

Error, Redacted

*Failing not necessarily
better*

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“After you graduate, a good eight or even nine out of ten of you will never write again,” the director of our writing program told us on our first day. She was joking, but she also meant: Your being here might be a serious mistake. We laughed. We were nervous. It showed.

Many of us were unproven, though some of us had some bits published here and there. We had moved to the middle of the country to learn how to practice a really hard art, operating under mild to grand delusions. Someone might have made the mistake of telling us the way we arranged words was pretty good, even exceptional, without warning us of the massive costs ahead. Someone had made a possible misstep in writing us warm, lovely recommendations. Someone had foolishly woken up before dawn to help us haul our furniture down to an East Village curb because, good grief, they believed in us. Someone, once, might have given us a copy of *Pale Fire* or *The Autobiography of Red* and written *Can’t want to see your own one day!* inside, and we didn’t register their gentle sarcasm.

The director was brutal, but her words, necessary. We had zero assurance of success and there would be little to no pay. Most of us would postpone the vital markers of adulthood for years and years—marriage, children, stable careers, homeownership—in exchange for the dubious bliss of being chained to the page. We were committing to being obsessive, irrational, and nearly impossible to live with, for a few hazy ideas, a handful of unclear scenes: a woman twisting into an angel; a man waking up alone in a burnt-down city; a couple bent over a desk together, examining an old script; a warship in flight. We were to throw everything away and give everything up, for the privilege of wrapping the right words around memories: a look someone once gave us from across a crowded room, a sensation of awe or terror or beauty that we once felt, then could not shake and could not forget.

Right then, on the first day of the program, admitting that we might have miscalculated wasn't a possibility. Having that kind of insight and grace and self-awareness would compromise the system, melt us down into pools of gristle and bone and regret. By *we*, of course, I mostly mean *me*, projecting my experiences on others. But I can't say *me*, yet, without this distancing; I haven't learned how to yet.

The idea for this piece came out of a mistake: a misreading.

This past summer, Norwegian magazine *Natt&Dag* interviewed Lars Holdhus, an artist and collaborator-friend. I right-clicked "translate to English" to flip the profile from Norwegian to English. "Jeg har gjort alle de feil valgene," the subtitle read. This translates, it seems, as "I have made all the wrong choices." In my mind's voice, I re-translated this as, "My life is a series of mistakes."

In the interview, Holdhus was asked why he applied to change his name. He replied, "I often make choices without realizing the consequences. I make changes overnight that I must live with the consequences of for the next ten years."

Over the next weeks, the image of the body as a product of a chain of successive mistakes took shape. I was kicked into mulling over all my wrong choices, on how many unconsidered moves, prompted by inscrutable reasoning or blind impulse, that I've made, often hand in hand with more reasonable, strategic choices. Sensible, irrational, right back to wrong, again. Five years ago, one turn seemed as arbitrary as another, and yet the outline and substance of my life now hinges entirely on that turn. Maddening.

I would like, for once, to see a social media update that reads,

"I've known nothing but ease and success for 18 years, but as of 2014, I did not get the job I hoped for right out of graduate school, and am moving back home with \$200K in debt to reassess everything." We might know quite a few people with that story.

Or: "Just spent a month unable to eat or drink properly because of crippling and all-consuming anxiety, but have emerged!—feeling *pretty alright, for now.*"

Or: "I cheated on my wife with my co-worker. Left her and our new family, but [name redacted] and I have moved to Austin, Texas and we are living in bliss, without much guilt."

Or: "I've frittered away my talents by never investing in them fully and am now in a career I hate for prestige and stability."

I don't know what this site—Realbook? Truthbook?—would look like, and I doubt everyone would sign up for it, but I suspect we'd certainly feel a lot less alone reading it.

The social media sites we live with now form a compact, glittering compendium of universal success. The flawless self, whose every step is sure and premeditated. This is not a new point. We opt into these places. The story these sites tend to tell, though, is what I find most troubling: that total accomplishment and unarguable happiness are the right goals for all of us, that we should be striving to perfect ourselves.

Maybe our frayed and thirsty dendrites might be better nourished by some hard truths, some honesty and fearlessness about one's flaws and dents. I'd like to see people talk honestly about their violence against themselves and others, their addictions and betrayals. I want to hear about how your dad had your record expunged and then put down money for your anger management, but doesn't really speak to you. I want to hear you say that not being there for your friend when his mother was dying was not really such a *valuable learning experience*. I want to hear about how you've f--ked up past the point of reasons or possible redemption.

One journey of many I made in my twenties: from Point A, complete self-absorption, to Point B, being slightly more self-aware. At twenty-one, my five-year plan and my ten-year plan didn't have any loopholes, any allowances for crippling anxiety and depression.

I did not know that I would have to set aside breaks for the days, weeks, and months lost in the past decade to Styron's darkness, Churchill's Black Dog, or, in my mind, a three-headed dog as tall as a house.

Ten years ago, it would have been an irredeemable error to write about depression, to write about myself truthfully. It would have been repulsive, because it would interrupt some false image of the capable and striving person, the person family and friends knew. In that story, I was supposed to be able to handle anything.

Depression is not exactly a mistake, but it is a bad tone. There isn't a singular, headline-worthy catastrophe I can refer to, but more an entire state of being in which the difficulty of finishing a single day is almost comical. Just, you know: a genetic, environmental, and chemical amalgam converging to make one's life a sealed-off hell. It is not wanting to write. It is not wanting to connect. At many points, it is just not wanting to live. Close friends' voices, even my mother's voice, can feel so distant: a train whistle thrown across a plain.

This isn't to say I'm special in any way or deserve any exceptions. It is just a thing to live with, as so many others live with it. Years of chaos and therapy and being lost to myself and to others are mostly behind. But I know that more trouble lies ahead, too. It is what it is.

Some blessed days, I wake up and the fog has completely cleared. I am filled with a million words and a billion crystalline images that have to be taken down until I am spent and sleep at my desk. This is the paradox: hand in hand with serious melancholy comes a transporting cobalt blue flood of ecstatic, manic production. Caught in it, I feel, clearly, that none of this is a mistake, that all this suffering is worth it, that this is what I've been put on earth to do. What other reason to be trapped in this cycle of transport and creation, this Sisyphean task of trying to speak clearly across the abyss to someone tiny and listless on the other side?

I work through these rotations, from the bottom to the top and

back again, at least five times a day. I'm always exhausted. I can't always show up. The effort of explaining why is just too much. For instance, right now: I need to take a nap. My phone's been off for a week.

Tackling failure is a hot theme in graduate school these days.

Learn from the massive, life-stopping bumbles of great leaders. Learn how to boldly, bravely navigate trying times with a steady compass. It is great fun, and cheerful melodrama for students. Each mistake can be slotted away as a neat little hurdle in the story of one's eventual ascendance into professional and social domination.

And yet writing teachers talk about how you need to mess up in horrible, irredeemable, grotesque ways. They describe how failure is part of the territory, part of the job, a necessary condition for creating. The reason, of course, is that without errors and unplanned, off-road expeditions, there is no traction, no pressure on the self, and so, no artistic progress. Only after I've grinded to a halt do I feel how much I love running. Being wracked over my betrayals of myself and others helps me imagine forgiveness, or earning forgiveness, with an acute urgency. When I am immobile in a closed half-darkness, I remember that I most want to be outside the city, walking under a night sky, looking for Jupiter and thinking about its storms.

"Failure is big right now," Stephen Marche tells us in *The New York Times*. The quote is in one of a couple of major pieces the newspaper has run in the past year on failure and art. On its About page, the industry and technology site *Unwinnable* reads: "a videogame is rendered unwinnable when it allows a player to make a mistake that cannot be corrected." Artist Addie Wagenknecht's new book, *Technological Selection of Fate*, is a compilation of her LiveJournal account, where, for nine years, she archived her personal failures exclusively for her online friends. Last year, the *New Yorker* printed Tony Kushner's speech at the Whiting Writers' Awards, in which he said, perfectly:

We write to negotiate our own relationships with momentariness and permanence, to speak with the dead, to bring them back to life, or try to, and of course we always fail to bring them back, and we call that failure art.

In a *Slate* piece on the misappropriation of Beckett's "fail better," Mark O'Connell points out what the quote's surrounding passage (from *Worstward Ho*) actually means: Everything is error, everything is failure. There is no perfect end state. There's no unified being, no one work that will ever be It, that gives me, or you, permission to rest.

From the ages of seven to twelve, I drew a comic series about a woman who was a highly trained detective on horseback. I sent her out on her horse to throw down on felons, catch them in the act. She never failed. She never did any less than perfect; she made everyone around her happy. In sum, she was me, wound up under years of extreme pressure, achieving, forever achieving. There was no alternative.

But on the page, my detective also had freedom to transgress. She would go off to do what she really wanted to do all along: throw *Eyes Wide Shut* parties in her weird mansion; commit some grand theft auto herself; and perhaps most horrifically, do nothing at all. I remember that I tore those pages in thirds and flushed them down the toilet so no one could find them.

Recently, I watched a good friend, a former all-star college athlete, an outstanding defense attorney, scream inchoately like one possessed at her father on her phone. We were on a sidewalk in the middle of the day. She called him every curse in the book for ten minutes as I stood looking around, pretending this wasn't happening, and then she hung up.

Her face was blank and I sensed that she'd shut down completely. I suggested we walk down to the river. There, we sat and

watched the boats pass in silence, and after some time she just said, "Nothing is alright; everything is a mess, and no one even knows." I didn't know what exactly she was referring to, but I knew the feeling, that inability to speak truthfully because the truth is too terrifying.

In gathering material for this essay, I canvassed friends about their mistakes. One wrote to me about what she'd missed in order to have the time and space to make art: birthdays, weddings, children's birthdays, funerals, even. She'd lost so much time with her parents that she couldn't get back. I thought of how I've grown apart from lots of dear friends because I have needed a perfectly clear, uncluttered mind to protect this absurd undertaking day in and day out.

There really is no preparation for precisely how angry, disappointed and hurt your friends will be when you've canceled or changed plans on them for the fortieth time. *To hell with you*, your friends might say to you, either under their breath or right to your face, and rightly so.

True grit is one of those phrases, divorced from the outstanding novel and film, that fills me with palpable hope. I imagine it inscribed on my wrist to remind me of what I've been through and what I need to go on.

Writing may be an act of slowly solving mysteries, but I'm also learning that it's a matter of purposefully choosing experiences that are inexplicable. Pick up a book you don't really understand and force yourself to review it. Try to explain your obsession with a certain abstraction, a certain sound. Look at work that scares you out of easy sleep. Move to an unknown city on a whim and see if you can make it there. Seek out other artists who constantly confront the uncanny, if only for a little inspiration.

My biggest mistake has been thinking that I knew my own story perfectly and there was nothing new to tell. Moving backward, I can now better sense my blind spots, the gaps where I routinely skip to the next track.

After we finished our master's program in writing, we headed back to the cocoons we'd left: the work force, more graduate school, freelance gig life.

Each act of creating can become an effort to justify the original misstep of trying to create. Redact the error. Bronze it, or maybe, if lucky, cast it in gold. Show that this is the only way the story could have been told.

But out in the cold light of the real world, well. Slapping your messy self on the page doesn't feel quite as safe as it does in a cod-dled workshop. Whether writing about oneself, or fictional selves, the act will require actual feeling, and feeling all the hard feelings is difficult to sustain every single day.

Thank God for all the opportunities I've missed and all of the wrong turns I've taken. Each step off the main path has brought me closer to my limits. If I didn't take the wrong turns, I wouldn't have met some of my closest friends; if I didn't follow some strange sound into a place I was uncomfortable, I wouldn't know anything new, or glimpse just how much I did not know. If I'm lucky, after the bad choices, I will still get to come home. If I'm really fortunate, at the end of each day, there is still an idea, and a bit of energy left to imagine a future time in which I'll make that idea real.

This is a bit like choosing to toss a coin to flick a railroad switch: watch the train then veer off far, wide, right, into recon-dite spaces.

An idea, or an image, is what I hope I'll always have left. Let's take that warship, again: black carbon, inscrutable, its shadow over the new colony sudden and stark.

With that image comes a hard drop, further and further down into galactic space, until I fall onto a thin, metallic, winding stair-way, on which I'll then walk until I enter a playroom made of glass.

In this room, my breathing slows down. Here's a full-body sensation, a deep-cell rolling wave, a muted electricity under the skin; this is all of the same feelings as when in love. I want to

linger here, in this room, as long as possible. I always want to feel this irrepressible, ecstatic joy, in pressing my sticky and completely unworthy hands up against the pane of the unknown.