Unsexing Them

They were not meant to be lovers. I realize this after writing more than two hundred pages and at first I try to deny it, but of course it is true. It isn’t a story about an affair. Victor is as faithful to his wife as a gold filling, and Simone’s passion for painting leaves no room for a lesser love. And so I begin unsexing them.

With Yankee thrift, I cut the sex scenes into a new file (waste not, want not), beginning at the end of the manuscript. First, I remove their final night together, more loss than lust, the sheets damp with tears and sweat, Simone’s dream of the boat in a wild sea, the words heavy and hidden, hollow and bite.

Deleted: the night they meet by chance at the train station, their hurried union bent over the sink in the narrow bathroom. A few keystrokes and the scene is nothing but a way to flee Boulogne. Stolen goes, but railway stays; I take longing and leave furlong.

I remove how the quick sharp pain of him thrills her, I remove how earlier they had fallen together on the carpet in the coldwater flat, his scraped knee, the bruise on her elbow, the taste of sauternes on his tongue, the word stunned. I remove the words shallow and sate, sudden and slow.

Last to go, the weekend in the country (Victor’s wife in the garden pulling lupine; Simone’s canvas wet in the hot shed), their first time, the paragraphs green with discovery, raw, each noun hunger, each adjective insatiable, drowsing afterward in the bee-buzzing field, her bare arm swagging his bare chest, the tall grasses flattened around them like the blast radius of a bomb, the slight breeze whispering over them, picking up its chill from the surface of the dark lake.

They walk through the edited white pages guileless as unpainted wood, smiling at each other without a lilt of hidden pleasure. Their affection for each other is obvious and bald as a well-lit kitchen, nearly familial. Paragraph after paragraph of sunlit cotton, blue and yellow pigments, solace and sorrow and bread.
Yet through it all—through Simone packing her suitcase full of sketches, the fighting in the Ardennes, Victor handing his wife the silver cup—theyir other life unfolds across seventeen patchwork pages buried in a subdirectory, not wearing a stitch of plot, throwing continuity to the wind, the whole of its story nothing beyond pulse, tongue, throat, and thigh.

Page after page of surreptitious, sweetness; furtive following flesh, release following ravishment, line after line of lingering, lightly, love.

Sheldon Tapley, “Bacchanal,” oil on panel