

There are eyes everywhere

Brian Dillon

"A woman's city, New York." Thus Elizabeth Hardwick in her novel *Sleepless Nights* (1979), on solitary women seen dragging their baggage—"parasitic growth heavy with suffering"—along city streets or picking their way, black-shawled, back to formerly grand apartments, now decayed. New York at the end of the 1970s is a museum of remnants from mid-century, where certain emblematic figures recall ways of being in public that are now definitively old-fashioned. Helen Levitt had her eye on these women too. Here is one of them, installed with placid dog on the steps of her building, in the shade. It is 1980, and she still has no air-conditioning up there in the dark behind her. In a black dress, stockings to the knee, and her black strapped pumps, she might have been sitting out here since the 1940s.

Levitt's New York photographs are full of tired, vigilant women on steps or stoops. Children too, famously: bursting out of doorways, swinging on railings, shinning up drainpipes to mock-fight like classical friezes atop crumbling lintels. She began photographing these kids in the 1930s, becoming a lyric witness of the working-class streets of Spanish Harlem and the Lower East Side. In 1948 she made a short film, *In the Street*, with James Agee and Janice Loeb; among sidewalk games and hydrant fountains, floral sundresses and playful kittens, there are numerous dogs and the laughing women who love them. In 1980, only the dog looks at us. All three human subjects—or is it four? A mother's outline behind that woman on the right?—have turned aside and stretched out their arms. Toward what?

The averted gaze is a recurring motif in Levitt's work: a woman's head plunged deep in her little boy's pram; a street full of men all looking in the wrong direction, only a child watching the photographer from a window. Some of this is attributable to the *Winkelsucher*, a right-angle viewfinder Levitt stuck on her Leica, allowing her partly to disguise what she was photographing. But the views from behind, the heads lopped off by framing or cropping: they persist over decades, so that one wants them to mean more. Is it too easy to say that in the 1940s they might be looking toward the future? And three or four decades later—a spidery girl almost tucked under a green car, a guy in shorts and not much else at a street crossing—they seem to stare at the dirty, spalled ruins of postwar New York. Even this tiny boy, whose outfit is the only thing attaching us to 1980, seems more curious about the old railings than the street behind him.

Soon, as Levitt lamented in one of her last interviews, there would be hardly any children on the sidewalks of New York for her to photograph. The little boy cannot tell he is almost antique. But the woman in black knows what is passing away, and she's determined to summon the spirit of city streets still, in the sunshine.