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ROUGH (DRAFT) SEX, OR FIFTY SHADES OF IMPOSSIBLE

Recently, while cleaning out my office, I came across a binder bursting with snatches of purple prose and dozens of crude sketches that could pass for the confused renderings of a sex-obsessed adolescent doodling in algebra class. Some of the sketches featured naked people with grossly exaggerated appendages and limbs locked in preposterous poses. Others depicted contorted stick figures awkwardly conjoined on couches, in the backseats of cars, and in one case, on the edge of a cliff. All featured some overtly sexual act that defied anatomical possibility, gravity, and good sense. There was nothing sexy in any of them. Worse yet, I was the author of every single one. In my defense, I've never claimed talents as a visual artist. I hadn't intended to draw anything pornographic. I'd produced the etchings simply to diagram impenetrable literary passages and flesh out the actions of fumbling characters. I'd illustrated confounding scenes merely to help members of a fiction writers' critique group comprehend each other's work.

The sketches, along with hundreds of loose pages framed in marginalia, represent the only record of my fleeting involvement with my very first critique group. My relationship to the group, dominated by erotica writers, lasted all too briefly. Formed in desperation, it hardly represented a good match. It ended quickly, in anticlimax and an awkward parting of ways. Like many ill-fated relationships, it dissolved before the parties involved could overcome plaguing insecurities or resolve troubling questions—in this case, about the guidelines that should govern craft-oriented critiques of fictional sex. Looking back, I wish my first critique group had been something other than it was—a somewhat random encounter of inexperienced writers blindly groping for insights. Given the nature of its inception, though, it was bound to be disappointing.

I discovered the group through an online social networking site. I'd just quit a teaching job to begin work on a novel about the prison-industrial complex. I'd also just moved into a new town, where I didn't know a single person. With long and lonely evenings to fill and little outlet for my intellectual energies, I started trolling the classifieds, looking for any book club or critique group that would have me. I settled too quickly on an ad posted

by “Ladybug,” the online name of someone hoping to expand a “literary fiction writers critique group for people serious about craft.” The ad, like many others on social networking sites, was full of misleading statements. At its fuzzy heart, its subject was a group of erotica writers, admittedly with “genre-crossing and literary aspirations.” I discovered the group’s sexual bent when Ladybug emailed me directions to her house and the pieces she and two other members had submitted for the next critique session.

I found it odd that three authors would share their unpublished work with a total stranger. Authors generally vet prospective readers before swapping material, and fools rush in, as the saying goes. That said, some people are just more forward than others. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” my aunt, a four-time divorcée, is fond of saying. Still, the authors’ lack of inhibition raised at least one of my eyebrows, not least because all three pieces contained fairly graphic depictions of what seemed to be sex. It did occur to me that I might be ill suited to a group so dedicated to the erotic arts. But then writers are writers, I assured myself, all bound by a love of words. Besides, I desperately needed human contact.

The next Friday evening, I drove to Ladybug’s house, an unassuming ranch on the outskirts of town. In Ladybug’s living room, I found several people seated around a narrow coffee table, picking over snacks and quietly talking. These included, in addition to Ladybug, two middle-aged women “dabbling” and “chipping away” at romance novels; Rhonda, a young woman writing about “a workplace affair”; Taylor, a painfully shy transgendered man “working in the genre of interstellar fantasy”; a male psychoanalyst drafting a novel about “murder and sexual intrigue”; and a sullen young man, “a huge fan of Chuck Palahniuk” who’d just obtained an MFA from an online university. I learned most of what I would about the members over the next three months. Initial introductions amounted to little more than mumbled remarks before Ladybug reviewed the ground rules established to ensure productive critique sessions.

Each author would briefly introduce his or her excerpt and discuss the techniques they’d employed to achieve an effect. Each would remain silent during critiques of their work, so they wouldn’t derail discussions with knee-jerk rebuttals. Beyond that, I can’t remember much. At the time, I wasn’t feeling so hot. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say I was feeling too hot, cramped and distracted by the perspiration running down my neck and a sense that the air in the room was growing close. Sitting between the psychoanalyst and Taylor, I felt conscious of my body in a way that recalled changing in my high school’s gym locker room. I shifted as much as space allowed, unable to find a comfortable position on the couch, a soft sinkhole swallowing all of us. I drew my knees together and my shoulders

inward, but nothing eased the pressure of Taylor's elbow poking my ribs or the psychoanalyst's shoulder pushing my arm against my breast. My thighs trembled from prolonged strain, and it grew difficult to balance my binder on my lap.

My physical discomfort might have been a somatic expression of my anxiety at the prospect of evaluating erotica with strangers. It only worsened, after all, when Ladybug introduced an excerpt of her historical romance novel. As Ladybug situated her excerpt in a larger tale—one of a winsome heroine “stranded on a desert (sic) island” until rescued from marauding pirates by the “dashing captain” of a British frigate—I struggled to concentrate on the words slipping out of focus on the pages splayed across my lap. Panicked, I realized I had nothing to say about the piece, even though I'd spent all afternoon rereading about the heroine casting aside her “savage rags” to accept the “amorous advances” of an accomplished master and commander clearly modeled on Russell Crowe. I kept getting lost in convoluted passages about tangled limbs, intertwined fingers and long locks of blonde hair, and lavish descriptions of “breathless heaving” and “undulating hips” and “knees buried in oriental silk sheets.” I kept returning to the same questions about a coital act more than gently resisting comprehension.

For a moment, I thought my critical capacities had been hobbled by my own sexual inexperience and physical limitations. I wondered if more dexterous individuals routinely achieve the extreme yogic postures employed by Ladybug's characters. But then I'm imaginative, I assured myself, and still couldn't envision the act described by Ladybug. There was something decidedly wrong with it, logistically speaking. References to “languid limbs wrapped around the captain's hips” and a “slender back arched toward the ceiling” seemed unnaturally coupled with descriptions of “a waterfall of hair flowing across the captain's shoulder blades” and “the play of tropical moonlight across his expansive chest.” Every limb seemed hyper-extended, and every extremity dangerously distended. Every law of physics appeared entirely upended.

If only to reassure myself that I wasn't miserably inadequate, having never heaved or undulated as the heroine, I pulled a sheet of paper from my binder and began to draw, staying as true to Ladybug's text as possible. As Chuck Palahniuk Jr. spoke of “subverting the paradigms of literature and pornography,” I completed a series of quick sketches, each dedicated to a different interpretation of an act I could only represent by dispensing with any consideration of human anatomical form. Again, I wondered if my artistic skills were insufficient to the task at hand, or if I'd led too lackluster a sex life to appreciate the heroine's elastic limbs and bedroom gymnastics.

I drew my only assurance from the fact that others in the room seemed confused by the piece, too. When Jr. petered out, almost everyone stared at the ceiling or shuffled papers. I leaned forward and stared into a bowl of Chex Mix to feign reflection. Unnerved by the deepening silence, I cleared my throat, sending the dead wrong signal that I was about to deliver a considered remark. Everyone looked at me, visibly relieved.

Cornered, I started with a mumbled remark about “a minor point, really, regarding certain passages spanning pages 25 to 37.” As Ladybug’s eyes narrowed, I took a deep breath and read sentences describing implausible arm spans, too many fingers caressing too many ankles and calves at the same time, and the captain’s elbows (“Inner arms?” I queried, only to be reminded of the rule against authors speaking during critiques) pressing against the back of the heroine’s knees as “he parted her legs and lifted her into him.” It wasn’t entirely clear, I said, how one sea captain, however familiar with rigging, could be touching and seeing so much all at once. The problem, I ventured, related to point of view. Simply, the captain seemed privy, in the same moment, to both frontal and dorsal views of the heroine. At the end of one paragraph, with her knees pressed against his ribs, he’d looked into the “dark pools of her glistening eyes.” But then, there’d been a minor plot twist—presumably a painful lumbar twist—and his eyes had wandered over the small of her back, still arched above the Chinese sheets. Prodded by the psychoanalyst, I held up a sketch to illustrate my point.

Ladybug bristled while everyone considered my work. The romance novelists lifted their feet from the ground and shifted in their chairs, envisioning various positions and shaking their heads. “He was supposed to be sideways,” Ladybug finally whispered, breaking one of her own rules. Lapsing back into silence, she watched me sketch a second figure over the original outline of the captain. “No, facing the other way, perpendicular,” she hissed. Exasperated and slightly unhinged by insecurities, I blurted, “Has anyone here actually done this?” Everyone looked at the floor. Needless to say, I’d behaved crassly. That alone might have gone unnoticed in the group, but I’d done something worse. I’d implied that Ladybug had struggled with point of view because she hadn’t engaged in the act under consideration. I’d inadvertently lent support to the injunction issued to young writers in many MFA programs. This, of course, is the injunction to “write what you know.”

I’ve never been exactly sure what most people mean when they say, “write what you know,” but it seems to be a mantra of sorts among MFA students warned against creating characters unlike themselves. For many, “write what you know” is shorthand advice rooted in the idea that, if one stays close to home to gather material, one will write with authority and

passion, and that a story rooted in personal experience will flow naturally from the pen. Forget all the authors who become blocked up trying to write about their traumatic childhoods. Even assuming that all authors wanted to write about their own lives, not everyone has a personal store of scandal and misadventure to draw upon for subject matter. As much as I hate to air the soft white laundry of the literary establishment, I'll say it. Most writers I know are almost boring in their willingness to sit by themselves for hours at a stretch. Not everyone can or should be Hunter S. Thompson. Writers are rarely rock 'n' rollers, and as some have lamented, you can't dance to a novel. If every bookish individual produced a barely veiled memoir, the world's readers would be in for a darn boring ride. Thank goodness there's no shortage of authors smitten with the creative aspect of creative writing, people who write wonderful novels about things they haven't experienced firsthand. Few mystery writers actually commit murders to better understand their most heinous villains. The best conduct extensive research and stretch their imaginations to fill in what they don't know. Millions happily devour their books.

That said, I'm willing to concede that simply countering "write what you know" with "know what you write," as many do, invites its own set of problems. What if an author is writing a book about dashing British naval officers and high-seas sexual hijinks, and home happens to be a quiet suburban ranch in the middle of a desert town? In Ladybug's case, it's hard to imagine what hands-on novel research would involve. Depending on one's confidence level and the costs of procuring certain services, it can be quite difficult to accrue firsthand sexual experiences of a certain kind, especially with men who look like Russell Crowe. This I know.

That caveat aside, authors should be wary of seemingly commonsense dictums such as "write what you know." Strictly interpreted, "write what you know" can be an impediment to good writing, especially if sex and romance enter the picture. Sexual relationships can be so consuming that it's sometimes hard for authors writing about their own affairs to gain the emotional distance needed for editing. Nostalgia often impairs the judgment of authors wallowing in happy memories of past flings—writers who find it difficult to finger the delete key, clinging to scenes that bring mysterious smiles to their faces but add nothing to their stories. On the flip side, authors writing about failed relationships often dispense with nuance to indulge their most vindictive tendencies. Mired in the familiar narratives and over-rehearsed dramas crowding their heads, they rarely consider multiple points of view, explore the motivations (or excuses) of secondary characters (usually exes), or deviate from transparently autobiographical narratives driven by bitter resentments. Intimately identi-

fied with their characters, they have difficulty recognizing the difference between craft-based critiques of their work and insulting commentary on their unhappy sex lives.

No one illustrated this more clearly than the author who presented after Ladybug. A self-defined “adult erotica writer with literary aspirations,” Rhonda dressed her part in a micro-skirt and thigh-high leather boots, a tight tweed jacket that barely buttoned over a halter top, and long red press-on nails. The piece, she said, recounted “this woman Jenna’s fling with this guy Ben,” a coworker at a distributing firm “just like the place” where Rhonda worked. Outside of Rhonda’s clipped introduction, our knowledge of Ben, aka “Jerkoff,” came from an ostensibly omniscient but not necessarily reliable third-person narrator with a penchant for telling rather than showing. The opinionated narrator, given to overusing the adjective “lame,” informed readers that Ben “wasn’t very good-looking and even worse in bed.” The piece didn’t provide details that might have suggested underlying reasons for Ben’s sexual proclivities and failings. We knew only that Ben had “zero interest in moving up the corporate ladder, or for that matter, going down on anything, either,” and that he “came quickly and snored.”

Needless to say, the excerpt had all the hallmarks of an axe-grinding breakup piece. Like the relationship it portrayed, it ended abruptly, with the statement that Jenna had been “screwed over for the last time.” From what we could tell, Rhonda had little interest in exploring the psychological valences of a sexual encounter. Her sole ambition, it seemed, had been to vindicate and flatter Jenna, a character “way better looking and totally in a different league than Ben.” To be fair, Rhonda provided a revealing description of Jenna, although she might have shown her readers more than they wanted to know. The description left us all in silence.

It wasn’t that Jenna’s business casual suit was a bit too revealing of “two perky natural breasts,” or that her fictional thong barely covered the topiary of her Brazilian wax. It was that the description hinted at a complete collapse of any distinctions between the embittered author, her acidic narrator, and her “screwed-over” character. To cut to the chase, Jenna bore an uncanny resemblance to her creator, between her “thigh-high leather boots,” her “really short skirt that showed a lot of thigh,” and her “flattering cleavage” and “long red nails.” Growing suspicion that the character, narrator, and author were all the same person was reinforced by Rhonda’s inadvertent use of “I” in place of “she” or “Jenna” at various points in the text, as when the third-person narrator stated, “I started dating him because he seemed like a bad boy.”

The unfortunate slippage between first and third person, the product of editorial oversight, provided an entrée into a conversation about the piece's deeper problems. In any critique, readers should always cite specific passages when making general statements about what an author is doing well or badly. Vague generalizations (e.g., "This was off-putting" or "This is the kind of sex that gives sex a bad name") don't provide authors with a clear sense of how to build upon their strengths or remedy their most pressing problems. Also, specific passages can provide support, crutches really, for readers critiquing defensive authors—writers who seek out feedback only to dismiss criticism as the product of gross misreading or unfounded conjecture. The dozen or so passages containing first-person pronouns provided our group's otherwise reticent members with a conversational toehold on a very slippery slope.

Taylor ventured forth first, fidgeting and looking at the floor as he tentatively offered that the frequent "default" to first person, coupled with physical descriptions of Jenna, suggested that "the piece might have been inspired by real-life experiences." With a pained expression, he continued that animosities left from a past relationship might have made it "hard to flesh out Ben as a character with real feelings." Unresolved anger, Taylor barely whispered, had "taken over the story." Everyone concurred, with exaggerated nods, that the characters needed further development. Tapping his pen on his knee, the psychoanalyst suggested Rhonda take some time away from the piece, to let the dust of her relationship settle before going back to "fictionalize things a bit."

This was the final straw for our ill-treated heroine, or rather author, who insisted that she "wasn't Jenna or anything like her" with such venom and conviction that most of us almost felt sheepish. Undeterred, the psychoanalyst began to probe into the subconscious underpinnings of the excerpt. In a tone one might associate with an AA intervention, he said Rhonda needed to consider her characters' motivations and answer the "painful question" of why Jenna always sought out men who reinforced her negative self-esteem. Blatantly violating the group's rules of engagement, Rhonda folded her arms across her chest and spit, "it was only a few times" and "she's dated guys who aren't like that, too." The unsolicited backstory didn't answer the psychoanalyst's questions about character motivation. Nor did they answer mine. Inspired by the heady atmosphere in the room, I added that "the guy sounded like a real dipshit," and that I needed to know more about the protagonist's slumming proclivities, because "only a bigger dipshit would repeatedly sleep with him." I'd gone too far. As I finished speaking, Rhonda insisted (in the literary present) "she's not a dipshit," only to add (in the historical past) that "he was just an asshole."

As I mentally measured the distance to the door, Linda, the woman “dabbling” with a romance novel, mercifully intervened. Happily, she said, we’d all just “stumbled into a learning moment” about the merits of establishing “safe authorial distance” from “embarrassing” material that’s “a little too close to home.”

A learning moment, it was. Fortuitously, Linda had just completed a noncredit course focused on how fiction writers can benefit from creating narrators with voices distinct from their own and foregoing journalistic accuracy for the sake of a good story. Students in her class had experimented with different narrative voices, assuming different “personas” entirely unlike themselves. In creating alter egos for narrators, they’d shed the compulsions of many first-time novelists to recount personal experiences exactly as they’d happened, and to “be themselves” on the page. Writing fiction is different from keeping a diary, in that it’s about “relinquishing reality,” Linda declared, growing ebullient. “In my art, I give myself freedom to make up other people to say and do things I can’t. I give myself permission to be someone else and have fun.”

Whatever artistic freedoms Linda had embraced, none of her characters seemed to be having much fun. Her piece, a series of sexual scenes presented as flashbacks, had been taken from her novel-in-progress, “an updated *Bridges of Madison County* with a touch of *Brokeback Mountain*.” When she started the novel, Linda’s protagonist had been a married suburban woman smitten with a businessman renting a neighbor’s house. Writing about people “just like her friends” had filled her with inhibitions, but her class had provided her with a “clear solution to a common craft problem.” On the advice of her teacher, she’d given one of her characters a quick sex change, deleting certain naughty bits and typing in others until she was ready to begin work on a piece of gay erotica about two men conducting a marital affair, quite literally, in a walk-in closet. She’d also reconstructed her narrator, abandoning first for third person and adopting a “male voice more appropriate for writing about squeamish details.” As she explained, performing or rather penning a sex change and adopting a “foreign point of view” had given her the “authorial distance” needed to write, because “she didn’t feel like she was writing about sex anymore.”

I was impressed, albeit perversely, by Linda’s ability to turn a myopic and bigoted view of sex into the basis for a bold experiment in craft. And whatever else can be said, she’d handily dispensed with the crushing restrictions of “write what you know.” Sadly, though, she seemed entirely disconnected from her post-operative characters and unable to depict their emotional states or ejaculations. Certainly, she referenced physiological states. Her piece featured involuntary quivering, heart palpitations, diz-

ziness, faintness, vertigo, tingling in the extremities, and a host of other things one might find on a list of side effects for an antiseizure medication. Her characters' encounters, though, never culminated in eye-rolling orgasms. After extended nuzzles and caresses, her characters abruptly "finished" without anything resembling an orgasm, as if stricken by an incurable case of coitus interruptus. In an erotic novel, this seemed a problem. Still, no one complained about the absence of a so-called money shot. We were members of a literary fiction group. We were above that kind of thing. So, like the characters, we finished quickly and quietly unfulfilled. After a few strained comments about commas, we thanked Linda for her point about unfettered artistry, if not her unsatisfying illustration of sex made exceedingly safe by authorial distance.

Linda, if anything, had provided a cautionary tale. If you're going to dispense with "write what you know" to gain authorial distance from difficult material, you should probably create a strong persona, a confident narrator who is so engaging that the facts become secondary to the telling of the story. However liberated from the embarrassments of heterosexuality, Linda hadn't created a narrator able to overcome his hesitations and bring her characters to orgasm. In her failure to satisfy, she'd broken what publishers often call the writer-reader contract.

Crassly put, this contract refers to authors' obligations to meet readers' basic expectations. If someone purchases and commits time to reading a book, that person should trust its author to deliver on a promise to entertain or enlighten—or at the very least, to tell a coherent story with a comprehensible plot and characters with identifiable motivations. By the contract, an author should deliver the goods advertised on the book flap. If a work is literary fiction, it should probe the deeper meanings of human existence or something like that. A murder mystery should contain a crime and some clues that lead logically to a resolution. Too many red herrings or false starts in a suspense novel can frustrate readers. Hence, the rule of thumb: if a gun appears in a play's first act, it should go off by the third. Otherwise, the gun's no more than a tease, and readers will reasonably criticize the author for failing to deliver. Linda hadn't delivered. She'd left us high and dry because she hadn't thought much about gay sex and couldn't fake it. She hadn't followed her own advice and created a persona confident enough to tell a story with such compelling (if inaccurate) details that readers would overlook minor errors for the sake of a good yarn.

As self-proclaimed experts on the contract will tell you, readers browsing through new books usually decide within a few sentences whether they're willing to buy the ticket and take the ride. A confident and authoritative narrative voice can often convince buyers that an author has the bona

fides to give them a memorable bang for their buck. Let it be said, though, that one should never confuse cockiness and confidence. If authors can win readers' trust by creating narrators who seem qualified to tell a given story, they can just as easily alienate readers with grandstanding narrators. This is especially true of authors writing about sex. However well endowed with a knowledge of sexual positions, a narrator should never come across as arrogant or presumptuous. Narrators who show off by using inaccessible language about esoteric practices are likely to engender a sense of sexual inadequacy in readers who, let's face it, might want some gentle hand holding on the path to emotional catharsis.

The "coming-of-age" novel excerpt the MFA submitted for the group's second meeting provided a case in point. The novel was about a guy taking a year off after getting a writing degree, "a guy with a dark side who's spent too much time in school and needs to find out what it's all about." The problem was that no one in the group could figure out what "it" was. It seemed to have something to do with sex. In the first sentence, the narrator described the main character Jake "getting off in a Daisy Chain with the waitress and some guy he knew from hanging out at Frankie's." If allusions to "double rainbows" and "golden showers" in the next few paragraphs perplexed some in the group, imagine the general consternation over cryptic references to the waitress's urolagnia and Jake's "raw deal with switch-hitters giving him swimmer's ear." Sure, the narrator knew his stuff, whatever that was, but he seemed incapable of communicating his expertise to lay readers. He simply took too much (and too many of us) for granted when he described the waitress "snowballing Jake to choke him in revenge for his lousy tip."

Aside from the possible double entendre of the word tip, this was a straightforward, almost journalistic account. Yet, it suggested a certain kind of literary obscurantism bound to alienate. Almost everyone, at one point, has railed against overeducated authors who pepper their prose with foreign phrases, technical terms, and esoteric seventy-five-cent words. A snob of sorts, I've often attributed attacks on literary obscurantism to the laziness that prevents just about everyone from opening a damn dictionary. Reading the graduate's excerpt, though, I truly understood the frustration of readers who criticize "literary elitists" who write books the so-called average person can't understand.

It's bad enough to dispense French phrases and distracting *bon mots* to dress up indecorous scenes ("He ejaculated loudly, delivering the *coup de grace* to the *ménage à trois*"). It's even worse, I'm convinced, to establish a narrator's authority through blithe references to cheap novelties, odd toys, or positions that defy most readers' comprehension. Undoubtedly,

my newfound empathy with the disgruntled democratic masses had its roots in my own performance anxieties. Still, should every reader of literary fiction be expected to know the definition of “chili chicken taco”? Should every reader need a firm grip on “saddlebacking” to enjoy a coming-of-age novel? I’m a working woman, and not in the oldest profession, and I don’t have time to get an advanced sex education or learn the lingua franca of every strange narrator passing in the night.

I didn’t say this to the group. I was among literary types, the sort of people who scorn passive readers and refuse to cater to the lowest common denominator in the name of democracy. Fortunately, I wasn’t the only one at a loss. After praising the graduate for writing with courage about male sexuality, the psychoanalyst suggested that some readers wouldn’t be able to visualize “certain, more transgressive acts.” As *The Bridges of Brokeback Mountain’s* author glanced at our transgender member, the psychoanalyst continued that Jr.’s piece had raised the most enduring craft concern inspired by the modern novel form: the appropriate balance between telling (“he felt anxious”) and more subtle “showing” or rendering through revealing gestures (“he bit his nails”). The narrator hadn’t “seduced the reader” through dialogue and well-chosen details, but had rather relied too heavily on the easy shorthand of an extensive vocabulary. Better, the psychoanalyst concluded, to “unpack scenes” and provide more detailed description to reveal characters’ “inner emotional states.”

As Jr. opened his mouth to speak, the group’s more prescient members grasped the potential for embarrassing elaborations. Through pursed lips, the woman chipping away at a romance novel, a tax consultant with a penchant for floral skirts, pointed out the pitfalls of providing potentially gratuitous details. Little, she said, would be gained by describing Jake’s expression as he performed “various and sundry acts.” Character-driven fiction should foreground the psychological facets of human sexual experience; otherwise, she insisted, it’s just pornography. Seemingly at odds, she and the psychoanalyst nevertheless agreed upon Jr.’s need to explore the complex emotional exchanges between Jake and the waitress, and to uncover the dramatic tension inherent in daisy chains. How to do this was the question.

She had an answer, one spelled out in a sample of her novel about a nun’s battle with celiac disease and her ensuing crisis of faith. She’d written metaphorically, using suggestive language to reference acts that “need not be named,” and free indirect discourse to “dip inside the heads” of characters having sexual intercourse. Indirect discourse, she explained, involved the use of an omniscient narrator to tack back and forth between characters’ thoughts (the real subject of literary fiction) and “sensual acts

conveyed more poetically than pornographically through innuendo." Waxing eloquent about poetic meter and less sublime rhythms, she scanned her excerpt until she found a scene that demonstrated the power of metaphor.

"With bated breath, the low-hanging fruit weighed heavily in her hands," she began, "and her palms filled with fire, but she dared not let go for fear of losing it." I listened intently, trying to visualize the scene and coming up with something almost unholy. The misplaced modifying clause suggested the fruit, itself, had bated breath. The vague pronoun "it" made it unclear what the nun feared losing—her mind, euphemistically speaking, a fire, understood as a manifestation of the spirit, or her grip on the fruit itself. Quibbles aside, there was something profoundly wrong with the piece, specifically with the piece of fruit. It came as an unpleasant revelation as I started doodling, reproducing the images flooding my mind and, I assumed, everyone else's: twin maraschino cherries dangling from sticky stems, a pair of oranges straining the end of a branch, and an over-ripe banana bruised from too much handling. As my indecent still life took shape, I recognized the gender ambiguity at the core of the metaphorical fruit. I had no idea, simply, if the fruit represented breasts, testicles, or some other kind of appendage.

Only when the nun "wrapped herself around his trunk and inhaled his nature" did I realize the proverbial fruit didn't refer to breasts, but rather to some aspect of male anatomy. "Low hanging," I decided, suggested testicles. After all, fruit could hardly denote/connote a banana/penis, which presumably wouldn't be low hanging at this particular juncture of a burgeoning relationship. Perhaps the nun had been cupping his testicles, but why did they weigh so much? And why were they so inflamed? A bit more specificity might have clarified things, but details only added further confusion, as when the nun "drew sweet juice from the swollen fruit with her hungry lips." I couldn't wrap my own head around it. Putting aside that the nun and not her lips was hungry, it wasn't clear what juice the nun could possibly be ingesting, unless the sweat of her partner's blessed labor, although "drew from" suggested some sort of extrusion. At some point, my confusion became too much, and I began to rail against the slippage between metaphoric and literal descriptions. It would have been better, I insisted, if there'd been a barrier, a dental dam of sorts, between the metaphorical world and its seamy physical underside, if only because you literally can't slobber on a metaphor.

At my third and last meeting with the group, my crusade against slipping metaphorical fig leaves was assumed by the psychoanalyst, an unwavering advocate of "sobriety in speech and writing." To the appreciative nods of a new member, a woman who looked like she'd been around

the block, as my mother used to say (and a seedy neighborhood, I'd add), he presented a scene he'd written to demonstrate how spare language can be both accessible and artistic. Taken from a suspense/thriller about a female Japanese American master of kung fu and disguise evading arrest, the scene featured a "silky haired heroin" (sic) making a sexual overture towards an off-duty police officer with "polished onyx skin." It stood as an argument against obscurantism, overly opinionated narrators, and overblown metaphors, or so its author said. It represented a testament to "direct Hemingway-esque" writing.

Hemingway-esque the piece was not. After enacting a patter of dialogue, the psychoanalyst read a description of the detective's hands moving over the martial artist's sacral bone, rib cage and kneecaps, zygomatic arch, "snowy brow," and delicate chin. Straight from *Fifty Shades of Gray's Anatomy*, the scene ended with the suspect "smiling smugly" as she touched the detective's "black member." Through straightforward descriptions of acts and gestures, the psychoanalyst declared, a "detached narrator" could both engage readers' senses and provide insight into characters. Granted, we'd learned the Japanese suspect was a silky smooth operator wily enough to risk an afternoon tryst, or rather medical examination, with an officer of the law. But this was hardly a neutral narrator. If the psychoanalyst was drunk on *Strunk & White*, his narrator was intoxicated by orientalism and fixated on color. The detective's penis was not simply a penis. It was a "black member" seemingly separate from the rest of the detective.

Maybe I've read too many history books, but I couldn't help but observe that the phrase "black member" recalled the obsessions of nineteenth-century pseudo-scientists creating bogus racial taxonomies based on measurements of facial angles, crania, and genitalia. When the new member asked "why I was getting so uptight," I ventured that the psychoanalyst wouldn't have put "white" before "member" if the detective had been Caucasian, to use a standard taxonomic term. "Black" had made the member seem like an exotic specimen. In any case, it was redundant, unless the detective's penis existed separate from his body and required its own description, much as a *Midnight Cowboy* might, I added, employing a term for dildo gleaned from Jr.'s writings. As Jr. praised the "guts of the piece," I scribbled "archaic" beside "member" and "given" beside "black." The psychoanalyst glanced at my scrawl and merely conceded an "unfortunate redundancy."

I might have walked out then if Taylor hadn't started speaking, stammering almost, about his attempt to "blur the lines between race and gender" in a sci-fi/fantasy novel about a hermaphroditic empathic healer

who travels around Galaxy Q, treating people on planets ravaged by warfare. Reluctantly, I pulled out his piece and skimmed the scene I'd read the night before. Involving the healer and a bisexual political dissident dying in a cave, it was painfully awkward, interrupted with stilted dialogue about energy transfer and the dissolution of pain into pure light. It was sloppy, too, filled with salving ointments softening on feverish brows and bodily fluids dripping onto scarred skin. The characters melted into one another and melded. Their tears mingled. Their sex lasted for seventeen pages, occurring more slowly than anything in real time. And yet it felt real. Forget that there were five hands in a tryst involving two humans, as I confirmed with a quick sketch. The fifth hand was a minor detail that Taylor could easily explain with a quick reference to laws governing stem cell reproduction and autogenesis in Q. I forgave the fifth hand. I welcomed its healing touch. It was almost...beautiful. For all its clumsiness, it never distracted from the arduousness of empathic sexual healing and the gradual, painstaking nature of recovery from emotional and bodily trauma.

If we seemed poised to regroup, the new member had to ruin our loving feeling. "It wasn't believable," she began, shaking her head. "Any of it. If he or whatever was like any of the guys I've dated, he would've finished in a sentence and rolled right over. It's ridiculous." The author began picking at the knee of his overalls. I suspected he might cry. For the first time, a member had spoken directly, rather than implicitly or accidentally about her own sex life. In narcissistic fashion, she'd insisted that fiction (an interstellar fantasy, no less) reflect her own experience. She'd judged a work by the tattered standard of her own life, using criteria entirely unrelated to craft. Worst of all, she'd demeaned an author for his supposed naïveté. That, for me, was the final straw.

I left the group without debuting any of my half-written novel. Like *The Great Gatsby's* narrator Nick Carraway returning to the Midwest after a stint of debauchery in New York, I wanted "no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart." I'd lost interest in what Fitzgerald called "the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men." I'd had enough of strangers' unintended confessions, badly crafted affairs, literary biases, and real bigotries. I'd concluded that fictional sex should be left in the hands of experts, erotica writers well versed in proven formulas, stock poses, and characters familiar to readers of purple prose—defrocked priests, masquerading aristocrats, and multimillionaires with endless stores of toys.

Two years later, much has changed, and I've revised my conclusion. First, I'm in a new and more fulfilling critique group, one defined by mutual trust and a commitment to exchanging honest, craft-oriented feedback.

Second, I've written a rough draft sex scene that could probably benefit from some gentle feedback. The scene, I'm certain, belongs in my novel. I swear, there really is something about fictional frottage that reveals characters' psychological states. I'm confident, too, that the piece meets certain minimal standards of storytelling. Still, despite my group's agreement that one should never confuse an author and narrator (Kafka presumably never witnessed anyone turn into an insect), I go rigid whenever I imagine others scrutinizing my rough draft sex.

Certainly, there's no reason readers shouldn't be able to critique sex scenes with the same criteria they apply to fiction generally. There's no rational reason to fear the snickers or smirks of my trusted peers. My peers know I'm not my narrator. They're aware that "write what you know," narrowly understood, has never been my guiding principle. This, though, is a bit academic. Down in the dirt, things are different. Extra hands accidentally slip into passages, awkwardly bent knees intrude upon scenes, and flimsy characters deflate at inopportune moments. Stretched metaphors sag, and attempts at erudition turn out to be turnoffs. People, however forgiving, make assumptions.

Sex is a monumental force in most people's lives, whether they're engaging or abstaining, slumming or sleeping their way through distant galaxies. Fair or not, the assumption is that, if you write a bad sex scene, you must be bad in bed. Excluding the "write what you know" fanatics, no reasonable person would expect an author to have every bit of knowledge at his or her disposal. Still, if you write a bad sex scene, you'll be a laughing stock by the end of the first sentence. If you don't believe me, consider the varied implications of different kinds of ignorance. Not long ago, someone in my critique group pointed out that I'd used "engine block" to refer to the space beneath a car's hood when, in fact, the term refers to the metal casing around the cylinders of an internal combustion engine. Not even the two motorheads in my group so much as blinked when I admitted ignorance, despite the fact that my main character is a seasoned cab driver. Ignorance of cars is forgivable. Bumbling around the fictional bedroom is not. It suggests some shameful inadequacy. It hints at some hidden kink or, more embarrassingly, its utter absence.

Usually, we reveal our sexual failures only to one other person at a time. In a writing group, such failures became the subject of collective scrutiny and discussions certain to mortify. In Ladybug's group, we all seemed so bad at sex scenes, so embarrassed and disappointed after every session. To be fair, we were all desperately, bravely trying to hone our skills. However exasperated our sighs or bitter the taste left by certain scenes, we finished every session with new questions and clues about what to show,

how much to tell, and how to get the most out of certain positions. Maybe, in our groping, we were working towards something more fulfilling, or at least less off-putting, one humiliating error at a time. Whether any of us should include sex scenes in our final drafts is a different matter.