



Donigan Cumming, from *Pretty Ribbons*, May 25, 1990.

# STILL LIFE AND NUDE

FICTION

BY DARLENE BARRY QUAIFFE

**T**he feet are the obscenity. I have no shame. That's what my mother said the day she saw me lift my nubile foot to his knee so he could tie the lace on my boot. My mother was a prophet of the first order, the Victorian order. She wasn't there to see the time I lifted my foot so I could rub my instep against his calf, my pump against the leg of his trousers, under a table of course. I was still young. I've waited until my 82nd year to become a brazen hussy. She also prophesied the coming of hussydom for me, but she thought it would happen in her lifetime. It was the day I declared to the dinner table that I was

going to become a journalist. Brazen. I wasn't brazen, I was naïve, headstrong, bored. But journalism sounded even better when she declared that women reporters were all brazen hussies.

So, you see, I've never been afraid of photographs. It's not your soul they steal, it's your desire to forget. Photographs pilfer forgetfulness. When you're young, you're awed by this. How could you possibly forget that at age eight you refused to smile and betray to the boy behind the camera your big teeth? And how could that self change in the space of a year to a girl with a wide-brimmed hat? Then, when you're old, snaps do just that—they

snap you into the heartless present. Never an opportunity to lose your soul (which might be a relief).

I can say that only after spreading the latest pictures around me like bits of broken mirror on the bed. My last stint as a journalist, except that I'm the record not the recorder and this is an exposé. Let's go one by one through the photos. Yes, I'll say only what comes into my mind at the moment. Frankly, it's always been my *modus vivendi*, as you can see.

Ah, but you look confused. Perhaps I should begin again. If only I could, would I? In this instance, since I'm no longer as simple as I once was, I will start again.

I am a woman, 82 years old and I just posed nude for a photographer.

He is called a documentary photographer and I am the naked document. He has a theory, I have eternal sleep. I wasn't seduced by his ideas of a counter-imagery of the grotesque, visual rhetoric, multiple versions of decisive moments, even though he wrote them in a letter. It was a chance to see myself, get outside the skin, like dying and being revived.

**I** slept with the photos spread out over the bed so I could dream the words I intend to write on the back of each shot. Take a shot, my girl, your last report. Mostly I dreamt poetry, all the lines I've committed to heart over the years. I've found a red pen to write with—off by heart. Now, take the snap of me standing in the bathroom sink. I call it *Down the Drain with Arthritis*, because what you notice are the grotesque feet and hands. The fact that I'm naked except for a short cotton sweater seems beside the point. Under the title, I am now writing "The hollow eyes of shock remain."

Somewhere there's another bathroom photo. I know because I fell asleep while he was taking it. My old bathroom hasn't been that warm in years with him pouring on the heat, the light and the hot water. Once I'm in the tub, I can't reach the taps and the water goes cold before I do. Yes, here it is, me in the tub with my gold chain. The necklace is clean and hard above the waterline. Below, my skin turns the water to ripples. In this black and white world my flesh looks like layers of silt rilled by the water. Breasts are no longer breasts, hands no longer hands. This is also true above the waterline in the world of air. The snap, the shot, this one I'll call *Primordial Mud*, and the line that comes to mind is "To raise ourselves from the heavens toward the earth." Written in ochre on a white cave.

Are you tired of all this? No, I'm not asking out of politeness. You're witnessing a private conversation. How can that feel? Should I just ignore you like my bony old dog curled up on the carpet. Well, perhaps, but she's my constant

companion. We have come to resemble each other. Here we are, her and me. This is a picture of my living-room. No, a picture of me naked on the sofa with the dog at my feet. Skinny crooked limbs both of us, she's wrapped in her tail, I'm wrapped in beads. She looks natural in her skin, you might think I don't. "There are fears that come up from underneath."

I wanted to murder time. The day I discovered this, I became an actress. I went from byliner to headliner. It was the season of the mature woman. Murdering time, acting, they're like this colour photo—unclothed, I have my back turned to the trappings of my life. Murdering time and acting require a third eye, not in the forehead, in the back-head. You can't see it in the picture, but it's there. A reptilian eye covered by two lids connected to our most primitive brain. It observes the world coldly, unlike our mammal brain, and notes only what is needed for survival of the body, not the soul or the mind. The reptile brain feeds on fear, turning it into action without contemplation.

I lie on the sofa in the classic nude position, my face turned away so that my eyes trace the pattern of the upholstery. It's necessary to keep them occupied while my third eye seeks among jewellery and newspapers, clothing and kleenex, ashtrays and cosmetics for those things that will keep me alive. The third eye knows the skin hangs off my skinny flanks, knows my knifing spine and still looks for my deliverance. The mammal brain thinks how pretty the floral pattern of the sofa, the new brain contemplates the human ability to turn our backs. This photo I call *The Holy Trinity: Killer, Lover, Schemer*. "Batter me softly three-person god."

Nothing in this photograph reminds me of my mother, yet everything speaks of her. Speaks in the voice of denial. This is an act of defiance, naked defiance, perhaps the last time I say no to the Victorian world I was born to. Even as a girl I wanted none of it. The meaningful glances, the unspoken words. Women cowering behind respectability. My old dog has more self-respect than my mother's friends despite their hard smiles. She's never bitten anyone. My mother would never understand what it is to be naked before a young

man's camera. But then she wouldn't agree that a dog has self-respect.

The eyes are the windows of the soul. Don't we wish. Don't we wish it were that easy. My windows will be on the front of a magazine. Open house. Hardly. Those unsuspecting readers who pay money and hold my face in their hands cannot see there any hint of ambush. But that's what I'm thinking behind those eyes. Resting my head on my hand the stone in my silver ring as dark and real as my eyes. The rings, the lipstick, the beads all bait. The eyes say nothing of the body, nothing of the trap.

I want very much to tell you what lives behind those windows. I spoke earlier of defiance. To stand in a sink is to defy gravity, to stand naked in a sink is to defy the body. To make it into an object, another bathroom fixture. My nakedness may assail you, but for me these photos objectify.

How is this smile any different than it was 10, 20, 30, 40...years ago? It is still me inviting the world, still me making monkey face. I can't see the difference. The girl is there. It's only in repose that I suspect something is different. When the face isn't lit I look to flesh and bone, and find what I found the day before. Whose struggle is this? Not mine. I mind my own business. Go about the stations of my day, kneeling is optional and genuflexion is done with eau-de-Cologne. Moment to moment I am not old, I am me, that's all. If no one were to look on me, then I would be ignorant of myself. The mind has no need of time, does not mark it passing. Time is an odious invention which I've put aside. See. I took a hammer to all my clocks and watches then dumped the bits into that fish-bowl, the sand is from my egg timer.

I am lying on my bed fully clothed wearing every bit of costume jewellery I own. I wear lipstick, my hair is combed, my dress is the colour of forgiveness. I stare at the single eye of the camera. It will turn away before I do. ♦

*Darlene Barry Quaipe is an Alberta-based writer. Still Life and Nude is a fictional response to photographs by Montreal artist Donigan Cumming published in Border Crossings, Volume 10, Number 1.*