You're Not a Star (and you never will be)
By Rye Donaldson

When you're blanketed in darkness and look up at the night sky, it feels like it could swallow you whole.

Gazing from below, watching stars shine, you think maybe those little specks of light in the sky watch you too. Maybe they'll pull you up and ignite you, give you that energy at your core that sustains them. And suddenly you'll be twirling and twisting, pulling everything into you, fusing your own sustenance[1]. But you don't glow. You're hidden in the dark.

If you want to join them you have to gather stardust, a few little specks at a time, so small it feels like nothing. You'll have to compress it, hold it tight to your chest, until it sticks into little clumps at your center[2].

They did it too, to become so bright and dazzling, you know that. But still, you'll look like a fool, letting the dust slip between your fingers until you're precise enough with your grasps to gather handfuls.

The thought of shining in the sky among them lifts you up until the far-off stars are so close you could reach out and be enveloped in their flames. You're ready to begin forming those knots of dust. Ready to be like them. But as you reach out, little slits open up all over those bright bubbling masses around you, blazing irises bulging and pitch black pupils gaping wider, wider, waiting to devour you at the slightest slip-up.

Your face grows warm and you sink down into your knees, arms wrapping around and pulling you into yourself. Breaths quicken, blood hammers in your ears: a reminder.

You're not a star, silly. You're just a human.

You drift back down to earth slowly, uncurling your limbs. As you feel the ground pushing against your back, your eyes blink open. The stars are far off in the sky like they always were. The night air cools your flushed cheeks, and the pounding in your ears slows. You can breathe again.

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[1]"Stars," NASA, accessed May 30, 2023, https://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/how-do-stars-form-and-evolve. Hydrogen forms Helium through nuclear fusion deep within the center of a star. This energy is what allows the star to shine so brightly. It also sustains the star, providing the necessary pressure to keep it from collapsing in on itself.
[2]"Stars". Stars form from turbulence within clouds of dust, where clumps of dust and gas form until they're big enough that their own gravitational attraction causes them to collapse. As the cloud of dust is collapsing, the core heats up, forming a protostar, which will eventually become a star.

That little spark in your heart isn't gone. It dances when you look at the stars, flickering in the cool wind[3]. But you ignore it, push it down, lock it up and lock the key too.

You'll grow up this way, keeping it shut and guarded. Even when it's daytime, and the stars are asleep, you're scared to let the spark out. What if you wake them up?

One day, before night falls, you'll unlock the key. You'll feel the familiar feeling of blood pounding in your ears. You'll turn the cool, smooth metal over and over until it becomes warm and sticky from your sweaty hands. It's still light out. The stars won't wake up, you're sure. You could let it out.

You won't let it out that day, though. Or the next, or the one after that. But slowly, ever so slowly, you'll get used to holding the key in your hand.

One morning, you take a deep breath, and plunge the little key deep inside your chest.

click.

Your eyes flutter open to light streaming through the blinds, illuminating the little specks of dust dancing in the air. They look so close now, so tangible, like you could reach out and just…

Your vision blurs, and your heart rate rises again. The pounding in your ears sounds like footsteps approaching, getting louder, louder. But you keep your eyes open this time.

You grip your chest, hiding the little spark begging to be free. It's still morning. It's bright out. Slowly, your vision starts to clear. Maybe the stars will wake up, maybe they'll see you. Your grip loosens. Maybe that's okay?

You hold your breath, and move your hand, and let the spark go. The world around you seems to slow down.

You wait. You watch carefully.

Nothing happens.

The footsteps fade, until they're gone.

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[3]Valerio Magrelli, "I Love Uncertain Gestures," Poetry Foundation, accessed May 30, 2023, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=37612.

You reach into the beams of light still filtering through your blinds. You try to pinch a speck of dust. You miss, the dust shooting away as you close your fingers.

You laugh.

You lean your head back, letting the sun dance across your cheeks, and as you do, the tightness in your chest dissipates.

Failure isn't so bad, you realize.
Letting yourself fail might be one of the most refreshing feelings in the world.

Because you're not a star, silly. No one is. We're all just human[4].

[4]Ari North, *Always Human*, Webtoon, June 23, 2017, https://www.webtoons.com/en/romance/always-human/list?title_no=557.

Bibliography

“Stars.” NASA. Accessed May 30, 2023.

https://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/how-do-stars-form-and-evolve.

This article from NASA is very informative and research-based, explaining what stars are, how they form, their lifespan, and how these things differ for different types of stars. I wanted to use the metaphor of a star to describe the fear of failure when learning new things, and so I focused mainly on the formation of stars. The article explained how stars form from clouds of dust, gathering it slowly as it grows. This became a metaphor for learning, describing how people start out bad at something, but improve and grow the more they do it. The article also mentioned that stars are sustained from the energy produced by nuclear fusion, and I used this as a metaphor for internal motivation and passion that keeps someone going.

Magrelli, Valerio. "I Love Uncertain Gestures." Poetry Foundation, accessed May 30, 2023,

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=37612.

Magrelli Valerio is an Italian poet and a professor of French literature. The poem "I Love Uncertain Gestures" is translated to English, and is something I came across when I was looking for poems more directly related to a fear of failure. The poem talks about all the little imperfect things people do in day to day life, like dropping a pencil for example, and how beautiful and meaningful they are. It appreciates the familiarity and humanity in these things.

This inspired me, and although I wasn't specifically writing about this topic, it relates a lot. The little spark that I talk about is somewhat based off of this poem, and is meant to represent the part of you that wants to learn new things and embrace mistakes.

North, Ari. “Always Human.” Webtoon, June 23, 2017.

https://www.webtoons.com/en/romance/always-human/list?title_no=557.

Always Human, written and illustrated by Ari North (known online as walkingnorth), tells the story of two girls falling in love, their struggles with technology in a very futuristic society, and how that impacts their understanding of each other. They work through many obstacles together, from misunderstandings and idealizations of each other and their struggles to body image and self-love. Throughout their story, Ari North does an incredible job of portraying the flaws and humanity of every character.

One big part of the story goes into detail about how Austen (one of the main characters) struggles with a big fear of failure. Her fear is about not wanting to give up on something after making it so far, while simultaneously being scared that she will hate or fail at the new thing she would choose to do instead. These anxieties are very similar to the ones I wrote about, and the refreshing resolution of these anxieties was inspired by both my own experiences and how it's portrayed in *Always Human*.