From a distance, I watch them digging through yesterday’s manure, scratching the ground backwards then dipping their curved beaks down and plucking up bugs. When they hear me approach, they stop what they’re doing and hurry toward the gate, running up and down the fence line, bobbing their heads, emitting the burbling sounds of a boiling tea kettle. They’re waiting for me—or more precisely they’re waiting for whatever morning snack I’ve brought them. Sometimes it’s kitchen scraps or a handful of their daily dried pellets, other times a few frozen blueberries, their favorite.

Inside, I kneel down in the dirt with an open palm of food and lose myself in a circle of chickens. Feathers brushing against arms. Beaks pinching at skin. They could eat as easily from their red plastic food bowl, but for some reason they nibble away at my hand till nothing’s left. Afterwards, I lock the gate and head off to divinity school, hoping to stumble upon some theological notion that might help piece my faith back together.

The chickens I tend to are a group of four egg-laying hens called Rhode Island Reds. Besides the occasional escape, their whole existence takes place in a 15’ by 30’ fenced-in rectangle at a park. Inside the fence, there’s a mound of manure, dirt to bathe in, and a little wooden house where they roost at night and lay eggs every morning. Other than that, they have a bowl for food, a bucket of murky water, and each other’s company. It’s a simple life they lead, monastic almost. In one corner there’s a folding chair where, on warm afternoons, I’ll sit down and watch them roaming around on their scaley, dinosaur feet.

The ancestors of these chickens are a fierce species of bird from Thailand, the red junglefowl, which roosted in trees, lived in small packs, and managed, somehow, to survive a forest full of predators. Now, not a snowball’s chance in hell. The modern chicken is a biological invention. They are big breasted and small boned. Their flight wings are clipped, their beaks scraped dull by machines. Their reproductive systems have been reproduced, so that these Rhode Island Reds lay nearly one egg a day rather than the dozen eggs the red junglefowl laid in a year.

I take some comfort, however, in knowing that these mother chickens haven’t only been considered for what their bodies provide: legs, breasts, wings, and eggs. In Great Britain, a series of chicken skeletons were found dating from the Iron Age, perfectly intact and buried, demonstrating that, at least for a time, humans did not eat chickens but revered them.

Contrary to anthropomorphizing God, zoomorphism conceives of God through animal forms or attributes. The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that in the beginning, when the earth was formless, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The Hebrew word used here for “hovering” is *rachaph*, which can be translated as “fluttering” or “brooding.” A mother hen will brood over her clutch of eggs for three weeks, leaving them only once or twice a day. She will
lose weight, her feathers will start to pale, but she will keep her eggs warm, protect them from harm. Some scholars believe the verb *rachaph* in Genesis 1:2 draws on myths about God as a mother bird giving birth to our egglike planet. In the New Testament, in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus also refers to himself as a mother bird: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem…How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

Entering divinity school after a decade of wandering has resulted in not being able to make sense of certain words. *Spirit, soul, sin, faith, belief, grace, God.* It’s as if these words, which had previously been backlit by the Christian story, have now become dark. For a long time, when I encountered one in class or while reading, I would either skip over it or scribble its etymology in the margins. “Grace” became “favor.” “Sin” became “missing the mark.” On good days, now, the words are beginning to hold meaning again. Perhaps this is the beginning of the long process of reconstruction. Perhaps I am making a new egg, stitching together faith from the fragments of old words.

A hen, however, is not a word. She is a being to be experienced. She is her own center of consciousness. She cannot be explained, will never be solved. She is a warm-blooded ball of flesh and feathers. Her favorite time of day is that hour of dusk when bugs are most active, as she struts around plucking their flying bodies right out of the air. She survives the night by hiding herself. She sleeps standing up, balanced, her clawed toes wrapped tightly around a stick. For six to twelve hours each night, she stays still. Then each morning, she leaves her home to find the world made anew. She is a magician, bobbing up and down the fence, turning bugs into eggs. Imagine her daily astonishment. “An egg! An egg!” she must cluck to the others. “Come look at this egg! Come sit here and pray and wait in silence!”

One day, she must suspect, this mysterious orb will become a living thing.

A few weeks back, as winter thawed into spring, I walked from the divinity school to the park. It had been a rough day of classes—one of those existential days of thinking about things I struggle to believe in. The sun drooped low in the sky, a breeze rattled the wire fencing. After feeding the hens the last of their daily pellets, I collected their eggs from their favorite nesting box and swaddled them in an old shirt, tucking it in my backpack next to a book of poems by the Catholic poet Martha Serpas.

When I saw that book, I thought why not? Why not read some poetry to chickens? As far as I could tell, neither they nor I had anything better to do.

I found a spot of sunlit earth and sat down on the warm ground, leaning against a tall pine. The hens bobbed up and down the fence, burbling to each other. In the distance, I heard children laughing. I flipped open the book and recited the first poem for my audience of four.
Two-thirds of the way through that poem—a poem about learning to see the world again after losing her father—Serpas writes:

Augustine said, *God loves each of us as if there were only one of us*, but I hadn’t believed him.

As I read those borrowed words out loud, I felt suddenly my doubts dissolving. Or no, not “dissolving,” but rather my doubts became like those religious words I had been unable to make sense of. They no longer had any weight, any meaning. It was as if they did not exist and had never existed. Among the billions of creatures, *God loves each of us*. All at once I felt my longing to worship satisfied—not through right beliefs but in this experience of love. And this love felt something like acceptance. And this acceptance felt something like being held and warmed beneath a feathery wing.

I finished reading the poem, then read it twice more. The last of the daylight slanted through the trees, lighting the ground in yellows and greens. The hens chased invisible bugs through invisible air. I wanted to stay there forever, incubating, because I knew the second I stood up, this feeling would flicker out and life would go on. And yet I knew also that I had been opened, and that this opening was a call, and that my response to this call had to be nothing more or less than the creaturely worship of looking and listening and being alive.