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Poet, Reader, and Subject:
A Review of Ross Gay's *Catalog of
Unabashed Gratitude*

Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude, by Ross Gay. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.

In the first line of the titular poem of Ross Gay's new book of poems, *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*, the speaker gives the audience a choice masked as a decorous introduction to the piece: "Friends, will you bear with me today." In one sense, the line represents a simple binary: stay or go; listen or do not, and to the extent that the poem is the second to last of the book, it's a safe bet that the choice to stay is forgone. But the line resonates in significant ways that make the poem, and the entire book, a compelling look at the nature of the confessional poem, as well as the creative process.

First and foremost, the line above establishes an explicit relationship between poet and reader. (And I am going to use poet throughout, rather than a more neutral term such as speaker, specifically because of the many moments in which these poems engage the concept of the poet and writing poetry. Likewise, I am going to use reader, rather than audience, because, similarly, the term reader is used throughout Gay's book.) This relationship moves beyond what we could characterize as the implicit relationship between reader and the poem, one that suggests that there is always, in some sense, a reader, whether concrete or assumed or imagined. Though I admit that this is an oversimplification of the relationship between reader (or audience) and poem (or any text), I want to draw attention to the way that some form of reader is generally implied.

The line "Friends, will you bear with me today" is explicit; it engages a reader with the presence and agency to react to, or act on, the poem. Consider what follows: "Friends, will you bear with me today / for I have awakened from a dream . . ." The primary motivation for this poem is this dream, but the speaker, sensing the audience may walk away, may not listen, must address that possibility—first and

foremost, by imploring them to "bear with me." But as with any dream, the material is personal, subconscious, highly specific, and often lacks the dreamer's significance once communicated to another individual. This is especially the case when the material of the dream is somewhat less than sublime:

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,
coochie-cooing my chin . . . (82)

The language here is representative of the poet's language throughout the book: a mixture of heightened imagery and narrative (e.g., ". . . stomped something from the south / of Spain, its breast aflame") and colloquial, sometimes silly language like "coochie-cooing." Such a combination here and elsewhere throughout the book works effectively to cultivate an authentic sense of the poet's mindset, one that values a linguistic, visceral spontaneity driven by elemental feeling. More interestingly, the poet recognizes the potential the reader's indifference, especially, I think, because of the nature of the material arising from the dream. The speaker goes on:

. . . 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 . . .
and who among us could ignore such odd
and precise council? (82-83)

The question at the end of the dream's narrative functions well as both a rhetorical question and a call for support. In both cases, we see the speaker turning toward the reader, in light of the poet-reader relationship, in order to garner support or plead the case for the dream-inspired litany that follows.

And what follows is nothing less than an exultation of what all comes to the poet's mind that deserves reverence and thanks from the speaker's taking part in the birth and cultivation of a community

orchard, "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 cow shit . . . twirling dung with my pitchfork / again and again / with hundreds and hundreds of other people, / we dreamt an orchard this way . . ." to the close call of a friend's suicide attempt: "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," to "the tiny bee's shadow perusing these words as I write them," to the "quick and gentle flocking / of men to the old lady falling down / on the corner of Fairmount and 18th . . ."

The poem focuses on accounting for, in some final way, those things in the world not worked through in the poems preceding this one. It's important to note the specificity of the subject matter: this is a world populated by ideas, individuals, and instances that are all very close to the poet, as opposed to, say, the mythic or abstract subjects such as justice, peace, etc. This is not to say, however, that the book does not dwell on such matters. One of the strengths of the book is the ease at which such ideas are cultivated from the seemingly small and highly personal. Take for instance this sequence in the poem "ode to buttoning and unbuttoning my shirt":

. . . or sometimes
the buttons
will be on the other
side and
I am a woman that day
or some of it
anyway
my conversations are different
and the car bomb slicing the air
and the people in it
for a quarter mile
and the honeybee's
legs furred with pollen
mean another
thing to me than on other days (7-8)

But while the poem "catalog of unabashed gratitude" is, for the most part, unabashed in its delivery, the poet engages the reader on two separate occasions for staying with the poem, as if such a display does take an exceptional patience or tolerance for what the poet has to say. Here is an instance of the poet interacting with the reader, who again is portrayed as having agency in the poem:

. . . I can't stop
my gratitude, which includes, dear reader,
you, for staying with me,
for moving your lips just so as I speak.
Here is a cup of tea. I have spooned honey into it. (86)

In a sense this welcoming interlude is no different than any other specific instance of giving thanks, yet, an interesting tension seems to arise among poet, reader, and subject matter. In what way, if any, must such a buoyant poem be born by the reader? I'm not entirely sure. But on reading these passages, I get a sense that the poet recognizes that on some level such a prolonged reverie weighs differently on the reader than it does on the one who's lived and now poeticizes it. That the poet assumes, or rightly points out, that the reader's lips are moving in unison with the poet's recitation is also interesting. Such harmony suggests a much more intimate relationship between poet and reader, a unification that occurs within the poem itself, as part of the poem, rather than at some implied distance. Toward the end, the reader is thanked again "for hanging tight, dear friend." The poet goes on to say:

I know I can be longwinded 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. (93)

The line, "Soon it will be over" recalls, in a sense, the first line of the poem when the speaker asks the reader to bear with the poet, that in some way getting through the poem will be strenuous work. The poet's relationship to the reader seems all the more concrete and visceral through the poet's desire to cleanse the reader, the combination of awkwardness and delicate care that comprise the process, and how the line "Soon it will be over" is both comforting, and a little disconcerting, as if the poet is acknowledging a particularly trying or traumatic experience.

But trying for who? The line "Soon it will be all over" seems to be there to comfort the poet as well. After all, cultivating such an extensive catalog, giving it language, is nothing if not difficult, exhausting. And in this book, some of the most compelling moments speak explicitly to that difficulty. For instance, in the poem "patience" very early on in the book, we see the speaker quickly question the extent to which the imagery communicates his intent:

. . . these sort of phallic spires
ringleted by these sort of vaginal blooms
which the new bees being bees, heed;
and yes, it is spring, if you can't tell
from the words my mind makes
of the world . . . (15)

Admittedly, it's not entirely clear in the lines above whether the poet has doubts about the efficacy of the images or the reader's ability to make out what those images mean. That said, other instances seem to speak to the poet's awareness of how easily one can fail to communicate to another, and in that sense, questions of efficacy of language and the poet's ability to use and control language arise throughout the book. Not every poem or event triggers such a dilemma, but when those moments arise, the poet addresses them explicitly.

In the poem "feet" we see variation of this relationship between speaker and poetics:

. . . 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 . . . (21-22)

Here, the poet seems to go after the efficacy of the poem (or his poetry) to communicate his intent. Trying "sadly" could be an admission of failure, but in what way? It seems as if the poet's inability to communicate via poetic language is the nature of the failure here, but the reader knows what the speaker is trying to do via the poet literally using that phrase. It's a trick, maybe, but the trick works, right? The speaker communicates his intent, though not with the desired poetic language, which in turn becomes part of the narrative. One could argue, as the poet does, that moments like these can be distracting, or, horseshit. But in this book, I think these moments are enriching

because they produce a vital level of confessional immediacy articulating just how tenuous and frustrating the relationship is between the poet not entirely in control of the language and a subject that can, at any time, elude that language.

This is not to say that such instances always bring about defeat. In the poem "to the mistake," the poet is:

. . . lecturing
on the miracle
of the mistake
in a poem
that hiccup or weird
gift that spirals
what's dull and land-locked
into as-yet-untraversed i.e. cosmic
(I overuse that metaphor
with my students . . . (46)

This situation that the poet emphasizes strikes me as similar to those above in how they both cultivate an awareness of how the composing process can break down. In this case, we see the poet placing value on that breakdown as a way to liberate an otherwise pedestrian piece of work. To some extent, any engagement of these breakdowns becomes fruitful for the poet. Recall that the poet loves when a poet says "*I am trying to do this* / or *I am trying to do that*." Though not the same thing as using a mistake to turn a poem, both instances speak to the poet's engagement of the subject in the moment.

Elsewhere, though, such breakdowns produce a much more visceral, desperate reaction. In what is easily one of the strongest poems in the book, "spoon," the poet remembers a murdered friend while contemplating his reflection in the face of a spoon:

I swore when I got into this poem I would convert
this sorrow into some kind of honey with the little musics

I can sometimes make with these scribbled artifacts
of our desolation. I can't even make a metaphor

of my reflection upside down and barely visible
in the spoon. I wish one single thing made sense.

To which I say: *Oh get over yourself*.
That's not the point. (40)

In these lines, we can see a poet alienated or shut out by the subject matter, unable to cultivate the language with which to articulate the moment. The description of poetry as "little musics" is strikingly distant, as is "these scribbled artifacts / of our desolation." This time, the breakdown brings to the fore an estrangement from the poem that must be confronted, but might not be resolved, even when the speaker brings himself back into the subject at hand.

We see this otherness again, though more fully formed and purposeful, in the poem "the opening," which recollects the poet's relationship with his father who has since passed away. In the poem, the poet has a voice, but he sits alongside an entirely separate, concrete persona:

You might rightly wonder what I am doing here
in the passenger seat of this teal Mitsubishi

with the hood secured by six or seven thick strips of duct tape
sitting next to Myself, who sits in the driver's seat . . .

. . . you wonder rightly what it is I am saying
quietly in the ear of myself, and what I am pointing at

with one hand while the other rests on Myself's shoulder . . .

(60-61)

While the weight of the poem rests on the poet's relationship with his father, the cleaving of the poet into separate individuals creates perhaps the most compelling relationship in the book. Every memory, every action of the poet exists in relationship to "Myself" who is there to bear this weight with the poet as he tenuously, painfully works through the series of memories and emotions in order to come to some conclusion about where he is and what he is doing. For instance, in a particularly difficult flight of imagination the poet considers matricide as an alternative to watching his mother live and slowly dissolve without his father: "You likewise might wonder how Myself has arrived at this flamboyant terror . . . he poured a poison / into his mother's half-eaten tub of blueberry yogurt, / which imagined matricide is perhaps especially jarring / to Myself, given the awkward walking he does / avoiding ants and other tiny beasts."

What is equally significant to the obvious and painful urgency of the poet's emotional process is the reader's presence in the ordeal. The phrase "you likewise might wonder" appears several times

throughout the poem and in several variations. And whether this you "might wonder" or "rightly wonder[s]," the uncertainty of the poem is never more immediate than when the poet, as he does throughout the book, turns to the reader to make some appeal or another, draws the reader into the work, or as it often seems, cannot conceive the poem, even the most difficult, without the reader playing a crucial role.