



“Where Are The Thin Places?”

“Really, they are everywhere we permit them to be”

When I saw the photograph passing through one of my social media feeds, I was immediately fascinated and pulled away from my work. A representation of a pre-conciliar altar boy with thurible is not especially unique; perhaps too often it is the stuff of fusty sentimentalism, with smiling, apple-cheeked boys surrounded by aromatic clouds of white all meant to suggest angels and innocence and heaven.

But this image, particularly at first glance, seems to hold nothing of heaven; indeed, with its wet streets, its murky, blurred shadows and the ghostly wisps of incense hanging heavily about a cassocked and besashed altar boy of worried brow and solemn countenance, it seems like heaven's opposite. The smoke takes the eye; it seems like a vapor of steam and the wheel just behind it almost suggests a train, a steam engine. To look quickly is to think of London's east side, of Jack the Ripper and dangerous, sodden streets, and men in great coats, saying “ere, wot's that, then?”

It takes a moment for the boy to come fully into one's awareness and then — once you have taken in his wet shoes and hem and the position of his arm in mid-swing, you can see the whole of the composition. No, this is not the ashy steam of Hell arising from below to menace the child or the rain-dimmed city, and no, the wheel does not belong to a train, but rather to a horse-drawn hearse, for we have stumbled into a funeral — a moment of substantial heaviness caught with light and preserved through chemistry.

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Now we understand why the men's heads are uncovered, too. Back then, amid human death and the intoned prayers meant to breach heaven on rising clouds of incense (working against the resistance of rain, and all the gravity), men would remove their hats in respect.

There is death; the hearse carries lighted candles and the gloom suggests either dawn, or dusk, or a sky too heavy for the light to win the day, though there is enough to dispel the darkness. Was there a priest nearby, either greeting the carriage or sending it on its way with a splash of holy water? We cannot know. We know only that there was a boy in a damply transparent surplice, standing by lingering wafts of scent and set to an ancient task. Incense cleanses and then it carries; it serves all that is visible and invisible. It permeates the veil.

And this, finally, is what is so striking about this image: that once upon a time, it was not an unusual thing for a child to stand in a bustling street and give dutiful, dignified service to human life and human death for the sake of the world and the God who permits all of it. Once upon a time we considered that the "thin places" were not reserved to the domed churches or temples — rather, they could reach down and touch us in the narrow, grimy corridors of a city street, and it needed only the presence of a solemn sentinel — there to receive, and thurible at the ready — for us to sense the slippy dissolve between heaven and earth.

Behold, something greater than yourself: death, and life, darkness and light; a bending of mist-and-glisten, for the deliverance of consolations barely registered, and never understood.

They open and close, the thin places; they range down and then arise, and their rising is prayer-and-fragrance laden, fit to place before a throne, because of the ones willing to stand in the dark, in the cold, in the wet — or in the deadly cities, or in the stagnating, stultifying suburbs — and dutifully attend to them.

Written by Elizabeth Scalia - Original: aletia.org



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