On Keeping Notebooks

by Margaret Emma Brandl

Gary Paul Nabhan writes in cartoonish print, a capital Q like a lollipop—tiny stroke, giant O at the top. His handwriting is huge. He skips pages. He begins writing a poem in all-caps; the poem is in sections and he switches to sentence case by section IV. The rest of the book is blank.

I am sitting in the Special Collections reading room, digging through boxes of other people's notebooks, diaries, and day planners. What sticks out about Nabhan's books is the varying sizes, colors, and materials: there is a handmade red leather notebook like a traveler's notebook: compact, chunky, soft, the leather a texture I've heard other people call "buttery" and covered in pen marks. In contrast to that, an ugly cream book adorned with butterflies, still bearing the original vellum insert that advertises the manufacturer, ending in the line, "Remember, there's no 'right' way to journal, just *your* way!"

The line is ironic in that I have come here to see if I am doing it "right."

Barry Lopez has these collections of tiny, flimsy pocket notebooks, some of them still bearing price stickers from the "U of O Bookstore"; the paper is thin and yellow and his handwriting is beautiful script. The notebooks I page through of his (there are so many boxes of his documents that it is not enough to request "Barry Lopez Box X"—one must specify the year, etc.) are full of ephemera and moveable bits, notes for a book cut up and taped down in search of a structure.

Since I was younger I've always loved to read books that mimic a journal or diary, that are full of doodles and tiny details. I love to note how my colleagues—other writers, other graduate students—take notes, in class and in life. A poet I know brings a small, lovely book to class—leather or something like it—and I watch him write careful, pointed sentences as I scribble random things in a spiral one-subject notebook from Walmart. A fiction writer I observe carries a gutted-out composition book and produces, occasionally, torn-out pages on which she crosses things out.

My greatest accomplishment that no one knows about is that I have kept a notebook since the first of January, 2003, recording every day. This is not something I mention in conversation because writers have always kept notebooks—and because I am an obsessive person and not always sure my notebooks are something to be proud of. Unlike Sarah Manguso, whose book *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* tells of how she later types all her paper journals into computer documents with a critical editor's eye, I still keep these daily notebooks on paper; and I don't go back to make edits. Also unlike Manguso, I do not generally, in my notebooks, seek to capture moments of brilliance or importance or poetic significance. I am tied to the mundane: that is, we ate dinner here; after that I picked this up; after that I worried about this; after that I went to bed. It can be cathartic to dump the contents of my head onto the page, but when I fall behind and feel the pressure of the literal years of having done this, pressure to fill in the days I've missed and keep the notebooks going, it weighs on me like a chore, like a responsibility. I

always go back and get it down—whatever "it" is, even if that means I have to relive moments I'd rather forget. I feel this immense loyalty to the process, though at the end of the day I'm not sure why.

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John Lane has difficult handwriting, but his notebooks contain the occasional illustration. I find a hilarious cartoony doodle of someone in a flipped kayak. The person under the water is still in the kayak, holding a paddle, mouth wide open in shock. Two curved arrows indicate the direction the boat needs to roll. The previous page features the same surprised figure (his nose a triangle, like a bird) on water that looks like a fluffy cloud. Under the drawing, the label "KAYAK." Lane's boxes are also full of mostly-unused planners; what I call in my notes "an absurd surplus of calendars." They are all themed, all illustrated—the New World Cycle of Celebrations calendar, a Norman Rockwell calendar, a thing that labels itself "A Poetry Daybook for 1994." A Frank Lloyd Wright calendar houses loose certificates: in 1970, Cleveland Junior High School recognized Lane for basketball.

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Ongoingness is not what I expect. I'm thinking that Manguso and I will be kindred spirits; but as it turns out her diary is more of what I would call a real writer's notebook—a genre different from the notebooks I carry around. My original notebooks were supposed to be for "real" writing—that is, stories and poems, not daily goings-on; but at some point this kind of daily cataloguing became my mode. The documents that more closely resemble my notebooks content-wise are what Molly McCarthy writes about in *The Accidental Diarist*—day planners, in which, back in the time that the United States was just becoming a country, people diligently measured time by jotting down one or two significant or not-so-significant details of each day. The weather was a common topic, as was travel. If someone was born or died, that fact was stated—and on to the next day. There is an economy to these day planners, though, that I envy—the fact that the keeping of the diary did not interfere with life.

After several years of being extremely picky about the size, shape, and binding of my notebooks, I became interested in nicer papers, varied sizes, and took with me to Italy a large red faux-leather volume with a ribbon bookmark. It was something far more stately than I'd ever used before, which seemed fitting, since I'd also never left the country. For the duration of the nine-day trip, if I had any spare time, it was almost always spent writing—I took breaks to write while perched on the round stones surrounding a Roman fountain, sitting on the steps as we waited in line for Uffizi, between exhausted jetlagged naps on the tour bus when we weren't wandering around Autogrills buying Nutella and being refused change because we weren't fast enough for the Italians. My mother has more pictures of me writing in Italy, I think, than she has pictures of me doing anything else.

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Max Crawford kept day planners—some bought in France, some made in the UK. In these books he keeps track of every time he calls his mother, does math on blank pages to keep up with

expenses, logs the hours he spends working on his writing and sleeping. 1991 is especially full of doodles. Monday, July 22nd features Edison flying a kite with a key on it, a giant cloud with lightning, and the word "BOOM!"—all-caps. A week in August has water droplets dripping down the page, bigger and bigger the further they go down, tiny ripples at the bottom. A man golfing (his speech bubble calling out, "4!"). I focus on the doodles because Crawford's handwriting is so small and difficult to read. At the end of 1997, he makes a list of Movie Comedies. I haven't seen most of them.

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My notebooks aren't an accumulation towards a specific project. Once the novelty of one year wore off, I wrote for another, and another, and another. At ten years I felt accomplished but also in too deep to stop—even though I didn't feel I had much direction to begin with, much impetus to be doing this once I stopped taking it seriously—that is, once it morphed from writing exercise into catalogue. December 31, 2017, will mark notebook-keeping for fifteen years straight, at which point for me, as an obsessive person, stopping would be more of an accomplishment than continuing.

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I discover on one of Gretel Ehrlich's notebooks a dry-rotted rubber band and take it to the front desk of the reading room. "They're not supposed to have rubber bands," the man there tells me. The spirals have been removed, so most of these tiny books are held together by binder clips. I flip through all the notebooks labeled "Japan Notes," thinking of my own notebooks I purchased and carried all over Japan, notebooks of varying sizes and colorful designs, decorated sometimes with nonsense English words. The last time I opened one of my own notebooks from Japan, I noticed that so many of the receipts I had taped in had almost entirely faded, as if I was trying to keep a bunch of blank paper.

This is the double meaning—I have anxiety about *keeping* my notebooks both ways. When I'm not questioning the fact that I write them, that I persist, that I feel it important to remind my future self what I did and experienced and worried about on any day of any given year—I'm questioning how to preserve them, the literal *keeping*. As I look through other people's notebooks I remember how the bookshelves in my childhood bedroom are plagued with dust; I recall seeing my brothers' boxes and electronics and other belongings shoved up against my bookcases, their papers and t-shirts spilling over into notebook territory. I find myself taking notes about the boxes the library uses for all these documents, though in the end I know better than to look them up: I have researched this previously, with serious intent; and if there's one thing I understand about archival boxes it's that I can't afford them.

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A woman named Geraldine Jayne in a video online flips through her Moleskine planner—something she decorates weekly and says she uses as a practice art journal. Journal flip-throughs are a whole genre of YouTube, a favorite of mixed media artists, teenage girls, and a substantial population of older women who refer to themselves as "crafty girls." Geraldine has a British

accent and a pleasantly bright weekly planner—she has painted pinks, oranges, and neon greens; she has tipped in other pieces of paper she embellished with a typewriter; she has multiple colored tassels and ribbons hanging off the book. It is mesmerizing to watch her turn the pages, to see what color combinations and collaged items will appear next, but most interesting of all is when she turns to a blank week. "This is a week… it started well for me, but then I ran into a bit of a hard time," she narrates. "I was just stuck, and I decided… to leave it. I now remember exactly what happened that week." She says, "The blank page can sometimes speak… even as powerfully as a page you've created on."

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The closest I come to having blank pages in my notebook is an absence of content that only I know is missing: I was a senior in undergrad at the University of Alabama when the tornado hit the week before finals. My notebook from the time—a small unlined book in which I wrote with multicolored gel pens—doesn't describe how I was feeling; it doesn't go into how I—selfishly—felt robbed of a ritual of "last"s now that finals were cancelled and May graduation was moved to August.

On those tornado days I didn't record how my then-boyfriend refused to spend time alone with me. How we all stood on the precarious dock of a friend's lake house—across the bridge in Northport, away from Tuscaloosa—as he swam far, far out into the cold, deep lake without me, twilight falling all around us so we could barely see well enough to climb back up the steep hill. It doesn't capture the night my friends crowded onto beds and air mattresses all in one tiny front bedroom and I gave the reading I had wanted to give them—the night before my dad drove in and moved me out of my dorm room, determined to spirit me out of Tuscaloosa and away from the wreckage as fast as possible. I shielded myself from the disappointment and guilt of never being allowed to do cleanup work, since it didn't open to volunteers until after I left—just like I shielded myself from the fact that my boyfriend no longer wanted to be with me, the fact that I realized the friends I spent those days with would all go on with undergrad as I went off to grad school and eventually forget to miss me—and the fact that, if the tornado had taken a path just a few blocks north of where it plowed through, we wouldn't have had dorms to return to or move out of—we may not even have had each other.

Sarah Manguso writes about how memories gradually become corrupt, not to be trusted: "Sensory memory lasts about two hundred to five hundred milliseconds after perception. Then it starts to degrade. Working memory, or short-term memory, allows recall for a period of several seconds to a minute." It goes on—seems that every time we call up a memory we risk losing pieces of it. The writers' notebooks are full of diagrams and doodles and sensory details—the smallest details, the ones we find most beautiful and useful. My notebooks may be less purposeful but are still full of sentences that hold weight when I reread them in the future—observations about people I loved or would love, the last times I saw or spoke to someone, unknowing. A time capsule, but in reverse—full of the things that surrounded the real stories of my life, the parts I didn't know yet were stories.