Dear Literary Editor—and Writer [1]

October 3, 2016 Yawping Wild [2]
Editors [3]
Open Letters [4]

Open Letters by Steven Lewis and Rob Spillman

A Candid Exchange About Literary Publishing



Dear (in no particular order or inference) Wendy Lesser, Ladette Randolph, Rob Spillman, Linda Swanson-Davies, Susan Burmeister-Brown, Sigrid Rausing, Lorin Stein, Sy Safransky, Bret Lott, Stacey Swann *et al.*:

After my family, I love nothing more than writing. And hanging around writers. Drinking with writers. Teaching writers. Going to workshops with writers. Attending writers' readings and signings. So, it gets my angry father up when I see

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editors and publishers abusing writers. It's akin to some jerk slapping around one of my kids or grandkids.

Of course, you may think I'm talking about the bottom-line barbarians from Penguin Random House or the Trident Media Group. But no. The bullies I'm talking about here are the small-press, literary-magazine, *Writing Down the Bones*, *Bird by Bird* folks who pride themselves on being advocates for writers. The ones who stake their claims on guarding the literary gates from the onslaught of Corporate America.

You.

Just lift the delicate veil of literary high-mindedness, and it's easy to see the disdain for writers on most websites. It begins with those submission guidelines. Behind the touchy-feely supportive language about your devotion to words and ideas—and the welcoming invitations to *all* writers, novice and experienced alike, to submit their work—you state that it will take three or four or five or six months (and sometimes more) to respond to a submission.

Why does it take that long? Have you ever once considered the burden on writers who wait up to half a year for your judgment?

Then there are all those rules about exclusivity. You're very clear about not considering anything that has been previously published, online or in print, in a blog or a Facebook posting. But what does it matter if any piece of writing—which most of you are getting for free—shows up in five or fifty other publications first? Your little magazine is not that important. It's not that special or unique. The literary world will not crumble if a terrific poem is distributed widely.

And finally, but not finally, there's the actual human being who wrote the piece that's languishing in your slush pile for months at a time. That writer. The well-behaved one, the one among thousands and thousands of hungry well-behaved writers, who has sent in a well-worked piece, who has followed each and every one of the guidelines, and who has taken it out of circulation for those three or four or five or six months—working against his or her self-interest, fearing your wrath.

One day, many months later, that anxious writer will almost certainly open the mailbox—or inbox—only to find a rather corporate-sounding rejection form letter in response to his or her exclusive submission that says nothing. "The piece is not right for us. Good luck in placing it elsewhere." The note is not signed by a human being.

Shame on you.

Shame on you for taking so long.

Shame on you for not having the decency to write one thoughtful sentence about the submission after keeping it that long.

Shame on you for asking so much of writers—in time, creativity, sweat, angst, patience, loyalty, ink—and then cowering in such effete style behind the arrogant cloak of "The Editors."

Shame on you for treating writers like indentured slaves.

As Frank Bascombe says in Richard Ford's novel *Let Me Be Frank With You*, I am beyond "white people's shit." There is simply no reason to have a six-month backlog for any publication. Put in some goddamn time and catch up. Or if that's too hard, just dispense five months of submissions with your empty-suit rejection letters and start over. Then commit yourself to respond to each submission in a few weeks—a month at most.

And if you're still so self-important you can't figure out how to respond to every writer in a reasonable time, don't be tight-assed about multiple or previously published submissions. Unless you can get back to a writer in four weeks, abandon all self-righteous and self-serving claims to exclusivity.

Your mission is to help spread the words.

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To honor the writer.

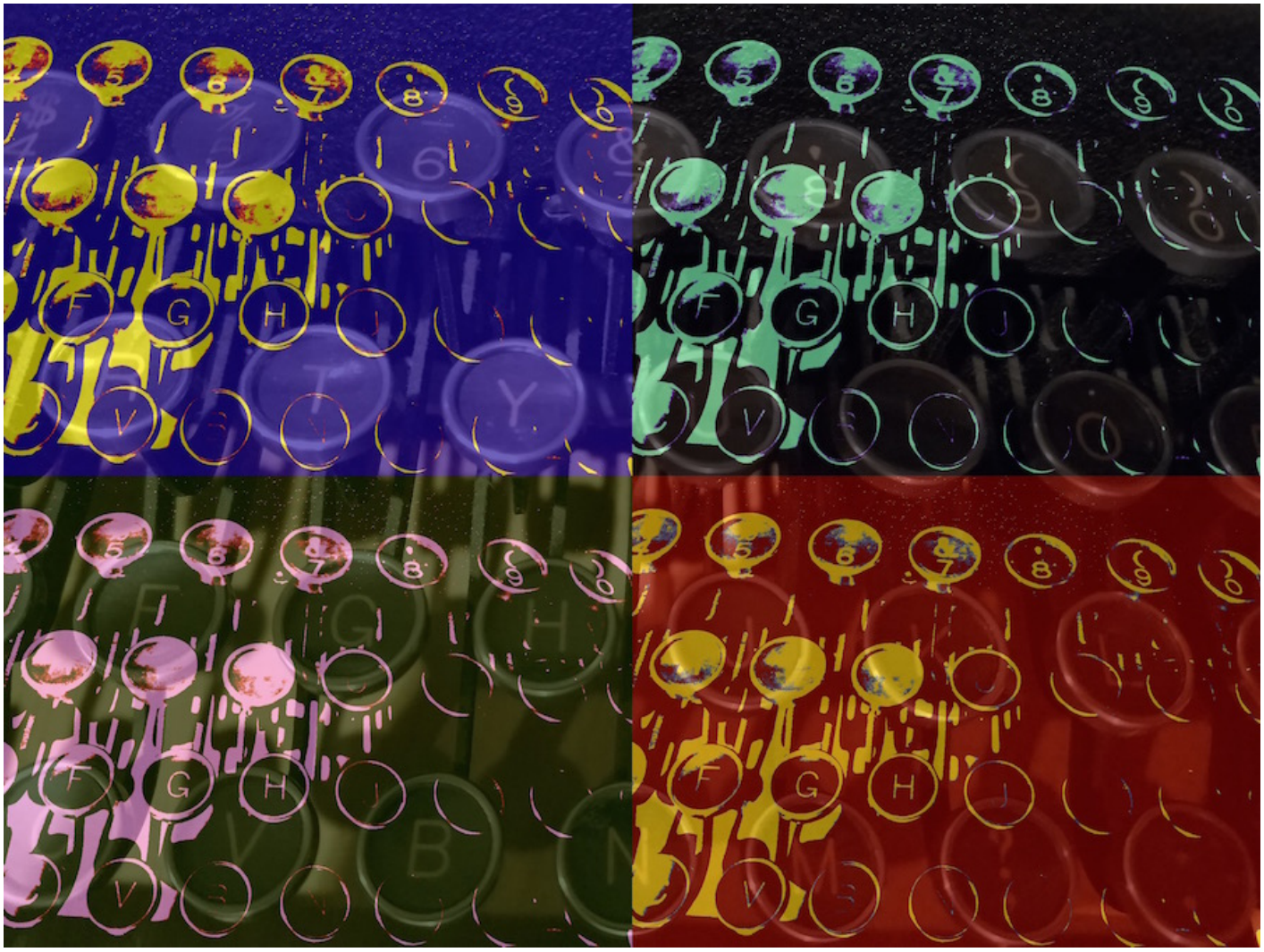
To honor the writing life.

To support writers.

You.

Yours truly,

Steven Lewis



Dear Steven Lewis:

There is no veil. The process is transparent. Like most established literary magazines, *Tin House*, which I edit, receives over 20,000 submissions a year. We read each submission. Every single one. Most submissions are read by multiple readers. At any one time, we have 25 readers, 6 interns, and 5 editors attempting to read these 20,000 submissions in a timely manner.

We are not running a pyramid scheme. We do not charge for submissions. But we do pay our writers. We allow simultaneous submissions, but you're right, we don't publish previously published work. In fact, publishing previously

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published work *would* be damaging to the literary world, because it would damage writers, particularly emerging ones. Every time a poem, story, or essay is *re*published, that's one more poem, story, or essay that remains *un*published.

You presume an adversarial relationship, that the supportive language on our submission guidelines is insincere, that we're not really interested in reading work or attending to its authors. I'd argue the opposite. The response time can be slow because we *are* reading all 20,000 submissions with care and attention. If we weren't hoping to find new voices, new work to love and bring to the world, why would we take on that tremendous workload? Why even have open submissions? Why allow for simultaneous submissions, when we know that work we might want can be taken elsewhere? We do this out of faith in the community of writers and in their work. We are continually surprised and renewed by fresh voices.

If you have a method for carefully considering the 55 submissions that come in *every single day of the year*, I am all ears.

You ask, "Have you ever once considered the burden on writers who wait up to half a year for your judgment?" I would ask you, "Have you ever considered the burden on a literary magazine of going through 20,000 submissions a year?"

According to your letter, we owe it to each submitter to critique their work. My understanding of our place in the literary ecosystem is to read your work with good will, a keen eye, and an eagerness to be impressed. Our job is not to teach you how to write.

Sincerely,

Rob Spillman

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Steven Lewis is a contributing writer and columnist at *Talking Writing*, a former mentor at Empire State College, current member of the Sarah Lawrence College Writing Institute faculty, and longtime freelancer. His work has been published widely, in journals from the notable to obscure, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Ploughshares*, *Narratively* and *Spirituality and Health*.

He's also literary ombudsman for Writers Read. His recent books include *Zen and the Art of Fatherhood*, *The ABCs of Real Family Values*, *The Anxious Groom*, *Fear and Loathing of Boca Raton*, and *A Month on a Barrier Island*. His new novel, *Take This*, was recently published by Codhill Press.

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Visit him online at Steven Lewis's website [5] or @LewisWrite4hire [6] on Twitter.

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Rob Spillman is the editor of *Tin House*.

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