

Joyland

Joy. Few other words in the English language seem so blithe, so uncomplicated. Knowing its origins reveals little: *gaudere* in Latin ('rejoice'), then the old French *joie*. We normally look to the grain of a word, to its double meanings or unexpected backstory, to get a feel for the texture of its concept. We want shadows, something dormant and unexplained that will give us a grip on it as we turn it over in our hands and examine it from every side. But this time, nothing . . . pure joy, sheer happiness.

This is joy's mystery: its purity, no hidden emotion, no otherness. And by the same token, from the outside – watched by envious onlookers – it appears to lack almost any defining feature ('all happy families are alike', writes Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*), any geography, beyond a fuzzy and pastel-hued rapture. It is only experienced from within, cannot truly be shared and once finished – like some emotional *wasabi* – is largely lost to memory, just as this writing can circle joy's geometric perfection but offer no plausible descriptions.

Never a mask, it effaces all other states if only for an instant, paints itself across the wearer's demeanour. Head up, eyes wide, feeling leaks out uncontrollably to meet what the body should otherwise resist. The face opens out in smiles, the chest broadens its gait, perhaps the mouth falls open: open to the world, to a slow bolt of pure sunlight that bleaches out every dark tone with an intensity free of calculation or value. For a moment, as joy unhooks us from cares and the burden of reason, everything is connected and radiant: pleasure is crowned king for a day.

Of course, joy would have none of this majesty were it not that we long for it in the face of tedium, oppression or despair. Nietzsche, for instance, sees joy as the ultimate human state, one that is precisely the overcoming of unhappiness or pain. A life-affirming principle, the special province of art in particular, joy absorbs suffering, turns it into power. It is this quality that, for the philosopher, gives joy a tragic quality ('deeper still than grief' says Zarathustra), something profound, beyond either pleasure or sorrow and through which the individual may begin to re-align the world.

But could we really live in a state of permanent joy – forgo the doubled nature of the world for an ideal of harmony and elation against which nothing else can be the measure? The French phrase *joie de vivre* promises most nearly to express this apparently impossible notion: life professed in the face of everything that should tell us otherwise, a well-spring of optimism impregnable against everyday cares. Again, an impulse of sweeping away, of the stunning absence of disappointment or dark, but now prolonged into a spirit of vitality that wants to turn everything in its path to pleasure.

You might find the promise of happiness extended far into the distance in a

constructive form in a place such as Joyland, on the seafront of Great Yarmouth (there are Joylands around the world: Texas, Kansas, Shanghai, Lahore . . .), an island of tourist amusement since 1949. Little funfair rides, sideshows, an arcade: it's bottled and gaudy, naturally, but there's still something about this brand of joy that feels close to its truth: transient, intense, temporarily but completely ignoring the world beyond its limits. A world of props and flats, of things gaily painted and colourfully out of kilter. While the children shriek with pleasure the grown-ups look on, sceptical or indulgent, sensing something missing in their own inability to be taken in. Here's a reminder that joy is above all watched over by the realm of childhood, one to which adults long to return but that for the most part they may only glimpse, always out of dimension.

The revelation of joy is its replication of an instant of the unfathomable state of our earlier life, a time when each thought, each emotion eclipses all that has gone before, with no cares for that unfolding thing that might come next. Like a line of gunpowder, it sparks and leaves nothing, perhaps just a faint line that traces the route of an intimate apocalypse.

Krzysztof Fijalkowski