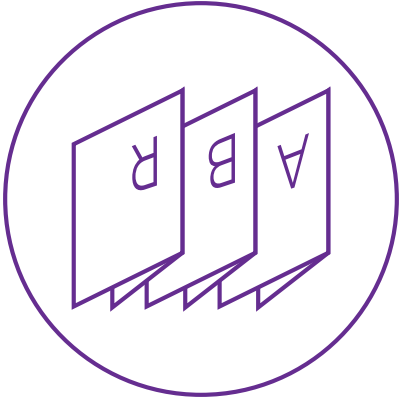




praying for joy
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praying for joy
Isabel Baraona
2025
20 pages
Saddle-stitched pamphlet
6 × 9.5 in. closed
Digital printing
Edition of 50



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praying for joy

P*raying for joy* is a short pamphlet containing a single poem by Isabel Baraona. A single poem, but one created by remixing and redacting two earlier pieces. *Praying for joy* shares its title with a painting series from 2010 and deals with themes that have long interested Baraona. Like the artist, the reader returns and reworks material in *praying for joy*; each page is an erasure of the same longer poem, which occupies the pamphlet's center spread. These erasures build toward the full poem and then break it apart, beginning and ending with a few spare lines. The premise is simple, but the reading experience elegantly enacts the book's themes and offers alternatives to the artistic traditions Baraona investigates.

From the beginning, *praying for joy* foregrounds the role of the reader with life-size hands, rendered in ink or watercolor outline, on the outside covers. On the inside covers, the respective hands face palm up and seem to be holding blood vessels or nerves – recurring motifs in Baraona's work – or perhaps they are flayed open, revealing their inner workings. Less typical of Baraona's books, there is no other imagery in the book, and the text is conven-

tionally typeset. Each page retains the layout of the complete poem, with empty spaces where words and lines were redacted. By setting type only on the pamphlet's rectos, Baraona emphasizes the text's incremental evolution, although the relatively opaque cream paper makes the palimpsest more textual than visual.

Like much of Baraona's oeuvre, *praying for joy* deals with gender and power, bodies and language, subject and object, and artistic creation itself. Such themes invite psychoanalytical readings, and the invitation is explicit

in the earlier work remixed into *praying for joy* – Baraona dedicated her 2013 poem "Prière de Bonheur" to Belgian writer and psychoanalyst Henry Bauchau. Like that earlier poem, *praying for joy* addresses the tragic female archetypes inherited from classical literature.

As the pamphlet progresses toward the center spread, the possibilities opened by erasure are closed. The first page reads: "I, / we, / saved by nonsense, by a shared laughter / praying every day for joy." But the I and we who first share laughter become: "I, male subject / we, fe-

male plural / praying every day for joy." Baraona can radically shift the meaning and tone of each iteration with minimal changes from page to page. The added word "barely" can turn hope into despair. A subject can be made into an object, their actions taken and attributed to someone else. Then, the poem breaks apart, and possibilities return to the blank spaces between words and lines.

In addition to the text's themes, the reading experience itself is psychoanalytical. As the reader pulls apart and pieces together fragments, what is redacted (or re-

pressed) speaks as loudly as what is said. And, like Lacan's ideal ego, the promise of a unified whole, the in-tact poem in the center spread, is illusory: it points back to Baraona's earlier works, which point back to Bauchau or Euripides and Sophocles, and so on. Nevertheless, *praying for joy* leaves the reader with cause for hope. The paranoid style of reading between the lines is balanced by the reparative possibilities of remixing and reworking a text.

In terms of art practice, it is promising to see Baraona revisit older works, including one-of-a-

kind paintings, and produce an affordable, accessible pamphlet that is undeniably a work of art in itself. Pieces like *praying for joy* invite new readers to consider how a book's material and structure informs its meaning and, in the case of this English version, to enjoy Baraona's writing in addition to her image-making. Old criteria about "primary" or "autonomous" works of art not only risk overlooking works like *praying for joy* but miss the point of its connections with other texts and traditions.

Indeed, such connections constitute another cause for hope, one with consequences beyond the practice of artists' books and publishing. What makes tragedy tragic is inevitability. The tragic character – a woman like Medea or Cassandra – knows their fate but does what they must do anyway. Baraona breaks the cycle. Remixing, redacting, and revising reminds the reader that other possibilities already exist within the text. Nothing is inevitable. Baraona's refrain, "praying every day for joy" is a genuine expression of hope and desire. Even as we work within a given tradition, new meanings – and maybe even new endings – are possible.