Decorum

She wrote, "They were making love  
up against a gymnasium wall,"  
and another young woman in class,  
serious enough to smile, said  
  
"No, that's fucking, they must  
have been fucking," to which many  
agreed, pleased to have the proper fit  
of word with act.  
  
But an older woman, a wife, a mother,  
famous in class for confusing grace  
with decorum and carriage,  
said the F-word would distract  
  
the reader, sensationalize the poem.  
"Why can't what they were doing  
just as easily be called making love?"  
It was an intelligent complaint,  
  
and the class proceeded to debate  
what's fucking, what's making love,  
and the importance of the context, tact,  
the *bon mot*. I leaned toward those  
  
who favored fucking; they were funnier  
and seemed to have more experience  
with the happy varieties of their subject.  
But then a young man said, now believing  
  
he had permission, "What's the difference,  
you fuck 'em and you call it making love;  
you tell 'em what they want to hear."  
The class jeered, and another man said  
  
"You're the kind of guy who gives fucking  
a bad name," and I remembered how fuck  
gets dirty as it moves reptilian  
out of certain minds, certain mouths.  
  
The young woman whose poem it was,  
small-boned and small-voiced,  
said she had no objection to fucking,  
but these people were making love, it was  
  
her poem and she herself up against  
that gymnasium wall, and it felt like love,  
and the hell with all of us.  
There was silence. The class turned  
  
to me, their teacher, who they hoped  
could clarify, perhaps ease things.  
I told them I disliked the word fucking  
in a poem, but that fucking  
  
might be right in this instance, yet  
I was unsure now, I couldn't decide.  
A tear formed and moved down  
the poet's cheek. I said I was sure  
  
only of "gymnasium," sure it was  
the wrong choice, making the act seem  
too public, more vulgar than she wished.  
How about "boat house?" I asked.

—Stephen Dunn