marrying a woman. At least they are in a car, a good excuse not to look at each other:

much better than a couch, the same as a television. When the girl thinks of sunset, she thinks of the sun setting on TV. Why does this, of all things, seem unbearable?

***

As opposed to adolescent habits, now the girl’s dietary restrictions have to do with issues of the digestive tract. For this reason, and others, they don’t go out to eat. As in adolescence, she believes whatever it is, is probably fatal, in that it probably comes from her head, which will kill her as soon as her body allows it.

***

They often play cards and the girl always wins.

The trick is to make everything part of the game: drawing an ace, opening the fridge, sex on the carpet or couch, a conversation about sex on the couch, falling asleep and waking afraid of the lights, accusing the other girl of snoring to be told, “you were snoring,” the mangled bodies, then the Proactiv commercial,
one’s opponent gets up to answer a
phone call and doesn’t come back—
she’ll come back. This is no time
to let one’s guard down. Both
girls have learned to count cards
out of necessity.
The game closet is filled
with so much fun!
One could stay here forever
and never get bored.

The years go by and the girls go with them. Each week,
the other girl asks why the
girl still won’t end things with that boy,
Because compulsory heterosexuality, the girl says,
Because loneliness, the other girl says.

Why would she say something so obvious? Why won’t
the car alarm go off outside
or the TV start up again with the toothpaste jingle?

Against all odds, the men in our family
are kind. Your father and I
worry about you. We wish
you would tell us how we could help.

If you only told us what was wrong,
then maybe we could help.

Panic! Baby wakes up,
where is my doll?

There is nothing left to say.
So quickly lovers become strangers,
like being overwhelmed by the ocean
or the city at night, like peeling out
of a theater for a cigarette
and feeling inhuman in the air.
Only what silences is now silent.
The ocean roars and the city gleams
and the air pierces with freshness.
What is there to do about this?
Hold each other? Remind oneself
of one’s own luxuriousness?
Leave the couch for the kitchen
and put the water up for tea?

In suckling, the breast
Cleaves open and there seated, silence like
A spider infinite marching.
I think of Maya’s womb, long with men
Like sand. When asked how she
Retains her shape
Says Maya: the world
Ends in two directions—
Maya with her corridor
Of womb. I looked at my
Breast and wondered, seeing:
Eyeball, mouth. Maya’s smile
Cleaved and I shaped me still
Feel your form wrestling comfort
In that interval which like
The ocean of scripture
Accommodates—my one like Maya’s
Infinity. Even the goddess needed
A lawn chair. Your march
In me is dancing.
Was. It was a baby,
  Itself. In the
  All life was. Baby saw
Rolled on its stalk.
  No gods. Karma
  A dog, it said.
  Baby’s eyeball
  
Twitch. Eventually grey Baby
  Emotion was.
  So karma, a wheel, Baby
  Like a gerbil.

The murmuring Universe
  a very small dog.
  Pair of eyes to share the duty of
  The dog regarded Baby.

  Somewhat. Karma hoped
  Power to make many at once—
  Spit babies out. There was so much
  Felt in production.

Pleasure and hummed to itself, regarded

Something moved and the world
twitching and grey. The baby eyeballed
baby’s eyeball was all life and
its greyness and its eyeball

If Baby did not laugh there could be
fretted. Someone get that Baby
There was no dog to be gotten.
regarded Baby

perceived twitching as discomfort and
Baby learnt self-hatred—
  pawing inside
  There was just enough power for
to engender
a second stupid
universal regarding.
Baby improved

one day to have enough
to have the Universe wheeling
to be produced and
In the meantime it practiced

Baby and Dog regard each other. 🐶
The Exquisite Woman
Panchalay Chalermkraivuth

The exquisite woman, sitting
Robed at the hairdresser’s
With hands arranged
Like flowers,
Had her hair
Pinned in a heavy
Fixture. Her neck—
Erect from the collar—nearly
Lolled. Tanazaki: Under the robe,
Struts for hands
And a hollow. There were
No feet. Komparu: from the hollow, I saw
Light. Maybe he saw
Her neck. We run out in our
Dressing gowns to buy
Salad greens. The sun
Drips enormously.
Enclosed by the robe was
Void and the void
Was. The exquisite woman
Said: nothing engenders
More than a negative.
She made being
Occurrence by putting on
A robe. Her neck
Radiated from the
Hollow like energy held
In and over and put
In motion
By stillness. In dressing gowns
Your knees and belly
Are. I talked to her for
Three hours once
About how she takes care
Of her hands. She described

Creams and medicinal
Soaks, gloves indoors with
Their insides decadent
For the final presentation.
It is okay for pubic hair to be
Wet in a dressing
Gown: You kiss it. It was a
Good question. The sun is
Oversized like the woman’s
Labia when I asked her
To open her robe.
A vagina is constructed
Not unlike the character for
Interval which contains
The character for Light.
When she masturbated
With her exquisite hands
Her vagina was
Hollow and the event
In the same time. The dressing
Gowns are full and fat. We from
Them: Drip, come. 😁

The Indo-Pacific Wing
Luna Beller-Tadiar

The Indo-Pacific wing is dark and small.
I leave white walls and high ceilings to enter.

What that is Indo
Pacific.
Hyphenated
Even before my father
Even before my mother
Took an air-boat to this
New World

And did not change her name.
The hyphen in my own last name
Nods as I enter.

An ancestor is often shown seated, says the plaque, in the posture assumed by elders when in consultation of community affairs. In a wood-carved statue, I see a brown man squatting. Think of the old women on the highways in the typhoon slush of Metro Manila, squatting with plastic baskets of car-wash rags and sampaguitas.

Ancestor squat like
Car rag sellers on the highway overpasses
Black glass glitter of the eyes glinting
Museum lights
And dead wood floors, glass boxes

Bound by the invention of a nation state. Still,
This is close:

The placard beneath a woven jacket reads
Northern Luzon—
Where my mother played. Is there something to sharing the same ocean.
Maybe passing the mountain where this was made on the drive up to mama’s lola’s house.

These
Cowry shells for eyes and
The body that would have fit in this jacket and
Me with my maroon Converse and
New York Japanese jeans.

I wonder if the guard notices silhouettes of cowry in my own eyes when I glance
Ghost of black glass glitter or
Maybe I just want someone to notice
Me walking into my own history
(the invention of the nation state)

Here in glass boxes on the third floor
Of a university gallery, Connecticut
On a grey fall day, this
Modernist building, these
Ancient
Squatting
Homes.

**Borscht Lore**
**Alison Primak**

Lena ate shit at the bottom of the driveway.
I was in the kitchen eating borscht, strained, and with no sour cream.
Waiting for her to come back and eat the cabbage.

She was on her scooter—
I saw it all through the window.
I thought she bashed her teeth in and I gave a little smile.

She got up and her mouth was full of beet juice,
Looking just like me,
People always asked if we were twins.

*Lab-nah and Lee-nah,* they’d always sing.
But mama gave me the better cot.
And the Bolsheviks knew I was allergic to bay leaves.

So that’s why we had nothing. No spices,
No bubblegum, no jean skirts.

I thought of the magazines missing from the mail pile.
I looked down at the empty bowl.
I raised my own reddened knuckles

And then out the window
With beet-red blood dribbling down her chin
I saw her run

Never saying anything more than:
“go away, cabbage face.”
Gabriel will you teach me
how to dance the forró

I was wading
in the river the first time I saw you
you with your guitar on the bank

you traced
the lines of my palm
carried me from the river
the people from the carnival came to play
by the riverbank
where are you from I asked them
many places we are always travelling

Anunciación greeted you with
three nail wounds of joy
I want to ask the archangel
what does one do

but where is he the archangel
we do not speak the same tongue
I do not know where to place the accent on his name

I walk my dog in the hills. Sometimes, I drop his leash
and use my hands to block out the new homes in the
distance. If I find the right angles, I see Irvine as it was
years ago, and suddenly my dog and I are surrounded
by capacious nothing. But I’m not nostalgic; if what I
wanted was to see the preserve as it once was, I could
find someone still alive who had taken photographs of
the old landscape.

I am tempted to call the houses ugly. Anyone who
calls something ugly, is ugly herself, says Dad.
Nothing is ugly if you’re using the right frame.

§ Gradient

Bastille Day in Paris. My dress is the color of pink
roses, tea-length and translucent. When I bought it, I
tried to ask the saleswoman whether it was lingerie:
C’est pour dormir? It is for sleeping? No, it’s for daytime.
You can wear it to the park. You have to wear a slip—do
you know what a slip is?

The dress isn’t entirely transparent. Before putting it
on, I held it up against my room’s white wall under a
flashlight’s unforgiving yellow beam. Not a speck of
white shone through and the dress was festive with-
out a slip.

Past midnight at the metro station, the deep, coffee
brown of the wooden bench beneath me shows dark
through the dress: my body, too. I pull at a loose
thread and notice, also tugging my skirt, another hand.
Pale, hairy, deep-creased, male. He lies wrapped in
an old blanket on the bench next to mine, his other
hand jerking under his cover. His face is hidden. His
hold on me is loose, and if I shift my weight, he would
release his grip. I don’t move until he sighs. The dress
isn’t a part of me, to keep or to give. Why take such a
small thing away from him, this corner of my dress?
Everything smells sweet like wine, and the tunnel is
full of light.
§ Crop

I had sex for the first time in the preserve
we were in the valley between the two tallest hills
the dust was smooth and dry against my skin I liked that
she started to unzip my pants after she took off my bra I said
roll over and I’ll take your dress off she said let me go inside
I said okay I said I want you I said please I even said thank you
I was glad I had done it I thought I’d bled but the color of
the dust hadn’t changed

§ Full

I had sex for the first time in the preserve
we were in the valley between the two tallest hills
the dust was smooth and dry against my skin I liked that
she started to unzip my pants after she took off my bra I said
roll over and I’ll take your dress off she said let me go inside
I said okay I said I want you I said please I even said thank you
I was glad I had done it I thought I’d bled but the color of
the dust hadn’t changed

we were so invisible I was afraid
she pushed me into the dirt
she pinned me down by my neck
stop I said stop I said
I compromised
that felt like dying

§ Gloss

In Amélie’s Montmartre, every hour is the golden
hour. The light is thick and amber, like honey. There’s
Amélie buying vegetables, glowing like the Madonna.
She’s radiant on the metro, as if the train’s fluorescent
lights were candles.

Parisians are irritated when I say how much I like
Amélie. C’est comme un rêve, is what they think of that
movie. It’s no good to live in a dreamscape. Tourists
like me memorialize our love by fastening tiny locks
to the bridge in Parisian neighborhoods. It almost
collapses under the weight, and the locksmith has to
go quietly at dawn so no one sees him, sever them and
throw them into the river. Dead fish, undying love.

Still, I’m with Amélie’s director, Jean-Pierre Jeunet,
when he says the film is too realistic. He says it’s
poetic, but he hates its French realism. The French
obsession with reality.
In the train’s sickly, green-white light, I’m a germ under a microscope. Wearing the rose dress, I’m no longer drunk, and too afraid to fall asleep. At my stop, I step from the warm station into the chilly black night, and see, in the pink shadow on the sidewalk (moonlight shining through my dress), a man’s silhouette.

At the corner I cut left and run. The tiers of the dress are useless wings, parachutes catching wind. The man will snatch on to the billowing fabric and pull and my dress will tear and tear to shreds and I will be naked, brown skin bare under the jaundice moon of the witching hour. I will be naked and he will be holding me by the wing-threads.

I reach the gate of my house at the same time as the man who shadows me. Est-ce que vous avez de l’eau? What? Water? I say, struggling with French, the cumbersome key, the iron door. J’ai dit, avez-vous de l’eau? He curls his hand around an imaginary object, lifts his head, and moves the object back and forth, to and from his mouth. He starts shouting, words about women I pretend not to know—t’es conasse, t’es salope—but the door gives: I slip in.

Rachel and I are at a big church holding hands, our parents have gone to the candles, our parents have gone to the pews. Everyone is tall, we hide underneath the red velvet benches. We poke our heads out and look up at the ceiling covered in gold and angels. The babies are fat and the people are pink, we laugh. Tired now, we lie down on the floor. I press my cheek against the cold stone. The women are wearing beautiful shoes. One velvet pair, covered in little diamonds, is shiny like the ceiling. I keep thinking the shoes are going to step on me; they come so close and grow so large, as though they’re the only things in the world. But they never do, they’re everything one moment and the next they’re just a clicking sound behind me growing softer. When this happens, when the shoes pass me, I’m the swings, as close as I can get to the sky, and then I drop and the clouds rush away from me. It feels like that even though I’m not moving. I see Mom’s clunky brown shoes—I know the sound because they don’t click, they clop—and when she passes I reach up to grab her long pink skirt but she swishes away, I miss. Rachel, I say, let’s go. We follow the brown shoes and loose stockings into the sun where Mom hugs a man we don’t know. Not Dad. Mom turns around. Not Mom. We look at each other and sit down on the steps, what to do? There are birds everywhere and people selling ugly toys that are supposed to look like the church. They don’t. I say, we’ll have an adventure, let’s discover Paris. We’ll find them. We walk around and around the church. Everywhere is brown stone. We are surrounded by smelly people whose fanny packs are in our faces. One of them pushes Rachel over. She slips and her knee breaks open, a new red flower. Sorry! he yells running to a group of people wearing the same T-shirts. I tie the ribbon from my hair around her cut. A tall man asks something we don’t understand. No! I say, we know the way. He follows us. He is making sure we find our Mom. He takes Rachel’s hand. I’m proud: I’ve found the enormous door. I’m making my way to the altar where we left our parents. The door is closed, there’s no way to open it. The man tries, too. His arms are tight and round like a snake’s throat after it swallows prey fatter than it is. A baby deer. He grunts, his arms swell even bigger, but he can’t open the door either. We sit down beneath the door. Rachel falls asleep on my lap. I try not to fall asleep so I can watch her but the sun is so bright, the edges of my eyes
are fuzzier and fuzzier, until all I see is the man's face, that makes me want to stay awake, I fight the blinding white light, I lose, I fall asleep too. When I wake up, the man is still next to us touching Rachel's legs. I look up and there's Mom. We took a nap! I say. She looks like a ghost, very white and shaky.

§ Burn

The Chilean government takes our photographs in the basement, where it is unexpectedly bright. I am told not to smile. White light a flood washing over me and, as it ebbs, taking something with it. Drenched, drained. The photographer hands me the card. My image in black and white, a ghost. Black braids frame the edge of my face; those appear in sharp detail but closing in towards the center of the photograph my skin fades paler and paler as though inside me were a source of light, blinding like the sun. The light erases the edges. My nose, without contour or character, is a dog's nose: plane and slight, two black dots in the middle of my face. All the photos are similarly blank, of foreigners and Chileans alike. In the event that I went missing and this image circulated on public television, would anyone be able to find me?

§ Dodge

Silvia, Josie, and I discover Chatroulette one day after church. Josie has a stick-and-poke daisy tattooed around her nipple, the pistil. She removes her bra unprompted, shows off the blotchy pink bumps the needle raised on tender skin. The men in the chat room all ask the same question and she says yes it did hurt.

Silvia and Josie are talking to tulsa Raymond, who compares the shapes and sizes of their breasts. (Josie's are rounder, but Silvia's are larger and therefore ultimately superior, is the language he uses.) I don't wear bras yet; I stick to the shadows where the camera can't reach. When tulsa Raymond has done a thorough evaluation, he leans back in his chair, rests his hands on his hairy belly, and surveys the room, satisfied. Spotted. "Who's that blackie in the corner?"

Silvia and Josie laugh and tell me to come into the webcam's frame. Tulsa Raymond explains that there are no blackies where he is and that he's always wanted to see one naked. Instead of moving into view, I shrink back, watching the tiny image of myself on screen as it edges away from the light—it grows blacker, more pixelated, and finally, I'm out of sight.

§ Pan

We stop running and break for water by the underpass. Cackling, Amanda points upwards. With my gaze I follow her index finger, which touches the bottom of a brown plastic foot. Black Barbie is hanging from an exposed pipe above the tunnel, naked. The noose: a chain of rubber bands. Multicolored. Her breasts catch the sunlight, glint; her plastic skin is glossy still. But her hair has lost its luster—burrs and dust stuck in the curls. Her left arm entangled with the vine of honeysuckle. We're in the type of neighborhood where they plant honeysuckle even at the entrance of the underpass. I can't see Barbie's face. Her neck is bent backwards and away from us, broken.

Amanda is still laughing but I'm quiet as I lower my head to drink from the fountain. Sweat drips into my mouth. I look down, into the tunnel: my house is on the other side. The only way home is through the dark.

Evacuation

Irene Connelly

All morning on the weather channel they had run radar readings for the area. Brash colors bleeding across the screen like the fireworks that would be rained out that night. It was very orderly, more orderly than the unwashed dishes accumulating on
the kitchen counter, and it might have lulled Gail but for the studiously contracted eyebrows and concerned voices of the weathermen. Now that they were in the car with just those voices, on the radio, things seemed grimmer. Gail tried to listen, as if attentiveness would mitigate the complete idiocy of driving toward the shore as a hurricane approached. But the kids hadn’t stopped begging since they left the house, for the moon roof to be opened (she didn’t know how), for the radio station to be changed to something less boring, for potato chips and not the apples she’d packed. There was no one in the passenger seat to handle the begging, or distribute apples, and Gail was on edge. The kids were not; they had never been the kind of children that intuited when things were wrong with adults. To them, it was a very beautiful day to be going seventy-five miles an hour toward the water. As they drove, the trees grew scrublier and shrank back from the edges of the highway. The billboards began to advertise fish tacos and bikini outlets. Not many cars shared the road, but the few accompanying them were cheerful, beach chairs strapped to the trunk, plastic beach toys visible through the windows. Gail’s minivan carried no chairs because she didn’t know how to use the roof rack. Once she could’ve figured it out but now, competence dulled by the years, it was the kind of thing for which she needed a husband.

“I-Hurricane Laura,” said the radio, and Gail’s own Laura, nine years old in the backseat, drowned out what followed, shouting. “Hurricane Laura, Hurricane Laura!”

“Do you know,” said Gail, “that hurricanes named after girls cause more damage because people don’t prepare for them as well? That’s called sexism.” Laura was unperturbed by this news. Will pointedly put in his earphones.

Gail’s was the last car to pull into the driveway. In her first years with Paul all his sisters had driven minivans, but now that their children were grown they had made modest upgrades, new models in sensible colors with GPS and rearview cameras. Only Gail was still in the minivan phase.

“All right, kids, can you listen to me for a sec? Will, can you please take out your earphones?” Will did so. “You know there’s a hurricane coming, right?” They nodded. “So that means the ocean might be rough. We don’t know what the weather will be like. So I don’t want you going in by yourselves, OK? Only with a grown-up.”

“Fine,” said Will, truculent. Gail knew that the privilege of going down to the ocean alone was the only consolation for spending Independence Day here instead of at home, where he could have sat with his friends in the park and watched the town fireworks display explode so close the ashes drifted down on their heads. He was thirteen, just old enough to be wandering by himself, and instead he was being leashed again to his mother. Gail wanted to tell him that she too would’ve preferred to be home, out of the scope of Hurricane Laura, but Paul was very stern about these family weekends, and parental consensus, she had read somewhere, was critical to children’s confidence in the family unit. Unpainted fingernails rapped on the driver’s window. It was Bev, the oldest of Paul’s trio of older sisters. “You’re here! We were starting to wonder. But we know you always run late.”

“That we do,” said Gail. Her teeth had already begun to worry the inside of her bottom lip. “Will, can you get the suitcases? Laura, show Aunt Bev what we brought.”
“Aunt Bev, we made ice cream!”

Having finally resigned herself to going down to the shore, Gail had decided the night before that she would bring something good for once, not a mix cake everyone would politely pretend was homemade. So she unwrapped the ice cream maker they had gotten for their wedding and never used (who would make ice cream with a hand crank when you could just pick up a carton at Stop-and-Shop?). She read the instructions and called Laura downstairs. (Will was in no way to be prevailed upon to participate in family activities.) Laura stood on a chair and watched the ingredients slide into the cold bowl. The box advertised ice cream that was ready in twenty minutes, but Gail’s vanilla soup didn’t even hint at becoming solid for an hour, and Laura went to watch television while she wound the crank in the kitchen, her arms aching. The other problem was that homemade ice cream seemed permanently on the verge of reverting to a liquid state, so that the small plastic container was packed, ridiculously, in a large cooler of ice, which Laura presented to a skeptical Bev. “How nice,” she said.

The trim gravel driveway was Bev’s, as was the house, inherited on her husband’s side, a dainty ranch with shingled siding they had redone themselves. “Only two blocks from the beach,” Bev always said. Alan, her husband, had installed an aboveground pool in the backyard with siding that matched the house’s. Paul had spent his adolescent summers there under the care of his newlywed sister; he was the last child, ten years younger than Bev, and she who had spoon-fed and scolded him as much as any mother now expected from him all the considerations accorded to one. Paul never begrudged her them.

doy you mind sleeping in the basement? We have extra people this year, our third cousin Simon, he’s—” she lowered her voice, “a bit odd, you’ll have to meet him, but I just thought I had to give him the spare room, he’s a guest. And you’re so young.” It was true that Gail was even younger than Paul, their baby, not even of Bev’s generation; but Bev didn’t treat her like Paul’s young wife, she treated her like Gail did the kids, to be managed and sometimes indulged, if she was good. Because of their youth, she found, they had been relegated to mattresses in the basement, which she grimly noted was below sea level.

“I’m not sharing with Laura,” said Will. “She kicks.”

“I’ll share with Laura,” Gail said. It was the only way to circumvent an unpleasant dispute, but Gail wondered if Will started these disputes because she never took a firm line with him. A more energetic mother might have forced him to share with his sister and turned out a more dutiful sibling than Will had been of late.

“Mommy, where’s my bathing suit? Can I go in the pool?”

“Yes, you may,” Gail rooted around in their suitcase and produced Laura’s favorite bathing suit, a blindingly pink hand-me-down from a neighbor. It did not quite fit Laura, who was far plumper than the original owner, but Laura seemed happily oblivious to how her skin puckered around the waistband, and Gail wanted to prolong this unconcern as long as she could. If it was just a phase, the pudginess, no one would remember it later, and if it never went away she would face long decades of shopping for conservative swimsuits and should have at least a few memories of the water lapping at her bare stomach. Still, her sisters-in-law had raised uniformly slim children, and Gail didn’t
think it was out of the range of possibility that one of them would make a comment, so she worried. Will, still mutinous, went into the yard with his soccer ball. He wanted to make the team when he started high school.

Gail ascertained that there was a satisfactory view of the kids from the kitchen window, so she settled there and watched. The other women were in the room but could not stop to talk. On the table was a laminated Fourth of July tablecloth patterned with undulating American flags at all angles; every year it surfaced for this barbeque and afterwards was scrupulously wiped clean by Bev and stowed away for the next occasion. The first cold dishes, the potato salads and the coleslaw and stuffed bell peppers that had been prepared in the preceding days, sat under plastic wrap. Bev was superintending a cake in the oven, Ruth was washing dishes, and Jean was setting out American flag plates on the deck. “Can I do something?” asked Gail.

“Oh no,” said Jean. “I think we’re all set.” They were a perfect unit, the sisters, a machine without cogs or gears. Gail’s offers to help, repeated at every gathering, were rebuffed no matter how much there was to do. This did not offend Gail anymore.

“Are you sure? I could just set the table.”

“Why don’t you just stay there and taste this broccoli? Tell me if I need to add more butter, it’s a new recipe and I’m nervous.”

So Gail was installed, like a child incapable of amusing herself, with a small bowl of buttered broccoli at the window, from which she watched Laura flounder in the aboveground pool.

When Paul finally called she was happier to hear his ringtone than she had been in a while. She took the phone into the hallway as if there was going to be a private exchange, although these days they had few private exchanges, on the phone or otherwise.

“Did you get there all right?” he asked.

“Yeah, we’re all settled in. Laura’s in the pool.”

“Traffic?”

“Not much, I think people are turned off by the weather reports.”

“You’re not still worried about that, are you? I told you I’ve sat out hurricanes in that house before.”

Gail changed the subject. “What’s going on at work?”

“I fixed three cable boxes this morning. I’m getting pretty good at it. This afternoon I’m learning to go up in the cherry picker and look at the lines, can you believe it? I’m wearing a hard hat right now.”

“No kidding,” said Gail. She supposed Paul, who was good-looking in general, was dashing in a hard hat, and she supposed she should make something out of that, a comment at least. A better wife would, especially one who was supposedly repairing her marriage. But she felt exhausted and she got off the phone.

Paul was spending Independence Day at home, repairing other people’s cable boxes. Pending a better contract the cable maintenance workers were on strike, and in order to neither cave immediately nor delay the instant service touted in commercials, the company had trained middle management staff, of which Paul was a part, to provide interim maintenance. Paul knew nothing about the actual mechanics of cable TV, whose bureaucratic intricacies he’d lived among
for decades, but he was happy to learn and he enjoyed the work in the same way he'd enjoyed walkouts and student protests at college, for the pleasant sense of contingency. When Gail pointed out that he was now pitted against his former causes, and that his college incarnation would have despised him as a scab, he frowned at her. “We provide some of the best benefits packages in America,” he said. “And frivolous strikes do nothing but compromise the credibility of unions.”

In the kitchen, Ruth asked if Paul was doing alright.

“He's wearing a hard hat right now,” Gail said, and the other three, who really were good sisters, made an appropriate fuss (“A hard hat! Can you imagine?” “Paul!”). Everything he did, perhaps including the acquisition of a wife and children, seemed vaguely cute to them.

When Gail first met her husband she was an academic, or at least in the process of becoming one. She was twenty-eight years old and in the midst of a postdoc in French history, having recently won a prize on her dissertation. She hadn’t had a boyfriend in years, although this didn’t bother her until she met Paul. He was nine years older than her, busily scrambling around the kind of corporate hierarchy that mystified and bored her, and yet he was completely entralling. Even when he stole bites of her sandwich or asked what time she wanted to go to a movie it was a memorable occasion, to be filed away like an item in one of her indexed bibliographies. She examined the last years and decided that actually she’ d been very unhappy, worrying about her mediocre research and the miserable brawl to obtain an adjunct professorship, and meanwhile missing out on all the sensations of being in love with Paul. When she became pregnant with Will it seemed like just another of these sensations. Paul said immediately they would get married and Gail decided she’d give it a few years and then return to academia. He would help. He respected her work—he always said happily that she was so much smarter than him, when most men felt compelled to demonstrate the opposite. In the beginning when she would get up in the middle of the night and write, he leaned over her at the computer and whispered that she was superlative. Although he loved his sisters he articulated stumblingly to her that she was different from them, ambitious in a way they had never been.

What she had not allowed herself to realize at the time was that her allure lay not so much in her distinction from his sisters but in the fact that he, Paul, could induce such a superlative woman to lead the life they did. Later he turned out to be very firmly of the opinion that someone should be there when the kids came home from school, and Gail, who could stay up all night writing an article, found she lacked the will or the presence of mind to maneuver in this situation. In the subsequent years at home she chose to forget the worries that plagued her before Paul, the stress of the job market and the midnight anxieties about the relevance of her work. She unpacked the prizewinning dissertation and read it again and found that it was good; it seemed like the only reason she wasn’t a historian, a prominent historian, was that instead she had made herself Paul’s wife.

***

And there she sat, Paul’s wife, while Paul’s sisters fanned themselves with the local paper’s Fourth of July supplement. “Do you think they’ll still do the fireworks tonight?” Jean asked. It was humid; rain crystallized, invisible, in the air.

“Well, we got one of those emails from the town th
morning saying they would,” said Bev. “But I’ve been watching the weather most of the day, and it doesn’t look good. Now, sunset isn’t until eight forty-five, so the earliest they could start is nine. But who knows, it might already be raining by then.”

“Should we even be on the beach if it’s raining?” Gail asked. “That close to the hurricane?”

“Oh, I think it’ll be fine. Alan, he grew up in this house, you know”—Gail did know, she’d been told many times—“and in ’71 there was a record hurricane. They waited it out right here. It was fine, there was barely even flooding in the basement. And we’re only two blocks from the beach.” Gail finished her broccoli, assured Jean it was seasoned well. When Laura came inside tired, Gail extracted a promise that she would not go back in the pool unsupervised, and went downstairs to take a nap.

Gail slept on the left side of the bed at home but now she unrolled herself expansively, experimentally, across the entire air mattress. This was what it was like to sleep without a husband. The fact was that Paul, busy now with his strike-breaking, had left her and come back again only recently, a situation Gail thought should result in her getting to choose where they spent Independence Day. But even with this leverage she had not succeeded in wresting them away from this clannish gathering and going to visit her own sister in the Adirondacks, where it would be just them, no fireworks and no hurricane. Even in the beginning, the only time she’d enjoyed these trips at all, it was because she liked having Paul play her protector, getting her drinks and cheerfully explaining to his sisters that she was working. She was too busy to cook. But Paul said, “The kids are used to going to Bev and Alan’s, and you know how much it means to me to keep the family together. That’s what we’re trying to do, right? Keep the family together.” Gail had acceded; she didn’t know why.

He left her in February, the dreariest part of the year. Sitting down late at night on her side of the bed, where he rarely ventured anymore, he said he thought it was clear to both of them they weren’t made for each other and he didn’t want to lie to himself anymore. Gail cried. She couldn’t say that she was entirely surprised, or that she had unswervingly thought they were made for each other. But the only times they sat up late like this, with the lamps on and the curtains closed, were the fugitive hours, stolen from the kids, when they made love. This tableau, this cast of the light, was supposed to belong to the better years, when Paul tossed her nightgowns on the floor. She cried for those soured memories. She was an ugly, frightening crier, and as soon as he could Paul went to sleep on the couch. The next day, she applied a cold compress to her eyes so as not to alarm Will and Laura, and she and Paul explained over breakfast that there would be a trial separation. Paul was careful to phrase it as a mutual decision, no doubt considering himself very tactful. Then the kids went to school and he took a suitcase that was too neat not to have been packed long in advance, and repaired to Jean’s house. Gail was alone.

What she felt then, sitting at the kitchen table with Will and Laura’s empty cereal bowls, was jealousy. Of course they weren’t made for each other, and of course it was in Paul’s interest to leave; for him a divorce meant a second chance at being made for someone. He was good-looking and affable, he would have a neat apartment somewhere and some nice hobbies with the kids only a weekend encumbrance, and he
would be snapped up. She, on the other hand, would be a single mother. Her body was carved out and scarred from two pregnancies; she looked older than she was and she would quickly grow haggard from caring for the kids alone on whatever demeaningly reduced budget would be hashed out. No one would ever tell her she was beautiful again, or superlative, even out of obligation; instead, other people would feel bad for her and she would pretend not to notice. That morning, she wished it were she who got to leave, who could have another existence unfold before her. Then she thought of her children and felt intensely guilty. She was sure that Bev, Ruth, and Jean, should they have faced a divorce, would just thank God for their primary custody, that they would always have the kids.

Gail sat in the kitchen for a while and then called her sister to say for the first time, “Paul wants a separation,” to taste the words in her mouth. Kate kindly drove down, gave vent to a short stream of sympathetic invective at the kitchen table, and then confined herself to saying over and over, “It’s all going to be absolutely fine.” She marched the kids out for ice cream so Gail could be alone and then she marched Gail to the salon to have her nails done and get her first ever set of highlights. Gail submitted mechanically, feeling that these were stock remedies for a kind of woman she was not, but nevertheless she felt better after, fortified; she started looking into teaching classes at the community college. She read all the literature on explaining divorce to children and scrutinized Will and Laura for signs of trauma, which they did not display. Being their mother took on a new degree of importance now that she faced the prospect of doing it alone. With Paul she felt auxiliary, a person who performed rote tasks while he did the work that sustained them. Now she would have to be enough for the three of them and she began to feel equal to the task. She outlined a schedule for him to visit and he came punctually, every week. Gradually she was able to be civil, to call Jean’s number and ask clinically if she could speak to Paul without hearing any pity in her voice.

Then, after four months, he came back. One day Jean mentioned over the phone he was looking for reasonable apartments and the next he walked right in the door without asking and sat down on the sofa and said he thought they should give things a second try. He didn’t pretend to love her any more than he had when he left; Gail knew he hadn’t had any revelation of that kind. What had happened, most likely, was that he had looked at apartments and found them bleak, and mildewy. He preferred his own house with his wife who wore nice earrings and made dinner every night, however haphazardly, and his children whom he really did love and did not want to see only on weekends. She looked out the window at Will, dribbling his soccer ball through a maze of cones he’d set up in the backyard, and her tenuous confidence collapsed. What if she wasn’t as good at explaining to the kids as she thought, and they were at this moment developing problems for which they would later blame their mother? If she said no, she would deny Will and Laura a family that didn’t require explanations from a book. And as for her, it seemed only a matter of time before the giddy independence waned, and solitude set in for good. So she said, ‘All right, let’s give it a second try.’ But while the kids, given the good news, climbed into Paul’s lap, she went to read in bed. It was a convenient solution but no more than that, and she didn’t think she could pretend very well to be overjoyed.
Later, sitting still drowsy on the deck with a wine cooler, Gail met their third cousin Simon. She was prepared to not like him because he had deprived her of a real bed, and she continued to dislike him in earnest when he appeared fresh from his own nap with no shirt on and asked Ruth “if that was Paul’s wife” in a way that suggested he knew she had very nearly been not Paul’s wife. Gail wondered how much of their extended family was aware of this.

“Yes, I’m Gail,” she said.

Simon plucked a piece of pasta salad from under the Saran Wrap with his fingers and sat down next to her.

“You know, Paul and I used to see a lot of each other in his college days. I was working in the city then. We spent a lot of time down at those bars. I doubt he ever told you half of what he got up to those days.” It was clear he wanted to enlighten her but Gail, having recently reaffirmed her intention to grow old with Paul, thought she’d rather not know and refused to ask.

Will clattered in, then, to find her. “Mom, can we go down to the beach? It’s really nice out.”

“Well, I guess so, but you have to give me fifteen minutes, I have to find my cover-up and the sunblock and—”

“Let me take him,” said Simon. “I was just out this morning.”

“Well, I don’t know if—”

“You just sit here and have a rest, he’ll be fine with me.”

“Simon used to be a lifeguard,” Ruth said.

Gail chewed her lip. She knew she shouldn’t be the kind of mother that hovered, that Will should get a trip to the beach.

“Just make sure you come back if the weather changes,” she said.

At five-thirty they were still at the ocean and appetizers were served, pigs in blankets and cubes of cheddar cheese. On the television wedged in the corner of the kitchen it said that winds would be over eighty miles per hour by the next morning, and they were expecting a statement from the governor.

“Don’t you think it might be worth considering leaving?” Gail said to Ruth.

“Oh, I don’t know, half of these hurricanes end up being glorified rainstorms.”

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t stay right here,” said Alan. “I’d rather be here to keep an eye on the house and start clearing up as soon as it’s over.” Gail felt weighed down by this house that wasn’t hers and all its requirements, its American flag tablecloths. She thought about making her excuses, leaving the ice cream, asking Alan to put the suitcases in the trunk. But there would be phone calls, the sisters would say to Paul she’d been acting strange and was everything all right, and he would start a fight.

Across the room Bev frowned. “What is that noise?” she asked. Everyone quieted and Gail heard a thumping coming from outside that was, apparently, not accounted for in Bev’s complete grasp of the house’s noises. Thinking more of the weather, Gail looked absently out the window to see, in the driveway, cousin Simon and Will, back from the beach. Simon was teaching him how to hit the soccer ball with his head,
and the ball was thumping, first against the shingles of the house and then Simon’s balding head and then her own son’s skull, knocking against the fragile bone and the brain cells she’d spent more than a decade of her life safeguarding.

“Oh, it’s just the boys,” said Bev, placated, but Gail said loudly, “You’re kidding me,” and ran in her bare feet onto the gravel driveway, shouting, “Stop it! Stop!” She batted the ball away from Simon so it rolled into the street under a car. “Are you trying to give him a concussion?”

“I’m just teaching him a few of my old tricks,” said Simon. “He says he wants to make the soccer team this year.” He had his hands up in the same exaggerated gesture Paul made when they fought. Gail hated this gesture.

“Mom,” said Will, “don’t you want me to get better at soccer?”

She turned on him. “No, I do not want you to get better at soccer if it gives you lasting brain damage. Don’t you know better than this? This is ridiculous.”

“Fine, whatever,” said Will, and stalked into the house, his swim trunks sagging low on his still-childish hips.

“That’s what boys do when you yell at them,” Simon said knowingly, and Gail felt she could hit him, what did he know about her son; but then she noticed Bev, Jean, Ruth, watching from the doorway and the window, and she faltered.

“Why don’t you two come inside for dinner?” Bev called, and Gail, feeling the gravel under her feet, went in.

Laura, tired, sat at her feet, and Will stood in a corner of the deck with Simon, the two of them exchanging commiserating looks that infuriated her. After a while she went inside, emptied her wine in the sink, and called Paul. He was still at work and she took pleasure in interrupting him and telling him how his atrocious relative was giving Will brain damage.

“You’re overreacting,” he said wearily. “Boys are rough—they hurt themselves, and they end up all right. I got into scraps, and I’m fine.” Gail rolled her eyes. He was always fine; the only urgency he felt was pleasant, the excitement of fighting a strike. He left her to bear for both of them the simmering sense that something was wrong, that something bad could happen at any moment.

She changed the subject. “I’m thinking about driving home tonight. The weather reports are getting extreme.”

“What? Don’t do that. I’ve seen the weather, it’ll all be fine, and being on the road in the middle of the night is just as dangerous as sitting through a hurricane.”

Gail imagined driving in eighty-mile-an-hour winds at midnight and spinning out, perishing with the children on a rain-slick highway median. There was such a story on the news for every hurricane that hit the shore. “Then why don’t you come get us?”

“What?”

“I’m very worried, and I want you to appreciate that and come down here and help me get the kids home.”

“No, I am not going to come down there just because you’re getting worked up over nothing. And honestly, I’m not sure if this is even about the hurricane, or
if you just can’t stand spending a weekend with my sisters, who go out of their way to be nice to you.”

“This has nothing to do with your sisters,” Gail hissed, and hung up.

When she slumped back on the sofa she saw that Bev stood in the doorway. “You know, Paul’s a very good boy,” she said, as if he were still the small child she had raised.

“I know he is,” said Gail, tired.

“I know you’ve been having some trouble,” Bev said.

“We’re fine.”

“Now, I don’t want to intrude, and I love Paul dearly. But I want the best for you too, sweetheart, and I hate to see you doing something you don’t want to.” Gail looked at her. “If you want to leave, you should.” She shrugged, as if anticipating whatever Gail was opening her mouth to say, and went back onto the deck.

It got dark soon after dinner, and the trees, blacker than the black sky, shook threateningly. Gail abandoned the idea of driving home. There were brown-outs—not a blackout, Alan was quick to reassure everyone, and in any case he had a backup generator in the garage—but brown-outs that lasted half an hour at a time, so that the television was useless. Alan brought out electric lanterns and a wind-up radio, which Laura operated tirelessly. Over the radio, sitting in small pools of lantern light, they heard the governor issue the long-anticipated evacuation notice, advising shoreline residents to get away from the water by the following afternoon.

“I’m not going anywhere until I’ve at least closed up the house right,” said Alan. The sisters assented and Simon said expansively that he didn’t see why they had to leave at all.

Gail stood up and began to clear the dessert plates. “The kids and I are going in the morning,” she said. “First thing in the morning.”

Paul called her and left a message saying he was sorry for snapping, but she ignored it until the kids were in bed. They slept under flannel and cotton sheets, under a quilt from the 70s with tiny parrots printed across it, under a wool blanket crocheted by Ruth. Bev brought down and helped to assemble this confection of bedding. “It always gets a little chilly in the basement, I find,” she noted, but said nothing else. Laura was exhausted from the excitement of the radio and Will was so thrilled at the prospect of being evacuated that he had almost forgiven Gail, and made no mention of Laura kicking.

It was impossible, in the populated house, to make a discreet call so Gail gingerly opened the front door. The wind was rising, it was becoming an entity as corporeal and capable of making noise as a car coming down the street, and the rain had started, but gently, not in earnest. Paul picked up on the first ring.

“You three OK for the night?”

“We’re driving back first thing in the morning. Did you close all the windows in the house?”

“Yeah. Not that it’ll hit us much, I don’t think.”

“I’m sorry for fighting.”

“Oh, let’s just forget about that.” He never held a grudge, Paul. There was nothing else to say and long years suddenly loomed in Gail’s mind, years of logistics, the only life it was possible to lead with him. It
was silent and he started to say he’d better go, and she said, “Paul?”

“Yeah?”

It came out of her breathless, the way her first kiss had sprung to her lips, at once frightening and delicious. “Would you be very angry if I said I wanted to leave?”

“What?”

“I’ve just been thinking.”

“Christ, Gail, babe, I thought we already settled — “

“I think we have to have a talk when I get home.”

“Alright, alright,” he said quickly. “But we really will talk, right? You’re not going to—you can’t just go deciding things without me.”

“I won’t.”

Afterwards Gail sat on the porch. She wished she’d been firmer, instead of pledging herself like that; in a back room of her mind she had staged a scene in which she was like Paul, in which she gathered her suitcase and announced her terms. But it wasn’t like her, to do that; she wasn’t like Paul.

Behind the ebb and flow of the wind she heard the ocean, two blocks away, crashing. It was gathering itself, waiting to be freed by Hurricane Laura from the usual rules that kept it lapping genteelly at the shore. Then she went to sleep. Early in the morning she woke the kids, deflated the air mattresses, folded the sheets. She retrieved the cooler, packed their things in the car, said goodbye to Bev, who was securing storm windows with deft hands, and backed the minivan out of the driveway. Will and Laura sat up straight in the backseat, pointing out the boarded-up storefronts they passed, the state troopers who directed them towards the designated evacuation corridor. There was traffic but Gail was patient with it. They were going home and it felt as good as driving on an empty highway, to be part of the line of cars snaking inland, to safety.

Song Among Songs
(Fragments from שיר קישי
trans. Eve Romm)

My lady is like a city walled to the skies with towers for breasts.

Her neck a great column with trophies hung on it the swords and shields of the heroes of Israel.

And the teeth of my lady like sheep from the washing two by two, and none of them missing.

You are lovely my lady—my sister, lovely! Your eyes are like doves.

***

On my bed at night I sought him beloved of my soul, who came to gaze into my bedroom through the lattice of the windows.

I have washed my feet already, should I dirty them? I have taken off my robe, should I don it once again?

***

My lady is a high wall around a garden where a fountain flows—her breasts are towers from which arrows fly.
I will scale the wall
and brave the towers
to breathe the perfume
of the garden
when the wind blows
if you let me
oh my lady
bride and sister
eyes like doves.

Dear reader,

As a look at our table of contents will reveal, very many of this issue’s contributors are women. This was not intentional; submissions and selections are blind, and it is not always important to know a writer’s gender, nor does one’s gender always inform one’s work, in the same way a writer’s race or sexuality is not necessarily essential to understanding her prose or poetry.

However, in the case of this issue of the Lit, it does matter. It matters because for its first 133 years, the Lit published work exclusively by men, because Yale was exclusively for men. It matters because many of these pieces engage with the authors’ own racial, cultural, and sexual identities. It matters because some of these pieces are by women about sexuality, queer sexuality, and sexuality without shame (this is volume xxx, after all).

Holding this publication in our hands means a lot to us, and it would have meant a lot to the young readers who grew up to become us. We hope it will mean a lot to you, too. Savor these pieces: they are gifts that we are so excited to have the opportunity to share.

Molly & Ivy
Editors-in-chief
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