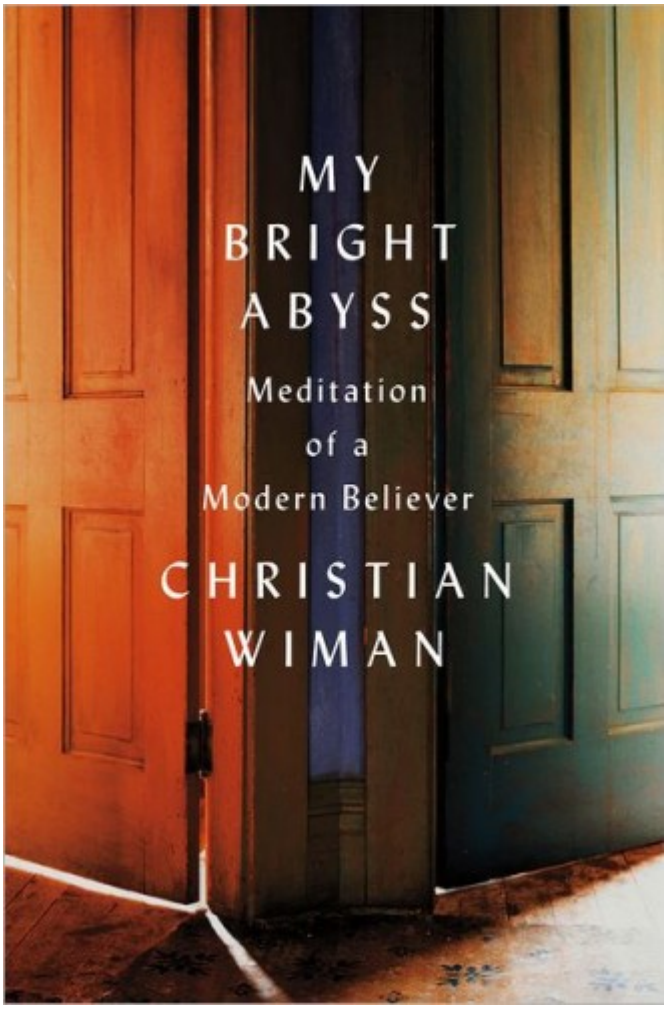
My Bright Abyss, by Christian Wiman

reviewed by Lil Copan in the June 26, 2013 issue

In Review



My Bright Abyss

By Christian Wiman
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Having struggled with a rare cancer that offered little chance of recovery, *Poetry* magazine editor Christian Wiman has navigated his way through questions of belief and death. His cartography begins early in his life with the story of his grandmother

and elderly great aunt. During his early adult years, Wiman lived in a trailer in the yard of “the big house” where they lived. The two women died within weeks of each other, and each came to dying with her own understanding or fear, even as she lived a life grounded in faith. With Wiman’s early lessons in dying came a discovery that he carries through the book: “Concentrating on death,” he writes, “concentrates life.”

Poetry is an essential holding place for Wiman, a place for “the persistent gravity of the ghost called God,” beyond the language of formal religion. It serves as the page on which Wiman explores “how you answer that burn of being” through question and form and meaning and stages of belief. “I knew very well *that* I believed,” he writes. “I was not at all sure exactly *what* I believed.”

Wiman looks, clear-eyed, at dying and offers this book as a personal record of his leaks of faith, a record of doubt where, mysteriously, deeply buried seeds of belief were rooting. He returns archaeologically to his own poetry written during a time when he claimed to be devoid of belief and finds traces of what might be called witness. What seems devoid of the language of faith becomes a record of an acknowledgment:

> you are still left with this question: *Why?* Why should existence be arranged so that our alienation from God is a given and we must forever fight our way not simply toward what he is but toward the whole notion *that* he is?

Poetry gives language to that alienation, to that fight, to that invisible hum.

One of the tenderest, most awkward scenes of the book is of Wiman walking down the street toward the train station on a bright winter day. He hears someone call his name, and he turns. The local pastor is hurrying to catch up with him, his shoes untied, buttoning up his flannel shirt as he runs.

> I remember Matt straining to find some language that would be true to his own faith and calling and at the same time adequate to the tragedy and faithlessness—the tragedy *of* faithlessness—that he perceived in me. And I remember when we parted there was an awkward moment when the severity of my situation and our unfamiliarity with each other left us with no words, and in a gesture that I’m sure was completely unconscious, he placed his hand over his heart for just a second as a flicker of empathetic anguish crossed his face. It sliced right through me.

In this wordless gesture, what Wiman names the void of God and the love of God met.

As the book progresses, we encounter his tender dips into belief, his half-backward steps to try to understand what, exactly, is rooted in the dark underearth and what that rooting means. We also hear the voices he returns to: Paul Tillich, Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, Meister Eckhart. He also turns to poets—especially to George Herbert, whose lines introduce a new language and landscape for belief—and to fiction writers like Marilynne Robinson and Cormac McCarthy, both of whom show the landscape of the void of God and the love of God.

You might say that Wiman turns to theologians for explorations, to poets for expressions of the human cry toward the divine, and to novelists for both explorations and cries: in fiction we meet the situations that test and question this thing called belief—even though the experience often goes unnamed.

Wiman's book of fragments are "exhortations to myself, mostly. My restless, useless parishioners. For the question remains: What do you do, what do you say, what in the world are you going to *believe in* when you are dying?" Ultimately, his claim to belief is one of recognition:

> I'm a Christian not because of the resurrection (I wrestle with this). . . . I am a Christian because of that moment on the cross when Jesus, drinking the very dregs of human bitterness, cries out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" . . . I am a Christian because I understand the moment of Christ's passion to have meaning in my own life.

Ultimately Wiman's language (or nonlanguage) for belief is acceptance. "Acceptance of all the gifts that God, even in the midst of death, grants us. Acceptance of the fact that we are, as Paul Tillich says, accepted."

Wiman reports that his cancer has gone into what may be "a long remission." He is leaving *Poetry* magazine and has accepted a joint appointment with Yale Divinity School and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, where he will be serving as senior lecturer in religion and literature. His book displays his intently honest exploration of that intersection.