The first time I failed one of her tests, the walls of my brain cracked so sharply and suddenly that they couldn't even scrounge up enough sense to collapse. I sat there, motionless, holding a test marked in so much red that my vision blurred. Even still, when the bell rang I was already halfway out of my seat. I half-heard what was said about test retake dates, but the possibility didn't quite fit in my mind.

I made it through the day, focusing in English and science and every subject that wasn't math. Soaking in each word they said, I did my classwork well, and by the end of the day, the test was not forgotten but smoothed over in my mind. I had failed a test before, so this time was no different. My insides were no longer cracking.

I made it through the next day as I always did. I went to class, did everything I was told to do, learned what I needed to. The difference came when I found myself standing hesitantly in the doorway to my math classroom, suddenly faced with gazes piercing into my skin. There weren't a lot of people in the room, just enough to set me at ease while not overcrowding me. I had failed, after all; no one needed to see that more than necessary.

I passed the retake with a C-. My heart crawled up my throat, my hands shook—I was alone in a stasis of red marks and disingenuous smiles, as if losing my good grade also meant losing who I was—who I was supposed to be.

Then the feeling passed, and I stood up again.

Weeks of math lessons passed me by, and I moved through them in a blur of late nights and hurried assignments as I had done before. I did each assignment, didn't quite understand each assignment, and made it through. Then I failed the next test too.

Like anything else, describing something like failure is hard to do when you've never had to do it before, and it is even harder to do when you still haven't really failed. At the time, I
couldn’t acknowledge that failure without devaluing it in some way. To the world, there were quiet moments and the bright tones that followed them, but beyond those things was me, struggling to see how I could fit into a world where I was not good enough. I had failed again, and that was not good.

I went through the same routine as the last time I failed: reading, thinking, then reading over incorrect answers without a clear sense of what to do to fix them. I went to bed. Morning came. When the day was over, I had passed with a C again. The test grade had edged further down.

My hands shook again and red hot shame swept over me, pouring over my head and filling me up until my cheeks were stained with it. I had to admit, I definitely matched the grade on my paper, but it wasn’t that funny of a thought.

I went home, ignored my homework for the day, and found myself out of touch with most things. Color was all around me, and I recognized the different shades, but none of them had a meaning attached to them anymore — all but one. Blue was blue, yellow was yellow, but only red meant something to me. It was the only one I understood well enough to recreate, which I seemed to do every time I stepped into my math classroom.

Ready to create more red, I went back to class the next day. I went through every motion through eyes that didn’t appreciate color and I finished the day. I finished that one, the next, and the ones after it, wading through each one without thinking about a lot of things. I felt abandoned in a sea of equations and, even with all my flailing, I rarely managed to get a breath of air.

Yet, there was always another test to take.
Failure crashed into me again and again, leaving me with more angry red lines and erased question marks that I didn’t know how to or want to deal with. By that point, I don’t think I looked at anything aside from that familiar red ink before putting my paper in my bag.

On a day following failure, much like many I had dealt with before, something in me changed. Where before I had waded through the days, that day I simply sunk. I know I must’ve distracted myself in drama, made an effort to feel better in English, taken notes in science, sat through lunch, sung in choir, and listened in world geography — but sometimes you do things solely because it’s all you know how to do.

After school, having dragged my eyes over the incorrect answers, I walked through the hallways to get to my math classroom. People were strewn about the halls, talking by lockers or struggling to gather their things before they had to leave, but none were waiting outside a classroom door that I could see.

When I had gathered my own things from my locker, I finally turned my feet toward my math classroom. I needed to retake my test and that formula I had down pat: fail, look over, retake after school, barely manage a pass or simply fail it again.

But then, I got to her door and I stopped moving. Stopped breathing, even.

It was then I realized that those cracks that appeared at my first bad quiz grade had never actually gone away. They had been paved over, decorated with half-hearted encouragement and worn-down desires, but the cracks were still there through everything. They had had a very long time to reach my foundations.

Now, they made up who I was.

For months, I had only felt apathy and hopelessness when I thought about my failures, so when bitterness hit me full-force with indignation and anger, I laughed. When I stood outside that door for what seemed like the hundredth time, an anger that had festered inside of me
uninhibited finally burst open. I found an acidic resentment behind the remnants of the anger, and upon finding it, I realized I wasn’t angry at my teacher — but I was certainly angry at myself.

When I realized that, the anger left just as quickly as it came, leaving only resignation in its wake. I looked at the door for another second, eyes blank, bitterness lingering.

I left and I didn’t retake any more tests.

Saying all of this, placing the emotions and apathy side-by-side, makes it seem more cause-and-effect than it actually was. It wasn’t the tests. The tests symbolized more than bad grades. They represented a part of me I value, making failure unacceptable; yet, not accepting my failures kept me from growing from them. I want to say I’m better than those feelings now. I can say that I’m better than them now.

Heart jumping, I looked at the results of my very first Calculus quiz, running calculations in my head that amounted to failure. My world paused, but after a few seconds, it moved again. The grade hadn’t changed on my paper, still resting below passing, but my pencil was already fixing the mistakes I made, already preparing to ask the questions I had left over.

While I have the ability to accept failure now, I’m not better in the sense that I got rid of all the issues behind my actions. There are still periods of time when my failures feel insurmountable, and these periods pursue me whether I am actively trying to improve or not. When I - when you feel like this, nothing matters anymore, and it doesn’t feel like anything should. Wading through life without appreciating anything, you lose what you value to the current, your identity becoming clouded by doubt, failure, challenge.

Still, I am better in the sense that I grew enough to use my old issues to sow new ones and create a better person with them. When surrounded by challenges and failure, this self-betterment feels worthless, but when you lose your values to the current, eventually, you find them again; you can choose to clean them and pick them back up, or you can choose to
leave them for the waiting water. Either way, they will wash up again to show you who you are and who you want to be.

I don’t have my life entirely planned out, and some days I revert back to who I used to be, but, when I don’t understand a math worksheet, I lay it on my desk and try to figure it out. I certainly haven’t found an equation that solves every problem yet, but I’ve figured out some that work for what I need to solve now.

At the very least, that’s progress, and that matters.