



## *Author Asks*

*from T Fleischmann,*  
*author of Syzygy, Beauty*

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- 1 I didn't have any clear process for selecting the five artists that are, at times, prominent in the essay. Instead, they are five artists that continue to emotionally resonate with me after years of viewing their work, each one finding their way into my writing on their own terms. What commonalities do you see among them?
- 2 Earlier drafts of the essay included longer and more detailed descriptions of the five works of art, although I eventually decided to cut those descriptions out. How did your familiarity (or lack of familiarity) with these works affect your experience reading the essay? Did you find copies of the images you didn't know, or move ahead with the skeleton description I provide?
- 3 Along those lines, I wrestled a bit with how much I needed to explain other possibly unfamiliar aspects of the narration, in particular my gender identity and the polyamorous nature of the relationships. I eventually realized that defining these aspects of the narrative would be distracting at best. Do you think I made the right choice, or would you have sometimes enjoyed a bit more grounding?
- 4 My friend once joked that everything I write could be subtitled "I think you're a jerk because you don't love me anymore." While you could certainly find that sentiment here, I also think of this book as parting ways with some romances that I had held onto. How do you interpret that struggle, between loving someone and realizing that love is never going to be what you want it to be? When am I letting go, and when am I just falling into my old habits?
- 5 More importantly, why don't you love me anymore, you jerk?
- 6 In general, I have a lot of trouble settling down or staying in place. This tendency is one of the topics in the book and also one of its modes. What effect does the speaker's unsettled nature have on you?
- 7 From the moment I first started writing *Syzygy, Beauty*, I thought of it as an essay. I recognize my own tendency to draw from diverse genres—from the prose poem to theological texts—but still think of this book firmly as an essay. Do you have genre in mind while you're reading? If you categorize this book, what categories come to mind, and for what reasons?

8 I think there's a lot of beauty in the declarative sentence—the way it can be so clear and emotionally direct, yet still reveal the slipperiness and confusion inherent in the speaker's experience. The declarative voice is one of the first things that friends commented on after reading this essay. How do you understand the essay's tendency toward declaration and aphorism? Am I certain of myself? Fooling myself? Masking something?

## Writing Exercises

I never took well to creative writing exercises while I was in school. Even if they ultimately could have proven helpful, I would always feel grumpy that I couldn't do something entirely unrelated that popped into my head. I'm not suggesting you should behave like I did (I'm sure this attitude caused me to miss out on far more than I ever would have gained by following my whims), but just giving a little heads-up on where I'm coming from.

### Exercise A

It seems easy for writers, especially writers who are students or teachers, to fall into a world that involves reading, talking about reading, editing, writing, talking about writing, and little else. While there is certainly a lot of privilege involved in this position, my best ideas and lines come to me when I'm installing tin on a roof, dancing to a good loud band, or doing something else far removed from the page. *Syzygy, Beauty*, for instance, was composed as much during carpentry projects as during my actual writing time. My first suggestion, then, is to cultivate some new hobby or activity, preferably something physical that feels productive. I'd suggest gardening or hiking if they aren't already part of your life, but anything not directly related to writing will do. Then, find a way to fit that activity into your creative routine, engaging with it either before or after you sit down to write. The repetition of physical labor or movement will allow you to think in a new, fruitful way.

### Exercise B

My writing improved significantly when I learned how to appreciate, draw from, and respect a wider range of language than that which I studied in school. Find a kind of writing that you don't normally associate with your capital-W Writing. Read a physics textbook, like the *Feynman Lectures*. Take up regular postal correspondence with a friend or through one of the amazing and vital prison correspondence programs you can find online. Pay careful attention to all of your friends' weird language quirks, the ones that make you love listening to them. Then, break down whatever barriers you've put in place: Start a new essay and intentionally let your voice be as geeky or personal or casual or confessional or weird as it is in these other places, especially if you didn't think you were supposed to write that way in the first place. See how that shift in language affects your thought process, your imagery, and all the edges of your essaying.

So, those two exercises might seem a little unhelpful, considering I told you to plant a garden and talk to your friends. Here's my one gesture toward a more traditional type of prompt:

### Exercise C

I believe that one of the most difficult challenges in writing an essay is the challenge of presenting myself—of deciding when to reveal my best self, my worst self, of finding something like honesty or authenticity in the way I construct my voice on the page. (I think this is true regardless of whether the essay is memoir or not.) So, start a new essay and write it as your worst self. Indulge your flaws. Be a jerk, be unlikable, be petty, and self-righteous and think you're great the whole time. Root out the qualities of yourself that you most often hide and parade them around the

page, seeing if maybe they have something to offer after all.

For writing exercises from other Sarabande authors, visit our website at [www.sarabandebooks.org](http://www.sarabandebooks.org).

## Suggested Reading

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

Jenny Boully, *The Body*

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*

Tracey Emin, *Strangeland*

Bruce Hainley, *Foul Mouth*

Harryette Mullen, *Muse and Drudge*

Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*

Arnold Lobel, *Frog and Toad*

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