

Bret Anthony Johnston

ON REJECTION

We hear that rejection preys upon and depends upon the writer's ego; seemingly informed people tell us that successful writers appropriate rejection and use it as fuel, that they co-opt the editor's or agent's malice, stupidity, or worst of all, indifference, and they cure it until it becomes a kind of treat, something akin to beef jerky. And we hear that those who reject our work are not rejecting us, they're not rejecting our souls because if we could get our souls on the page, we wouldn't get rejected at all; instead, we'd get flown first-class to Sweden to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature. They say this because most writers, especially beginning or unpublished writers, freak out over rejection. To the good men and women offering this consolation and advice, I say, okay, yes, sure, but you've obviously never ridden a skateboard.

Think of it this way: After you start sliding on the middle of your board down a handrail that runs the length of twelve brick stairs and realize your back foot has slipped off and in less than a millisecond your "eggs" will be "scrambled" on the banister, then a form letter from a second-rate agent takes on a less pressing, almost appealing meaning.

Like skateboarders, writers live by rejection; like writers, any skater worth his salt must have the single-minded tenacity of a wiener dog. Learning how to spin and not over-rotate Caballerials, in which you cannot see anything except sky or ceiling for most of the maneuver, requires the same prolonged dedication as submitting to glossies and finer literary journals. Eventually, you will land with the board under your feet, your weight centered, and with an unparalleled surprise and elation, you will ride away. But in the first hundred or so tries, you're going to fall, and you're going to want to return to easier tricks — things like frontside grinds, or paying mortgages or having babies or performing brain surgery, in the dark, on yourself.

This is a long, meandering manner of saying, writing — let alone getting published — is as frightening as it is difficult. And

in many ways, these two endeavors demand perfectly divergent skills: the tough-skinned, hard-won confidence that it takes to survive rejection after rejection is the polar opposite of the necessarily vulnerable and acutely sensitive work of writing an affecting piece of prose. (In other contexts, however, maybe the demands aren't quite so dissimilar, for writers reject their own work every day, deeming this paragraph not worthy, this sentence too lax or long or confusing for inclusion in the finished manuscript.) So, then, it comes down to trust. Writers who second-guess themselves because they've received yet another rejection from the editor who's been so encouraging in the past will very often fall victim to not trusting their work or its process; that is, they will deny themselves that essential, empowering privilege: the privilege of bad writing, the privilege of, in Anne Lamott's famous words, writing "shitty first drafts."

Perhaps it would help to think of publishing as a process as well, a process as idiosyncratic, wanton and bewildering as writing a publishable story. If one cannot trust editors or agents — and editors and agents should only be trusted after they've agreed to represent or publish you — then one can certainly trust the *process* of publishing. You can take a Zen-like solace in sending out manuscripts, and place faith in the admittedly unfounded idea that all good work will find an audience. Writing, I believe, is an act of faith, an act of courage. Publication — that last, absolutely necessary separation of the writer from his work — is the means that justifies the end; beyond our dreams of film options, glowing reviews, our names in prestigious tables of contents, publication becomes a simple key that opens the door to what we really and truly want: readers. Henry James says all writers are readers moved to emulation, and I'd humbly add that we read and write out of a tremendous curiosity about other human beings; it's a cry from the heart, a protest against our own mortality, and we believe there are more of us out there. Stated another way, if you keep sending out stories, you're eventually going to get good news when you open your SASE. It's stilted, laborious and compromising work — like those first attempts to ride a skateboard without, as we say, "eating hell" — but the readers are worth it,

we know that, and you're not alone. As a way of attesting to our community of rejection, I'll close by sampling from rejection slips I've received over the years:

- Dear Mr. Johnston, Having a talking cow in a story is nothing short of disaster.

- This lovely story suffers from bland language and perhaps not enough plot.

- (For the same story as above): I'm distracted by the narrator's voice and I feel that the overly prominent plot overshadows all else.

- Honestly, Mr. Johnston, this may be one of the finest stories I've read in twenty years, but because of backlog pressures, I'll have to pass.

- Got a real kick out of seeing my grandmother's first name in this story. She was a real twit, that one. Liked to soak peanuts in her Pepsi.

- On a standard form rejection, the word "Over" was scrawled at the bottom. When I flipped the paper, there was nothing there.

- On 9/20/2000: I'd be delighted to publish your story and make your writing known to the larger world.

- 5/14/2002 (Same magazine as above): Sorry for the long delay, but I wanted to let you know the magazine is in a permanent state of suspension. You're free to send the story we accepted elsewhere.

- Stories devoted to the geriatric theme theme(*sic*, the editor wrote the word twice) run across my grain, and over the years I have seldom published a piece of fiction written in that vein. In any case, I don't think your story was a successful piece of work. My troubles with the backlog continue here. I'm doing

my best not to add anything to it, especially fiction or poetry or nonfiction, before the spring. If you would like to submit another story by April 15, I'd get around to it.

Finally, this last selection marks the only occasion on which I've corresponded with an editor who's not accepted the story in question:

- I feel you may lay it on a bit thick with the dying donkey.
- My response: What dying donkey?