

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Who Has Seen the Wind?

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you.

But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I.

But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

Christina Rossetti¹

✧ Reflections

The Episcopal Church's liturgical calendar remembers particular women and men of faith whose examples are worthy of our recollection and reflection, people we consider to be saints (with a lower case s). On their day, we remember them with a special prayer. The 19th century poet Christina Rossetti is one of these, commemorated on April 27. She is probably most famous for penning the words to the beloved Christmas carol "In the Bleak Midwinter," later covered by many musicians, most recently the popular Shawn Colvin. If you're a J.K. Rowling fan, you might be interested to know that her novel, *The Cuckoo's Calling*, (published under her pseudonym, Robert Galbraith) borrows its title from a line in Rossetti's poem, "A Dirge."

At the age of 14, Rossetti suffered a nervous breakdown which triggered a life-long struggle with depression. It was in her teenage years that she, as well as her mother and sister, became deeply interested in the Anglo-Catholic movement and her work from that point on is illustrative of her religious conviction. Her poems—often meditations in the Romantic tradition—are largely concerned with mystery, incarnation, and devotion.

The poem presented here is deceptively simple and not, on first glance, particularly religious. And yet it seems to me to underscore her value not only among the world's finest writers—particularly in her subtlety, her restraint, and her economy of language—but among the Church's most inspirational figures. I think she uses this beautiful business about wind as an

¹ "Who Has Seen the Wind?" by Christina Rossetti. Public domain.

analogy for faith: we can't *see* wind, except for the movement of the trees, and yet we know that wind is there because we can feel a breeze, see the leaves trembling, and know with assurance that though air is invisible, it is certainly real. It strikes me as an invitation to think about the mysteries of faith. Of course no one doubts that air and wind exist—they have science on their side, for one thing— but the feeling of that knowledge might be akin to faith, which is, essentially, a belief in what is invisible and unable to be empirically proven.

There is—and will likely always be—a tension between our rational, reasonable, analytical brains and our more fervent, intuitive, curious souls. Or, as C.S. Lewis writes in his book *Mere Christianity*, “The battle is between faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other.” To apply reason to faith, on one hand, is to undermine the definition at the heart of religion and yet, we human creatures have a difficult time extricating one from the other. We like both; we like certainty. While many people find themselves desiring proof that God is real, that heaven exists, that angels are among us, etc., the very nature of faith means that there is no proof except the heart's truth. John Keats says it better: “I am certain of nothing,” he writes, “but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination.”

Anne Lamott writes that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. And she seems to understand what Lewis and Rossetti and Keats might be claiming in their own ways: that in order for faith to *be* faith, one must give oneself over to mystery, to the invisible, to unknowing, and to the realization that divinity cannot be reduced to scientific knowledge but is, nevertheless, all around us. After all, if God were able to be understood and analyzed, as though God were a lab experiment, or as provable as wind and atmosphere, God would be too much like man, and not God. God's *Godness* depends on God being beyond all that we can imagine or understand. Rossetti's poem reminds me of what I might too easily forget, that God is surely present if I am attentive to the earthly and invisible divinity among us always. No wonder, then, the “trees bow down their heads” when “the wind is passing by.”

✠ About the poet

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894), born in London to Italian parents, is considered a major Victorian poet. Often compared to Emily Dickinson, Rossetti wrote with a refined technique and a commitment to formal experimentation. Critical interest in her work rose in the final decades of the twentieth century particularly in feminist criticism discourse. During her lifetime, opinion was divided over whether Rossetti or Elizabeth Barrett Browning was the greatest female poet of the era. Christina Rossetti was the younger sister of the famous Pre-Raphaelite artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti.



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