

Lucretius

*On the Nature of Things*

Selection from Book IV

“Sensation and Sex”

In this last case, as I have explained, the thing in us that responds to the stimulus is the seed that comes with ripening years and strengthening limbs. For different things respond to different stimuli or provocations. *The one stimulus that evokes human seed from the human body is a human form.* As soon as this seed is dislodged from its resting-place, it travels through every member of the body, concentrating at certain reservoirs in the loins, and promptly acts upon the generative organs. These organs are stimulated and swollen by the seed. Hence follows the will to eject it in the direction in which tyrannical lust is tugging. The body makes for the source from which the mind is pierced by love. For the wounded normally fall in the direction of their wound: the blood spurts out towards the source of the blow; and the enemy who delivered it, if he is fighting at close quarters, is bespattered by the crimson stream. So, when a man is pierced by the shafts of Venus, whether they are launched by a lad with womanish limbs or a woman radiating love from her whole body, he strives towards the source of the wound and craves to be united with it and to transmit something of his own substance from body to body. His speechless yearning is a presentiment of bliss.

This, then, is what we term Venus. This is the origin of the thing called love — that drop of Venus' honey that first drips into our heart, to be followed by numbing heart-ache. Though the object of your love may be absent, images of it still haunt you and the beloved name chimes sweetly in your ears. If you find yourself thus passionately enamoured of an individual, you should keep well away from such images. Thrust from you anything that might feed your passion, and turn your mind elsewhere. Vent the seed of love upon other objects. By clinging to it you assure yourself the certainty of heart-sickness arid pain. With nourishment the festering sore quickens and strengthens. Day by day the frenzy heightens and the grief deepens. Your only remedy is to lance the first wound with new incisions; to salve it, while it is still fresh, with promiscuous attachments; to guide the motions of your mind into some other channel.

Do not think that by avoiding grand passions you are missing the delights of Venus. Rather, you are reaping such profits as carry with them no penalty. Rest assured that this pleasure is enjoyed in a purer form by the healthy than by the love-sick. Lovers' passion is

storm-tossed, even in the moment of fruition, by waves of delusion and incertitude. They cannot make up their mind what to enjoy first with eye or hand. They clasp the object of their longing so tightly that the embrace is painful. They kiss so fiercely that teeth are driven into lips. All this because their pleasure is not pure, but they are goaded by an underlying impulse to hurt the thing, whatever it may be, that gives rise to these budding shoots of madness.

In the actual presence of love Venus lightens the penalties she imposes, and her sting is assuaged by an admixture of alluring pleasure. For in love there is the hope that the flame of passion may be quenched by the same body that kindled it. But this runs clean counter to the course of nature. This is the one thing of which the more we have, the more our breast burns with the evil lust of having. Food and fluid are taken into our body; since they can fill their allotted places, the desire for meat and drink is thus easily appeased. But a pretty face or a pleasing complexion gives the body nothing to enjoy but insubstantial images, which all too often fond hope scatters to the winds.

When a thirsty man tries to drink in his dreams but is given no drop to quench the fire in his limbs, he clutches at images of water with fruitless effort and while he laps up a rushing stream he remains thirsty in the midst. Just so in the midst of love Venus teases lovers with images. They cannot glut their eyes by gazing on the beloved form, however closely. Their hands glean nothing from those dainty limbs in their aimless roving over all the body. Then comes the moment when with limbs entwined they pluck the flower of youth. Their bodies thrill with the presentiment of joy, and it: is seed-time in the fields of Venus. Body clings greedily to body; moist lips are pressed on lips, and deep breaths are drawn through clenched teeth. But all to no purpose. One can glean nothing from the other, nor enter in and be wholly absorbed, body in body; for sometimes it seems that that is what they are craving and striving to do, so hungrily do they cling together in Venus' fetters, while their limbs are unnerved and liquefied by the intensity of rapture. At length, when the spate of lust is spent, there comes a slight intermission in the raging fever. But not for long. Soon the same frenzy returns. The fit is upon them once more. They ask themselves what it is they are craving for, but find no device that will master their malady. In aimless bewilderment they waste away, stricken by an unseen wound.

Add to this that they spend their strength and fail under the strain. Their days are passed at the mercy of another's whim. Their wealth slips from them, transmuted to Babylonian brocades. Their duties are neglected. Their reputation totters and goes into a decline. It is all very well for dainty feet to sparkle with gay slippers of Sicyon; for settings of gold to enclasp

huge emeralds aglow with green fire, and sea-tinted garments to suffer the constant wear and stain of Venus. A hard-won patrimony is metamorphosed into bonnets and tiaras or, it may be, into Grecian robes, masterpieces from the looms of Elis or of Ceos. No matter how lavish the decor and the cuisine—drinking parties (with no lack of drinks), entertainments, perfumes, garlands, festoons and all—they are still to no purpose. From the very heart of the fountain of delight there rises a jet of bitterness that poisons the fragrance of the flowers. Perhaps the unforgetting mind frets itself remorsefully with the thought of life's best years squandered in sloth and debauchery. Perhaps the beloved has let fly some two-edged word, which lodges in the impassioned heart and glows there like a living flame. Perhaps he thinks she is rolling her eyes too freely and turning them upon another, or he catches in her face a hint of mockery.

And these are the evils inherent in love that prospers and fulfils its hopes. In starved and thwarted love the evils you can see plainly without even opening your eyes are past all counting. How much better to be on your guard beforehand, as I have advised, and take care that you are not enmeshed!

To avoid enticement into the snares of love is not so difficult as, once entrapped, to escape out of the toils and snap the tenacious knots of Venus. And yet, be you never so tightly entangled and embrangled, you can still free yourself from the curse unless you stand in the way of your own freedom. First, you should concentrate on all the faults of mind or body of her whom you covet and sigh for. For men often behave as though blinded by love and credit the beloved with charms to which she has no valid title. How often do we see blemished and unsightly women basking in a lover's adoration! One man scoffs at another and urges him to propitiate Venus because he is the victim of such a degrading passion; yet as like as not the poor devil is in the same unhappy plight himself, all unaware. A sallow wench is acclaimed as a nut-brown maid. A sluttish slattern is admired for her 'sweet disorder'. Her eyes are never green, but grey as Athene's. If she is stringy and woody, she is lithe as a gazelle. A stunted runt is a sprite, a sheer delight from top to toe. A clumsy giantess is 'a daughter of the gods divinely tall'. She has an impediment in her speech—a charming lisp, of course. She's as mute as a stockfish—what modesty! A waspish, fiery-tempered scold - she 'burns with a gem-like flame'. She becomes 'svelte' and 'willowy' when she is almost too skinny to live; 'delicate' when she is half-dead with coughing. Her breasts are swollen and protuberant: she is 'Ceres suckling Bacchus'. Her nose is snub—'a Faun', then, or 'a child of the Satyrs'. Her lips bulge: she is 'all kiss'. It would be a wearisome task to run through the whole catalogue. But suppose her face in fact is all that could be desired and the charm of Venus radiates from her whole body. Even

so' there are still others. Even so, we lived without her before. Even so, in her physical nature she is no different, as we well know, from the plainest of her sex. She is driven to use foul smelling fumigants Her maids keep well away from her and snigger behind her back. The tearful lover, shut out from the presence heaps the threshold with flowers and garlands, anoints the disdainful door posts with perfume, and plants rueful kisses on the door. Often enough, were he admitted, one whiff would promptly make him cast round for some decent pretext to take his leave. His fond complaint, long-pondered and far-fetched, would fall dismally flat. He would curse himself for a fool to have endowed her with qualities above mortal imperfection.

To the daughters of Venus themselves all this is no secret. Hence they are at pains to hide all the back-stage activities of life from those whom they wish to keep fast bound in the bonds of love. But their pains are wasted, since your mind has power to drag all these mysteries into the daylight and get at the truth behind the sniggers. Then, if the lady is good-hearted and void of malice, it is up to you in your turn to accept unpleasant facts and make allowance for human imperfection.