Pain, prayer, poetry: An interview with Christian Wiman

“For decades there has been a premium on language as subject,” says poet Christian Wiman. But recently poets are “trying to find some way of speaking of ‘ultimate things’ with some sort of credibility.”

Amy Frykholm interviews Christian Wiman

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CHRISTIAN WIMAN is a poet and editor of Poetry *magazine in Chicago. His most recent book of poems,* Every Riven Thing, *was published last fall by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

Why did you become a poet?
Some existential glitch in my brain, I guess—some soul-wound, some little abyss at birth. You look up one day to find that you're addicted to playing with language and that the glitches and wounds and abysses of your brain seem to be soothed by that. You never really become a poet, though. It's an ideal definition, always as elusive as the next poem.

What about your background—growing up in Texas, for example—helped you in the process of becoming a poet and what hindered you?
It was great to grow up in a storytelling culture, and in one that was, at least then, still so close to the earth. It had an intellectual rift between heaven and earth, body and spirit, and it took me a long time to get past that (maybe I'm still not completely past it). And maybe I'd have benefited from having a few books in the house. But overall I'd say that the flatlands of west Texas are as good a place as any to become a poet.

Can you recall an early encounter with a poem that got you interested?
I don't recall reading any poetry before I went to college other than that in the Bible. Certainly I didn't know there was such a thing as a living poet. I trace the moment when poetry's arrow struck and stayed in me to an afternoon in Oxford when I was on a summer fellowship. I had bought a book that had selections of Yeats and Eliot in one volume. The sounds electrified me—and just that, *sound,* for I understood little of what I was reading. Those sounds released something in me too—a tight knot of existential tension I hadn't even known was there. There was no looking back.

What effect, if any, has your recent turn to Christianity had on your poetry?
I hope my poetry has been utterly changed. It's the same voice, the same style, and I don't really think I turned to Christianity so much as assented to a faith that had long been latent within me. (I think this faith, often expressed as a lack, is everywhere in the earlier work.) But now there is more air in the poems, they veer into directions that in the past I probably would have closed off, and they are more open to simple praise and outright joy.

As someone who reads hundreds of poems monthly for *Poetry* magazine, you are perhaps uniquely qualified to speak about the state of poetry more broadly. Where is the zeitgeist of contemporary poetry?
I think poetry is largely in a holding pattern, trying to figure out what it wants to be,

or what it needs to be as the culture—economic, spiritual—collapses around it. For decades there has been a premium on language as subject, and more recently many poems present an ironclad irony that mirrors the culture's death mask.

What do I see now? Poets trying to find their way out of this, trying to find some way of speaking of "ultimate things" with some sort of credibility. It is already happening.

What contemporary poets do you think *Christian Century* readers should know about? Can you name some important poets who might not be on our radar screens yet?
I still read anything new by Richard Wilbur, Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill or Kay Ryan. I think Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay" is one of the best poems of the second half of the 20th century. Among younger or less-established poets, Ilya Kaminsky, Atsuro Riley, Don Paterson and Laura Kasischke have all written original and beautiful books. And if you're willing to search the Internet to find some poems by poets who don't yet have books, look for Nate Klug or Averill Curdy. And of course, look in *Poetry* magazine, where you can find all of these poets.

For some people, writing is a kind of prayer—a meditation on experience, under God, about the deepest questions. Would you describe it that way?
Writing poetry is for me emotionally and psychically chaotic. It causes great strain, which often expresses itself physically. There's nothing contemplative or easeful about it, however much contemplation might have been necessary to make the poem happen in the first place.

I do think writing poetry is how religious faith survived in me for years—that ever-elusive but ever-enticing tug toward the ineffable—but I think of prayer as a different (and a higher) form of communication.

What theologians or thinkers have most interested you?
I suppose I'm more influenced by unsystematic or even accidental theologians: Fanny Howe, Sara Grant, Marilynne Robinson, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, Teresa of Ávila, Meister Eckhart. All of these writers come at God at a slant, you might say, in feints and hints, glimmerings and ghostly epiphanies. That the list is mostly women, who seem less inclined toward systematizing, is probably no accident.

Of other theologians, I've been very moved and helped by Jürgen Moltmann, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in particular. I carry on a running argument with Karl Barth, whose passion greatly appeals to me, if not always the

narrowness within which he lets it operate. And I love Paul Tillich when I'm reading him, but then afterward I often can't remember the essence of what I've read. Probably not a good sign.

How would you describe the relation between poetry and faith?
I know some poets who feel a great tension between the writing of poetry—which requires an assertion of ego, no matter how modest the poet may seem—and faith. And there are famous historical examples: Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Herbert. I don't experience this. I feel that God has given me a gift and that he expects me to use it. More and more, even if the poem is a failed one, I feel God's presence when I write, feel my life in his.

Who knows, perhaps at some point I'll reach a point where I'll have to revise my poetry-versus-prayer distinction.

In your most recent book of poems, you write about the problem of pain—especially physical pain. How do you translate pain into poetry?
The pain that poetry deals with is psychological, spiritual, existential. Poetry's great power is its ability to enact rather than simply describe these states, so that a reader can have his own experience rendered to him, so that it can *be* experience and not simply neurosis. Poetry can also be *about* physical pain too, of course, but that's all it can be in that regard: about. Physical pain—I mean the real thing, when you are absolutely islanded in your life and mind, and all you want are drugs and darkness—has no translation. If the poet tries to describe this later, it's for existential reasons.

Your poetry often involves detailed recollections of particular moments. How do you remember detail? Is this a particular gift or something you've trained it to do?
Simone Weil says that "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer." Maybe so, maybe not. What's indelible for me about the connection is that attention, like spiritual awareness, cannot be completely willed. There's an element of givenness to it—of grace—which means that attentiveness has a passive quality as well as an active one. The world will come to you—and God will come to you—but only if you are open enough to receive it. I have trained myself to wait, which means that it is not at all unusual for me to go months without writing a poem. But I am listening during that time. I have learned how to continue listening.

Could you name any poets you read for the simple pleasure of it?
I read all poetry outside of work for "the simple pleasure of it." Right now I'm reading Susan Howe's remarkable and very challenging book *That This,* and I'm dipping in and out of Emily Dickinson. I always return to George Herbert, who is probably my favorite poet. Indeed, that whole period—the Renaissance—seems astonishing to me, and unmatched until Modernism.

"Poetry makes nothing happen," said W. H. Auden. Do you agree?
I think poetry can change a person's life. Or rather, poetry can give a person access to those feelings and emotions and understandings that make a change of life possible. And less grandly, poetry can simply make your days more alive, can make you see things and people that you never would have noticed. Great good can come of this. So in these senses, I couldn't disagree more with Auden.

But he was really speaking in sociopolitical terms and not existential or psychological ones. Still, it seems to me that there are examples of poetry reaching right into the heart of a culture and having deep effects. (What irony there is in the fact that after 9/11, many people found themselves reading Auden's "September 1, 1939" for solace, community, hope.) Poetry is a mysterious, ancient and very powerful art. We know of no culture without it. It may seem to dwindle in a country's consciousness at times, but it is always at the very heart of that consciousness, helping to keep it alive.

One sometimes hears arguments about the role of difficulty in contemporary poetry—whether difficulty can play an essential role or is simply an obstacle. What do you think? Or is the issue not important?
I think the argument is largely a canard. Here's a line from that Susan Howe book I'm reading: "You steal on me you step in close to ease with soft promise your limit and absolute absence." Is this "difficult"?

When I first read it, I admit to having been slightly annoyed at its syntactical confusion, its absence of clarifying punctuation. But something made me keep reading the sentence over and over—all those soft subsiding vowel sounds mixed with the monosyllabic urgency, the mysterious nature of the encounter being described, the way the line makes you feel something of that encounter and even participate in it. It could be describing our relationship to God.

As it happens, Howe is talking primarily about her dead husband, but the point is: there's no other way of saying what she's saying here. The language is *action.* Great poetry is usually difficult in some way, and then clear in ways we would never expect. Its difficulty, you might say, makes new clarities possible in and for us. "I wanted to write a poem / that you would understand," wrote William Carlos Williams. "For what good is it to me / if you can't understand it? / But you got to try *hard.*"

Read Wiman's "A Break in the Storm."