



**Ann Cotten**

**Banned!**

An Epic

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## INTRODUCTION

They're paler now, much less intelligible—  
the silhouettes we once held in our arms.  
I prodded life until it jumped, like a prodigal,  
and even now I'm tarnished from its charms.  
I gnaw in desperation at the camisolar seam  
that binds my heart so firmly to the world  
and needles me, necessarily perforating my skin.  
World keeps a steady chill, heart pumps endlessly,  
the language of my border makes me grateful, rather messily.

O how confusing is enthusiasm's sowing!  
How denotation slips through time, in doing so  
rotates the spit on which the summer's roasting  
beside November waving up and down its knowing saw.  
In balmy Danube's tepid ripples I see icy floatings,  
in cuckoo's calls I hear the ancient reaper mowing.  
All summer long I sniff out deep and fertile horrors  
and all the while, the air continues to overcome the river's

old names. I plunge my feet in micaceous mud  
just to get through its geriatric roils—swim there too long  
and you forget yourself, forget how to belong.

As, straining the cuirass, the young girl's breasts defy  
gravity and shyness—swelling, un-called for endorsements  
seen from on high like ancient tumuli  
in which hopes hold out like a load of reinforcements—  
together with these resident ghosts it is my mission  
to polish utopia stainless with my information,  
mash up Now, Not, and Yet in alloys Elba-ish.  
In interlapping German and Latin tonguings I fix  
to flatten all the problems of philosophy, its shifting...  
they call it shirring. Sheer but rather vicious little putsches.

That sweet carrots hide in the flattest soil  
is a fact known to carrot connoisseurs.  
Still it may be that my stanzas will total  
the calibrated sense of know-it-alls, pedantosaurs.  
"Now Cotten has stuck her head in the sand,"  
I can already hear reviewers tapping away  
at their Ipads, trembling with confused rage,  
as they condemn the poet who has always slightly "missed the page,"  
strutting her ostrich plumage, gauche even for Broadway's

perverted standards. Anyway, why should anyone read it?  
Following Inger Christensen, the plot exists  
as nothing more than scenery for the intricate rhyme scheme,  
which the plot accompanies like a striptease.  
Bored with itself alone, the rhyming skips  
around a bit, uncertain, waiting for the plot  
which, like a local goddess draped over an easy-chair,  
stays on because she hopes a bit more striptease might be got,  
hoping evening peels the inhibitions off as it wears.

God, not again, comparing poetry and sex!  
Alright, but what hobby's not embodied in sex?  
Maybe one that one began at age five or six,  
like paragliding? It has been likened to sex.

Knitting? Playing the flute? Practice for sex.  
Refined pastimes emphasize the delay of sex,  
while others offer goals that temporarily prevent sex,  
like cycling, it's said, vaginal ballet, or even tundra treks.  
Nevertheless, since poetry is taken up again, even swells

if interrupted for some tonsil hockey or a spot of strip-whist,  
and even when perpetually groomed the other way,  
I fail to see what in principal contradicts  
poetry as something to grip that's risqué,  
that mirrors sex, encourages sex, to stay  
ambition, in the Hegelian sense of *sèche étude de vie*.  
Not, anyhow, as the scum of some—yup, Academy:  
scum that flatters itself as being better off than knowledge:  
nostalgia. Unmethodically scraped off and revarnished

world, dressed up with pub-wit quips and a bunch of frilly pathos.  
These people write like a rancid layer of fat  
sent to pasture in mankind's gentle library  
or other commonplaces, as if a maxim nailed to a pallet  
were pure and never alloy. Hammer that.  
Either way you will have to finally decide,  
although the nuances will never cease to plague your label:  
do you use rhyme and let them rate you outdated  
or do you yawp and bang your wild free verse on the table?

This time I'd like to get past such sordid attacking.  
A Byron strophe's not a Spiderman costume  
and if it were, it's all the same: one mustn't rattle  
the cups. If you are like, "Vavoom!"  
and dive through critics' cocktail functions like a perfume,  
you soon will see how serious your thoughts really are.  
I know. Remember how I found you crying in the corner,  
wrapped in your rhymes? Grab my apology at once;  
the time for introduction's almost up.

It now remains to choose from nine muses a single one.  
Respectful and yet buddy-buddy, as you would treat anyone.  
No smooching, though, until the eyes start rolling!

A wink means not till later tonight. Then, with oils from  
Cypress, sandalwood from Myrrh, sausage out of Poland,  
I'll turn up at their bedroom door just like  
their country cousin with some home-grown weed to light  
us up. And then we'll listen to the string of memories  
and sing their praises, at length, using the mose savvy harmonies.

I need every one of the nine muses,  
I know I do, but I don't know their names so well.  
They're complex, concrete, massive, like so many Lampedusas  
on which dreams end, sighing, folding and stinging like Medusas.  
Their lurid colors would make lesser poets turn pale –  
not me. "One perseveres here." "And one smiles," say Clio  
and Euterpe. "Sing lightly, forlornly 'Mondo, addio!'"  
councils Polyhymnia, blushing constantly.  
Thalia twinkles wisdom at me: "Time that leads

to death is still time. Play with it, dear. All you are is play!"  
Melpomene makes not a peep and yet she changes the game  
with sadness deeply soulful as she looks at me.  
"You know, it goes askew." "The askewer, the better!"  
Erato hurtles in the Kamasutra with an über-thick quill,  
flogged to the beat by demoniac soul-imbroglio-knots.  
Terpsichore howls from the table: "Enough dirty jokes!  
Take a look at vernacular. Civilize your prater: be easy to sing!  
The masses should fasten you." "Check it out, I've got the I Ching,"

says Urania, laying the great book in front of me  
so gently that my reading is, for once, relaxing:  
a sunlit sea where I'm serene and even sheer  
like pricey fabric, finely woven. It seems right for me to be here,  
and out of pure joy my soul lags in my veins.  
Out of the bathroom I hear the voice of Calliope  
sketching, warm and witty, another little trope  
and suddenly I know with whom I would elope.  
How the world's old conduits travel onward and on  
through oceans, through Saharas; so she, always she,  
flows on ahead of me with vague and ur-delicious hip swings.

I pop inside with her and don't come out awhile.  
By the time we get out the party has retired.  
    Sleeping, all eight lay in complicated embrace  
and from the wurst a mouse flits chewing with haste  
    as cockroaches look up from nibbling on the day-old muffins.  
I take in my hand Calliope's warmer  
one while I space, rhapsodizing on variety  
until Calliope seals my mouth shut with her  
mouth, draws me from her room: No longer we'll disturb  
this forest, this that breathes us. We exit and we hear  
how in half sleep Urania bolts the bedroom door.

O Muses, sleep! Keep on sleeping on—at length!  
    I need your breath at its most peaceful pace.  
O Muses, help me through being, sleeping, dreaming! I'm afraid!  
    It alarms me what they see with such peace,  
    what's clearly written on the wall, in every empty space.  
I read how it stands with the world but I can't bear  
not to know, Что делать? Your names sure are famous,  
in the cow of the world each one of you's a stomach,  
you make milk and bread from grass in one unified front.

Lately I have been going to dark openings  
    from which a muffled chain sound rattles.  
Heavy heads, ancestry-flecked, three and three and three  
busy with fateful mooing, little battles. "Sedentariness breeds slavery!"  
I call out when Calliope's away. She dries  
her puppet visage for the world, only to please,  
since work is incinerated in every worldly pleasure.  
If one wants to outlast smoldering wars, leisure  
ly curls are helpful. Everybody likes a locklet.  
Voltaire was well aware of this. On the contrary, Kant forgot it.

Blow dryer and emphasis help one to endure the saucy  
    enticing of the Muses, who, like magpies, are  
drawn to everything. They store it all up and adopt it,  
are even able to massage it into something where  
    everything refers to them. Then they play hard to get.  
Ah, I've been mixed up in their business too long.  
That they alone the world are, know, make, love;

I can't get rid of that fact, while a wild delta fing  
ers and flows in me: erosion through naming.

Since I'm always concerned with clarification and beauty  
this erosion began to delight me considerably.  
And my work led to a new kind of verbal currency  
in New TV, while all the drably  
fattening idiots of Old Television managed doubly  
to let themselves get peeled off by our fresh new trend  
in 2020, going bankrupt and into early retirement,  
thanks to their offshore funds. It was the end of their scene,  
we made the New TV sans money: it streams.

Since the Internet everybody needs a new approach.  
The long gaps in success will open  
when success erupts of obsolete means, such as  
typesetting on TV. "Now go on in  
and buff the floor until it shines  
and then buff on" I thought, and mixed their games up.  
And when I was their mascot, I brought all my friends and  
detonated on time. While the old folks were flying, I hired my flock,  
and what we started then has yet to stop.

But we grow older, more efficient, and forgetful,  
forgetful, efficient: it's correlated, like a dance.  
Once upon we found everything dreadful,  
except for beauty, but beauty was chance.  
Since we learned to make our beauty, it has a dumber cadence.  
And so we see nonsense is just as hard as work,  
and so we work and stick together. But it's the wrong fight.  
We know who's reckless, who's a chicken, who's greedy,  
we tell each other and forget about it evening after evening.

It wouldn't be quite honest if I claimed  
that the adventure I am going to explain  
only took place because thoughts robbed me of sensations.  
I didn't leave the country of my own volition,  
even if that's what those who dragged me think  
because I hold my chin so high. Now I'll tell the real story,

how Being alone drove me into this annihilating conflict,  
because time, space, expression all have quantities,  
but thinking doesn't. Though at least thought won't put you six underneath.

The word's a good mediator between being and thinking,  
but it needs boundless space, time, and affection; barring that  
    's just scraps. Everything should come like a rabbit from a hat.  
Inaccurate things are distorted through the locat  
    ion where they're written.  
Only when it's correct, it wafts up to the brain,  
memory remembers sense and the ball hits the bat.  
But the reader needn't rack her brain about that,  
to her I swear: I'll tell it all exactly accurate.

To tell *All that* – that smacks of a threat.  
    *All that* continues to ferment in keen heads.  
It seeks the order out of which it sprang (more and more often,  
waste management as happiness), now sad, corrosive, rotten,  
*All that*. Yes. I don't remember anymore what it means  
to the hold the All, Weltgeist, nuclear physics, stop, I will  
know if a Muse would only hold it briefly to my cheek.  
Yes and yes! I see it, I bite it! Knead it! Still  
it remains to be proven, but one hears it in catastrophe.

Thanks to *All that* the song to come is pretty long.  
    And as it's proper for a stripper,  
I'm wearing tons of garments when the song  
    begins. Then while the plot unfolds I unzip  
    and toss my soul off, hoping for a tip.  
So listen up, here comes the ghastly ballad of  
Siberian disaster sung by a totally inadequate,  
modernist, delirious, fake Marquis de Sade  
in a woman's gestalt. From it you'll learn a lot.

1

Banned! My fate sounded with the ample ring  
    of long and sultry afternoons, kiwis and crocodiles

glossed in crooked stars: and how, like a boomerang  
    (let us not speak of other projectiles;  
    we write in unfamiliar styles  
and are more reassured when nothing comes back,  
no ex-ally with our own arrows in his neck  
breaking through branches, bending like a basket  
around himself) it comes back to hand how one first grasped it.

That's how it goes with childhood imaginings.  
    Because the world is bigger than one pictures  
and one soon is beyond that door's enticing interface,  
    the fairy-tale horizon so unfairly tailored,  
    now just a window ledge. How poor  
the things for which one spent all that healthy ambition;  
horizon only shortly employed for its propulsion.  
Now I'm a little like Napoleon: big on the inside,  
I commandeer everyone by looking down on them right.

And thus adulthood gums the whole world up.  
    The studios are full of younger meat  
    who, glancing up like littluns, try to hold  
me (it's anyone's guess if they're being sincere)  
    and all just to figure out what I'm thinking.  
When they watch, my soul is nothing but a vague funk.  
Its place I have declared official knowledge dump,  
since one can head the youngsters off with factoids of evidence  
while I guide our souls around the bend, their darling drunken reverend.

Sometimes I would do workshops with the schoolchildren.  
    It drove them crazy, just as it did me.  
They saw my lines of sight as they leaned in on them:  
transparently inebriated, full of fears and adulation,  
    titillating in their hair. But I saw how little they could see  
what was happening. Because I love reality and don't use a box  
to chasten it or play footsie beneath the table,  
all hands on it, I scoff, so that some boundaries get crossed:  
nothing fun will happen if no innocence wears off.

When it comes to knives, forks and scissors, I don't actually play

properly. I just shear off their appearance from their uses.  
They glisten, heavily weigh in the palm, lay  
close to each other, and what they could do, nobody dreams to say.

Children, always blind to their own purposes,  
are their own tools: they chat, watch, laugh, examine,  
build their world out of what you tell them.  
When they are so polite and arch-absorbent, ach, I could scream  
from paranoia! Every group has at least one

who despises me. While for all the rest I paint my face  
with sweet, effective, practical, unhorny tasks  
as well as banter which they always answer with a laugh.  
When I wink at the dark soul still stuck in the corner,  
she doesn't wink me back. The thorny rascal.  
So I begin to speak with them in codes,  
coerce them to admit their little inner notions:  
that I'm a person just like them and hardly altered  
except, when I realized Being bent me off the present, then I faltered.

What is the soul then but this realization  
of reality's realness, really: moments of perception  
which seriously discourage any mention  
except in speech's paralysis of the will  
through instrumentally rationalistic dementia,  
so lunges language. Lounging, one says language is corrupt?  
Corruption's just the warmth of sidling up  
to fellow men. One only wants to want what everybody wants.  
Just not right off. Why? One insists on being recognized.

Resistance, yeah: it stands in question and is then confirmed,  
manipulated according to our collective dictionaries  
in order to make a profit while getting in line with others  
so that the views don't *want* to wander off.

They hang around, dangerous, sexy, cheap and—curses—  
always around, when, bound through irony,  
certainties survive in their borders, their fences,  
and function until the youngens enhance  
reality with mohawks the color of iron. Y

et it's never settled, what they think they mean  
at first holds up, but  
just as quickly slips into the laws of language.  
"Y'all are green?" "Yes, green" Then take a bit  
of bribery, expensive provocants: here, and not  
another word: snatch the linens. Then nobody should make the asses  
ment that we bungled these wild children's chances  
just to chain them to tinker their whole lives for a pension.  
We'll risk making our television bristle with ever newer asses.

So adolescence ends. I much prefer the start.  
I often lost myself in closets with bad seeds;  
the moments, that they glorified, hit me with such an art,  
it adds up that their parents nowadays want to indict me.  
I am the stick they hit on in their search for victims.  
I watch them so they know to understand themselves  
as misunderstood; and in the night always the cold ices of the pillow;  
I guess it's good I'm gone, so that these children undisturbed  
can mint some imitative fictions, absurd but rightly heard.

I admit it wasn't right, no, I'll concede I went too far.  
I didn't punch it up to something dire alone, though.  
I stand out as a finely-groomed authority  
and must display that life goes on, and that delicate feeling  
is viable without slitting one's throat.  
The compromise is nothing but a nervous to and fro,  
how the girl would move as she fumbled with my hair  
with so many glances: desire like a dare,  
initially covetous, then wanting to punish me. Unawares

she lured me—did she fully know herself?  
But then I had to live it down to the full:  
what did she think this thing with glances was?  
She was fourteen, the daughter of a colleague, and I had kissed  
her on the forehead ever since she was a chick.  
She'd dragged me into a corner to tell me something  
but said nothing, just dashed her eyes to the floor.  
Me: "Let's go," Her: "Wait a mo-," and then she did it again:  
One kiss, and day's remains were veiled with such an errant thing.

I would be lying to say that I kept my cool.  
I paled, I reddened, I was fingers under her rule.  
    She just wanted to know how much she terrified me.  
Ghosting around my antics, unable to pacify me,  
    I watched her till she stuck her wicked tongue out at me.  
I suddenly became a problem for her. I would meet  
her glances. When she looked away, I peeked.  
Her mother recognized it as possible career fodder:  
two clues, a scandal, DNA traces, a tweet—

so she imagined, completely misjudging  
    the reality, typical for a newscaster.  
A gorgeous woman, scrupulous, clean-cut,  
a bit blank but her grace totally made it up,  
    always a bit more elegant, better, and faster  
than others. When a freaky summer showered us with mud,  
nukes, poison gas attacks, fraud, and once more flood,  
she'd haul us through, so urbane and so heinous,  
just like the world. She was glib and industrious,

I liked her, and yet, could never get close.  
    We greeted one another, laughed, grabbed pudding in the canteen.  
Things got more intense once Lena took me home;  
    I suddenly stood with her daughter in that bright and clean  
apartment, by the bookshelf where so many notes  
in her handwriting, like convulsing ants, dancing, adorned  
with facts like husks she sucked dry, getting at the causes,  
and in the kitchen, lemons. A hundred Post-its squirmed  
out of meter-high piles of copies under squalid saucers.

I stared but Lena found my staring boring.  
    We were both endlessly awkward.  
She showed me the wobbly stationary bike  
    with the glitter-chrome frame—we could talk  
about that—then suddenly something went on between us:  
Lena to me, her Being in my mouth, wooing supple-hard,  
fleeing till I find there, she leans me on the wall  
in her way, I push her away from my side with my arms,  
weighing her charms, until she goes wild and almost col

lapses between us. She draws me to her room. I peer  
around a bit, she flashes  
me the maddest stare, her hand on the dimmer.  
Not knowing what, if nothing happens, we were  
to do, we plough ahead, rash  
and dumb with lust, what could we two do,  
what could we have done that would be forbidden.  
Whenever one doubts, the other gets keener,  
the difference of skins makes one of us redden,

which is no doubt the most nameable of all temptations,  
the memory that will remain beside tough luck and brimstone.  
The strangeness seemed to fan the flames,  
but it filled her with worries once I had gone.

She fled to her Mummy, who of course did not blame us,  
but me. Their harmonic concord yawned to swallow the entire  
story. Their trust, so sudden, angered me. Their congress  
concluded that it would be best if I were stashed away a while.  
I didn't want to disappear. So there ensued an arbitration trial.

The thing's not over yet, it's still ongoing. How?

The girl liked me, regarded me with pity,  
spent a stressed-out week in her room. Ever since she  
gave her mother the hint—she only told me once herself—she howled.

Eventually she pulled herself together and with singular wit  
testified that I hadn't done anything wrong to her,  
I should hardly have safeguarded her from herself. Her delusion.  
"Of course I should have!" so I - what an open *pas de deux*—  
I wanted to show how I knew her, how I loved her, and why, too:

"Of course as a newscaster I must always  
protect the people from themselves foremost  
and even more the daughter of a talk show host,  
whom I love—I admit it. Sure enough, her behavior  
likes to surface in ways curious, even in our  
destructive house, with many a thing severe.  
Against this influence my friendship should protect her,  
since I do adore our young Lena—"

"Enough of that cunning arrogance! Judge, a subpoena!"

"Look, don't you see you've got Ma in a sweat?"

blurted Lena but she was much too intense.  
And our newsbird couldn't sit still another moment,  
stood up and let her perfect voice thunder across the court.

I won't repeat a word she said—quite a nitpicky horror  
for Lena and for me, as we sat with our heads sunken  
and let the weather gush above us. And then Lena fumbled  
for my hand, her mind made up to squeeze it tight, in public.  
That's when it first hit: that the trial might really go to shit.