

# This Poem...Sucks? Loving and Leaving the Poetry Fail

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Notice how your poem is failing you. Notice your intense disappointment, your looming suspicion that you've let down not only yourself but some unnamed (or named) deity of literary ambition.

For those of us who write poems, who want to continue to write poems, and who naturally want, every once in a while, to write a *good* poem, the sense of deflated dejection that comes from a "failed" poetic attempt is hard to overcome. [Notice the way that previous sentence is weakened by the redundancy of "deflated dejection," despite the deft use of alliteration...]

But the poetic fail is neither obvious nor a failure. The poetic fail wants to share its breakfast cereal with your literary gods. The poetic fail is made of rainbows of opportunity and shooting stars of intention. The poetic fail loves elaborate metaphors and effusive language.

What if poetry is all about sucking? I have poems that I am convinced have something to say through their repeated failure to become good citizens, like one I recently gave up on, called "Stupid Hat." It was lectured, scissored, inflated, and eventually stuffed into a cat-shaped pillowcase, but it still wasn't "working." Failure to perform. Finally I decided to tell this poem that we just weren't a good match and should see other people. Then an amazing thing happened: my failed poem started hanging out with all my other poems, and they apparently told stories about me and drank vitamin water together, and now two of my other poems have come to me with language and ideas that they borrowed from "Stupid Hat" and presented to me in a much sharper, smarter, louder, more usable form.

In other words, a cliché: "Something something failure something something something success." But how do we learn to go from one to the other? How do we shut off the oozing faucet of despair long enough to look frankly and open-mindedly at our poetic low performers? And more to the point, how do we stop thinking of our poems in terms of performance at all, as if writing a poem were a section on the MCA-II, through which we had to prove our human proficiency?

Well, it's hard, and probably no one can make it not hard [notice the sucky word choice there], but here are some places to start:

- 1) Lose the ego. Take it out into the middle of the lake and throw it overboard. It's no good for your writing. It demands perfection and only wants to compete in foot races and feats of strength with everyone around it. The further we can get from pride and narcissism, the more openly we can discuss our poems.
- 2) Discuss your poems. Some specialized terminology is helpful, but even more so is practice and experience. Tell people about your poems. Tell yourself about your poems. Describe them, defend them, attack them, get more comfortable using language to talk about your language.
- 3) Love language more and better. Collect words, quotes, notes, ideas, images, graffiti, ads, names, made-up words. Poems are made up of words [um...duh?], so make them good ones. Sleep with your dictionary.
- 4) Collaborate. Let other voices into your poems. Let your voice into other people's poems. Revise together. Cut and swap lines. Get messy.
- 5) Don't be afraid of change.
- 6) Don't be afraid of changing your poem.
- 7) Don't be afraid of changing your mind.

The point is: "Something something don't give up." But also this: revision is as much an art as writing. It takes practice, and for most of us, doing it with other people may be the best way to make it fun and productive. Share the burden, share the joy. Share your Lucky Charms (please?).

Poems are tricky. If you let them (and you should), they'll sneak out after dark and play pranks on you. They'll come back to you, even the ones you held back a year, in the form of dreams, conversations, new poems, and more new poems. These are the most excellent moments in the life of a person who writes poems—when the fail surprises you, says it's sorry and gives you flowers made of exactly what you wanted to say.