

The Robert Kroetsch Keynote Address
Sage Hill Writing Experience
July 4, 2026

What We Make of Failure

Neil Aitken

I'm beginning with a confession. Over the last few weeks, I have spent far too many hours staring into the blinding nothingness of the empty page, the computer screen a mirror to my own insecurities as I've struggled to see my way through to something to say this afternoon. Uncertainty, anxiety, and a lingering fear that perhaps I had nothing left to say or write, or that even if I could turn my thoughts into words, that when I spoke them, they would fall in a fumbling cascade and clatter before you, an awkward cacophony, a bluster of noise and gesture that ultimately fails to reach anyone waiting on an opposite shore.

Still, I pressed on into the silence, one line, one idea at a time, until at last, for better or worse, I've found myself here. What propels us forward in these moments? How do we press on when words evade us, when writing seems hard or even impossible, or when life itself collapses around us and beneath us?

Often we're advised to write what we know. And certainly there are many experiences, spaces, and fields of knowledge which we have a unique perspective and familiarity with that might offer us a good launching point for our writing. But it is also true that perhaps the things many of us are most familiar with are failure, disappointment, and grief.

For all our admiration of perfection and the completed work, we will likely spend much more of our time as writers struggling with this fear of failure, a worry that whatever we're doing will not be enough, or that we might not cross the finish line of whatever piece we are laboring over. Thanks to film and social media, we tend to romanticize the virtuoso, the genius who arrives at the beautiful, the compelling, the earth-shaking in a single afternoon, or perhaps even a single draft. And sometimes, we think to ourselves, if we cannot succeed now, then it must not be worth doing, or I must not be the one to write this. We think *I must be doing something wrong*.

What is the function of failure in the creative process? Why do we fear it? And should we? What are we to make of failure?

Before my father was a librarian, he was a student of linguistics and an instructor of English for non-English speakers. He told me once that many students struggle to learn a new language because they are afraid to make mistakes. They want to open their mouths and speak perfectly, fluently, from the start. But the students who progressed, the ones who came to master the language, were actually the ones who weren't afraid to fail and who used each false step, each stumble, each failure as an opportunity to learn, to ask new questions, and to improve. They persisted, they experimented. They tested and tried different things and learned through that process the limits of language. How can you know what you do not know, unless you find yourself suddenly at a loss, unless you fail?

The work of writing seems to me more iterative and cyclical, a process of refinement rather than a simple linear race to a finishing line. We are continuously wrestling with silence. We test phrases. Speak our words out to the empty room or to a sympathetic ear. We listen to hear if they resonate, if that last note rings true or carries far beyond the end of the line, the close of a paragraph, the final page turn. And when it does not, we go back and like Beckett says, we try again, fail again, fail better.

Writing in my mind is an ongoing conversation with failure and loss. The finished text, the summation of countless missteps and revisions. Or, as 19th-century mathematician, Charles Babbage put it in the opening paragraph of his 1832 treatise on machines and manufacturing processes:

“If we look around the rooms we inhabit, or through those storehouses of every convenience, or every luxury that man can desire... we shall find in the history of each article, of every fabric, a series of failures”

Behind each book we see on the shelf of the library or bookstore, on a list of winners and finalists, there lies a long and often invisible history of failures. Of poems abandoned. Of lines rewritten. Pages tossed. Characters eliminated. Manuscripts cast to the side or left languishing in a box.

Everything we write is haunted by the ghosts of what might have been or what never survived to the end. In the margins, in the spaces, in the silence between pages, the author still remembers, even if the reader cannot see those traces.

Failure is not a destination, unless we let it become one. Each failure is a rung in a ladder that ascends ever higher, trying to reach what seems beyond the reach of language.

Speaking as a former computer programmer, if you want an education in failure, consider writing code, where almost always your first draft is riddled with error, sometimes catastrophically so. And you spend hours, sometimes days deep in the lines searching for whatever is causing the program to fail. Sometimes your code refuses to run, whether due to a problem with your logic, or your own critical misunderstanding of what you've written, how it does not mean what you think it means.

Sometimes a small error or gap in reasoning ripples through the entire system, and when you find it at last, there is a moment of joy and relief. Sometimes in the process of fixing errors and understanding the root causes of failure, you arrive at a deeper understanding of what's possible within the language you've chosen, and your imagination grows a little wider, a little wilder.

There were times too, when we inherited a body of code from someone else, a previous project we had been tasked to rework and integrate into a new title. Stepping into another person's code can feel a bit transgressive, as if we've trespassed into the workings of a mind not our own. Sometimes the code includes comments, non-compiled text in the margins intended for themselves or for whoever finds themselves editing the code. And sometimes, there is nothing to hold onto, and you must puzzle your way through their thinking, grappling with the occasional note that reads "I'm not certain why this works, but if you remove this, the whole thing breaks."

Editing our own past writing can sometimes feel this way as well, fraught and prone to error, especially when we try to step back into drafts we've left for years. What was I thinking? How does this work? Or why did I give up here? Sometimes old drafts feel like fragile machines, and that the slightest touch or change might break everything. The spectre of failure, small or catastrophic, looms large over us as we wrestle with our writing and revision.

I remember many years ago when I lived in Los Angeles and had just started going to open mic poetry events throughout the city. It was terrifying at first to get up in front of people and read my work, which often felt raw and not fully polished, but the desire to speak and hear the words in the wider world was so compelling, as was the idea of setting them free, letting them out of myself. I remember asking one of the regular readers how they managed to read with such confidence, as if without fear, and they

told me that they were always nervous. If they weren't nervous, it meant that they had gotten comfortable. *You have to have skin in the game*, they said. Being nervous is normal, it's how you know that these things matter. And what matters is what we do with the fear, how we channel it, how we turn it into something else.

Just as fear comes because we have something we care about. Failure exists only because there exists the idea of success or completion. Often, we think success looks like perfection, like the poem or story that is so perfectly crafted that there is no error, that everything is exactly in place. But the world is not like that. Perfect things rarely exist, and when we encounter them, we feel that something is not quite real about them.

Much of our modern society is still informed by centuries of obsession with Aristotle and Plato's worship of the ideal and perfected. We live in a time of Instagram filters and AI tools that promise to refine and refine, and polish and polish, our images, our faces, and our writing, rendering us the best approximation of the perfect. Obsessing over the impossible destination of perfection, invariably leads us to compare ourselves with each other, agonize in envy, and consider ourselves failures. This is not the work of art or literature.

Sometimes we need to be reminded that what moves us as human beings is not perfection, but imperfection – the incompleteness, the ephemerality, and brokenness of the world we live in, in which we still somehow find beauty.

Many of us are drawn to ruins and abandoned places, spaces where time has worn down the structures, weathered and has begun to erase the traces of the human. Decay, collapse, and silence. A stillness that feels older and longer than anything we could offer. In such spaces, we are humbled and reminded that the natural order of things is this winding down - and yet within this decline, some things persist and take on a type of beauty, a beauty that refuses to be immortal, but instead exists in brevity, in transience, in the knowledge that if we were not here, we would have missed it.

In the collapse of a poem, the failure of a line, or the stumble mid-chapter, we might also find something unexpectedly beautiful in the ruins, something we might have missed if we had gotten it right the first time. Sometimes the lines or images we cut, once excised from their original text, take on a strange beauty or cast a long shadow that points us to something new, something we could not see around the corner or in the distance, beyond the horizon's line. The hole left behind does not always need to be filled. Sometimes the void is the answer. Sometimes we need to be haunted as writers and as readers. The shot cuts away. The camera goes dark. There is an abrupt break in the

sound. In what seems to be nothingness, something new is surfacing, emerging, taking form.

For the past 17 years, I have been involved with various literary translation projects, helping Ming Di, a poet-translator friend, translate around two hundred contemporary Chinese poems into English. Both of us, being poets and being bilingual, could operate in both languages, and so had an unusual freedom to discuss and wrestle with how best to bring each poem across. Our conversations were frequently negotiations, given the impossibility of rendering everything embodied in the Chinese, what could we translate, what should we prioritize? The linguistic exchange rate was brutal. Failure was guaranteed. And yet, even so, what could we do so that something of the beauty of the poem in its first language could be felt in the new one? If the original text stood on one side of a vast lake, what could we fit within the bounds of the vessel we used to bring the poem across? And could you see what we'd left behind from the other side?

As I worked on these translations, I came to realize that translation itself is nothing more than the art of beautiful failure. We try our best to capture something of the gesture and tone of the original, recognizing that so much of what makes the poem a poem in the original language will not survive. We will certainly fail. But failure is not the end, failure is the gesture, failure is knocking at the door of comprehension. Failure is beautiful.

I love collecting translations of Li Bai's poems and over the years have assembled over twenty different translators' takes on the same eight-line poem, Song You Ren (which is often rendered as "Taking Leave of an Old Friend" or "Farewell to a Friend"). The original poem is formed of eight lines consisting of five characters each. It's a model of brevity and understatement. The poem's occasion is a farewell, the one poet escorting his old friend to the outskirts of town. They linger at the city gate while dust and weeds blow by, the clouds pass, and then the horses finally neigh, signalling it is time to go.

I'm fascinated by what each translator chooses to save, and what they end up abandoning. One cannot capture the contrasting colors, the mirrored grammar, and the sense of directional motion, while also preserving rhythm, word play, the onomatopoeia of the horses neighing and the wind sighing, the visual puns of the character for cart containing a waving hand and a vehicle, the passage of time, and the lingering sense that this will be their last meeting in this life. So much is not stated. So much lives in the gaps and silences between the images and words. So much relies on what we cannot translate. And so what's to be done?

We attempt it anyway. Whether we encounter the poem in its original language, but separated by centuries, or we read in the fractal cubist multiplicity of these various attempts to render it, somehow we glimpse what is beautiful and each attempt brings us closer to grasping it. But we might also accept that writing is always moonlight on the surface of the waves. Or the stars in the vault of the night sky. Or whatever lies just beyond the edge of the world we can see.

What can we make of failure? I do not know the entirety of that answer for you or for me, but I suspect it involves questions, it involves courage, it involves writing not only what we know, but what we do not know and even what we might fear to know. It may require salvage. It might mean renovation or rebuilding. Sometimes failure opens an unexpected or unwanted door, and we find ourselves embarking on a journey we did not anticipate.

When I finished my PhD in 2015, I was living alone in Los Angeles, not entirely certain what was coming next. Although I'd won a prize and had my first book published a few years earlier, I had failed to land a critical full-time teaching position in creative writing. I had talked to an immigration lawyer and had decided to apply for a self-sponsored green card, figuring that this would help improve my odds on the market. However, I could not stay in LA, so I accepted an invitation from my aunt to move up to Portland, Oregon area while I waited for what was supposed to be a six or seven-month process.

Unfortunately for me and many others, when 2016 rolled around, US immigration policies became unpredictable and much more complicated. A few months dragged out to four years, and by 2019, I resigned myself to giving up my dream to teach creative writing at a US university. With my sister's help, I picked up the pieces and packed up all my worldly things and drove back to Canada, feeling like a failure.

Driving across the open prairie and the wide landscape of Saskatchewan, I was reminded of how vast the world is, how small I am in the midst of that vastness, and yet, how I am still a part of it. The wind and the hawk and the high clouds and blue skies care nothing, know nothing about my so-called failures. Looking out the window, I realized that I was still a human being capable of wonder, capable of longing, capable of making it to my destination. Within me stirred once more the desire to write, not for anyone else, not to earn a position or validation, but simply for me.

I spent the next four years in Saskatchewan. We saw blizzards and blazing heat. I helped my mother with a basement renovation and created my own office in the coolness of that space. We sheltered in place during the pandemic. We rebuilt after a

torrential storm overwhelmed the city's drains and flooded most of the basements in our neighborhood. I lost a few hundred books in the flood. The basement was rebuilt. I rebuilt my own career as well during those years, teaching and mentoring writers online, connecting other writers together, and collaborating with composers on music projects and eventually opera. Out of the failure that drove me out of one country, grew new opportunities in this one. New friendships. New chances to serve and help. Without the thorny path that brought me home, I would not have had the opportunity to serve as Virtual Writer-in-Residence for the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild, Writer-in-Residence for the Regina Public Library, or give this keynote today. The void did not stay empty. Now, I cannot imagine my life without that failure setting me down a new path.

What can we make of failure? As I've worked with various composers over the years who have set my texts to music or with whom I have collaborated to write new pieces and draft opera librettos, I have gained a deeper appreciation for how writing that I have sometimes cast aside as incomplete or broken, or somehow failed or on the verge of failure, may in fact not be failures at all, just not in the right form. Perhaps I had thought I was writing a poem or an essay, but instead these fragments were instead the foundation of an art song, one where music and voice could do more than what I could accomplish on the page. The silences and gaps I could not bridge with words, might instead require a different art to transform, to give them life.

Perhaps the failure that is hardest to deal with is the failure of our own imagination to recognize that there is still life and wonder and mystery to be found in things we might be too quick to discard. Or the failure to ask a deeper question, to push back against the easy line, the expected image, the turn or twist that is safe – and not dare ourselves to go further, bolder, and wilder.

In the summer of 1828, Charles Babbage had travelled to the continent from London and was staying in Italy. From his hotel window, he could see Mount Vesuvius, the dormant volcano. In his memoir, he describes his intense curiosity about the natural workings of volcanoes and how he had arranged to be carried up to the lip of the volcano and lowered with ropes into its interior to conduct a survey. In his account, he says that having made a few measurements, he noted that there was a ledge that overlooked the active portion of the volcano. He timed the micro-eruptions, then lay himself down on the protruding ledge and peered into the heart of the volcano, then pulled himself up before the next lava burst.

I remember reading his account and then realizing that there was much more to this than Babbage was saying. For in fact, the year previous 1827, was absolutely

devastating for Babbage. In a single year, in a brutal fever epidemic, he lost his father, his beloved wife, and two of his children. Now, here he was in the depths of a volcano, peering into its heart, microseconds away from annihilation, his own grief buried within, and somehow, somehow he pulls himself up and continues onward. He returns. He begins even more earnestly his work on the Analytical Engine, what would have been the first computer, a dream that would occupy his entire life and would send ripples across history, not only inspiring the modern digital computer, influencing early science fiction, but also imagining a future where the machine could be used to create art, music, and literature.

What will we make of failure? What will we make of grief? What will we make of a life that is not perfect or whole? Somewhere in the silence, the answer awaits.

I'm going to close with a poem that feels like it fits into this silence.

After

I don't recall what we did that summer,
other than carry ourselves from place
to place with the memory of my father
rattling about in my heart grown empty,
like an old house forgotten in the prairie,
just a shell exposed to the wind and storms.

We crossed the plains again. The car
a swiftly hurtling silence. My mother
staring at the emptied road, her eyes
scanning for a rogue deer. I could only
see the ghostly drifts of snow, not snow,
just heat and vapor. The barely visible.
The never was or already gone.

At the heart of the trip, there's a long
stretch of open nothing. A sigh of sorts.
What my body does now. Even years

later. There's only words. Only the wind
and the sun and the fields. Only the towns
on the verge of forgetting everything.

My mother says nothing here. I say
nothing as well. We lay our nothings
side by side. We stare into the blankness.
I think of my father. I think of his grave.
Of the earth. Of the body vanished into flame.
Of the dust and ash. Of the way language
is a vapor, memory an evaporation. Or perhaps,
only a sublimation. How we don't see it happen.

That final shift of states. The way words
become shuttered cities. Or ghosts. Or just
the shadows burned into surfaces. After
the world ends in brilliant light. How
in the perfect darkness, fish move sightless,
their hearts still beating.

Here we are in this moment and in every moment of writing. In the long shadow of
failure and grief and the fragility of present joy.

Even in the dark, the stars go on.
A fire in the night.
One broken fragment at a time.

We write. We keep writing.