“Soon it will be over, which is precisely what the child in my dream said, holding my hand, pointing at the roiling sea and the sky hurtling our way like so many buffalo, who said it’s much worse than we think, and sooner; to whom I said no duh child in my dreams, what do you think this singing and shuddering is, what this screaming and reaching and dancing and crying is, other than loving what every second goes away?”

Alison Stagner, Host

In a time like this, where do you look to for joy? In a recent episode of Krista Tippett’s podcast, On Being, poet Ross Gay recently said, “It is joy by which the labor that will make the life that I want, possible. It is not at all puzzling to me that joy is possible in the midst of difficulty.”

I’m Alison Stagner, your guest host for today, and the Communications Manager at Seattle Arts & Lectures. Because Seattle is under shelter-in-place, I’m recording this from my living room—so please excuse the audio quality. But we weren’t going to let the coronavirus stop us from bringing you SAL/on air, our collection of engaging talks from the world’s best writers from over 30 years of Seattle Arts & Lectures.

Besides being a disciple of joy, Ross Gay is a gardener, a painter, a professor, a basketball player, and a founding member of the Bloomington Community Orchard, a free-fruit-for-all non-profit focused on food, justice, and joy. He is the author of three collections of poetry. The title poem in his most recent, Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude, is a long piece which, Ross told the LA Times, was begun as a “way to publicly imagine what it means for a person to be adamantly in love with his life. I wanted to realize joy as a fundamental aspect of our lives and practice it as a discipline.” In a time when we’ve found fundamental aspects of our lives fractured by COVID-19, let’s let Ross’s poems instruct us. These are dark times, friends. And what do you do during dark times? You plant seeds and wait for summer.

This is SAL/on air.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Ross Gay
I want to read you, real quickly, a poem by someone else. Do any of you know to know the poet Thomas Lux?

Yeah, yeah, he just died. And he died like two days ago, three days ago. Yeah. Tom was my teacher. I went to Sarah Lawrence College, and I was a real young writer when I went there and I just didn't know anything, and in my second semester, I took a class with Tom. And he's an - he was amazing teacher, just like a masterful teacher, like could show you - you know, could
listen, could be patient with you. And he, he really taught me how to write a poem. It wasn't like after his class, I knew how to write a poem, but he showed me the things that would eventually lead to poems. Anyway, you know, and then I just the last few days have been like listening to him on YouTube and, you know, on the Poetry Foundation, and I'm like, Oh, my God, like this was one of the people who taught me that poetry as a sort of act of joy, of radical joy, is a real thing. This is a poem called "Render, Render."

You know, I'm just gonna tell you the story real quick. Me and this poet, Patrick, was out. We were reading down at Georgia Tech. We were reading at a Georgia Tech like 10 years ago now. And Tom had a real distinct way of reading and we were like, at a party after the reading, and we were imitating Tom. Just with - He was just within earshot, you know? He was like, he was with a few people and he said, you know, you raise them up like they're your own kids. What do they do? They mock you.

Yes, anyway, there's a poem called "Render, Render." But I'm gonna try to read the first line how you read it:

Boil it down: feet, skin, gristle, bones, vertebrae, heart muscle, boil it down, skim, and boil again, dreams, history, add them and boil again, boil and skim in closed cauldrons, boil your horse, his hooves, the runned-over dog you loved, the girl by the pencil sharpener who looked at you, looked away, boil that for hours, render it down, take more from the top as more settles to the bottom, the heavier, the denser, throw in ache and sperm, and a bead of sweat that slid from your armpit to your waist as you sat stiff-backed before a test, turn up the fire, boil and skim, boil some more, add a fever and the virus that blinded an eye, now's the time to add guilt and fear, throw logs on the fire, coal, gasoline, throw two goldfish in the pot (their swim bladders used for "clearing"), boil and boil, render it down and distill, concentrate that for which there is no other use at all, boil it down, down, then stir it with rosewater, that
which is now one dense, fatty, scented red essence
which you smear on your lips
and go forth
to plant as many kisses upon the world
as the world can bear!

He gave a lot to poetry. So I'm going to read to you from this book, Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude, with the pretty cover [audience laughs]. And, you know, my - my mom when this book came out she said, "Awww, Rossy. That's the best cover you've had yet." I was like - and then I had to tell I was like, "Well, that's the only cover I didn't actually paint, Mom." [Audience laughs] She's a good mom.

This is called "Sharing with the Ants." And I have some you know, a lot of sort of fruit poems, tree poems, gardening poems. So I'll read a few of these. "Sharing with the Ants."

a euphemism for some
yank and gobble
no doubt some
yummy tumble or other
like monkey-spanking
or hiding the salami
of course your mind
goes there
loosey-goose that you are
me too! me too!
you have a favorite
don’t lie
I’ve heard you say them
tending the hive
eating the melon
how’s the tunnel traffic
or as a “massage therapist”
would say to my pal
when his loneliness
dragged him to a carpeted room
in an apartment building
in Chinatown
where the small hands
lathered his body
open the door
naturally
sharing with the ants
some entymologic metaphor
the chronic yoke
in love-making
not only of body to body
but life to death
sharing with the ants
or the specific act of dragging with the tongue
one’s sweat-gilded body from the tibia’s
look-out along the rope bridge
of the Achilles marching
across the long plains of the calf
and the meticulously unnamed zone behind the knee
over the hamstring into
use your imagination for Chrissakes
but I will tell you it is dark there
and sweet
sharing with the ants
but actually that’s not at all
what I’m talking about
I mean actually
sharing with the ants
which I did September 21
a Friday in 2012
when by fluke or whim or
prayer I jostled the crotch-high
fig tree whose few fruit had been
scooped by our fat friends
the squirrels
but found shriveled and purple
into an almost testicular papoose
smuggled beneath the fronds
of a few leaves
one stalwart fruit which
I immediately bit in half
only to find a small platoon of ants
twisting in the meat
and when I spit out my bite
another 4 or 5 lay sacked out
their spindly legs
pedaling slow nothing
one barely looking at me through a half-open eye
the way an infant might
curled into his mother’s breast
and one stumbled dazed through my beard
tickling me as it tumbled
head over feet over head
over feet back into the bite
in my hand the hooked sabers
of their mandibles made soft kneading
the flesh their claws
heavy and slow with fruit
their armor slathered plush
as the seeds shone above
the sounds of their work
like water slapping
a pier at night
and not one to disrupt an orgy
I mostly gobbled around their nuzzle and slurp
careful not to chomp a reveler
and nibbling one last thread of flesh
noticed a dozy ant nibbling the same
toward me its antennae
just caressing my face
its pincers
slowing at my lips both
of our mouths sugared
and shining both of us
twirling beneath the fig’s
seeds spinning like a newly
discovered galaxy
that’s been there forever

That’s my - what’s the word, is it entomology? That’s my soft-porn etymological poem.
[Audience laughs]

This is called "Feet." So there's a couple things that you need to know, I think, two things. One, there's a comic book that maybe you all know now - again, if you didn't know before - called Powerman and Iron Fist. Okay, so Powerman was my hero. He's - He's also named Luke Cage. There's a TV show called Luke Cage - and Iron Fist was his his teammate. And the Real World was a show. Is it still a show? Okay, all right. Okay, great. Thank you. And that's all you need to know. "Feet."

Friends, mine are ugly feet:
the body’s common wreckage
stuffed into boots. The second toe
on the left foot’s crooked
enough that when a child
asks, “what’s that?” of it,
(the left more haywire than the right)
I can without flinch or fear of doubt lie
that a cow stepped on it
which maybe makes them fear cows
for which I repent in love
as I am with those philosophical beasts
who would never smash my feet
nor sneer at them
the way my mother does:
“We always bought you good shoes, honey,”
she says, “You can’t blame us
for those things,” and for this
and other reasons
I have never indulged in the pleasure
of flip-flops shy or ashamed
digging my toes like ten tiny ostriches into the sand
at the beach with friends
who I’m not sure love me
though I don’t think Tina loved me—
she liked me, I think—but said
to me, as we sat on lawn chairs
beside a pool where I lifeguarded and was meticulous
at obscuring from view with a book or towel
my screwy friends,
You have pretty feet,
in that gaudy, cement–mixer, Levittown accent
that sends all the lemurs scaling my ribcage to see
and she actually had pretty feet
and so I took this as a kindness incomparable and probably
fell a little bit in love with her for that afternoon
with the weird white streak in her hair
and her machinegun chatter and probably her gum snapping
and so slid my feet from beneath my Powerman and Iron Fist comic book
into the sun for which they acted like plants opening their tiny mouths
to the food hurtling to them through the solar system
and like plants you could watch them almost smile,
almost say thank you, you could watch them
turn colors, and be, almost, emboldened,
as much as some snaggletoothed feet can be emboldened,
and Tina witnessed none of this
because she was probably digging in her purse
or talking about that hottie on The Real World
or yelling at some friend’s little sister to put her ass in her trunks
or pouring the crumbs of her Fritos into her thrown open mouth,
but do you really think I’m talking to you about my fucking feet?
Of course she’s dead: Tina was her name, of leukemia: so I heard—
why else would I try sadly to make music of her unremarkable kindness?
I am trying, I think, to forgive myself
for something I don’t know what.
But what I do know is that I love the moment when the poet says
I am trying to do this
or I am trying to do that.
Sometimes it’s a horseshit trick. But sometimes
it’s a way by which the poet says
I wish I could tell you,
truly, of the little factory
in my head: the smokestacks
chuffing, the dandelions
and purslane and willows of sweet clover
prying through the blacktop.
I wish I could tell you
how inside is the steady mumble and clank of machines.
But mostly I wish I could tell you of the footsteps I hear,
more than I can ever count,
all of whose gaits I can discern by listening, closely.
Which promptly disappear
after being lodged again,
here, where we started, in the factory
where loss makes all things
beautiful grow.

I'm writing this book of little essayettes. And - that's not my name. It's a good name for a little essay. Someone - when I read a few someplace, someone said essayettes and I said, Oh, that's good one. And they're - they are, like little things, and I decided like, I'm calling them Delights. I try to write them all the time.

This one is called "Nicknames."

I'm writing in a notebook with the words: pay attention, which is a cousin to another notebook in my bag with the words: pay attention, motherfucker, printed on a Chandler and Price (that's a letterpress) that I co-own with my friend, which I have yet to see, for it is lodged in a print shop in Lubbock, Texas, my beloved co-owner pal, which makes him kind of a spouse I suppose, who gifted me these delightful notebooks, is named Boogie, or Boogs, and was so named by me, one of my greatest literary achievements. Boogie, or Boogs, might not be the first name you'd assigned to Boogie, or Boogs, for a number of reasons, perhaps the most significant of which is that he probably, he has definitely not spent a lot of time dancing, boogie-ing, which you might ascertain from his appearance, which would be a wrong thing to do, though you'd be right. [Audience laughs]
This is one of the reasons Boogie, or Boogs is such a great nickname. It's a kind of curveball that has, with much repetition, become utterly natural and his Christian name, Curtis, has come to seem awkward and clunky, kind of Lutheran, kind of curt. It's a clothesline of a name really, Curtis is, the football kind. Another reason I love this nickname, and have now come to love how much I love this nickname is because Boogie doesn't know that every time I say his name, I'm also invoking the great and similarly nicknamed L-Boogie, for Lauryn Hill, whom I am guessing perhaps wrongly - probably rightly - Boogie has never boogied to.

He calls me Salpicon, which he tells me means sizzle, which I think fits pretty good—though it would be a safe assumption given my own delight that the nickname Salpicon might afford Boogie some similarly pleasurable, ironic association, which I do not need to know about. I've shortened my nickname to Picon, whatever that means. Anyway, I love nicknames. They delight me. I'm a bit of a nickname magnet.

There are evidently people from whom nicknames are repelled like projectiles from Luke Cage's skin. Teflon to fried eggs. My friend Pat is one of them. Though the simple Spanishification of his name, Patricio, time to time, among some of us, is one that has endured, sort of, time to time, drop the pie, and it's a nice name, three to one that, in a generation or two, might become associated, incorrectly and beautifully, and so correctly, with something arboreal.

How delightful is that how have a bit of a nickname magnet and have been assigned the following aliases: Bizquick, Biz, Raheem the Compassionate, Beef, Beefie, Big Man, Bigs Biggie, Big lil Big, Big Papa The Big Gay, Bones, Babyboy, Baby Gay, The Baby, Booger, Beast, Sammy, Sossy, Saucy, Sauce, Saucypants, Dr. Sauce, Dr. Hot Sauce, Doc, The Docto, Tall Lady, Tall Drink, Wave, Arroz (con pollo), Ross the Boss the King of Applesauce, Rosski, Snozzers, Six, Unky, Daddy, and several others to loot or private to share. I don't know exactly what nicknames mean, though a quick reading of mine, and the abundance of b sounds, that babbiest of sounds, makes me think it might be primal. I know that I rarely call the people I love by their names. I call them if it's okay with them, by the name I or someone close to me has given them. I wonder if this means I think of my beloveds as my children. That seems very patronizing. Especially because I mostly don't give them money. But on the other hand, how lovely all my mothers. All my babies.

Okay. I just looked at my watch to kind of recalibrate, and I didn't even I look - like this, like I was actually looking at it, but I didn't look at it. This is called "To the Fig Tree on Ninth and Christian." This was a real tree, like a 30 foot tree, right in Philadelphia, right across from Sabrina's, a very good restaurant.

"To the Fig Tree on Ninth and Christian."

Tumbling through the
city in my
mind without once
looking up
the racket in
the lugwork probably
rehearsing some
stupid thing I
said or did
some crime or
other the city they
say is a lonely
place until yes
the sound of sweeping
and a woman
yes with a
broom beneath
which you are now
too the canopy
of a fig its
arms pulling the
September sun to it
and she
has a hose too
and so works hard
rinsing and scrubbing
the walk
lest some poor sod
slip on the silk
of a fig
and break his hip
and not probably
reach over to gobble up
the perpetrator
the light catches
the veins in her hands
when I ask about
the tree they
flutter in the air and
she says take
as much as
you can
help me
so I load my
pockets and mouth
and she points
to the step-ladder against
the wall to
mean more but 
I was without a 
sack so my meager 
plunder would have to 
suffice and an old woman 
whom gravity 
was pulling into 
the earth loosed one 
from a low slung 
branch and its eye 
wept like hers
which she dabbed 
with a kerchief as she 
cleaved the fig with 
what remained of her 
teeth and soon there were 
eight or nine 
people gathered beneath 
the tree looking into 
it like a constellation pointing
*do you see it*
and I am tall and so 
good for these things 
and a bald man even 
told me so 
when I grabbed three 
or four for 
him reaching into the 
giddy throngs of 
wasps sugar 
stoned which he only 
pointed to smiling and 
rubbing his stomach
I mean he was really rubbing his stomach 
it was hot his 
head shone while he 
offered recipes to the 
group using words which 
I couldn’t understand and besides 
I was a little 
tipsy on the dance 
of the velvety heart rolling 
in my mouth 
pulling me down and
down into the
oldest countries of my
body where I ate my first fig
from the hand of a man who escaped his country
by swimming through the night
and maybe
never said more than
five words to me
at once but gave me
figs and a man on his way
to work hops twice
to reach at last his
fig which he smiles at and calls
baby, c’mere baby,
he says and blows a kiss
to the tree which everyone knows
cannot grow this far north
being Mediterranean
and favoring the rocky, sun-baked soils
of Jordan and Sicily
but no one told the fig tree
or the immigrants
there is a way
the fig tree grows
in groves it wants,
it seems, to hold us,
yes I am anthropomorphizing
goddammit I have twice
in the last thirty seconds
rubbed my sweaty
forearm into someone else’s
sweaty shoulder
gleeful eating out of each other’s hands
on Christian St.
in Philadelphia a city like most
which has murdered its own
people
this is true
we are feeding each other
from a tree
at the corner of Christian and 9th
strangers maybe
never again.
I want to read you this delight that I wrote today. It's called "Just an Observation."

Though an observation may not feel as though it qualifies as a delight, it is sometimes delightful to observe. That's all. Though the observation I'm making here is not particularly, I have been carrying around in my front left pocket for the last week or so, and consequently have probably developed some kind of wasting disease in the hip flexor or femur or other equally urgent and tender organs around there, a little photo from the New York Times of Mike Pence, Mitch McConnell, and Neil Gorsuch. I immediately noticed that these three silver haired men, how good old days it must feel to them, who were all posing for a photo, or photos, and were presumably smiling, were actually frowning. I mean, their smiles are frowns. There is an internet phenom named Grumpy Cat. [Audience laughs] (Who knows grumpy cat? Who knows little bub? Little bub lives in my town. That makes me famous.) [Audience laughs]

There's an internet phenom named Grumpy Cat who has a perpetual and exaggerated frown, which these people do not, though McConnell visage is of someone whose penis is in a vice, or of a cat who's just eating the parakeet, which is, I guess a kind of Grumpy Cat extremist. McConnell's is what I would call an alarmed smile-frown. While the other areas are just smile-frowning, my impulse, as you can tell is to read the smile-frowns. But I want to resist that. I couldn't resist McConnell's. I want to assign some kind of meaning to the smile-frown, which is an easy enough speculative exercise. And I'm actually quite good at it, hovering in the liminal space between sensitivity and paranoia as I do. But yes, I want to resist that, and instead return to that delight of observation, of noticing, and of noticing, undelightfully, that these men when they smile, frown.

What I was - I was carrying that around in my pocket. And I was like, I'm probably actually getting sick doing it.

This is called "Unsolicited, Un-Accosting Touches." September 9th. (Again, you know, they have that kind of current event feel to them). The other day I was sitting in a small town in Indiana, sipping a coffee, doing a little work while waiting to give a reading at the local college. I'd wander the square, a feature of the small town Midwest - (this is a long parenthetical, some of these have) a feature of the small-town Midwest, a city hallish building in the center, always with some sad trumpeting of one war or another. This one had a guy in one of those not-very-protective-looking hats they then called a helmet during WWI. He's carrying, naturally, a gun.

Jenna Osmond's book Public Figures alerted me to the ubiquity of the gun, the weapon in the hands of our statues. I delight, I wish to now imagine and even impose, given as beneficent dictatorship of one's own life, anyway, it's a delight. Even if illusory, the heart ticking crookedly, the order fraying and the bloodstream's windstorm. All new statues must have in their hands, flowers, or hoes, or babies or seedlings, or cute little animals or some such. We could go on like this for a while. But never again, never, ever, guns. I decree it. And I also decree the removal of already extent guns. Let the emptiness or war heroes carry be the metaphor for a while. (So I come back).
I'd wander this square and walk by a storefront garage with huge Trump signs, "Make America Great Again." It was a foreign auto repair shop and inside were mostly Toyotas and Hondas. I set up into the coffee shop where it seemed every black person in this town was hiding. Every one of them offering some version of the new greeting, except the guy I meet later that day, who was deep in his computer typing away, took my notebooks out and was reading over these delights, transcribing them into my computer.

And while I was working, headphones on, swaying a little to the new De La Sol record (delight: it'll probably garner its own entry), and a little white girl - she looked 15, but could have been, I suppose a college student - was standing next to me with our hand raised. I looked up, confused, pulled my headphones back, and she said, like a coach or something, "Working on your paper? Good job to you, high five!" (Audience laughs.)

I must have looked really young that day. I shaved that morning. And you better believe I high fived that little child, in her Def Leppard pre-ripped shirt and her itty bitty Doc Martens. For I love, I delight in, unsolicited, unaccosting public physical interactions. Walking down the street in Umbertide - oh, I love that phrase. That's in Italy - a few months ago, a trash truck pulled up beside me and the guy in the passenger seat yelled something I didn't understand. I said como, the Spanish word for Come again? Which is a ridiculous thing to say because even if he had come again, I wouldn't understood him. [Audience laughs] He knew this and hopped out of the truck to empty a couple cans of trash into the truck. He flex his muscles pointed at me and smacked my biceps hard. Twice. I loved him. [Audience laughs] Or when a waitress puts her hand on my shoulder? Forget if she calls me honey or baby. Or someone scooting by puts their hand on my back? The handshake, the hug, I love them both. Once I was getting on a plane, not sure where, and shuffling down the aisle, I saw at the beginning of coach, my great uncle Earl. I got down on my knees and put my hand on his forearm and said Uncle Earl, it's me, Ross. He looked at me kind of quizzically, as did the woman traveling with him who did not look one bit like my Aunt Sylvia. [Audience laughs] Which made me look back at my not-Uncle Earl, who looked maybe like my Uncle Earl's second cousin 20 years ago.

And though it was benign, though I did check in with my mother to see if Uncle Earl had died (he hadn't yet and no one was hurt), it was a little weird. And they looked a little freaked out. All the same, given as Uncle Earl did die about six months later, I'm delighted I got to see him [audience laughs], and touch his forearm gently, lovingly, about 1000 miles away.

I think I'm gonna read you one more poem. It's a little bit long. Not really long. It's like an hour and a half. Just joking. This is called "Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude."

And it's a - two things you need to know is that it starts off and it sort of starts - it starts in this Bloomington Community Orchard, which is this - It's an orchard in Bloomington, hence the name. And it's this incredible - what I think of as a sort of project. It's like a civic project. It's a project in how to love your neighbors. That's really what it is, you know, there's a, it's an almost entirely volunteer run organization. But we, you know, this young woman named Amy Countryman, she did a senior thesis kind of project, she was trying to figure out food security in
Bloomington, and found that very few of the trees, the urban canopy, made had food-producing trees. So, she thought, well, one of the solutions to that, and it's like a regular solution in various times of our - various times, in various places, is to have like community orchards, public orchards.

So she proposed the public, she did this project, she proposed the public orchard. Her advisor said, we'll go to the urban forester and see if that works. See what he says. So he said, if you can get support, community buy in, let's do it. And she had a call out meeting it and you know, like, 100, and some people came to the call out meeting. So six months later, there was an orchard, you know, and there was so many incredible sort of struggles in the process of making this orchard like, you know, you know, like, what are the practices we're going to use? What are the - how are we going to deal with the site, etc. The thing that's - the most moving argument that we had, which was this deep sort of ethical struggle that we all had to come up with was, do we put a lock on the gate or not? It's a public orchard, it's a Bloomington community orchard and, you know, because we put in zillions hours into making this thing and people were like, scared. And we didn't put a lock on the orchard, you know, there's not a lock there. That's part of it. The other thing is that there's this thing named Aralee in this poem who was an idea and who is now like a three-year-old child or something.

It's called "Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude."

I'm gonna have a drink beforehand. Because it's an hour and a half poem. [Audience laughs] I gotta, I gotta get ready. (It's not an hour and a half poem.)

Friends, will you bear with me today, for I have awakened from a dream in which a robin made with its shabby wings a kind of veil behind which it shimmied and stomped something from the south of Spain, its breast aflare, looking me dead in the eye from the branch that grew into my window, coochie-cooing my chin, the bird shuffling its little talons left, then right, while the leaves bristled against the plaster wall, two of them drifting onto my blanket while the bird opened and closed its wings like a matador giving up on murder, jutting its beak, turning a circle, and flashing, again, the ruddy bombast of its breast by which I knew upon waking it was telling me
in no uncertain terms
to bellow forth the tubas and sousaphones,
the whole rusty brass band of gratitude
not quite dormant in my belly—
it said so in a human voice,
“Bellow forth”—
and who among us could ignore such odd
and precise counsel?

Hear ye! hear ye! I am here
to holler that I have hauled tons—by which I don’t mean lots,
I mean tons — of cowshit
and stood ankle deep in swales of maggots
swirling the spent beer grains
the brewery man was good enough to dump off
holding his nose, for they smell very bad,
but make the compost writhe giddy and lick its lips,
twirling dung with my pitchfork
again and again
with hundreds and hundreds of other people,
we dreamt an orchard this way,
furrowing our brows,
and hauling our wheelbarrows,
and sweating through our shirts,
and two years later there was a party
at which trees were sunk into the well-fed earth,
one of which, a liberty apple, after being watered in
was tamped by a baby barefoot
with a bow hanging in her hair
biting her lip in her joyous work
and friends this is the realest place I know,
it makes me squirm like a worm I am so grateful,
you could ride your bike there
or roller skate or catch the bus
there is a fence and a gate twisted by hand,
there is a fig tree taller than you in Indiana,
it will make you gasp.
It might make you want to stay alive even, thank you;

and thank you
for not taking my pal when the engine
of his mind dragged him
to swig fistfuls of Xanax and a bottle or two of booze,
and thank you for taking my father
a few years after his own father went down thank you
mercy, mercy, thank you
for not smoking meth with your mother
oh thank you thank you
for leaving and for coming back,
and thank you for what inside my friends’
love bursts like a throng of roadside goldenrod
gleaming into the world,
likely hauling a shovel with her
like one named Aralee ought,
with hands big as a horse’s,
and who, like one named Aralee ought,
will laugh time to time til the juice
runs from her nose; oh
thank you
for the way a small thing’s wail makes
the milk or what once was milk
in us gather into horses
huckle-buckling across a field;

and thank you, friends, when last spring
the hyacinth bells rang
and the crocuses flaunted
their upturned skirts, and a quiet roved
the beehive which when I entered
were snugged two or three dead
fist-sized clutches of bees between the frames,
almost clinging to one another,
this one’s tiny head pushed
into another’s tiny wing,
one’s forelegs resting on another’s face,
the translucent paper of their wings fluttering
beneath my breath and when
a few dropped to the frames beneath:
honey; and after falling down to cry,
everything’s glacial shine.

And thank you, too. And thanks
for the corduroy couch I have put you on.
Put your feet up. Here’s a light blanket,
a pillow, dear one,
for I can feel this is going to be long.
I can’t stop
my gratitude, which includes, dear reader,
you, for staying here with me,
for moving your lips just so as I speak.
Here is a cup of tea. I have spooned honey into it.

And thank you the tiny bee’s shadow
perusing these words as I write them.
And the way my love talks quietly
when in the hive,
so quietly, in fact, you cannot hear her
but only notice barely her lips moving
in conversation. Thank you what does not scare her
in me, but makes her reach my way. Thank you the love
she is which hurts sometimes. And the time
she misremembered elephants
in one of my poems which, oh, here
they come, garlanded with morning glory and wisteria
blooms, trombones all the way down to the river.
Thank you the quiet
in which the river bends around the elephant’s
solemn trunk, polishing stones, floating
on its gentle back
the flock of geese flying overhead.

And to the quick and gentle flocking
of men to the old lady falling down
on the corner of Fairmount and 18th, holding patiently
with the softest parts of their hands
her cane and purple hat,
gathering for her the contents of her purse
and touching her shoulder and elbow;
thank you the cockeyed court
on which in a half-court 3 vs. 3 we oldheads
made of some runny-nosed kids
a shambles, and the 61-year-old
after flipping a reverse lay-up off a back door cut
from my no-look pass to seal the game
ripped off his shirt and threw punches at the gods
and hollered at the kids to admire the pacemaker’s scar
grinning across his chest; thank you
the glad accordion’s wheeze
in the chest; thank you the bagpipes.

Thank you to the woman barefoot in a gaudy dress
for stopping her car in the middle of the road
and the tractor trailer behind her, and the van behind it, 
whisking a turtle off the road.
Thank you god of gaudy.
Thank you paisley panties.
Thank you the organ up my dress.
Thank you the sheer dress you wore kneeling in my dream 
at the creek’s edge and the light 
swimming through it. The koi kissing 
halos into the glassy air.
The room in my mind with the blinds drawn 
where we nearly injure each other 
crawling into the shawl of the other’s body.
Thank you for saying it plain:
fuck each other dumb.

And you, again, you, for the true kindness 
it has been for you to remain awake 
with me like this, nodding time to time 
and making that noise which I take to mean 
yes, or, I understand, or, please go on 
but not too long, or, why are you spitting 
so much, or, easy Tiger 
hands to yourself. I am excitable. 
I am sorry. I am grateful. 
I just want us to be friends now, forever. 
Take this bowl of blackberries from the garden. 
The sun has made them warm. 
I picked them just for you. I promise 
I will try to stay on my side of the couch. 

And thank you the baggie of dreadlocks I found in a drawer 
while washing and folding the clothes of our murdered friend; 
the photo in which his arm slung 
around the sign to “the trail of silences”; thank you 
the way before he died he held 
his hands open to us; for coming back 
in a waft of incense or in the shape of a boy 
in another city looking 
from between his mother’s legs, 
or disappearing into the stacks after brushing by; 
for moseying back in dreams where, 
seeing us lost and scared 
he put his hand on our shoulders 
and pointed us to the temple across town;
and thank you to the man all night long
hosing a mist on his early-bloomed
peach tree so that the hard frost
not waste the crop, the ice
in his beard and the ghosts
lifting from him when the warming sun
told him sleep now; thank you
the ancestor who loved you
before she knew you
by smuggling seeds into her braid for the long
journey, who loved you
before he knew you by putting
a walnut tree in the ground, who loved you
before she knew you by not slaughtering
the land; thank you
who did not bulldoze the ancient grove
of dates and olives,
who sailed his keys into the ocean
and walked softly home; who did not fire, who did not
plunge the head into the toilet, who said stop,
don’t do that; who lifted some broken
someone up; who volunteered
the way a plant birthed of the reseeding plant
is called a volunteer, like the plum tree
that marched beside the raised bed
in my garden, like the arugula that marched
itself between the blueberries,
nary a bayonet, nary an army, nary a nation,
which usage of the word volunteer
familiar to gardeners the wide world
made my pal shout “Oh!” and dance
and plunge his knuckles
into the lush soil before gobbling two strawberries
and digging a song from his guitar
made of wood from a tree someone planted, thank you;

thank you zinnia, and gooseberry, rudbeckia
and pawpaw, Ashmead’s kernel, cockscomb
and scarlet runner, feverfew and lemonbalm;
thank you knitbone and sweetgrass and sunchoke
and false indigo whose petals stammered apart
by bumblebees good lord please give me a minute...
and moonglow and catkin and crookneck
and painted tongue and seedpod and johnny jump-up;  
thank you what in us rackets glad  
what gladrackets us;

and thank you, too, this knuckleheaded heart, this pelican heart, 
this gap-toothed heart flinging open its gaudy maw  
to the sky, oh clumsy, oh bumblefucked,  
oh giddy, oh dumbstruck,  
oh rickshaw, oh goat twisting  
its head at me from my peach tree’s highest branch,  
balanced impossibly gobbling the last fruit,  
its tongue working like an engine,  
a lone sweet drop tumbling by some miracle  
into my mouth like the smell of someone I’ve loved;  
heart like an elephant screaming  
at the bones of its dead;  
heart like the lady on the bus  
dressed head to toe in gold, the sun  
shivering her shiny boots, singing  
Erykah Badu to herself  
leaning her head against the window;

and thank you the way my father one time came back in a dream  
by plucking the two cables beneath my chin  
like a bass fiddle’s strings  
and played me until I woke singing,  
no kidding, singing, smiling,  
thank you, thank you,  
stumbling into the garden where  
the Juneberry’s flowers had burst open  
like the bells of French horns, the lily  
my mother and I planted oozed into the air,  
the bazillion ants labored in their earthen workshops  
below, the collard greens waved in the wind  
like the sails of ships, and the wasps  
swam in the mint bloom’s viscous swill;

and you, again you, for hanging tight, dear friend.  
I know I can be long-winded sometimes.  
I want so badly to rub the sponge of gratitude  
over every last thing, including you, which, yes, awkward,  
the suds in your ear and armpit, the little sparkling gems  
slipping into your eye. Soon it will be over,
which is precisely what the child in my dream said, holding my hand, pointing at the roiling sea and the sky hurtling our way like so many buffalo, who said it's *much worse than we think*, and sooner; to whom I said *no duh child in my dreams*, what do you think this singing and shuddering is, what this screaming and reaching and dancing and crying is, other than loving what every second goes away? Goodbye, I mean to say. And thank you. Every day.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Alison Stagner, Host

We’ll hear more from Ross Gay, and his Q&A with SAL Associate Director Rebecca Hoogs, in a moment. But first, since our economic outlook is looking bleak, I wanted to take a moment to tell you about our Community Access Tickets program, or CAT. At SAL, we believe that reading, writing, and creative thinking are indispensable to a curious, engaged, democratic society. Our goal is to make these experiences available to as many people as possible. If you’re living in the Seattle area, and you find yourself facing economic hardship, we encourage you to apply for CAT. CAT allows folks who are priced out of our lowest seating levels to be entered into a drawing for free tickets to any of our events. Head to lectures.org/community-access/ or look for a link at the bottom of our homepage at lectures.org to sign up. We hope you can join us. And now, back to Ross Gay.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Rebecca Hoogs
Oh my goodness. Thank you so much, Ross. That was amazing. If you have a question for the poet, please write it on a card and pass it to an usher. And how can you not have questions? Or just praise? You can just send your praise up too. I’m curious. How did you first get into writing and where you are a reader and a writer as a kid?

Ross Gay
You know, when I was really little, I read poems. (To the WITS student: Hey, thank you again for that poem!) [Audience applauds] When I was real, I think when I was real little, I read but, um, you know, I read comic books for a little, I read Powerman and Iron Fist. But I didn’t read. You know, I wasn’t like a reader like a lot of - or a good number of writers, it seems to me, like when they’re little. I just read a bio on the back of someone's book and it said - the bio said something like so and so knew she was gonna be a writer from the time she was eight. I was gonna be a basketball player or a football player or something.
And I remember a lovely story. I remember. I, I had gotten some records off that - I think the Columbia Record Company, the thing and mail order thing? And I was sitting somewhere - my father was an avid reader, he was always reading in fact, he always had his face in a book. And we used to say, like, I wonder if some of those books don't have any words, and it's just a way for him to be able to like, ignore us when we're getting too loud. [Audience laughs] But he saw me, like, I could overhear him. I was listening on headphones, his headphones on his record player, I overheard him watching me read the lyrics to Earth, Wind, and Fire songs. And because I was and am a big Earth, Wind, and Fire guy, and I heard him say, Well, at least he's reading something. [Audience laughs]. Yeah.

Rebecca Hoogs
So then when did you find poetry?

Ross Gay
In my sophomore year of college, I took a class - and I was a football player in college and I was close to losing my funding, my scholarship and I, I had a class with a guy named David Johnson, and he made me give a presentation on Amiri Baraka. And I started reading poems that were articulating things about alienation, and race and class that I had not - I had felt but I had no sort of way to articulate or think about.

Rebecca Hoogs
So jumping forward to the present, and I'm going to ask you about the essays or the essayettes, and the delights. What, why - why move to that form? And what do you feel that you were able to do in these little essays that you can't do in poetry, or what sort of what sort of permission or opportunity do they give you that feels different from poetry?

Ross Gay
You know, I'm not sure what is different. I mean, what I like about the essay as a form is that it's, in a way, it's like, it's formless, you know, it's, it's whatever you want to do. Whereas poems, they're actually, you know, really sort of intensely in my, in my mind, they're sort of intensely made things and essays are also intensely made things, but poems I have a sort of - probably a kind of understanding of the form or practice in the form, such that they're- they're still tremendously surprising to me, every poem I write is kind of surprising. But essays are - this is it: essays are things that I don't know how to write. I really don't know how to write essays. And I'm into doing stuff that I don't know how to do.

Rebecca Hoogs
Mm hmm. It's interesting. You - you didn't read this poem tonight. But you have a book, a poem in your book called "To the Mistake."

Ross Gay
Yeah, yeah, yeah.
Rebecca Hoogs
You say today I'm lecturing on the miracle of the mistake in a poem, that hiccup or weird gift, and you know, you go on from there, but I thought that was so interesting. Like, how do you know - and maybe it relates to the surprise thing - but how do you know what a mistake in a poem is? Why - and why call it a mistake?

Ross Gay
Yeah. Well, the - I think I'm probably trying to draw the metaphor - that's a poem in which I talk about this mistake. (Although maybe it was a mistake - in which I, before a reunion for like, the gifted and talented and - I took acid, [audience laughs] and it was so it was like, you know, I basically - I kind of - it was just a dumb mistake, like, you know, like, four hours before the thing and I was like, well, like, I was a non-drug guy, like I didn't - I had never smoked weed before, you know, and like - I didn't even drink alcohol before the reunion. [Audience laughs] And, as you know, from your laughter, I was tripping very hard with this reunion with my teacher, Mr. Knowles and his wife, Mrs. Ice-Knowles, and these 30 other kids who were not on acid, as far as I know. That's the actual mistake I was trying to, like, make that mistake and the sort of accident, the accident of a poem, pulled together as a metaphor.

Rebecca Hoogs
It's a question from the audience. This person says, this may be a silly question but no disclaimers. But have you always been so joyful? And if not, what cause you to be?

Ross Gay
I don't know. Now, you know, I'm a sort of a melancholy dude, actually. You know, and, like to me, joy is this - I'm trying to like, you know, I love the life of sort of meditating on what joy is. And first of all, I feel like joy is a kind of discipline. You know? And it feels to me that joy is not like I don't you know, sometimes people are like, you're so happy. And I'm like, joy to me is is something like this understanding that everything is going away. We are fading as we speak, right? And everything we love. And - and first of all, I mean, maybe the thing that is joy is recognizing that that is a fundamental connection between us. It's a fundamental connection between us, and to recognize that, and that it's, like, you know, like a forest. Like, we're all connected by those things. If we - and it's a kind of like nourishment, like, this is, this is over, you know, that we might then care for each other better, you know, and we might exist in the world in a certain kind of way differently to. That's sort of, I mean, that's - that's - I'm sort of inquiring in myself and in my head, what joy is and it feels to me that that is sort of part of it. So that joy is, you know, to be joyful strikes me as a kind of practice in the midst of, you know, the horrors how, how do you remain that or cultivate or...

Rebecca Hoogs
What, what have you been doing? Or how, how are you continuing to practice joy in this particular political moment, staying sane, practicing joy, but also resisting Do you find it harder? Do you have different strategies for yourself?

Ross Gay
I mean, part of it is like, you know, working. Like doing shit. Calling my senators and stuff, you know, that's part of it. But also meditating in a very real way on, on the collaborations that we're going to do, that we are already doing and we're going to be doing that is, you know, I think will be on like, you know, will be will be really incredible and beautiful. I feel like there's this sort of, a different kind of tenderness might be emerging. And, you know, where, where this sort of deep connection to one another might become even more sort of present. So I'm, you know, obviously I'm like, scared and all of these other things and I'm also like, very curious about what we're going to do. You know, I've seen such beautiful sort of solidarity. Beautiful. So that's part of it attended to that really attended to that.

Rebecca Hoogs
This may be related a little bit, but my high school - a question from the audience - my high school students are about to write odes in my English class. What advice do you have for young people about how to notice things around them? And how do you choose what to praise?

Ross Gay
You know, like, part of the game with this, this book of delights, is just again, that's like a muscle, you know, like attending to what delights you is a muscle and if you do a lot, you're gonna do it a lot. It's just like a thing. It's like doing push ups and like, you know, and like, it's real, like if I, if I write that write them often enough, I write four in a row, you know, five in a row six in a row seven in a row. Like there'll be days when I'm walking down the street. I'm like, Oh, that's a delight. Oh, that's, that's what I want my life to be, you know? [Audience applauds] So, partly like I would tell, I mean, I'm also like a better basketball coach a lot of years. I'd be like, say 100 things that delight you like this morning, you know? The toast? You know? Orange juice was from concentrate delightful.

Rebecca Hoogs
This person says, tell us more about the orchard. What is your vision and hope for the garden?

Ross Gay
Well, so I was gone last year from the orchard. I've been on the board of the orchard for - I was on it for four years or something and then off for a year, and I think we're in like the sixth year or something like that. And the organization has just been doing these incredible things, like we're, we're, first of all, like getting, you know, we have this maintenance of this site that we're doing. And that's one thing, which means like taking care of the trees, like sort of, you know, growing them up into their productive years and figuring out how to how to manage the fruit, but also how to sort of manage that as a site. Meaning like, how to mow - like just basics, how to mow, how to keep it pretty enough for the city and everyone to be like, Oh, yeah, that's a pretty thing. But I think a lot of what's happening is that there's these beautiful collaborations happening. So the orchard is collaborating and has these things called partner plantings. So little neighborhoods that want to have an orchard, they collaborate with the orchard and get a little help in starting their, their own orchards. In a way that's sort of the most magical stuff that we do. We have this site which is beautiful, which you should come to if you're in Indiana and Bloomington, Indiana, you know, between come anytime but you know stuff is more interesting
- if you're a gardener, it's always interesting - but like in April, May, June, July, etc. It's incredible. So the site is really incredible but we do all of this other sort of outreach sort of propagating types of stuff. You know, we teach lots of classes, you know,

**Rebecca Hoogs**
What is your favorite plant to grow?

**Ross Gay**
A favorite plant to grow. I get a thrill - I get a thrill out of growing greens across the board. Partly because I love eating greens, and partly because I love eating my own greens from like April to December like that just makes me so happy. I love growing garlic. It does not stop fascinating me that you stick one clove in and turns into a bulb. It's crazy. Seeds are crazy.

I have these fruit trees that are really wonderful. And I live in a place where there's a lot of sort of, you know, disease, you get rats and funguses. So when they come out good, you know, that's incredible. There's a fruit called a goumi that we talked about a little bit before and it's a it's just a very easy to grow fruit. It's red and kind of a little bit tart. The longer it's on the branch, it gets sweet, and it will kind of actually sort of wizen on the branch and sort of get a little fermented. But it's sweet and speckled and gorgeous. And it puts nitrogen in the soil and it makes beautiful flowers that the bees love and it smells good. I mean, there's 10,000 good things about this plant and the food. The fruit tastes so good. I love that to, and because you don't have to do anything to it, you just put in the ground and it just kind of feeds itself. And I love other plants too. Potatoes. I mean potatoes are ridiculous, right? [Audience laughs]

It's so fun. My brother and his wife brought their kids out to Indiana and they're like, they weren't gardeners. They're not gardeners you know. And the kids were dressed nicely for some reason - I'm not sure why - they were in the car. And it was time to harvest potatoes, I was like, come on guys. Let's go harvest potatoes. So they're like, in these sweet little dresses like those shoes, you know with the little buckles on them, digging in the potatoes. It's Uncle Rossy, you gotta let them do it. So yeah, potatoes. Sweet potatoes, too! [Audience laughs]

**Rebecca Hoogs**
[Laughing] You cannot forget about sweet potatoes.

**Ross Gay**
No, we can't. Sweet potatoes are incredible and the greens are so damn good. They grow so abundant. The greens are yummy. Okay, okay.

**Rebecca Hoogs**
You - you address the reader quite often in your poetry, and I was wondering how much you think of the reader, when you are writing. Is the reader a sort of presence for you when - you're when you're in the process of composing?

**Ross Gay**
You know, kind of like yes and no. I, I am a writer that, like I, part of the joy of my writing life is like this sort of public sharing the work. So I'm very conscious of like, trying to figure out how to make a poem do what it needs to do for me, which is like to have a sort - I need a poem to sort of - be a kind of experience of transformation, like I have a question and that question either needs to be further illuminated, or it has to be answered in a way, or some actual thing in me needs to be transformed in the process of writing a poem. That's what I'm, that's what I hope for. And if the poem can be like a map for some sort of similar experience, that's great. And I, and I hope for that, you know, and I hope for it in the process of writing the poem, too. So in a way, I am aware of that. The other thing is that I'm aware of an audience as I'm writing poems, because I, I think very much about what they sound like in the air, you know, for other people's bodies, like for my body, as well as other people's bodies, so I'm aware of that, and I'm aware of how they're going to come out of my mouth. So I will revise poems so that there are some word, sounds, that are hard to say together. And I'll tweak a poem for that reason.

Rebecca Hoogs
Do you read out loud as you're composing?

Ross Gay
Yeah.

Rebecca Hoogs
This writer - this person asked, How do you know when a poem's done?

Ross Gay
Well, there is that - that most important thing, which is that I, I need to feel sort of transformed, you know, I need to feel different and - which means that sometimes, a poem can be done and be very useful. But it might not be a poem that I share, because it did what it needed to do for me, but I don't, it doesn't seem like it's good, beyond you know - I have poems like that. They've been very useful for me in that way. I also have really good readers. I have a handful of friends who will read my poems and tell me if you went too far or, you know, or not. Yeah, yeah.

Rebecca Hoogs
How do you define poetic vulnerability, and how does it show up in poems, either for you or for poets you like to read?

Ross Gay
There's so many things, or ways to maybe talk about that. Cause it could mean, like, the sort of - every poem is kind of vulnerable in the first place. But I think it needs the sort of openness, the sort of availability or something to an audience. Say the question again, how do you define it, or?

Rebecca Hoogs
How do you define - or how does it show up and poems that you love or poems, either by other people or poems that's you're trying to write? And if it's something that you're striving for -

**Ross Gay**

It is absolutely something I'm striving for. I, I want, I want my poems to communicate. Well, actually, I just want to, I mean, the truth is that I want to do very serious work in my poems. And that work is often sort of psychic, emotional, spiritual work. And if I'm doing it and sort of leaving a kind of artifact of that experience - it's, it's, it's kind of necessarily going to be vulnerable, you know? It, you know, poems are the ways that I work things out, you know, it's how I think, you know. Writing is one of the ways that I really think. Conversation is another way, thinking as another way.

But I'm a better thinker as a writer. I just want to say the person who most has modeled for me a kind of poetic vulnerability is Toi Derricotte. I feel like yeah, I feel like if you want to learn how to be exposed, like radically courageous in in sharing, you know, that Toi Derricotte. Yeah.

**Rebecca Hoogs**

Thank you so much, Ross. It's been a great gift to have you here tonight. Thank you all for being here. Thank you. [Audience applauds]

**[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]**

**Alison Stagner, Host**

Thanks so much to Ross Gay for joining us on the SAL stage. Thanks as well to the Seattle Arts & Lectures staff, board and community—and thanks to all of you for listening. This show would not be possible without you. Our show is produced by Jack Straw Cultural Center with theme music by Daniel Spils. To hear more, make sure to subscribe from wherever you get your podcasts. While you’re there, why not rate and review us five stars so that more people can enjoy SAL/on air.

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