

Letter from America Autumn 2015

My husband, Howard, is not a writer; he's a family practice doctor, a GP. And he knew little about the writing world before we met in 2011. Yet, when the news of the *Best American Poetry 2015* scandal hit the internet, *he* was the one keeping me informed.

The first thing he emailed me (and then also came downstairs to discuss in person) was an article in *The Atlantic* that profiles Michael Derrick Hudson, a white poet who writes under the pseudonym Yi-Fen Chou. “After a poem of mine has been rejected a multitude of times under my real name, I put Yi-Fen’s name on it and send it out again,” he wrote. ‘As a strategy for “placing” poems this has been quite successful ... The poem in question ... was rejected under my real name forty times before I sent it out as Yi-Fen Chou (I keep detailed records). As Yi-Fen the poem was rejected nine times before *Prairie Schooner* took it. If indeed this is one of the best American poems of 2015, it took quite a bit of effort to get it into print, but I’m nothing if not persistent.’”

As news of this situation lit up the blogosphere over the subsequent days, Howard would periodically wander back into my study with an update, his hair sticking up and his face blanched that wan color that comes from looking at a screen. “They’re now saying that *Yi-Fen Chou* is the name of a girl he went to high school with. Her family is upset.” He pumped his fist, like *Aha*. “I *thought* there was something feminine about that name.”

Howard is the son of Chinese immigrants, not just bilingual, but also bi-cultural, able to shift deftly between his parents’ world – their norms, values, and experiences – and the larger American culture. Our relationship provided him a crash course in yet another culture – the writing and publishing world – and he was a quick study. After we got married last year, he often joked that I should take his last name (Yang) to make it easier to get published. After countless readings and writerly social events and trips to AWP, he had gleaned that the publishing industry has a particular interest in writers whose names suggest connections to historically under-represented groups. He made the joke a lot. “If you submitted under Yang...,” he’d say with a wry grin.

But he didn’t look so happy now. When I’d get up in the morning, he’d have already been up for an hour reading blog posts, some of them by angry Asian Americans. I’d find links to them in my inbox.

I had wailed to him countless times about rejections. He’d seen me go through the cycles of self-doubt, frustration, and question-asking. Was my work bad? Was this the sexism about which I’d been reading? I would talk to him about it, breathless, giving him the round-up. There was the VIDA Count, for example, a survey that provided depressing statistics about the numbers of women published each year in various literary journals. There was also this gem in *The Christian Science Monitor*: “Female author submits novel under man’s name. You will totally believe what happens next.” It went on to quantify and qualify the positive responses that the writer got with the male name and compare those responses to the ones she got with her own name. In these low moments of discouragement, I had also wondered out loud about whether my own Irish-sounding name was holding me back. “Maybe I *should* use Yang!” I’d say, and we’d laugh.

We'd joked about it so many times that it took me a while to get what was happening in terms of Howard's response to the *Best American Poetry* situation. He had always been the type to get hooked on certain "infotainment" stories on the internet. Also, Howard had never been someone who reacted much to inflammatory material. Even blatant racist comments would just make him smile and shake his head like he was sorry for the person. But it was dawning on me now that he was rattled in a way I had never seen him rattled. "It really bothers you," I said, "what this guy did."

He stood there smiling at me for a moment, saying neither yes nor no, and I thought maybe he hadn't heard. I started to say it again, but before I finished, he shrugged and said, "Yes, it kind of does." This was, in Howard terms, real outrage.

It took a few more days for him to say why this situation bothered him more than the usual asinine comments about his appearance or heritage. We had a long conversation, digging, hashing it out.

Here's what we figured out, to the extent we figured anything out. Most people know that stereotypes are harmful – for example, the buck-toothed, bumbling Chinese guy in the Mandarin collar and sandals. Awareness of the hurtfulness of a caricature like that has helped such things to dissipate somewhat. However, what we might term "positive stereotypes" have proliferated: the assumption that a Chinese person possesses special secret wisdom or has access to mystical healing powers, for example. Although such stereotypes might be less overtly hurtful, they're still stereotypes. The Chinese person is still not an individual but is fetishized and exoticized. The culture at large was doing it (Chinese doctors endorsing wonder diets in advertisements, for example), and so, perhaps, was the publishing industry. There was benefit to Asian-American writers, sure, who would otherwise have gone unnoticed, but that benefit was small compared to the myriad challenges that came with being part of a marginalized group, day after day fielding some form of this message: *You're not from here. You're not one of us.* It was hard enough to be in a group dealing with that. "But now," Howard said, "some white guy is going to trade on that struggle for his own gain?"

Maybe another reason it struck a nerve was that the guy's deed is reflective of today's racism, not yesterday's racism. Hudson would probably say he was just trying to get his poems noticed. And that's probably true. He's so used to being in the front of the line, as it were, that maybe he didn't consider that he was "cutting" (i.e. jumping the queue) by masquerading as a member of an under-represented group nor how that action might affect people who've historically been in the back. He probably didn't think deeply about why the poems were being accepted at all – that it's possible the Chinese name endowed the poems with profundity and mysticism that wouldn't otherwise have been there, nor how frustrating the perpetuation of that stereotype can be for people who deal with it daily.

Now that we know for sure that at least one white person was using an Asian name to place his work, will we still joke about it? I'm sure we will. Howard will still say, "This wouldn't happen if you used Yang." But I think now I'll see the sadness behind the humor. And even though I believe in words, I don't think there's a poem out there that would capture it – that look in his eyes – exactly right.

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