

A Findable Veil: Joy and Hope in Carl Phillips's *Wild Is the Wind*

Wild Is the Wind. Carl Phillips. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. 80 pp. \$23.00 (cloth).

The time had come to talk about sex. My grandmother and I were engaging in our ritual: her in bed watching old Westerns while I read next to her in her rocking chair. I had never talked to her about the people I've wanted to "know" biblically, but alas, when she asked me to hand her what I was reading—Carl Phillips's *Wild Is the Wind*, opened to "Gold Leaf"—I was sure that my desires were about to be untethered from their secrecy. At twenty-seven, I had yet to have sex, due to trauma or fear of God and the church. I hesitantly handed her the book, and she read aloud,

. . . looking back, back through the skull,
into the self that is partly the animal you've always wanted to be,
that—depending—fear has prevented or rescued you from becoming

When she asked me what I thought it meant, I didn't want to tell her what it represented to me. That I wanted to fuck. That I wanted to be more animal. That I wanted to inhabit and take full control over my body and what I did with it. Instead of answering my grandmother's question, I volleyed back, "I'd like to know what you think." Unflinchingly, she talked at length about the "you" character's desire for intimacy. After our discussion, I sat not so much with what she said but with the fact that she said it, what I couldn't say.

The threads that run throughout Phillips's work—the deep investment in nature, in the body, in our relationships to each other—especially in conjunction with my experiences now as a sexually active person, have brought me to a new understanding of intimacy and the erotic within *Wild Is the Wind*, that is, the agency, joy, and hope that come with becoming the "animal you've always wanted to be." What's more, though despair, intimacy, and love were all ideas that I'd come to know well in Phillips's work, I hadn't thought much about joy and

hope until I started watching the Instagram Live Cooking videos that he started during the first months of the pandemic. As he taught us recipes while singing and dancing across the kitchen, I thought, “How could the joy that he exhibits here in real time not make an appearance in his work?” It’s not that it wasn’t there; it’s that I wasn’t looking for it.

Phillips is well known for his embrace of abstractions in his poetry, which he addresses directly in “If You Go Away”:

I know death’s
an abstraction, but I prefer
a shape to things, though the shapes
are changeable. In my latest version,
 death is a young man with a habit for using
one side of his mouth to blow his hair slightly
up from his brow, while with the other half he
mutters things like *Each time I leave,*
 it’s like I’ve left forever.

Phillips reminds us that these abstractions—pleasure, intimacy, death—are unstable because they are crafted by our own desires, which are connected to memory—and what is more unstable than memory? Here, the speaker crafts their own version of death, namely, a death that is inextricable from longing and the grief of leaving. This kind of grief is prevalent throughout Phillips’s body of work, but *Wild Is the Wind* refashions melancholic ruminations on intimacy in a way that leads to a particular kind of joy and hope, one that can be accessed only through eros, or the erotic.

One night when I was in conversation with interdisciplinary artist Jayson P. Smith about *Wild Is the Wind*, they said, “We often think of the erotic as something that is inherently sexual, but I want to move that to a kind of carnality, meaning of or relating to the body.” Smith then asked me what embodiment and the erotic meant to me. The question made me unravel in a similar way as when I read *Wild Is the Wind* for the first time with my grandmother. The first thing I thought of was danger. I feel most safe when I’m alone. When I’m alone, men can’t see me. Can’t touch me. Recently I self-pleasured and pretended that God didn’t exist. But then I thought of embodiment in the context of *Wild Is the Wind*, and *danger* was no longer the word but, rather, *return*.

“What does it mean to consider all returns to the body as a precursor for joy, or as joy itself?” Smith asked. What *does* it mean to treat these moments of intense embodiment that Phillips considers—the distinctly internal and external bodily act of making and consuming a meal or “getting slowly dressed again,” as in “If You Will, I Will”—as joy? My return to my body after assault, after reconceptualizing my notions of the divine, meant that I could touch myself and say it is good. That I can be touched and say it is good. That my body can be a site of return rather than danger.

Consider the first verse of the jazz standard, sung by Nina Simone, after which the collection is named:

My love is like the wind . . .
Give me more than one caress,
satisfy this hungriness,
let the wind blow through your heart,
for wild is the wind.

In the jazz standard, the wind represents the singer’s love, and in Phillips’s “Givingly” it is the same good, wild thing:

The wind was clean. The wind
was a good thing, in his hair, and across our faces.

Some of the most erotic experiences come from nature, like the delight felt by the speaker here, who seems to feel as much joy and pleasure when he feels the wind across his face as he does in bodily contact.

In thinking about returns to the body, I also think about agency. Take “That It Might Save, or Drown Them”:

Two points make a line—but
so does one point, surely, when pulled at
once in two opposed directions: how
to turn away from what’s familiar, for
example, toward what isn’t

defines hope well enough, but can define,
too, despair . . .

Here we have a movement that will become either hope or despair, dependent on the context of this turning away. To deny oneself despair,

to move in a way that engenders hope, is a kind of choice. I can't think of a Carl Phillips poem where the speaker is without gestures of agency. They are all either making choices or standing on the other side of their choices. For example, "If You Will, I Will" includes an example of how even (and especially) in the moments after intimacy, Phillips's speakers assert themselves as their own authority:

You've changed, he says,
getting slowly dressed again. *You don't know me*, I say, I say back.

Phillips's work is a practice of saying it back.

When I've told colleagues that I was writing a book review about joy and hope centering *Wild Is the Wind*, they are often surprised that I'm not writing about a poet like Ross Gay. But the kinds of joy that Phillips and Gay talk about are not as different as some might suppose: yes, there is a difference in the level of exuberance in Gay's work, but both writers write about sensory and sensual experience as pathways to varying iterations of joy and hope. It's worthwhile here to turn to Phillips's "Craft and Vision":

Always, if it's wanted badly enough, there's
somewhere a findable veil just waiting to be lifted or pulled
slowly aside, classic revelation, a word that itself at its
root has a veil within it, somehow making the word feel
all the more like proof, as if proof meant nakedness, as if one
and the same—darkness
and weather; force, and sex."

Wild Is the Wind is indeed a findable veil that, when we lift it, helps us find our way back to our bodies, to find agency in our bodies, and to find choice through a meditation centered in our individualized emotional spaces, even though emotions, in the moment, don't feel like something that you can choose. The syntax in these poems, the way that it spreads out and keeps us between two temporal possibilities, creates a meditative and erotic tension, a sense of anticipation. The reader has time to decide, to say either I'm coming with you, or I'm not. The body, here, is the conduit to these transcendent experiences; it is the only thing that will lead us there. It is the intermediary that we have.