

publishing & the pinocchio
syndrome

So maybe you take your poems to your girlfriend, or your husband, or your friend, and they all love them. *You're so talented*, they tell you. They actually cry. They say, *I am going to keep these close to my heart.* But then you take those same poems to a creative writing class or a workshop, and those people say, *I don't understand; what is this about?* And *You have to get rid of all these clichés. This is so sentimental.* They poke and prod one of your poems until what had seemed to you a living, vibrant creature now seems like an abused animal. There's your poem, barely moving. Are they right? Are they idiots? You don't know. But you do what you can. You take suggestion A, and ignore suggestions B and C—everyone seems to have contradictory suggestions—and you work some more. You bring your poems back to the workshop, or to another writer friend, and at last you feel they are as ready as they are going to get.

Now you send your poems to the editors of several established literary journals that publish poetry. You even try *The New Yorker*. Sure, they probably get a lot of submissions, but your work is good. Your girlfriend *cried*. By the sixth or seventh draft, your workshop thought that one particularly troublesome opening had finally been smoothed out. Surely the *New Yorker* editors will recognize the power of your work.

After a very long wait—a few months to a year or more—your poems come back with form rejections.

Dear —, Thank you for submitting your work to —.
Unfortunately we cannot use it at this time.

Sincerely,

The Editors

In some cases, you simply never hear from the editors at all.

Either way, it's as though the poems have fallen into a black hole, all the love and energy you put in sucked right out of them.

Are the editors right? Are they idiots?

As you hacked through the jungle, you thought your butter knife had been honed to a pretty sharp blade. You thought you were making progress.

Now, all you have to show for your hard work, your dreams of literary fame and fortune, or at least recognition and a small check, your hopes for a book one day—all you have is *Sincerely, The Editors*.

This is the awful moment when you see that today, at least, you have failed. It feels terrible.

When my first poetry collection, *The Philosopher's Club*, was a finalist for the Barnard New Women Poets Prize—there were three finalists, and one would be selected to have her book published—I was ecstatic. In the weeks before the final decision I went around thinking, *Please please please please pick me pick me pick me*. I tried to tell myself, *I probably won't win*. But there were only three of us, chosen from several

hundred. The odds were good. I was thirty-four years old, two years out of graduate school, teaching several grueling composition classes at San Francisco State. I had published a few poems. I had been seriously writing and studying poetry for nearly seven years. I was ready.

When my manuscript wasn't selected, I took my usual run in Golden Gate Park. I cried as I ran, and the words in my head now were, *You'll never have a book. You'll never have a book. You aren't good enough.*

For the next several years, I submitted my manuscript, every year, to every first-book competition in the United States (that was, and is, how most first books of poetry are published by small presses and university presses). I racked up a lot of fees for copying and submitting, and a lot of letters informing me that So-and-So had won the competition. Thank you for submitting your work. *Sincerely, The Editors.*

You think you're ready. But most of the time, you are wrong. This is what the rejection slips are telling you. They are telling you that a lot of people out there are working very hard and writing very well. Possibly they have been at it longer. Possibly they are more talented.

By the time *The Philosopher's Club* was published, I was forty. I had revised or outright jettisoned nearly half of the poems that had been part of the book when it was a finalist for the Barnard prize. In the years it took to publish *The Philosopher's Club*, I wrote a better book, one I can go back to now and feel okay about, instead of wanting to track down all the copies in existence and burn them.

This is not to say, *Persist and you will overcome all obstacles.* But be patient. Adrienne Rich once wrote a book titled *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. Wild patience is what you need. Publishing is competitive. Editors of journals receive thousands of submissions—many of them, truthfully, pretty bad, written by people who have not bothered to learn their craft before sending in their late-night inspirations. In addition, there are many competent poems that don't go far enough into wildness or surprise or complication or whatever else a particular editor is hoping to find. And there are a few marvelously realized pieces an

editor will respond to immediately—or possibly miss, due to illness or a hangover or several other human reasons. Somewhere in this mix are your own poems.

Of course editors are selecting according to their own taste. Of course, in the case of a university journal, graduate students, and not longtime editors, may be reading your work. You can't always know. Maybe your work *is* ready. But assume that it isn't, quite. You don't get out of the jungle easily. You'll need to sharpen your blade even more.

Once, when I was whining to a friend on the phone about a rejection—everyone gets rejections, even writers who have published several books, even Pulitzer Prize winners—she interrupted me and said, “Oh, Kim, butch it up.”

This is good advice for a sensitive poet.

i'm only a wooden writer

The logic of publishing is this:

Just because a poem is rejected doesn't mean it's bad.

Just because a poem is published doesn't mean it's any good.

And: The work is more important than the publication, but you may not really understand this until you are published.

Also, it is actually easy to get published. Somewhere. By someone. The problem is that this won't be enough. You will want to be published somewhere else, somewhere better. Your first publication was in a stapled local zine, and now you want to see your work in an established literary journal. If you attain that, you will wonder why you didn't win the yearly prize given to poems published in the journal. Next you will want your own book, and then you will feel a pressing need to achieve a second book, to prove to yourself that the first wasn't a fluke. You will want awards for your books, then big grants and fellowships and endowed chairs, and after all of this, you will really want eternal youth.

But if you are not yet published, nothing I have just said will mean anything to you. It's natural to want to share your work in print, to have it judged worthy by an editor, but don't fall prey to what I call the Pinocchio Syndrome: Publish me! I'm only a wooden writer! Make me a real writer!

The work is more important.

Let this mantra save you, when you start collecting rejections.