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Walk Through the Poem: "Believing Green" by Christian Wiman

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A Walk Through the Poem: “Believing Green” by Christian Wiman

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April 26, 2017

Shelbi Gesch

I first stumbled across poet Christian Wiman by serendipitous accident, at last year’s Faith and Writing Conference in Grand Rapids. I’d heard too much about him to pass up the opportunity to hear him read his own work in person, but what sealed the deal for me was his own phenomenal story of enduring incurable cancer, re-encountering God along the way, and living to write about it. The book from which this poem is taken, *Once In the West*, travels through the experience of facing one’s own mortality and features pieces of memory and reflection that bear the richness of experience lived with deep reflection and expressed with care. Here’s Wiman’s piece, “Believing Green.”

Believing Green

By [Christian Wiman](#)

2810 El Paso Street, 1974

Solitary as a mast on a mountaintop,
an ocean of knowing long withdrawn,

she ditted the days, grew fluent in cat,
felt, she said, each seed surreptitiously split

the adamantine dark, believing green.
It was the town’s torpor washed me to her door,

it was the itch existence stranded me on that shore
of big-lipped shells pinked with altogether other suns,

random wall-blobs impastoed with jewels and jowls
sometimes a citizen seemed to peek through,

inward and inward all the space and spice
of her edible heavens.

O to feel again within the molded dough
wet pottery, buttery cosmos, brain that has not cooled;

to bring to being an instant
sculpture garden: five flashlit jackrabbits locked in black.

From her I learned the earthworm’s exemplary open-mindedness,
its engine of discriminate shit.

From her I learned all the nuances of neverness
that link the gladiola to God.

How gone she must be, graveless maybe,
who felt the best death would be for friends to eat you,

whose last name I never even knew:
dirt-rich mouse-proud lady who Rubied me

into a life so starred and laughtered there was no need
for after.

First, let me admit that as a writer, poetry is not my strength. I'm more of an essayist, a non-fiction writer, but I do enjoy reading poems, however illiterate to the art I often feel after jumping through a book of poetry. Poetry, to me, has always seemed like a second language. I can *learn* to read it, *learn* to interpret it, but though I enjoy finding and using creative turns of phrase and well-placed metaphors where I see them, I still naturally think of a table as a table first, rather than as, say, an "elevated platform for family gathering and nourishment." Poetry and poetic language is something that remains less than natural to me.

But, occasionally, a poet comes along like Wiman, who speaks my language –or maybe I should say, speaks the language I *want* to speak as a native tongue. I would give my left foot for a thesaurus made of Wiman's poetic vocabulary. He uses (and occasionally invents) words with such aplomb that you don't even mind the fact that keeping a smartphone dictionary app by your side becomes a necessity for reading his work. He has an incredible knack for finding arresting combinations of words: words that pull you into the page, phrases demand your attention, like in the case of "Believing Green."

"Believing Green" has a synesthetic feel to it that I both feel I understand and yet don't. I think I first read this poem in the beginning of February—that point in the year when you know spring theoretically exists, but you have to take it on faith after months of snow and wind that hurts your lungs to breathe. "Believing green" also has a magical quality –the idea that belief has the power to bring things to life, that belief animates things.

And there's magic in the sound and the rhythm of Wiman's lines. Phrases like "adamantine dark" and words like "torpor," "surreptitiously," "impastoed," reflect an exactitude of language and a union of sound and rhythm that demands to be blown into life by being read aloud. Didn't your ears itch to hear someone read "five flashlit jackrabbits locked in black" aloud as your eyes traced the lines on the page? Could you hear the dance of rhythm in the words "adamantine dark"?

Perhaps you've spent some time around preschool-age children. If you have, maybe you've noticed the particular gift little ones have for stumbling on language in shockingly vivid ways that reflect far more honesty than we who have learned to speak the language for many years can. Wiman here demonstrates that he, as a poet, has either retained or re-learned this skill of whittling language to an abstract honesty that is normally only possessed by children. He's distilled the sensory down to the raw, slippery words that trip through our minds, only to be intercepted by our inner censor and translated into common language for the sake of more efficient communication. But what is lost in our drive for efficiency, Wiman showcases by reinhabiting his younger self and inviting us along to wander through the magic of a childhood memory.

His experience has an approachable quality about it that's unique, but relatable: that one person we knew growing up who gave us an upside-down, turned inside-out view of the world that changed everything. Maybe it was the neighborhood crazy cat lady. Maybe it was the repairman who showed you how the insides of a television worked. The lady he describes –I love how he cleverly hides her name in a verb, "Rubied"—seems to exist outside of time, bridging the mystery of adulthood and the magic of childhood in a way that gives both ends of the bridge hope that joy still exists.