



Looking

God first spoke to Brendan as he crouched among the reeds, looking for frogs jumping. The voice came out of the wind. It said

“You are the one,” and again and again, “you are the one.”

Was it really a voice? Brendan was so startled he stood up, no longer caring that the frogs would know him, and avoid him. As he did he saw the wind flowing over the top of the reeds, like a moving shadow in the early light, just as he had seen before and he turned full circle at the voice, trying to see if there was more about him than the climbing sun, the watery sky and the water or the hills. It was all the same, and there again was the noise of the wind, but empty this time.

So he stood for some time, wondering what remained to him of his adventure, the game he had given himself, being a boy mostly used to his own company (it was why he would say he spent his time seeking God’s shy creatures, knowing they would only flinch and flee from him but treasuring the idea that he had stopped to watch and see them living, when the other boys he knew would happily trap and kill them). He understood that if he waited long enough the landscape would settle back, down, the hills the same as ever, and the frogs would begin to croak and jump again as if he was not there. He wanted the landscape to be as if he was not there, its natural state. He would be like a ghost there.

Out beyond the reeds the sea stirred. Brendan understood there was no more to keep him, that he could not stay. He turned and began to struggle back through the tangled plants, making for his home.

It was further up along the shore, where he found his father lying against the wall, a bottle in his hand.

“Well if it isn't the holy Brendan,” he said when he saw his son, and he lifted the stone bottle, vaguely at the boy.

“Do you, know,” he said, “that when you were born, they say the sky was alight with stars and fire? Do you know that’s what they say?”

Brendan had stopped in front of him. He felt immediately afraid, and wanted to walk on, but he did not dare, and then he was ashamed of his first fear, because he knew and he told himself, the old man, he was a great man. Brendan honoured his wisdom and loved his love. They had only to live with his drinking. Brendan did not despise him for

his drinking. It was just that he did not know what to say, especially when his father spoke of these serious things, things Brendan knew but did not want to think about.

“I’ve heard it said,” he replied, speaking warily, and sullen, not that the old man noticed.

“Like the blessed fucking virgin,” said his father, “and wasn’t that a problem for that old Joseph, wondering what the fucking hell was going on with a baby on the way and him never laying a finger on her well what would any man do but kick her out he was going to kick her out you know that boy? Kick out the fucking mother of God!”

Most of the time his father worked hard, out fishing in the bay. He loved his family and cared for them. That was most of the time. Every so often, it was like a darkness settled on him, and he would drink through all his waking hours, cursing his life and everyone around him. The mood could last for some days, and then would leave him as quickly as it had come.

Brendan flinched at each blasphemy, remembering the way his mother would flinch, crossing herself and turning her back to him, as if she could avoid the evil of his thoughts. “What are you shrivelling for?” he heard his father cry once. “They’re only words. Do you think God really gives a fuck about words?”

Perhaps they were only words. Brendan knew his father meant little by them, but then he felt the violence behind them and it scared him, though he had never seen his father strike anyone. It seemed then that the darkness did not come on the old man. It was in him, and sometimes it was as though he could not keep it contained. The darkness obscured him. Brendan understood even then, that though his father often said what he thought, he had never spoken about how he felt. This seemed right to Brendan. It was how he wanted to be.

He said

“Can I get you anything?”

The old man paused, as if he was still hoping Brendan would respond to him. After a moment it was like he gave up, and slumped, his chin falling to his chest and his arms gone loose with his hands lying around the base of the bottle. Brendan walked past him. He could smell cooking from inside the hut.

His mother turned from the pot as he stooped under the threshold.

“I wasn't expecting you back,” she said. “Has something happened?”

“I was startled by the wind, that's all, and I scared off the frogs, so I came home.”

She nodded, as if she understood. Should he ask her about the voice? Did God really speak to country boys? He did not want to seem foolish. He thought he had said enough and he stepped backwards out of the hut. He walked a little further to a mound

from where he had a clear view of the bay. He sat on the mound, still listening for the wind.

In front of him the sea was like a strange field, shining in the cold sunlight, a thing that seemed to breathe with the wind. He shivered. If God had chosen him, what should he do? The voice had seemed so clear, but now he could not be sure. The sea seemed endless, and yet he thought, or dreamt, if he just had a fine boat and friends how he might sail and sail and who knows what strange lands they would find? The ocean's vastness cowed his imagination, like God, but when he thought of islands breaking through the light-like mass, they seemed like points of clarity and truth, things you could hold or touch while still and always part of the adventure of the sea. He wanted to make the adventure real in his life. He wanted the voyage.

He knew boats. He was learning his father's craft, and for a while he had been happy to imagine himself out with the old man every day, helping him, like working people on the sea so often it seemed somehow they were in touch with its rhythms and being. He still wanted to feel that closeness, and he loved his father with a passion that was like an ache in him. He wanted to help the old man, and to know him better, but he was beginning to understand that he did not want to spend his life like he had in this bay. He wanted to go further, to know more, and be more. He wanted his father's blessing on his dreams.

He looked back from the sea to the cottage on the shore, smoke rising from the fire. He had obligations, he knew, and he realised that his father might have had the same dreams, and had put them aside to get on with his ordinary life, a good life. Brendan could do the same. He thought, it might be the devil not God that spoke to him, the devil of his desire to be away, to think he was more than this life.

But the voice had been so clear, for a moment. It had come out of the blue sky, when all Brendan had been thinking of were the frogs and the reeds. God among the frogs and the reeds: Brendan sighed and his breath was like the sea. Somewhere in the wind he could hear his brothers' voices. They would be coming down from the hill now. They were real voices.

Calling

When the old man died, they buried him at sea. They took him out in his boat and cast him over the side. The priest came with them, so they could bless his passing, swathed in cloth like a baby. There was not room for all the children. His oldest brother Michael had gone. His mother stayed by the shore, weeping. She did not want him to go into the cold waves. She wanted him in hallowed earth, where she could kneel by him and pray, touching the earth. The boat put out in a drizzle so that the sky seemed to swallow them, taking them into the sea. She stayed on the shore staring out after them, the water running down her cold face, dripping from her chin. Brendan thought, he should take her hand, and lead her in, and comfort her. He was the oldest one now, until Michael returned. He had to care for the family. He looked at his mother and could not bring himself to take her hand. He turned back to the sea. The boat was gone.

“He belongs to the sea,” he thought, and then he found he had spoken the words out loud.

“He belongs to God boy,” came his mother’s voice, no moving in her dark lips. He had turned his head in time to catch sight of her mouth.

“Isn’t God in the sea?”

“God is here, in our hearts, and our hearts are in the soil this land. The sea is a dream and God is close to us.”

Water, running over the black lips. She would not move. Brendan felt a sudden, consuming despair, as though she had died in front of him, had gone from him. If she had really died he thought he might have hugged her corpse as he wept over her, but this was nothing. She was like the stone, a blasted tree, standing against the rain. He could not touch her. He could not bear it. He walked past her and there was nothing in her eyes. He walked on. He began to run.

Over the shingle, where the hills came down or the ground rose, there was a cave above the beach. It was only a small cave, reached by a ledge that went up the little cliff from the pebbles. You had to be nimble in places, choosing your steps carefully among the fragments of shale on the narrow ledge. Brendan was always careful, always nervous of losing his balance. He was not a strong boy, not like his father, his brothers, and when the ground was uncertain he had no confidence in his poise. The moving stones hurt his feet. Now, as he hurried up the ledge the wind pushed him against the cliff. It groaned and whined at him but it made the ledge safer, made him feel he was coming to some kind of refuge. He had often felt that way in the cave, running here to be by himself. He did not imagine he was the only one who came here, but for all of them perhaps it was the same, the sense of seclusion and security, out from the rain or wind, the sun. It was cool and dim, where you could sit just in from the mouth on a ledge of rock, looking

out on the motion of the sea and the sky, watching the air and not part of the struggle for life in it.

The rock was softened by some dry moss. Brendan put his palms flat on the moss, feeling the rainwater run down him, off him, and he shivered, turning to sit on the rock, looking out on the sea. It was just a grey sheen now, the dullest thing, but there was more than the look of it. Only when you sat down and away from whatever you had been doing did you hear it, its sigh and cast about the shore like a living thing. Brendan looked out into the sheen and imagined the boat bearing his father, the grim faces of the men as they strove to hold it steady, ready to cast the body over the side with all solemnity, another life over and an event of apparent meaning, going into the sea and the dull grey sheen, the mass of it. The sea heaved and churned, as though stirred by some great internal struggle. Perhaps this was why men were so easily moved by the sea, finding in it some image or echo of their own dreams and wars. Brendan looked on the sea, imagining these struggles by other men, the miseries of lives taken and ruined, a world of suffering that was beyond him. He could not imagine why he had been spared so far but he was glad to be safe and at peace here, glad for his father's tranquil death and when he looked at the water like any other man he apprehended the annihilation as well as the tumult, the coming to an end and the silence in the infinity of the water and the sky.

There was more. The sea was not like God. The wars and passions of men, were not God but of the earth. God was like the sea, the nothing made visible, the prospect of new earth, new life and hope, he could not see but which he understood might be out there, a prospect. He felt the life of the sea as a tumult like any man and imagined his father slipping into the sea, but more than this he felt its call, its beckoning him into the rain, the falling water away from the shore. He thought if only he could go out into that visible nothing, he might begin to understand what the voice among the reeds had meant for him. He looked away from the water and around the cave. The rock of the cave floor was strewn with pebbles, sand and wrack blown in from the shore. It would be the same in other places, close to the sea, for it was how God had made the world, but how else God had made the world he could not begin to imagine. He only wanted to see it with his own eyes. The wind whistled among the rocks at the entrance to the cave. It was too easy to mistake your dreams for God's will, but then his life here fishing with his family was becoming like a dream. He felt he could be here no longer. He had to know more.

Still he may have done nothing if the priest had not found him out there. Some hours had passed and the boat had returned safely, ready again for the living. They had missed Brendan and after a while the mother had guessed he might have gone up to the cave. She knew he would seek refuge there, from whatever it was troubled him. The priest had been interested in his trouble. He said he knew the place and would go to find him, to bring him back. He came up to the cave calling Brendan's name. Brendan heard it in

the wind, not like God's voice in the reeds for he recognised the tone, the voice of the man he had heard preaching so often, and he said aloud, "father".

It was enough to find him. The priest came into the cave, and saw Brendan still sitting on the little shelf, his arms wrapped around himself to keep out the cold. He looked up questioningly at the priest and there was something about him, something he recognised. Naturally he had heard the stories about Brendan, and perhaps it was the occasion and the word he had called out from the cave, but it seemed a moment had come and the question seemed the right one, the thing that needed to be said there. He said,

"Brendan, do you know what I mean when I speak of a vocation?"

Brendan looked back at the stooping man. He had pictured him on the boat with the swathed body and now he thought, has my father gone into the sea? With the wind came the smell of it, the salt reaching around his face, like fingers of rancid light pressing up into his nose.

Gathering

In summer, looking over a blue sea in a fierce wind, Brendan stood out against the gusts on a spit of rock just high enough to remain dry above the waves that heaved over the crags of the shore. The wind blasts threw themselves at him, as if they would take him from the firm rock into the embrace of the waves. He looked on the blue surface, flecked with white and a thousand rising points of darker blue, like an animated hardness itself that somehow failed to be hard, curling itself around the rocks, drawing itself back from them, as if it would draw their hardness into itself, reaching for the solidity of the land and pulling back again and again in failure. Brendan felt the draw of this motion, looking out from the rocks to the seeming infinity of the water. When Christ walked on the water he showed himself true master of the earth. It was his calling, to be out on the soft surface of the earth, to glorify God in all the moving wonder of his creation. The hours of meditation in his cell had taught him this much. Away from the sea, eyes closed and sensing the near presence of his four bare walls, he could think only of the sea, the sea that was like nothing come to earth, and always somewhere out there, the chance to look on and know what no man had seen, a way of experiencing creation in its cradling, and if he should come upon lives untouched by God, he could embrace with love the humbling duty to spread the Word. It was his calling that had brought him back to the edge of the ocean, standing on the rocks. He closed his eyes and the wind tore at him. He pictured himself, as he had bowed before the abbot to kiss his ring in thanks. The abbot had looked at him with love and concern. "You have my blessing," he said, "yet I cannot pretend that I am happy or unconcerned. If you had a better idea of where your journey might take you ..."

Brendan had thought to himself, what it would be to have such certainty. He knew the abbot himself had dreamed of trying the tales of the land of ice and light. With the abbot's help he had seen plainly the common vanity of the world in his longing to seek out wonders for his own eyes. If he had thought his vocation was no more than this vanity, he would surely have put it aside and bent to a life in the house of the order. The abbot had agreed to let him go because they both felt there was more. If they were fooling themselves they would come to their ends all the same.

He opened his eyes to the waves turning beyond his feet. He had no doubt about his way forward, yet away from the abbot there was no voice calling out at him, if there had ever been a voice in the reeds. Grown to manhood, he heard only his own thoughts, again and again in his head.

Yet the others had listened to him. The abbot had said, he had about him an authority that men would always follow. The abbot had insisted, he could not journey alone, but should seek and choose his companions. He turned from the waves to the shore and he saw them busy about the boat, laying in their final provisions: he saw blankets, and the

buckets on which they would depend to catch rainwater, handed from one man to the next, passed on to the currach, a frame of no more than skins and wood with a simple sail and oars to steer them. Men had gone further in less he told himself. It was not a question of trusting God. God let madness alone, left men to provide for themselves as best they could. He trusted God only in the sense he would accept whatever came to them as God's will, and let go his life without complaint, when it was no longer his to hold on to.

He looked back quickly to the water, the bright sky. Suddenly, when he had not thought of it for years, he saw the boat bearing his father's body, a shadow going into the brilliant pale of the mist and rain. It was like the claw of the sea on the rocks, the land going into softness, its dissolution. He crossed himself. He shivered at the memory of his father, the man he had loved, the man of the sea. Behind him he knew he had gathered his brothers on the shore. It was time for them to become sailors.

Skin

No storm prepared you for the next storm, and yet every storm was the same, the screaming wind, the waves wrestling for mastery of the boat, twisting the frame and stretching the skins so tight that Brendan could almost feel it in his own flesh, tensed ready for breaking, straining with his brothers to hold their boat together, casting the water back in its face, rising and falling on the waves and with every fall fearing they would be engulfed.

But the currach was like a cork on the furious sea, a thing so small and light it rode every wave, as though it became nothing in their grasp, as light itself. Holding on, holding things down was enough to exhaust the struggling men, for hour after hour as the storm raged, and yet they came through the storm, again and again as they made their way north, soaked to the skin while the skins held still, freezing in the seas as the sweat of their struggle broke through their flesh and was washed with the saltwater out into the sea.

After every storm they lay back against the taut sides of the boat and gave thanks for their deliverance. Brendan led the prayers, a strong clear voice singing out over the calmed seas, and his companions came to understand better why they had followed him so readily. There was a strength that was more than the play of the light about him, an authority and confidence they believed would take them to the dream of new worlds, new wonders. They thought he was a man who carried God's light within him. They had heard the stories of the stars at his birth. They called him brother to his face, but they began to talk of him as the holy one, the saint. Though they lived in fear of the storms, they told themselves they were safe, that God's light was on them, and they prayed for his life inside them.

Brendan sensed the beginnings of their reverence. He was confused at first, wanting to show them his hands chapped by the struggle to hold the oars, and the heat of the daily sun, the cracking of his lips when they were short of water, he wanted to say, look, I am a man like you, and no more than you. I feel the same fear and doubt as you.

He would look harder at his hands. His father used to say they were small hands, too small for heavy work, laughing as he hugged him. He could not say now that they had been forced to heavy work, but they were lined and freckled, chapped from the oars. He thought he could see his ageing humanity in his hands, changed and worn before him. He reflected, smiling to himself, that he felt in himself for the most part what his hands could touch. His hands delivered the world to him. The skin was cracking alongside his nails. Nervously he would pull at the rag ends, trying to make his fingers smooth again, opening little fissures that swelled with blood, and then lingered raw for a few days. He could not help it. He wanted to make his fingers smooth, and it never worked, and still he could not tolerate the hard, protruding slivers of skin. He began to pick at the corner

of a nail now, and stopped himself, self-conscious. Sooner or later he knew he would pull it free from his finger, and there would be the blood and the little pain, a thing both part of himself and beyond him. His hands touched the world. He laid them flat against the skin of their boat, and the skin held the boat away from him.

He felt the growing reverence of his brothers, and he wanted to resist it. At the same time he knew, this faith might be a strength to them when they needed such strength. This was his voyage, his journey and he owed it to them to keep his sense of purpose. More than this, his doubts only existed as the shadow of his faith; if he had not dreamt of the voyage, and made it real, there would have been no hope to doubt. He would have had only the dull business of his everyday life, fulfilling the tasks that fell to him until the day came when he stopped, surrendering that hold on himself which did not come from his hands.

Every storm was the same, like a routine, and yet every storm seemed to bring in the end, until it passed. He had to hold on to his purpose though he did not know where he was going. Every sight of land looked much the same, an uneven strip of darker grey or brown rising up to break the sea from the sky. It was like the land of home, already named by men, where he knew they lived under the Word of Christ. He had led his companions into shore from time to time, picking up fresh stores, but he knew now they had left these mostly friendly places, the places men would revere the harsh cloth they wore against their skin, the badge of their sincerity. He knew they had passed now into waters that would bring them to their new visions, and perhaps new fears.

John, the oldest of the brothers, was standing to fix the sail and catch the fair wind. Brendan knew he had entered the cloister only after an early life at sea, when he had enjoyed both wife and family. He was the best sailor among them, a gift to their voyage made possible by the fever that had taken away his family, sparing him, he told Brendan, sparing him he could only think to lead a better life, where he might pray for the souls of his lost ones, living in hope of meeting them all again in paradise.

Brendan looked away to the waves. He had barely thought of his father in paradise, or anywhere. He did not think of meeting him again while he was like a presence to him still, a ghost in the water. Brendan held up his fingers to the wind. The skinned prow of the boat rose and fell into the waves. Sometime later, in another storm, when John was worrying about the mast he was swept off the boat by the same waves, into the same seas. All storms felt much the same. It was just the lives that changed beneath them.

Reaching

After the loss of John, Brendan thought there might be an end of the brothers' faith in him. He doubted himself. He had imagined their drowning together as an end to the voyage, as one of their journey's destinations, but he had not thought he might lead just one of their company to his death. He knew he had done nothing to place John in special peril; calling him to the voyage had been enough.

But his brothers only crossed themselves, saying God's will be done.

"He is at peace now," they told each other, and Brendan. "He always felt he had lived beyond his time, and now he has returned to the love of his family."

Brendan could not have said so much, not because he did not believe it, but because he was afraid to offer such easy comfort. He thought, the same could be said of any of us; any of us might be taken. But if his brothers realised this, they appeared to accept it, and still they looked at him with reserve and respect. He felt too this talk of a family's love like an accusation. He had no answer, and he put the accusation out of his mind. The wind stirred about the surface of the waves, a grey like soft metal flecked with silver, turning yellow as the sun turned down. The wind was like voices whispering in the waves.

The nights were shorter now. As the darkness fell Brendan thought he saw a shape in the far sea before them, but the light was gone before he could be sure. His brothers were wrapping their furs around them ready for the cold of the darkness. The wind went through the sail, a touch that was driving them forward. Brendan picked up his furs. No one else seemed to have seen the shape. It may have been nothing. It seemed hard to imagine that anything lay before them but more nights and days of the same featureless ocean, the nothing that held them, that drove them on into itself. With the death of John heavy on him like the furs, Brendan feared that this voyage would only find its ending when the skins tired and the storms took them, as if that could be the meaning of the journey. He felt sure now that the shape had been an illusion, a trick of the light and his hopes. He groaned to himself as he realised he no longer believed they would find new land. He did not know how to turn back. He closed his eyes, pulling the furs closer around him, shivering.

All through the short night, he could not sleep. When he closed his eyes he saw his father lying drunk by the wall of their home, railing silently at the sky or sea, or whatever it was that came before him, the bottle in his hand. He saw his mother standing beyond him, her face mute with her hurt love and miserable disapproval. It was like a bad spirit in him, and not the man. The man was not the spirit in him, and surely God would understand. The life of God in him was not the evil in him. Brendan only looked on his father with love. Perhaps that was how God saw them all, sense offering more than what simply fell before your eyes. Perhaps this was why when he opened his eyes to the boat and the moonless darkness he saw John, his arms stretched out for the

sail on either side of the mast, figuring the sacrificed Christ like a mockery of his guilt, for even in the confusion of his dozing mind, afflicted by his fears, his guilt, and failing hope for their success (whatever success might have meant) he knew that the death of John was not like the butchering of Christ on the cross. His mind turned away from the image, rejecting the work of his imagination, only to face again some memory of his father, the traces of his life as a child before he had tried to follow the voice from the reeds. In the short night he may have slept, but he found no rest. So it was the short night stretched from moment to moment, and he cursed his consciousness.

Then the dawn rose, a fire that shimmered in the ice walls of the island. The saint turned to look at the sun, praising God for the light. He was shaking like the fire, racked with cold and the sudden, awesome realisation that all he had believed could be true. It was huge out of the sea above them. Brendan threw off his furs, standing up in the boat as if he could better take it in on his feet and his brothers stirred around him, sensing something had changed in the sea and then opening their eyes to its presence above them. They crossed themselves, the words forming, the sounds beginning to come in their mouths. The harmony stirred in the flesh of Brendan's throat, the notes shaking with his limbs. He had imagined this moment, wondering how he would react, imagining silence but there was no holding their peace now. His relief and wonder demanded a voice, and he gave the words of his prayer to the sky and the glittering sun from the ice that towered above them, the voices of his brothers sounding in tones that went into the ice, across it and around them, glancing over the sea and into the nothing from where they had come. Brendan lifted his arms and his brothers knelt beside him, while the dawn light passed over them, refracted like flickering rainbows waves from the crystal walls.

Going

If he had died at sea, there would have been a romance, a poetry in such an end after all the dreaming of his journeys. There was comfort then to find himself, prone in an ordinary sickbed, waiting for the end. There was comfort in the reflection that the journeys had not been about his dreams: his death at sea would seem to have framed it so, but the truth was they were only what he felt he had to do. He turned with some difficulty in his bed: they were waiting by him, praying for him, the brothers of his house. Perhaps word had been sent to his family.

Or maybe the end would come in a remote place, his family place. He pictured the cave at the end of the shore, where the cliffs rose. He climbed its little path wearily, feeling his strength fail him, and lay down on the weed-strewn rock, listening to the air, the sea and the birdsong. He had said farewell to his mother, his natural brothers, and they had understood, letting him go. Would the skies dance at his death as they had for his birth, so the stories already told? Brendan, lying awake in the little boat, opened his eyes to the strange stars of that northern heaven. There was little wind and the boat moved gently, easily on the waves. He had thought little about the stars, beyond their use to him for navigation. He noticed as he had noticed a thousand times how they were not still, how they winked and seemed to blur out of focus. Were they like islands at the end of some other sea, places he could never go except in his dreams? Or were they holes in the fabric of the sky where heaven showed through, tiny flashes of God's love for this earth canopied and cradled by the sky, the air? If he stretched out his hand it was closer to those stars, and yet it had not even begun its journey to touch them.

They had seen wonders now, a place without men that seemed like the end of the earth, desolate, fiery, cold and beautiful. For a while the vision of it had consumed them, but the time came when he had to say what they should do next. His brothers looked to the saint, the man who had brought them through the ordeal of the endless seas to an end, and he had looked to his heart, hoping the answer would come from his heart, the spirit of God in him. There was nothing else. But the voices whispered like the still waves and he could not hear them. What came to him was not like a voice, but only the certainty that they should go on, no longer north, where there seemed only the sea turned to ice, but west towards the setting of the sun, and then, where the currents urged them. He said to them, we are in a world of wonder, where we can seek and touch these marvellous lands.

If he turned his eyes to one side he could see the dark water, close to his eyes. In its darkness it was still like the skies, alive with restless moments of light, and remembering the way it had wrapped then drawn back from the rocks of the shore at home he lifted his arm from beneath the furs, moving his hand over the side of the boat, for a moment

holding his hand flat above the visible surface, feeling the cold of it play on his palm,
then he let his hand go into the water, through the surface. It was gone.

Crete: Easter Sunday 1999