

Re-verse

INTRODUCED BY CLAIRE ORCHARD

The poet: Originally from the Philippines, Gabriel Dyangco came to Aotearoa with his family. He is studying fitness, and is a cleaner at a Porirua rest home at weekends.

In brief: This poem is from a recent anthology of poetry and prose written by people who are, or have been, cleaners. I'm impressed by the range of voices the editors have assembled.

Why I like it: It provides a window into these few moments between Gabriel and Dora. He's there to clean her room, and he takes care in doing so. But in the process he takes the time, and has the inclination, to talk with Dora, listening patiently as she repeats the same details about herself, week after week. It seems likely, given her sons live in Australia, that Dora has few visitors, meaning this brief interaction with Gabriel is a rare moment of human connection in her day. We find out a few snippets of personal information about Dora – that she likes coffee and dislikes her daughter-in-law – but nothing about Gabriel. He's a calm, compassionate stranger to Dora, but also to us. Reading this poem, and indeed this collection, enlarged my understanding of the vital roles thousands of cleaners perform within our communities.

Why read it: I'm hopeful one of the effects of living through a global pandemic is we'll continue to offer those around us more patience and kindness. This poem provides an exemplar of what that can look like, and the impact it can have.

CLEANER BOY

I put my trolley in the hall
and knock on her door.
She says, 'Come in.'
I say, 'Hello Dora, how are you today?'
She says, 'Who are you?'
'It's me, Gabriel, the cleaner boy.'
I start to clean the mirror
then I clean the sink.
'Who are you again?'
'Gabriel. Cleaner boy.'
I start with the photos. Dust in the corners.
There she is, young.
'Who's this in the photo?' I ask every week.
'My sons. In Australia. Married.'
I don't like my daughter-in-law.
She says that every week.
I put back the photo. She says,
'Put it there. In the right place.'
I run my finger on the shelf, checking for dust.
She says, 'Who are you?'
'Gabriel. Cleaner boy. Want a coffee?'
I remove my gloves, my apron, sanitise my hands,
and we walk to the lounge.
I show her, again, how to use the coffee machine.
She says, 'That's brilliant.'
I didn't know it can do that.'
We go back to her room.
I collect the rubbish, put in a new liner.
'What's your name again?'
'Gabriel. Cleaner boy.'

By Gabriel Dyangco, from *Somewhere a cleaner*, Landing Press (2020)

VISIT
OLD ST PAUL'S
LIVING HERITAGE ICON
EVENT & WEDDING VENUE

www.heritage.org.nz



HERITAGE NEW ZEALAND
POUHERE TAONGA