



Climbing outside, I was tested all the time, but I got to decide how I defined success or failure. Climbing outside, these abstractions felt less like a line in the sand, and more like a continuum. For a recovering perfectionist, nerd, and overachiever, this was healing.

Not that I wasn't used to failing. I spent the first decade of my adulthood pursuing the singular life goal of becoming The Great Essayist of the 21st Century—a goal I have since amended to An Essayist in the 21st Century. I have been told by famous writers and 22-year-old interns alike that I have minimal talent and no control of my tone, that my writing, like my personality, is “funny, but not quite right.” After a decade of often futile literary striving, trad climbing was a perverse sort of relief. Climbing is hard, but it is easier than writing.

“Fail. Fail again. Fail better,” wrote Samuel Beckett.

I failed. I failed again. I failed worse.

“It's mental,” said Wally. “It's just in your mind.”

My regular gym buddies patiently tagged out to top rope with me, but the only other member of our rotating gym crew that winter who top roped exclusively was Wally's eight-year-old kid.

Finally, after a cruel February of useless effort and three humiliating failures, I passed on my fourth try. Jacob reverse-sandbagged me by claiming he really wanted to climb at the one gym in the system where the lead-test route happens to be dead vertical, instead of overhanging. Climbing is definitely about failure, but it is just as much about kindness, patience, and helping out your friends.

I was happy when they gave me the purple card that said I passed my test. I carried it around in my pocket for a while, like it meant something. But then I started dreaming about the next big trip, ogling desert cracks on Mountain Project and wondering what it would feel like to rap off a giant sandstone tower on what looked like a red planet, knowing that all the while, the purple card on its desiccating rubber band would be on the ground in the shredded shopping bag with last week's sweaty spandex while I would be high above the height of the skylights of any former industrial space full of molded plastic handholds. I'd be signed in to no lead log and released from no liability, and each piece I placed and move I made, each foot of rope I paid out and whip I took would be wholly unsupervised. Out there, each moment would be its own test to pass or fail anew.

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