

Revising Rejection

Poetry and Life Lessons from a 19th-Century Japanese Poet

CARON LEVIS

THE CLASS OF SEVENTH-GRADERS shouted and bumped each other on the way into the classroom after lunch. While they were settling into their seats, I turned and wrote “Rejection & revision” on the board in large letters, then waited. Avery¹, a girl in the front row with long braids who liked writing long poems, was the first to notice. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she said. Justin, who still owed me work from last week, called out from the back, “Ms. Caron, do we have to write that down?” This was the eighth session of a ten-week poetry residency, the day students were to start revising the poems that they would publish in our anthology. In answer to their questions I picked up the chalk and added “The Writer’s Life” next to my first words and some of the students laughed. The week before I had talked about my writing process, bringing in stacks of revisions and several of my letters from publishers to show them that the

path to publication is often paved with rejection.

Today I asked if any of them had ever experienced rejection like that. Had they ever put themselves out there, tried for something, wanted something, only to be told no? Nods and “yeah’s” filled the room. I asked them what they did when that happened. How did they handle it and move on? How did they keep trying? A lot of shrugs. “You just don’t think on it,” Jordan muttered and crossed his arms. Keisha popped out of her seat and said, “You try something else.” Raven called out, “You smash things.” Someone near me whispered under his breath, “You talk it out with somebody.”

I nodded, and then I wrote a poem on the board. A poem, I told them, that had helped me when I was getting all those rejection letters in the mail:

Refused at the inn—
but I took this unkindness
as a gracious act;
under the hazy evening moon
I slept beneath blossoms
—OTAGAKI RENGETSU²

Caron Levis has enjoyed working as an arts and character educator for over ten years. Her first picture book, Stuck with the Blooz, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, was selected as one of Bankstreet College’s Best Books of the Year. Her short stories have been listed in the Best American Non-required Reading, published in Fence Magazine, The New Guard Review; included in anthologies by Persea Books and W.W. Norton; and she is the recipient of a NYFA fiction fellowship. Caron is a graduate of The New School’s MFA Writing for Children program, where she is now program advisor. Find out more at www.caronlevis.com.

¹Names of students have been changed to respect privacy.

²Another translation I found is this: *Turned away at the inn / I take this unkindness as grace...// resting instead / beneath the cherry blossoms / on a night with a hazy moon* —from “Kinko kawa”

“Why do you think I keep this over my desk?” I asked the class, and the students looked at the poem again. They told me that the poem shows how you can take a bad situation and make it better, transforming a negative into a positive.

A girl in the back called out, “I don’t get it.” I told her I hadn’t gotten it the first time I read it either. A teacher had given it to me a long time ago, and while I’d liked the sound of it, I hadn’t understood it until I needed it.

To give the students some context for the poem I told them a little about about Rengetsu, the poet who’d written it. Rengetsu lived from 1791-1875. She was born under the name Nobu in Japan, given up for adoption, and then sent to work in a castle as a servant girl from the age of eight until she was fourteen. At the castle she learned both the “polite arts” and the military arts. Skilled at dancing, sewing, and calligraphy, she could also fight with sword, spear, and sickle and chain. (Yes, this got many of the students’ attention!) It is most likely that she learned the poetry form of *waka* here, which was the form she was to use throughout her life as a poet.

As a woman in 19th-century Japan, Rengetsu’s options were limited, and she came to be a poet only after having faced a great deal of loss, grief, and change. When she was still a young woman, she lived through the deaths of several children, her husband, and a number of other close family members. At the age of thirty-three, upon the death of her second husband, she became a Buddhist nun of the Pure Land Sect and changed her name to Rengetsu, meaning Lotus Moon. A few years after that, following more loss and needing a new way to support herself, she began writing poetry at the age of forty-two. Her work quickly developed a large following and was admired for its honesty and simplicity. She often used the poetry not only to support herself financially—writing her poems on decorative paper or on pottery and selling them at markets—but to express and exorcise the grief and melancholy she felt. Here is one example:

As a pastime
bringing clumsy
fragile things to sell
at Uruma market—
how lonely!

An enthusiastic traveler, Rengetsu often wrote poetry inspired by her trips and by the natural world around her. She faced many challenges on the road, but used these experiences as inspiration for her poems. One day, having started out to get tofu, Rengetsu remembered that the cherry blossoms would be blooming in Yoshino, a little way from her home, so she impulsively went to see them. The trip took longer than she anticipated, however, and while she was still on the road it began to grow dark. She asked for a room at a nearby home but was turned away. With nowhere to go, she looked for a place to spend the night. Eventually she settled beneath a cherry tree, where she looked at the sky through the blossoms, finding a moment of joy amidst hardship that inspired the poem that—well over a hundred years later—I keep on my bulletin board.

“Why do you think I keep this over my desk?” I asked the class, and the students looked at the poem again. They told me that the poem shows how you can take a bad situation and make it better, transforming a negative into a positive. How, “sometimes if you’re freaked out, you need to just chill a minute,” and see that things aren’t as bad as you thought. They also noted that Rengetsu probably got the better deal, since the room probably wouldn’t have been as beautiful as the blossoms anyway. Once again I drew their attention to the words I’d written on the board at the start of class, and pointed out that what they’d just been describing were the ways Rengetsu had applied the tools of “re-vision” to her life.

With this picture of revision fresh in their minds, I asked the students to write their own version of Rengetsu’s poem. I told them that the poem is a *waka*, a kind of haiku that has five lines and 31 syllables. For that day, however, I told them that I didn’t care

how many syllables or lines we used. I wanted them to focus on the action of transforming a negative experience into a positive one, using strong word and image choices.

We began by brainstorming alternatives to the word “refused.” Students came up with: rejected, ignored, dismissed, dissed, and several others. For a quick group poem, I suggested they brainstorm times that either their class faced a challenge of some kind, or perhaps they were dismissed because of their age. Suggestions burst from around the room, popcorn style, and we wrote the lines of this class poem together, erasing a word here, replacing a word there, to come up with this spontaneous, modern version of Rengetu’s poem:

Ignored by the adults—
but we took this dismissal
as an act of love;
we learned from mistakes,
and stood tall.

I then asked students to work individually; using an experience from their past, or one they could imagine facing in their future, to write a *waka* where a “refusal” is transformed into an opportunity or new way of thinking. Remember, I told them, you want to turn a negative into a positive. They got to work immediately and I walked around the room—relieved to see that this lesson plan—which had grown out of my own attempts to deal with rejection—was inspiring these students to find a way through their obstacles as well.

I’d devised this lesson as I was waiting for word from a publisher on a new manuscript, and seeing Rengetsu’s poem pinned front and center on my bulletin board, had grabbed it and looked, for the first time, into its history. This search led me to discover the master poet and incredible woman who for many years had been helping me see rejection with new eyes.

Shortly after teaching the class I got news that

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a manuscript I’d submitted had been rejected, and a call for a major revision of something else I’d been working on for a long time. Feeling defeated, frustrated, frightened, I looked around for some much-needed comfort and rejuvenation. This time, it wasn’t just Rengetsu’s poem that motivated me to get back to work, but the honest, moving, and hopeful student poems I now have tacked up right beside her. 🍵

SEVENTH-GRADE STUDENT, BROOKLYN

Rejected by my mind
but I took this as a challenge
like a ghost I went through my obstacles
waiting for my mind’s combat.