The Elements of Style

More than 600 women respond to a survey about how they present themselves.

By SASHA WEISS

EARLY ON A Sunday morning, I passed an elderly woman crossing the street, dressed, arrestingly, for church. She wore a flowing black skirt that fell to her midcalf, and a peach blouse with ample sleeves, a high neck, and a fringe of black ruffle that made a stripe across her chest and arms. The effect was simultaneously cheeky and demure, and its boldness made me wonder: How did she gain this confidence, and how had she retained it? The next thought: How could I be more like her?

WOMEN IN CLOTHES
By Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits,
Leanne Shapton and 639 Others
Illustrated. 515 pp.
Blue Rider Press. Paper, $30.

This sartorial scene, and the responses it provoked — amusement, appraisal, pleasure, curiosity, projection — will be familiar to many women. Watching other women, seeing how they're dressed and how they pull it off, is the way most of us learn to become ourselves. "Women in Clothes," the new book edited by the novelist-critics Sheila Heti and Heidi Julavits and the artist Leanne Shapton, is a compilation of the lessons, fears and wishes that can emerge from this kind of close looking.

The book began as a survey consisting of an "ever-evolving" list of questions that the editors sent out to more than 600 women. A small sample: Do you think you have taste or style? Can you say a bit about how your mother's body and style has been passed down to you? Are there any dressing rules you'd want to convey to other women? Do you ever wish you were a man or could dress like a man or had a man's body? The questions are provocative and psychological. They suggest that a closet is an archive of emotion. (As one of the women interviewed puts it, already wise at 28: "We are always asking for something when we get dressed. Asking to be loved, . . . to be admired, to be left alone, to make people laugh, to scare people, to look wealthy, to say I'm poor, I love myself.") The questions also resist the idea, commonly held, that paying too much attention to dress is frivolous. For most of the women interviewed here, dress is a tool they learn to deploy around the same time they are taught to use a knife and fork, and it is just as essential for their social survival.

"Women in Clothes" is part advice manual, part anthropological study, part feminist document. The interviewees are young girls (the youngest is 5), old women (salty and dignified matriarchs), famous women (Kim Gordon, Lena Dunham), religious women, trans women, designers, choreographers (Monica Bill Barnes, on costumes: "As soon as you present yourself as really pretty onstage, you lose a certain amount of power. You're safer. You're admired. And then people feel comfortable with you"), artists, Asian garment workers, and even a man or two (the art historian Alexander Nagel has one of the book's most sophisticated definitions of style: "The state in which one feels the least separation between one's character and one's body"). Some of the interviews are presented in full; others are broken down thematically and appear as sidebars, with a chorus of voices responding to one question (Q: "Do you consider yourself photogenic? A: "Yes, yes, and no. I have three selves in photos. Two are photogenic. One is not at all. Horrible." "Yes, but only if I smile my head off").

There are plenty of visual pleasures on offer here, too, as there should be in a book about fashion. Interspersed throughout are "projects," visual exercises devised by the editors and their friends. The artist Micah Lexier, for instance, asked women to "handwrite their name as a way of presenting themselves"; the results are touchingly childlike and tentative. For another, the editors asked a group of women to "send a photograph of your mother from the time before she had children and tell us what you see." One of the most striking features is a series of images called "collections" — photographs of multiples from individual women's wardrobes: "Constance Stern's black cotton underwear," "Aria Sloss's white nightgowns." The photographs are arranged in grids, evoking both the wry minimalism of Sol LeWitt and the diaristic spontaneity of a Pinterest board. Amy Pinkham's collection of bobby pins looks twiggy and breakable; Amy Rose Spiegel's collection of false eyelashes, all a little bent from use, evokes both glamour and its fading. No matter how droopy or worn or idiosyncratic these objects are, they are ennobled by the unsentimental attention paid to them by the camera.

Lydia Burkhalter's collection of gray sweatshirts.

The volume contains hundreds of stories, which is why it's not the kind of book you'll read straight through but is perfect for flipping around in late at night in the tub, or for giving as a gift with certain parts marked. There's the one about a precious ring, taken from a grandmother's safe after she died, that was lost and found; the one about a dead lover whose tastes and opinions continue to hover over a woman's life; another about a hospice worker whose patients perk up when they are dressed in a favorite item; a middle-aged woman who likes to put on a fake mustache to feel more sexual. But certain themes do emerge. A silky thread that

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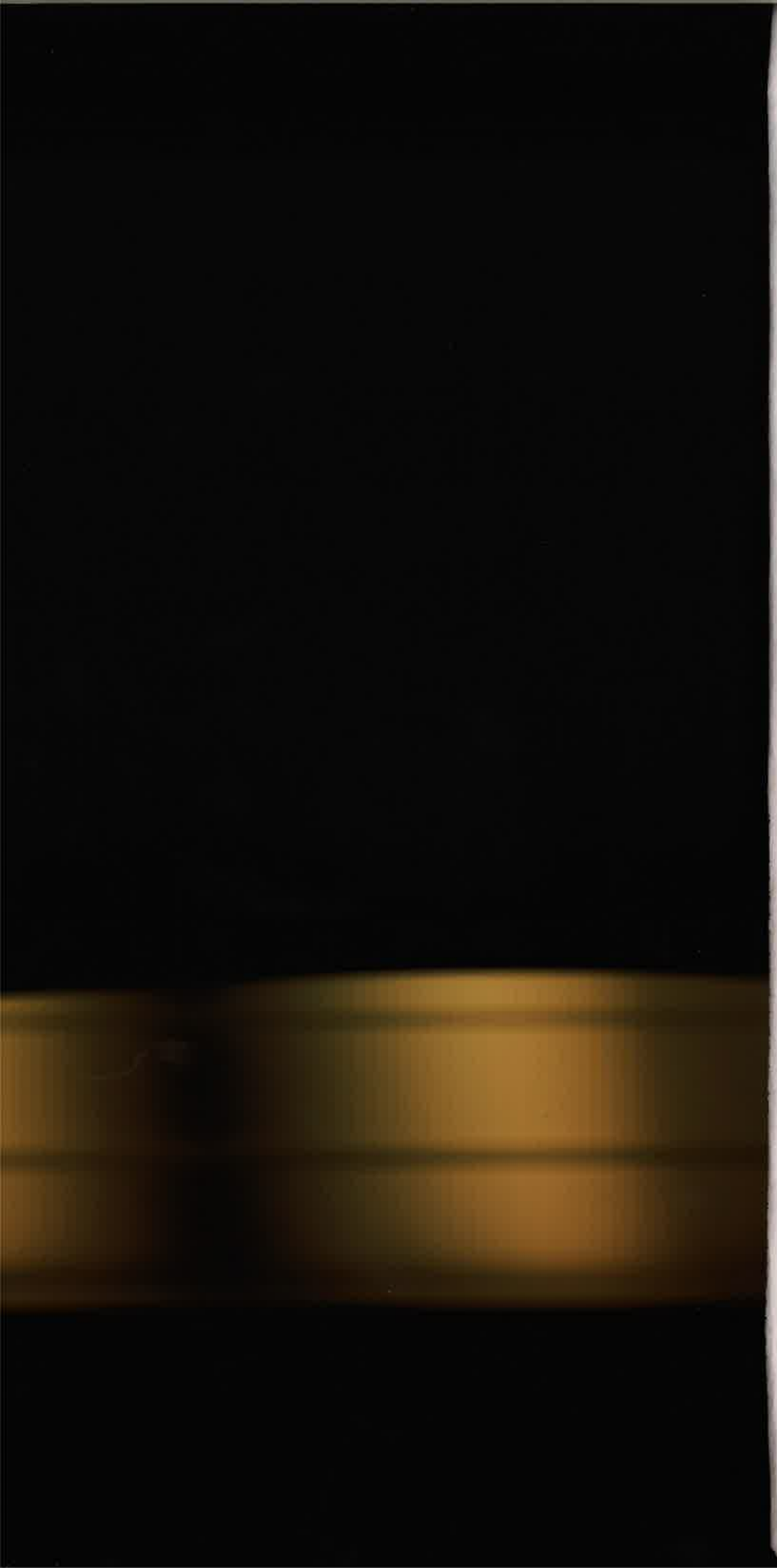

links the stories is clothing as an expression of private waywardness. Dressing is a way to live doubly: There is a self assembled for the public, and then there are the secrets kept and marked with clothes.

Agnes Barley describes wearing a pink silk ribbon around her waist, underneath her clothes, for 10 years, without being sure exactly why. Molly Murray talks about subtly altering every article of clothing she has ever bought, cutting off embellishments, changing a hemline, ripping out labels. The rebellions are not always secrets: Amy Rudersdorf recalls observing her artistic aunt as a child and learning that fashion is "leg hair poking out of her magenta tights." Clothing is as much a means for defiance and privacy as it is a vehicle for pleasing self-presentation.

All three of the editors, when they appear in the text as interlocutors, are wonderful interviewers and essayists — subtle, probing, sympathetic — but Heti, especially, has a gift for pulling insight from details of other women's lives that might at first seem banal or irrelevant. This is a move she often makes in her own writing: She records her thoughts — loopy, vulgar, absurd ones alongside developed, aphoristic, clever ones — as a way of mapping for us her own experiments in figuring out how to live. Here are some excerpts from her diary, which she presents as her answers to the survey questions:

"I feel like half the reason I got married was because I wanted to wear a wedding band."

"There's something to be said for the person who does not discern. Something to be said for the truly democratic heart that can see the good everywhere."

"I always try to be a 'pretty girl,' but I admire someone like Margaux, whose image is far more complex."

"On the plane to Coral Gables, Florida, I made a list of all the clothes I own: 200 items. My plan is to edit my closet this way — whatever I forgot to write down, I'll give away."

"I thought, 'I want to go home now,' and took the streetcar back to my neighborhood."

This impulse for what the critic James Wood has called "radical transparency" has become pervasive throughout the culture (we see it in everything from Richard Linklater's latest film, "Boyhood," to the popularity of Karl Ove Knausgaard's six-volume memoir-novel recording what seems like every detail of his life), but Heti and her coeditors give it an important, feminist twist. The kind of openness they practice and encourage is instructive; it is also, in its way, political. It gives other women permission to improvise, to show their mistakes, to share information. Pushing against the prevailing rules that have governed women's self-presentation for thousands of years, they say: Be voluble, grandiose, experimental, wild. Be imperfect. □

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHMELLING