

## Drowned Church

It seems that progress can cover up the past; that we can say, this will be useful and that will not. In my own time I have seen the passing of traditions I don't know how to mourn. Midnight Mass with my Grandmother; the one man in the family qualified to officiate at Rosh Hashanah; Grace. What had been, in times past, a deep-layered accretion of beauty and shame, duty and absolution, became in my generation merely a sprinkle of blessings and colour.

In Mexico in 1966 they dammed a valley and drowned a church, 400 years old. For forty-nine years the church stood beneath the surface, a tracery of cut-out stone holding the water apart from itself. Lake fish flitted through the vaulted windows. Weed instead of flowers. The High Church ritual of water moving, slow as incense.

The dam leaves no trace of its interruption by the stone, just the water reaching infinitesimally higher at every point on the shore. In drought times, in these times, the dam's water not so much recedes as stops arriving. As the outflow continues—as the molecular loosening of evaporation goes on—the refuse and leavings of a drowned valley rise. Tree trunks slimed with fifty years' submersion. Boots, boats, bottles, shoes and wrappers, bags, tricycles, cars. And the church, its worked stone piercing the water's sinking hood, spire and facade, windows and doorways rearing up as the water retrenches. In this new light, the weed lies down and dies, the living body of the water church gives up its movement; stands exposed in the uncompromising, engulfing air.

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