

THE BOOK OF REPULSIVE WOMEN

Djuna Barnes

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FROM FIFTH AVENUE UP

SOMEDAY beneath some hard
Capricious star—
Spreading its light a little
Over far,
We'll know you for the woman
That you are.

For though one took you, hurled you
Out of space,
With your legs half strangled
In your lace,
You'd lip the world to madness
On your face.

We'd see your body in the grass
With cool pale eyes.
We'd strain to touch those lang'rous
Length of thighs,
And hear your short sharp modern
Babylonian cries.

It wouldn't go. We'd feel you
Coil in fear
Leaning across the fertile
Fields to leer
As you urged some bitter secret
Through the ear.

We see your arms grow humid
In the heat;
We see your damp chemise lie
Pulsing in the beat
Of the over-hearts left oozing
At your feet.

See you sagging down with bulging
Hair to sip,
The dappled damp from some vague
Under lip,
Your soft saliva, loosed
With orgy, drip.

Once we'd not have called this
Woman you—
When leaning above your mothers
Spleen you drew

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Your mouth across her breast as
Trick musicians do.

Plunging grandly out to fall
Upon your face.
Naked—female—baby
In grimace,
With your belly bulging stately
Into space.

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IN GENERAL

WHAT altar cloth, what rag of worth
Unpriced?
What turn of card, what trick of game
Undiced?
And you we valued still a little
More than Christ.

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SEEN FROM THE "L"

SO SHE stands—nude—stretching dully
Two amber combs loll through her hair
A vague molested carpet pitches
Down the dusty length of stair.
She does not see, she does not care
It's always there.

The frail mosaic on her window
Facing starkly toward the street
Is scribbled there by tipsy sparrows—
Etched there with their rocking feet.
Is fashioned too, by every beat
Of shirt and sheet.

Sill her clothing is less risky
Than her body in its prime,
They are chain—stitched and so is she
Chain—stitched to her soul for time.
Ravelling grandly into vice
Dropping crooked into rhyme.
Slipping through the stitch of virtue,
Into crime.

Though her lips are vague as fancy
In her youth—
They bloom vivid and repulsive
As the truth.
Even vases in the making
Are uncouth.

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IN PARTICULAR

WHAT loin-cloth, what rag of wrong

Unpriced?

What turn of body, what of lust

Undiced?

So we've worshipped you a little

More than Christ.

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FROM THIRD AVENUE ON

AND now she walks on out turned feet
Beside the litter in the street
Or rolls beneath a dirty sheet
Within the town.
She does not stir to doff her dress,
She does not kneel low to confess,
A little conscience, no distress
And settled down.

Ah God! she settles down we say;
It means her powers slip away
It means she draws back. day by day
From good or bad.
And so she looks upon the floor
Or listens at an open door
Or lies her down, upturned to snore
Both loud and sad.

Or sits besides the chinaware,
Sits mouthing meekly in a chair,
With over-curled, hard waving hair
Above her eyes.
Or grins too vacant into space—
A vacant space is in her face—
Where nothing came to take the place
Of high hard cries.

Or yet we hear her on the stairs
With some few elements of prayers,
Until she breaks it off and swears
A loved bad word.
Somewhere beneath her hurried curse,
A corpse lies bounding in a hearse;
And friends and relatives disperse,
And are not stirred.

Those living dead up in their rooms
Must note how partial are the tombs,
That take men back into their wombs
While theirs must fast.
And those who have their blooms in jars
No longer stare into the stars,
Instead, they watch the dinky cars—
And live aghast.

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TWILIGHT OF THE ILLICIT

YOU, with your long blank udders
 And your calms,
Your spotted linen and your
Slack'ning arms.
With satiated fingers dragging
At your palms.

Your knees set far apart like
Heavy spheres;
With discs upon your eyes like
Husks of tears,
And great ghastly loops of gold
Snared in your ears.

Your dying hair hand-beaten
'Round your head.
Lips, long lengthened by wise words
Unsaid.
And in your living all grimaces
Of the dead.

One sees you sitting in the sun
Asleep;
With the sweeter gifts you had
And didn't keep,
One grieves that the altars of
Your vice lie deep.

You, the twilight powder of
A fire-wet dawn;
You, the massive mother of
Illicit spawn;
While the others shrink in virtue
You have borne.

We'll see you staring in the sun
A few more years,
With discs upon your eyes like
Husks of tears;
And great ghastly loops of gold
Snared in your ears.

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TO A CABARET DANCER

A THOUSAND lights had smitten her
 Into this thing;
Life had taken her and given her
 One place to sing.

She came with laughter wide and calm;
 And splendid grace;
And looked between the lights and wine
 For one fine face.

And found life only passion wide
 'Twixt mouth and wine.
She ceased to search, and growing wise
 Became less fine.

Yet some wondrous thing within the mess
 Was held in check:—
Was missing as she groped and clung
 About his neck.

One master chord we couldn't sound
 For lost the keys,
Yet she hinted of it as she sang
 Between our knees.

We watched her come with subtle fire
 And learned feet,
Stumbling among the lustful drunk
 Yet somehow sweet.

We saw the crimson leave her cheeks
 Flame in her eyes;
For when a woman lives in awful haste
 A woman dies.

The jests that lit our hours by night
 And made them gay,
Soiled a sweet and ignorant soul
 And fouled its play.

Barriers and heart both broken—dust
 Beneath her feet.
You've passed her forty times and sneered
 Out in the street.

A thousand jibes had driven her

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To this at last;
Till the ruined crimson of her lips
Grew vague and vast.

Until her songless soul admits
Time comes to kill;
You pay her price and wonder why
You need her still.

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SUICIDE

Corpse A

THEY brought her in, a shattered small
 Cocoon,
With a little bruised body like
A startled moon;
And all the subtle symphonies of her
A twilight rune.

Corpse B

THEY gave her hurried shoves this way
 And that.
Her body shock—abbreviated
As a city cat.
She lay out listlessly like some small mug
Of beer gone flat.