

TURNING REJECTION LETTERS UPSIDE DOWN

All My People Are Elegies: Essays, Prose Poems and Other Epistolary Oddities,
by Sean Thomas Dougherty (NYQ Books, 2019)

Rejection. If you are a poet, you know very well what it is. You craft your thoughts, you hone, you cut, and finally you send out your work. More times than not, it comes back to you unwanted. What can you do? You have to accept the whimsical caprice of someone somewhere on the other end of a submission link. You grumble and buck yourself up. But that wasn't going to work for Sean Thomas Dougherty, the award-winning poet, author of seventeen other books. He decided to take rejection and turn it into rejectionade.

It began as a series of Facebook posts in which Dougherty wrote the imagined responses we all would love to send to an editor. He starts out innocently enough – but soon it goes much deeper as shown here:

Dear Editor of Esteemed Midwestern Journal,

I am sorry to bother you again. No, I have not attached poems for submission. Instead I wanted to tell you about the smell of beer and fried food at Wrigley Field when my friend Michael was a boy and the scent of pierogi his mother baked, and the South Side Blues that rang from the high window of a girl in her room reciting to herself, who would grow up to blow the mic off every stiff podium. I wanted to remind you of Lake Michigan frozen, and the ice Fishers huddled over their chain-sawed holes, and the razored wind that rips into the aluminum walls of freight cars that men are loading with gloved hands. I'm writing to tell you that last night I worked the night shift and I stood over a man I took care of praying. I was praying he was breathing. He was. But every night I ask you how many of us are praying to simply breathe?

Sincerely,

In “Dear Editor of Esteemed Northwest Review” (yes, he names names) he takes on the persona of a high school English teacher who writes how she missed the

deadline because she had papers to grade. The editor had asked in the guidelines to hear something personal. The teacher writes

she grew up learning how to fish from her father in Puget Sound. The teacher asks the editor how he feels looking through the endless queue of poems that holds so much hope. In the next stanza the teacher asks about Hope, a girl, (have you heard about her, Editor) who was taken while hiking in the Cascades. Again, the poem morphs into something much bigger than a poetry submission.

Dougherty takes on every possible type of rejection -- the contest editor who sends countdown reminder emails, the editor who wishes you luck placing it elsewhere (later, another poem asks where exactly this elsewhere is), the editors who are overly kind, the editor who makes suggestions and if you revise it, would love to see it again, the editor who never got back to the writer, and so on and so on.

In case you think this idea of turning rejection upside down could wear itself out, it doesn't. Dougherty's exquisite poetic language makes certain of that.

In "Dear Editors, Who Didn't Send Me Interesting Rejection Letters," he writes:

And so, I hand you a glass moon of whisky. A Ferris Wheel

Rising over the lake. The dark that rests after the wheat has been reaped.

I send you what the bird feels, as the air first fills its wings. Even

sparrows sing. Not only the rain can fill the emptiness of two palmed

Hands.

So yes, rejection. You know that in the end it's part of this whole dance we do. But if you are Sean Thomas Dougherty, you turn rejection into a collection of stunning prose poems. A collection not to be missed.

--Francine Witte