

A. E. STALLINGS

From Lucretius' *The Nature of Things*

From Book Four: Against passion

Add this—lovers fritter away their strength, worn out in thrall.
This also—one lives ever at the other's beck and call.
They grow slack in their duties. Good name stumbles and malingers.
Wealth, turned to Babylonian perfumes, slips through the fingers.

But you can bet that *she's* well heeled, in shoes from Sicyon,
And those are genuine emeralds, the rocks that she's got on.
The wine-dark sheets, from rough and constant use upon the bed
And drinking up the sweat of Venus, are worn down to the thread.
The father's hard-earned fortune turns to tiaras for her hair,
Alindan silks, diaphanous gowns from Cos for her to wear.
He shells out for fantastic feasts with all the trimmings—fine
Linen, music, perfume, garlands, wreaths, free-flowing wine—
But in vain—since in the very fountain of delights, there rises
Something of bitterness that chokes even among the roses.
Perhaps it's that remorse, gnawing at the conscience, taunts
The lover he's thrown his life away in sloth, among low haunts;
Or else his darling wings a two-edged word at him, a dart
That smolders like a fire, and rankles in the love-struck heart;
Or else he thinks her roving eye too freely wanders after
Another, and imagines in her face a trace of laughter.

And these are just the problems of a love that's going *well!*
Imagine a love that's crossed and doesn't have a chance in hell—
Even with your eyes shut, you can grasp that the amount
Of troubles in unhappy love are more than you could count.
Best to keep eyes open, as I've said—don't take the bait.
It's easier to avoid the toils of love than extricate
Yourself once you are caught fast in the nets and to break free

From the strong knots of Venus. Yet you're still able to flee
 The danger, even if you're tangled up, snared in the gin,
 So long as you don't stand in your own way, and don't begin
 To overlook all shortcomings in body and in mind
 Of the woman you lust after. For desire makes men blind—
 And generally they overlook their girlfriends' faults, and bless
 These women with fine qualities they don't in fact possess.
 That's how it comes that we see girls—malformed in many ways,
 And hideous—are petted darlings, objects of high praise.
 Indeed, one lover often urges another he would mock:
 "Venus has it out for you—your love's a laughingstock."
 (Poor fool—that *his* delusion's worse would come as quite a shock!)

The black girl is *brown sugar*. A slob that doesn't bathe or clean
 Is a *Natural Beauty*, *Athena* if her eyes are grayish-green.
 A stringy beanpole's a *gazelle*. A midget is a *sprite*,
Cute as a button. She's a *knockout* if she's giant's height.
 The speech-impaired has a *charming lithp*, if she can't talk at all
 She's *shy*. The sharp-tongued shrew is *spunky*, a little *fireball*.
 If she's too skin-and-bones to live, she's a *slip of a girl*, if she
 Is sickly, she's just *delicate*, though half dead from TB.
 Obese, with massive breasts?—a *goddess* of fertility!
 Snub nosed is *pert*, fat lips are *pouts* begging to be kissed—
 And other delusions of this kind too numerous to list.
 Yet even if her face has every beauty you could name,
 And she pours out the power of Venus from her entire frame,
 The truth is, there are other fish in the sea. The truth is, too,
 We've lived without her up to now. She does—we know it's true—
 Exactly the same things as all the ugly women do,
 And fumigates herself, poor girl, to cover the stench after,
 While her maids steer clear of her and try to hide their laughter.
 But the lover, locked out, weeps, and strews the stoop with
 wreaths in bloom,
 And anoints the haughty doorposts with sweet-marjoram perfume,
 And presses his lips to the door, the fool—when if he were let in,
 One whiff and he would seek a good excuse to leave again!
 His long-rehearsed heartfelt lament would then come crashing down,
 Right then and there he'd curse himself for being such a clown,

And for granting her perfection that no mere mortal attains.
Our Venuses are on to this—that's why they take great pains
To hide the backstage business of life, keeping unaware
Those whom they wish to hold bound fast, caught in desire's snare.
But all in vain, because your mind can drag everything out
Into the light, and find what all the tittering is about—
Yet if she is good-natured, never spiteful, it's only fair
To make allowances for foibles that all humans share.

[*Translated from the Latin*]