

MANJU KAK

Artist Woman

These are my works of art, eating, sleeping, breathing.
Can yours do that? Can yours come alive and ask you why?

I gave to them from my body my agony when I lay sweat-soaked in an air-stilled room. When I was scrubbing, washing, cleaning, tending to them and their growing needs you were smeared in paint. When I kneaded dough to make chapaties on a hot gas stove through sweltering blue summer you were clicking snapshots of desert women. Documenting you called it as you drove in your air-conditioned jeep to exotic destinations for your camera to see weary lined faces of. For me no camera, in my heart here I carry the pain of my first born's death, of our mother's crippled arthritic bones as she hobbles to the bathroom, the stench of bed-pans and soiled sheets. As you went to New York to mount your exhibition at the Feminist Congress I was in the hospital room watching the drip squeeze into swollen vein. I stayed on to iron shirts, to wash and clean after father.

You needed the quiet for your craft.

You had the studio over the garage under the flaming gulmohar tree. I had the flat where the children studied in a makeshift box-room. Where the cots were folded in the day, stacked beside Ma's tin trunk into which her worldly belongings were locked when her house was sold. Choose of your best I told her, impatient packers at the door, and in it she put a picture by you painted when still at school, of a coconut tree tall with lush undergrowth. It makes me recall how slim and straight she is, she told me of you.

Every now and then when I do her bed and fold her clothes she says to me; take out my picture, take it out and let me look at it. Slowly in her rheumatic arms she will hold it at a distance, putting the magnifying glass to her eye she will read you into it. And then she will take out her album where she has cut your reviews and pasted in slowly by slowly. See, she tells my daughter, this is Masi, what a fine woman she is. I nod, swallow the small lump in my throat. I traveled second class last week to some hill station where it rained and where the children could eat nothing as we had to play high price for the room. Potato cutlets were ten rupees a plate and coke was sixteen. I ran my whole kitchen and a day's vegetables on that money.

I longed to go back worrying for her left alone to the care of a neighbour.

I counted the hours when I could run into my own kitchen and toss up enough to feed them.

Taking our bags down at the station and flagging an auto-ricksha we were happy to be back—backhome where I wiped the kitchen and put water to boil. Rupees five for tea!

The paper was at the doorstep. Turning the pages we saw a review of the new photos you had taken...of Artist Woman. The children clapped—wasn't their aunt brave and strong. I turned the key in the lock and began dusting, then I went to the corner store to fetch milk and boiled it. And when they went for baths I got the kitchen running and put lunch on the table. I called my neighbour. They scampered off, to friends, singing, I will be an artist like my masi when I grow up ... while I cleared the table. My soiled fingers brushed against your face splashed upon the paper. They lingered. Sister, why did you go so far to look for artist woman.

Wasn't I in your own home?

Right here with my work of art.

Manju Kak lives in New Delhi, India.