

THE CHURCH THAT ISN'T THERE

David Middleton

north Louisiana, the late 1980s

Where nothing can be other than it was.
—John Finlay, “The Wide Porch,” 1984

a thing cannot be other than it is.
—Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*

1

In that first place from which the heart and mind
Call up in words the image of a thing
As what it was, is, ought, and has to be
I see affixed atop a concrete block
By marble graves and gravel parking lot
An old bell without belfry, yoke, or rope,
No longer rung though ghostly echoes toll
Forever for a church that isn't there.

The new church building has its own new bells,
Recorded sounds computer-timed to chime,
Thick red brick walls, low roof, bare windows squared,
Shut tight to trap the regulated air
Of central heat and cooling, no more need
For funeral home fans with winter scenes—
December's Driskill Hill in cresting snow—
Or iron potbellied stoves the deacons stoked
With logs of woodpile oak and hickory.

The worshippers there now seem satisfied,
 Their Bibles in the language of the day,
 Most sewn in cloth, as always, but a few
 With cover angels smiling wing to wing
 Or flowers loud in paperback pastels,
 The simple hymns, Jehovah's jingling themes,
 A happy hopping dot that shows the way
 Through verses scrolled on giant projector screens,
 The altar call's "Just As I Am," the same,
 If lilting toward I Am from Need To Be,
 The pews quite different, though, the contoured backs,
 The cushioned seats, the smooth white solid pine.

It wasn't always so, for when that bell
 Now on the ground rang swinging clean and clear
 The pews were straight-backed, slatted, dark-stained, hard,
 Their holders fit for glad and solemn psalms
 In hymnals filled with Heaven, Hell, and Sin,
 No Purgatory but a guilt unpurged
 Till soul was born again alone and here
 Where star-falls scar the dark with blemished light,
 Even their grave elation circumscribed,
 Inquisitors suspecting everything—
 That self-denial was a kind of pride—
 And in rough country hands, soft-leather bound,
 Inerrant in its wanderings through tongues,
 Pages opaque and silky, strong and thin,
 A stately Jacobean Sacred Writ,
 Black Bibles that a king had authorized,
 Red words a greater king had bled to say.

And there, subsistence farmers, hunger-lean,
 Raised up the first church house in those stark years
 Between Petersburg's trenches and the Marne's—
 The longleaf pine cut down for walls and floor,
 Then planed and notched, doors locked with heavy keys,
 The roof-tree-rafters' sharp-pitched angled arch,
 Tall windowpanes, blank gold, green, purple, blue,
 A belfry's winding steps and maiden bell.

Inside, before the choir, the pulpit stood,
The holy focal point, and, at its foot,
No altar for high rites of flesh and blood,
Only a modest Table of the Lord,
A place for trays of tiny grape juice cups
And tidbit crackers scattered patternless,
No wine or bread made more with mystery,
And on the table's apron, in relief,
A plain command, the almost fasting feast
They kept: "This do in remembrance of me."

2

And there they felt a steady beckoning
Through seasons of creation and their lives
Drawing them ever onward, pew by pew,
Through north Louisiana when they heard
The tollings and the tellings of the bell.

The back pew first where now and then a child
Would cry to reach beyond the baptistry,
Its waters of the Jordan warm and calm,
The farther shore a mural, Adam's land,
Lambs grazing safe in spring's soft meadow grass,
And all along the cemetery fence
Unbruised magnolia blossoms opening slow
In April when the eastern phoebe leaves.

The older children, restless, further up
Doodling in the Bible coloring books,
Playing footsy under pews as prayers went on,
Girls teasing boys, the giggle-whispering,
Long sermons like eternity to them,
Light-bladed glades outside, their native place,
Looking past John the Baptist to a creek
In which they laughed and splashed through mayhaw days,
The summer herons green along the streams,
Striking quick minnows, stalking almost still.

Then teens and young adults seeing themselves
Slinging the stone that split Goliath's brow
Or dancing like a naked shepherd king
Or in The Song of Songs, their kisses spiced
With camphor, saffron, myrrh, and spikenard,
And in the Dove that seemed a turtledove
Cooing to woo and aching for its mate
Where Jesus rises drenched in sinlessness,
Rose pink so near, unfolding in its rose,
Jays making raucous flocks with mockingbirds,
Male sparrows courting females, feathers preened,
Driving off hawks from eggs in nesting time.

Next, in the middle pews, the middle-aged
Between dependent children, parents, pressed,
Too late to turn back now, so far to go,
Their first and second childhoods distant dreams,
The sun moving up to and through its noon,
Its firestorms flaring west of Galilee,
Kisatchie's asters tossed in autumn wind,
The scarlet ibis climbing toward the Gulf.

And last, in pews near table, pulpit, choir
The old who faintly hear the cries behind
Yet gaze in silent calm beyond the plains
Of Canaan to the Great Sea and their graves,
Torn spider webs hung frosted stone to stone,
Snow egrets over fields of virgin snow,
White berries on the poison mistletoe.

3

And by such pews and bells we come to know
Each season of the body and the soul,
The ways of winter moons and summer suns,
The progress of the far-cast gathered stars
Both wandering and constant by design,
Appearing thus for us, seen as we see,
Our granted vantage point this human pew,
Dear-bought and stained with more than human blood,
The universe a temple, stellar-belled,
Its music fire, its fire a light that sings:
And we who praise are ringers of the things
Just as they were, are, ought, and have to be,
Calling the congregations near and far
To common rites of life, death, peace, and war,
The parts of bells a part of what we are—
The crown, head, shoulder, waist, mouth, lip, and tongue—
Sounding out all our days and nights profound
As does a bell well grounded, stilled for years
Yet tolling in remembrance where we dwell
Forever in a church that's always here.

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