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The Mundane as Maximalism of the Mind: Reclaiming the Quotidian

How was your day? We ask this because we don't know what else to ask, or how else to ask it. We might also genuinely want to know. It's so easy to answer "good," "fine." There is both too much and too little to say at once. During the pandemic, "how was your day?" collapsed into the monotony of survival. Our entire world spiraled down into a particular couch cushion, a chair at the dining room table, the walk to the end of the block and back. Our brains were in crisis mode, and our thoughts were consumed with just getting things done, as getting those things done required more thought than ever (how to safely grocery shop? When to go to the doctor?). In the swirl of chaos, unpredictability, and monotony, many writers reported difficulty writing or thinking creatively at all.

We know. We don't want to write about the pandemic either. But as nonfiction writers, amidst the tragedies and uncountable losses, the pandemic forced us to learn again what it's so easy to forget: what is worthy of our writing attention. "How was your day?" Within the tedium of this question are the seeds for an essay, a book, or even many essays and books. In this essay, we will explore how studying the so-called mundane, forgettable, daily details of our lives can unfold in unexpected, generative ways. In our to-do lists and sleepless nights, writers at any level can find patterns, obsessions, forgotten histories, buried stories. In the tradition of Sonya Huber and Ross Gay, you do not need the extraordinary to find your subjects—you already have the extraordinary within the ordinary.

This might not be an earth-shattering idea. Even as early as the 900s and early 1000s, Sei Shōnagon wrote *The Pillow Book*, a collection of lists and brief reflections on daily life as court lady to the Empress in

Heian-period Japan (including writing like: “Depressing Things: A dog howling in the daytime. A lying-in room when the baby has died. A cold, empty brazier. An ox-driver who hates his oxen”). Of course, we have Michel de Montaigne, and in the 1860s, Alexander Smith wrote about essayists’ “quick ear and eye, an ability to discern the infinite suggestiveness of common things.” More recently, Patrick Madden’s work on the essay anthology/resource *Quotidiana* and his own book by the same name follow this tradition. In an interview with the *American Literary Review*, Madden wrote of this kind of quotidian writing as “discovering something that already exists.” As nonfiction writers, we of course look to our daily lives for inspiration and raw material. But we are suggesting adopting what the flash writer Kathy Fish calls “radical noticing” as a reorientation, recalibration, and necessary way of seeing and generating new work. And, most importantly, this is not only a neat strategy for finding a way into work: *especially* for historically marginalized writers, honoring the quotidian allows us to honor the parts of our lives and, by extension, the parts of our selves, that have been deemed unworthy of contemplation.

Some of the best-loved (and bestselling) nonfiction tends to be the stories that readers are thrilled to experience secondhand: the travel to unknown places meeting sexy people, the horrific tragedy that we hope to never experience, the voyeur for the sweet or forbidden romance. These are all big stories, ones that shatter lives, perhaps *the* biggest moments in the writer’s life. And they are, of course, also worthy of literary contemplation. We wish we had the forbidden romance, the travel, the big story. But much of our lives are not lived in these big stories. We might not have the time or the money for them. Many, especially some historically marginalized writers, may not have access to these stories. For some, each day is a series of negotiations around systemic oppression. Most of us live our lives between and within to-do lists. We grade papers, we attend meetings, we take our children to school, we scroll on our phones while watching Netflix on the couch, we wish we were spending our one precious life a little more loudly. Even big stories are broken down into logistics, like waiting for a plane, finding a new apartment you can afford, or needing

to eat something. This is the stuff that makes up a life. Everything comes back to this. And our writing can (and maybe should), too.

What does this look like in practice? What do our lives actually contain? The simplest and perhaps easiest to examine is the artifact: the lists, phone calls, emails, various piles of laundry, unwashed dishes, crumpled blanket, errant Legos, stack of unread books, stack of unread mail, the steaming cup of coffee, the cold cup of coffee. Each of these is a still life. They are springboards for narration and reflection. Each of these is a stop along a narrative trajectory: if we examine the cold cup of coffee, we are forced to consider what happened before it, and what happened after, and why. It's never just about the cup of coffee.

For example, in my (Jill's) early days of new motherhood during the pandemic, I remember one evening looking at some chicken breasts I was defrosting in cold water on the countertop. I examined the before and after: diapers, naps, sitting with the baby trying to play, worrying. I looked at the chicken and thought: this is the only thing I've *done* today, and my life felt small, unbelievably plotless, uninteresting. But then, I thought: no. This defrosting chicken *is* the plot. This defrosting chicken was a story of love, a story of care, a story of trying to feed a family, a story of new motherhood. And, by extension: the story is an essay. The extraordinary from the ordinary.

Another way we can examine the quotidian is through observing the routines of our days. As writers and as human beings, we tend to look to the novel parts of our days for inspiration—they are naturally stickier in our heads than our rote tasks. But those routines themselves are structures that can be broken down in many different, essayistic ways. The routines are patterns—what do we find ourselves doing over and over? Why? These patterns illustrate what underpins any essay: our priorities, the things most important to us, whether by desire or necessity. When we examine those reasons why we do the things we do, our essays can telescope even further. When my (Amy's) daughter was still a breastfeeding infant, and I'd returned to work at what had long been my dream job on the tenure-track, I found myself

running the half-mile home from the train station each evening, work bag, purse, and breast pump banging bruises into my thighs, just to get home a minute or two earlier to my nursing daughter. Urgency now bloomed in the space (minutes, running steps) between the two biggest responsibilities in my life—an urgency that persists to this day, an urgency shared by nearly every working mother but experienced uniquely. Examine the mind of someone (you?) who drops their child off at school every day, who checks the weather every day, who passes that pile of laundry every day, who works at a job they love or a job they hate every day, and you can find stories (essays!) of loves, of fears, of desires.

The way we inhabit routines in our lives can also telescope outward and challenge and/or reinforce our larger histories, cultural narratives, or the current political moment. For example: when I (Jill) felt worthless for the defrosted chicken, what story was I telling myself? I felt like the “work” of being a mother was worthless, or that the “work” of planning and preparing dinner was worthless. I do not, as a person, believe these things, but they had seeped in anyway. And here, again: an essay.

As always, throughout the mundane details of our days, we can find the opportunity to encounter sensory portals. As nonfiction writers, most of us are primed for remembering and recording sensory details already, but we are intentional here about our use of the word “portals”: a path into somewhere else. Along with the mundane moments of our days, we can watch where our mind wants to depart those moments—what makes us depart? Our hands in the warm dish water? The smell of the trash we should’ve taken out yesterday? Where do our minds go, and where do they land? Notice the containers of your day, and notice where your mind resists them. Here, you may find not just your subject, but your structure.

Two terrific examples of this kind of attention are the short, sharp essays in Ross Gay’s collection *The Book of Delights* (Algonquin Books, 2019) and Sonya Huber’s memoir *Supremely Tiny Acts* (Mad Creek, 2021). In *The Book of Delights*, Gay chronicled the delights around him as a project. He set rules: “Write a delight every day for a year; begin and end on my birthday, August 1; draft them quickly; and write them by

hand” (xi). The book is almost a textbook study of what we are arguing here—a close focus on everyday minutia. Each vignette is a story in and of itself, and can often speak for itself. However, as with any excellent essay collection, the essays gain even more power in their juxtaposition and accumulation. In examining the delights in his life, the book becomes a story about what delight means, and what is meaningful in our lives. That is the power of examining these details.

Gay’s essays often honor the quotidian sensory, as well as daily artifacts made exquisite by his attention. For example, the delights build in this cascading list of observed joys: “A fly, its wings hauling all the light in the room, landing on the porcelain handle as if to say, ‘Notice the precise flare of this handle, as though designed for the romance between the thumb and index finger that holding a cup can be.’ Or the peanut butter salty enough. Or the light blue bike the man pushed through the lobby. Or the topknot of the barista. Or the sweet glance of the man in his stylish short pants (well-lotioned ankles gleaming beneath) walking two little dogs. Or the woman stepping in and out of her shoe, her foot curling up and stretching out and curling up” (Gay 3). Gay allows his mind to focus on what it wants to focus on, while telescoping down to the specific. In the light of his focused attention, these details become important, even life-changing.

In the flash essay “Hickories,” Gay’s attention to what might be described as mundane conversation, small talk, becomes a story about much more—it places each human life on a continuum with all it did not and will not witness. Gay writes,

My friend Michael and I met today to put together the order for the nut grove the city has asked the Community Orchard to plant and oversee. Hazelnuts, pecans, buartnuts (a mix of heartnut and butternut), hickories. ‘How long until the hickories start making their fruit?’ I asked Michael. He said, ‘Oh, they’ll be in full production in about 200 to 250 years.’ (141)

Without Gay’s attention, this would simply be a piece of trivia. Because of Gay’s attention, this conversation snippet becomes an essay that, combined with the rest of his delights, tells a story of

impossible beauty finding its way even through horror, of hope, of embracing the mystery of trust. Plant something now and have faith it will outlive you.

Like Gay's near-daily essayettes, Sonya Huber's *Supremely Tiny Acts* is also a formal experiment in closely observing the quotidian in search of truth, whether sublime, infuriating, cautiously hopeful, or bittersweet. *Supremely Tiny Acts* is subtitled "a memoir of a day," but the back cover describes it as a "book-length essay." Both forms feel taxonomically correct. The book's dramatic present is a straightforward narrative chronicling Huber's day—November 19, 2019, to be exact—at court following her arrest at a climate protest weeks earlier, and then taking her teenage son to get his learner's permit.

But Huber's detailed scenes—getting to the train from her Connecticut town to New York City (where the protest was held), grading her students' essays on the commute, navigating Grand Central's food court, selecting a gift for her son at a Buddhist shop, sitting with him in the DMV's complicated waiting area, which confuses everybody—become gateways. Some gateways open into flashbacks of the protest, including Huber's ten hours sitting in a jail cell with her fellow arrestees; or into meditations on Huber's grading, "which requires a kind of extended opening of my soul's eyeball or ear"; or into memories of a childhood spent under the mercurial skies of the Midwest; or into questions about the equity of activism that relies on the kind of free time and social protection of most associated with white privilege; or into righteous rants about the impossibility of a mother, wife, writer, and teacher to meet everyone's expectations, including and especially her own (Huber 51). The narrative spine of the book anchors Huber's rich digressions, but it's the digressions that illustrate the vastness of our human existence even as we eat tacos from a plastic container, play games on our phones, or locate the right coat to guard against the temperature outside.

The interplay between a tight, economic narrative of a day and the whole of a person's life—including her interior life—grows from the permission Huber gives herself to associate, and then associate again and again from the same moment, the *plunk* of a stone creating radiating ripples. Even the most

ordinary artifacts—her vibrating FitBit, the chicory in her coffee, a colleague’s text, a student’s essay—prompt a kind of maximalism of the mind.

Here is that maximalism at work, where Huber’s job as a writing teacher spirals out and then back in again: “What I have to do when I read a student’s essay is hold open the cage of my heart,” Huber says as she grades on the train. “That makes me think of John Cage, his song ‘4’33’” that is just silence, that overlaps in his life between Dadaism and Buddhism” (51). From there, Huber meditates on the phrase “cage of the heart,” this time delving into memory—her father’s recent heart surgery, her trip to Illinois to visit him in the hospital, and the time, years ago, she went to that same hospital with a kidney infection so advanced it almost killed her. Then, in a final cognitive leap, Huber alights on an analogy: She compares the sudden opening of one’s heart-cage to the sudden spread of a butterfly’s wings—the kind Nabokov famously chased. “Am I sharpening my students’ tools for surgery or butterfly catching?” she asks, returning us to the dramatic present of her grading (52).

Similar to Gay’s delights (e.g. waking from a dream in which Gay realizes he’s been having an incestuous relationship with his own mother to the relief that none of it was real), the polarity between the mundanity of the present and its parallel inner world can also be downright funny. In the midst of eating tacos in Grand Central, Huber spends four pages following the associations prompted by the black plastic container they came in. What if she had just asked for a paper one? “That’s what I should have done. But instead of being ethical I prefer not to interrupt anyone’s normal routine, I prefer to just glide along and offer zero speedbumps, not to be a trouble, be a horrid good girl,” she says, offering the briefest commentary on gender that resonates with women who go about their days trying not to make anyone uncomfortable (133). Huber eats her tacos, recalls previous trips to the city for treatment for rheumatoid arthritis, appreciates the crisp garnish of raw cabbage she normally eats as sauerkraut in her German family, and tries and fails to read her book. Then the tacos are eaten, and Huber is stuck with the plastic container. She decides it’s too risky to take it home in her bag, where it might leak taco juice onto her

books and papers. “So I put it in the trash and feel a thrill of doomy badness, like I’m just being a regular person and that’s satisfying because my relationship with that piece of plastic is *over*,” she writes (135).

If how we spend our days is how we spend our lives, then Gay and Huber are each taking stock of theirs. In the preface to *The Book of Delights*, Gay surveys his daily essays to discern the ties that bind them. “Because I was writing these essayettes pretty much daily (confession: I skipped some days), patterns and themes and concerns show up,” he says. “For instance, I traveled quite a bit this year. I often write in cafés. My mother is often on my mind. Racism is often on my mind. Kindness is often on my mind. Politics. Pop music. Books. Public space. My garden is often on my mind” (Gay xii). These broad but evergreen subjects could shape many kinds of nonfiction books, including those with larger narrative scopes. But because Gay observes them in the context of his daily life, we see them less as exigences for writing (delight, of course, is the exigence) than inherent to the specific ways Gay encounters and defines delight as a Black poet living in the American Midwest. Some of Gay’s delights might overlap with some of the reader’s, but likely for different reasons. In other words, what we each find delightful depends entirely on what has made us. And this is why we love essays.

Huber, on the other hand, explicitly interrogates why she chose the day of her court appearance for *Supremely Tiny Acts*. After she purchases a glass egg for her son as a gift from her excursion into the city, she writes:

Somehow it’s the beautiful glass egg in my bag that makes me think I should write about this day, because it’s a beating glowing bright heart of surprise. But then I have to fight with myself, like right, typical of you to choose a day to write about where you seem all activist-y and engaged, and is this all a smokescreen for the days in which you’re completely passive and complicit or the most interesting you do is laundry and going to TJ Maxx? And then is this inner bully yet another smokescreen to show how aware I am, to deflect feared external criticism? Russian nested dolls.” (126)

Because this microcosm of Huber’s self-doubt grows out of a heartfelt and innocuous purchase for her son, it contributes to the book’s portrait of Huber as someone who feels conflicted and even guilty about her activism—how it takes her away from her family, how her racial and economic privilege allows her to get arrested without fear of losing her academic job. Yet patriarchal oppression also deems a day of laundry or grocery shopping less worthy of examination, despite Huber having written compellingly about all the other mundane activities that surround her court appearance. This, too, tracks as the familiar double bind.¹⁴

Most creative nonfiction teachers try to convince their students that their subjects and experiences need not be wildly unique or adventurous to make great essays and memoirs. But perhaps our current moment gives us even more cause to elevate daily life in our writing. The COVID-19 pandemic, entering its third year, has for many of us reduced the scope of our living and shone spotlights on parts of our lives that have previously gone unexamined—the “filler” around experiences we more typically deem “important.” We know, for instance, that women’s domestic labor has greatly increased since the beginning of the pandemic, throwing our already-out-of-balance lives into stark relief. The pandemic has exposed just how threadbare many American lives are—and this is especially true in historically marginalized communities. As we confront the unsustainability of our extreme conditions, we should also remember that toasting a Hot Pocket, packing extra masks in our children’s backpacks, or nodding at one another on the street, as Gay does when he encounters another Black person in order to say, as subtly as possible, “I see your innocence,” contain within them our desire to nourish one another, protect one another, and make one another more visible (Gay 26).

This is more than a craft essay. This is an argument to give your life the attention it deserves. This is an argument that the chicken breast matters. The chicken breast is a story about the tension between a mother’s love and ambivalence and patriarchal norms and fighting against them—it’s an essay. This is an

