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## The Beauty of Birds

Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings,  
and not one of them is forgotten before God?  
But even the very hairs of your head are all  
numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more  
value than many sparrows. (Luke 12.6–7)

It was surprisingly fitting when I finally decided to get little pet finches, small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. Delicate patterns, bright vermillion beaks, and soft, stripe-laced feathers no bigger than the nail of a baby's finger. I obsessively researched the background of zebra finches, finding where they came from, what they liked to eat, and anything and everything I could find about their behavioral patterns. To know a creature, one must know what drives their behaviors. Zebra finches are like many other small birds, messily throwing seed husks around, attempting to build nests, happily hopping between different perches, obsessively preening to maintain their vanity. However, not all birds are created equal, and nothing is more beautiful to me than how they raise their young: male zebra finches sing glorious little beeping and chirping songs,

each unique to the bird—or, rather, the bird’s family. Only males can sing, and when eggs are laid, the only catalyst for healthy baby bird development is through hearing the song of their father.

Imagine an entire microcosm of life and potential, only brought about by hearing the song of the father, the whisper of a life to be.

It was glorious to hear Atticus’s and Augustus’s songs for the first time.

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When I was young, my family lived amongst tall trees in a suburb of Cleveland. The Great Lakes were close enough to taste in the air, and the beautiful climate made for lush springs, ladybug-dotted summers, and sunset autumns. Spring was always my favorite, not necessarily for the jewels of the sun shining off the flowers in the school garden, the flash of butterfly wings, or the feeling of being part of the Emerald City as the sun burst through layers and layers of canopy. Spring brought something more precious than gems: baby birds cracking from eggs, ready to embrace new life in my world, my grand backyard that held everything to a five-year-old. To find the bits of robin’s egg shells, so blue and so small they fit like a hat on my finger was wonderful, but the true magic came when we could find a nest.

That spring, I was too young for school and would eagerly await my almost-twin older sister to come home from kindergarten every day. This meant I was home with my mother often, and having poor lungs mixed with spring pollen meant going outside was difficult, but a family of blue jays had blessed me with their presence by building a nest in plain sight. When Alexis came home, the three of us would watch with delight at this growing family of sapphire-colored feather bundles.

Blue jays come from the crow family, meaning that they have a large brain-to-body ratio. They are smart birds, and have special instincts to protect the young; it is rare to see a nest of fledgling blue jays without fiercely loyal parents.

I can remember the day when we couldn't find the parents anywhere.

There were three down-cushioned babies that year, each fuzzy with baby feathers but big enough to begin learning to fly on new, unshafted wings. Little heads would poke out of the nest, black beaks oddly proportioned to their pudgy new bodies. They were learning (rather poorly) to fly, and ended up grounded after several attempts at hopping back and forth, downward and downward, through the branches. At first, I was delighted: the babies Alexis and I had dubbed Baby, Angel, and Blueberry were close enough that we could go and inspect them, with my mother moderating the distance between us and the chicks. As it became darker, however, we realized the babies couldn't get back to their nest. Panic ensued. We stayed out as long as we could to ensure the helpless birds were safe, but there was no safety net in place. I had learned from my preschool teacher who rescued birds (we had taken injured birds to her more than once) that we shouldn't touch baby birds. My mother had two inconsolable children on her hands, and at four and five years old, we couldn't be reasoned with. At night, we couldn't keep away the things that might hurt them, including the Neighbor's Mean Old Cat. I had seen Cinderella enough times on VHS to know that cats tried to hurt the little things I thought were cute. Mom had always fixed everything for us, so she had to have a solution this time, right? We turned to her, and in that moment, I'm sure she thought of the only thing she knew that always fixed everything for her.

Turning to God in prayer always helped to fix things in unexpected ways. When that leap of faith was taken, God had to listen, and as we all knelt together and prayed for the baby

birds, *our* baby birds, by name, we felt peace that somehow they would be safe through the night.

We eagerly awoke the next morning to see if our babies were all right, only to discover the Neighbor's Mean Old Cat was circling the lawn, dangerously close to the chicks. We counted their hiding spots, one, two, three on the ground, and realized that somehow, they were safe. It was a miracle, but the cat was still circling the lawn. He took a swipe at Blueberry, the fattest, fluffiest, and lowest to the ground. Terrified eyes widened in horror as we watched through the window, innocent bystanders turned witnesses about to report their version of the crime. However, the Neighbor's Mean Old Cat never laid claw on that precious baby, or any other baby: he was batted away by a full-grown adult blue jay, a beautiful, loud, and majestic savior.

It was at that moment that my mother looked up to see where this bird came from, seemingly out of nowhere, and we all noticed cerulean flashes in the leaves. There wasn't one bird, not even five birds, but nearly a dozen blue jays in the trees in a dome encircling the babies in their wings of protection.

The song of the blue jay, however annoying some people think it may be, is one of the sweetest sounds to me. It is a reminder of the scripture that tells me God cares for even the littlest sparrow, and so, wouldn't He care about everything that was important to me?

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Birds have saved me all my life.

They taught me tenderness when I was eight and found a baby bird had fallen out of his nest, killing himself on impact with the concrete in my backyard. I mourned over this precious creature and I gave him a funeral in the private confines of the corner of the backyard where we put our garbage cans. I

learned to value the little life that had been, and how glorious life was. Though a common bird in Utah's spring, that particular little barn swallow was gone forever. I learned to cherish the little things that made life worth living.

They taught me how to stay grounded when I didn't know what was real or fake and was horribly manipulated in a situation I couldn't escape. As a missionary in Arkansas, few good things came my way while spending three months with a difficult companion. When I didn't know what parts of my companion's assessment of me were lies and what were truths, the bird feeder I hung out the window was my anchor to the world. I may not have known if I really was as terrible as my companion made me out to be, but I knew the rich wildlife of Arkansas included a vast array of songbirds. Goldfinches and bluebirds would visit me and remind me of the good in the world, almost like clockwork in the mornings.

They taught me to have hope when my anxiety became especially brutal, lasting for weeks on end, and I felt there was no hope in sight. Once someone I loved sent a blow to my self-esteem that toppled everything I valued about myself, and one of the only consistencies I could count on at that time were the birds. The mourning dove would call out with his sorrowful song, melancholy for the innocence lost and the harsh realities of love I was experiencing. As I walked to school on the verge of tears, I could always listen for the soft, tender cooing following me daily, like a funeral procession, letting me know I wasn't alone.

So yes, it was fitting that I got pet finches, because birds had saved me all my life, and it was time for me to save one in return.

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My mother-in-law texted me a picture of a little bird in her front lawn a few months ago saying what a funny and

beautiful little bird he was. Somehow, he had been sitting on the grass for nearly an hour as her three giant husky dogs played around him. She joked she should try to catch him. However, I knew from the picture that something was wrong. Much like my baby birds, this little one couldn't fly. His wings were clipped, clearly a pet zebra finch native to Australia, unequipped for the cold October dusk, and I was brought back to that time where I remembered another helpless little creature, on the ground, unable to do anything about his plight.

Atticus Finch was caught only after hours of trying to wrangle him in a cage in the garage. He was scared and nervous, puffed up in agitation to attempt to look bigger and tougher than he was, and in the palm of my hand, his little heart beating ten miles a minute, I couldn't help but be reminded of all the times I had felt helpless. We searched for his owner, but it became apparent that someone had grown tired of him and let him go, something that sadly happens far too often with pet birds. No one would claim this precious little animal, perching in his new cage with head under his wing in nervousness, and I thought of all the times I had felt alone. As strange as it sounds, in that moment I knew why I loved birds so much.

We bought Augustus to keep Atticus company, and they became the best of friends. I don't know how old Atticus is, or why he was left to fend for himself, but I would like to think that I did something good in remembering that this tiny bird was important, and in giving him a home that he may not even know he has. Every time I hear their family songs, mingling together, I think about what could have been lost: that one unique voice, that one-of-a-kind song. I remember how lucky I am to hear and recognize my birds' glorious songs, and how the birds have always been there for me. As I marvel at the soft feathers Atticus puffs from under his wings when he's peaceful, I picture the little bird amongst the grass seeds a late October evening, not a peep coming from his tiny beak as he cowered in

fear, fluffing himself in fear. I am thrilled he now trusts me enough to consider my home his home. Both Atticus and Augustus fluff themselves in contentment rather than fear, little feathers falling as they preen sometimes. When I pick them up, I can't help but marvel at the beauty of something so small, and how I get the chance to be reminded of that every day.

#### Works Cited

Osborne, Ellie A. "Saving Atticus." May 2020. Author's personal collection.