

One time

by [Christian Wiman](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

1. *Canyon de Chelly, Arizona*

Then I looked down into the lovely cut
of a missing river, something under dusk's
upflooding shadows claiming for itself a clarity
of which my eyes were not yet capable:
fissures could be footpaths, ancient homes
random erosions; pictographs depicting fealties
of who knows what hearts, to who knows what gods.
To believe is to believe you have been torn
from the abyss, yet stand waveringly on its rim.
I come back to the world. I come back
to the world and would speak of it plainly,
with only so much artifice as words
themselves require, only so much distance
as my own eyes impose. I believe
in the slickrock whorls of the real
canyon, the yucca's stricken clench,
and, on the other side, the dozen buzzards swirled
and buoyed above some terrible intangible fire
that must scald the very heart
of matter to cast up such miraculous ash.

2. *2047 Grace Street*

But the world is more often refuge
than evidence, comfort and covert
for the flinching will, rather than the sharp
particulate instants through which God's being burns

into ours. I say God and mean more
than the bright abyss that opens in that word.
I say world and mean less
than the abstract oblivion of cells
out of which every intact thing emerges,
into which every intact thing finally goes.
I do not know how to come closer to God
but by standing where a world is ending
for one man. It is still dark,
and for an hour I have listened
to the breathing of the woman I love beyond
my ability to love. Praise to the pain
scalding us toward each other, the grief
beyond which, please God, she will live
and thrive. And praise to the light that is not
yet, the dawn in which one bird believes,
crying not as if there had been no night
but as if there were no night in which it had not been.