

Blood Money: C.E. Morgan's 'The Sport of Kings'

On May 17, 1875, under blue skies and wearing the flapping green-and-orange silks of his legendary employer J.P. McGrath, a diminutive, tough, whip-thin African-American jockey named Oliver Lewis, weighing little more than a hundred pounds, careened to the first Kentucky Derby victory on a chestnut Thoroughbred with a white blaze and two white socks named Aristides. Thirteen of the fifteen jockeys surrounding him as they thundered down the home stretch were also African-American. In fact, black jockeys would dominate the sport in the south for another thirty years, winning 15 of the first 28 Derbies.

Aristides' trainer, Ansel Williamson, had been born a slave in rural Virginia. Purchased by a wealthy horse breeder, he learned the art and science of groomsmanship, and was eventually hired by J.P. McGrath, of the famed green-and-orange silks, who'd been born dirt-poor but, after winning \$105,000 in a single night in a New York gambling house, started a Thoroughbred farm that went on to become one of the most famous of its time.



1887. Eadweard Muybridge. Wellcome Gallery, London.

That a former-slave-turned-Hall-of-Famer trained Aristides—whose statue now stands at Churchill Downs—and an African-American jockey the size of a young girl rode the pounding horse to victory, hints at the intrigue, breathtaking chance, and monumental toil involved in the sport of horse racing. It also, for novelist C.E. Morgan—with her sharp comprehension of history and a penchant for literary gambles of her own—sparked the genesis of a brilliant, winding epic novel of a racially and economically fraught America: *The Sport of Kings*.

Spanning over 200 years as it moves back and forth through time, *The Sport of Kings* opens in the mid-1950s. Henry Forge, a restless, ambitious teenager schooled from birth in the racial politics of the south, sets in motion a shocking crime against his father's black groom, Filip. The event is one of several sharp seismic blips in the bedrock inequity of Forge

become warped into a strange, intellectual coldness by her father's intense, even immoral, over-involvement in her life. When Henrietta blurts a racial slur at school and is penalized, her father, irate, decides to homeschool her on a strange curriculum of evolutionary biology, manifest destiny, and horsemanship.



Henry Forge is, to put it mildly, obsessed with genetics. He's especially intrigued by the strategy of linebreeding: the idea that doubling down on a certain lineage can perfect and purify it, yielding—if the circumstances are just right—the ideal

specimen. (Even today, the odd, invisible world of dominance, alleles, and zygotes is a hallmark preoccupation of the sport, so much so that even the casual gambler can combine mares and stallions on fantasy web sites such as TrueNicks.com to produce virtual “nicks,” foals with an edge on wins. The site’s slogan could have come from Henry Forge himself: “Do more than just hope for the best.”)

The cloistered universe of Forge Run Farm is rendered in such careful and specific detail by Morgan that its sheer particularity could become claustrophobic—even her other characters realize how deeply weird the Forges are and try to get away from them, like the salt-of-the-earth veterinarian, Lou, who skitters to her truck to escape “these crazy people”—if it’s not for the sea change the author delivers halfway through the book, when Allmon Shaughnessy arrives on the farm.

Allmon is a 24-year-old fresh off a seven-year prison sentence, schooled in the Groom Program at Blackburn, and an undeniable talent with horses. He’s the only child of a wandering, handsome, alcoholic father, Mike Shaughnessy (“known in high school as that Irish fucking fuck”) and a caring but overburdened African-American mother, Marie. At fifteen, Allmon is noticed for his athletic promise and brought into a pre-NFL program, the Academy for Physical Education, where the coaches’ focus on phenotype is not so different from the horse breeders’ whom Allmon will encounter later (““How big was your dad?” “Six-two.” “Good...I want you big, fast, and I want you mean”).

But Marie’s chronic health problems, revealed to be lupus, are sinking the household. As with Erica Garner—the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by police violence in 2014 for selling cigarettes without tax stamps, herself dead at 27 from a heart attack after childbirth—a legacy of racism and poverty live in Marie’s body, the “gendered necropolitics” of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, the [sequelae](#). “Make me an

animal,” Marie begs, in a heartbreaking prayer, “so I won’t know anything. Make me a man, so I won’t give a damn about anyone.”

Her son Allmon does give a damn, but he is orphaned too young to know what to do with his anger and his aching heart. He is led into crime by older boys on the street; tried as an adult for possession of narcotics, an illegal firearm and a stolen car, he is sentenced to seven years, some of which is described in horrifying detail as he learns to defend himself.



The introduction of Allmon to the farm—their first ever black groom, hired by Henrietta without the blessing or even knowledge of her father—will change the course of the Forge family forever. Most likely not in the way you, avid reader, are thinking, because Morgan will not give the reader what he or she expects. But—and there’s that wink at history

again—change is coming, and change is, as Lyell and Darwin would agree, nature—and therefore man’s—most unstoppable force.

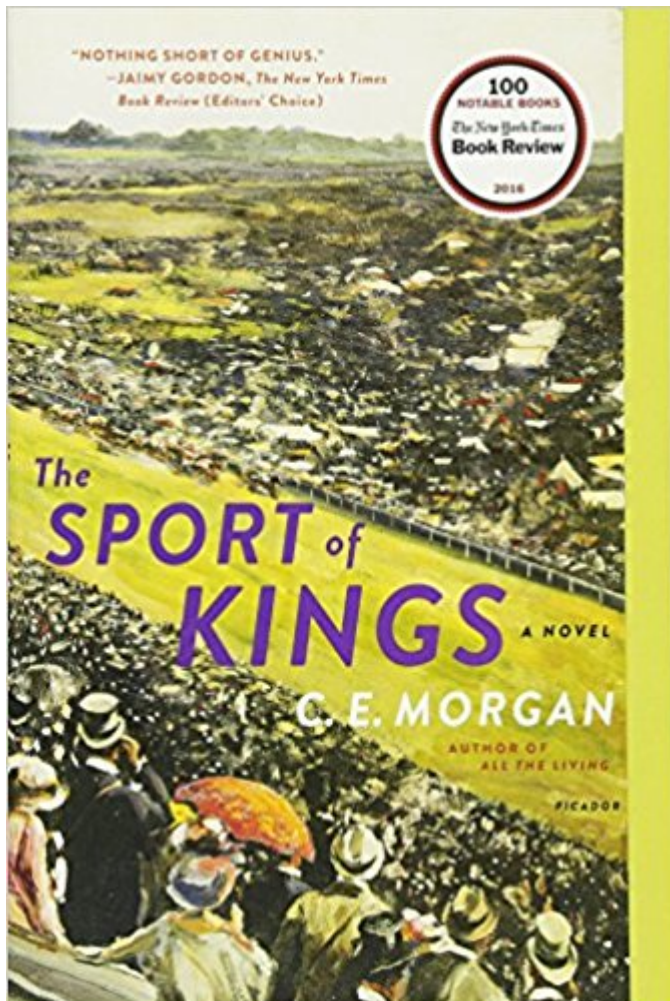
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C.E. Morgan was born and raised in rural Kentucky. She attended Berea College, a tuition-free institution founded as an abolitionist school in 1855, and later, Harvard Divinity School. And like Allmon’s mother, Marie, she is no stranger to chronic pain, as indicated by this interview with *Commonweal Magazine*:

Anyone who lives with poor health or chronic pain, or who has endured poverty—real poverty—knows what it is to live with lack and a resulting fear so incessant that it becomes thoroughly normalized, invisible in its ubiquity. If you’re lucky enough to have that fear begin to ease, which it has for me only in the past year, it’s an odd experience. A stranglehold eases off your entire body.

An essay Morgan wrote for the Oxford American, “[My Friend, Nothing is in Vain](#),” suggests that her own brand of chronic pain may, like Marie’s, be auto-immune in nature, like lupus.

But it’s important to keep in mind that a novelist need not have experienced firsthand that which they write into their work, and Morgan’s first preoccupation is with the way she renders her subjects. “Evil’s breeding ground is a lack of empathy,” she explains. “Evil acts reduce the other to an object, a being to its component parts, and obliterate subjectivity....So I locate moral beauty in an other-regarding ethic.”



She's also concerned with the notion of "attunement": "Humans struggle to remain attuned to one another—they want to turn away because of fear, or ambition, or boredom, or some lure of the ego. It's difficult. It requires radical vulnerability, radical risk."

Writing so boldly outside one's historical period, race, and gender also puts the novelist in a position of "radical vulnerability," and the whole thing can only work if it is a radical risk: the author wholly invested, putting her emotions and reputation on the line, tapping into voices that are not her own. It's a gamble with a nearly paralyzing moral and ethical obligation, and that's before you even get to the whole issue of "craft." But if the stakes were not so high, how else could Morgan have propelled herself to create a character as stunning in thought, action, and voice as "The Reverend," Allmon's restless, glittering-eyed, charismatic

preacher of a grandfather? (Morgan is excellent at writing convincing, multi-dimensional characters of faith, and their sermons; her first novel, *All the Living*, a quietly gorgeous, small-scope book taking place over only three months and focusing on just three characters, features pastor Bell Johnson, whose words read much like Morgan's prescription for novel writing itself, her "other-regarding ethic": "My heart was like a shirt wore wrong side out, brothers and sisters, that's how it was when God turned me, so that my innermost heart was all exposed.") But The Reverend is a different kind of preacher. An urgent, assertive, slightly wild and dogmatic man with an Old Testament streak, he has chosen a life of urban poverty and service. He harshly judges his own daughter, Marie, for her decisions, and is easier on his flock than his own family, much like John Ames's grandfather in *Gilead*. He also speaks many of my favorite lines in the book:

"Y'all act like Jesus is dead! Well, let me ask you this: Is Jesus dead in the ground? 'Cause I heard a rumor Jesus done rose up from the grave!"

A woman cried out, "He rose!"

"And how come he rose up out of that dark and nasty grave?"

"Tell me!"

"How come he said, 'Eat my body and remember me?'...Because my Jesus, my Jesus is the original Negro, and he said, only I can pay the bill..."

...Now the Reverend stopped suddenly, plucked a pink handkerchief out of his suit pocket, and mopped his streaming face, and when he spoke again his voice was conversational: "Now eventually somebody's gonna tell you Jesus ain't had no brown skin. And you know what you're gonna say when they tell you that? You're gonna say: If Jesus wasn't born no Negro, he died a Negro. What part the cross you don't understand?"

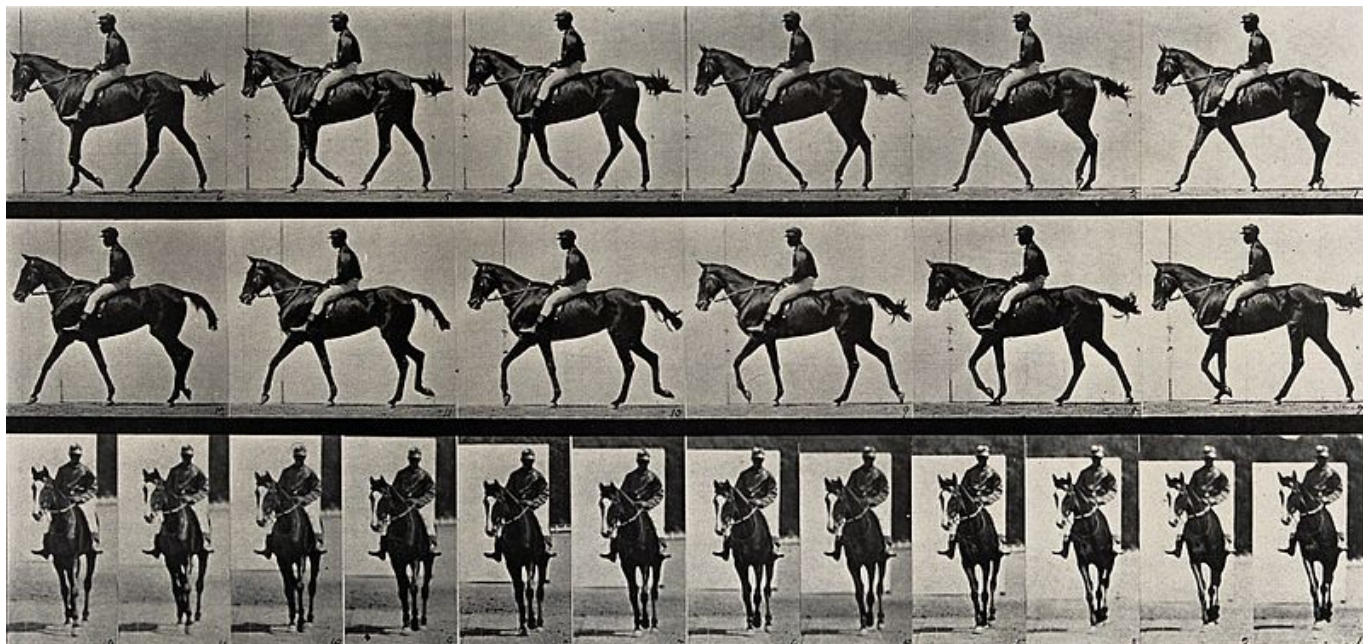
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The Sport of Kings is by no means a “perfect” book: its arc treads a little too close to Philipp Meyer’s *The Son* to feel wholly new, and at one key section, delving back into the early days of slavery on Forge Run Farm, the novel takes a sudden dive so immoderately Faulknerian—all dark and lushly incestuous and overwrought—that it threatens, like kudzu, to choke up the whole book.

But *The Sport of Kings* possesses a certain perfection of spirit, a reckless authorial gamble. Something special happens when a novelist combines that gamble with a terrific intellect and a heart for human suffering. We end up with a book that’s one in a million, a *Secretariat*, a *Hellmouth*, pounding for the finish.

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And what of those African-American jockeys who dominated the sport of horse racing in its early decades? The athletes like Isaac Burns Murphy, whose 44% win rate has never been surpassed, and whose earnings would have made him a millionaire if he lived today; or Jimmy Winkfield, who won 220 races in 1901 alone, every one of them a threat to life and limb?



Sadly, Jim Crow racism, and sometimes direct sabotage, thinned their ranks. The Irish jockeys of the northern states were not, on the whole, kind. Isaac Burns Murphy was once discovered, apparently drunk, on the back of a horse prior to a race; it was later proven he'd been drugged by an opponent. Winkfield escaped segregation in the United States with a successful second career in Russia, winning the Russian Oaks five times and the Russian Derby four; but when he was invited back to the States for a *Sports Illustrated* gala in 1961, he was told he could not enter through the front door.

No African-American jockey has won the Kentucky Derby since 1902, though Winkfield placed second the following year.

The sport is now dominated by riders from Latin American countries, immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, rural gauchos of small stature and true grit. (Leona O'Brien, that daughter of famous horse trainer Leo O'Brien, whom I mentioned earlier? She went on to marry her father's jockey, the Puerto Rican-born John Velazquez, now the highest-paid in his sport; they have two children). Morgan gives these newer jockeys a brief nod in *The Sport of Kings*, and a reader can't help but think that fifty years from now, there will be a novel in their story, too.

An Interview with Taylor Brown, Author of Gods of Howl Mountain



The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams): Taylor Brown is the author of a collection of short stories, [In the Season of Blood and Gold](#), and three novels: [Fallen Land](#), hailed by Booklist as “a masterpiece;” [The River of Kings](#), and [Gods of Howl Mountain](#), out next month (March 2018), of which a starred *Booklist* review said:

It's the characters, so wonderfully vibrant and alive in their all-too-human variety—scared, tightly wound, angry, damaged, yet resourceful and resilient, some honorable, some not—that demonstrate Brown's prodigious talent. Brown has quickly established himself in the top echelon of Southern writers.

An [excerpt](#) from *Gods of Howl Mountain* appears in this month's issue of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

Thank you so much for answering our questions, Taylor.

Let's start with some background on *Gods of Howl Mountain*. The novel is set in rural North Carolina in the 1950s. Rory Docherty, a young man freshly home from the Korean War, has returned to the mountain where he grew up. He lives with his grandmother, a folk healer; his father is dead and his mother, mute since witnessing a terrible crime, has lived most of her life in a mental hospital nearby. Rory finds work running bootleg whiskey for a powerful local family. But when he falls for the daughter of a preacher, he gets himself into a new brand of trouble that may open up secrets about his mother and his past.

Begging my own Yankee ignorance here: Is there a Howl Mountain, North Carolina? How did you develop a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains and its long legacy of family feuds, bootlegging, folk medicine, snake-handling, and more?

Taylor Brown: There is no Howl Mountain, North Carolina – the place and history are products of my own imagination. That said, I was inspired by the history and folklore of Blowing Rock, a town in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. The town itself is named after “The Blowing Rock,” a rock formation that stands three thousand feet above the Johns River Gorge and is storied for a powerful wind that blows upward out of the gorge. Legend has it, a heartbroken Native American brave leapt from the cliff, only to be blown back into the arms of his lover. That idea of mysterious winds inspired the cyclonic updrafts at the top of Howl Mountain, which I do envision as being in roughly the same area as Blowing Rock. However, I wanted to be free to create a geography and history of my own.

Though I grew up on the Georgia coast, I've long had a

fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as the world of bootlegging, folk medicine, stock car racing, and more. As a child, I remember hearing my father play the song "Copperhead Road" by Steve Earle, still one of my favorite songs. The narrator is a Vietnam vet whose family has been involved in bootlegging for years, and who returns from Vietnam to begin growing the new cash crop of the region – marijuana. I can remember sitting in front of the stereo in my dad's study as a kid, playing that song over and over again.

Like most of my novels, *Gods of Howl Mountain* started with a short story. This time it was "Kingdom Come," the second story in my collection, *The Season of Blood and Gold*. With that story, I decided I wanted to write a novel set in this time and place. In fact, it was a large part of my motivation to move to western North Carolina in 2009, where I lived for two years—first in Asheville, then in Black Mountain, NC.

It's strange how organic these books become over the years. In 2013, I met Jason Frye, a writer who has become a great friend and editor of mine. Jason is from Logan, West Virginia, and his grandfather used to catch rattlesnakes to sell to the serpent-handling churches in the area. Jason has a black-and-white photograph of this one-armed snake-handling preacher on his office wall, and he directed me toward Dennis Covington's incredible book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Later, I ended up seeing someone who was in herb school in Asheville, and she was an incredible help for the specifics of Granny May's folks medicine.

So, as you can see, this story has traveled quite a long road with me.

WBT: I can't help but notice that many of your novels and stories feature characters whose lives have bumped up against the vast movements of history and, in particular, war. There's Callum and Ava in *Fallen Land*, for example, caught up in

General Sherman's "March to the Sea" in the final year of the American Civil War; or Lawton in *The River of Kings*, who's still grappling with the legacy of his recent service in ways that sometimes baffle or worry his college-student brother. In *Gods of Howl Mountain*, Rory is a Korean war vet and amputee, and you've mentioned that your newest work-in-progress features a female Army vet as well. Where do you think your attentiveness to veterans comes from—and your—what I would call—remarkably mature, long-range, compassionate interest in the ways war shapes whole generations, whole nations?

TB: That's a very good question, Andria. I've begun writing a little about my father, who was killed in a motorcycle accident last fall.

WBT: Yes, I remember that, and I am so sorry.

TB: He was of the Vietnam generation, and I grew up with stories of his time in the Army. For instance, he sent his 21st birthday on guard duty at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, marching through a hailstorm. Later, he graduated from the University of Georgia Law School and Army OCS at Fort Benning in the same year.

Fortunately, he was never sent to Vietnam, but the threat of war hovered over his entire early manhood, as it did over his entire generation's. He had so many friends who were impacted. One of his good friends, Sully, was a Green Beret in Vietnam, and I know my father was very moved by how the war has impacted his friend—the emotional and physical trauma. I think, as a burgeoning writer, you're maybe especially attuned to such stories or emotions.

What's more, 9/11 took place during a very formative time for me: when the towers fell, I was a freshman in college—nineteen years old—and I knew my generation was going to war. The military was never an option for me, as I was born with bilateral club feet, which have necessitated a multitude of

reconstructive surgeries. but so many of my friends had to consider their involvement (or lack thereof).

Of course, 9/11 kicked off the GWoT, so our nation has been at war for most of my adult life. I think it's easy for the average civilian to forget that; after all, so little of the general population has "skin in the game" these days. But, as a writer, I think your job is not to be incognizant or unaware of such things, you know? I think your job, in some part, is to try and empathize with the experiences and traumas of others, to put yourself in their shoes (or boots).

WBT: Yes!

In a "Writer's Bone" essay interview with Daniel Ford, you mentioned that you've written several stories based on old ballads, and that *Fallen Land* was inspired by an American ballad of Irish descent, "When First Unto This Country, A Stranger I Came" (Library of Congress Archives of American Folk Song #65A2). What is it about these ballads that speaks to you so strongly? Was there any particular music that inspired, or worked its way into, *Gods of Howl Mountain*?

And, as a fellow writer, I'm curious: Are you careful about the music you listen to when working intensely on a novel, the way some authors are careful about what they read? Do you have "sets" of music that have sort of accompanied each of your novels?

TB: Yes, as I mentioned before, I think Steve Earle's "Copperhead Road" certainly influenced this book—it's just a song that's been big in my imagination since I was a kid. It's a modern ballad, really, and I love how it juxtaposes outlaws from two different generations. Steve Earle's "Johnny Come Lately" does much the same thing, exploring the vastly different homecomings of soldiers returning from WWII versus Vietnam.

WBT: I know that song! We had it on an old Farm Aid CD when I

worked in rural political organizing. Steve Earle is a good guy – a big supporter of Farm Aid! And wow, that video really has the same feel as the opening of *Gods of Howl Mountain*. I can see how the tone of it worked its way into the novel.

TB: As for the old ballads like the one that inspired *Fallen Land*, I think there's something so timeless and visceral about them. These were songs of the people, sung again and again and again, the verses evolving over the decades. I think of those ballads as survivors, really. It's like natural selection—only the strongest songs survive century after century, migrating from old countries to new ones, from mountains to prairies to coasts. There must be a nugget of truth or beauty or power in these old songs that just won't die, that continue to move our hearts and blood.

I'm fairly careful about what I listen to when I'm actually sitting there writing. Often, it's music that doesn't have lyrics, or else I can't understand the lyrics well—I don't want to have other words in my head. Rather, it's the mood or atmosphere of certain songs that seems to help. Also, there's music that helps with certain projects, but not while I'm actually writing. For instance, I've been working on something that relates to motorcycles, and I've been playing various renditions of my favorite song of all time—"Vincent Black Lightning 1952"—on repeat.

Not surprisingly, it's another modern ballad.

WBT: You are thirty-five, and *Gods of Howl Mountain* is your fourth book. This just might make you the Leonardo DiCaprio of fiction writing! What is it like to have published "early and often?" In Virginia Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet," she famously writes, "For heaven's sake, publish nothing before you are thirty." How would you respond to Ms. Woolf?

TB: Ha, sometimes I feel a lot older on the inside than I look on the outside! To be honest, though, I only had a few short stories published before I was thirty. It may seem like an “overnight success,” but I spent the large part of a decade working in near isolation, writing and throwing away two novels before *Fallen Land*, as well as tons and tons of short stories. I really didn’t know another serious writer until I was around thirty years old.

I’ve heard that Virginia Woolf quote before, and, I don’t know—I think that sometimes writers use it as an excuse. Looking back at my early stories, there are some cringe-worthy moments, sure—and plenty of things I would do differently now—but I don’t regret them. We only have so much time to express ourselves in this life, and early work shows us where we were then and how we’ve arrived where we are now. It’s all part of the journey, I think.

WBT: I love that—“we only have so much time to express ourselves in this life.”

This seems like a good time to ask if you have any advice for the even-younger poets (or fiction writers) out there, those who hope to make writing their life’s work?

TB: I think Harry Crews said it best: “Get in the chair.” There’s really no secret but that. Desire, discipline, and force of will. And what did Calvin Coolidge say? “Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.” I think that’s as true of writing as it is for anything. It isn’t going to be easy. You’re going to get knocked down again and again and again. You’re going to have to write through shitty jobs and shattering heartbreaks and rejections. But that makes you tough—not just with writing, but in life.

I hear young writers whine sometimes because they got rejected from the hippest new lit journal. Fuck that. In my book, rejections are badges of honor. Paper your walls with them.

Each is proof that you kept writing despite all the forces trying to keep you from making your art, and every rejection is one step closer to the glorious moment of publication. Every rejection makes that moment sweeter. So keep your chin up and keep swinging, and remember your heroes went through these same battles. If they didn't, you might want to find new ones.