

## [PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

### [Soundbyte from Ross Gay]

“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 dozey 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 aflame,  
looking me dead in the eye  
from the branch that grew into my window,  
cooche-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,  
frowning 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/](https://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 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 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 gumi 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 potoates.

**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*.

*SAL transcripts are created through the use of <https://otter.ai> and produced by a transcription process that is lightly edited for concision. Accuracy may vary.*