

# 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.