

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/2

Doug Holder

What is a failed poet?

I posed this question to poets of my acquaintance: "What is a failed poet?" I hear the term used all the time, but what does it mean? How do you define a failed poet? Is there such a thing? Below are some very thought provoking answers to this question I posed:

A failed poet can be a mainstream adherent who buckled to society's pressure against artistic commitment and stopped producing work in order to "act like a grownup" or "get a real job." Worse than this type of poet, however, is the practicing, productive poet who never reaches his or her full potential out of fear of offending readers or popular poetic figures and theorists.

An artist who holds back, obeying current rules or trends whether or not they challenge or showcase individualized craft, generally frustrates readers as well as himself by writing safe for decades. An artist who lacks personal integrity is the worst poetic failure of all.

--Mignon King (co-editor of Bagel Bards 3 Anthology)

Just off the top of my head, a failed poet is one who doesn't write.

--Tam Lin Neville (editor "Off the Grid Press")

Even Faulkner, you know, described himself as a failed poet. Raymond Chandler, failed poet, found his talent late in life...writing crime novels. I was not familiar with the term. Sounds like a good subject for a funny poem.

--Ed Meek (author of "Walk Out")

Thanks for the prompt. A quick search turned up Wordsworth, Faulkner, Raymond Chandler, J Alfred Prufrock (Eliot by extension?), and Alexander Wilson, father of American ornithology all as "failed poets."

There is something a little precious about the idea of calling oneself a failed poet (Oh, I couldn't possibly...), and most of the above (admittedly abbreviated) list used failure as a catalyst for something else. What is a successful poet?

--Valerie Lawson (coeditor of "Third Coast" magazine)

To answer your question, first let us ask what is a failed human being. If the

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/2

question promotes strict answers then we will have strict answers to the question "What is a failed poet".

But then let us particularize the query to other categories as well and ask the question:

What is a failed flower?

What is a failed kitten?

What is a failed cow?

What is a failed elephant ?

What is a failed worm?

And then ask:

What is a failed baby?

And then ask again:

What is a failed planet?

Or what is a failed solar system?

Or what is a failed galaxy?

I have a preferred answer. It is that if anyone of those things had cause to exist and have fulfilled their existence in any way, according to any place on a range of some Platonic ideal that listed things from low to high, good to bad, quick to slow, sweet to sour, heavy to light and so forth, then they would have to be called successful. That is: they would be successful if they performed their state of existence along any particular position in the entire range of their performance.

I often quietly reflect on of Grey's Elegy In A Country Churchyard. We are all are unknown and our Fulfillment is unknown. We all deserve quiet contemplation and fond consideration. It seems harsh to speak of a "failed poet". Might it be more a reflection on us who ask the question then on the thing the question is being asked of?

--Sidewalk Sam (founder of "ArtsFirst" — Boston, Mass.)

A failed poet is a person who loves language, but they cannot express in words the bridge to the other world where poetry is supposed to take you. I am a failed poet because I cannot attain the lean, carved from the air grace of the poet's I most admire. I've written only a handful of poems at that level. So, I write what

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/2

I call spoken songs, and I write fiction.

A lot of fiction writers are failed poets. They started out as poets but couldn't take the heat.

A failed poet could also be a shadow artist who wanted to write but became a talker and an alcoholic instead.

--C.D. Collins (author of "Blue Land" -- Polyho Press)

I have to hand it to CD, because whether or not she agrees with it, the woman is a poet because she authentically uses original language and phrasing. Her narratives use repetition and musical phrasing like all great modern lyric poets. As for the mint juleps...we'll that's another story. Someone I once loved said that writing poetry is largely a thankless task, and in that sense, for those of us still "in the "Tower of Song" no matter what degree, well, we fail and succeed. It's the love of language and the compulsion to capture something beautiful, weird or hidden about the world that makes anyone a good poet.

--Lo Galluccio (author of "Hot Rain")

If your poems falls in the forest and nobody hears it you have failed as a poet. Poets write to be read, to be heard---if poets don't put themselves in the position to be heard, either by not working hard enough to be good or are not being good enough to be published and read---then they have failed. They have failed if they fail to make people care about what they write. It is a no brainer that they care about their own writing---not a measurement of success.

--Tim Gager (founder Dire Literary Series— Cambridge, Mass./ author of "this is where you go when you are gone")

I tell my workshop students that there is no such thing as a bad poem, as long as the poet is happy with it. It's all about what purpose the poem serves for the poet. I've learned from students that there are multifold reasons to write poetry: Some are closet poets who write strictly for themselves; some like to journal with poetry; others want to write social/political commentaries in verse; one student wanted only to write poems for his girlfriend; another wanted to write poetry in order to become a better, more concise newspaper reporter. The list could go on. So who outside of poets themselves, is qualified to determine how well a poem executes the purpose for which it was written.

If one wishes to write for publication, there are of course standards, but these

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/2

vary drastically, depending on editors' likes and dislikes. Poets sometimes feel "failed" if they keep getting rejections from editors with a different definition of merit than they have. That doesn't mean there aren't editors elsewhere who would like and publish the same poems.

*And getting published doesn't always mean the poet is satisfied that her/his work is good either. William Faulkner said, "I'm a failed poet. Maybe every novelist wants to write poetry first, finds he can't and then tries the short story, which is the next most demanding form after poetry. And failing at that, only then does he take up novel writing." Yet both Faulkner's first nationally published works, the poem "L'Après-Midi d'un faune," and his first published book, *The Marble Faun*, were poetry. Was his poetry good? At least his publishers thought so. But it was Faulkner's own expectations that compelled him to consider himself a failed poet.*

It's easy for those of us involved in the publishing part of poetry to develop stringent definitions of excellence. And where has this gotten poetry, when most Americans think they don't like poetry because they can't relate to it?

--Ellaraine Lockie (author of "Finishing Lines")

When I announced to my mom that I wanted to be a writer she wearily told me that I came by it naturally and that I came from a long line of failed and petty literati. I've often thought about what that means and Liz (my daughter) and I had a long debate about it. Our conclusion is that a failed writer is someone who has put their heart and soul into their writing with no lasting results. We all know poets who thrive on being "poets" without much output. I'm sure they anguish over their work but the results are, to put it politely, trivial. Our conclusion that it was better to be a petty literati than a failed one. I'm still not sure I agree, but a part of me would much prefer to go down swinging for the fence in the majors than being a position player in a very minor league.

--Steve Glines (founder of the "Wilderness House Literary Review")

There is no such thing as a failed poet. What gives someone the right to call a poet a failure? A poet can only fail if he stops writing. Just write. I hate all this labeling. To summarize: "There is no such thing!"

--Gloria Mindock (founder of Cervena Barva Press)

... maybe a failed poet is one who doesn't attempt to capture what s/he feels and

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/2

thinks through language . . . perhaps s/he is one who loses touch with the impulse to write . . . maybe a failed poet is one who never finds another with the capacity to sense the works / words as "instruments of evocation" (using Christopher Wilmarth's words for his sculptures) . . . maybe a failed poet is a poet, acknowledging that there may inevitably be distance between impulse / intention and word-form . . . in Japan there is / was a tradition of a sort of savoring of failure, related to the experience of pathos, passing, and poignancy . . .

--Eytan Fichman (professor Boston Architectural Center--Boston, Mass.)

*Maybe a more sensible question is what is the definition of a poet? What is poetry? And who has the qualifications to make these definitions or determinations? What makes a successful poet? Sales? Media attention? The number of publications you are published in? Pimping yourself? I dare say there are not that many poets around who have read the work of Gene Ruggles, considered by many to be an important poet, but who had only one book published (*Lifeguard In the Snow*, University of Pittsburg Press). Does that make him a failed poet? I think not!!! And the idea that everyone is a poet is absurd, just as absurd that if you write a poem and you are happy with it, that this somehow makes you a poet.*

I think the suffering of those people in Burma and China are far more important than an exercise on what is a failed poet.

--a.d. winans (founder of Second Coming Press-)

I think the worst version of a failed poet is one who has never tapped into his or her deepest private self and it inside-out for the public. Like digging deep past the skin, the tissue and the muscle for the humming tuning fork in the marrow and letting it resonate on the page for the whole world to see....if this is not accomplished then the poet has failed and his poems are soulless and the equivalent to crossword puzzles.

--rob plath (author of poetry collection "Ashtrays and Bulls")

I've been giving more thought to failure. It seems to me that failure is an inability to achieve what one has set to accomplish. And the concept that if one is satisfied with one's own work and chooses not to publish, they too might be a success. I have a friend or two who's shrink told them to write poetry and/or memoir as a method of dealing with their issues. If it helped and they never sent

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/2

them out, are they success or failures? Then there is the poet who sends poetry to magazine "a" and is rejected, but magazine "b" accepts. What does that mean for the poet? Your question is an interesting rhetorical exercise with no right and no wrong, no answer to success or failure. --Zvi Sesling (founder of the "Muddy River Review)

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--Charles Plymell-- (founder of Cherry Valley Editions)