

## JOURNEY TO THE IN-BETWEEN

By Michael Ventura

*Midnight,*

*One more night without sleeping.*

*Green door,*

*What's that secret you're keeping?*

--Pop song by Bob Davie, 1956

Today sexuality still seems to be a territory as private and filled with fear as ever it was. You might argue the opposite, because so much about sexuality these days is fearlessly public--and that's true, if by "public" you mean the merely visible. But privately, we haven't advanced far in our ability to talk of our own sexuality, one with another.

As in days of yore, we embark on our individual sexual journeys with minimal guidance--zip, really. There's scant discussion about *being* a sexual being: how it feels, what we do, who we are sexually, and what that means to us as we go about our lives. We don't have much idea of what sex is *for* even. (If it were only for reproduction wouldn't we rut seasonally like other mammals?) Rarely can couples in long-term relationships expand the scope of their shared sensuality. Psychotherapy has gone from viewing sex almost mystically, like Freud, to making of sex something so clinical it's almost boring, in the tradition of Masters & Johnson and their many descendants. Much of contemporary psychotherapy seems to have minimized sexuality to something that's no more than an element of *relationship*, rather than a force in itself, a realm all its own.

That's part of what makes sexuality scary: it *is* a force in itself, a realm all its own; one in which the rational and the measured are overwhelmed and subsumed.

It's this "realm of the senses" (from the title of Nagisa Oshima's controversial 1976 movie) that ignites a relationship during that first buoyant period when lovers experience intoxicating sensuality, and when being irrational, overwhelmed, and subsumed is thrilling. But, if they last, relationships tend to settle down into a sexual sameness, or even not much sex at all. That's a familiar complaint from couples who find it necessary to enter a therapist's consulting room, when over familiarity can be a delicate dilemma.

What if "over familiarity" is a cover for something else? What if that "something else" is fear? Fear of the power that lies waiting in the dangerous places you may go in the realm of your senses, where you've been keeping secrets not only from your world and your lover, but from yourself?

To *begin* a relationship is, by definition, to change's one life, and an initially intoxicating sensuality is often the fuel the drives that change--for don't we discover each other's bodies before, somewhere down the line, we truly discover each other? That early stage of sensual intoxication opens many passageways for mutual discoveries that, on the surface, have little to do with sex. But once a relationship settles in--once it's firmly woven into the fabric of one's life--change becomes threatening. We start to prefer a pleasurable, domesticated fuck, not too high or low on the scale of intensity, as a comfort and a release, although a limited repertoire risks boredom. Wandering off into the realm of the senses, which is always uncharted--a place where the unexpected always happens--isn't what most settled couples are eager to experience, however much they miss their initial sexual adventure and indulge secretly in titillating fantasies that remain firmly in

the fantasist's control. (Some turn to pornography to expand their sexuality, only to confine it further, imprisoning their desires within the limits of pornographic imagery. Pornography is, paradoxically, disembodied sex--an oxymoronic enterprise.)

What is it, then, that lurks, awaiting discovery, deep in the senses, and why, for so many, is it feared more than desired?

### **Lessons of In-Betweenness**

Let's forego generalizations and get down.

In my twenties, sex was about compulsion. It didn't feel like a choice. In an odd way, it didn't feel like it had anything to do with *me*. The sexual imperative was impersonal. It gripped me and swept me up, not because I was me, but because I was human. There was no way I could choose *not* to have sexual feelings--which, I now see, was one ingredient in the psychological stew that made sex frightening for me. I asked myself, *What kind of a joke is God playing? Why am I built to want something so deeply that, at the same time, I dread so much?*

There was no shortage of lovers. I was attracted to women and they were attracted to me. But sometimes, my fear was so great that even a little stimulation made me come prematurely. Or I'd fake the performance, not realizing that I was essentially having an out-of-body experience, my mind taking over by "faking" while my body did whatever it did, without sensations of pleasure since, really, I wasn't participating. Some rare times, I'd go wild with sex, and that felt like becoming someone else, someone I didn't know and wasn't sure I wanted to know. Of course, being a guy, I spoke of this to no one, including my shrinks.

Then I met . . . let's call her Zelda. She asked me out. "I know a neat place we can go," she said. "Let's go," I agreed. Not until we were a few strides inside the joint did I realize that Zelda's "neat place" was a raucous lesbian bar.

That's when I noticed that it was hard to tell about Zelda. There was something masculine about her: she was tall-ish, with cropped hair, and a manner that mixed humor with a gentle severity. *Zelda's a dyke?* I wondered. *But what a body! If she's a dyke, she's a fantastic dyke! Lesbian bar--am I on Mars?*

Loud rock and country music. Women dancing with each other. Women linking arms, talking, fondling, smooching. I was neither titillated nor horrified. I was in shock! What was I doing here? What was Zelda trying to prove? It was definitely a test. I didn't want to stay and couldn't leave--on the street I come from there's nothing worse than chickening out.

Zelda said, "Let's dance." We danced, while I wondered who or what those lesbians thought *I* was.

I never learned whether Zelda had been with women, but we spent a year or so together during which volatile arguments counterpointed our equally volatile, celebratory sex, the best I'd as yet experienced consistently. In retrospect, I know now that something about Zelda's masculinity awakened me sensually--except that wouldn't make sense if you saw her. She had incredible breasts . . . and her legs went on forever--nothing masculine that way. But she had such sensational sensual power, and power is a quality we perceive as masculine. So what was it? Now I'd say that our boundaries were smudged. In bed, nothing was one thing or another: maleness and femaleness flowed

freely within us both. Everything was in-between in our realm of the senses--and, in that in-betweenness, for the first time, I felt sexually empowered and free.

In-betweenness, from my first experience of it, was interesting on every level--much more interesting than being, sexually, only “a man.” But the in-between state had its ups and downs. Over the years--in relationships and brief encounters--I felt as though my body time-traveled. Sometimes, in sex, I’d inhabit my body fully; sometimes it was as though I was back in my up-tight twenties; and always it was as though my body shifted its valence, as it were, with each person, or shifted at different times during a sustained relationship, differently on different nights, or different from one year to the next, one stage of life to the next.

You can be in a relationship for years and suddenly see a face upon your lover that you’ve never seen and never guessed was there. Slowly I realized that it wasn’t “as though” my body changed sexually with different people and different situations; it did change. Human beings are such powerful receptors and radiators that you quite literally change what I’d call your “imaginal body” in sexual intimacy with another, and the other changes in turn. This is so far from the model of sexuality presented by and to mainstream society that it took me some time to entertain the notion that perhaps it was society in general, and not me, that was sexually freakish. Society says you’re one thing or another--male or female, straight or gay, young or old, human or animal. But the deeper you venture into the realm of the senses, the more you encounter the shape-shifting reality of your in-betweenness in feelings and sensations that are male *and* female, straight *and* gay, young *and* old, human *and* animal. This can get more than a little confusing.

Inhabiting my body consistently on my own terms, rather than being wholly at the mercy of the shape-shifting phenomenon I now understood sex to be, was, let's say, a concern. As much as in-betweenness educated and thrilled me, I wanted a certain sexual identity, too: a me-ness that I could count on even when the senses took over. The imaginal body was a marvel, but I wanted a firmer point of reference to start from and return to.

To know yourself as a sexual individual--rather than as one who does or doesn't fulfill a role assigned to you--takes some conscious work. As it happened, the conscious work I chose arose from a conversation with a friend--let's call her Xena.

Xena and I had sometimes been wildly attracted to each other, and we'd now and then been lovers, but our relationship wasn't romantic. We were friends. We trusted each other. We were each the only person we could speak with about our sexuality.

One day, we met for lunch and, as usual with us, the tremendous mystery of simply having a sexual body was the subject that preoccupied our conversation. In the midst of it, I was suddenly swept up, overcome, with lust for my friend, so much so that I blushed. Knowing me well, Xena got it. We laughed. I said something like, "There's *got* to be some way to break through to another level of sexual life!" That, rather than the intensity of my attraction, interested her. Xena said, "What about ritual?" That brought the problem into the intellect, where we were comfortable dealing with it.

What came of that discussion was a plan: we'd meet one night a week for four weeks--representing the four directions of the compass. We'd each bring flowers, food, water, a prayer, and a song. No inebriants. We'd meet, disrobe, sit, exchange flowers, say the prayers, and sing our songs to each other (though neither of us was much at singing).

We'd gaze at each other in silence until we felt our physical and psychic reality shift, however long that might take--we were both familiar with trance-states from other sorts of ritual. We wouldn't begin to touch until we felt "the shift." We agreed to contain the experience in a vessel of secrecy: we wouldn't speak of it at all for some years, and then, if we had a reason to speak of it, we'd do so in the most general terms, keeping details to a minimum, never revealing the other's name, and keeping the memory as an intact vessel.

If this had been in some sort of therapeutic setting (though I can't imagine what sort), it would have involved safety precautions of some kind, but Xena and I--recklessly, no doubt--never considered safety. We wanted to open ourselves to the forces and energies of sensuality without equivocation. We were ready to accept immolation--in theory, anyway, remembering that in Oshima's film, *In the Realm of the Senses*, the lovers became so entranced by their sensuality that they destroyed each other. We avoided that fate, perhaps only because we recognized the possibility and were open to it. In any case, we proceeded.

The intensity that we achieved was uncanny. Me, I'm about 5'8", and, at the time, weighed about 145 pounds, while Xena was, in the loveliest way, large. Yet, at one point, there was I, tossing her into the air and catching her--something possible for me only in a trance-state. Sometimes it felt like we were undersea creatures--squids, maybe. Gender was absent. All there was for us was sensation. Our physical bodies were merely vehicles--ramps for leaping into flights of physically enacted fancy. I promise you that I'm not exaggerating.

We met four times thus, to honor the north, south, east, and west--symbolic as aspects of our bodies and psyches. As the storytellers say, "There are four directions and a fifth direction, which is exactly where *you* are." When it was all over, Xena and I felt that, at last, our bodies were our own: psyches fully embodied, bodies electrically psyched. Many years have passed since then, and I can testify that we weren't wrong that we'd learned to inhabit our physical identities. I've since surrendered my body to given situations, but I've never felt my imaginal body determined, beyond my choosing, by a situation. After those rituals, I found that there was an equal exchange between my body and the sensual situation in which it finds itself. This was in-betweenness realized as a sexual territory that could be accessed consciously, with purpose. (A footnote: Xena and I haven't made love since, but our friendship wasn't thwarted by what we did. We remain close.)

A genuine breakthrough alters the rhythms and patterns of the sphere of life related to it; more subtly, in areas not as accessible to language, a genuine breakthrough alters the energies of one's life--the energies one radiates and attracts. It's no coincidence that, after this experiment in ritual (which I never had the need or desire to repeat), the women who've been attractive to me and whom I've attracted have been centered sexually in what I've called in-betweenness. In general, my sexual life has become both more relaxed and more intense. More relaxed in that my in-betweenness has a solid center and I feel no insecurity about it, either physically or emotionally. How that's worked out concretely is that--contrary to what's continually broadcast by a culture neurotically transfixed on youth--sex in my fifties and now my sixties has been far, far



more satisfying, intense, and entrancing than sex in my twenties and thirties. What a surprise!

For instance, I've been with a woman whom I'll call Zoe. She's a bisexual who usually prefers women and who's as often as not related to me sexually as though I were what she calls "a femme"--a designation that has nothing to do with my daily, walking-around, heterosexual persona, which I'd define as sort of tough-streetkid-growing-old-but-don't-mess-with-me. It's a persona I'm more than comfortable with, even sort of addicted to, yet being "femme" doesn't bother me. It interests me.

Zoe's explanation for calling me that goes something like this: "You're hetero, but you're not straight. I think of you as a lesbian in a man's body. Straight men--that I've been with, anyway--they're ignorant of the vastness of pleasure. It's all cocks with them. If the cock is up, they're happy. If it's down, they're crushed. Well, cocks go up and down! But we have *lots* of body, and any part of the body can come! A lover a mine, a butch lesbian, said, 'Sweetie, I promise I can make your *knees* come!'--and she could. You know what you are, Ventura? A heterosexual queer." I feel I've been given a significant compliment--a kind of flag that stakes out my territory in the vastness of pleasure that's in-betweenness.

What does Zoe mean when she says that knees can come, that any part of the body can come? She means that, given proper attention, any surface of skin can be driven to a pitch of intensity that sizzles all the wires and rings all the bells--in different ways, with different sensations, from that of genital orgasms. The feelings are more like the varieties of orgasm that women report--waves of sensation--and as a male, I've discovered these comings can go on much longer than, and be just as intense as, penile

ejaculation--which is not to denigrate penile orgasm. It's just not nearly all there is; not nearly all that's possible. Since I don't inhabit a woman's biological body, I wouldn't dare say what inhabiting in-betweenness means for women, except that it has something to do with a note left me by Zee: "I'm so glad that my breasts have touched the back of your thighs and calves."

Well, if I'm a heterosexual queer I know one thing: I'm not the only one. No matter how strange your experience is, no matter how unique it feels, you're not the only one having such an experience.

As it turns out, a friend of many years--let's call him Zeb--has made a similar journey, though how he did so he's never said. Nearing 60, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and was due for surgery any day. Afterward, he'd no longer experience ejaculations, and, in all probability, would be incapable of an erection. My friend was freaked out about having cancer, but not disturbed about the sexual consequences of the prostate surgery. When I brought up the subject as gently as I could, Zeb, who's never been afflicted with delicacy, said, "I don't worry about that, Mike. I don't fuck with just my dick. I fuck with my whole body."

Fucking with your whole body is a graphic description of what I, being of an abstract bent, have called in-betweenness. Fucking with your whole body involves fucking with your whole psyche, not just a pet piece of it.

At most levels and expressions of Western culture, how sexuality is framed, defined, and presented is confined and misconceived. In heterosexually "straight" thought, sexuality tends to be dealt with only as part of something else--one element of a relationship, one element of a marriage. Lesbians, homosexuals, bisexuals and gender-

benders of all sorts--the queer spectrum--have tended to approach sexuality with far more imagination (forced to, no doubt, because they're defined by their sexual activity). By "imagination" I don't mean this or that kinky act. I mean a recognition that the sexual act is psychoactive, psychotropic, psychedelic, opening one to states of being unattainable by other means. In this view, sexuality isn't only something one does--it's someplace one goes: as Oshima said, a realm.

Put another way, sexuality is a means of communication in which what's communicated is sensory and imaginal, not easily transferable to the verbalizations of "relationship" or verbalizations of any kind. Zoe put it most succinctly: "Sex is a language. I speak it."

### **In the Realm of the Real World**

It may be tempting to dismiss contemplations of in-betweenness as a kind of sexual "tripping." (I've never used hallucinogens, by the way, in case you were wondering.) Society's traditional argument is that a man is a man and a woman is a woman, period; they must experience sex accordingly, through the genitalia. But the more we discover about biology, the more we find that "a man is a man and a woman is a woman" just ain't so.

Alice Dreger is professor of clinical medical humanities and bioethics in the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University. This summer, during the controversy over whether South African runner Caster Semenya was a man or a woman, Dreger wrote an essay in August 22 *The New York Times* in which she stated: "The biology of sex is a lot more complicated than the average [person] believes. Many think

you can simply look at a person's 'sex chromosomes.' If a person has XY chromosomes, you declare him a man. If XX, she's a woman. Right? Wrong. A little biology: on the Y chromosome, a gene called SRY usually makes a fetus grow as a male. It turns out, though, that SRY can show up on an X, turning an XX [female] fetus essentially male. And if the SRY does not work on the Y, the [male] fetus develops essentially female."

No one knows how many people that describes. Dreger informs us that there exists no scientific test to determine whether a person is, finally and definitely, female or male! Still less can we be certain of the gender of the psyche. No matter how male-valenced, there are always female aspects; no matter how female-valenced, there are always male aspects.

"The real world" is still run on strictly heterosexual, male-dominated terms--less strictly than ever, but still strictly enough that it takes much effort and gumption to go against the tottering but formidable assumptions of what's "normal." Where that struggle is most difficult of all is, if we but admit it, not out there in society, but in ourselves.

When I discussed this essay with an especially well-informed shrink friend whom we'll call Zachariah, he said, "The fear of encountering one's in-betweenness in the sexual trance is probably the least discussed aspect of sexuality. The secret of sex is that sense of the free-floatingness and boundryless-ness of it, the way you float through the boundaries of male and female, the unpredictability of it. Sex remains a mystery because of this shape-shifting quality."

There's no fixed place in the realm of the senses--no "there" there. What you know changes every time you go into it. As was told me once by a woman whom we'll call Zia, "There are things you have to learn all over again, every night."

That's really what's so scary about sexuality. In the young phases of life--and we're young whenever we fall in love--we perceive sex as adventure, and that's when it's most completely satisfying, for that's when we're most open to journeys into the senses. Those journeys *are* genuine adventures. In the settled phases of our lives, we may miss the adventure, but we use sexuality for everything else--comfort, reassurance, release, and the confirmation of our sense of identity. In the settled phases of life, we don't want our identity threatened. But identity that isn't continually challenged grows stale and begins to lose its shape and firmness--for habit is poor nutrition for identity. That's when people begin to speak of something "missing." You hear that a lot in settled relationships. But what, exactly, is missing? What's missing are the unexplored realms of oneself.

Sexuality is scary because it's where we meet ourselves most directly, without filters, without verbiage, and, if we go far enough, without fixed roles. It's also where we meet ourselves with and through the Other--this Other with whom we journey into the realm; this Other, a partner as fluid **as** we are.

Let's, for a moment, leave the complexities of psychology aside and admit that it's natural to fear sex because it's natural to fear the unpredictable and it's natural to fear danger--even though this sort of danger has many positive aspects. It's natural to fear change, and in the shape-shifting qualities of deep sexuality, change is ever-present--it can even be said that in the throes of such sex, sex *is* change. To see suddenly, upon someone long loved, a face you've never seen is unnerving, and some part of you wants to say, "Honey, put your mask back on," while some other part of you wants to say, "Who are *you* and how do I get to know you better?" You go with one response or the

other before you have time to think or even to feel, and that split-second decision might change your relationship to the other and to yourself. It might change your life.

So there's no such thing as safe sex. Not for the psyche. There's routine sex, in which partners remain within well-practiced roles, but even that isn't safe because of the hole it leaves inside and the yearnings it creates, yearnings that may even lead you elsewhere, to be with someone else. You may not act out these yearnings, but that sort of repression is its own agony. In the same way, there's no such thing as casual sex. What's meant by "casual sex" is engaging sexually while turning off those parts of yourself that are capable of caring. The price one pays for the repetition of such behavior is anything but casual.

Sex is scary the way the sea is scary, the way a storm is scary--because it's elemental, and, as in all great elemental things, the same qualities that make it so powerfully beautiful can make it powerfully frightening.

Zeb said, "A guy doesn't fuck just with his dick, a woman doesn't fuck just with her pussy. You fuck with your *life*."

And, uh, *that's* what's really scary about sex.

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