

MODERN LOVE: MORE HYSTERICAL THAN FREE

by Michael Ventura

Austin Sun - April 19, 1975

“Anything you can say about yourself is made up.” I had been talking (I talk a lot) for a long time when Karen shot that remark across the bed. I stopped talking. I still don’t know if what she said is true, but I know it’s important to remember that it might be true. Open my drawer – or my heart, for that matter – and you’ll find scraps and fragments, written and felt in no order, contradictory, often paradoxical. I won’t pretend that I can write this with any sort of cohesion or unity; I don’t feel this with any cohesion or unity. Some of this has been fruitful to think and write down. Some of these bits have repaid my effort by helping me later to live through a love or a loneliness. It’s a little much to expect that they’ll do anything for anyone else, but there would be no setting them down without that notion. So I’ll set them here as though you just opened my drawer and are picking them out in no special sequence. And let the spaces between the fragments stand for everything I don’t know or am afraid to admit. The spaces, at least, aren’t made up.

If there were an occult art that would read the truth from the stains on our sheets, how many would consult the oracle? Not many, I think. Not if the truth were really being told. In the daytime I’ve talked big about seeking the truth of sex; in the night I’ve often settled for assurance, comfort, or... words again, Ventura. What you’re trying to say is: There are nights when the flesh of her breast, the flesh of her thigh, seems an incredible expanse. Your desire retreats, dwarfed. Is there some multi-syllable word for the fear of limitless space? And do you call it *love* on those other nights when you also seem giant, and the bed incredibly long, and the two of you all the world you need?

In the morning you’ve shrunk again: too small people on a bed in a big world.

Only one thing I ever heard about sex was true every day or night I thought of it. Karen said it: “There are things you have to learn all over again every night.”

Last night Betsy – fourteen years old! – at the poetry class. We were talking about Cavafy’s love-poems. “Michael, tell me” – the little wench is smiling, knowing I’m on the spot – “tell me something *concrete* about relationships.”

How would I know?

But I didn’t miss a beat.

“Never say *I love you* when what you mean is *Good morning*.”

Nightbyrd, prefacing the first *Sexuality and Relationships* articles, explaining why they were written anonymously, under pseudonyms: “Even in this liberated age, there’s a great deal of self-consciousness about expressing sexual desires and experiences openly.”

Bullshit, Jeff. For one thing:
“Liberated age” is media myth. This ain’t no way a liberated age. It’s an hysterical age.

Any way you slice it – politics, economics, sex, art – any way; the overwhelming reality of our days is that they are hysterical, and they are more hysterical, and then they are more hysterical. I have seen a woman in a mental hospital tear off her robe and run down the hall screaming. She was not trying to liberate her body. She was trying to jump out the window.

Self-consciousness? Stripped to the bone, not signing our names means one thing: We don’t trust our friends, we don’t trust who we sleep with, slept with, or are likely to sleep with.

Who the devil else are we hiding from anyway? Those several thousand eyes out there in Readership Land who wouldn’t recognize us anyway? I don’t think so. We’re hiding from each other. Whoever “each other” means to each of us. And this is as good an image as I can conjure of a pervasive, commonly-accepted hysteria.

Perhaps now y’all will tolerate the statement that this fear reveals more of where sex is really at with us than any of the hip homilies anyone can mouth. The assumption that we’ll all use pseudonyms is itself the most important statement THE SUN has printed about our relationships and sexuality. Compared to that, the rest is just filler.

I listen to myself when I joke with my friends about sex. I watch myself when I meet someone new and attractive at a party. Fear and coyness and snideness. Posing and verbal dishonesty and anxiety. Masked with charm and smart talk, and juiced with alcohol. And almost everyone around me seems to be doing the same thing. “Liberated age,” my ass.

Say over to yourself the lyrics of most popular songs. The songs, say, that move any one of us to jack up the volume on the radio. AM or FM, baby, they are most of them pathological states of male and female machismo, possessiveness, jealousy, abject pleading or equally abject gloating, sex-revenge or a syrupy, choking nostalgia for something that few of us ever knew first-hand. What we like to say and what we pay to hear so often don’t jibe at all – you wonder whether all of us haven’t gone stark staring mad.

One could make a good case for saying: you can more accurately check out your so-called liberation by which songs you turn up on the radio and which records you buy than by what you say or write or want to hear about relationships. And not only are we split in the way we listen to our music, but the music itself is split: so often there are rhymes of tenderness set in rhythms of arrogance, intimidation and hostility. The same people who were the generation of Peace and Love invented a music that literally shriveled the nerve-endings in your ears, blasted the possibility of the rational from its presence, and had the power to wither a greenhouse. Everywhere we turn, our social forms are wracked with these splits, with this particular mode of hysteria.

Look at our politics. We – many of us – are, at least loosely, part of the same movement (over the last decade) that said *political* liberation meant involvement, but that *sexual* liberation implied non-involvement. Again and again we said things politically that most have avoided sexually. Political freedom meant individual responsibility, sexual freedom (to these same people) meant freedom-from-responsibility. The movement’s political forms meant everyone-has-an-individual-and-responsible-conscience; the social

(i.e., sexual) forms were tribal music, merging of individualities and repudiation of what is meant by conscience.

This-all was at the time that it became fashionable to talk about how The Counter Culture was repudiating the Western mind-body split.

Huh?

Our “liberated” counter-culture greases its social (sexual, that is) wheels with drugs we would not have in any great quantity without the machinations of the Mafia. That is, of an organization whose sole authority is its willingness to murder. And yet the counter-culture supposes itself to be a new wave. From hip-young-professionals to street-people we want little to do with implications or consequences. How many times have you heard your friends, or yourself, say they got their best sex on pot, mescaline, what-all, without *ever* thinking about who they’re depending on to sensitize their genitalia.

I give you a great lady, the writer Doris Lessing: “In any situation there is always a key fact, an essence. But it is usually every other fact, thousands of facts, that are discussed, dealt with. The central fact is usually ignored, or not seen.” The central fact of all drug-doing in this country is the Mafia. In no article or living-room discussion have I heard this mentioned in a counter-culture crowd; at least, not in relation to *their favorite* drugs.

And the central fact in all this liberation-talk is our hysteria.

As though it all weren’t one stew. As though what I want politically isn’t part of what I want sexually. As though tender words in violent rhythms won’t do violence to the rhythms of my tenderness. As though obtaining my visions through the commerce of murderers corresponds in any way to obtaining my visions through the tutoring of a Yaqui. As though I can be part of all this, I mean, as I no doubt am, and not wind up even more crazed, more at a loss, more bewildered by as simple and inescapable thing as my own erection.

One feels a fate growing inside and can’t be sure if it’s a future or a cancer. At the right moment, will you be ready to forsake whatever is necessary? Will you know the moment? My judgment has been so dulled...

Look. I gotta love you. I just can’t do it any other way anymore. From now if the stakes ain’t high I don’t play the game. Penny-ante sex just doesn’t make it. I’ve had it with these casual fucks and fuck-ups. I gotta find out. With you. Or leave. That’s it.

There’s that crucial point when you’re falling in love. You’re both in bed and you both *know* what it could be for you if you have the courage to trust enough, to give and take, to know and be known, in your muscles and in your eyes, to do and be done, as you really need and want. If only you can let yourself go, let the other in, just enough, for a start. There’s this five minutes between people – or sometimes it’s a couple of days, or sometimes a week or a month – when you’re trying to know whether you have the courage this time. Whether this person and what you feel for this person are worth what it’s going to cost. You weigh it, feel it out, wonder what you’ll become because of this.

And it could happen in bed or at a restaurant or anywhere, but you realize you've chosen, whether or not to live this one out.

Usually it's not. And you refer to it later with a bored, condescending air that *means* that what's exciting about people is their possibilities. Either you decide to try to live out those possibilities or you don't. And if you don't they take their place with all the other jagged, fragmented half-memories you keep.

Or the many times you've started with "I'm not going to get involved" (*why?*) "this is just gonna be casual." And so you batten down everything in you that needs more. And you live with a dread you don't want to name: the knowledge that ignoring a need doesn't cancel it out. And that one day all those needs will vomit themselves up and someone will say "he's cracked," "he's hysterical," "he's schizo," and a doctor will use pills and shocks and a lot of words to make up for all the times when you or life said "no" to what is deepest in you. To what you were made for, in every way: Deep connection with other people. Without which we become mad, and do our little bit for the wasting of the world.

That point where you're no longer living the situation, it's living you.
Michael, me boyo, get the flying hell outa here.

Men are always scared shitless of a woman's hysteria. And maybe women are even more scared of a man's. There's still this friggin taboo against men getting at all hysterical. But hysteria is the most important sign there is. It means something is trying desperately to happen. Someone's trying to get *in* or get the hell out, and for real. All cautions and defenses gone. What hysteria *means* is that we haven't got any tools or modes-of-behavior for that state of mind, for being that naked, for wanting or needing anything so openly. So it's all tears or crazy words or screams or punches, and the message is always one or the other: *I want in* or *I want out*. And it's one of the Big Mistakes to treat this as capital-H Hysteria, as Something-That-Shouldn't-Be-Happening, and pacify it, calm it, ignore the message. Face the message. In or out.

Anyway what *is* my real name? Because I talk to, say, Sally, at a party, and I sound pretty much like who I like to think I am – a little too pompous, maybe, but that's me too. Then I turn around and talk to Kathleen, and where did *he* come from, that constipated jerk speaking through my mouth with a voice that doesn't sound like mine and who's never said one relaxed (much less intelligent) thing in his life. Then I talk to a guy I don't like, and he can say something I completely agree with, and I answer back in kind, but the tone of my voice and the set of my face says: Go to hell. Then I go over to Ron and Debby, two old friends with whom I have no mistrust and no misgiving, and we comment snidely about the strange people we're *being* with all these *other* strange people. Then I'm dancing, rocking and happy at it, and the woman I'm dancing with,

who had just been talking intently straight at me, is another person entirely, doesn't look in my eyes once while we dance. (I learned a long time ago not to trust anyone who won't look into your eyes at all while you dance.) (Think about it.)

Yeah I have a lot of dreams about what it could be between you and me. And you're saying they're not going to come true? But you don't think I've cruised into the age of twenty-nine still expecting my dreams to come true do you? Of course they're not going to come true. Something else is going to come true. I've learned that your dreams are useful not because they come true but because they take you places you would never have otherwise gone, and teach you what you never knew was there to learn.

From a letter by my friend Sarah:

"I can think and see anything I want to. I mean points of view that are living, generating, effecting forces. It's up to me... It's a fact that you attract, or perceive and understand, what you generate or want. There is a way to fight, fighting not being synonymous with hysteria and irrationality...

"There's an intuitive sense that's really beginning to *work*, to do things. There's a kind of power that comes out of wanting something so much that it brings itself about. In situations I have an energy that I can almost *see*, and really feel a definite magnetic field that does things. All that is one thing, it's another to control it. It's become very evident to me that I have to be very clear about what I want because I'm going to get it. And the tension comes out of trying to want what's right, not giving over to something cheap or harmful. Every act and gesture brings out the motives underlying the time... Yes, I guess it's a question of responsibility. Seeing how, exactly how, every gesture effects something or someone... And acting out of an aesthetic love."

Karen: "We don't love until we can choose... Neither of us had really made a choice – and I think that it is the courage of having made a choice that enables people to go through hard things together and for one another."

That was a long time ago. We made love as though we were trying to get under each other's skin. Past a certain stage of intimacy sex becomes infused with a *content*, it is where you explore and reveal and decide. Or it is the anchor to what you need to be together, though you spend your days flailing over what you are.

Where can you go for even a hint of this? Durrell perhaps. Lessing. Proust. None of the jargons or technical discussions even approach these realities. Most people won't even concede they *are* realities. Or begin to tap the *information* that is locked in our sensations.

Metaphorically maybe you can talk about it like this. That within each man there is the secret body of a woman. That within each woman there is the secret body of a man. That what we call "love" is the search of these hidden bodies for their complements in the tangible world. That they sicken within us whenever our partner does not in some way embody them. That thusly it is possible to kill whatever capacity for love the world's left us. What else is that instant of attraction or reception, that sudden leap in you, but your secret body greeting its likeness in another?

(Careful, Ventura. A few thoughts like that and you'll lose your membership in the Twentieth Century. Poetry is at best a suspect habit, best done in private, and be sure to wash your hands after you write it.)

Remy de Gourmont: "If love did not contain the secret of life, it would be but the most egoist of passions, or at best an agreeable pastime in somewhat debatable taste."

It all changes too fast. She and I change too fast. What is conveyed by a smile one day is conveyed by a gasp the next. Love-making that began as a genial exercise and now... I haven't the language for this. The only thing that's true every time I think it, transcending sexual politics, and encircling the complexities, is that thing she said all that time ago: "There are things you have to learn all over again every night." Those are the terms of the disciplines of the art of sex. (The art of sex! What is poor Ventura coming to. But there *are* things you have to learn all over again every night. If you remember that every morning, you just might have a chance.)

If there is a relevant modern meditation it might be just to spend at least ten minutes a day every day trying to convince yourself that what you knew yesterday you might not know anymore.

"People are saying that Time will take care of people like me."

*Copyright by Michael Ventura, all rights reserved.
The last line, in quotes, is from Willie Nelson.*