

*Sitting in the kitchen one day, I asked my mother how it was that she believed in ghosts but not God. "Helen," she said, "I believe what I can see."*

*This statement, while humorous, carries a lot with it. There's the creepy part, which is my mom confessing to seeing ghosts. We'll talk more about that later. The most interesting part for me is the implication of belief: that in order for something to be real, it has to be tangible. One has to be able to look belief in the eye and say: there. There is the solid evidence for your existence.*

*Coming from my mother, this makes a lot of sense. My grandmother was a biologist who left her strict Mormon upbringing behind in order to pursue her unlady-like passion for science. Mom was raised with spiders and snakes in jars in the cupboards, and the idea that all things in life had a logical and scientific explanation. As a child she was kicked out of Sunday school when the teacher asked her what the most important book in her house was, and she answered "Grey's Anatomy." Her penchant for the provable is not undermined, in her opinion, by the fact that in her life she claims to have seen multiple ghosts.*

*One of my earliest memories is sitting in Quaker meeting for worship and watching my mom stand up to speak. I must have been around three, and I can remember looking at my feet, which at that time were not very far away from the rest of my body, and swinging them from*

*my spot on the much-too-large and much-too-uncomfortable bench. My mom stood above me and told a story. This is the story she told:*

*In the fall of 1989, my family discovered that the mysterious illness that had been afflicting my mother for years was in fact chronic lyme disease. She had spent years getting different tests, hearing different diagnoses, seeing different doctors. It took ten doctors to find one that would even test her for lyme. Although there was some relief in having a name for it, the label brought little comfort. Next to nothing was known about lyme at that point, and even less was known about its chronic manifestation. The treatment was experimental and held the possibility of numerous side effects, and the general consensus in the medical world was that there was no cure.*

*One night, my mother lay in bed and contemplated the holiday season to come. She considered how difficult it would be to push through the pain she constantly experienced in order to make it a happy Christmas for her three daughters, the youngest of whom, me, was less than two years old.*

*At this point two women appeared in the room. The first was my great grandmother and the second a close family friend and mentor of my mother's. Both women deceased for many years, sat down next to her on the bed. As they did this, my mother felt the bed sink under their weight.*

*They each looked her in the eye, and my great grandmother said one thing: "It's alright. It's going to be alright."*

*What was it that my mother saw that night? She explains it as a phenomenon of the human brain - her worries were so overwhelming that her brain took it upon itself to reassure her with a physical representation of the most comforting figures in her life. It was all in her head, but it was what her head needed at that moment. This event did not cause her to falter at all in her beliefs. To her, it made perfect sense, it was nothing that she couldn't explain. Psychology provided the answers, and so her beliefs were not challenged. She was reassured by her unconscious's ability to conjure up comforting images, encouraging words.*

*"I believe what I can see." This definition of belief is troubling for me. On the one hand, it makes sense. The existence of any given object is reinforced by the fact that we can perceive it. In science, empirical evidence is needed to validate even the most basic facts. In faith, however, things are different. Faith requires us to believe in things that we cannot prove, to put aside our preconceived ideas about evidentiary support. It requires us to see what we can believe.*

*We consider belief to be subjective, and sight to be objective. But our sight is changed by our beliefs. No one thinks the same thing when they see the moon at night, just as no one thinks the same thing when*

*they hear the word “God.” For my mother, sight is a definite - it brings certainty, it is proof. For me, sight is another way of believing. I cannot question the legitimacy of what someone else sees, or what they believe.*

*My mom has never seen God. I’m not so sure. I believe what I can see, too. My world has been built on the things that I’ve seen, the things I’ve experienced, and the conclusions that I have drawn from them.*

*When I was little I believed that the moon had little feet that he used to follow me as I looked out the back window of my father’s car. This was the best explanation I could find for how the moon was there, in the same place in the sky, everywhere we drove. Of course, he hid the feet when I looked at him. Every time I turned away, though, out would come his little feet, and he would patter along the sky, so that when I next looked he would be in place. I would try to catch him in the act, looking away and then suddenly whipping my head around, ready to exclaim “Gotcha!”*

*This was how I made sense of something that I had no other name for. My belief in the moon’s little feet gave me a comforting feeling - it was nice to have a celestial object whose mission it was to keep me in its sights. God is the name that I have chosen to give to certain things that I have seen or experienced, it is the title of my faith. It’s the name I give to the things that I see but cannot label. I don’t have much of an operational definition beyond that, but so far that’s been enough.*

*I'm not trying to say that God is like the moon's non-existent little feet. Only that while sight might be objective, what we see changes according to our beliefs. We make leaps of faith in order to interpret what we see. When we see things that contradict our beliefs, we have the choice to either readjust our vision, or change our beliefs. For me at least, it's not just about seeing, but it's not just about believing either. There is an interaction between the two, a balance. It's a symbiotic relationship.*

*In the Rumi poem that Isa read, it says, "You dance inside my chest, where no one can see you, but sometimes I do, and that sight becomes this art." Believing is an art; it is cultivated and evolves with us. It is at once accepted and controversial, public and personal, universal and limited. It is based on how we see the world, and then how we chose to hold that sight within ourselves. To other people, it might not make any sense. Your beliefs might look to me like a toilet filled with goldfish stuck in the middle of an art gallery. But that's okay. We don't have beliefs so that other people can approve of them; we don't need to agree. Your belief in something different does not undermine whatever I choose to place my faith in; what you see doesn't have to compete with what I see.*

*Here's the main point, what I've been trying to get at: I think I do see God. Not just in the usual sunsets and the smiles of little children. I*

*don't have an autographed photograph, but I believe that God is evident in our ability to grow and to change, to endure pain, and to ask for help when we need it. I see God in our ability to open our minds to seeing in a completely new and different way; to make complete 180s in our beliefs, and have that be okay. I see God in the contradictions that we hold within ourselves, and how we forgive others their contradictions. And sunsets and the smiles of little children. Those too.*

*The hymn we sang, "We Walk by Faith and Not By Sight," says "No gracious words we hear, but we believe him near." True enough. I can't say that I've ever heard God. I wouldn't know how to identify it as God if I did hear it. But I know that I have heard gracious words, and I choose to believe that they've come from some God-like force. When those women came to my mom and told her everything was going to be alright, I believe that that was a little piece of God, an example of God's gracious words. This is how I conceptualize God: God's a puzzle that gets put together throughout our lives. There are pieces everywhere, some are within us, some are within others, some appear in moments of need or crisis, and some get lost behind the couch only to be found years later when we're looking for the remote control. The little piece of God that was in the room with Mom that night connected with the little piece that is within her. I imagine the pieces fitting together with a satisfactory snap. Those pieces made it possible for Mom to continue, despite chronic pain and fatigue.*

*As cheesy as it sounds, when I look at my mother, I see God. I see a force within her that has allowed her to continue despite her illness, to do amazing work with mentally handicapped toddlers and their families, and to raise three daughters, each of whom manage to see things differently. Because twenty years after those women told her everything would be alright, my mother has made everything alright. Mom is all the proof I need, she is the reason for my belief. There, there is the solid evidence for your existence.*