



George Estreich

Ross Gay's Logics of Delight

As a thought experiment, it's fun to read Ross Gay's *The Book of Delights* and notice things you'd never find in a book by Tomas Tranströmer. Kombucha, for instance. The words "tummy" and "adore." An entire short essay about the writer rubbing coconut oil on his body while looking in a mirror. The early discography of Stevie Wonder. I make no claim about the relative value of Tranströmer and Gay, about the surreal, somber, limpid-cryptic poetry of a Swedish Nobel laureate versus these brilliant American "essayettes" dedicated to delight—I love them both—but to suggest that for a writer (me) more instinctively inclined to the somber, understated, surreal, etc., Gay's essays had an impact. (When I told my wife about the ground rules of Gay's book—every day, write about something delightful—she said, "That doesn't sound like you.")

The best writing doesn't fit my existing tastes; it rewrites them. It makes me question what I think I think, my narrative of self to self, the preferences I think I have. So for me, Gay's essays are disruptive in the best way, because they do not deny melancholy so much as decenter it. They question the assumption I bought into as an undergraduate and probably never fully let go of, that happiness is simple and therefore boring, and that melancholy, along with its whole sorry family tree (grief, depression, the whole DSM-adjacent nine yards) is endlessly complex and interesting. They show that delight can be as simple and complex as sorrow.

As the book unfolds, those complexities transcend the personal: Gay's vision of delight is social and ultimately political. I saw that much on my first reading; the second around, the depths began coming

into focus, the complications beneath a deceptively offhand surface. This essay is an attempt to share what I've found. Gay's book is, among other things, an act of gratitude and attention; feeling grateful for the book's existence, I've tried to pay attention to it, and to understand something about how it works. To try and illuminate Gay's vision of delight, and his portrayal of writing and reading as political acts.

From its opening words, *The Book of Delights* is exactly what its title suggests. It is, yes, a catalogue of written delights; but it's also a *book*, self-referential, recursive, exploring the way delight is expressed, shared, and understood. That double focus is evident in the book's preface:

One day last July, feeling delighted and compelled to both wonder about and share that delight, I decided that it might feel nice, even useful, to write a daily essay about something delightful. I remember laughing to myself for how obvious it was. I could call it something like *The Book of Delights*.

I came up with a handful of 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. The rules made it a discipline for me. A practice. Spend time thinking and writing about delight every day.

From a craft perspective, that opening is amazingly efficient. Even as Gay establishes an informal voice (inviting, accessible, literally reader-friendly), he lays out, even performs, the book's central assumptions. Take the first paragraph, for example. It distills the book's logic, moving from emotion (feeling delighted") to reflection (and compelled to wonder about") to expression (and share"). It embodies Gay's idea (spelled out later in the preface) that delight multiplies when attended to (I remember laughing to myself"). The second paragraph, with its account of Gay's "discipline" and "practice," foreshadows the book's focus on process (we see Gay writing throughout the book, usually in coffee shops); it also links writing to the body (write them by hand," "a handful of rules"). And it ends with the book in the reader's hands, or on her

screen (I could call it something like *The Book of Delights*”), setting the stage for a book that is inventively self-referential, from beginning to end.

Throughout *The Book of Delights*, images of writing and reading are intertwined. It’s fitting, then, that the preface attends to reading nearly as much as writing. In it, Gay considers the book he’s written, seeing what it shows him about himself, what his reflections reflect back to him. Patterns and themes and concerns show up,” he writes:

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. Dreams. Public space. My garden is often on my mind.

This is an efficient summary of the book’s motifs: the writer, looking back, shows the reader what’s to come. It’s an abstract told slant, a poetic distillation. But Gay also sets himself beside the reader, not above or apart: he too is a reader of his book.

In Gay’s list of “things on my mind,” the last, given its own sentence, is the garden. To me, that emphasis is significant. The garden can be read as an image of the book, which feels less assembled than cultivated: Gay tends various ideas over the course of a year, helping them flourish. The book’s formal constraints resemble the tidy boundaries of a garden plot, making an exuberant unruliness possible.

The Book of Delights begins with Gay’s forty-second birthday and ends with his forty-third. In Gay’s hands, that formal choice yields a complex idea of delight, one inextricable from transience and mortality. In the book’s first essay, “My Birthday, Kinda,” Gay writes:

...the older I get—in all likelihood closer to my death than to my birth, despite all the arugula and quinoa—the more I think of this day as a delight.

And in the book's next-to-last essay, "Coco-baby," Gay describes [his] nearly forty-three-year-old body stationed on this plane for the briefest." Between those narrative parentheses, death and delight are linked in image after image. A crossing guard is reimagined as a guide across the River Styx. Using a scythe in the backyard, Gay thinks of the Angel of Death. Recalling his terror on watching *The Exorcist* at age nine, he watches it as an adult and finds it "silly"; he writes, "I was offered another version of the grave: laughter in its midst." Forest soil is "swirling with the living the dead make." These figures strike me as anything but morbid. They're more in the spirit of Whitman, accepting death as inevitable, joining it to organic process: *Look for me under your bootsoles.*

With the brief essay "Donny Hathaway on Pandora," Gay joins this reflection on death and delight to a reflection on writing. Quoting "my friend Jericho" (presumably the poet Jericho Brown), Gay writes that Donny Hathaway's song, with its pickup line "For all we know we may never meet again," is really about dying:

Actual dying. Which is to say, our imminent disappearance is Donny's subject, his *voice's* subject—which the voice's first subject always is, as fading and disappearance are sound's essential characteristics.

Gay's essay has deep roots in poetic tradition. Death, love, lyric: for me, reading "Donny Hathaway on Pandora" disturbed dust in the stacks of memory, brought back decades-old English-major echoes of Donne, of death be not proud and making time run, of Petrarchan sonnets where death and song are factored into the come-on. (Sure, we die, but you'll live forever in verse.)

But Gay recalculates these old equations. In "Donny Hathaway on Pandora," the song is only the beginning: it gives rise to his friend's interpretation, which he interprets in turn. The essay celebrates the transformation of the original song—not its permanence, but its mutability, the way it changes on being received, as Gay's riff on his friend's riff gives way to a song of his own. Hathaway's voice, writes Gay, "is

a voice that makes you realize that your voice is the song of your disappearing, which is our most common song”:

The knowledge of which, the understanding of which, the inhabiting of which, might be the beginning of a radical love. A renovating love, even.

“Donny Hathaway on Pandora” shows us two poets talking about a pop song, but it’s about much more than music. To say that death is “the voice’s first subject,” I’d argue, makes the essay about writing. But it also elevates the reader, who *produces* delight, rather than passively receiving it. To truly understand an idea, to *inhabit* it, is “the beginning of a radical love.”

In a later essay (“Fishing an Eyelash: Two or Three Cents on the Virtues of the Poetry Reading”), Gay recombines the same elements: writing, reading, mortality, delight. Gay writes that he actually prefers poetry readings to books of poetry:

The reason is simple: because during a poetry reading you are watching someone communicate with their body, which is as it communicates in the process of fading away. It will, perhaps one day soon, be dead, I mean. It sounds necrophilic, I know, but it’s not exactly.

Here again, Gay inverts the relationship between death and deathless art, elevating the body’s passing above the word’s relative permanence, the lumpiness of real bodies above the idealized:

Because the fact of the dying, which, too, you and I will do, and which books will not, reminds us that the performing body, the reading body, the living body, the body fiddling with the reading lamp on the podium or playing with the hem of her dress or keeping beat on the microphone like Whitney Houston used to, looking into the corners of the room, the occasional sparkling line of spit between his lips, the armpit of their T-shirt damp, pointing to the giraffe in their poem, all of it, is lustrous.

Gay is hilariously acute about poetry readings (“twelve or thirteen people gathered on couches in . . . one of the most passive-aggressively lit rooms in America”), but the essay turns somber at the end: “In other

words, books don't die. And preferring them to people won't prevent our doing so." "Fishing an Eyelash" ends on a somber note; "Donny Hathaway on Pandora," on a hopeful one. But the "feel" of the ending—major or minor, auroral or crepuscular—is less important than its sudden yet apt arrival: the sudden pivot, the controlled swerve of meaning.

It's the move of a poet writing prose, and for me it's connected to the hummingbirds that show up now and then in the book. When Gay writes that their veering...delights me," he could be describing his essays: they accelerate, turn, and hover, and like hummingbirds they seem both real and improbable, to defy the laws they live by. Their endings remind me of the moment when a hummer angles towards the light, and its throat goes from lightless black to radiant carmine. Gay's essays are about the radiance, but they're also about the pivot: the slight, transformative shift in the angle of vision.

Some books of essays are set in houses, some in wilderness; some navigate labyrinths of text, or memory, or dream. *The Book of Delights*, for the most part, is set in public space. The poetry reading is only one example: we see Gay in coffee shops and bakeries, on airplanes and in airports, in a community garden, at a Laundromat, walking down the street. As the preface tells us, public space is on the author's mind.

For Gay, public spaces afford a specific delight: moments of acknowledgment, kindness, or recognition, often between strangers, often wordless. In "The High-Five from Strangers, Etc.," Gay is working in a café where, he tells us parenthetically, "every other black person in this town was [hiding], every one of them offering some discreet version of the negreeting." When a young white woman offers him an enthusiastic high-five—she has mistaken him for an undergraduate working on a paper—he accepts: "you better believe I high-fived that child in her preripped Def Leppard shirt and her itty-bitty Doc Martens." But that moment swiftly yields to complications. "I love, I delight in, unequivocally pleasant public physical interactions with strangers," Gay tells us, but then continues:

What constitutes pleasant, it's no secret, is informed by my large-ish, male, and cisgender body, a body that is also large-ish, male, cisgender, and not white. In other words, the pleasant, the delightful, are not universal. We all should understand this by now.

Gay's essays are virtual versions of these "unequivocally pleasant physical interactions": in place of high-fives and hugs and casual touch, the essay's language is physically pleasurable, a way of reaching out. The essay simply constitutes a different public sphere, and the connections between strangers in cafés, the moments of recognition, are analogous to the connections between strangers that the essays themselves create. But the essay can also acknowledge and dissect the complications beneath the "unequivocally pleasant.:

In a related essay ("Microgentrification: WE BUY GOLD"), Gay is sitting outside "one of my beloved cafés" when an employee of the pawnshop next door approaches him and asks him to leave: "Hey, buddy, you don't scare me, but I'm afraid you might scare some of my customers, so I'm gonna have to ask you to move on." Gay writes, "Did I mention there was a pink, neon WE BUY GOLD sign flickering in the window above my head?" (The delight part of the essay: Gay returns a year later, and the pawnshop is gone. "Not their porch anymore," writes Gay.)

These moments, though casual, almost anecdotal in feel, are dense with meaning. Each café is a microcosm of American community, each encounter a pinhole lens on a vast landscape. The essays describe public space to raise the question of who is welcome there, and who is welcome is a matter of both economics and race. In the essay "Loitering," Gay makes his critique explicit. He's in a coffee shop, where having spent two dollars on coffee buys him temporary belonging: he has the right to occupy space, a patron and not a loiterer. But the danger of being reclassified is always present; and, as he writes, "the darker your skin, the more likely you are to be 'loitering.'" Gay praises loitering as a source of delight in and of itself, the essence of "the *best* day," but it's also a form of resistance:

It occurs to me that laughter and loitering are kissing cousins, as both bespeak an interruption of production and consumption. And it's probably for this reason that I have been among groups of nonwhite people laughing hard who have been shushed—in a Qdoba in Bloomington, in a bar in Fishtown, in the Harvard Club at Harvard. The shushing, perhaps, reminds how threatening to the order are our bodies in nonproductive, nonconsumptive delight.

The essay contains and defies the command to be silent: Gay cheerfully refuses to be shushed. That Gay does so suggests a political role both for the essay, and for delight itself. If systemic forces can obstruct the possibility of delight, then the equation can be reversed. As Gay writes, “It might be that the logics of delight interrupt the logics of capitalism.” Delight is not only a feeling; it is a force.

Like the book's vision of delight, its cumulative self-portrait is more complex than it first appears. Despite the book's cheer, Gay's affection for affection, his embrace of hugs and high fives, there's another side to identity, as if the self-portrait were burning at the edges. He alludes to past trauma, to a depression that found him “at the brink.” He shows himself as irritable, beset by guilt and an overactive work ethic, a “tendency toward panic and paranoia.”

There's a paradox in these asides: even as they expose the writer, they render him mysterious. They remind me that he might have written another book equally true and utterly different, one in which the delights were asides and the early trauma, the crushing work ethic, the panic and paranoia, the self-criticism, constituted the dominant mood. The Ross Gay we see in these pages is, like any autobiographical character, a construction, a word-assemblage reconstituted by the reader. In it, Gay has chosen to highlight his delight-focused self. In doing so, he highlights his role as a maker—which is, after all, the first thing we read in the book, with Gay's account of his writing process. That sets the stage for a book where making in the broadest sense, from gardening to writing, is inextricably linked to delight.

Gay's self-portrait is reflexive throughout: self-aware, self-questioning, addressing the reader, commenting on his choices as he goes. That approach cannot be disentangled from the various inquiries woven into the book, the heavy freight (racism, capitalism, masculinity) somehow levitated by the voice: as he explores these subjects, Gay reflects on how he expresses them. In another author, that approach might seem coy or narcissistic, but for Gay, it's more like loading a bow. Even when his gaze is inward, his aim is outward. His self-aware approach responds to a lack of awareness; his reflective approach opposes an unreflective racism. "If you're black in this country," writes Gay, "you're presumed guilty...The eyes and heart of a nation are not avoidable things. The imagination of a country is not an avoidable thing."

Throughout *The Book of Delights*, we see Gay subject to "the imagination of a country": the pawnshop owner who imagines him a threat, others at a Qdoba or a university club, imagining his laughter as disruptive. Other examples seem funny, sad, and farcical all at once. He's repeatedly mistaken for the actor who plays the villain in the movie *Ghost*. He's told ("by white women only") that he resembles Barack Obama. Against mistaken identities, the book posits a better fiction: something truer and more complex, suggesting many selves, acknowledging the fact of construction.

That approach is distilled in the book's penultimate essay, "Coco-baby." It's literally reflective: Gay is at home, oiling his body before a mirror, "looking at myself, who I am so often not nice to":

Today when I watched myself, particularly when I was oiling my chest and stomach, which I do kind of by self-hugging, I was thinking how many bodies of mine are in this body, this nearly forty-three-year-old body stationed on this plane for the briefest. I could see, as I always can, probably kind of dysmorphically, my biggest body, when it was 260 pounds and a battering ram and felt sort of impervious. I could also see my twelve-year-old self, chubby and gangly and ashamed. And of course, the baby me, who I don't remember being, though I have seen pictures.

It's interesting to me that this confessional moment—"myself, who I am so often not nice to"—is embedded in a vision of "myself" as multiple. Gay is a Whitmanian writer, celebratory and multitudinous, so the literal self-embrace of the essay ("self-hugging") is a complex act. In a book devoted to the possibilities of community, even the self is a community across time. At the same time, caring for oneself is inseparable from caring for others; a book filled with hugs—a fact Gay acknowledges parenthetically, writing "(yes, another hugging delight)"—includes one for himself.

Unlike most essays in *The Book of Delights*, "Coco-baby" finds the writer at home, by himself. But the essay doesn't turn away from questions of public space so much as transform them. It describes a private ritual in the public space of language, and it considers the way we describe ourselves to others and what it means to receive the description. On what it means to be exposed, and on whose terms:

This time of year I am mostly brown, except for the stretch from my waist to my mid-thighs, which is a lighter shade, neither of them to be compared to a food or coffee drink.

Even in private, "the imagination of the country" is inescapable. In response, Gay rejects clichéd or racist comparisons, but he goes further: he counters these comparisons with exact description, and he implies who gets to do the describing in the first place.

To me, his tone reads as a challenge, a suggestion that the writer's care needs to be matched by the reader's. Here, too, "Coco-baby" picks up on a central concern of the book: the way Black lives are represented, and the way those representations are received. Gay addresses the subject directly in the essay "Still Processing," in which he listens to a podcast about a reality TV show about the lives of Whitney Houston and Bobby Brown:

As I understand it, they were not having an easy time, which, yes, is a euphemism for they were a train wreck, and we do love a train wreck, especially if all the passengers on the train are black.

As in “Coco-baby,” Gay’s tone turns suddenly sharp, which suggests a key point: though the book’s voice is typically engaging and warm, it is, like his self-portrait, *functional*, a tool. Gay can undercut that warmth when it suits him:

... it’s old hat, the commodification of black suffering. If I had a nickel for every white person who can recite lines from *The Wire*. I have no illusions, by which I mean to tell you it is a fact, that one of the objectives of popular culture, popular media . . . [is] to conflate blackness and suffering.

Gay enacts that conflation by way of a startling experiment in concrete poetry: he repeats the words “blackness and suffering” over and over, running the printed words together, turning them to a collapsed incantation, an inkblot that radiates specific meaning. Gay implies that the insistent equation of suffering and Black lives, for profit, renders those lives illegible, even as he embeds that illegibility in a legible, complex inquiry. *The Book of Delights* both dissects exploitative representations and offers itself as an alternative, an ethical act of imagination.

I think that the reality show’s equation of blackness and suffering is what Gay means by “the imagination of a country”: an inescapable, hostile frame for Black lives. Gay argues that that equation is functional, naturalizing systems of oppression that exist “by design.” But his ending pivots quickly, as his essay’s endings do—in this case, as in the preface, to the book in the reader’s hands:

And the delight? You have been reading a book of delights written by a black person. A book of black delight.

Daily as air.

In this essay, I’ve tried to account for the delights already “in” Ross Gay’s book: the elements another reader might reasonably discover, assent to, or co-create. But one of the delights, for me, has less to do with Gay’s work, more with what it shakes loose in me. Even as it transforms and enlarges my understanding of what writing can be, it shifts my sense of why I started writing in the first place.

I'm partway through a manuscript of essays like this—mostly about contemporary writers I love, mostly nonfiction—and each time I write, I come back to poetry. Which is to say, to my own beginnings as a writer, when I got an MFA in poetry, over thirty years ago, and I assumed poetry would always be my main genre. I was wrong about that, but at the same time I'm realizing I never left: that I am mostly (only) interested in essays that provide the concentration and surprise and invention of the best poems, that offer some prose version of what I was looking for in the first place. By some tangle of upbringing and neurochemistry, I gravitated towards reading bleaker things, to poems that accurately named the depression I had yet to fully face. But maybe what I was really after was an intensity equally present in the writing about delight or sorrow. The best writing, like Gay's *The Book of Delights*, includes both impulses, even as it transcends them. What I want—these days, anyway—is a translation of poetic energy into prose, a high-octane fuel in a right-justified machine.

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