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Girl Pictures

Justine Kurland

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Cherry Bomb

By Justine Kurland

The Runaways are everything that's great about teenage girls. The tough ones who never came to school because they were out too late the night before. It's true, there have always been as many girl punks as boys. The Runaways are as real as getting beat up after school.

—Lisa Fancher, album liner notes to *The Runaways*, 1976

I channeled the raw, angry energy of girl bands into my photographs of teenagers. It was as if I took Cherie Currie—The Runaways' lead singer—on a picnic somewhere out in the country. I would show her my favorite tree to climb, braid her hair by a gently flowing river, and read aloud to her, my gaze occasionally drifting toward the horizon while she lazily plucked a blade of grass and tasted its sweet greenness. All the power chords we would ever need lay within reach, latent, coiled in wait. The intensity of our becoming funneled up vertically from where we sat.



Steve Emberton, *The Runaways*, 1976

Alyssum was the first girl I photographed. At age fifteen, she had been sent to live with her father—a punitive measure for skipping school and smoking pot. I happened to be dating her father at the time, but I vastly preferred her company to his. After he left for work, we spent long conspiratorial mornings stretched under the air conditioner in his Midtown Manhattan condominium. Together we conceived a plan to shoot film stills starring Alyssum as a teenage runaway. I outfitted her in my own ratty clothes and brought her to the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The only surviving picture from the time shows her in a cherry tree by the West Side Highway. The branches seem too thin to support even her small weight; their cloud of petals offers little camouflage. She hovers pinkly between the river and the highway, two modes of travel that share a single vanishing point.

I expanded the cast to include some college freshmen and eventually started trolling the streets around various high schools, cruising for genuine teenage collaborators. Looking back, it seems miraculous that so many of them were prepared to get into a stranger's car and be driven off to an out-of-the-way location. But then, being a teenage girl is nothing without the willingness and ability to posture as *the* teenage girl.

My original inspiration was the after-school TV special—those cautionary tales of teenage delinquency that unintentionally glamorize the transgression they're meant to condemn. The usually male protagonist doesn't belong to the world as he has inherited it. He fights alienation by striking out to find a world of his own. I think first of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but I trace the teenage runaway story further back to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which in turn rubs against tales of early immigrants pushing violently westward. Like a game of telephone, each reiteration alters and distorts a fundamentally American myth of rebellion and conquest, emphasizing or erasing certain details

as new social and historical contexts demand. At least my narratives were honest about what they were: fantasies of attachment and belonging that sharply diverged from the hardships experienced by so many actual teenage runaways.

My runaways built forts in idyllic forests and lived communally in a perpetual state of youthful bliss. I wanted to make the communion between girls visible, foregrounding their experiences as primary and irrefutable. I imagined a world in which acts of solidarity between girls would engender even more girls—they would multiply through the sheer force of togetherness and lay claim to a new territory. Their collective awakening would ignite and spread through suburbs and schoolyards, calling to clusters of girls camped on stoops and the hoods of cars, or aimlessly wandering the neighborhoods where they lived. Behind the camera, I was also somehow in front of it—one of them, a girl made strong by other girls.

Lily was my dream of a teenage runaway; it was as if she walked out of a picture I had yet to make. She lived in Tribeca but dated boys only from Brooklyn, the kind that say “Waz good?” when they answer the phone. She would climb into my car slightly stoned, her legs weighed down by Rollerblades, making it difficult for her to pull them inside. Lily died some years later. At her memorial, her father told a story about pulling the car over to the side of the road and lecturing his kids not to fight while he drove. “As long as you live in my house and wear the clothes I buy you,” he recalled saying, “you will live by my rules.” Lily pulled her sundress off over her head, got out of the car, and walked naked down the country road.

The first condition of freedom is the ability to move at will, and sometimes that means getting *into* a car rather than getting out of one. It’s difficult to describe the joy of a carload of girls, going somewhere with the radio turned up and the windows rolled down. They sing along with the music, tell stories in rushed spurts, lounge across each other, swap shirts, scatter clothes all over the back seat, lick melted chocolate off their fingers, and stick their heads out the windows, hair whipping back and mouths expanding with air. At last we arrive at a view, a place where the landscape opens up—a place to plant a garden, build a home, picture a world. They spill out of the car along with candy wrappers and crushed soda cans, bounding into the frame, already becoming a photograph.

The car itself was the invisible collaborator in these pictures. I spent more and more time in it, over greater and greater distances. I could find girls wherever I stopped, but they went home after we made photographs, while I kept driving. My road trips underscored the pictures I staged—the adventure of driving west a performance in itself. I cross the Mississippi and when I reach Kansas, the land starts buckling up through the waving grass. Colorado crests, jagged and crystalline. The valley rolls between the Sierra Nevada and the Coastal Ranges, velvet green in the spring and scratchy yellow the rest of the year. Finally, the Pacific. The waves change to blue and flatten against the horizon. I pull into a turnout on Highway 1 and get out of my car with the radio still blaring and the surf pounding ahead of me. I dance in the beams of my headlights, because I’ve traveled as far away from far away as the highways will take me. *Hello world! I’m your wild girl. I’m your ch-ch-ch-ch-cherry bomb!*

That was then. Revisiting these photographs now, twenty years later, I am confronted by a standing army of teenage runaway girls, deployed across the American landscape, at a time when they need each other more than ever. “So what,” they say, “we’re never coming back.”

Biographies

Justine Kurland (born in Warsaw, New York, 1969) received a BFA from the School of Visual Arts and an MFA from Yale University. Her work is in the public collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Guggenheim Museum, and International Center of Photography, New York, among other institutions. Her monograph, *Highway Kind*, was published by Aperture in 2016.

Rebecca Bengal writes short stories, essays, and long-form narrative, frequently about photography. Her work has been published by the *New Yorker*, *Bookforum*, *Paris Review*, *Vogue*, and the *New York Times*, among others. She is the Spring 2020 Mina Hohenberg Darden Chair in Creative Writing at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia.

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None of this would have come together without Kim Bourus, who pointed to a box on my shelf labeled "Girl Pictures" and asked to look inside. I felt the way one might about their middle-school yearbook picture, all pimples and optimism, but was able to reconceive the work through her eyes.

To my son Casper McCorkle, now the age of these girls then, whose desire to run looks very different but is no less felt.

Girl Pictures by Justine Kurland

Story by Rebecca Bengal

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