

Excerpts from *The Book of Delights*

By: Ross Gay

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

16. Hummingbird

- 55 Today as I was walking down Foothill Boulevard to do laundry (the Laundromat one of my delights—not quite the democratic space of the post office or public library, but still, delightful) a hummingbird buzzed past me and alighted in a mostly dead tree poking almost up to the power line. The bird sat on the spindly branch that bounced in the breeze, twisting its head this way and that, but pretty much just stood still, looking out over the traffic jam on the far side of the street, not moving even as I got directly beneath it. I've never seen one sitting still like that for so long so in the open, although Stephanie thinks the hummingbird might be my totem animal given how they seem to follow me around.

- (While I'm writing this, sitting on the curb outside the Laundromat, a young woman
56 walked by wearing a winter cat hat with pointy ears, walking a mini Doberman pinscher wearing matching pink booties, skittering across the asphalt. I swear to you.)

Once I saw a hummingbird perusing the red impatiens outside my building at school, and I walked slowly over to the planting, plucked one, and held it in my outstretched hand perfectly still, long enough that at least one student walking my way crossed the street so as not to get too close to me, until the blur of light did in fact dip its face into the meager sweet in my hand. And another time I was visiting with a woman I'd met at a reading in Berkeley who wanted to show me her garden (that's not a euphemism—her actual garden). After we walked through the actual garden, admiring the fruit trees and herbs and busy beehives, we sat down on the deck overlooking it all, and she got around to telling me about a friend of hers whose husband was ill and encouraged her to take other lovers if she wanted, which she did—want and take. How's it going for her, I asked, and before my host could respond, a hummingbird buzzed by, almost ruffling her long gray hair, and dipped its beak neck-deep into the honeysuckle just behind my new friend's head, its wings almost moaning, the sound of slurping nearly audible as the bird eased its head in and out of the flower, at which she said, nodding, "I think it's going alright."

(Oct. 6)

19. The Irrepressible: The Gratitudes

- 63 No, not everything irrepressible. (Delight: a T-shirt I saw that read, "Make it scary to be a racist again." Though, truly, difficult as this is, I want light shone on the racist, too, and the hateful in me, too. Which is the frightened. Little more.) I'm actually talking about this amaranth plant I see growing in the thumb-thick cracks in the asphalt beneath a chain-link fence with three strands of barbed wire strung atop that. Just in case, I guess. It looks like it's escaped from a planting of the

stuff in a barrel planter behind the chain link and barbed wire. The plants are lush with green foliage—the part sometimes called callaloo—and pinkish, conical flowers. Some are perfectly erect; some bow their heads, like they're listening, or like they're looking back for someone, waiting on them. "Come on," they seem to whisper when the breeze blows through them. They're bodies against a fence. They're candles.

They're also visited, we can see, since we're very close now, by honeybees, recently added to the endangered species list. So close are we that we can see that each flower, as is so often the case, is actually many flowers. A few bumblebees—is the name because they bumble? If so, it's a misnomer, given these things crawl elegantly on the flower clusters, reminding me of Philippe Petit of *Man on Wire* fame, or, more sweetly, more to the point, a baby's hand wrapping around my finger, which—right now, in my life, there is a child named Auri, whose hand wraps my finger when I put it in her little palm and she totters across the room, which is one of the delights.

My dad was an irrepressible know-it-all, which sometimes could be a delight, sometimes not, and one of his delightful facts was that a bumblebee (misnomer—ballerina bee) was an impossibility. Too much mass. Too teeny of wings. Once he said it as one buzzed right by us. *That's impossible*, he said, smiling.

If you get closer to the amaranth, you'll notice in the lighter-colored flowers—the reddish, fiery pink sort of fading to a lavender—that the flowers are giving way to the seeds, of which, on every flower—the bees know this, the honey and ballerinas and the many I can't see—by my estimation, there are a zillion. A zillion seeds on every flower, I'm saying. Maybe one hundred flowers. Meaning, check my math here, one hundred zillion seeds. Meaning, keep your calculators out, one hundred zillion future plants, on every one of which how many flowers, how many seeds (some of which are now in a paper bag in my pocket, thank you very much). This is what I think exponential growth actually means. This is why I study gratitude. Or what I mean when I say it. From a crack in the street.

(Oct. 21)

84. Fireflies

Just beyond the pear tree already wealthy with sun-blushed fruitlets is an alcove of trees, a dense black screen made by the walnuts and maples that is, for these lucky weeks, pierced by the lumen-tummied bugs, one of which landed on my neck earlier today, crawling down my arm to my hand, balancing itself when I brought it closer by throwing open the bifurcated cape its wings make. How common a creature it seems before its cylindrical torso starts glowing, intermittently, at which point it is all of strangeness and beauty in one small body. What's the opposite of anthropomorphism? That's what I mean to do.

I have a strong memory, I wonder if it's true, of my father taking my brother and me to the dusty fields behind Longmeadow Apartments, where we lived for a year, to look at the moonless black night being pierced by fireflies, or lightning bugs, depending on where you live. I can feel my small hand in my dad's big hand, mesmerized by this show, which I don't think I knew was

made by bugs. There is some profound lyric lesson in witnessing an unfathomably beautiful event in the dark night, an event illegible except for its unfathomable beauty, while leaning your head into your father's hip, which probably smelled of Cavatini or Mexican Pizza from Pizza Hut. I don't know what it is, but I am certain of it.

(June 13)