**Elegance in Overalls: the American Pastoral of Christian Wiman**

Not yet fifty years old, the American poet Christian Wiman has recently been stricken with a serious illness. At the moment his doctors say that he is likely to survive it, but for anyone in doubt about the magnitude of the possible loss, one glance at his latest collection, *Every Riven Thing*, should serve to state the case. In a poem called “Sitting Down to Breakfast Alone” he remembers the Longhorn Diner:

steam spiriting out of black coffee,

the scorched pores of toast, a bowl

of apple butter like edible soil,

bald cloth, knifelight, the lip of a glass,

my plate’s gleaming, teeming emptiness.

The risk for any American poet following Robert Frost into a pastoral mode is to sound the way Norman Rockwell looked. It’s not the worst fate, but the aspirant was after something less comfortable and more intense. Wiman attains intensity often enough to remind you of just how great Frost was, and often there is a touch of another of his masters, Richard Wilbur: the apple butter like edible soil might have been on the menu if Wilbur had ever written a poem about a cheap American eatery.

But the best thing to say about Wiman is not that he reminds you of previous poets: it’s that he makes you forget them. His rural landscapes might start off by sounding like Seamus Heaney with more machinery, but soon they are all his. Wiman’s poem “Five Houses Down”, which caused such a stir when it came out in the*New Yorker* last year, is a piece of American Gothic so sharply seen that it brings back, for any reader in the English-speaking world, that eccentric junk-buff who lived nearby. If he never did, he does now.

I loved the eyesore opulence

of his five partial cars, the wonder-cluttered porch

with its oilspill plumage, tools

cauled in oil, the dark

clockwork of disassembled engines

Wiman has retained his childhood fascination with the disassembled engines, to the point where, though well capable of strict forms, he would rather take them apart and leave the pieces in approximate touch. Though an outstanding poem, an instant classic, “Five Houses Down” is only one of his many backyard masterpieces, as if the Wright Brothers were still turning out flying machines at home. Actually the brothers had a flourishing bicycle business and Wiman is the powerful editor of *Poetry* (Chicago), but once those wide open spaces start to work their magic it’s hard to shake the impression that every complex mechanism in America was invented in a barn, up to and including moon rockets.

Rangy and soft-spoken in real life, definitely a Sam Shepherd type, Wiman seems ideal casting for a would-be rocketeer raised in the flyover (he was born in West Texas), as long as we remember that only an extreme technical sophistication can produce such simplicity. He knows all about having more. You need to know that if you are plausibly to long for less.

Welcome to the hell of having everything:

one repentant politician on sixty screens,

van-sized vats of crabgrass toxin,

a solid quarter mile of disposable diapers,

all our impossibles pluralled.

Here one of his illustrious predecessors, Randall Jarrell, would have recognized a fellow sufferer, a sad heart at the supermarket. But Wiman can go only so far towards despair, because he has God for solace. On the rare occasions that I find a Wiman poem less than profound, it’s because it claims profundity, usually by employing an ellipsis… those deadly three dots that indicate a thought too deep to be dealt with just now. Such gestures towards the unsayable mark his religious poetry, which he might think of as his strongest, at this time when the threat of death is so real.

But we must hope that what this fine poet faces is more life, and the obligation to go on with redoubled force. In which case, the poems he writes will be among the best written by anybody, at this favourable time for poetry, when everything is against it –in the same way that the wind, blowing against the bows of the aircraft carrier, lifts the aircraft into the air. If one so often thinks of being airborne when reading Wiman’s work, it could be because he seems to be thinking that way too.

There comes a time when time is not enough:

a hand takes hold or a hand lets go; cells swarm,

cease; high and cryless a white bird blazes beyond

itself, to be itself, burning unconsumed.

Those lines are a fragment from “The Reservoir”: the longest single poem in the book and an indication of where his work might go next, towards larger constructions. It would be a welcome development, although not without its dangers. Even in “The Reservoir”, which I find enviably fluent, the ineffable looms. It’s so hard for a poet to be clear that anyone who can manage it should embrace his duty never to be any other way. More power, less smoke! But that’s the kind of thing we shout only at the greatly gifted, as they go flashing by.

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