Three Birds There

Katie Machen

What looks alone at first may not actually be alone. I sit in the breakfast nook, in the bay window on the third floor with the high telephone post beside me, closer in distance than the bathroom behind, but separated by glass and wall and heat. Dive, approach, land, and there is a black crow so close I could ask his name. His feathers blow in the windchill but he remains otherwise still upon the wire. I think we may have a moment here. I think he may see me, may know not to be afraid, thankful for the streaks along my windowpane and the screens set out like armor to keep him from smashing his head, from sharing my morning toast. Before I know it he rises and glides to the right, calling a goodbye, perhaps, and I see him joined by two others, then four more, off. He is not the alone one, but the chief in this moment, though I know his time will come to split aside, to resume last place. I see the humility in their distribution. He was never mine to begin with.

I have not been to church in a year. Just once or twice with a friend every few months or so, but nothing permanent, and nothing to call mine. I tell my friend this, then tell them what I am giving up for Lent this year. This friend likes to be called they, not he or she. Sometimes it is hard for me to say “they.” It does not come off my tongue, flow from my mouth easily, naturally. I become sad about this, and then guilty. When I write it down it is easier. My friend says they are happy I am reconnecting with my faith, that I’m feeling tinges of God in the tips of my big toes. I say that God never left my big toes. I think God might be a they.

When I was in elementary school, my mother taught Godly Play, a Montessori-inspired Sunday School program for young children meant to echo the beauty and mystery of the
Episcopalian church. In Godly Play we would sit in a circle on the ground on big square pillows, feeling like small Tibetan monks in horse and hound Maryland. We settled into the room that was half windows, half blank space, and sang a tune one mother had strung together, repeating over and over, “Be still and know that I am God.” Our bodies quieted, soothed by the slow rhythm that grounded us in one room, our dwelling place and God’s.

We heard our mothers tell Old Testament stories and New Testament parables with beautiful props filled with that same mystery that resulted from the tranquil room and the procedural pace of the lesson. For some reason there were no fathers that taught Godly Play. The mothers took turns each week reading the stories from scripts, taking wooden Joseph and adorning him with a multicolored overcoat, letting us be the brothers that give him away, bringing the coat back bloody and smeared with dirt. Afterwards we returned the figures to their boxes, not cardboard, but solid wood pieced together at home and painted gold. If we had been good we might play with the desert box, an indoor sandbox exciting enough in its taboo nature, the dunes that go on within walls of glass. Boys smuggled figures from the shelf and played war between Father Abraham and Moses and Pharaoh and Baby Jesus, divvying up teams based on number rather than loyalty to historical accuracy. I dug my fingers deep into the sands of time, the embodied forever, the endless fear of the wilderness.

When it was time to reconvene, the sandbox closed, figures returned to their gold square homes, and we found ourselves again on our cushions, the circle resumed, our own sort of communion. My mother or someone else’s would dim the lights and ignite a fat candle, maybe one leftover from Advent, in the middle of the circle. We sat still, eyes on the flame, entranced. It flickered on our pink faces and then with a brief maternal exhale was gone. “He used to be there,” she pointed to the candle, “but now He is everywhere.” I drew in a full breath, the smoke
of the candle filling my nose, filling my whole being. For years I couldn’t imagine the Holy Spirit in terms other than smoke in a room, a candle just extinguished.

When I was four years old, several years before my mother started teaching Godly Play, she picked me up from Sunday School. My teacher was a fastidious woman who would later instruct etiquette workshops, showing my sixth grade class how to cut our fried chicken, where to place our forks and spoons. She was very excited to see my mother, to tell her the news: “Katie understands what a parable is!”

“Good,” responded my mom, nodding along, smiling vacantly. In the car on the way home she thought, What’s a parable? Her Catholic upbringing had instructed her not to ask questions, not to read the Bible, but to trust the word of the priest who read from the Gospel in Latin. She was an Episcopalian now. She had been received, had followed a welcome course, and my father could now rest assured that his children would not be raised Catholic as he took Sunday mornings to sleep in, to wake at 11 and make himself an omelet.

A candle is lit, it blows out, the room fills with God. Jesus tells stories inside stories, feels God and is God.

The birds are gone from my frame, but I imagine they go on, that they take turns playing line leader. In their V, the figurehead guides the others who fan out behind, each shielded partially by the next from the wind and surrounding elements. I do not know if birds feel cold. They are autonomous individuals and they are a part of the whole, the flock, a bird, birds. Their paradox is altogether expected. They are together, they are their own, they are each other’s. When I see them there, connected only by the faith that tells them they will keep gliding, I can
see God there, can discern Creation in the wind of impending spring on my bare neck, in the
robin with his red breast perched by my window.

One week before my sixteenth birthday, I went on a mission trip with my best friend
Diana’s youth group, the United Methodists up the street with the contemporary worship
services, the kind with drums and guitars. Episcopalians are pipe organ kinds of people. Since
my church did not have an active youth group I joined Diana’s, and the trip was meant to be the
pinnacle of the year, an opportunity to grow as a group and to show our love for others. “Mission
trip” was what we called it, though I don’t think any of us actually thought about what that
wording might suggest. We raised funds for months in advance, spending hours in the cold
selling Christmas trees by the fire hall, and we bonded as a group, playing volleyball on Sunday
evenings and participating in a Live Nativity in December as shepherds or as Mary holding a
baby doll if we were so lucky, all sweatpants and ski coat hidden beneath a blue cloak. We were
going nowhere particularly exciting or exotic, but rather to a little coastal town in New Jersey,
just three hours north of home. We were a jumble of teenagers, most of whom attended Diana’s
school rather than my own. We went off to fix houses, to do physical labor that we considered to
be service, but we never once considered any sort of mission. I still do not know what the
mission really was.

My youth group joined hundreds of other young Christian students from across the
country. We assembled in crews of strangers to paint walls or build porch steps at the houses of
local residents, many of whom were elderly. There were six of us in each crew, five youths and
one adult leader, and each member had a job: there was the lunch maker, the tool collector, the
devotions leader, the energizer who got the group going on a slow, early morning. Break makers
took the pulse of the group throughout the day and decided when we needed to pause for water. Often the devotions leader, who led us in thoughtful conversation about our week’s theme *Reveal*, would also be the spokesperson for finding God-sightings. As we sat on the shaded porch eating cold cut sandwiches and swilling our Gatorade, my group was called to remark upon any God-sightings found so far throughout the day, like we were playing one big game of “I Spy” or living in a *Where’s Waldo?* book. The group was, for the most part, silent.

“I can’t think of any,” said the cheerleading self-proclaimed Backseat Baptist from West Virginia. With one hand twirling her ponytail and the other responding to a text message, her devotion to the group was partial, and she had earlier admitted that her grandmother had made her come in the first place.

“Nothing has happened today,” said one of the two boys. Earlier, while painting the house’s exterior, he told me he wasn’t so sure about any of this stuff. “What if the Egyptians had it right all along and we’re just wasting our time with this? I don’t want to take any chances,” he said, pushing his glasses higher up his nose and wiping sweat from his forehead. We were right to paint outside in the morning before the July sun migrated to the back of the house.

“I can think of some,” I said. Our group leader Thom, a balding man in his sixties, looked up at me expectantly and with surprise. He had rested quiet for the most part, probably unhappy to have been placed with a group of such disconnected, uninterested students. “Well, it isn’t as hot as it was yesterday, the clouds look beautiful today, and there are these birds that keep singing like they’re in conversation with each other. Do you hear them?” Thom stared at me as if trying to figure me out. I couldn’t tell what he thought of my declaration, of my God-sighting that felt like less of a miracle and more of an obvious list of my present surroundings. At the time
I did not know if the two might have been one in the same. The rest of the group nodded. We finished our sandwiches and went back to work.

On these kinds of trips, we were expected to give something away, the pieces of ourselves that we held onto again and again, that we hated but could not shake. The inadequacy, the anger, the self-conscious shoes that rubbed and rubbed our feet until a blister formed, the blister too. The trip leant itself to this kind of giving, encouraged it with singing to Jesus and prayer and speakers who asked what there was to lay down before God, who gave the easy equation for going one, two, three I'm a Christian. In our evening gatherings we reflected on the day's portion of a Bible passage, focusing on the idea of revelation through a weeklong study of Luke 4:18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the captives free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." On a mission, sent, the head of the V and the wings out to the side.

We thought about lost and found, we thought about God-sightings, we thought about who the captives were, who the prisoners, who were free. A game of Tag: who's it, I hope it's not me, it's probably me. The Its, the taggers, indistinguishable from the tagged. Tag what is the good tag who are the poor, tag am I blind? Could I be blind if I know what vision is supposed to be like? Is there blindness in the future or in the now? What is sight after all?

A cross was there, a literal one, and we were given pieces of paper to write down that one thing that stood between us and God, that one thing that we could not believe God could handle. The lights lowered and we were given time, as much as we needed, to go to the cross, to kneel on the ground, to sit in silence thinking about all these things as one group. Many people cried. The
room of strangers and friends did not give me my faith, nor did the tall cross there, the scraps of crumpled paper.

A bird I can hear but cannot find, tucked away, its call distant and clear, the sound of the bluebird my mother points out every March. It is only recently that I realized that God-sightings are poems on the ground, a coin that fell from someone’s pocket to be picked up by a child someplace, put there on purpose or left like wax on the table from the candle at last night’s dinner. A surprise cup of lemonade in summer, a compliment from a stranger or just the eye contact there, all God, all poetry. The summer I went on a mission was the same summer I fancied myself a photographer, capturing shadows of small tree branches or of my own legs made even longer, the light just right filling sky after rain, the paint by number gold I could not make up.

“She has a good eye,” my dad would say. “The eye of an artist,” added Mom. As if the found macro lens of a digital camera equated to skill, to artistry.

I see God in the amateur photography I took that summer, in the self-portraits of shadows on the driveway, one blade of grass longer than the rest, an apple just bitten into.

In the middle of the week, the crews were able to break early from work and reconvene with their youth groups for an afternoon of free time. We spent our Wednesday at the beach. Carrie was a chaperone on the trip and was integral to the regenesis of my spirituality, the guiding force that told me the old Watch in a Field story when it was not yet old to me. The logic seemed infallible. A watch is found in a field. Who put the watch there? Could one really believe that the watch just found itself there in that field or that the field grew the watch? Of course not.
There must be a watchmaker someplace. When the watch is opened it is found to work perfectly, each part in harmony, each part there for a reason. I could not make the watch because I am not a watchmaker. But someone did make that watch, and when it is turned, is set into motion, it goes on and will tell time until its battery dies one day. Carrie did not tell me what would happen next to the watch.

“What about hell?” I asked Carrie. “Is that really true?” My concern was never myself. I do not care much for my own afterlife; what is present and what remains seem inconsequential or at least unmanageable, and should I go or not go, I will have lived, will have delighted in the sky melting into sea, the skim milk in my chai, the taste a memory of hot cups of Nepali tea, the thumbprint smeared on a dirty windowpane.

“That’s what it says,” she told me. “It’s pretty clear on that front.” I sat on a wooden bench in the sand. There were no desert glass boxes, just open pathways to the ocean or else back to the car. I looked down at my hands, which shook; I felt my teeth chatter, not due to wind but as a result of giddy fear, the uncertainty shaking within my mouth in a way I could taste, saliva thin. The clock was there. So was the candlewax, the residual scent of the flame. I saw Jesus walk along the beach, saw him step into his boat and turn towards an unthinkable number of people sitting on their picnic blankets to hear. I listened, I searched, I could not see that I was blind.

I try to imagine I could be like a baby bird, the leap from a hard tree branch not an act of bravery but of faith. J. M. Barrie writes, “The reason birds can fly and we can't is simply that they have perfect faith, for to have faith is to have wings.” Baby birds must wait for their sight with mouths open and up, must wait for the glaze to peel apart, to reveal bulging eyes and a
mother waiting, fresh from regurgitation, the provision there. They are patient; they do not know
the glaze will peel and yet there is no question of their provision, no fear. Entitlement, perhaps, a
faith not limited to flight but also certain of purpose. Their bodies curl into each other inside a
nest of twigs and sticky webs, their feet eventually precisely hooked upon tree branch. The wind
a vehicle, a liberty. Never captive, but suddenly free.

That night I lay in my cot in the hot math classroom of the middle school we stayed at,
the lights off and the room, filled with sleepers, silent. I nestled into my sleeping bag despite the
heat, feeling like the infants at my church’s nursery who burrowed their heads into my shoulder
each Sunday while their parents sang hymns, recited the Nicene Creed, took communion. With
eyes closed I felt the things that were unclear, the disparities I could not reconcile, and even so I
felt love there, felt the possibility of new life, of birds singing even when the day is humid. I did
not accept the parts that were not there and yet I let the rest of it sit in my hand. Lying detached
from my body I saw myself as a figure that ran forward, ran faster than I could run in an earthly
dimension, and came to another figure, one with arms wide. I met the figure there in an embrace
and I wept into my pillow, the revelation of the Him there, the them. *Katie understands what a
parable is.* The difference between understanding and seeing, between seeing and believing,
between believing and understanding. When I awoke the next day I felt the film peeled away, the
eyes new.

A hybrid Episcopalian United Methodist Anythingist Christian who finally “got it” in
some way, the result of conversations on the beach and crying to myself in a cot in a humid
middle school classroom. “I think something really important happened last night,” I would say
to Carrie and all the rest. The start, the start again.
To take flight, to be off, to leave a nest. I wonder why I see some birds alone. I make the choice to strip the skin, to don new feathers, to look at the nothingness and the wide sky. Off and away with opened up eyes, no glaze, more mine.

Five years after the mission trip I flew to a foreign country and pretended that too belonged to me, the birds there, the flying, even the poop that landed on my head as I walked down the old streets to buy my bread for lunch. I did not go to church, I did not pray aloud, I did not sing songs about grace or truth or brokenness.

In a small apartment in the South of France, Mathilde turned to me, drunk, red-haired, and smiling, “Who is Jesus to you?” The party had gone on for hours; the empty bottles of wine lined the counter and people salsa danced in the tight kitchen. I felt myself taken aback at the question as she settled close to me on the sofa, someone smoking a cigarette at the other end. I shook my head a little and smiled vaguely, shocked at the lack of response ready at my lips. “You can answer in English, if that’s easier,” she said, but the language barrier was not the problem. Most of the people I had met in France were Catholic, if not practicing, then at least at their core, and several deeply intrigued by my Protestantism, my idea of a Jesus that I could see, that I could feel. Mathilde came from no religion, her parents having wanted her to make her own choice.

Finally I said, “He is love. That’s all there is.” I felt the simplification pushing down on me, covering my hair in the cigarette smoke and the quiche just from the oven, Mathilde a perfect French hostess even at two in the morning.

“But aren’t all religions about love when it comes down to it?” she asked. I stared ahead, certain this was not the right time for this conversation, that I should have been warned, that
there was no way for me to explain what felt right, to tell the stories she already knew, to exhibit how this love might be different from Gandhi’s, from Mother Teresa’s. The conversation was interrupted but I could not help but sit and wonder over and over at the blankness of my stare, at my dumbfounded and inadequate reply. I felt the love, even there, but it was imprecise, lost in the uninhibited unity of ten people singing along to the same song.

Later that month I wandered an unfamiliar neighborhood with an old friend, strolling uphill in the dark and finally settling down at a bar for a glass of wine. I told him about this incident, about my silence, and he told me he no longer had existential crises. We sat in that, his nothing having evaporated, and I told him I never believed in hell. We were one there, neither of us on the same page, neither of us certain of each other or of ourselves, and yet we fit. We could be. I went to sleep that night and wondered if this would be my new self, if my resolve there was for keeps. I felt empty and asked myself again, “Who is Jesus to you?” I settled. I sunk down.

I woke with peace on my lips, stillness suffusing my sightline even then. I felt like a prophet filled with dreams, like Joseph woken to tell the future. I knew no future and I could not answer my question but I felt the stillness, sensed the blown away flame, the embrace taken residence. My fear became the vapor there, became mixed with the smoke, drifted off.

God-sightings: the wafting of fresh, inexpensive bread, the chiming of bells on the quarter hour, the stranger who lifts my friend’s wheelchair and helps him into the metro. God is made of lying on the table to look out the window and find a new world there pushed upside down and going on in a straight line. God is made of baby spit on shoulders, of snow melted into squelching grass beneath my feet, of odors in the street so pungent as to seem ungodly, that is where God is. The response to an imminent need, the right angle of vertical tree and flat,
horizontal cloud. All poetry, all God. The earth itself, the people inside, the dust that plays
volleyball from one respiratory system to another.

The crow will not return to my wire and I will not see his place in the order, if he is at the
dip of the V or if he lags behind, below, his formation just out of sync but also just intentionally
so. He goes. One him, one them, they go. I sit and wait for another, I add them among my lists.