

## Pilgrims in Time

*Dian Saderup*

FOUR CARVED BISHOPS KEEP VIGIL above the threshold to Canterbury Cathedral. The filigree of sculpture surrounding them is as airy as lace, though crafted of stone. It looks as if it could rise upon wind as easily as shatter to earth.

I clutched my purse, camera, mittens, and notebook in one arm as I passed beneath these warders then heaved open the heavy wooden door. In the entryway a sign tells visitors that Canterbury is not a museum but always foremost a place of Christian worship, as it has been throughout the centuries and will remain for ages to come, hallowed by the blood of the martyred Beckett who was assassinated there in 1170 for opposing King Henry II's interference in church affairs. However, for me, the cathedral remained a museum — another esthetic exercise to get through. As a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints I already had my shrines. Also I was fatigued from two weeks of endless sightseeing and worried by news of family problems back home in Utah. I was unprepared for epiphany and do not know now — except through the series of strangely related images and thoughts that brought it — how to convey my experience of Canterbury.

I left the entry chamber, awkwardly fiddling to get my instamatic camera into the tennis sock I use for its case; photographs were prohibited. Then I looked up. A tourist handbook had informed me that the vaulted ceiling of Canterbury's nave is the highest of any cathedral in England. That bit of architectural trivia had done nothing to prepare me for what now soared above my head. The sheer vertical columns on either side thrust nearly ninety feet from floor to ceiling, where they arched inward and fanned into perfect stone fingers that met and interlocked at the highest point. Emily Dickinson once wrote that a poem is true poetry if it makes you feel like the top of your head is going to blow off when you read it. Each time I lowered my eyes and traced the

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*DIAN SADERUP* has published fiction, essays, and poetry in various LDS periodicals. She teaches composition at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts.

upward motion of the nave I felt as though the crown of my head might lift away with whatever wind that place had power to stir so suddenly within me.

"Seems impossible, doesn't it?" a stranger coming from behind me said. I nodded. She brushed my arm then walked down the center aisle. I remembered what a sprawling hulk the cathedral was from the outside and could now see it held dozens of turns and enclosures to explore. I was glad to be left alone as I passed from the nave and entered the adjacent north aisle, a straight, pillared passageway lined with tombs and memorial plaques. The succession of arches now moved before me. I walked several steps and stopped. Below my feet was a slate covering someone's burial place in the floor. His name, birth, and death dates chiseled in the stone were so eroded they were barely discernable.

Looking down at the marker, I had a sudden, vivid memory of my grandmother — invariably composed, dignified, formal — at my grandfather's funeral the past spring. Just before the final closing of the casket, she had lurched forward, falling upon his body, her lips pressing his cheek, ear, brow, and wispy hair. My grandfather's body was placed in a Los Angeles mausoleum in a large sealed drawer with his name in gold letters carved into the white marble: Raymond Leroy Fix. I glanced up at an ebony and pearl inlaid plaque on the wall of Canterbury. It read: *In Ever Loving and Proud Memory of my Husband Major General Henry Richard Abadie C.B., 1915. Also of his four sons who gave their lives for their country.* The woman's name was nowhere on the marker. I thought of my grandmother's famished lips as I read the words cut into the stone at the bottom of the marker: *May they find rest in the bosom of our Lord. Amen.* Continuing down the aisle, I brushed the tip of my index finger against each stone column as I passed. The tall arches overhead receded before me and unfurled behind.

As I walked I worried one corner of the blue airmail envelope clipped to my notebook. The letter I'd received from my mother the morning before hadn't contained harrowing news, just disturbing details that gnawed the underside of my consciousness like moths — continual, discomfoting reminders that the fabric of the world I shared with my family was subject to a kind of random, inevitable unraveling. My father, who had suffered a minor stroke a year and a half before, had spent forty-five minutes unsuccessfully trying to insert a typewriter into its case. When my mother found him at it, she merely turned the case over and fit the machine inside. Once, he could fix nearly any mechanical object imaginable. My older brother with a wife and four children was still out of work after nine months of unemployment; my mother said he suffered overwhelming discouragement. Arthritis was gradually fraying the joints in my younger sister's knees and hands and back. She was in medical school and had hoped to become a surgeon.

Such thoughts of home rose and fell repeatedly in my mind, insisting themselves upon me, then passively receding as I encountered various parts of the cathedral. I saw the effigies of Henry IV and Joan of Navarre. All of King Henry's alabaster fingers were broken off at the knuckles; the Queen had lost both her hands. The tomb of Archbishop Chicheley arrested me. The effigy

on the upper table of the vault shows the bishop in his scarlet, gold-trimmed robes. His mitre is studded with gems. The small figures of two boys reading sacred texts flank his gorgeously shod feet.

Beneath this vision of elegant repose, on a slab placed directly upon the stone floor containing Chicheley's body, is a solitary figure. I peered through the arches that support the upper table and connect it to the lower slab. The figure is without coloring and is naked. It lies upon a simply sculpted burial sheet which is drawn up by one of the bishop's thin hands over his left hip and loins. The marble skin clings to the ribcage the way wasted flesh does to a starving man's. The jutting bones of face and skull are thinly veiled in flesh; the neck is a series of sinews and veins, vessels thick, as if turgid with blood. The figure is a cadaver.

I crouched close to a single arch. I wanted to put my hand through it, to touch the still stone that signified Chicheley's once-quick body. I gently placed three fingers against the smooth chill of the archbishop's left hand, then spread my whole palm over the bent knuckles, covering the hand completely.

Many signs in museums I had visited over the years had requested that I not touch sculptures because the oils in my skin could damage the surface of the stone, wear it away by imperceptible degrees. But here I didn't move for several minutes. I thought of the broken-off fingers on Henry IV's alabaster effigy and of his queen's vanished hands, and I thought of my father, as my mother told me she had found him sitting on his bed eighteen months ago when he had had his stroke. The right side of his mouth had drooped when he smiled at her and spoke a garble of words. At first she had thought he was making some sort of joke and she'd laughed, but then she'd seen his hand, oddly curled, in his lap. My outstretched arm began to tire. When I stood up, my knees crackled the way they've done for the past five years whenever I crouch low then rise.

As I continued on through the cemetery that is Canterbury, beneath me and around me were the dead. But above me the pillars and ceilings of each section I entered flung themselves upward in an ecstasy of arches. The vaulted structure of the cathedral from west to east forms two inter-connected crosses. A line running the length of the nave, through the choir and the presbytery and into Trinity Chapel, is the great shaft of the cross. Two separate sets of transepts are distinct intersections of that shaft. Arches form the tracery framing the multiple stained glass windows throughout the building and dominate the orderly stonework panelling the walls.

Every passageway between enclosures is an arch. The exquisite woodwork of the choir stalls is a series of arches elaborately ornamented with tiny flowers, ribbons, crowns, and cherubs. In the dim space behind a facade of arches high above the choir I could see the gleam of metal organ pipes. When I stood at the base of the south aisle of the nave, I watched the steady march of arches to the first set of transepts where they jog slightly, take on an airier form, ascend a bank of stairs, and finally conclude their procession, curving into the faraway crown of the apse. Everywhere one looks in the cathedral, arches conspire to draw the eyes toward pinnacles, great and small.

I sat down on one of the many wooden chairs that line the nave in rows and experienced a tangle of sensations: persistent vague anxiety about things at home, raw excitement, a growing esthetic and spiritual awe, keen hunger for a banana or anything sweet. The cathedral was chilly. I massaged each of my white fingers. I still hadn't come upon the spot where Beckett had been murdered; as far as academics went, that was probably the most important thing for me to see. I scaled the vault of the nave once again with my eyes, then lowered them quickly. I felt my scalp rise almost perceptibly. For an instant I thought about the sword stroke of the one assassin that had sheared the crown off of Archbishop Beckett's head, the tip of the assassin's blade then shattering upon the stone pavement. There was a story associated with that amputated crown, but I couldn't remember it. After resting a few more minutes, I gathered up my notebook and purse, into which I had earlier stuffed my mittens and camera. My boots were heavy as I walked; the nerves in my neck and head felt electric, as though my hair might lift and stand on end.

In the southwest transept I came across the tiny gift stall. I picked out a card with a soft watercolor of the cathedral on it. My parents back in Provo would enjoy getting it in the mail and clearing a space for it among the stacked sheets of music cluttering my mother's piano. A woman in line ahead of me handed a book she'd been thumbing through for several minutes to the cashier.

"That'll be ninety-five pence," the cashier said pleasantly.

The woman, whose hands were rough, her nails rimmed with thin lines of soot, handed her a one-pound note, then said, "Are you sure? I thought it was a pound fifty."

The cashier turned the book over. "I guess the prices have gone up. I'm sorry."

The woman began to pick change from her wallet.

The cashier glanced quickly at the book jacket. I caught a look at the cover. It had an orange sunrise on it. The title was *Coping with Depression*. "But see —" the cashier said, "this has a flaw. The corner's bent. The pound will cover it fine."

"Why, thank you," the woman said. "Thank you." She took the thin package and put it into the pocket of her worn coat. I bought my card and left the stall, moved by the small kindness I had happened to witness.

The stone stairs leading to the ancient site of Thomas Beckett's shrine in the eastern end of Canterbury are so worn by the passage of pilgrims' feet that they are wavy. In 1538 Henry VIII, enraged by the threat of papal authority to the throne, had had the shrine destroyed: the tide of pilgrims to the cathedral from throughout England and the Continent had become intolerable. Ascending those stairs now, I felt like part of an invisible procession. The undulant stone beneath my battered hiking boots was memory given physical form.

When I came to the corona, or crown of the apse — the tip of the great cross formed by the cathedral — I remembered having read that it was here the crown of Beckett's head had once been preserved. The corona has now been designated The Chapel of Saints and Martyrs of Our Time and houses memorial displays on the Reverend Martin Luther King and the German phi-

osopher, writer, and nun, Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism and victim of the Nazi Holocaust. Her family, I read, had never been reconciled to her conversion, a grief that was a cross she bore the greater portion of her life. Shortly before her arrest in Holland and deportation to Auschwitz where she was to die four days later in the gas chambers, she had written: "The total gift of one's being and of one's whole life is the will to live and work with Christ, which also means to suffer and to die with him in that terrible death from which the life of grace issues forth for humanity." Stories of her ministrations to those with her on the death train from Holland to Poland continue to this day. I looked at the black-and-white photographs of her, brittle traces of her life and faith: a dark-haired girl at her mother's side, a tentative smile half hidden by her hand as she ducks the glance of the camera; a speaker behind the lectern of a university auditorium; a plain, dignified woman in a nun's habit among a group of sisters at the Carmel in Cologne.

Nearby, a tiered stand held several flickering candles: signs, I read, offered prayers and the sustained offering of our lives. I put a coin in the black metal box on the stand, took a candle from beneath it, and lit it off the wick of one already burning, then placed it among the rest. A group of French school boys came noisily up the apse, talking in words I couldn't understand. One tall boy blew out two candles with a single breath. A woman shushed and herded them all into the corona, squeezing me up against the glass box of the memorials. I edged my way out of the room, their exotic chatter fading behind me as I walked back beneath a continuously unfolding canopy of arches.

Memories flowed through me like a strong current, breaking off into a strange network of smaller streams dappled by light and shadow. One was of a woman whose name and face I don't remember, a nurse in a hospital I was in years ago. It was after midnight, and I had been crying, unable to stop for over an hour. Several nurses had come in one after another, each reprimanding me for keeping the other patients in the ward awake. Then this woman came to my bedside and took my hand in hers and stroked it. I told her I was afraid. She said she would hold my hand and not leave me. She stayed for a long time as I finally drifted to sleep, then hovered at the borders of my dreams all night, bringing her flashlight periodically to shine it briefly on my face and to cover my hand with hers for a moment. In my memory now I can see her only as some dim spirit in a dark room, a reddish light glowing from her palm like an offered gift.

Retracing my way down the wavy stairs, I saw to my left a second passage, paralleling them but descending yet another level into a dark region deep in the cathedral. A sign above this passage read *Silence Please Beyond This Point*. One of my boots squeaked as I made my way into the Romanesque crypt that lies beneath the apse. The crypt, or undercroft, is the oldest surviving portion of Canterbury, dating from the early 1100s. When I entered its shadow realm, the past encountered at every turn in the building above stretched suddenly into antiquity. The orderly sea of arches over me here were not high and not light. The rough low ceiling, with its dim gridwork of stone domes, appeared to support a great weight.

In the apse and the nave, the tunnels of arches had been magnets drawing, not only my eyes, but something intangible within me from earth upward. But here in the crypt it was as though the ceiling were some heavy mysterious substance stretched down at regular intervals and fixed to the earth. If heaven were a tent of stone, the pillars of the undercroft would be the stakes that fastened it to the hard ground, and the domed space thus created would be the air we breathe. Through a rhythmic field of columns, I could see at the center of the crypt the tiny yellow shivering of a few candles.

I moved among the network of columns with the regular squeaking of my one boot, sudden tears filling my eyes. Each of the many domes in the ceiling was supported by four capitals carefully ornamented with minute designs — all cut, I was instantly aware, by specific hands: fervently precise gifts to God. Who had crafted this place? Had they had children or fat infants or still sons lying in the ground wherever home had been? Had the air turned their fingers white with cold, as it had done mine, while they tapped their rude chisels into the rock? Was the bread they ate dry against their tongues as they chewed, or had they sometimes had the luxury of butter? Did their fingers and palms ever bleed as they worked? Had they thought with desire of the pillowy flesh of their wives to pass the laboring hours? Or of the incorruptible pillow that is the Holy Spirit?

Then all around me, not just the crypt but the whole of the cathedral came to startling focus within the eye of my mind: Canterbury was a kind of continual upward striving, with its roots in the descent that is death.

I continued on through a succession of columns and domes to the quivering candles in the gloom at the heart of the crypt. I came to the Chapel of Our Lady of the Undercroft. As requested by a sign, I lit a candle in remembrance of the souls of the departed, and I read the words inscribed at the base of the woman's effigy: *For God's sake, pray for the soul of Johane de Borwasche who was the Lady of Mohun.* Every adoring detailed corner of the cathedral and each laden pilgrim's step upon these stones were an ageless chorus of prayers for the soul of Johane de Borwasche, and for all the dead and dying.

When I ascended from the undercroft on stairs opposite the ones I had come down, the narrow hall I then passed through opened into the one area of the cathedral where I had not yet been, the northwest transept, and site, I discovered, of Thomas Beckett's martyrdom. In this plainest corner of Canterbury, the simple letters etched in the wall read:

Thomas Beckett  
Archbishop Saint Martyr  
Died Here  
Tuesday 29th December  
1170

A single brass candlestick held one lighted taper. This was the spot where one of Henry II's knights had sliced the crown from Beckett's head, and where the Archbishop had died.

It seemed that since entering the cathedral I had come a long journey. The related complex of images along my way had filled me with a kind of ineffable vision, but now, at once, everything was simple. Musical Middle English words from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* sounded in my head, memorized several years ago for a medieval literature class: "From every shires end/Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,/The holy blisful martyr for to seke,/That hem hath holpen, when that they were seke."

A low padded bench invited prayer before the holy place. Alone in the transept darkening with the fading light of the lengthening afternoon, I knelt on the bench and lifted my eyes to make both petition and offering: God bless my father that he might regain his speech more fully, my brother that his depression might lift, my sister that her arthritis might be eased, my mother with strength and comfort to bear the distress of her loved ones and an uncertain future. I named the specific woes of all those precious to me, family and friends, finally asking blessing upon all the suffering world, that as we labor beneath the weight of sin and mortality the grace of God might surround us, to nourish our hope in a land of grief.

