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# Publishing: A Conversation/ Publishing a Conversation

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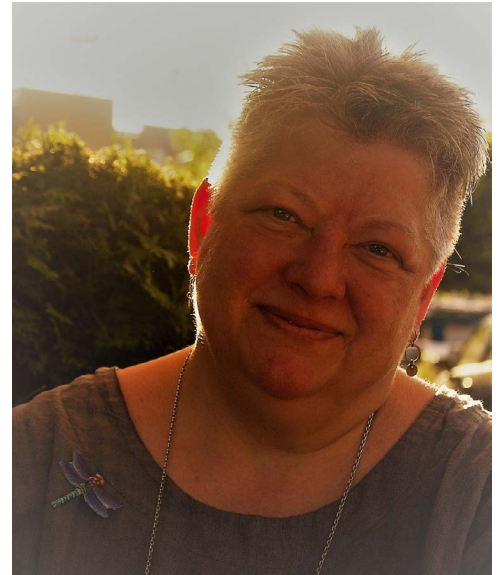
## ANTICIPATION

I love the moment when I send a piece out. It is out there—via the mail with a SASE or via the internet—and for the time it travels and I wait to hear, it is all about the possibilities. When I send out creative writing pieces to literary magazines, I imagine not only hearing that the piece has been accepted but that I also have been invited to become a feature writer, and, thus, never again will go through the peer-review process as my pieces will always already be welcome. When I send out academic pieces to various journals, I imagine my piece not only will be accepted but will be rewarded as the best "something." As a result of my prolific publications, I receive letters from fellow writers and academics telling me how much my writing means to them. My university features me in campus publications. I am offered an endowed chair, a MacArthur fellowship . . . the possibilities are endless.

## DEJECTION

There have been times when I sent out a piece I was unduly proud of to a top-tier journal believing they too would love the piece only to be shot down. Really, shot down. One editor asked: "Why did you even think you could send this piece our way?" Another queried: "Are you familiar with the reputation of our publication?"

Upon being rejected, I recall being in high school, pulsing with the desire to be accepted, to be loved, waiting to be asked to the dance, never, ever being one of the first girls who would be. Upon being rejected, I respond as I usually do when hurt: I try to charm my way back in. In fact, I sent the editor, who wondered why I even sent my essay to him, a piece about the dizzying experience of having my writing refused. That night, after being shot down, I kept reliving the feeling of plummeting towards the earth, hands over my head, waiting for the terrible impact of it all. I lay in bed unable to sleep. The following morning, I forwarded him the following play I had written in my head.



### Keywords

writing, academic publishing, blind peer review, journal editorship

Upon Being Rejected by  
*Fill-in-the-name-of-an-esteemed-journal-in-your-field:*  
 A Play in Two Acts

The Characters: All the characters reside in the writer's head. They often all speak together, and quite frequently speak at cross purposes.

Scenes:

Act one: The writer's bedroom as she attempts to go to sleep.

Act two: The writer's study, at a table with her laptop (really, it is her dining room table, but she likes to imagine it is her study).

Act One

The writer is curled up on her side of the bed. The lights are off. Her partner slumbers peacefully by her side. The dog, who should never have been allowed in the bed in the first place, also slumbers peacefully, and most peacefully at this moment because all four of her paws are touching the writer and this, apparently, makes her feel more secure.

In spite of engaging in various partially learned relaxation techniques, the writer is unable to go to sleep because various voices are speaking in her head. As the minutes pass, the voices become more and more strident. The following characters' declamations begin overlapping. For example, as soon as Cassandra gets to "but not now," Fayanna begins speaking her lines. Soon the entire conversation becomes cacophonous—all voices speaking at once.

Cassandra: Now you are never going to get reappointed. If you had placed that essay in the journal, you could feel pretty comfortable, but not now. You need to get some publications out there, and how are you going to do that when it took you so long to pull this one together?

Fayanna: It would be good to remember how you feel right now and think about those feelings when you are commenting on students' papers so you can be more vigilant about saying something that will make them feel there is something promising there, even when they get a C on the paper. You don't want to leave students feeling this dejected. Think about how you can respond with greater kindness, gentleness.

Tempest: I can't believe I have been treated this way. I just can't believe it. Who does he think he is rejecting my paper? I can't believe this. What an \*&&@^!#. What a &&%#\*\* journal. %#^@#&^^.

Cassandra: So what are you going to do now? You had this lovely life, you know. And now you have gone and ruined it all. What will you do when you have to leave the university? Hmmm? Just where do you think you can go and what do you think you can do? How marketable is someone whose work is about menstrual products and Holocaust atrocity photographs, of all things. Well?

Prudence: Now, it is clear that he read the paper and he read it with care. He has given you some good advice to consider. Call your writing group and ask them to recommend some journals where you might try to place the piece so you can begin studying those journals.

Cassandra: You've really done it this time. Do you really think you can get this thing placed? You shouldn't have sent it in until it was perfect. Now you won't have anything to show for yourself. You need more publications.

Prudence: It is a promising piece and there is a place for it.

Fayanna: It was so lovely when it was out there and one could imagine it published. The fourth or fifth piece in the journal. The essay placed where the publication naturally fell open.

Cassandra: I really don't think there is enough time to turn this piece around. What are you going to do if you aren't reappointed?

Tempest: %\$#\*&&. You can show him. What you need to do is to find a bigger, better journal.

All Characters: A bigger, better journal? Hmmm . . . Well . . . Ummm . . .

Each lost in her own tantalizing thoughts, the characters are quiet. In the lull the author falls to sleep.

Act Two

The writer at her laptop typing away. She looks up and murmurs to herself.

Writer: I wonder if they would consider a short, creative piece. A play in two acts, perhaps?

To some degree, this play protected me from my fall, but it was not the magic answer. I did not charm my way into that journal then nor have I since.

I know that in the publishing world, rejection is inevitable. I know that, but it still always feels personal, as if the journal, most decidedly, does not want to dance with me. The editors of the journals, similar to the boys when I was in high school, are in the power position and they let you know it when they reject you. “We are only able to publish a fraction of what is submitted”; “thank you for your interest in our publication”; “subscribe to our blog”; “be sure to follow us on Twitter or Facebook” are some of the solipsistic responses you receive. There also are the crueller responses: “after careful consideration by our editors, we regret to inform you that we must decline this submission on editorial grounds and subsequently have declined to send the paper out to external peer reviewers”; “our editorial board and expert reviewers determined that your paper doesn’t meet our publication standards.”

That said, sometimes there also are rejections coupled with a few paragraphs of explanation. Those paragraphs clarify that your piece has been read and that there may be hope for it. Often, however, what becomes clear is that if there is hope, it is that the piece will be published elsewhere.

And then there is the world of creative writing. For a time, I sent my nonfiction stories to a well-known magazine again and again. Each time I sent my piece I felt sure was perfect for the magazine, the SASE came back: no. And this is another horror when it comes to creative writing: you simply are turned down with phrases like “your piece was given careful consideration by our editors, but it does not suit our current needs”; “we hope you have success elsewhere”; “we hope you will continue to support our literary community and are willing to offer you a discounted subscription rate”; “we recommend you consult a recent issue of our journal in order to better understand what types of submissions we are seeking.” If you are fortunate, you might receive the phrase “we appreciate your interest and encourage you to pitch us again.” You never receive individual comments. You never are told why you aren’t a fit—even if you try, again and again, with a particular publication.

On one occasion, I refused to stand by, a wallflower, pretending these rejections did not matter. I wrote to the editor of the well-known magazine to say, emphatically, that I wouldn’t be sending him anything for two years. When I sent in another piece, the third year hence, that didn’t deter him. I received another rejection. I mentioned my unproductive relationship with the editor of this

literary magazine to my class one day and one of my students beamed at me. She said, “Oh, my mother was published in that magazine. I can’t wait to tell her how many times you have been rejected. That will make her feel so good about her acceptance. I think it is lovely that people like my mother get published; she’s a nurse.”

And with that student’s remark, I most assuredly not only fell, but I landed, my white (chubby) legs making a slight splash as I fell into the ocean while everything turned away, quite leisurely, from my disaster.<sup>1</sup>

## ENVY

When fallen and rejected, I always turn to one of my favourite quotations about writers from Anne Lamott. Not only do I turn to her in times of need, I include this quotation on my peer-review rubric for students and thus I look at it multiple times over any given semester:

I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her.<sup>2</sup>

Now, when you read that final sentence, you love Anne Lamott. However, if you are fallen, like me, then you suspect she is the writer of whom she speaks. If so, you want to take your shoe off and hit her twice on the head for being so crafty to appear so much like you, the writer without confidence and without the necessary elegant first drafts, and yet, possibly, she is the writer who writes brilliantly without second-guessing, without shame, without high-falutin’ ideas about publication. And so, you might want to take your ergonomic, earth-friendly shoe and go thwack!, “There you go Anne for deceiving me,” and, again, thwack!, “There you go Anne for being the one who really does write those publishable first drafts.”

But it really isn’t Anne I want to hit on the head; it is those other published authors I have been reading. I can’t help but wonder, “Do these writers ever get rejected?” And most days, I think not.

As an academic, I have been in conversation with Marianne

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1 I am indebted here to W. H. Auden’s reading of Pieter Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1555). In “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938), Auden notes that Icarus’s fall, marked only by two white legs “disappearing into the green water,” does not stop the everyday from carrying on. In the face of the suffering of others, “someone else is eating, or opening a window, or just walking dully along”; “everything turns away, quite leisurely from the disaster.”

2 This quotation comes from Anne Lamott’s ubiquitously quoted essay entitled “Shitty First Drafts” in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. I have found this essay cited in almost every blog or book that discusses how one becomes a writer. See Lamott, Anne, “Shitty First Drafts,” *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anchor Books, 1994, p. 21.

Hirsch,<sup>3</sup> Alison Landsberg,<sup>4</sup> Claude Lanzmann,<sup>5</sup> Dan Stone,<sup>6</sup> and James Young<sup>7</sup>—in just the last few weeks, often throughout the day—as I revise an essay, for the fifth time that I believe, at long last, will be published. None of them know I have been cogitating with them hour after hour, and yet I have. None of them know—i.e., the prolific and brilliant James Young—that I might want to take off my shoe and hit him on the head, and yet I do.

Not only do I think these authors never are rejected by the editorial staff at various journals, I also imagine that even when they bring a potluck dish or a wine to a dinner party, their offering is the one that is most exclaimed about. I didn't bring up the notion of a dish to share or the most-current wine capriciously.

For me, each of these individuals has become a familiar. When I contemplate my research about the Holocaust, I have been in conversation with them. I not only have read what they have to say, but I have imagined the dinners where they first fomented this notion for their next publication. Were they eating salmon or steak or something vegan? Did they drink a Pinot Noir or an iced green tea? Who did they invite to dinner when that notion first entered their head? And if it was James Young, did he grill an herbed salmon and did his wife prepare a salad with beets and orange slices for their guests?

Published writers, I imagine, lead perfect lives. They write with ease. Publication houses and journal editors seek them out. Not only are they admired for their writing, but they are admired for their witty conversation, the scarf they tie just so around their necks, their cheese soufflé that never ceases to astonish their guests.

And then there are the writers who write the pieces I wish I had written. I wanted to stomp my feet and tear up the draft when my colleague, Sandie Friedman,<sup>8</sup> brought her first draft of “How to Do Things with Titles” to our writing workshop. “But I want to write this piece,” I kept thinking; “Why did you come up with this first and not me?” It is a very clever essay. I had an all-out tantrum when Cecelia Watson<sup>9</sup> published *Semicolon: The Past, Present, and Future of a Misunderstood Mark*. I have a well-honed lecture on the erotics of punctuation in which I make suggestive comments about punctuation marks, including the mutuality or excess of the semicolon (I screamed; she screamed. Or—her delight seemingly knew no bounds as it was expressed not only gutturally but also in the curling of her toes; it was expressed in her innermost thoughts that spiraled higher and then higher; it was expressed in the contentment after the crescendo; it was; it was; it was.) I read Watson's book twice in the same night. It was not only smart, but a delight. I wanted to write this book that was both smart and a delight. She used footnotes. I love footnotes. I swear by footnotes; they are where I often am at my best. *Semicolon* should have been my book.

## AMITY

Like so many others, I love Kenneth Burke's<sup>10</sup> metaphor for writing an argument:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them

3 Of late, I have been working with Holocaust photographs, memory, and “postmemory.” Marianne Hirsch, one of the foremost scholars of the Holocaust, eloquently coined the term and the psychological, moral concept of postmemory. In “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” Marianne Hirsch identifies one of the cruxes of the postmemorial relationship to the Shoah as the place wherein the viewer identifies with, and yet, ultimately, remains separated from the sufferer and his/her/their suffering. As Hirsch explains, postmemory “is defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by the unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after” (p. 10). See Hirsch, Marianne, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 1, Spring 2001, pp. 5-37.

4 Alison Landsberg has offered eloquent, compelling readings I vehemently oppose. In particular, I applaud and disagree with her reading of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). See Landsberg, Alison, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Columbia UP, 2004.

5 Claude Lanzmann is the creator of the masterpiece *Shoah* (1985)—a film that was 11 years in the making, is nine and one-half hours long, and explores witnessing (or the failure to bear witness) from the point of view of survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators.

6 Dan Stone has four books coming out in 2021. Need I say more? See *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after the Holocaust and World War II; The Holocaust; Beyond Camps and Forced Labour*, editor; *Cambridge History of the Holocaust*, Vol. 1, editor.

7 James Young is a scholar who writes with brilliance and elegance. He is the foremost scholar of Holocaust memorials and most gracious when lesser scholars, such as myself, request permission to use one of his photographs in a publication. And yet, at times, I am so envious because he said something memorable about a monument I have just discovered and also am trying to analyze persuasively. At those times, I want to thump him on the head with my ever-practical shoe.

8 See Friedman, Sandie, “How to Do Things with Titles.” *Writing on the Edge*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1 April 2012, pp.21-26.,

9 Run, really, put on your walking/jogging shoes and run to your local bookstore to buy her book. You won't believe how delightful it is until you actually read it. See Watson, Cecelia. *Semicolon: The Past, Present, and Future of a Misunderstood Mark*, HarperCollins, 2019.

10 See Burke, Kenneth, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd edition, U of California P, 1973. pp. 110-111.

got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers, you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

Many years ago when I was writing my dissertation about how modern playwrights staged the home, one of my readers said, "You really must take Bachelard<sup>11</sup> to task for voicing such sexist ideas about women's relationship to their homes." I loved Bachelard for his notion of interrogating where we go in our daydreams. What if Freud had made a similar observation? Wouldn't we have a vastly different understanding of the superego?

Bachelard wrote *The Poetics of Space* in the 1950s; I didn't feel it was right to dismiss his sense that women had a more intimate relationship with their homes. Moreover, I felt I had invited him into my dissertation. I was happy to have him there. He helped me think about what it meant for a playwright to set a play or part of a play in an attic or a bedroom or a living room. He helped me analyze what these rooms mean in the world of daydreams and what they might mean in the world of a particular play. When I thought of Bachelard, I thought of a lovely moussaka I would have liked to serve him if he ever came to dinner. In a similar vein, I thought of all of the scholars and dramatists in my dissertation as guests I wanted to honour with fine food. In my parlor conversations, food and drink also are involved. I see these individuals balancing plates, taking bites of this or that, sipping from a glass. They bring their "answers," but they also bring something more.

This sense of something more comes, in part, from the intimacy of feminist writers I read in the 80s. Dorothy Allison<sup>12</sup> not only shared with me the grittiness of her life in *Trash*, she also shared her erotic fantasies in *On Our Backs*. Jewelle Gomez<sup>13</sup> offered me gems of poems and her recipe for "Play-Cards-All-Night Chili" in *Cookin' with Honey: What Literary Lesbians Eat*. These writers not only offered me stories and arguments that altered how I saw myself and the world, they also invited me into their lives by sharing insights into who they were not only as writers but as flesh-and-blood women. Virginia Woolf<sup>14</sup> was one of the first to say women needed rooms of their own in order to write. In fact, the creation of rooms in homes may be credited with encouraging our sense of interiority, our inner thoughts, thoughts that call to be expressed in verbal or written form. Allison and Gomez made those rooms even more

intimate as they opened their doors to their bedroom or their kitchen and allowed us to see not only where they write but also where they live, fully embodied as writers and as lesbians.

## SHORING UP

Publishing is so intimate. When my writing is rejected, I feel I have been smote by both academic and creative writing journals. I also have felt simultaneously nurtured and bullied by editors and anonymous readers.

A number of years ago, an editor and an outside reader coached me through revising an essay I had submitted to a journal about teaching writing. In my piece, I discussed the ways two students engaged archival photographs from the Shoah. One set of photographs depicted the murder of a group of women in a ravine. I had included the images in the essay, and the editor informed me he wouldn't publish the images because they depicted this horrible atrocity.

I had multiple conversations with him in my head in which I tried to convince him that it was only logical to include the images because I was talking about the effect of these photographs on one student writer. Sometimes, by e-mail, I shared with him parts of my conversation. He was not persuaded. He pointed out that this journal was not a publication where one might expect to see atrocity photographs and thus he did not feel it was ethical to include them. I wanted to persist with my argument, and then one of the outside readers intervened with the simple statement: "Do you want to get this essay published?" And with that statement, that I always have imagined was followed by a truly exasperated sigh, my reader made me stop whining.

I wanted my piece published, and I wanted it published ethically. I finally realized that there were ethics on the editor's side as well in terms of his duties to his readership/audience. I also knew that if this editor and reader were to come dinner, I would apologize for being so obstinate and would make them rainbow trout with tarragon, vegetable pancakes, radicchio salad, flan, and would serve a well-chilled Pinot Gris.

Shoring up publications never becomes more real than in May when annual reports are due. Every year, when I write my report, I recall my Catholic past. I imagine all of my sins of omission—the papers I wrote that did not find a home; the committees I might have joined, but didn't; those unhappy students I never made happy. I try to imagine celebrating myself, celebrating my year, and I fall flat. Many days of the year I feel I am doing meaningful work;

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11 See Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space (La Poétique de l'Espace, 1958)*, translated by Maria Jolas, Orion Press, 1964.

12 See Allison, Dorothy, *Trash: Short Stories*, Firebrand Books, 1988 and/or *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dutton, 1992.

13 See Gomez, Jewelle, *Oral Tradition: Selected Poems Old and New*, Firebrand Books, 1995 and/or *The Best Lesbian Erotica of 1997*, Cleis, 1997.

14 See Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own*, Hogarth Press, 1929.

however, every time annual reports come around, I feel mendicant, rice bowl in hand.

As I write down each presentation, publication, submission in revision, I hear the words of Eliot's<sup>15</sup> Fisher King in my head: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." I wonder, will what I have done be enough? Mendicant. Suppliant. Possibly ruined. Months pass before I receive word from my director and the dean. It has been thirty-five years of annual reports, and when I read the director's or the dean's comments—no matter if they are at times laudatory—I don't feel buoyed, only a sense of relief. Once again, I have been spared, and I prepare to shore myself up one more time.

## PERSISTENCE

My appointment requires that I publish. I am thankful for that requirement; it keeps me in conversation. And yet there is very little time in the semester for going to an archive, tracking down a reference in a footnote, spending enough time to really think through the nuances of a given argument. There are too many papers to comment on, too many sections to teach, too many students to meet to carve out the space for hours of reading and rereading as well as writing, rewriting, and unwriting (I can't bring myself to say the dreadful word: *deleting*).

When the time permits, I relish this effort to be in conversation, to fully examine why I do what I do in the classroom, to think through what a given effort to memorialize the Holocaust means, to analyze the ways talking about menstruation have changed.

And yet, I often find myself wondering if there could be greater largesse when it comes to the work editors of both academic and creative publications accept. Shouldn't creative writing journals do something more than send form letters (a modicum of feedback would be a start)? Would it be possible to publish pieces of writing still in process (Adrienne Rich's<sup>16</sup> "Notes toward a Politics of Location" comes to mind, where she ends her essay with the following sentence: "This is the end of these notes, but it is not an ending."). Why must scholarship purport to be so polished, so authoritative, so absolute? Shouldn't publication be about enlarging the circle of who we read and who reads us? Wouldn't a journal benefit from including something that isn't their usual fare?

I keep writing. I keep trying to publish. And each time, I go through each of the six stages; sometimes I dwell more in one stage than another. Often I live barraged by all six: I send out this piece for final review; I receive word that another piece has been rejected and I can't find it in me to literally add that rejection letter to the others in order to "earn" 100 rejections; Sandie brings another

essay to our writing group that I believe I should be writing; a reviewer offers me concrete suggestions for revision and says she enthusiastically supports the publication of my work; at long last, I am asked to sign the contributor contract for a chapter I wrote three years ago.

And then I imagine creating a series of erasure poems from the rejection letter I received, the reviewer's suggestions for revision, the contributor contract poem. And so begins the ongoing struggle, the internal conversation: should I begin playing with the erasure poems or should I tackle the pile of student assignments I need to grade . . .

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15 See Eliot, T. S., "The Waste Land," [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land). Accessed 3 February 2020.

16 See Rich, Adrienne, "Notes toward a Politics of Location," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, Norton, 1994, p. 231.