This essay was presented as a work in progress. Please do not cite without the author's permission.

Christian Wiman

It Is Good to Sit Even A Rotting Body

It is good to sit even a rotting body
in sunlight uncompromised
by god, or lack of god,

to see the bee beyond
all the plundered flowers
air-stagger toward you

and like a delicate helicopter
hover above your knee
until it finds you to be

not sweet but at least
not flinching, its hair-legs
on the hair of your leg

silvering
a coolness through you
like a soul of nerve.
I have spent my life trying to be a poet, so it is inevitable that any definition of joy that I have would come from poetry. Inevitable, too, that there would be little in the way of definition. “Joy’s trick,” writes Richard Wilbur, “is to supply / Dry lips with what can cool and slake / Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache / Nothing can satisfy.” Joy is an abundance that awakens a hunger it cannot quite sate. Joy’s trick is to come upon us as an absolute fulfillment that nevertheless leaves us yearning. The yearning is part of the fulfillment, as is admitting the insufficiency of even our most joyful experiences. “He who binds himself to a joy / Does the winged life destroy / But he who kisses the joy as it flies / Lives in eternity's sunrise.” A conference on joy would be anathema to William Blake, because to have joy is to release joy; it is the very thing you can never quite name, the thing that is the source and summation of all names. “as if someone had summoned us / demanding joy, /
pure and disinterested, / joy in which faith / is self-evident.” That’s Adam Zagajewski, describing his response to Bach. Joy in which faith is self-evident. This seems quite right to me. Joy is a word for those experiences that are beyond words. To aim at joy seems to me as hopeless and misguided as to aim at writing a poem. It can’t be done. To say that joy inheres only in community ignores all of the experiences of making art, and anyone who had reality stream through him like that knows that there are few experiences more joyful. Or more terrible. I think my fellow panelists are quite correct to point out that joy can be experienced in suffering. Pleasure can too, actually—“a treasured and luxurious gloom of choice,” Wordsworth calls it—but that’s another matter. The poem that is included among the materials for this conference is a poem about the absence of God. The paradox is that when writing it I felt the presence of God. Or actually something beyond that. “We pray God to be free of God,” as Meister Eckhart has it. A soul of nerve. A quicksilver instant that you cannot create yourself, that is created within you, by means of you, beyond you. Joy is to Christians what inspiration is to the poet: all you can do is to try and live in a state of “iridescent readiness” (the phrase is W. S. Di Piero’s), that you might be adequate to the moment when it comes.