

BRAZEN

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NY
Q Books™

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
Beacon, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
P. O. Box 470
Beacon, NY 12508

www.nyq.org

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First Edition

Set in New Baskerville

Layout by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover Design and Photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023932276

ISBN: 978-1-63045-084-7

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Midnight in the Backyard of Lust and Longing

The sapphists are at it again. *Screw you's!* ricochet off our common walls, invectives landmine my window. *You cheating bitch!* Like clockwork, this drunken Friday night climax to their ceaseless lovers' quarrel. *I'll kill you!* I hear the big one growl. And then the smashed plates, the screams. By the time the cops arrive it's a full-out brawl, the two women spilling from their back door, tussling across the no man's land between their tiny backyard and mine. Worse than animals. This time it's Holly, the younger one, dragged to the patrol car, yellow hair wilding, small hands cuffed behind her back, kicking at the cops in those Daisy Dukes, an army jacket waifing her silhouette. More clothes than she had on the last time the cops rolled up. Or the time before. It's almost dawn, and the trees shiver in the fog, raccoons slink through the tall grass. Marie, Holly's better half, paces the yard in a blue bathrobe and slippers, smoking a cigarette, sobbing as the cops jam her lover into their car. *Watch her head!* she cries, and flings herself across the yard, lunges for Holly through the glass. *Baby! Baby!* she sobs, the reason for their discord forgotten. Holly mouths a sloppy kiss. Marie opens her robe, presses herself against the glass. Can you believe it? I would give anything to be loved like that.

Power Play

When my lover tells me I cannot say *no*, and I protest, she parts my legs, says *yes, baby. Yes.* I do what I'm told. *No* becomes a foreign country. I take it as permission. Open season. So when the waiter asks if there'll be anything else, I peruse his menu. I'm stuffed, but I say *yes*, cram my mouth with macaroons and chocolate. And when the Lyft driver seduces me in the rear-view, eyes me like prey, asks, *May I kiss you?* I say *yes*. And when the long-legged woman I've long lusted after at the gym wonders aloud if I'm single, asks me to dinner and a movie, I say *yes*. And when she invites me into her bed, what can I say but *yes, yes, yes?* And when my fan in Nova Scotia begs me to be his muse, to sanction an explicit ode to my breasts, my ankles, my lower lip, a poem he'd never show his wife, I cannot say *no* to his lust and delusion. Now he wants to climb me, sublime me, shoot me full of stars. *Is this what you want, too?* he writes, and I answer *yes*. And when I return to my lover at last and she sinks into the heady dampness between my thighs, looks up at me and asks, *Have you been faithful?* I say, *Yes*.

Pas de Deux

1. She said: *Tell me one thing that doesn't end badly?*

2. I wanted her ruffled tutu and toe shoes,
pink satin ribbons latticed up my legs like body armor.

She knew I avoided mirrors, reflecting pools.
What, she asked, do you dislike about your face?

3. Hers was a thoughtless beauty,
while I worked hard for everything,

danced my body into submission,
those endless practice hours at the barre,
legs turned out, toes pointing, pointing.

4. *La laisse tomber*, she said, when I leapt,
head-first into her arms. She let me fall.

5. I dreamed a solo, spotlight, applause,
not tucked in the corps de ballet.

She, too, dreamed prima ballerina. On stage,
her wicked tour jetés just missed my face.

6. *A dancer in love with anyone but herself*
is called an understudy,
she laughed when I asked her to choose.

That night, I arabesqued right through her;
she tasted jealousy for the first time.

7. She became a self-fulfilling prophecy,
out till dawn, sex-soaked, sweaty with another,
less ambitious girl's perfume. (See #1).

8. When I found the photos with my eyes x'ed out,
I knew I would leave her.

My eyes—my one good feature.

When I asked him to turn me on he said:

—for Michael Cohen

1. *Turn yourself on.*

His voice had that flat affect lovers get
when they're done with you.

2. *You're burning through men,* my mother warned.
Like there was a limit.

Every day, a fresh opportunity
to ruin some poor man's life.

I was on fire.

3. *I'd take a bullet for you,* he told me once.
And meant it.

I didn't answer.
I tasted loneliness at last.

4. And he, behind me,
palms on my ass, riding.

5. (That night) I fell asleep with the TV remote
between my legs.

When I awoke, he was gone.

6. If he knew what I would write about him,
he'd have hated me sooner.

7. Sometimes, the person you'd take a bullet for
is the one behind the gun.

Bad Mother

My boy died young.
I was a bad mother.
So was my mother.
My best excuse?
When she died young
I fell off the earth.
Think thud/careen not spiral.
Think death wish. Free-fall.
A blueprint, the way I see it.
Soupçon for self-loathing,
with a narcotic chaser.
(Lovers who'd sell me out
for a half-gram of coke.)
Not good choices.
My mother threw me to the wolves.
Loved my sister (the easier one)
and my brother more.
Died when I needed her most.
My dead boy sealed my fate.
My only one.
I pondered suicide.
Learned to police my head.
Mind over matter, my mother said.
But she never lost a child.
My near-fatal accident at twenty.
The day my little brother almost drowned.
Even then, my mother had two spare kids.
I should have had more.

Hyena

I'm like a hyena, I get into the garbage cans. I have an insatiable curiosity.
—Leonora Carrington, painter

After Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse) [1937–1938] by L.C.

That camel toe beckons from her white jodhpur pants like an invitation, but of course, it's not. Instead, she extends her hand to the hyena's toothy mouth, sits in the blue chair, the color of its eyes. Out the window, a galloping white mare, forest-bound. *You're that horse*, Leonora says. *I've set you free*. And she? *The hyena*, she sighs. She paints herself as hermaphrodite, her elongated clit, that trio of dugs hanging from her belly. Today when she reaches for me, I see who's coming. Dark and cunning. Like her avatar. So unlike yesterday, when we lay together in the high grass, the thin September light, straw yellow, her face shading mine. *You're ravishing*, I said; she did not believe me. I stroked the wild hair from her forehead, planted kisses on her pulsing throat, tugged those white pants down past her hips. Mercurial, intent on pleasure. How can I not adore her? I open like a filleted animal. *Don't play me*, Leonora warns, when I gush over the horse, delight in how she portrays me. *See the smudge, lower left?* She points to a smear at the painting's edge where a figure once lived. *I decided I didn't like her any more. It could have been you.*