

human life. Hochschild observes that “the ideology of the American dream includes no provision for failure; a failed dream denies the loser not only success but even a safe harbor within which to hide the loss.”¹⁷ Failure happens, yet it isn’t supposed to be there. The contradiction is each person’s private secret; it has driven some to despair.

In rejecting failure, we reject a resource as well. Failure can be inconsequential, crushing, or anything in between, but we need it as much as we need success, and even when we don’t need it, it happens and must be taken into account. Our successes and failures, in combination, teach us about the world and ourselves; they push us beyond ourselves. They help us understand history, literature, science, and the arts; they show us who we are, what we do well, whom we love, what we desire, what our limits are and aren’t, and how our private and public lives meet and part. When they have no explanation, they stand as stubborn reminders that not all of life bends to our will or understanding. Explained or unexplained, they are not always what they seem.

The narrator of Robert Browning’s poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864) suggests that failures may be successes in disguise, and vice versa.¹⁸ The poem is solemn, exuberant, witty, soulful, and jagged—a vigorous call to repose. Its overall meaning is that old age is the mirror opposite of youth; where youth strives, old age rests and contemplates; where youth acts, old age trusts in the action of God. The ideas are somewhat cryptic until one grasps the underlying symmetry of youth and old age, and with it, the ambiguity of success and failure. Near the beginning, the narrator tells us:

For thence,—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks,—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not
sink i’ the scale.

Toward the end, he repeats the idea, but in stronger, more resolved language, as he speaks no more of comfort, but of isolation and God:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through
language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God,
whose wheel the pitcher
shaped.

“All I could never be”—what does that mean? There is a sense that his failures are, in God’s eyes, part of his beauty, part of the shape of his life. Yes, the failures themselves—unrecognized, unmitigated, unrepaired.

Our failures may count among our greatest assets; they may show us the outlines of who we are. In her note to the second edition of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O’Connor writes, “Does one’s integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen.”¹⁹ By this she means that our impossibilities and incapacities end up defining what we *can and must* do. A person may try to be someone or something else, but will eventually hit upon an obstacle. That obstacle—which seems to make us fail—ultimately brings us back to ourselves.

This does not mean that failure is always illuminating or redemptive, or that we are always capable of seeing it that way. The shame of failure drives people to suicide; the fear of failure can overpower the mind. The writer who feels she has passed her peak may not be able to put that thought away; each new work, even each sentence, seems to limp along while the earlier writings surged and sang and spar-