



Rejection

Jonathan Edwards

LIKE MOST WRITERS, I have spent most of my life being rejected. Whole years of my life have surrendered to it, whole decades. Non-writers can never know this. Non-writers have a different conception of time. They think of the weekend they spent in Florence, the year they lived in London, the months of a fondly-remembered relationship. They think of the day ahead and the innocent hopes they have for it. I think of the decades in which I was rejected. I think of ways in which the coming weeks will offer new opportunities for rejection.

For the entirety of my twenties, I was rejected. I took it seriously. I treated rejection like a job. I worked at it, and I worked hard. The wages were poor. The wages were brown envelopes with my own handwriting on them, thumping onto my welcome mat a few months or weeks or sometimes days after I'd sent them.

I think it was Matthew Sweeney who said once that every time he was rejected he went to bed with a bottle of whiskey for a week. I tried this once and found that the lifestyle was not viable. There weren't enough days in a lifetime, enough bottles of whiskey on the planet. Rejection was not something of isolated incidents. It was an ongoing process, a life to commit to.

Rejections multiply, copulate, give birth to other rejections. Rejection innovates, loves technology. The brown envelopes have given way to Submittable, with its bank of 'declines,' its record of rejections, sitting



there every time you open a screen. *Look*, you can think, *here's where I was rejected six years ago. Ah, yes. A wonderful summer.* I have come to see acceptance only as the absence of rejection. I have come to see acceptance only as a brief reprieve, or even a path to a new rejection. A book not reviewed, or reviewed badly, or a good review that leads to no significant sales, or significant sales which cause no one to write to you about your book, or people who write to you about your book and tell you how much they love one of the poems. *Oh yeah*, says rejection, *the others are crap.*

Once, after judging a poetry competition, I asked the organisation I was working with what they wanted done with all the poems that hadn't won. The poems I'd rejected. 'They're just sitting there under the stairs,' I said. 'All these papers. I need the space. I need the room. What do you want me to do with these poems?' The organisation went quiet. The organisation said they'd check and get back to me.

So, after a week, I drove all the poems over to the local tip. It was a warm day and, when I got there, I found myself sweating as I unloaded all the poems out of my car and into a skip. It was work, this rejecting of people's poems, this breaking of hearts. The boxes were heavy, and I had to rest them on the lip of the skip before they dropped in with a thud. When the skip was full, I took a moment, drew breath, looked down at them all, lying there in the skip, the thousands on thousands of poems, the pieces of paper, the pieces of hopes and dreams. *I've spent decades*, I thought, as I looked down, *I've spent my life, really, in a room, doing this, thinking it would fix something. Everyone has exactly these dreams, and this is what those dreams really look like.*

And it would be sort of relief, wouldn't it, if the story ended there, if that's all there was, those poems dumped in a skip, because then you could give up and do all the things you've thought you could if you weren't busy writing. But something else happened that day, as I looked down into the skip, something wonderful, and there's no reason you should believe



in it apart from the fact that it happened, and perhaps apart from the fact that you want to. What happened that day as I looked down into the skip was exactly what happens in every writer's life, just often enough, for those who keep going, to keep going. As I was looking down, a gust of wind came, and it lifted from the pile of poems a single poem, just one, blew it over the side of the skip, then blew it again and again, until it was rumbling, moving through the air, that poem, until it was heading off in the direction of the local town, soaring really, through the air, on its way to be published, on its way to find readers.