

A large, stylized teal illustration of a flowering branch with several five-petaled flowers and large, rounded leaves. The branch curves from the bottom left towards the top right. The text is overlaid on this background.

# The Book of Delights

Essays

“Ross Gay’s eye lands upon  
wonder at every turn, bolstering  
my belief in the countless small  
miracles that surround us.”

—TRACY K. SMITH,  
Pulitzer Prize Winner and Poet Laureate  
of the United States

A small, stylized pink flower with five petals and a thin stem, positioned to the left of the author's name.

**ROSS GAY**

National Book Award Finalist and Winner of the  
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## 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.

Because I was writing these essayettes pretty much daily (confession: I skipped some days), patterns and themes and concerns show up. 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. Dreams. Public space. My garden is often on my mind.

It didn't take me long to learn that the discipline or practice of writing these essays occasioned a kind of delight radar. Or maybe it was more like the development of a delight muscle. Something that implies that the more you study delight, the more delight there is to study. A month or two into this project delights were calling to me: *Write about me! Write about me!* Because it is rude not to acknowledge your delights, I'd tell them that though they might not become essayettes, they were still important, and I was grateful to them. Which is to say, I felt my life to be more full of delight. Not without sorrow or fear or pain or loss. But more full of delight. I also learned this year that my delight grows—much like love and joy—when I share it.

## 8. The Negreeting

IT'S A LOT of pressure to nod at every black person you see. That's what I'm thinking, generously, sitting on a bench in an alley in Bloomington between the chocolate shop and farm-to-table and across the street from the e-cig store, where the sun warms the brick wall behind me as a guy I see around town who mostly never acknowledges me walks by, not acknowledging me. In this town, where the population of black people is scant, the labor of acknowledgment is itself scant. (There he goes again, sipping his cranberry Le Croix, sunglasses on, paying me no mind. I like his sneakers, red like mine, and thought maybe in addition to being American phenotypical kin we might also be consumer kin. What a loss.) Though maybe that's not right, and I'm neglecting the significant emotional burden, the emotional labor, of

needing—of feeling the need, or feeling the mandate—to nod at every black person you pass. Maybe my not-kin (mind you, I never expect white people to nod at me) was just rejecting the premise and the mandate. (Maybe he didn't see you, you ask? He saw me. Maybe he thought you were Dominican? Same diff!)

I was recently in Vancouver where they clearly have some entirely different racial thing going on—all manner of brown types, some nonbrown, too—though fewer, I'm guessing, African American types. I was just walking around, making crude and generalized observations, forgive me. Anyway, for two days I don't think I negreeted once—oh, I tried, at the Thai place, where a mixed family's brown infant was babbling and not eating his food cutely, and his black father, more or less right next to me, mostly never once acknowledged my presence despite his child not taking his eyes off me and me making futile slightly pleadingly negreeting eyes at him. Maybe dad was jealous? I doubt it. Anyway, my neighbor's non-negreeting felt in Canada almost like a non-non. He was eating his Thai food with his family and keeping this beautiful floppy afro'd child from sticking a chopstick up his nose.

(One of my father's favorite stories, and, to me, one of his saddest, was when he was working the register at Red Barn in Youngstown and a black customer

concluded his order with the word *brother*. My father replied, “My mother didn’t raise any fools.” It must’ve hurt the guy’s feelings, because my dad had to pull out his Louisville Slugger to quell the disagreement, so he said. It hurts my feelings.)

When I landed back in Denver, bereft of negreetings for my two days in Canada, I was immediately negreeted, again and again, five times in ten minutes, which felt comfortable and inviting and true. Felt like being held, in a way, and seen, in a way.

My friend Abdel has been writing a book about innocence, and I’m going to co-opt a touch of what he’s exploring—particularly the fact that innocence is an impossible state for black people in America who are, by virtue of this country’s fundamental beliefs, always presumed guilty. It’s not hard to get this. Read Michelle Alexander’s *New Jim Crow*. Or Devah Pager’s work about hiring practices showing that black men without a record receive job callbacks at a rate lower than white men previously convicted of felonies. Statistics about black kids being expelled from nursery and elementary schools. Police killing unarmed black people, sometimes children, and being acquitted.

If you’re black in this country you’re presumed guilty. Or, to come back to Abdel, who’s a schoolteacher and thinks a lot about children, you’re not allowed to

be innocent. The eyes and heart of a nation are not avoidable things. The imagination of a country is not an avoidable thing. And the negreeting, back home, where we are mostly never seen, is a way of witnessing each other's innocence—a way of saying, "I see your innocence."

And my brother-not-brother ignoring me in his nice red kicks? Maybe he's going a step further. Maybe he's imagining a world—this one a street in Bloomington, Indiana—where his unions are not based on deprivation and terror. Not a huddling together. Maybe he's refusing the premise of our un-innocence entirely and so feels no need to negreet. And in this way proclaims our innocence.

Maybe.

*(Sep. 6)*

## 9. The High-Five from Strangers, Etc.

TODAY I WAS wandering the square of the small Indiana town where I gave a poetry reading at the local college. (A feature of the small-town Midwest: a city-hallish building in the center, always with some sad statue trumpeting one war or another. This one had a guy in one of those not-very-protective-looking hats they called a helmet during WWI. He's carrying, naturally, a gun. Jena Osman's book *Public Figures* alerted me to the ubiquity of the gun, the weapon, in the hands of our statues. A delight I wish to now imagine and even impose, given that beneficent dictatorship [of one's own life, anyway] is a delight, all new statues must have in their hands flowers or shovels or babies or seedlings or



chinchillas—we could go on like this for a while. But never again—never ever—guns. I decree it, and also decree the removal of the already extant guns. Let the emptiness our war heroes carry be the metaphor for a while.) As I was finishing circling the square, I passed a storefront garage with huge Make America Great Again signs. It was a foreign auto repair shop, and inside were mostly Toyotas and Hondas.

I settled into the coffee shop (where, it seemed, every other black person in this town was [hiding], every one of them offering me some discreet version of the negreet-ing), took my notebooks out, and was reading over these delights, transcribing them into my computer.

And while I was working, headphones on, swaying to the new De La Soul record (delight, which deserves its own entry), I noticed a white girl—she looked fifteen, but could've been, I suppose, a college student—standing next to me with her 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!” And you better believe I high-fived that child in her prepped Def Leppard shirt and her itty-bitty Doc Martens. For I love, I delight in, unequivocally pleasant public physical interactions with strangers. 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.

A few months ago, walking down the street in Umbertide, in Italy, a trash truck pulled up beside me and the guy in the passenger's 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 have understood him. He knew this, and hopping out of the truck to dump in a couple cans, he flexed his muscles, pointed at me, and smacked my biceps hard. Twice! I loved him! Or when a waitress puts her hand on my shoulder. (Forget it if she calls me honey. Baby even better.) 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, and shuffling down the aisle I saw, sitting at the front of coach, reading a magazine, 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, which made me look back at my not-Uncle Earl who looked maybe like my Uncle

Earl's second cousin twenty years ago. And though it was benign, and no one was hurt, it was a little weird, and they looked confused. All the same, given as Uncle Earl died about six months later, I'm delighted I got to see him, and touch him, gently, lovingly, about one thousand miles away.

*(Sep. 9)*

## 24. Umbrella in the Café

I'M ON MY way to New Brunswick for a reading and decided to stop in Jersey City at a bakery on Jersey Avenue called Choc-O-Pain, with croissants and quiche that smelled so good as I walked in this morning I closed my eyes and reached out like I was falling. This place is kitty-corner to a place called Nicole's, a West Indian joint where they have the best roti I've ever eaten, and when I stopped in yesterday on my way into New York to get one, the owner, Nicole, said to me, "I was just thinking about you on Sunday." Had she not added Sunday, the cynic in me might have thought she was just being a good businessperson, but that Sunday made it precise and kind of holy, like maybe she was praying for me, and however it was I flitted through Nicole's mind, a little butterfly, a little flutterbye, delights me, given

the cancer she has been afflicted with these past several years. How beautiful and dark she looked, like maybe she'd gone home for a few weeks, I wondered.

In the bakery—let me interrupt myself to acknowledge how often thus far in my journey of delight a food or food-type establishment and experience is the occasion of a delight, that it might form a kind of atlas or map of delights, which is a *very* good idea for a book, perhaps a companion book to this one; the map of delights!—I was sitting here reading C. D. Wright's last book, *The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All*, which I love and mourn its being the last one, forever the last one. And where I am sitting, with my legs crossed (I am long-leggedly tall and sometimes it's a puzzle where to put my legs), my right foot, in a now very-large-seeming red sneaker, is in the path of every person who walks in the door and out the door, which makes for a lanky and regular semi-distraction from the page. The proximity, the negotiation, the closeness also means mini-contacts again and again as I bob my big red foot down, but briefly, so as not to catch a cramp in my hamstring or calf, which would be dangerous.

A guy on his way out, after buying his Americano and scooting by my big red bobbing foot, and smiling

softly at me, and me at him, looked at the drizzle through the big plate-glass window, put his coffee down, opened his umbrella, put it over his head, picked up his coffee, then realized, I presume, that he was still inside this bakery. (The window was very clean.) I saw him giggle to himself, realizing, I think, what he had done—let me interrupt to mention that a man with a sack of some sort slung over his shoulder just entered Choc-O-Pain and exclaimed, “Good morning, Jersey City family!”—and so lowered his umbrella and walked quickly out, with a smirk that today I read as a smirk of gentleness, of self-forgiveness. Do you ever think of yourself, late to your meeting or peed your pants some or sent the private e-mail to the group or burned the soup or ordered your cortado with your fly down or snot on your face or opened your umbrella in the bakery, as the cutest little thing?

*(Nov. 28)*

## **45. Microgentrification: WE BUY GOLD**

YOU MIGHT HAVE called it a microaggression, or a macroaggression, when about a year ago I was sitting on the far end of the porch/stoop situation outside one of my beloved cafés, which shared the stoop with a pawn shop, I forget the name, in front of which I sat, or to the side of which I sat, where the sun was sneaking under the awning, and while I was blissed out, eyes closed, holding my eight-ounce coffee in my lap, bathing in vitamin D, all the tanks of my immunity being refilled, an employee at the pawn shop interrupted by saying, “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.” Did I mention there was

a pink, neon WE BUY GOLD sign flickering in the window above my head?

Anyway, I recalled this interaction as I was leaving that very same café, which has now expanded next door into the WE BUY GOLD store, and looked at the porch where about a year ago I had been told to scoot. Not their porch anymore.

*(Feb. 22)*



## 47. The Sanctity of Trains

SOMETHING I'VE NOTICED riding on Amtrak trains, like the one I'm on right now between Syracuse and Manhattan, is that people leave their bags unattended for extended periods of time. Maybe they go to the end of the car to use the bathroom, or sometimes they go to the far end of the train to the café, which smells vomity like microwave cheese. My neighbor on this train—across the aisle and one row up—disappeared for a good twenty minutes, her bag wide open, a computer peeking out, not that I was checking. She is not unusual in this flaunting of security, otherwise known as trust, on the train. Nearly everyone participates in this practice of trust, and without recruiting a neighbor across the aisle to “keep an eye on my stuff while I use the restroom,” which seems to be a coffee shop phenomenon. Trusting

one's coffee shop neighbor, but not the people in line, et cetera.

I suppose, given the snugness of a train, especially if it's full, one might speculate there's a kind of eyes-on-the-street-ness at play, although it seemed to me, this morning, when I was first leaving my valuables on my seat for pilfering, my laptop and cellphone glittering atop my sweatshirt and scarf, most everyone was sleeping and so provided little if any eyewitness deterrent.

I suppose I could spend time theorizing how it is that people are not bad to each other, but that's really not the point. The point is that in almost every instance of our lives, our social lives, we are, if we pay attention, in the midst of an almost constant, if subtle, caretaking. Holding open doors. Offering elbows at crosswalks. Letting someone else go first. Helping with the heavy bags. Reaching what's too high, or what's been dropped. Pulling someone back to their feet. Stopping at the car wreck, at the struck dog. The alternating merge, also known as the zipper. This caretaking is our default mode and it's always a lie that convinces us to act or believe otherwise. Always.

*(Mar. 2)*

## 49. Kombucha in a Mid-century Glass

IT IS NO small delight that this delight is one that previously might have incited in me a kind of misguided disgust, one I will blame on my mother and father's precarious economic standing during my childhood, which is not blaming my parents but a system that delights in such precarity, and *requires* it, so that people like the president of the United States and all the billionaires fluffing him can buy islands and very good health care, a system that has helped me to be quite confused and angry and guilty about things like comfort, my own included, though I am being helped in disentangling all this by a very good therapist whom I trust in part because he says things like "Our life on this plane is about getting to pure love." And that's a no-brainer.

All that to say what incites in me pleasure, or delight (T-shirt idea: INCITE DELIGHT! Or, INSIGHT DELIGHT!), can also incite in me self-loathing, disgust, and guilt, which is such grade-school, textbook psycho-doofusness as to be laughable, though the bad feeling tends only to be laughable in retrospect. Like, “You’re killing yourself over that? C’mon baby. You’re just fine.”

For god’s sake though, all I want to tell you, share with you, minus the whole psychological encumbrance, is that last night I was sitting on the couch drinking homemade kombucha from a mid-century, probably a fifties-style, water glass, maybe a six ounce, with a light blue floral pattern. I have questioned my growing affinity for some of the aesthetics of that era, the fifties, the not-so-good old days, as a kind of aesthetic assimilation, questioning I realized was actually a centering of whiteness when I remembered my Papa’s house in Youngstown with the rhubarb plants out back, mid-century par excellence. Aunt Butter’s more or less the same. I did not expect this delight to illuminate my afflictions like this.

Anyhow, the booch had just the right sweetness and fizz—I could feel my tummy’s trillion flora fornicating as it went down. And the glass was small enough to both

encourage moderation and highlight the pleasure of the refill, a pleasure, it is important to note, that has an inverse relationship to the size of the vessel. This probably explains why when drinking muscadine wine, the only wine I actually really like, and, a “country wine,” conveniently fitting into my whole class drama, I more or less require a small glass, six ounces or less, ideally with a floral pattern painted on that you can feel when you run your fingers over it, the fermented elixir inside somehow doubly dignified by the humane, by which I mean handmade, aspect of its holding.

*(Mar. 6)*

## 67. Cuplicking

TODAY I FOUND myself (I adore that construction for its Whitmanian assertion of multitudinousness) licking the little remnants, little stains, from the coffee dribbling down the rim of the cup. More fastidious than lascivious—kind of cleaning the cup. Like a raccoon.

The first time I noticed someone doing this it was my friend, my professor, Susan Blake. I was back at Lafayette College on a teaching fellowship, and we were meeting over lunch to talk about me coteaching the *Invisible Man* unit. She got a warm-up on her coffee as we were eating dessert, pumpkin pie I think, and I noticed her lick the cup, unselfconsciously removing the dribble stains. I can't recall if she looked to see how thorough a job she did, though I usually do, and will touch up where I've missed. Nor do I recall if she

licked the cup more than once, though I assume she did, since I do, and she was my teacher in licking the cup. I think I wondered, when she licked the cup, dragging her broad tongue against the porcelain, if she was flirting, if cuplicking was a way middle-aged people communicate desire.

Being a middle-aged person now, it's no surprise that I worry that any odd gesture might smuggle with it the possibility for misperception as flirting with beginning-aged people, some of whom I teach, and that, friends, is a losing battle. By which I mean to say, I don't think she was flirting and, if I lick the cup while in the presence of students, I do it surreptitiously and never, god forbid, while making eye contact. When Professor Blake, which she forbade me from calling her and so made me a kind of adult—when Susan generously read the first two chapters of my dissertation, she asked me, without meaning to hurt my feelings, if I spent anywhere near as much time on my prose as I do my poems. When she handed the sixty or so pages back, all sliced up with red-penned comments, she also handed me a handbook kind of book called *Writing Prose* (ninth edition) with the ugliest teal cover ever. How do we thank our dead teachers?

(Apr. 22)