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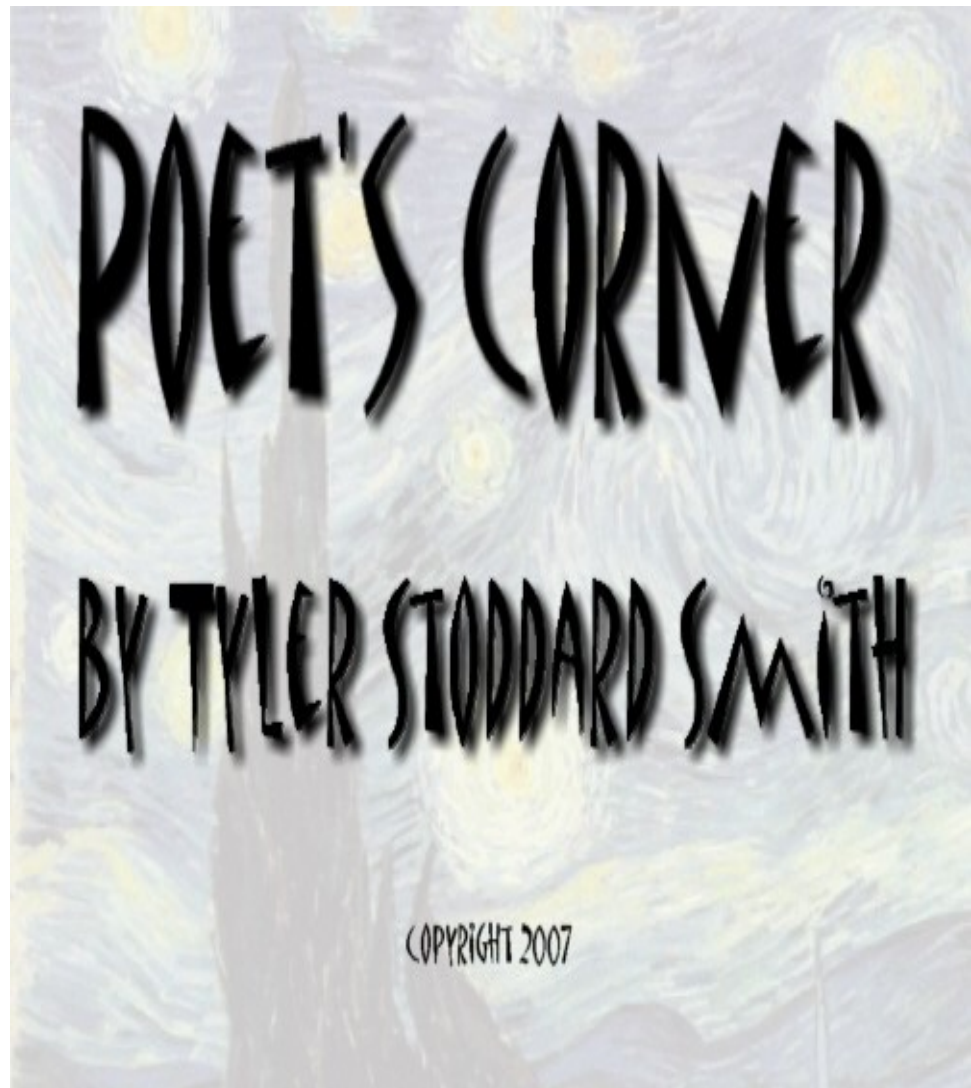
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Rejection letters are always a drag; whether they are negative responses from job opportunities, university admissions boards or literary journals. However, there is nothing quite as spirit-crushing as a rejection letter received after submitting a poem. A short-story rejection slip is depressing, but not devastating. You manufacture a story in your head, create some characters and make them talk. Fine. So you didn't like my characters. Their dialogue is unrealistic. Their motives are questionable. Fine. They aren't *me*. But a rejection letter from a poem is, for me, the equivalent of standing out on a street corner naked and having passers-by hand you terse little notes reading, "Your penis is unconvincing," or "You call those nipples?," or maybe, "You have an affected buttocks." And that kind of stuff just breaks my heart. You pour it all into a poem: your skeleton, your bile, your oozing primordial remnant—your private parts. To be told that the fundamental *you* is not up to snuff—that's hard murder.

I was looking out a window at the Vail ski slopes and thought that the skiers in the distance resembled fleas on a giant polar bear. That made me feel fairly poetic, so I went to my girlfriend's computer to write it down. I'd never seen a ski poem and thought that perhaps there was a niche industry there. Most skiers are rich, most skiers are educated, and everybody loves a hokey poem about their sport, their profession, their passion. I could be the Pablo Neruda of ski poems: "I want to bounce over moguls/like the raindrops in Chile/bounce across your breasts." Every poet, at one point in his or her life, considers dipping the quill in hackneyed Hallmark ink. But, this is *poetry*, and the real poet must never compromise feeling, self or

integrity. My mind whirred around, thinking of words and meter, then came to a stop and remembered that it had been a while since I last checked one of my "poetry" e-mail addresses. This address (which I will not divulge, as I still may have a poem in me one day) is one of the many e-mail addresses writers have. Most publications assert that their editors will accommodate no more than two or three submissions per writer, per year. So, after those first two rejections, what can the writer do but stew until the coming year nears? I'll tell you what: The writer can fabricate names and alternate e-mail addresses, assuring at least a few more reads a year (alas, this is inevitably coupled with a few more rejections each year). I have three poetry e-mail addresses. I had checked two of the addresses fairly recently, but it had been over a month since I checked the third. I went to my account, as I always do, hopeful as one is hopeful for making parole (in that this kind of hope is seldom realized and often results in continued forced sodomy, or in the best of cases, a job cleaning those cheese spackle guns at Taco Bell). I have four replies.

Three are in response to a poem I wrote about the death of Federico Garcia-Lorca. One is in response to a Bukowski rip-off that details the deleterious gastro-intestinal effects of drinking gin and eating chicken wings in excess. It looked bad. You can always tell you're about to be denied when the response reads something like: Re: My Poetry Submission. If the bastards don't want you, they won't even bother with changing first person to possessive. Sure enough, I receive all vaguely complimentary albeit offensively generic rejections (I will not even begin to go into the despair upon receiving SASE snail-mail rejection letters. The thought of *paying* to be rejected makes me want to burrow through an excelsior filled cage with a rent copy of *Leaves of Grass*).

Then, something snapped in me. Not exactly snapped, but kind of slurped. As I quickly changed websites to cnn.com/money to see how rapidly my stock was tanking, a warm swell enveloped me. I thought of Whitman and how he went door to door hawking his scrawls. Then to Rimbaud and how if it all went to shit I could just leave for Paris and drink absinthe all day. And finally, to a guy I read about in Saskatchewan who juggles moose testicles for the patients' amusement in a cancer ward. There are solutions to problems. These men had all been faced with artistic rejection (except for the moose dude, maybe) in their careers and had found ways to assuage their pain. Besides, it wasn't *that* bad. I was in Vail. Of course, I had (still have) over \$10,000 of credit card debt, a shit job, an STD I picked up in Nuevo Laredo and the house in Vail was my best friend's boss's house that we broke into; but it was still far from hopeless. Maybe poetry would never work out. I could be happy on a beach just drinking boat drinks and making passes at women—who needs poetry? Maybe this was just not my epoch; maybe in 2388, when robots/yetis rule the earth, I will be appreciated as "ahead of my time." I didn't *need* poetry the way I *need* pornography. I would survive.

My trip from Vail over a little more than a week, I sat in my girlfriend's and my 300 square foot apartment in Denver, restless. The first few days I never wrote, I never thought of writing. However, after those few days, I started to lose it. I would wake up before my girlfriend and run to liquor store to buy a half-pint of vodka at 9:00am. I sat behind a car, drank the Absolut Citron mixed with Diet Rock Star Energy Drink and then wobbled my way back up the stairs. I would sit through an agonizing episode of *ER* in which I would lament my abbreviated pre-med career and think how, if I had been more vigilant in organic chemistry, I could have made MDMA and sold hits of Ecstasy to the gentry. The vodka would kick in and around 10:00am my girlfriend would wake up.

"Did you leave this morning?"

"No."

"That Diet Rock Star smells like booze."

"I know, doesn't it?"

"What are you eating?"

"Chinese food."

"From last night?"

"Yes."

"We were going to eat that together for lunch in the park."

"This is different Chinese food."

"Are you drunk?"

"No."

"Then where in the fuck are your pants?"

You ask a lot of questions, don't you?"

"Jesus."

It went this way for a while until I reached that point of indifference that breeds the most valuable of ideas. Snow was falling over Denver and I sat out on our balcony and watched it. The chill was numbing but the scenery was hypnotic. I saw each snowflake as if I had been taken on some kind of peyote-induced vision quest. Every bit of geometry made sense, much like cheeseburgers; every cheeseburger, like every snowflake is different, yet hauntingly similar. My poems, God help me, were different. My unmetered scribbles were vessels for a universal suffering, a galactic joy. I resolved to sell a poem.

Up to this point, I had published a grand total of one poem (a floundering rant on commercialism picked up by a Marxist rag out of Portland) and had been paid for none. I was going to create and I was going to get paid for standing skinned alive on the street, my own entrails squishing through my fingers as I raised them over my head in Promethean awkwardness. I would become a merchant of my own quill and scroll. I would set up shop on my own—like Whitman—and sell my poems.

"Original Poems: \$500 or Best Offer" read my slipshod cardboard sign. I spent almost two hours perfecting the desperate scrawls that adorned my sign. I don't want to seem too complacent, I thought. Better dirty up the sign. I want to seem educated—perhaps one year of college, then the mendicant breakdown of sociopathic genius. I printed out a quantity of poems and sorted them into three piles. One pile would be for the patchouli-lathered quasi-hippies who might identify with me—people who might buy a poem just because the idea of buying a poem on the street seemed "counter-cultural." Another pile would be my attempt at a "romantic" poem. Now obsolete, the poem was written for an ex-girlfriend that borrowed heavily from—who else?—Neruda. These poems would be for husbands too lazy to stop for flowers after coming home smelling like stripper perfume the night before. Finally, I managed to track down a poem I'd written a long time ago that amounted to a musing on nature. Nobody knows what to do with nature poems. This poem was the kind of wild-card I'd sell to those folks I couldn't get a really solid read on. Nature confuses by its very, well, nature. Thus, its appeal in poems is undeniable but still perplexes the reader, which I suppose is good.

What followed was easily one of the most petrifying moments of my life. I gathered my stack of poems and made my way out to one of the busier intersections in Denver—at Hamden and Colorado. My first fear was that I would saunter up to the intersection only to find another "homeless" person with an even more sympathetic if not humorous sign and that I'd have to pack up my gear and find another intersection. I had picked this particular intersection because it was close to our apartment and I thought that if things really got out of hand or the gendarmes decided to go after me for loitering or soliciting (I can never remember which is which), I would have time to make a quick dash back to the apartment, burn all my poems and call my parents, asking them for another loan. I didn't see any other vagrant with a sign, so I freaked out and ran back to the apartment anyway. The thing was, the closer I got to setting up my makeshift poetry

kiosk, I was reminded that I had gone to college with two guys who I knew were in Denver. Denver is a big city, but I was beset by a strong mental image of either of them pulling up next to me in their BMW's, noticing me, then it's that whole awkward situation you see in movies where they demand to "take me in," feed me and give me money until their wives come home and demand that "he can only stay the night, then he has to leave. . . Think of the children!" Or, the other option: The eye contact between former colleagues, one of whom has obviously "made it," and the other, obviously bat-shit crazy, probably drunk and likely to start screaming about "modes of being."

When I return to our apartment, my girlfriend is there, which is a bit of a problem, as I thought that she would be in class and that I would not have to explain why her upper middle class boyfriend is wandering around the streets of Denver with a stack of poetry and a cardboard sign.

"I thought you were in class, baby."

"I imagine you did. What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm selling my poems on the street."

"You've got to be shitting me. Why don't you call my cousin—he said he'd give you a job at Starbucks."

"I hate Starbucks, no way."

"Everybody hates Starbucks. You just have a bad reason—they took over your Taco Bell and that Taco Bell was the *only* one who would still make the Cheesarito?"

"I told you that?"

"Yes, a bio-degradable moment, obviously."

"You read that phrase in a book."

"No, *you* read that in a book. You say it all the time because you can't remember that you say it all the time."

"It's a good line, though, you have to admit."

"It was a good line. Now you just embarrass yourself with it. . . like you're doing out on the street. Selling fucking poems, Tyler? Why don't you just keep submitting to the *New Yorker*?"

"They don't reply anymore. They just send me offers to subscribe, completely ignoring my submissions."

"You shouldn't have written them hate mail every time they rejected you."

"It wasn't hate mail, it was more desperate pleas for a sympathy publication."

"You called an editor "fit for little more than extinction."

"I was writing a metaphor."

"Go sell your poems on the street, then. How's it going out there, I guess I'll ask."

"Terrible. I totally panicked and ran back here."

"For wine?"

"For wine."

"Get your fat-ass out there and you can have wine after you've sold ten poems."

"Ten?"

"Ten at least." She ushers me out the door, sort of tenderly, which is nice. But again, I'm scared shitless. I gird up my loins, as I have another flash ushered on by the Ghost of Poetry Future—who looks a lot like a black Emily Dickenson—that has me writing Crayon hieroglyphics on a bathroom wall somewhere in New Jersey with a bottle of something in hand and a case of mild gigantism that has only afflicted my lymph nodes. I walk out of the apartment, this time resolute in selling my poetry.

Again, I walk down to the corner of Hamden and Colorado. I sit for one moment, pondering the possibility (inevitability?) of humiliation and shame, but I am not the *most* weak-willed person in the world and I take up a spot at the northwest corner of the intersection by the left-hand turn lane. I arrange my poems in their respective piles, I don my sign and try not to make eye contact with any of the drivers. I am sweating ice. I feel an acute sense of fraud. I feel death.

Moments go by and it seems, in my agitated state, that none of the drivers have even recognized this freaked-out specimen standing on the side of the road. The light is still green. The cars whiz by and I long to be in a fugue state, or at least drunk. But I'm here, carrying with me the hope every poet must carry in his or her heart that what they have to offer is valuable, valuable not just to the self, but to humanity. The light goes yellow and it seems I am being rained on by a sulfuric acid cloud. My skin gets hot, my knees wobble and my head feels as if needles have sprung from every hair follicle. The light turns red. An eternity goes by and still nothing. I begin to daydream. . . Word gets out. Within a week a writing professor will drive by after reading one of the poems purchased by his wife and take me in and coddle me and cultivate my writing and then I'll be fighting Jonathan Safran Foer at some art opening in Soho. I think when Annie Leibowitz shoots my photo for *Rolling Stone*, I'd like to be ass naked holding a five liter jug of Carlo Rossi burgundy with only a Purdue roaster chicken covering my crotch. Art. Just start with one poem. One god-damned poem.

After waiting another eternity on this damned corner, I resolve to engage at least one person on this corner. I walk gingerly up to the Ford Explorer stopped at the light. The driver is a 40ish man in street clothes, so I'm relatively assured that he either has enough money not to work or has one of those jobs that allow for free-thinking and poetic tendencies. I make eye contact with the man and he looks back and, noticing my sign, lets out a laugh. He rolls down the window.

"I don't have \$500. What kind of poems are you selling?" He sounds vaguely Texan, something that puts me at ease. I am from Texas.

"I've got a few kinds here. Romantic, pensive, natural..."

"I'll give you five dollars for one of each."

"Five a piece?"

"God, no. Five for one of each." I am about to wet myself I am so excited. I reach into each of my little cardboard boxes and pull out one of each poem. I hand him the poems and he hands me a five dollar bill. My first poetry sale fills me with such happiness that after taking the money, I nearly walk out into traffic out of mongloid jubilation. There are souls on this earth that still care! I am the happiest man alive. I resolve to stay out on this magical corner for the rest of my days, happily whooping like a Valkyrie and selling poems to this world—this beautiful, artistic, forgiving, gentle world. I regard the Rocky Mountains in the distance and feel I belong here in this place. There is a place for the poet on this Earth!

As my eyes water with joy and Haydn's "Der Himmel Erzahlen" bellows throughout my very soul, a Ford Explorer pulls up and a 40ish man with a hint of a Texas accent throws some pieces of paper at my feet.

"Hey, man—these motherfuckers don't even rhyme."

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Tyler Stoddard Smith's works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry have been featured or are upcoming in: The McSweeney's Joke Book of Book Jokes (Vintage), Best American Fantasy (Prime Books), Esquire, Meridian, Pindeldyboz, The Big Jewel, Yankee Pot Roast, Word Riot, Fresh Yarn, Barrelhouse, Monkeybicycle, and McSweeney's, among others. A graduate of Rice University, he received his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Colorado--Boulder. He also edits a political satire website, www.demockercy.com. For more info, feel free to e-mail him at Stoddard.smith@gmail.com.