

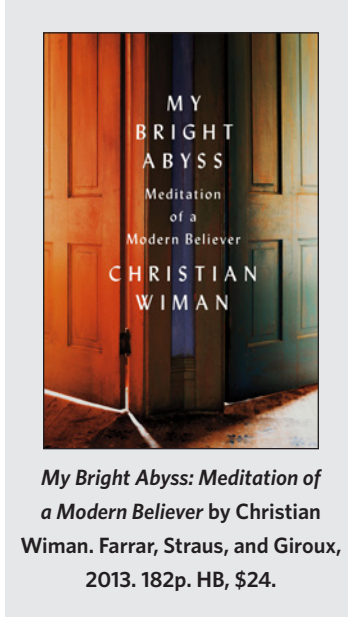
# Faithful Grieving: On Christian Wiman

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**I**T WAS A FLASH OF TRULY AUDACIOUS cleverness when the architects of Christianity fired the aristocratic godheads of the Greeks and Romans and made their own hero into a shoeless peasant who suffers a humiliation and defeat that then becomes an exaltation and triumph. In a world where the majority of us are victims of the most scurvy forms of power and not wielders of it, this chiefly sentimental way of seeing has some pretty lustrous appeal. Friedrich Nietzsche might have loathed the Christian worldview because

he considered it a cop out for failures, but he stopped short of seeing that we are all of us failures, kings and knaves alike, in that we all succumb to the double kick of disease and death. No matter how many secular artists join Theodore Roethke in proclaiming spirituality the “rambling lies invented for the sick,” Christ calls to the infirm because his risen body is a victory over his broken body.

The trick in producing a spiritual memoir spurred by disease is circumventing the fact that you have become a cliché: Of course you discovered or rediscovered your god during a grievous bout with cancer—doesn’t everyone? In *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, poet Christian Wiman shows how that circumvention happens: by way of wounded bafflement before the divine, the eschewing of populist piety, and a recognition of the um-



bilical that attaches poetry to prayer. Every genuine poet is a believer—even that ardent atheist rascal Algernon Charles Swinburne—because every genuine poet stretches for the sublime and knows that belief must be lyrical and never literal. What one beholds in religious poets such as George Herbert, John Donne, and Gerard Manley Hopkins is equal to what one beholds in a secular poet such as Walt Whitman: the ecstatic unfurling of language in assertion of the passionate, in transference of the seem-

ingly ineffable. For William Wordsworth, the divine was assimilated through that human propensity for passion. For Cardinal Newman and his Oxford Movement, poetry became the necessary outcrop of faith, of religious verity, and Matthew Arnold half-seriously wished to replace that religious verity with art—he dubbed the word God “a term of poetry.”

In verse and prose alike, Christian Wiman possesses an endearing and profound spiritual sensibility. He is the much-lauded author of three books of poetry and also a collection of critical and personal essays, two sections of which have been smuggled into *My Bright Abyss* to new effect. For the past decade he has been at the wheel of *Poetry* magazine, since 1912 the premier American outlet for poems (and which, by dint of some abracadabra that renewed faith in magic, received a \$200 mil-

lion endowment from philanthropist Ruth Lilly in 2003, suggesting—“proving” is a touch too strong—that poetry isn’t the cadaver American culture presumes it to be). Wiman revamped the magazine’s aesthetic and more than doubled its circulation, all while composing his own necessary verse and being racked by an unholy and incurable bone cancer. His collection *Every Riven Thing* (2010) contains an urgency of vision and an ecumenical reach rare among poets of his generation—his lines are often an admix of the concretion of William Carlos Williams and the spiritual, cerebral sweep of Geoffrey Hill. A stanza in “Not Altogether Gone” reads: “When there is nothing left to curse / you can curse nothing / but when there is nothing left to love / the heart eats inward and inward its own need / for release.” Love, too, is a landscape central to Wiman’s vision; in *Every Riven Thing* and *My Bright Abyss* especially, he restores to love’s transcendence its rightful integrity, its open-armed mystery.

Poetry, Wiman writes in this memoir, is “that brief marriage of word and world.” His own world was ravaged by the cancer that brought him to the mouth of hell, and this book chronicles his hard clawing through tremendous anguish and the morasses of faith. There’s a devastating passage in which Wiman describes himself in agony on the sofa at dawn, his varicose bones causing a “lightning strike of absolute feeling and absolute oblivion” as he prays not to his truant God but to the pain itself—savage, omnipotent pain. You won’t find Wiman’s breed of Christianity in the polished Sunday pews. Rather, his faith acknowledges and then approaches the mystical, the abject void of being, the terrible and terror-making quiet of God. In the poem “One Time,” in *Every Riven Thing*, Wiman writes: “I do not know how to come closer to God / except by standing where a world is ending / for one man.”

Indeed, Wiman’s faith threatens to warp and make meaningless the very definition of faith: “Trust no theory, no religious history or creed, in which the author’s personal faith is not actively at risk.” The immense complexity and dynamism of Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* derive from

just that: fury at God for his inability to feel God, and the reality that Donne is always just moments away from shucking the whole affair. Hopkins’s verse is equally complex and dynamic but with an altogether different aim: warding off the doctrinal despair that threatens to damn him, and the making of God manifest in rhythm as Wordsworth made God manifest in nature. Wiman’s spiritual memoir seeks a similar understanding, a similar *reckoning*, born of both upheaval and melancholy. *My Bright Abyss* is built of prose so lyrical and true you want to roll it around in your mouth and then speak it to strangers on the street:

We crave radical ruptures when we have allowed the nerves of our inner lives to go numb. But after those ruptures—the excitement or the tragedy, the pleasure or the pain—the mind returns to what it was, the soul quicksilters off from the pierce of experience, and the kingdom of boredom, which could be the kingdom of God, begins the clock-tick toward its next collapse.

Here too is a welcome abundance of the thinkers and bards who have informed Wiman’s wide vista—Patrick Kavanagh, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Herbert, Hopkins, and Hill. Wiman’s own verse, peppered throughout, augments the lyrical potency of this dire rumination: “My God my bright abyss / into which all my longing will not go / once more I come to the edge of all I know / and believing nothing believe in this.”

Raised in a sand-storming west Texas town that seems at the very skirt of civilization, Wiman was exposed to the intense rhythms and pitch of the Baptist church. He never met a professed unbeliever until he reached college in Virginia, where he embarked upon his own cerebral species of unbelief. His full-circle spiritual odyssey recounted in *My Bright Abyss* is not a simple recrudescence, not a matter of simply picking up his faith where he left it, because “if you believe at fifty what you believed at fifteen, then you have not lived—or have denied the reality of your life.” What Wiman strives for in this book is a new way of believ-

ing, a dismantling of the ancient paradigms and rubric that deceive us—all those unholdable terms such as “eternity” and “omniscient”; one poem in *Every Riven Thing* begins “Lord is not a word”—and also a dismissing of our infantile human projections of the divine. Here he follows in the tradition of Ludwig Feuerbach who, in his 1841 treatise *The Essence of Christianity*, argued that our gods are mere projections of human psychology. Unlike myriad artists and intellectuals, Wiman fears no incompatibility between the movements of the mind and the surge of the spirit.

*My Bright Abyss* is segmented into eleven chapters, each chapter consisting of short portions separated by asterisks, ruminant paragraphs that read like prose poems. Wiman is less concerned with telling a story than uncovering a condition, so the effect is quite like the Gospels: One may dip or plunge in anywhere for lyricism, for sapience, for sustenance. Writing about Robert Browning’s poem “Childe Roland,” Wiman offers this lovely prescription for dying: “To fling yourself into failure; to soar into the sadness by which you’ve lived; to die with neither defiance nor submission, but in some higher fusion of the two; to walk lost at the last into the arms of emptiness, crying the miracles of God.” Wiman might have neglected to credit Hill with those final words—in his poem “Genesis,” Hill wrote: “Against the burly air I strode / Crying the miracles of God”—but one suspects it’s an appropriation Hill would applaud.

Wiman’s sentences fall asleep only when he chooses to recline into sentiments no better than the fatuous snores of dogma: “God’s love creates and sustains human love” or “God is constant.” Hopkins’s line “Christ plays in ten thousand places” means something; Kavanagh’s line “God’s truth is life,” which Wiman takes for the title of a chapter, means nothing—it’s a mere shibboleth in the shadows of meaning, a dogmatic utterance costumed as revelation. Wiman’s faith can also have him sounding by turns pharisaical and flip: One evening he and his wife “wondered whether people who do not have the love of God in them . . . whether such

people could fully feel human love,” when, for legions of conscientious adults, the absence of imaginary divine love bolsters the worth of actual human love—he has it backward. After a particularly opaque bit of Bonhoeffer, Wiman writes: “It hardly matters whether or not one ‘agrees’ with any of this,” and one feels impelled to rejoin, *Excuse me—hardly matters to whom?* Wiman means that the Bonhoeffer pronouncements contain a poetical truth immune to rational scrutiny, and seems to hope that simply slapping the tag *spiritual* or *poetical* onto an assertion will bulletproof it against the aim of inquiry. We have a name for that: fundamentalism. The verity or falsity of a claim—any claim—matters and matters a great deal, regardless of the emotional storm it incites.

An intellectual wary of intellectualism, Wiman has thrown off those “mind-forged manacles,” as William Blake named them, but you can’t think rightly just with your faith or illness any more than you can through the prism of your gender or skin pigment. Wiman’s consummate refusal to acknowledge the grip of illness on the mind is significant. Our most profound pieties get their mitts on us in childhood or illness, precisely when we are most in need of explanations and least equipped with the rational equipment to reject them. It’s telling that Wiman didn’t seek Allah, Buddha, Vishnu, or Zeus when his cancer came: He limped to Christ, the very figure of his place and time—his culture, his country, his circumstance. What’s more, the “modern” of his subtitle suggests that belief or spirituality can willy-nilly mean anything you want it to. Entire quadrants of the American populace are “modern” in their belief systems, by which they mean loosely attached to nebulous versions of a tradition and mythos they understand hardly at all.

It might be the apex of egoism to believe that a deity has a personal interest in your mammalian body and how it does or does not function, and you’d have to be suffering from stage-four solipsism to consider your death an affront to the firmament and not just to your family, but without this religious breed of self-

involvement we wouldn't have that art most central to our survival—Leonardo da Vinci, Donne, John Milton, and Joseph Haydn, for starters. (D. H. Lawrence: "One has to be so terribly religious to be an artist.") Wiman is most at home when holding forth on art and poetry, when delving into immortal lines by Wallace Stevens and Rainer Maria Rilke and Robert Frost. "People who think poetry has no power," he writes, "have a very limited conception of what power means." The critic Kenneth Burke once described literature as "equipment for living," but it is also, more important, equipment for dying. The great Nietzsche scholar Walter Kaufmann, in *Tragedy and Philosophy*, penned a line both beautiful and true, a line of finality, and one that should be emblazoned on every blackboard and pulpit—and in every hospital—across this land: "After the retreat from poetry comes the retreat from prose, and finally the retreat into darkness." When that drape of darkness threatens to cover you, literature is the only religion worth having—at least for some of us, and quite possibly for Wiman, too.

*My Bright Abyss* is not ultimately about the

power of piety but the power of poetry, since our only means of attempting apprehension of the divine are poetic means (which is precisely how Percy Bysshe Shelley and company made religion of their art, and why a priggish Christian like T. S. Eliot was contemptuous of the Romantic worldview). Ortega y Gasset in *Man and Crisis* wrote of "the sincere and naked depths" of an individual's "own personal self. Therefore he must go back to make contact with himself." One of the manifold strengths of Wiman's rumination is its soft-spoken sincerity, its Hopkinsian earnestness devoid of the shifty proselytizing and reductiveness that mar many a spiritual memoir, and its dignified lack of bathos—there's a gut-punching section written to his twin daughters that begins: "My loves, I will be with you, even if I am not with you." In descending through those naked depths and attempting to make crucial contact with himself, Wiman refuses easeful conclusions, he celebrates the verse and the two-faced joy at the hub of our lives—Nietzsche's *tragic joy*—and in doing so he has written what will be for many a life-changing book. ■