

## **Failure: A Love Letter**

by Isobel O'Hare

Including text from Gustaf Sobin's poem, "That the Universe is Chrysalid," highlighted in green.

Originally delivered in lecture form at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, January 2015.

Dear Isobel,

Wake up. Today is the day when you must write your lecture. You've been putting it off. You've been writing lists of ideas, terrible ideas, and abandoning each of them in turn. Today you will choose one and stick with it, even if it turns out to be the worst idea you've had yet.

Fail to have a lecture at all. Stand and stare at your audience for 45 minutes of silence. It might be the most enjoyable experience they have that day.

You've been crying a lot lately. Use that. Cry for 35 minutes, then ask for questions. Answer each one with more crying.

Take famous quotes about failure and replace their nouns with an N+7 generator. Read that.

All of old. Noun else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No mausoleum. Try again. Fail again. Fail bible.

Notice that, in its insistence on replacing not only nouns but also adjectives, even the N+7 generator has failed.

Lie in bed for another 30 minutes. Write an entire lecture in your head without getting up. When you do get up, forget all of the brilliant ideas you've just had.

*that the universe is chrysalid.*

Make coffee. Remember that time in childhood when you were told you'd never amount to anything. Remind yourself that, thanks to student loans and an unpredictable freelance income, your net worth is -\$81,919. Realize the person who said that was right: you have failed to justify your existence in monetary terms.

*that all things that are, are continuous emanations.*

Attend trivia night at the pub with friends. Fail to answer a single question correctly. They will stop asking you to come out, leaving you more time to sit at home and fail in private.

*that their being is a perpetual becoming.*

Write a letter to an ex-lover:

Dear former lover,

Isn't it strange when the person who has been your best friend for a number of years suddenly becomes a stranger? How is this acceptable?

Sincerely,

Me.

Don't send it. You don't actually want to have that conversation. Instead, put it into the N+7 generator:

Death former lower,

Isn't it odd when the persona who has been your best friendly for a numeral of yearbooks suddenly becomes a stranglehold? How is this acceptable?

Sincerely,

Me.

Debit former lug,

Isn't it odd when the pervert who has been your best frippery for a nursing of yetis suddenly becomes a straw? How is this acceptable?

Sincerely, Me.

*that becoming is the breath of lust. and that lust is perfection.*

Dear Isobel,

When you are writing your lecture, draw on examples from your reading. This way the audience will know you are prepared:

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam writes that, "From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures."

*that all increments are equal.*

Dear Isobel,

Get rid of all of the dresses you used to wear when you were trying too hard to be a girl. All those perfectly matched earrings, bags, and shoes. A costume is an excellent way to engage with people socially without saying anything of substance or sharing anything truly personal.

What happens when your very person is nothing more than a conversation piece? Who are you without your best frippery?

*the spore is the clavicord of the tree.*

Share what you have written thus far with a friend, who tells you that your idea for a lecture is not “original, interesting, or thought-provoking.” Take this as a compliment, keep going, and resolve never to share another first draft.

*the clavicord is lust.*

Fail to be rigorous and productive. The poet Robert Duncan claimed to need periods of inertia between writing poems. Allow yourself the freedom to do nothing without guilt. Stop lying on the couch thinking that you “should” be doing something. Stare at the ceiling and do nothing. It’s okay if you fall asleep. It’s okay if you spend an entire day like this. Fail to write down your thoughts. Let them pass through you just this once. Not everything needs to be recorded.

*that in creating we extend the very energy that’s created us.*

Halberstam asks, "What is at stake in arguing for the trees and against the forest?"

Dear Isobel,

Nobody plants 1,000 trees in one motion. You start with one and trust that you and your future forest will figure out its final form in time.

*that this extension is space.*

Halberstam claims that “While some of us who have escaped our cages may start looking for ways back into the zoo, others may try to rebuild a sanctuary in the wild, and a few fugitive types will actually insist on staying lost.”

Dear Isobel,

You escaped the cage of your parents and instead of remaining in the wild you set out to find replacement cages. You found them in relationships, in academia, and in jobs you thought would provide the stability and definition your life had always lacked. You leave these cages when your skin begins to meld with the metal and your own limbs have prevented you from roaming. You peel yourself back, which is painful and confusing. It would be so easy to stay right here.

*that space, the space we move through, and dwell in, is made up of the infinitesimal crystals that we murmur.*

The filmmaker Werner Herzog claims that there is an “ecstatic truth” that lies just beneath the surface of facts. You may gut a fish and label its many parts, but all you have gained is knowledge of a dead thing. If you can watch a fish be a fish and feel content in your unknowing, if you can appreciate beauty without having to possess it, which often necessitates an act of killing, then maybe there is hope for you.

*music hears.*

Your fish friend is like Halberstam’s “forgotten subcultural producers who lie hidden beneath the glittering surface of market valued success.” You can point to gills and a dorsal fin and feel confident that you know what they are. A house, a car, a Roth IRA, a baby, and a

husband each gives us this same comfort. It's not that these things aren't important, but they aren't all that is important, or even the most important things, in life. If you don't have any of them, you are still alive, right?

*that creation is momentum made perceptible.*

Duncan said that "science and poetry are identical as pictures of what is happening." As writers we tend toward the ecstatic truth of things, which is as essential to our society as knowing the location of a fish's caudal peduncle.

*the attempt to store or isolate momentum is tyranny.*

Robert Duncan points out that "there are people who believe and live as if life is the significant thing and people who live as if their self is the significant thing." The humanist believes that only "the human being is the living thing" and that "everything around is for him."

Don't be that guy. Duncan said, "It's what comes to me that I go along with, not what I seem to initiate myself."

*not sequence, but elaboration.*

Dear Isobel,

Hey, did you know that Meriwether Lewis thought he was a failure? It's true. He wrote the following note on his 31st birthday:

"This day I completed my thirty first year, and conceived that I had in all human probability now existed about half the period which I am to remain in this Sublunary world. I reflected that I had as yet done but little, very little indeed, to further the hapiness of the human race, or to advance

the information of the succeeding generation. I viewed with regret the many hours I have spent in indolence, and now soarly feel the want of that information which those hours would have given me had they been judiciously expended. but since they are past and cannot be recalled, I dash from me the gloomy thought and resolve in future, to redouble my exertions and at least indeavour to promote those two primary objects of human existance, by giving them the aid of that portion of talents which nature and fortune have bestoed on me; or in future, to live for *mankind*, as I have heretofore lived *for myself*.”

Duncan would have approved.

Dear Isobel,

Write before you think. As soon as you have an idea, it's already dead.

*that genesis is a wind.*

Tell your audience about the poet who taught you the importance of vulnerability. She said that when you write something and think, “Oh my god, I would die if anyone read this,” then you must share it. When she told you this, you realized that everything you had written to her made you feel that way. You die every time. You're dying right now.

*the rock ripples; the night swims.*

Dear Isobel,

Every attempt at communication is a failure. When your writing and your day to day lives are unified, these failures overlap in unexpected ways. You can learn from them. Failure is not only necessary; it is inevitable. You are never in a more precarious position than when you are

certain of something, when everything seems to make sense. You know from experience that any time you've made a declaration about yourself, no sooner have the words left your mouth than they cease to be true.

*that the eyes are forever swifter than their green mirrors.*

Forget everything you have ever heard about failure being a stepping stone on the way to success. If you delude yourself into thinking that the way you are failing now will lead to some success or happiness in the future, you are missing the point. There is nothing better than the way you are failing right now. If you can't be content with that, then you are placing all of your happiness in the hands of a future that may never arrive.

*that structure is shadow.*

Realize that, as much as you love Samuel Beckett, that "fail better" quote you put through the N+7 generator earlier only serves to reinforce this idea of failure as a pit stop on the way to success. Sometimes in your own writing, you must kill your darlings, and sometimes you must disregard the statements of geniuses when they do not ring true to you. Halberstam argues that failure can be a way of life, a quiet one that seeks truth in solitude rather than the validation of others.

*that music should catch fire and flame into gesture, motion, deed.*

Your life is not a project and there is no one right way or single straight path that will take you to its conclusion. Happiness is not an achievement, a reward for a life lived correctly, but something to be experienced fleetingly as part of a well-balanced diet of feelings and life stages. When we go through times of sadness or loss, it is easy to think that this is where we will

always be. But everything is temporary. You have to feel this way until you feel a different way.  
That is all there is.

*that the past hasn't yet happened.*

Was it Yoko Ono who said, "The work that I do is about not knowing the equipment, and not knowing that particular balance, and then finding it as I go?"

Gertrude Stein said, "I wouldn't know what I knew."

*that only the edge is dominion. only the edge secretes.*

In his introduction to *A Poet's Mind*, a collection of interviews with Robert Duncan, Christopher Wagstaff refers to the poet as an "ever-curious participant rather than an authority." You may be reminded of what Keats called the "half-knowledge" of a mind that could be intellectual without being saturated with the known.

*that our lust is lightness. acceleration.*

Robert Duncan also said, "You can't have the answers and still connect to the imagination."

Dear Isobel,

Approach your work as if it is a mystery telling itself through you. This is what Charles Olson called projective verse. Think of yourself as a vehicle for what is being expressed.

*and what we call the 'stillness' is the inconceivable velocity of our flesh, thinking in the same  
space-cadence as the universe.*

Fail at being serious. Instead, be series. Duncan says that a series is “something that follows through and has consequences.” Try to simply finish something without worrying how brilliant it will be when it is done. No matter your intention, its consequences are beyond your control. So get on with it.

*the thrust of a single whisper.*

Fail to integrate. Cultivate being rather than personality. Do not make a poem. Simply make. Once you have the content, it will help you find its form. Duncan has this to say about personality: “Disintegration means you think you are a single thing flying apart. But I believe that I’m part of an event, a total event. In a poem, what one is doing in one’s activity in language is trying to open up that event. And that, of course, means opening up, or bringing together in order to open up, meaning and feeling — your own two areas in relation to this event that you’re part of. This is very different from feeling that you’re a person.”

*the lymph, the lightning!*

Fail to have a beginning, middle, and end. Your work is a field and everything in it is active. You don’t walk into a field and say this is the beginning of the field and this is its only end. You enter and explore this space that can be reimaged from all angles.

Jamaica Kincaid wrote, “I am not at all—absolutely not at all—interested in the pursuit of happiness. I am not interested in the pursuit of positivity. I am interested in pursuing a truth, and the truth often seems to be not happiness but its opposite.” There have been plenty of times in your life when you could have stayed where you were and been happy, comfortable, and safe. If you can imagine yourself as that fish, unaware of the names of its insides but living its truth at

every moment, why would you want to trade that for a handful of easy stick labels? The truth will most likely make you miserable for at least a little while, and that's okay. You probably need to go through that.

*that life, in its ecstatic throes, touches the resplendence of death.*

Dear Isobel,

Remember that fish? Less than a week after she criticized your lecture, that same friend excitedly told you that she received a beautiful painting from a friend. She brought it to where you were seated and unrolled it to reveal an image of a salmon, sliced open to display its inner mechanisms. Something went “Aha!” inside and Duncan's words returned to you. Science and poetry. It's okay that your friend doesn't get it, because you don't get it either, or at least your two versions of getting it are no better or worse than one another.

In *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*, Jesper Juul wonders why he plays video games when he knows that he will fail at least part of the time. He asks himself, “why does this enjoyment contain at its core something that I most certainly do not enjoy?” He writes of being angered by a game in which he doesn't fail even once, citing studies that report the disappointment experienced by gamers who find a game too easy. Game testers will rate a game more highly if they fail at it at least once. Juul asks why we seek failure in games, as well as in stories, when we avoid it in real life. Is it catharsis, that feeling of vicarious purgation of our daily frustrations? It's an interesting paradox in that failing in a game is an actual personal failure experience, but it is also a sanctioned arena in which to practice failure. Where the real world provides no promise of improvement or eventual success, games offer endless opportunities to start over and improve our scores.

Humans are more likely to accept responsibility for a success than a failure. Hence the adage, “Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan.” Fear of failure can lead to procrastination and other forms of self-sabotage. Juul claims that sometimes “we perform worse than we should in order to feel better about our poor performance.” It’s okay that your paper is terrible or that you aren’t properly prepared for that presentation. You were up all night. You got no sleep. You’re terribly hungover and all of these things just happened to you.

Juul defines play as a “parody of emotional vulnerability” and that, through play, we experience precarious emotions such as anger, fear, shock, disgust, and loneliness in transformed, masked, or hidden forms. The same idea might apply to writing a poem or a story. Approached in this manner, writing a poem is a space in which you are allowed to die a little in the expression of a feeling that is forbidden elsewhere.

The philosopher Aaron Smuts defines the paradox of painful art thusly:

- 1) People do not seek out situations that cause painful emotions.
- 2) People have painful emotions in response to some art.
- 3) People seek out art that they know will arouse painful emotions.

Art grants us this controlled experience of pain and failure. Again, catharsis.

*that the senses shall iridesce into their infinite sensations.*

In the children’s book, *Liam Wins the Game, Sometimes*, a child is “explicitly told that it is acceptable to feel bad about losing, but that he or she must accept losing in order to be able to play.”

Becoming comfortable with failure is important not because it will lead to success but because it will make you a better person. You will know pain and you will thus be better equipped to empathize with the pain of others. Here you should mention a poet you know who told you her story of unrequited love. How she pined for someone without hope of her love being returned. Rather than delude herself with the idea that the object of her affections would eventually relent, she accepted defeat and told herself that she was learning to face the impossible. Juul says that “we should care enough about winning to put in sufficient effort, but we should see learning, rather than winning, as the ultimate goal.”

*that we become, ultimately, the space we've created.*

Dear Isobel,

Remember when you first began your MFA program? You arrived feeling like you had no idea what you were doing. This feeling only became amplified throughout your first semester when you realized that you should have gone to nursing school like your mother said. Your second semester was better. You felt like you had some hold on who you were and what you were doing, what kind of poet you are and what you are trying to accomplish. Then in your third semester that fantasy exploded like the Antares shuttle, made as it was of shoddy, outdated materials. This cycle is necessary. If you always felt like an idiot, you'd never do anything, but if you always felt like a genius you'd never do anything interesting. Each feeds the other.

In the video game *Burnout*, players are encouraged to crash in the most spectacularly damaging and expensive ways possible. Here you should suggest an exercise for the audience to complete at some point during residency: Fail to follow the advice of your fellow workshop participants, even the famous ones, at least once. If they tell you that your imagery is unrealistic,

write the most unbelievable story or poem you can think of. Make everything ridiculous. If they point out cliches, write a piece in response that is nothing but cliches. If your puns are too clever, write even cleverer ones. Beat your imaginary reader over the head with your insufferable preciousness. Be, in the words of Robert Duncan, “perfectly glad to be way down at the very bottom playing around.”

Revel in what Halberstam refers to as “naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition.” Crash and burn and fail in the most dramatic way you can, and find out what you can learn from that.

Juul says that “the basic trick of learning and improvement is that we have to accept the painful answer (this is my fault, and a failure of me being who I want to be) in order to be motivated to become who we want to be. This is how each moment-to- moment attempt to avoid failure has existential significance for us.”

*that we become, ultimately, the space we've created.*

The idea that 10,000 hours of work will result in expertise or mastery is absurd and stems from capitalism and that Protestant work ethic that tells us to keep working for that future reward. Skill does not come from mindless repetition alone but from taking risks and being foolish and trying things we've never tried before.

Returning to Juul and video games, writing could be approached as a single player game where writers do not have an a priori structure of challenges and goals laid out for them. The writer must construct her own game. Just as Jesper Juul concludes his book with the statement that a game is never “just a game,” a phrase that allows players to shrug off their failures while

inwardly fuming, a poem is never just a poem, a story never just a story. We are always wrestling with ourselves when we come to the page, and how we respond to our failures determines what we learn from each.

*that we become, ultimately, the space we've created.*

Dear Isobel,

Do you recall that story in the news about how poor kids who do everything right are no better off than rich kids who do everything wrong? With such obstacles in one's way, goals must shift. Instead of hoping for success as it is currently measured, in dollar signs and lucrative careers, material possessions and retirement accounts, we should strive to be better people. You didn't enroll in this program to become rich or famous. You simply wanted to be a better writer, to learn. Not to be the best in the program, to fight every other poet for a blue ribbon and a cash prize, but to share in an educational experience that would hopefully make all of you a little less neurotic and deluded and a little better at sitting down and wrestling with white space.

*that we become, ultimately, the space we've created.*

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed writes that “the very promise that happiness is what you get for having the right associations might be how we are directed toward certain things... the demand for happiness is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as if what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals but our failure to follow them.”

Positive psychology views happiness as something achieved, like capital, by following a prescribed path. And like capital, it can then be spent or invested. Our happiness makes it more likely that things will go our way. Happiness is also seen as an interpersonal responsibility: we must be happy in order to increase the happiness of others.

Dear Isobel,

As a woman, you experience this every time a stranger on the sidewalk tells you to smile. What you are supposed to understand is that a smile is your social currency. This happiness responsibility can also exist in romantic relationships or in the workplace, where anything other than a sunny disposition may be labelled toxic.

Happiness and success are linked, and Ahmed speaks of the right to be unhappy in much the same way as Halberstam talks about the freedom to fail, suggesting also that objects conventionally associated with happiness favor those who are already privileged, and how these conventional notions of happiness may not be every person's ideal. To be "unhappy" in the eyes of others may be a subjective misunderstanding of another person's happiness.

Dear Isobel,

When you told people in Baltimore that you were moving to the West Coast, one of your friends said he'd never make that kind of move without having any "prospects" lined up. And you laughed and asked, what better prospect is there than love?

"To suffer," says Ahmed, "can mean to feel your disagreement with what has been judged as good."

By that definition, Isobel, you have suffered all your life.

Audre Lorde said, "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."

*that we become, ultimately, the space we've created.*

For Ahmed, "the freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to be affected by what is unhappy, and to live a life that might affect others unhappily. The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us. It would thus mean the freedom to cause unhappiness by acts of deviation."

Telling oneself that things will get better is a poor consolation for present suffering. Ahmed refers to Durkheim when she says that "an attachment to the future would mean to be missing something, unable to experience the past or the present as something other than hasty, as something we have to get through, rush through, in order to be somewhere else."

Dear Isobel,

When you read that, did you remember from the lyrics to one of your favorite songs, Laurie Anderson's "Language is a Virus" that "Paradise is exactly like where you are right now, only much, much better." This is the seduction of metaphor.

In *A Vindication of Love*, Cristina Nehring writes that "the stronger your sentiments, the greater your chance of failure. Failure happens more often to the brave than to the docile. This is not emotional snobbery, it is reality. The more you have to invest, the more you also have to lose. Failure is no shame, by this token, but a badge of courage, the insignia of wealth."

Here we see economic language used again, but this time flipped on its head. Emotional availability is an asset. Love is an investment with no guarantee of any return. Failure and its associated lessons have made you so rich.

At the same time, Nehring urges us not to romanticize failure, reminding us that “to be heroic is to be endangered. As bruises are part of battle, failure is part of love. If we have no wounds, chances are we haven’t put up a fight. Chances are we have loitered timidly on the sidelines of the great skirmish.”

*that we become, ultimately, the space we’ve created.*

In *Failure and the American Writer*, Gavin Jones claims that “the professional discipline of history has failed to provide a sequence to make sense of the past,... leaving a gap to be filled by literary works.” He quotes Henry Adams, historian and grandson of John Quincy Adams, when he says, “for all serious purpose, [history is] less instructive than Walter Scott or Alexandre Dumas.” Adams equates geological catastrophism, first postulated by Clarence King, with the American experience, its revolutions causing collisions of past and future that led to profound changes in our national development. King believed that evolution is not the result of gradual changes and natural selection, but of the capacity to respond quickly and creatively to catastrophic environmental transformations. History therefore has no inherent developmental narrative, so why should literature? Or is it that literature must, in order to fill in these gaps?

“Failure, for Adams,” says Jones, “is primarily a mode of temporal transition, a slipping across a chasm, a sudden leap into the machine age.”

Literature exists at the point at which a fault breaks apart.

A poem is the expression of this.

*blossoming generatrix, and genius of our every breath.*

Samuel Beckett also said, “To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion.”

N+7 Beckett says, “To be an ass is to fail, as no other dare fail, that falsity is his wren and the shrink from it desertion.”

Dear Isobel,

You are an ass and sometimes you will fail. Let it be your wren.

According to Gavin Jones, the story of America is the story of a failed mission. The Puritans, “having failed to rivet the eyes of the world upon their city on the hill,... were left alone with America.” After a Civil War and a Depression, “failure emerged as a category of social identity in the 19th century... the language of business became applied to the soul.”

Dear Isobel,

We already talked about how you were told you’d never amount to anything, as if your worth could be measured quantitatively. And look what you just wrote there. Worth. Your worth. How else would you describe it? Your validity? Your beauty? The girl you love was once told by a teacher that she would never amount to anything either, but she is the most beautiful person you know so clearly that teacher was a fool.

In his history of failure in the lives and works of American writers, Jones discusses Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Stephen Crane, Mark Twain, Sarah Orne

Jewett, and Henry James. He refers to them as “theorists of failure” who, rather than viewing failure as “a condition to be passed through on the road to success,” stage failure within their texts, not as a theme but as a literary form. For these writers, failure becomes “a process of change without development.”

Sarah Orne Jewett was particularly aware of her own failures as a writer. Her goal was to “write the things themselves just as they are,” which would have delighted Robert Duncan but must have frustrated readers and other writers seeking some metaphorical interconnectedness and plot progression. In personal correspondence she wrote of her inability to construct a long narrative, saying of herself, “I have no dramatic talent. The story would have no plot. I should have to fill it out with descriptions of character and meditations. It seems to me I can furnish the theatre, and show you the actors, and the scenery, and the audience, but there never is any play! I could write you entertaining letters perhaps, from some desirable house where I was in most charming company, but I couldn’t make a story about it. ... what shall be done with such a girl? For I wish to keep on writing, and to do the very best I can.” There is no movement in Jewett’s stories. No progression, no closure, no beginning or end, nothing at stake perhaps but the characters’ existential situations. One could say that there is no story in her stories.

Dear Isobel,

Have you ever been told that your poems go off in too many directions? That it’s okay to venture out into the wilderness as long as you ultimately rein yourself in and return to a straight and logical path? The next time someone says such a thing to you, remember the field. Remember the root structures under that field and how rhizomes spread out into so many different directions and interconnect, or don’t, and reach and dig and settle, or don’t, and live

quite successfully in big jumbled messes of beautiful incoherence. Remember that Duncan said, “In poetry today they want you to straighten it out when it’s a dream of this kind.” You could spend a lifetime trying to untie one of those knots, or you could lie in the cool grass above them and listen to the frogs and dream.

*blossoming generatrix, and genius of our every breath.*

Dear Isobel,

You’ve got to wrap it up now. End by writing a letter to your audience.

Dear beautiful darling audience member,

Inside your love letter you will find a stamped envelope that contains a blank card. Write to someone. Don’t think too much about it, and don’t worry about how you’ll come across. Is there something you have wanted to say but you’re afraid you’ll die if you do? Is there a question about this lecture that you’re embarrassed to ask me in person? Draw a picture for your nephew, send a poem to a friend. Take your field of white space and do with it what you will.

Dear Isobel,

You were afraid to fuck this up. You were afraid to be a failure.

You fucked this up. You are a failure.

P.S.

Here you should thank your audience and remain at the podium in case of questions.