



fiction

Our Lady's Cathedral

by Subrata Augustine Gomes

WE ARE KNEELING DOWN SIDE by side in Our Lady's Cathedral. Whispering as if praying. She is in a blue-rimmed white gown. But she is no nun. I am in my usual casual black. As though every mass was a funeral. Who will care to notice anyhow? To ponder? To apprehend? Are they not, including the priest, the ever-erect corpses in the Guatemalan catacomb? The hum of hymns, the seems, is sneaking in through the vents, from some other world, from ... outside. We two are the only living. Talking. Yet, without at all disturbing the ether that prevails. Rendezvous in a graveyard! Amidst daemonic sighs whizzing by the living. But the dimensions must never collide. That is the rule. But are we really talking? Or are we only praying? If we had offered sacrifices like Cain and Abel... colonnades of ashen and azure fumes aspiring heavenward, falling and coiling and uncoiling and recoiling... and

only two radiant white poles would have succeeded piercing the kirk-top, through God's-eve-like pores, up up up...

Her father is a boozier. A wife-beater. He only lets her out on Sundays. Sundays she comes to church in her nunish raiment. I do not know, she has never told me, if that, too, was her father's wish. I did not ask. Never do. We never ever ask. We only say, or respond, as if in a confession. But never have we muttered 'mea culpa' so loud as to appal one another. We never know why Father has taught us to confess. Are we then needed to commit a crime only to be able to confess? But her father never has uttered 'mea culpa'. How would he? Where could he? He never comes to church. Where but in the church can you 'mea culpa'? I have to remind her of her nanny nonetheless. She too forgets. She too. In their big bee-hive-like house, only one room is her nanny's. Its doors never open. Meal-time, the maid deliv-



ers it through the window-hole. Since how long she knows not. Everyone has forgotten.

After mass, under the crucifix, we feign a final prayer. Or perhaps we do actually pray. Our lips lisp the prayers we have been taught; our hearts, some other. No-one could say we did not pray. One day, at school, when she too attended, Sister ordered us to rise and to explain why we were talking. In fear of God, in fear of telling a lie, we did not open our mouths. She drove us out then. The classroom was on an upper storey, with an open verandah adjacent. Right underneath we stood face to face, smiling. We thanked God and we thanked Sister. For how wonderful was the time when we were being equally punished for equal crime, equally happy with equal happiness! And so, we did not talk when we had all the right to, having been expelled, been punished ... we only kept quiet. As though we had pleaded

ourselves guilty and were only penancing. But God knew and we knew, we were not. And why, after all, did Sister drive us out? For talking? For not talking?

Another day we were reeling across the cemetery. No-one scolded. No-one will scold you in the graveyard. Nor inside the church. The grass there was as tall as ourselves. And I plucked a handful of the cottonseeds flowers, made a bouquet, and gave it to her. But she passed that onto a tomb. I had every objection, but ... but you cannot take back what is given to the dead. It is a mortal sin. Lucky, we know what what beet a sin. We keep ourselves away from that that.

About the writer: Subrata Augustine Gomes is a poet, translator and editor of several books and magazines. The above story is a translation of his Bengali story Matrimurti Cathedral which he read out at the Spring Writing Festival held in Sydney, Australia in September 1996.

monologue

From My Grandmother to Me

by Rebecca Haque

IONCE TOLD MY FRIEND THAT when I am alone, I put the videotape of Memory into the VCR of my brain, and while I pick and rearrange and dust and cook lunch for my family in my large, open, uncluttered apartment, I also simultaneously see myriad movies running in my head.

Now, today, as I stand before the open double-burner stove in my galley kitchen and sprinkle friend coriander and cumin dust over the prawn tomato curry, my consciousness rewinds its technicolour tape and I see my grandmother toiling and weeping over her mud-baked, wood-guzzling, back-breaking, lung-defiling 'choola' stove.

An inexplicable sadness suffuses my spirit. I regret that I never knew her well. Oh! I knew the comfort of her bosom and the cradle of her ample lap — but what of her, the woman? I knew nothing. Nothing! I was too young. I was too engrossed in living my own full, wild, untamed life to give a thought to her claustrophobic existence.

Affluent, wife of an upper middle-class 'bourgeois' lawyer living in a posh Armanitola sprawling double-storey pseudo-mansion, my grandmother was nevertheless prone to intermittent periods of hysteria and deep depression. What passions raged in her, I wonder?

Shackled by the hypocritical 'purdah', deprived of the written word, did her spirit perhaps yearn and yearn for something more? Did her inchoate and inarticulate desires need an audience, a voice?

Oh! My poor, mad, misunderstood grandmother. Today, let me be thy voice!

I never really mourned her passing. I was too far away when she died. But I did see her suffering, her flesh gone inky black and bloated with stomach cancer and the roads all around inundated with the waters of the great flood in the year 1966. I was twelve and having fun in that big old house, months out of school back in the West, and death and the dying did not touch me. It just did not register, nor did the long broken faces of my parents and my aunts and uncles have any greater import than the 'Jhalmoori-walla' or the delicious guava tree in my grandmother's backyard.

Later, much later, I did mourn her. A young bride, I drove with my tall, proud groom to the private cemetery where she lay buried. My first visit, and as it has turned out, my last too. (I do not like going to cemeteries and graveyards. The dead are not dead with me. They live in my memory). On the way to the cemetery, some elemental feeling of

oneness with my grandmother took hold of me and I felt a powerful surge of chest-racking sobbing burst forth from my larynx. I did not think, I only felt. And as I stood by her grave and wept into my open palms, I thought, 'I know you, my grandmother, I see you and your dark smiling face and your thick coiling hair and I grieve for you. I grieve for the slow destruction of your soul, but I thank you too, for your X-chromosome. I am your inheritor.'

And as I stood and my chest heaved and my shoulders bowed low with grief, my groom reached out and softly touched me. As I gathered breath in his enveloping arms, I thought, 'thank God for these strong tender arms and the clear wide brow and the sparkling eyes. He will never shackle me or browbeat me or imprison my spirit. With him I shall be what I am, a free spirit.'

Such was my paternal grandmother. And what of my maternal grandmother, you ask? Alas, I never knew her. I wish, oh how I wish, I knew her. For she gave birth to my mother, you see. A fighter, a survivor. Like me.

About the writer: Rebecca Haque is associate professor of English at Dhaka University.



Painting by G S Kabir

poem

The neo-Brahmin's Song

by Sarbojit Sen

Here we are, the modern brahmins,
The best and brightest on this earth;
And to ourselves we tell these days.

We need no more fear reward's dearth.

We are the lights of the this universe.

And upon the blind and groping shine;

If elite havens we possess,

Tis just, the sacred must be fine.

We are the gods that men must follow.

Renounce the sage's courses,

Ideals all they must swallow.

And re-kneel to market for

We are the chosen, by us chosen.

Choosing to call it princely one

Four our's the vision glossy bright.

And their's of ancient sterilesme.

Our's the land, our's the sky.

Our's the victory complete,

For Truth is dead, the Spirit fled.

We need no more be discreet