



On Earth As It Is

2011

Yes, Father

David Brennan

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Recommended Citation

Brennan, David, "Yes, Father" (2011). *On Earth As It Is*. 26.
<https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/onearth/26>

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

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photo by matthew simmons

Yes, Father

David Brennan

A Catholic Priest, my father, walks the beach in Tampa, 1968. The sun halfway through setting. Facing the water, hands in the pockets of his plaid shorts, he thinks he hears, impossibly blowing in off the empty rippling expanse, a woman singing:

“A woman’s voice. It is not the voice of God, at least not the voice that I have been taught to listen for. Her song is the very essence of what we have been schooled in defining as temptation: sensual, sugary, mournful. A woman walking the waves of the sea; I wonder where she is—*she* who believes in me when I have no right to expect devotion of any sort, when she is the very one I abandoned. *If it’s what you need to do*, she said. *Let’s see how it goes*. And then I left. Came to this humid hell by choice and demand, headed south by travel and trope, all for an ideal that from this vantage no longer looks idyllic. She is in New York, where it is just beginning to turn hot, and the park trees are thick and full of shade, unlike the scanty palms that line this beach; their shade barely spans the expanse of my soaked brow. It seems, now that I have left, now that I am here alone—a true priest would not say *alone*. A true priest would say *with God*, but I don’t feel like I am with God. I feel alone. Lonely.

“The sea is a vast thing. In Boston and New York even its nearness felt distant, couched in inlets and harbors and rivers; it existed more as a thought-sea than as actual repetitive wave lapping around the ankles, waves that approach from an unknowable point unknowable miles from the curling white foam of where they rise and break. But it is not the sea that captures my attention—it is too vast, too far-reaching to truly be anything more than an idea (unless, of course, it drowns you)—it is the simple song skimming the wave tops, a song sung by a single person, individual, unrepeatable, that pricks my eardrum. I pick up a conch shell from the sand, the calcified and twisted armor pink and of an almost luxurious softness under my fingertips. I have wound the shell of a sea about myself, the repetitive and hypnotic motions of prayer and Mass my waves, the Church’s vague decrees and murky hierarchies impenetrable as the mountainous scapes the placid sea-surface hides. And then the simple singing of a woman—no siren song, mind you, it is not bewitchment that I speak of—that proximate, conversable song so thoroughly drowns out the unquenchable rumble of an ocean that I am bidden by it as by no prior song; I cannot escape the fact that humanity’s most potent portion resides in the One. My God, diluted, ubiquitous, swims in itself, her song, undeniable and accurate, swims in me.

“Why here? Perhaps it is the air, thick and wet, an underwater medium perfect to transport sound waves; we are whales deep beneath surface bellowing messages across miles, considering the slowness of the reply. Except I have not replied. I have kept my mouth shut. I expect the music from the flashing neon of the bar further down the beach, the honky-tonk cranked, patrons around umbrella-ed tables clinking glasses and shouting the lyrics. But that is not the direction it comes from. It is a music of the vastness, I would say a music of God; only God, in my mind, does not approve. God, in my mind, approves of very little I have done the past six months. God in my mind.

“I have been a seeker; I have been a follower. When as a child I was told one day I would be a priest and make the family proud I did not question but instead accepted the prophecy as answer to a question unasked: What do you want your life to be? I followed the questionless answer through diligent years of practice until it was truth; I sought the answer I already knew and never bothered to consider its source. What was the question? God was always question and answer enough. I had mystery in spades. Why had my brother died? Why had my father died? God was the only reasonable path to knowing the lost men in my family of women. I have sought brotherhood and fatherhood in God’s community, but I am a man of women, sisters and mothers, sharp voices and chiding, forgiving glances. I have sought the absent pieces of my life, and misplaced the ones that have always been present.

“Song and sea—I am able to perform my own small miracle: to listen to the music whisking over waves while standing ankle-deep in that same water. Water sings a sort of music, and song moves in waves; aren’t they one and the same, song and sea? Must they be known exclusively? I want to say no, but my dilemma is this: if I throw myself to the sea, dive with full heart down, then the song that banters sweetly with the wind will be wholly lost to me as I swim through blurry depths; but if I keep my head above water, if I wade but knee deep, though I’ll forfeit deepest knowing still I’ll be privy to both that ethereal song and sea’s touch—I will be one through pluralities.

“Like every good drug it won’t be refused. Like every good god it orders reverence. Like every good death it lies to the liar. Like any decent choir it is broken and singular. Like snow it smothers me with light and chill. Like sand it is a comfortable abrasive. Like neon it is guide and anticipant. Like corned beef its salt is fleshy on my tongue. Like sleep it is the mutable other. Undiminished, the song resonates even my atoms to compliance. It is symmetry consummated.

“And the sea is just the sea.”

David Brennan is the author of the poetry collection *The White Visitation* (BlazeVox Books) and the chapbook *The Family Flamboyant* (Brickhouse Books). His recent work has appeared in *Action Yes*, *PANK*, *Strange Machine*, *Fact-Simile*, and elsewhere. He lives and teaches in Virginia.

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