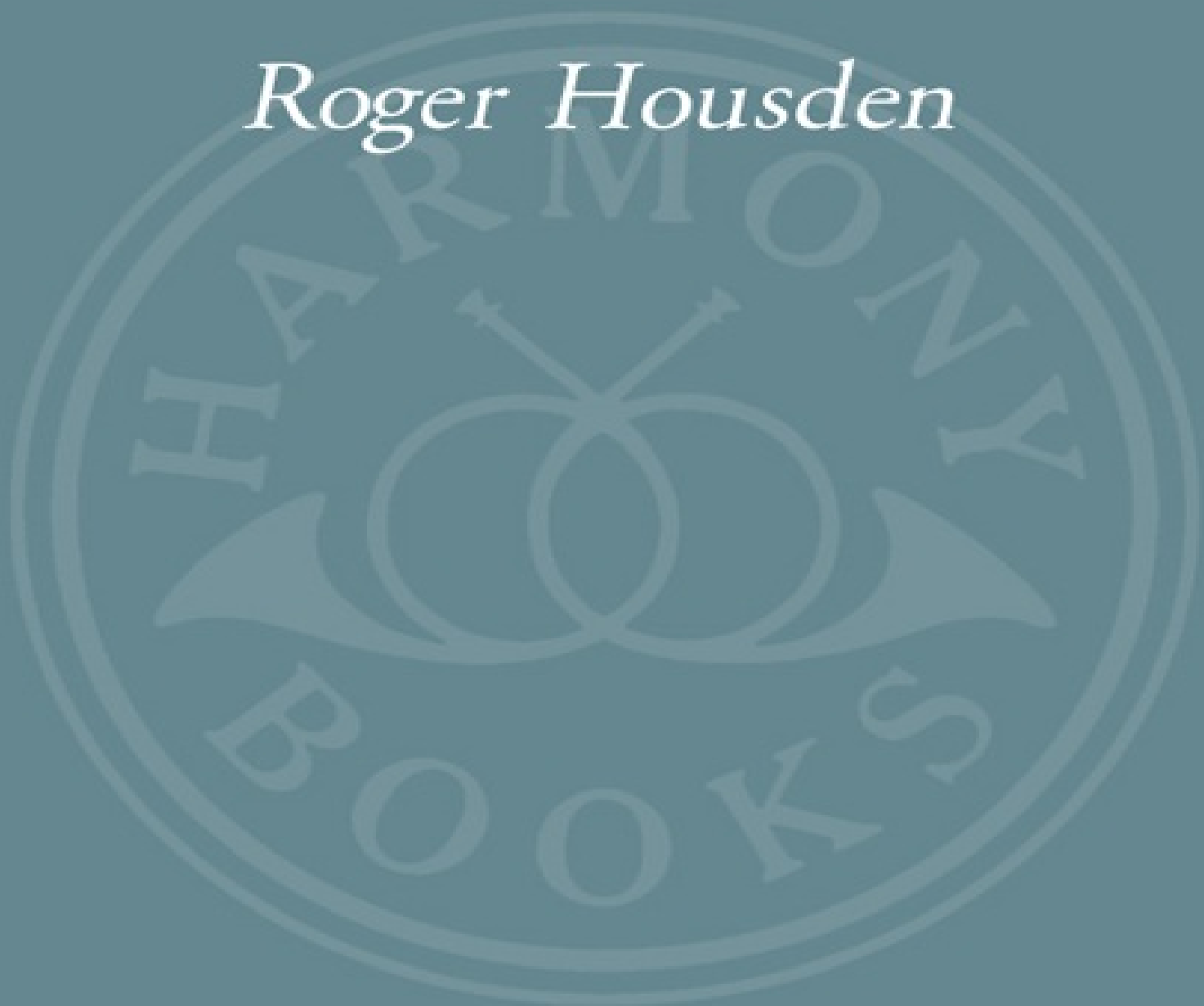


DANCING WITH JOY

99 POEMS

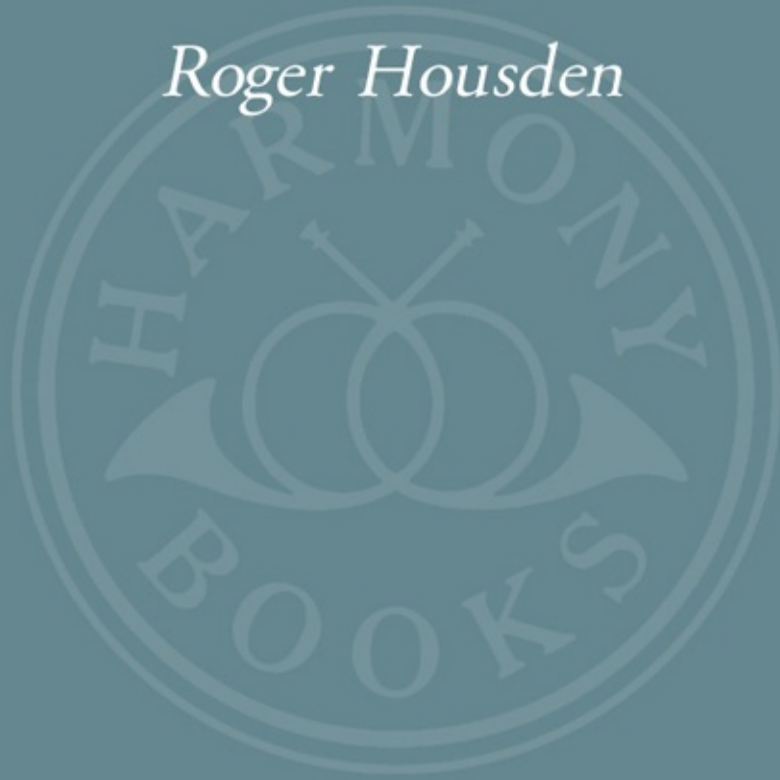
Roger Housden



DANCING WITH JOY

99 POEMS

Roger Housden



Seven Sins for a Life Worth Living

How Rembrandt Reveals Your Beautiful, Imperfect Self:

Life Lessons from the Master

Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime

Ten Poems to Set You Free

Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation

(editor)

Ten Poems to Open Your Heart

Chasing Rumi:

A Fable About Finding the Heart's True Desire

Ten Poems to Change Your Life



DANCING
WITH JOY

99 POEMS

EDITED BY
ROGER HOUSDEN



HARMONY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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- “Good God, What a Night That Was” by Petronius Arbiter
- “Ecstasy” by Hayden Carruth
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“A Summer Day” by Li Po

“First Thanksgiving” by Sharon Olds

“Here” by Grace Paley

“The Pleasures of the Door” by Francis Ponge

“Grapefruit” by Gerald Stern

“In Praise of Dreams” by Wislawa Szymborska

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“The Great Sea” by UvavnuK

“This Is Just to Say” by William Carlos Williams

“A Blessing” by James Wright

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” by W. B. Yeats

“Matins” (*Excerpt*) by Denise Levertov

“I Come Home Wanting to Touch Everyone” by Stephen Dunn

“Snow Geese” by Mary Oliver

“Why” by Wendell Berry

ABOUT THE POETS

INTRODUCTION

*Why all the embarrassment
about being happy?*

asks Wendell Berry in his poem “Why,” which you will find at the end of this collection. Why indeed! In the novel *Snow* by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, one of the characters says to another,

“You got drunk so you could resist the hidden happiness rising inside of you.”

That's an original spin on the usual explanation, that people get drunk to drown their sorrows. What is it about happiness— not to mention joy—that prompts these authors to suggest it might be so daunting? Could it be that we live in such a difficult, tragic world that it can seem a betrayal or denial of our common darkness to jump for joy? That, in embracing happiness, we somehow turn our back on the sufferings of others— and, indeed, on our own sufferings—and so deservedly bring upon ourselves the retributions of guilt? This is precisely the question that Jack Gilbert addresses in his magnificent poem “A Brief for the Defense,” and it is no accident that this poem features at the beginning of this book.

But there is something else: melancholy, despair, and depression are not only everywhere, an integral part of many people's experience, but they also have *cachet*. The demon of despair has always seemed more interesting than the angel of joy. *Melancholia* is weighty with meaning; it seems to be something of substance and conveys its substance onto its subject. If you have had a terrible childhood, you will be more likely to sell your autobiography than if you had an uneventful, happy one. Melancholy has always been equated with creativity and is commonly associated with art and artists, and, perhaps especially, with poets. Bob Dylan, in the recent film of his life by Martin Scorsese, says he has never had any interest in being happy. The hero of the novel *Snow* is a poet, a melancholic one, and someone says to him in earnest, and as a compliment, that

“Only people who are very intelligent and very unhappy can write good poems.”

Conventional wisdom tells us that nobody goes to heaven for having a good time. We genuinely think pain is virtuous, which is not surprising given that so many of us worship a crucified Savior. Suffering can indeed be a great purifier, a forger of character, no doubt about that; but joy can free us from our character altogether, at least for a time. It can take us out into the wide world beyond our own self-preoccupations. It can join us to the air and the trees, to other people, to cows and to stones and to the living spirit of humankind itself. It can join us to the china mug of tea in our own right hand.

This book exists to celebrate the many colors and freedoms of joy. Not that the poets represented here do not feel despair or loneliness—of course they do—but they have also known the rarer moments, or even whole periods, of grace, of inexplicable beauty, joy, and ecstatic insight; and from out of those times the most glorious poems have come—in resounding rebuttal of the speaker in *Snow*!

It must be said, though, that joy can even arise out of sadness itself:

says William Stafford in his poem “Cutting Loose.” Or the Swede, Tomas Tranströmer, who in the poem “Allegro” says that

*After a black day, I play Haydn,
and feel a little warmth in my hands.*

Sometimes it is difficult even to tell the one from the other. In her poem “Thank You, My Fate,” Anna Swir has this to say about making love:

*I don't know whether this is joy
or sadness, I don't understand
what I feel, I'm crying,
I'm crying...
I'm unworthy, how beautiful
my life.*

Joy is an upwelling of life, of spirit, a blossoming of freedom. It is what we are here for. It is wholehearted, full-bodied, all-encompassing. In a moment of joy, you are no longer a kingdom divided—between right and wrong, this way or that way, should or shouldn't. And yet joy and melancholy exist on a spectrum and are not separate. This is why I have made the unlikely choice of including Pablo Neruda's poem “To Sadness” in a collection called *Dancing with Joy*. This book does not have the pink spin of candy floss. Its joy is substantial, even though it is often as light as air. And because the poems have weight as well as wings, they can afford to share space with a poem like this, in which Neruda reminds us that a surfeit of sunlight and honey can sometimes require its opposite to make sense of its beauty:

*give me
your black wing,
sister sadness:
I need the sapphire to be
extinguished sometimes and the oblique
mesh of the rain to fall,
the weeping of the earth...*

Neruda's poem gives ballast, as well as an added lift, to all the joy surrounding it on the other pages.

Whereas melancholy can sometimes weigh heavy with meaning, joy often seems to have no reason at all. It comes unbidden, and, as William Blake reminds us, leaves the same way. With no reason or purpose beyond itself, joy has no proper function in a utilitarian world. With no function, it has no intrinsic use. Joy is useless! It won't *get* us anywhere! Which may be another reason we tend to be wary of it. Joy exists in the present moment and has no plans for the future. It is not serious. When we are joyful, our plans and schemes and intentions all fly out of the window. When we are joyful, we have no future as such, because we are fully here in the present experience. You can only think about joy after it has come and gone. You can't train it to stay longer; nor can you work out how to repeat the experience. Joy, finally, is beyond our control, even if it might be true that we can learn how to become more prone to it. This is how Raymond Carver, in his poem “Happiness,” puts it:

It comes on

*unexpectedly. And goes beyond, really,
any early morning talk about it.*

Or as Mark Strand says in “Eating Poetry,” inspired by an evening in a library in the company of poetry books,

I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

Joy may indeed be useless, but it is also contagious. Any one of these pages may catch you alight. Anything, or nothing at all, can jump-start the tide of joy in our veins. For Wislawa Szymborska, it is a dream, or, in another of her poems, the joy of writing; for Robert Bly, being in the company of his ten-year-old son; for Stephen Dunn, coming home to his family; for Gerald Stern, it is dancing or a grapefruit at breakfast; for Kim Addonizio, it is a red dress; for Dorianne Laux, kissing; for Billy Collins, a cigarette; for Kabir, for Rumi, for Hafiz, it is spiritual joy. For Walt Whitman, it is friendship; for Wordsworth, solitude; for Keats, beauty. It is, finally, a sudden influx of life felt in all of its fullness, all of its transient beauty, its awakening joy.

Not that it is always easy or always a breeze to bear, as Denise Levertov suggests in “Matins”:

*Marvelous Truth, confront us
at every turn...
Thrust close your smile
that we know you, terrible joy.*

Even so,

We must risk delight

Jack Gilbert says, despite all our preoccupations with how difficult this life is. It is even our human, moral duty, he suggests. And once you can bear to see things for what they are, joy comes naturally—this, at least, is the view of Han Shan, the old Chinese poet-sage:

*once you see through transience and illusion
the joys of roaming free are wonderful indeed*

There are just four poems in *Dancing with Joy* that have appeared in previous collections of mine: “A Blessing” by James Wright, “Thank You, My Fate” by Anna Swir, and “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” by William Wordsworth are all in my anthology *Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation*; “Thank You, My Fate” by Anna Swir is also to be found in *Ten Poems to Set You Free*, and “Ecstasy” by Hayden Carruth is in *Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime*. Try as I might to justify leaving them out, these poems would not lie down quietly. How can you have an anthology that goes by a name such as this, they clamored, and even think of our being absent? In any event, the context of this new anthology casts these poems in a somewhat different light. And in the case of the Wordsworth poem, it would have seemed a particular neglect given the inclusion of Billy Collins's hilarious “Lines Composed over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey,” which cried out to have Wordsworth's original on the preceding page.

Risking Everything included a hundred and ten poems by a total of forty-eight poets. *Dancing with Joy* comprises ninety-nine poems by a total of sixty-nine poets. The range of poetic voice, then, has widened considerably here. *Dancing with Joy* has widened, too, in terms of time and space, spanning as it does a few of the English classical and Romantic poets, a Roman writer, some early Chinese poets, and poets from Turkey, Sweden, Poland, Russia, and

France, as well as a strong representation of twentieth-century and contemporary American and English poets.

Even the experience and age range of the contributors has widened. On the one hand, there is Stanley Kunitz, who was writing up until the day he died at age one hundred, and on the other is Erica Ehrenberg, a superb new voice who, at twenty-six, is having her work published here for the first time in book form.

All of which goes to suggest that there are, after all, many kinds of joy, to which neither age, nor era, nor continent can lay any exclusive claim. Joy, like suffering, is a quintessential human experience that comes unbidden; yet it is much rarer than its dark sister and is therefore more precious.

Which is all the more reason, I believe, for a volume like this that serves to catch the many forms of joy on the wing and hold them on the page as a mirror for our own moments of quiet or ecstatic abandon and that serves also as solace and inspiration for our own dark days, which, as we know, will always come. Finally, whatever else it is and in whatever form it shows up, joy is ever and always a gift; and it has been a gift indeed to me to have the opportunity to gather all these joys between two covers and send them out into the world.

DANCING WITH JOY

A BRIEF FOR THE DEFENSE

 JACK GILBERT

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, they are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
at the fountain are laughing together between
the suffering they have known and the awfulness
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
in the village is very sick. There is laughter
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
We must admit there will be music despite everything.
We stand at the prow again of a small ship
anchored late at night in the tiny port
looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront
is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning.
To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
all the years of sorrow that are to come.

MINDFUL

 MARY OLIVER

Every day
I see or I hear
something
that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

in the haystack
of light.
It is what I was born for—
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world—
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant—
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise
with such teachings
as these—
the untrimmable light

of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

HAPPINESS

 STEPHEN DUNN

A state you dare not enter
with hopes of staying,
quicksand in the marshes, and all

the roads leading to a castle
that doesn't exist.
But there it is, as promised,

with its perfect bridge above
the crocodiles,
and its doors forever open.

Maxine, back from a weekend with her boyfriend,
smiles like a big cat and says
that she's a conjugated verb.
She's been doing the direct object
with a second person pronoun named Phil,
and when she walks into the room,
everybody turns:

some kind of light is coming from her head.
Even the geraniums look curious,
and the bees, if they were here, would buzz
suspiciously around her hair, looking
for the door in her corona.
We're all attracted to the perfume
of fermenting joy,

we've all tried to start a fire,
and one day maybe it will blaze up on its own.
In the meantime, she is the one today among us
most able to bear the idea of her own beauty,

and when we see it, what we do is natural:
we take our burned hands
out of our pockets,
and clap.

GOOD GOOD, WHAT A NIGHT THAT WAS

 PETRONIUS ARBITER

Good God, what a night that was,
The bed was so soft, and how we clung,
Burning together, lying this way and that,
Our uncontrollable passions
Flowing through our mouths.
If only I could die that way,
I'd say goodbye to the business of living.

TRANSLATED BY KENNETH REXRO

ECSTASY

 HAYDEN CARRUTH

For years it was in sex and I thought
This was the most of it
so brief
a moment
or two of transport out of oneself
or
in music which lasted longer and filled
me with the exquisite wrenching agony
of the blues
and now it is equally
transitory and obscure as I sit in my broken
chair that cats have shredded
by the stove on a winter night with wind and snow
howling outside and I imagine
the whole world at peace
at peace and everyone comfortable and warm
the great pain assuaged
a moment
of the most shining and singular gratification.

YOUR LAUGHTER

 PABLO NERUDA

Take bread away from me, if you wish,
take air away, but
do not take from me your laughter.

Do not take away the rose,
the lanceflower that you pluck,
the water that suddenly
bursts forth in your joy,
the sudden wave
of silver born in you.

My struggle is harsh and I come back
with eyes tired
at times from having seen
the unchanging earth,
but when your laughter enters
it rises to the sky seeking me
and it opens for me all
the doors of life.

My love, in the darkest
hour your laughter
opens, and if suddenly
you see my blood staining
the stones of the street,
laugh, because your laughter
will be for my hands
like a fresh sword.

Next to the sea in the autumn,
your laughter must raise
its foamy cascade,
and in the spring, love,
I want your laughter like
the flower I was waiting for,
the blue flower, the rose


of my echoing country.

Laugh at the night,
at the day, at the moon,
laugh at the twisted
streets of the island,
laugh at this clumsy
boy who loves you,
but when I open
my eyes and close them,

when my steps go,
when my steps return,
deny me bread, air,
light, spring,
but never your laughter
for I would die.

TRANSLATED BY DONALD WAL

WHAT DO WOMEN WANT?

 KIM ADDONIZIO

I want a red dress.
I want it flimsy and cheap,
I want it too tight, I want to wear it
until someone tears it off me.
I want it sleeveless and backless,
this dress, so no one has to guess
what's underneath. I want to walk down
the street past Thrifty's and the hardware store
with all those keys glittering in the window,
past Mr. and Mrs. Wong selling day-old
donuts in their cafe, past the Guerra brothers
slinging pigs from the truck and onto the dolly,
hoisting the slick snouts over their shoulders.
I want to walk like I'm the only
woman on earth and I can have my pick.
I want that red dress bad.
I want it to confirm
your worst fears about me,
to show you how little I care about you
or anything except what
I want. When I find it, I'll pull that garment

from its hanger like I'm choosing a body
to carry me into this world, through
the birth-cries and the love-cries too,
and I'll wear it like bones, like skin,
it'll be the goddamned dress they bury me in.
sLi-Young Lee

FROM BLOSSOMS COMES

 LI-YOUNG LEE

this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted *Peaches*.

From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to impossible blossom, to
sweet impossible blossom.

PHOTOGRAPH

 LUCILLE CLIFTON

*my grandsons
spinning in their joy*

universe
keep them turning turning
black blurs against the window
of the world
for they are beautiful
and there is trouble coming
round and round and round

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