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Durham Cathedral

Antonio G. Manuud

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POEM by Antonio G. Manuud

Durham Cathedral

(For Dinah Priest)

It was, I remember, unusual for England
To have such a sunburst day:
Cows swatted flies from their brindled flanks
And bees did the work of summer with English precision.
Down by the Wear, two swans
Skated prettily to a feast of crumbs
From the largesse of little old women.

The oriental student shed his jacket
(Inscrutable wog) in the cool,
Archival refuge that they call
The County Library.

She came, I remember,
To laugh over the *London Illustrated News*
And to coax me out towards sunshine
Through the cold monoxide of traffic on the bridge
Where I am sure once upon a time
A watchful eye had spied a screaming
Sortie of wild-eyed Scots on the stolid
Castle—long ago, on such a day as this.

But *we* had history for buffer
Between the ancient shaft's tearing at flesh
And the dainty nibbling at Lady's Fingers
In the cool, neutral shade
Of a corner table in Carrick's.

We sang, knowing no madrigals, a Christmas song—
 But then who cared? The busy market place
 Was drowned in a euphoric haze
 Of grave flower-stalls and proud merchandise
 (All Empire made) as hand in hand we marched...

Giddily off to dozing cricket grounds
 Where daisies in the sun
 Soon occupied our hands:
 I pulled at them (their white fragility)
 For her to weave into a garland;
 And a punt, gliding silently downriver,
 Sprouted English arms, as undergraduates
 Full of summer, waved at us.

We laughed, waved back, and turned to buy
 Ices. And I wondered as she shook
 The sun-gold in her hair, and sang a phrase
 From Handel—carried in upsweepings
 Of Norman chevron, tower and spire,
 Finials of a later age—up to the open sky,
 What Gothic mind, what Gothic hand
 Should one day smite Norman stone and Gothic tracery
 Down to be ground
 Finely, historically, into the clammy
 Dust of England.

And still she laughed and sang with quickened pace:
And He shall reign for ever and ever;
And He shall reign for ever and ever!

So here I am, half a world away today,
 In the long shadow, grown damp—and longer still—
 Of the great cathedral;
 And thinking to pull daisies,
 I tug wonderingly
 Only at warm and frozen memories.