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Facing Pages

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Facing Pages

II

Once upon a time *The Iowa Review* offered a t-shirt, a rejection slip t-shirt, which copied the true slip and proclaimed, in its crucial passage, “We are sorry we cannot use it and that the volume of submissions precludes a more personal reply.” The t-shirt was popular around town, showing up frequently in corridors, cafes, and on joggers. I always enjoyed its implied contradiction: our proposing to preclude a more personal reply with a fairly intimate item of clothing. I often wore the shirt myself, especially when out of town; and once at Xel-ha, in the Yucatan, a guy lounging by water turned to a friend as I walked by and said, “I’ve got poems there right now.” I kept on walking.

The t-shirt was wonderful for making amends. A man wrote from Texas, to object less to our rejection of his fiction than to the spaghetti sauce he found splattered on his manuscript. The t-shirt more than calmed his indignation. Or once by a computer glitch that I still can’t fathom, we printed a poem of Daniel Halpern’s and affixed to its end two lines of Vern Rutsala’s, from another poem in the same issue. Thus in a fishing poem, also a meditation on ambition, when Halpern’s speaker finds himself, at the very end, casting “in pale light” and pulling the evening in on his fly, we concluded his poem by observing that,

. . . his snakeskin failure suddenly peels away,
pulled off like cellophane from a cheap cigar.

It almost made sense, and the t-shirt that went with our note of apology brought a friendly reply—and a cookbook featuring Italian dishes. Someone nominated Halpern’s poem for a Pushcart Prize that year, and I was tempted to send the unauthorized version.

Nevertheless, I eventually tired of that slip, ran out of t-shirts, and wrote a less cheeky rejection that would grace less well an item of clothing. Here is what we choose to say now:

Thank you very much for giving us this chance to read your story [essay, or poem] and for making, thereby, a hidden contribution to our magazine. Our issues depend on the submissions of many writers, few of whom we can include, and in re-

turning your work we mean only to admit that for the present we favor other offerings. Still we value your thinking of us, and we regret that the number of submissions encourages this rather impersonal reply.

Many writers have found this note sincere, at least so they have told us, though at least one has said, and no doubt others have grumbled, that the last thing they wanted to make was “a hidden contribution” to our magazine. More recently, another writer has called it “smarmy.”

Perhaps we should change it again. Perhaps, we could extend the theme of our summer rejections, when we don’t read new work, and so return submissions with a message like, “We have gone out to clean the pasture spring. . . . We shan’t be gone long. — You come [back] too.” Similarly, we could let poets phrase more exacting rejections for us:

We were hoping for a “poem of the mind in the act
of finding what will suffice” and are unpersuaded
by your attempt.

There’s a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
But it’s not yours.

Shut, shut the door, good John! (fatigued, we said)
Tie up the knocker, say we’re sick, we’re dead.

Never! never! never! never! never!

Thy drasty ryiming is nat worth a tord!

Or, coming nearer to home,

You have wasted your life.

If writing is discovery, I feel further revision coming on. I remember *kayak*’s wonderful old rejections, stolen from dime novels of the west, each with an illustration of a hanging, a gunfight, or a cowboy thrown through the swinging doors of a saloon. And a fantasy beckons: Compose twelve rejections like those above and writers who collect them all get free subscriptions.

The romance and worry of editing a small magazine lie almost entirely in making selections from among the submissions one receives, unsolicited. For us that means 200–300 items a week in the three genres named, and a few besides, though not all year round. Writers slack off over the holidays and many have caught on to our not reading over the summer. Reading these manuscripts is the work that keeps the dream of discovery alive. It justifies a recent ad of ours that begins, “What do Barbara Bedway, Robert Cohen, C. S. Godshalk, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Mona Simpson have in common?” and then offers this reply:

Each writer won a Pushcart Prize with a story
first published in our magazine—
Three of those stories were lead stories
in separate Pushcart volumes—
Two of those stories also appeared in
BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES—
And only one of those writers was known to us
even slightly when we took her story.

Since that ad was composed, we could add Robert Boswell, Barbara Grizuti Harrison, Ron Tanner, Laura Kalpakian, and Cori Jones to the list—two Pushcart and two Best American Short Story selections, and a CLMPGE award there, and all from work that came in over the transom—not that we have a transom—and from writers with whom we had no prior acquaintance.

The challenge resides in making the first decisions about work that lacks history. When in a complementary life, I teach Chaucer or Reading Poems, I am teaching works about which one seldom thinks to ask, is it good? Is the ode “To Autumn” worthy of close reading and study? Only in the fringe areas of such courses, by adding a sheaf of poems from this review to Reading Poems, after having worked through much of a standard anthology, am I likely to vex students with the added worry of how the uncanonized work stands in with the “classics.” But in this office, from day to day, the ruling question is, even when considering poems or stories by well known writers, should we introduce this new piece so it may have the chance of finding readers now and in the future?

Of course the situation is not as dire as all this. Rejection by *The Iowa Review* no more threatens a writer with oblivion than our acceptance res-

cues her or him from it. We are not the only magazine around. Sometimes I think of the many magazines in our culture as so many sections of a vast roulette wheel; writers toss their work on the national table, the times give it a spin, and works fall into place somewhere, if not with us, with another journal. But the point of it all is to take all incoming work seriously, as if we were the only chance the writer had.

And the point of the change in our rejection slip, then, had everything to do with how making such choices feels. It has always seemed to me euphemistic to say “we cannot use it,” or “it is not right for us,” as editors are apt to pen on more personal notes, that both usages smack of refuge taken in imagined, impersonal forces much larger than the editor’s self. It is as if an editor must submit to those forces and so was not responsible for deciding, personally, this is good, this is good enough, this is not. It is as if fault for failure lay totally with the writer, who just couldn’t attain a height already established, and had nothing to do also with taste, convictions, faults of understanding, or of attention, and personal histories of reading, all of which can be notoriously vagrant. It smacks of a confidence we might align with Eliot, in the essay I’ve mentioned before, in which he described the “tendency” of his time, and of *The Criterion*, as classical and thus guided by “Reason,” and by an “intelligence [not] at the mercy of emotion.”

There have been equally confident coterie magazines, such as *The Black Mountain Review*, in which a “cohort,” which was Creeley’s word on one occasion, promotes its idea of what literature needs right then. The first issue of *BMR* carried a review of Roethke so outspoken in its attack that it caused Kenneth Rexroth to withdraw as a contributing editor. Creeley announced Rexroth’s withdrawal two issues later, with regret, but without backing away from the review he had sponsored, and used the occasion to sketch the “cohort” to which he felt obliged. Such a magazine is apt to feature the writing of its editors, their friends and associates, and rely less on unsolicited manuscripts. But a more or less openminded reading of the unknown for the sake of coming to value new work one discovers was never their purpose and so not their responsibility.

For magazines like ours that try to extend themselves differently, and that represent a university, after all, not just a private point of view, being fairly responsive to so much new work is problematic daily. Our practice is to have screening readers, research assistants assigned to the magazine

and members of a graduate class, separate the more from the less interesting, to return the latter quickly, and to gather with me to consider a smaller, favored pile. We meet in discussion circles twice weekly and try to discover, through reading and subsequent discussion, which works sustain and deepen our interest. Which works do we feel ourselves moving into as we read and absorb them and what do we make of that passage?

Our method has attendant difficulties that we hope to circumvent by complementary, corrective practices. The common wisdom of small magazines is that each lives by the taste and discernment of an individual editor, that committee decisions tend to be safe decisions, a sign of a “feeble editor,” Eliot’s term again, with a lack of vision. For that reason our discussions needn’t lead to majority rule. The impassioned advocacy of two or three readers often overcomes a milder, majority advocacy. In addition, I ask to see all manuscripts by former contributors within a five to six year period and will sometimes continue a relation with a writer that we discovered earlier. And there are a handful of instances in any one year in which I get to the manuscript first, and take it without bothering to gain the assent of my assistants. Being editor for over a dozen years grants me some privileges. But finding a manuscript that makes me want to exercise that small power is rare. I’d wait a long time to fill up an issue.

So our standard practice is to encourage rather than distrust the “committee” format. Literature, it seems to me, requires an audience, and a small group of readers willing to listen and learn, not just impose their values over all others, is a plausible test circle. When in a group of five to ten people a story wins the active interest of nearly everyone there, when one reader’s observations begin to connect with another’s, when discussion leads us deeper and deeper into the story, with a sense of movement and ripening pleasure, that story has earned a chance to come before a larger audience, even at the expense of good stories by better known writers. The same is true with poems, with the difference that the poem will be read aloud in our circle, usually more than once, which reading both initiates and quickens discussion.

This work of a reading circle, of trying again and again to bring new work under discussion, prompts other fantasies, most of which imagine alternative procedures. Why not, for example, subvert intention and tip things toward chance? We could draw a date by lot and fill an issue with the work that comes to us that morning. We could number manuscripts as

they arrive and take all those that carry prime numbers. We could reject all work except that which arrives on Wednesdays, “Wodon’s day” — related to *wōd* in Old English, meaning, “insane, mad” — save Wednesday manuscripts for a couple of months then, blindfolded, draw the number needed from a great basket. We could take a writer, say Richard Kostelanetz, then take as our next acceptance the first writer whose name begins with “Z,” and as our next the first writer whose initial is the last letter of the “Z”-name, and so forth. Or we could make an issue from Luckie Thirteens, the thirteenth work submitted by writers who have already collected the twelve rejection notes imagined above. One could devise as many systems as one wished to dethrone reason and deliberation, and we could wonder all the while whether our issues might not become better.

But we are unlikely to follow these fantasies, at least not soon. Instead I will reaffirm our communal decisions, our shaping a staff year by year as a deliberative community, and argue that by so doing we have been venturing toward a kind of Deweyian, democratic affirmation of the truth as that which becomes discovered in process. And for the moment I’ll leave it at that.

Except to admit that for more than a dozen years one of my most errant fantasies has been to imagine that one day, by facing again and again new and newer pages, I would discover the truth and so could suddenly separate, unerringly, the good stuff from the the less worthy. What need of a t-shirt then? With all traces of the feeble editor erased, I’d brandish a vision.

So far, however, I learn too much from our discussions to suffer such ideas. —*D.H.*