

Expecto Patronum, by Kathryn Soper

Once upon a time there was a little girl who wanted to know God, although she didn't know yet that that's what she wanted. She only knew that she felt lonely, even when she wasn't alone, and after her father left she felt lonelier still, as if her body was made of empty space. Sometimes she sensed a strange yet familiar something just beyond her reach, a power or presence that promised to fill her hollow frame if she could only learn its secret, but she did not think of this power in terms of God. Her only religious experience was sporadic Sunday mornings at the Greek Orthodox church her grandmother frequented. There, God was something apart and unknowable, a chant in a foreign tongue, a patch of colors in a high window, a swing of the censer in the distant sanctum.

When this girl was a little less little, her mother married someone else and began taking her to a different church, where the priests didn't glitter and the windows were curtained yet clear, and there she heard stories about a father-God who spoke to people. And while she dreaded the long hours spent on metallic folding chairs in small carpeted classrooms, sometimes her teachers spoke of a previous life when we lived with God, and she longed for this absent heavenly father the way she longed for her absent earthly father, and she knew she would never be sad again if she only had them back. And whenever she heard the story of the boy-prophet who had seen God and heard his voice, she felt a wild hope that someday she would.

At church this little girl learned that she could indeed know God the way the boy-prophet had. The way to this knowledge was prayer. But there were rules of prayer, and the most important rule was this: when you prayed, you had to believe that your prayer would be heard and honored. Prayer was like knocking on a door and believing someone would open it. It couldn't and wouldn't open if you didn't believe. Indeed, the very bible verses which had sparked the boy-prophet's reunion with his heavenly father made this clear:

If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering, for him who wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man thinketh he shall receive anything of the Lord.

So this little girl didn't pray much, because until God actually opened the door she couldn't know he would, and she didn't know how to believe in something that wasn't real yet.

But sometimes she was so sad or so scared that she didn't care about how this might be done, and so she tried to pray. Once she was nine she was in bed and couldn't sleep because the room was dark and the darkness was charged with terror, as if the emptiness within her had turned inside out and swallowed the whole world, and she needed the light from the hallway, but the door was closed and she was too scared to get out of bed and open it. And she remembered God's promise to those who knocked, and her need was so dire and so earnest that it reached beyond her own fearful skin, and in

her nine-year-old mind she imagined the door opening, just a little, and she asked for it to open, just a little. And it did.

Another time, when she was eleven, she was babysitting too many children and the baby began to wail, as if it knew its parents were gone, and the girl became panicked and desperately needed to stop the child's suffering but didn't know how, so she let her desperation and her longing for relief flow outward and upward from her eleven-year-old self, and as she pled for peace to descend she felt a wild hope that it would. And it did. These were her stories, and when she was at camp with the other girls from church, and the time came for her to say why she believed in God, she told these stories. And she was glad, because it would be awful to have no stories to tell.

Yet as this girl grew up the darkness in her room grew darker, and the door wouldn't open no matter how dire her need or how earnest her plea. She stopped praying because she was too sad and too angry and her stories could not help that. She stopped going to church because the stories she heard only made her more sad and more angry. But when the girl became a woman with a wailing infant of her own she returned to church and returned to prayer, determined to master the rules of knowing God so that her daughter didn't have to be sad and angry, and found that the most important rule bewildered her more than ever:

Seek unto my Father, and it shall be done in that very moment what ye shall ask, if ye ask in faith, believing that ye shall receive. JST Mark 9:45

And whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you. 3 Ne 18:20

Even though the girl was now a woman she still had no idea how to believe in the reality of something that wasn't yet real. At church she was told that she simply needed to believe that God was real, and that whatever he did or didn't do was good, no matter what it was. But in the stories the girl read, to be healed you had to believe you would be healed, not just that God had the ability to heal. To move a mountain you had to believe the mountain would move, not just that God had the ability to move it. Prayer was not making wishes, it was summoning expectations. And the girl had no idea what she could expect, for while she figured God was capable doing just about anything, she knew that trusting what God *can* do and trusting what God *will* do are very different things.

So the woman read and read and read, looking for stories that pointed the way. At this time she was the mother, not just the babysitter, of too many children, so to read she had to sequester herself in the only room in the house that had a locking door—the bathroom. One night, late into the night, she read the story of a boy orphaned as a baby; a boy with magical powers that did marvelous things—but only if he trusted them. And this was his earnest struggle.

a boy who kindled his belief until it leapt from his phoenix-feather wand in the form of a swift and silvery beast; a boy whose faith raised himself from the dead. The incantation he used was two words from archaic Latin: EXPECTO PATRONUM: I await Father. It

would yield nothing unless he spoke them in utter faith, believing he would receive. And he did not have that faith until a turning of time granted him a vision of what was to come. Only when he had seen what would happen could he call it forth. He thought he saw his father.

And suddenly and surely, the girl knew how to believe something that hadn't yet happened: she first needed to know what was to happen. God knew what would happen. God's word was essentially telling his children what was to happen. She read stories about Jesus healing people after promising he would, and about prophets who moved mountains after hearing God promise they would, and about a heaven obtained only after God promised it would be. (No man, she learned, is saved in ignorance.) The pattern revealed that everything God gave was something he'd already promised to give. And God always kept his word. The girl was elated. This was the key to unlock her own latent powers, the truth that would drive away darkness and raise her from the dead. As long as she obtained God's word, and asked according to his word, she could believe, and she would receive.

This process seemed so simple once she understood. The Book of Mormon even had a name for it: [seeing with the eye of faith](#). **It was with the eye of faith** She loved its solidness and certainty; she loved the God who worked so cleanly and clearly. And she from that point on she loved going to church, where she could raise her hand and explain to others how prayer worked, how God worked, how life worked. She told them the stories she had read, which were not her own. She assured them that they had no need to be angry or sad. And ignoring her own anger and sadness, which remained deeply lodged in her being despite all she had learned, she believed in believing, nothing wavering.

Until she couldn't. Until the baby was born, too soon—a son, her son, who tried to wail but could only gasp. The tiny sacs of his lungs could not inflate. Minutes after emerging into life he began to die.

As soon as the womangirlmother was able to sit up she sat at the side of his tiny hospital bed, next to the machine that was keeping him alive. In rhythmic puffs it pushed a carefully calibrated blend of oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide through a tube lodged in his trachea. With each puff of air his chest rose toward heaven, then fell back toward earth, his body kept from the depths of the grave only by this machine forcing air into his cells in tight and steady sequence. Expanding every tiny sac into being But even this wasn't enough. The womangirlmother tried to pray in faith, but she didn't know what to have faith in, because God hadn't spoken. God hadn't told her what would happen. She knew what she wanted, but she also knew that what God wants and what she wanted could be very different things. She tried to open her eye of faith, but all she could see was a small white headstone.

Desperate, she listened as her son's father pronounced a blessing on his head, and she hoped beyond hope to hear God say that that her son would be made whole. God did. And she believed, and her son was made whole. But she'd stepped too close to the death of her child to quickly dismiss it. And just as she was beginning to, just as she surfaced

from the sadness and the anger, a photo arrived in her email inbox, a photo of a baby she had never met but loved nonetheless. Her friend's first and only child, born after a long string of miscarriages, a tiny baby boy, in the photo staring wide-eyed at the world he would soon leave. This baby, too, had been blessed, but died anyway. This mother, too, had believed, but didn't receive.

The girl could no longer pray. She could no longer think. She could no longer know. At church she stopped talking, stopped telling stories. She stopped asking for the door to open. At night, instead of locking herself in the bathroom to read, she sat alone in a room on the floor. She sat and breathed because that's all she could do. She inhaled and her lungs filled. She exhaled and they emptied. She sat in that emptiness with no hope, no desire, dissolving into her empty space until it turned inside out and swallowed herself. She spoke no incantation, made no command, offered no wish. She released her expectations and watched them leap away, swift and silvery, bounding far beyond her reach.

It was then that a rush of air pushed up through her nostrils and down through her trachea into her lungs, expanding every tiny sac into being, swelling her wide and deep and wider and deeper until it suddenly withdrew, pulling itself back and back and back only to rush forward again, and again. She was not breathing; she was being breathed, like a wave driven by the sea and tossed.

Night after night she sat. She felt her heart pulse and her blood flow. She felt her breath move and knew it was God moving, breathing her, surrounding her, infusing her, claiming her until she claimed herself; his exhale her inhale, his inhale her exhale. The present father.

The girl sat like that for a long time, praying without praying. She kept praying after she stood up. She is praying still, today and tomorrow, sad and angry, or not. She is praying even when she does not, can not, will not believe. She feels her lungs inflate, she feels her being be. Her intent is real, as she is real, as God is real. There is no word spoken; no promise given. There is no answer, because there is no question. There is no awaiting what is to come, for it already is. There is no story to tell. There is only God, and a little girl knowing him.