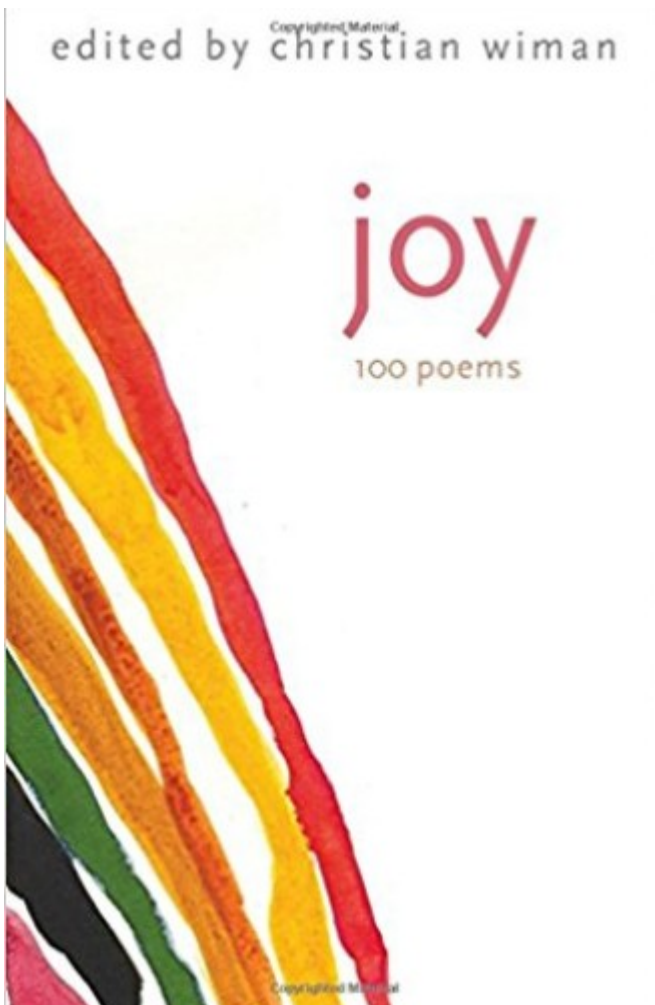


Christian Wiman and the poetry of joy

In this anthology of poems selected by Wiman, joy comes in modest and unlikely guise.

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Joy

100 Poems

Edited by Christian Wiman
Yale University Press

Simone Weil says in a passage quoted in this anthology, "A test of what is real is that it is hard and rough. Joys are found in it."

Using Weil's definition, this is the most *real* collection of poetry I have ever read. It includes poems about a chronically ill child, patients playing basketball in a psychiatric hospital, being widowed, having an orgasm, and the pleasure of urinating on the seats of a sports car. In these poems, joy alights on all manner of things, none of them too sweet to believe. Weil's formulation takes life in Lucille Clifton's "hag riding":

why
is what i ask myself
maybe it is the afrikan in me
still trying to get home
after all these years
but when I wake to the heat of the morning
galloping down the highway of my life
something hopeful rises in me
rises and runs me out into the road
and i lob my fierce thigh high
over the rump of the day and honey
i ride i ride

Joy is also the most exciting poetry collection I've ever read. Many of these poems have the force of driving, rhythmic music. The majority of the poems in the collection are from writers whose work took flight after modernism. This is a blessing. I cannot be the only person who wasted years mistaking an aversion to archaic language and the thorny puzzles of high modernism for an aversion to poetry itself. Many of these poems are beautifully plainspoken.

In "Waking with Russell," Don Paterson wakes up in bed next to his four-year-old son. The poet suffers a sense of mid-life dread. He looks at his child. "His four-day-old smile dawned on him again / possessed him, till it could not fall or waver"; Undone by the sight, Paterson closes the poem in a song of praise:

The true path was as lost to me as ever
when you cut in front and lit it as you ran.
See how the true gift never leaves the giver:
returned and redelivered, it rolled on
until the smile poured through us like a river.

He's addressing his child. Yet I couldn't help but raise my eyes beyond the boy,
toward the One who gives our loved ones their Godward aspect.

In her otherwise enthusiastic review in the *Atlantic*, Adrianna Smith laments the collection's "slant toward a theological comprehension of joy, specifically, an over-representation of a Christian one." What Smith misses is that for many people "theological comprehension" is joy's necessary predicate. The language of a given religion enhances the believer's ability to receive and express joy. The Christianity of this collection is hardly explicit, but the book wouldn't be as joyful without it.

In an introductory essay, editor Christian Wiman acknowledges that *joy* is a wounded, "essential, inadequate word." He then asks a series of questions that aim to scrape the barnacles off. If joy is more than "the intensification of happiness" what is it? Why can't joy be created or counted on? Why does it often involve loss of self, as in parental love or religious ecstasy? Finally, "What is it we are feeling when we are feeling joy?"

Some of these poems exemplify and necessitate Wiman's questions. Others reach toward an answer, as in the last stanza of "Hamlen Brook" by Richard Wilbur:

Joy's trick is to supply
Dry lips with what can cool and
slake,
Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache
Nothing can satisfy.

I wish Wiman had been more precise about the connection between joy and faith. Whose arrival brings us both a superabundance and an ache? Who is seizing us when we are seized by joy? Wiman does not ask the questions his questions raise. But that may be for the best. This book is more experience than argument, and the poems speak for themselves.

Joy comes in modest and unlikely guise. In Maria Hummel's poem "Station," it arrives while she is on the train with her seriously ill child, traveling to see yet another doctor. Rails become blades, underscoring the situation's severity: "We ride the blades again / beside the crooked bay. You smile. I hold you like a hole holds light."

Joy sanctifies the ordinary. In "C Major," Tomas Tranströmer relates the ecstatic moment of a man who steps outside and sees that it has begun to snow:

The whole town was downhill
The smiles passing by—
everyone was smiling behind turned-up collars.
It was free!
And all the question marks began singing of God's being.

Joy transforms, brings light, shocks us out of monotony. Nina Cassian's "Temptation" names what abundant life might look like.

Call yourself alive? Look I promise you
that for the first time you'll feel your pores opening
like fish mouths, and you'll actually be able to hear
your blood surging through all those lanes,
and you'll feel light gliding across the cornea
like the train of a dress.

I don't see how any attentive Christian could read this book without naming Christ where its poets name joy. Faithful readers will likely emerge able to see Christ's presence better, differently, from strange and unexpected angles. If that seems too heavy an expectation to lay on any poetry anthology, let's be content with *Joy's* lesser gifts: a reminder of how good contemporary poetry can be, an endlessly quotable resource, and a catalog of bright contradiction in these most dreary days.