

Neil Shepard (Vermont)

Beyond Human Failure: Toward a Poetics of Plant Human Interaction

Abstract:

Poet and editor Neil Shepard will read from his new collection, *The Book of Failures*, examining the disquiet and agitation at the edges of thought and probing the many ways we perceive ourselves to fail in the eyes of others. Even as one narrator of the poems describes his feelings of erasure as “auditioning for a bit part in anonymity,” another admits, “I like it here on the edge / of empire” and still another holds “a grudge against / business as usual.” As the metaphysician Leo Bronstein once remarked on failure and success, one is not the opposite of the other: “Success is to be the achievement of a goal known, open, given. Failure, achievement of a goal not known yet, hidden and to be discovered. Friendship is to know this. Prophecy is about this. Spirituality means this.” *The Book of Failures* attempts to articulate this wisdom, resisting easy wins, holding out for something larger and more daring than what we traditionally think of as success. In his role as editor of the online literary journal *Plant-Human Quarterly*, Shepard will examine the successes of this three-year-old magazine, exploring the myriad ways writers manifest their relationship to the botanical world – from heavily researched pieces, to keen observation, to less systematic, intuitive ways of knowing and interacting – that attempt to communicate across boundaries and possibly approach a plant’s-eye-view of the world. In its intermixing of verbal and visual mediums (photographic and painterly collages), *PHQ* hopes to transport readers across the seemingly unbridgeable divide from the sentience of plants to humans.

