

DO(!!!) Try Us Again

By James Gallant

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Every writer has their own way of dealing with **rejection!** (we prefer the kinder, gentler 'declined' here @ FOTD) in their own way. Some tough it out, others hit the bottle and there's always suicide. In any (every?) case it's invariably unpleasant because as writers we can't help but identify with our writing and when that gets dumped by pitiless editors and clam-hearted first readers we feel like we've been personally spurned (humiliated, wronged, savaged and wounded also come to mind.) But those of us who read Eckhart Tolle also know there's an upside to this—although for the life of us we just can't pin it down this very second. All of us at Fleas are published writers and we've all had our work trashed by idiots who ought to know better. If you still can't shake off the blues, DO read Do Try Us Again and take comfort in the fact that being gunny-sacked can, in hindsight, show its funny side. We published the author's mordantly hilarious A Scatological Tale in Issue 8 and it's a pleasure to feature him again! Now put your voodoo doll down, cap the poison bottle and DO NOT mail the envelope marked EDITOR containing that suspicious white powder...your publishing debut is just around the corner...please scroll down. (Spacing is author's own.)*

Do Try Us Again

James Gallant

From editor Veronica Geng, The New Yorker, to James Gallant, April 28, 1977:

Dear James Gallant:

Some of us here have just read your "The Antelope's Confession" in *Transatlantic Review*, and think it's beautiful and funny. As far as can tell from our files, you have not been submitting stories to us. But we would like it very much if you were to think of us when you have a new story.

*

James Gallant to Veronica Geng, May 3, 1977:

I had, as a matter of fact, submitted "The Antelope's Confession" to *The New Yorker* and received in return a printed rejection slip.

Find enclosed "The Cock" and "Dee and Kelley."

*

From a *Paris Review* editor, June 1977

Thanks for nudging us concerning the whereabouts of your "Notes of the Night Janitor." Lo and behold, your manuscript has surfaced after all this time! It had somehow deposited itself in an obscure corner of Mr. Plimpton's study beneath a catcher's mitt, to be unearthed by me only this week. Although we are returning it, we found much to admire. We would have preferred, however, a story with a plot to your sectioning of short pieces. Do try us again.

*

Veronica Geng, The New Yorker, to James Gallant, July 2, 1977: We do make mistakes here. I think turning down "The Antelope's Confession" was one of them. Thank you for sending "The Cock" and "Dee and Kelley."

I'm afraid we didn't admire them as much as "The Antelope's Confession." "The Cock" struck us as somewhat arched [sic] and calculated. I was impressed by "Dee and Kelley," but uneasily so; it didn't quite win my confidence. The trouble, I think, is that the strong feeling you have for these characters, which comes across clearly in your letter, doesn't come through the story.

I hope you don't feel you've been subjected to a come-on, and then let down. We continue to be very interested in your writing, and I hope that when you have a new story, you'll show it to us first.

*

A letter from an acquaintance, Chicago writer Maxine Chernoff, July 16, 1977:

I like your "The Marriage." It's well-written, funny, and imaginative. You'll be happy to know I have some big friends in small places. One, John Mort, has started a little magazine called *Uncle*. I know he'd like your work. He attended the Iowa Workshop in Fiction, but knew the wrong people, so didn't get very far. If you've exhausted lucrative markets, send pieces to John.

The New Yorker continues to tease me, as probably it does you. Mort has made it there twice with humorous pieces, and swears we should persist. The problem is they want "proper" stories. I mean, if your Alice in "The Marriage" were a poet and wore gloves from L.L. Bean, they might publish you. You're far too funny, and you're not Donald Barthelme, their resident humorist, so that's two strikes against you.

I recommend also *Mississippi Review*. They seem to be open to imaginative work and recently took a piece of mine after about a year of sending back and forth. Paul [Hoover, Maxine's husband] is sending a book of poems to dozens of small presses who all love his work, and have no \$\$\$. No money and lots of friends ahead of you, no matter how much better you might be. Of course the major presses are just about hopeless, and university presses publish very uneven lists, often very boring.

*

From Veronica Geng at The New Yorker, to Gallant:

Three of us here read "Letters to Andrea Odradeksi" with interest constantly undermined by puzzlement. We felt teased. We all felt you weren't simply writing as parody, but we didn't know much beyond that. Perhaps there's something missing from the tone that might at least slightly indicate to us how to read this? I don't, heaven knows, mean that you should nudge the reader in the ribs all the time. But you must, after all, intend us to feel or see *something* as a result of what you've written, or while we're reading it. You're writing with authority, you're not just throwing words up into the air and asking us to make what we will of them.

But what do you have in mind? Can you tell me?

Do you like Barthelme?...

*

From Maxine Chernoff to Gallant:

Paul and I just got our proofs for pieces in the *Mississippi Review*, as presumably you did for your "Gold," so it looks as if we'll all be in the same issue. I feel like we just won the lottery or something. I'm trying to write prose poems and be a good mommy to a madly sexual five year old who threatens to kill me in various ways--while grading papers by Nigerian tribesmen, Vietnamese boat people, and Russian dissidents. Do you know how sad it is to have to fail a Vietnamese boat person?

*

DeWitt Henry, editor of Ploughshares to James Gallant, March 2, 1978;

I apologize for the long delay. I just haven't been able to make up my mind about "Dee and Kelley." It is *good*, oddly convincing, subtle, imaginative and wry. My problem, and it is my problem, is that I can't gauge beyond that, *how* good, and with passing time, as issues here have

gradually taken shape, we've maybe settled for easier choices; but on the strength of those choices now, and also what's fair to you, it's best to say a reluctant no.

*

Carol Bergé, author and editor of *Center*, in accepting Gallant's story, "*Round*," April 4, 1980:

You're beautiful. I love the story.... You do remind me of me.

*

Peter Bricklebank, editor of Fiction, to James Gallant, September 4, 1982

I saw your "Dee and Kelley" some months ago, and when Lyn moved on recently, and I picked up the reins, I read it again. Firstly, let me apologize for the delay. I feel particularly sorry in the case of "Dee and Kelley," for it is good; unfortunately, I don't think it is for *Fiction*. It's obviously one of those infuriatingly awkward pieces that, if they don't quite defy classification, do defy finding a home.

*

From Stanley Lindberg editor of The Georgia Review, November 18, 1985:

I thought you already had an official letter of acceptance for "Reviewing *American, Land of Faeries*," but my staff assures me I never sent one. After arguing futilely that it had been misfiled by the faeries, I conceded to write this second letter. You can file it with the original which I am convinced will eventually make it through the mails. In any case, you piece has not only been accepted, it is at the printers.

*

From a friend, Taylor Stoehr, University of Massachusetts, executive editor of Paul Goodman's works:

I thought you wanted criticism, and that's what I offered in my last. I see you generally as a more confident and accomplished writer than, apparently, you do. Send me no more attacks on yourself, whether by the likes of Fathead [an editor who had rejected Gallant's work] or by yourself. UP! UP! as Beckett's hero says to Lucky in *Godot*. You are obviously in love with your life, whatever you say about it. And by the way, you ought to forget about *The Georgia Review*, and such like, and aim for *The New Yorker* with your pieces.

*

Carol Bergé, editor of Center, in response to a letter from Gallant:

It's a peculiar ambiguity you present, your evident lust to be published in a magazine [her *Center*] you say is "awful." I realize one's reputation in academia [Gallant was working as a janitor] counts as much as daring or even quality. Perhaps *Center* was your first encounter with innovative writing and you have gone into the sort of shock or anger many people suffer when their rigid tenets are threatened by change or something diff. from what they are accustomed to. I had that reaction in the early Fifties when confronted with the Beats.... I got really furious with them, But then I realized...that I was dealing with creatives of a high intelligence and sentience, and I shut up and started to make room for something. I wish men knew how to make room for new life, the way women do. The tissues need not tear when admitting new life to the world, though there is always some resistance and some pain.

You may be good, but you're not *that* good. Believe it.

*

From an editor, *Studia Mystica*, to Gallant, 1986

What a fascinating story your "Dee and Kelley." I read it not only with interest, but real enjoyment. However, it is just not quite right for *Studia Mystica*. Those words sound familiar, but they are true. Your story is in the tradition of the occult, and that is something we are staying far away from. But we would like to see more of your work. Perhaps you have something that is more in line with our interests?

*

Gallant to Mary Giles, Dec. 29, 1986:

You remark that my story is "in the tradition of the occult," and that you are "staying far away from" that tradition. But a person might well find my story instructive where "staying away from the occult" is concerned, since it is, after all, a cautionary tale. Buddhists say that at a certain stage in their discipline "occult" phenomena turn up very regularly--an indication of serious levels of spirituality having been attained, even if such phenomena are not to be taken seriously. Moreover, John Dee--both the historical figure and my character--placed his occultism within the framework of Christian orthodoxy.

[No response to this letter.]

*

From the editor of Rhino, April 1, 1987

I am pleased that you are happy we have accepted your story, "Eric's Vacuum Cleaner," but you used a phrase that caused me some concern. When you made reference to your "nip-and-tuck" economic situation, you may just have been commenting on the hard times that affect us all. If, however, you were conveying that you expect to be paid for your story, I may have disappointing news for you.

*

From Alice Turner, fiction editor at Playboy:

What a wonderful story, your "Won't You Come Home, Bill Bailey"--how strange and interesting. And what a cool customer you were!

It doesn't really work as a *Playboy* story but thank you for letting us see it.

*

From a friend, poet Geoffrey Gardner, Aug 10, 1996:

Everyone I know who writes well, and for real (unless they are established "names" as one says) has the same experience as you. It gets harder all the time, as we get further and further into the academic licensing of writers every year, with more and more writers produced, and the Seven Possible Manners of writing more firmly entrenched. And such people run the little magazines, more and more, as outlets for the licensed. You write better and better all the time, and therefore all too well and authentically.

*

A 1996 letter from the New York agent interested in marketing Gallant's stories, and his novel-in-process, *The Big Bust at Tyrone's Rooming House: a Novel of Atlanta*.

Glad to hear you're seriously considering the possibility of making money with your writing, because your writing is certainly good enough to deserve it. There's no reason why writers with half the talent of yours should be raking in money hand over fist while you're not. At this point in your career, I think it's just a matter of positioning yourself correctly--which is why I wanted to wait for the novel before showing you around in New York. *Marx and the Faeries* is good, but it's a collection, and they are notoriously difficult to sell.

I feel your writing is very strong--in your authentic dialogue, your sense of pacing, your ability to keep a certain distance in what could be uncomfortable situations, and your sense of humor. Your sense of tragedy, I feel, is lurking beneath the surface, and needs to be brought forth here and there.

I would caution about going on too long about too little. Of course, this is a bit tricky, because many of your stories concern towns in which nothing much happens.

*

Letter composed by the New York agent working with Gallant, October 1996, sent to twenty magazines (The New Yorker, Playboy, Granta, Esquire, Hudson Review, Paris Review, etc.):

Here are new stories from James Gallant, a superb Southern writer with a great feel for irony and understatement. He has had work in *North American Review*, *Press*, *Georgia Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Transatlantic Review*, and *Exquisite Corpse*. He's also made the "Distinguished 100" list in *The Best American Short Stories*. I will soon be going out with his collection to publishers, and am showing you a selection of five of his stories in advance.

*

From John Yow, editor at Longstreet Press, to Gallant: February 17, 1997

Thanks for your query regarding your collection, *Marx and the Faeries*, but it doesn't sound like a good prospect for Longstreet. As you no doubt know (and as I know from having read your "On Leaving the World" in *The Georgia Review*) your work is not really targeted to the general audience that our sales people believe Longstreet needs to cultivate. I might mention that the *GR* piece (which I thoroughly enjoyed, by the way) was brought to my attention by

fiction writer Mary Hood. Since she liked it so much, maybe she would be pleased to recommend your work to her editor at Knopf or her agent?"

*

From Geoffrey Gardner to Gallant:

Sorry to hear Longstreet's not interested in your book, and about your tumble off the ladder. How's the house-renovating going otherwise? Maybe if Knopf doesn't want your book, you can build a deck for them, or repair their floors. I've read and enjoyed your "Poor Man's Cruise to the Bahamas." I especially like that upside-down clock declaring "lowdown midnight or hangdog noon."

As alternatives to probably futile attempts to get police attention to your Atlanta neighborhood crime problem, I'm sympathetic to self-policing efforts. However, I'm ambivalent about that pistol-packin' mama you describe who patrols your Atlanta neighborhood with its crack-cocaine sellers round about midnight. And I think if I were to accept the invitation of your ex-Green Beret neighbor to roam the streets at night with him and his handy Glock, I'd have trouble keeping my cookies down.

*

From the New York agent to Gallant, February, 1997:

I hope all is well, and that this novel you are working on is coming along. All but five of the magazines to which I submitted your stories have responded negatively, and I have to say I'm not overly optimistic about our chances at the remaining five. Since it's been over five months, I think they're just being annoyingly slow.

I enclose surplus Xeroxes that might come in handy if you want to send the pieces to other magazines.

*

Prairie dogs are rodents reviled by developers and ranchers in Aurora, Colorado, where the literary magazine *Prairie Dog* (previously known as Infinity Limited) was published. The magazine's acceptance of Gallant's "Hard Times at Diddle Motors" was accompanied by a legal document to be signed by the author:

"You warrant that you are the sole owner of the work; that you have full legal power to enter into this agreement; that the work is original; that you have not previously entered into an agreement with respect to the work that would conflict with this agreement; and that the work does not violate the right of any third party. You hereby grant Prairie Dog one-time publishing rights, with an option to reprint once in future collections. In compensation for your grant of rights and warranties hereunder, Prairie Dog agrees to deliver within thirty days of publication, and you agree to accept, two copies of the issue in which your work appears."

"Hard Times at Diddle Motors" appeared as the featured story in the issue of *Prairie Dog* that proved to be its last.

*

From an editor at W.W. Norton and Company, New York and London: Aug 29, 1998:

Please excuse the delay in getting back to you. We have had a chance to review the sample chapters of your book, *Marx and the Faeries*, and we would like to see more of your work. Please send us the full manuscript whenever it is convenient.

*

From the editor at W.W. Norton and Company, November, 1998:

I found your perspective unique and your style to be pleasingly literate. However, I think this work is a bit too subjective to really work on our list. You have set yourself up with a giant project, Mr. Gallant, to write a book about an illusory society that you and all your readers are living in the midst of.

I'm just not sure I understand exactly what you are trying to say.

*

From an editor at Roundabout Press to whom Gallant had sent *Marx and the Faeries*:

Apologies for this slap-dash response [on the back of a manuscript page]. I'm away from my desk, but wanted to tell you that you write so well--terrific verbal energy--but it's not quite right for our press. Your book would seem a better fit at one of the big New York houses.

*

From the executive editor of the University of Illinois Press, concerning Gallant's Marx and the Faeries: December 1998

You've published in some very interesting journals. You're proposing a collection of already published essays in your *Marx and the Faeries*. This is an age in which the book-buying culture has shrunk to the point where publishing solid monographs is almost impossible. Works made up primarily of previously published short works like yours are even more problematic; and academics are, of course, looking primarily for books useful to their existence in the academic bureaucracy, and seem mainly to be teaching students how to exist *in* the academic bureaucracy.

Your "creative non-fiction" might ultimately make a more sensible thing to publish, of course, from the point of view of the good of the culture. But there's the tough question, can we afford to do so?

*

From Beggar's Press, Publisher of Unique Books and Periodicals, and home of Raskolnikov's Cellar:

We're so sorry about the delay with your manuscript, *Marx and the Faeries*. Here's what happened: One of our staff put a huge box containing over 200 unprocessed [sic] manuscripts in a back room by mistake. She thought falsely that they had been read and processed. Some of them had not even been opened yet. We are as quickly as possible reading and processing them. If you have not yet received yours, you soon will. We hope this will not interfere with our relationship in the future. Excellent writers and poets like you are the one asset that sets us apart from other publications.

*

From Geoffrey Gardner, concerning Gallant's novel The Big Bust at Tyrone's Rooming House: a Novel of Atlanta:

My high esteem for the book and the reasons I esteem it can only mean it's going to have a rough time in the wide world. The trouble is, it's neither a simple entertainment nor a weighty, hefty ARTWORK. But more than that I think the combination of subjects--race, race relations, drugs, sex, and crime--with your attitude of compassionate generosity mixed with gently mocking and self-mocking wry humor--are what very few will want to take in or be able to

comprehend. The so-called politically correct will be will be made nervous by your frankness and accuracy of observation, and will retreat into suspecting the book is racist, which it is not.

*

New York agent, having shown Gallant's *The Big Bust* "all around New York"- unsuccessfully-- Grace Paley and Robert Nichols, owners of the small non-profit New England press Glad Day Books were showing interest in publishing it in 2001. The agent, informed of this, responded:

"The issue is 1) should we keep the book available (i.e. never printed) if a big publisher should ever want it, even two or three years down the road? I'd hate to see you sign away or tie up any rights, and then finally we get our break somewhere else. It might be better to put it in a drawer and wait three or four or five years, and then try again with a traditional publisher."

*

From Gallant in 2001 to Grace Paley and Robert Nichols, who had agreed to publish his novel:

"I had assumed, since my book has an Atlanta setting, and deals with local issues, especially the crack-cocaine trade, we'd certainly get a review in the local *Journal-Constitution*. The book editor there tells me not to count on it, since they are receiving as many as two hundred books a day, and publish only two or three reviews per week.

"I have a contract with [my agent] who was unable to place the book. One way or the other, he knows he's unlikely to make a penny on *The Big Bust*, but would like to examine my contract with Glad Day, in the event a major press should want to scoop up the book after your publishing it--or maybe Time-Warner decided to make a quirky movie of it. My first person narrator would have to be a star. (My daughter suggests Nicholas Cage for the role.)

*

Nichols to Gallant:

Contract?? Us?

*

Gallant to Nichols:

There's a woman working at the Emory University campus bookstore here who used to work for B. Dalton. I asked her if book signings sell books. "Yes," she said, "if you don't just sit there behind a stack of books, but engage passers-by with a song and dance."

I told her I used to sell vacuum cleaners.

"You could do it," she said.

*

Atlanta Journal-Constitution review, 2004:

James Gallant's novel "The Big Bust at Tyrone's Rooming House" (Glad Day Books, \$18 paperback) takes a mostly lighthearted look at life in Atlanta's Grant Park neighborhood, where the author lives. The narrator is a white, middle-aged former professor who spends his days puttering around his yard. As a result, he finds himself frequently interacting with his neighbors, mostly retirees and a wandering cast of addicts, dealers and prostitutes.

*

Nichols to Gallant:

[An employee with the outfit warehousing Glad Day and other small press books in New England, here named "Pat"] tells me that things had changed in the book distribution business. She's still trying to figure it out. There are, I gather, basically two distributors remaining, Baker

and Taylor, and Ingram, and most local bookstores order from them. Very efficient, simplifies stocking and bookkeeping. If we want to get our books onto the shelves Pat clearly felt that we ought to go with them. However, these distributors want 55% of the sales price, and that wouldn't leave much for the press or our writers. She recommended doubling our prices. I told her we weren't in it for the money.

*

From a second New York agent to Gallant, April 1, 2008, concerning his novel *Whatever Happened to Debbie and Phil?* (later renamed *Whatever Happened to Ohio?*):

Thank you for sending me the pages from your novel. I enjoyed reading them. I was intrigued by the premise of your story, and I liked the way you introduced your characters. Unfortunately, though I thought your story had a lot to offer the reader, I had trouble connecting emotionally. Therefore, I do not feel confident that I could....

*

From an editor at Tupelo Press to Gallant concerning *Whatever Happened to Ohio?* Sept. 14, 2011:

Thank you for sending the first 107 pages of your novel, and we apologize for having taken so longer to respond....We're very grateful for having had the chance to inhabit and explore the world of your characters. We're sorry not to be taking it, for we admired the intelligence at work here, and found a lot of charm. In the end, though, the humor was too broad for us. This is a strong work and we expect that it will soon find a home elsewhere, if it hasn't already done so.

*

From an editor at Monkey Puzzle Press to Gallant, May 22, 2012:

Thank you for sending us the proposal for your novel [*Whatever Happened to Ohio?*] We enjoyed the opening chapter very much, and hope you will send us the full manuscript post-haste.

*

From the editor at Money Puzzle Press to Gallant, October 1, 2012

Thank you for sending the manuscript [*Whatever Happened to Ohio?*] to Monkey Puzzle Press. The fiction market is difficult to break into these days, and we have decided not to develop any further works in that genre. Presently we are seeking nonfiction/memoir/autobiographical works for possible publication. If there comes a time when you complete a manuscript that is in the aforementioned genres, I hope you will consider submitting it to us.

*

Whatever Happened to Ohio, published in 2018 as an e-novel by Vagabondage Press in its "Battered Suitcase" series, was available, Kindle edition, for only \$3.99 from amazon.com books, before the press delisted the book.

Fortnightly Review in the UK published print collection of Gallant's essays and stories, *Verisimilitudes: essays and approximations* in 2018:

https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/099913650X/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_bibl_vppi_i2

Gallant's *La Leona and Other Guitar Stories* won the Schaffner Press prize for music-in-literature in 2019. The book is available in paperback and Kindle editions presently from Amazon, Barnes and Noble, etc.

*

A response to the work you are presently reading from *The Paris Review*, June, 2018:

"A nice break from the usual. Thanks! We regret that we are unable to publish it, but we like your work and would like to see more if it."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Back in the days of paper (we thought they'd never end) a tendency to masochism inspired me to file in a manila folder some of the more piquant notes I received from editors. In the course of time, the folder bulged on a shelf over my work desk. A while back I took it down and I was glancing through the notes when they suggested a narrative of sorts, a tale of night-sea vagrancy youthful students of the craft of writing may find illuminating.*

AUTHOR BIO: : For what it may or may not be worth, I am the winner of 2019 Schaffner Press Prize for music-in-literature for my story collection, *La Leona, and Other Guitar stories*, just published. My e-novel, *Whatever Happened to Ohio?* from Vagabondage Press, and a collection of essays and short fiction, *Verisimilitude: essays and approximations*, published by Fortnightly Review press (UK), appeared in 2018. (I have been an online columnist for FR since 2015 (<http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/category/verisimilitudes/>)).

