THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF WATER

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REVIEW OF FOLDING A RIVER BY KAWITA KANDPAL (MARICK PRESS, 2006)

Kawita Kandpal's debut collection engages the reader in a sensory exploration of familial and romantic love and loss; these age-old themes are intertwined with the plight of translation, and always, as the book's title suggests, the landscape of water. The poet attempts to navigate through a world where nothing is fixed, including and especially the self. The resulting collection is distinguished by language that is at once adroitly muscular and distressingly transient. *Folding a River* is a book that celebrates the spaces just beyond our reach.

The image systems that will recur throughout the collection are established in the first poem, "Gravity: Three Movements." This title already implies the poet's concern with matters of literal weight, and by the end of the poem, we understand that gravity here extends to metaphorical weights as well. Kandpal begins:

It's the well of his palm she remembers. The ways sparrows nestle after the first snow on her window ledge. She shudders knowing how little the human hand holds. Barely enough to carry water between rivers.

Immediately: a memory, a cupped hand. Birds, their small, perhaps enviable, minds grasping nothing beyond the present. The ultimate inefficacy of the flesh to preserve, to transport, to contain. And, of course, water.

A prevailing motif in poetry, water is often evoked for its properties of mobility, clarity, and simple essentiality. To sustain the motif as the base for an entire collection is a risky choice precisely because of this popularity. What new ways can there be for the poet to innovate such a well-worn image? Kandpal's strategy, it seems, is to embrace water so wholly, so unabashedly, that the reader has no choice but to float alongside (and within) her poems. The overarching effect is one of suspension, whether in the Ganges River or the Great Lakes or the ocean of memory. While the landscapes may shift from physical to emotional, the movements *within* remain constant, tying the poems together as though by a subtle, lucid thread. "Every narrative begins / with water," Kandpal writes in the poem "Language of Bone." *Folding a River* surveys the layers of meaning that erupt from the juxtaposed landscapes of narrative.

Even the packaging of the book reflects the fluidity between landscapes. Beautifully photographed by Ian Tadashi Moore, the front cover features a bejeweled blue sari depicted as the surface of water in the foreground; the texture of fabric becomes increasingly visible as it fades back into the distance. The back cover shows the same sari in a realistic form, crumpled and folded over itself. Together, the images demonstrate the impact of distance on perception.

Kandpal's approach to landscape is highlighted by her smart use of form in the collection. Several poems move across the field in the more expected ways (for example, indenting alternate lines in the back-and-forth rhythm of water). The poet's most striking formal technique, however, is her occasional use of the caesura throughout entire poems. In the book's first section, the final line of "Before Partition" reads:

There is no word	for the soft opening	of sky.

Later, the poem "Veil" opens with:

in my eyes.

I wear

your absence

In both of these poems, the caesuras serve to give presence to that which is absent—in "Before Partition," the deficiencies of language; in "Veil," the missing father. Thus, the reader is provided pause to reflect on these different weights—of words, and of the spaces in between. Within the larger scheme of the book, these caesura poems, nearly always positioned between poems of less halted movement, create folds in the collection's overall texture.

In a book that relies so heavily on the mutability of water and memory, it can be difficult to maintain a reliable momentum, as so much of the natural vocabulary of mutability centers on abstraction. For the most part, Kandpal acquits herself of this problem by intermittently inserting unexpected images into the poems, infusing them with a solid launch from which to dive. However, there are points where the poet does seem to indulge in abstractions too great for the poems to support—the frequent occurrences of the words "sweetness" and "grace," as well as phrases such as "the shape of longing" ("Float, Memory"), are too imprecise to be evocative, even in a collection whose primary mode is lyric.

Kandpal is at her best in the poems she fills with unfamiliar images that subsume the sensuousness of her subjects. In the poem "Blueprints of the Universe," she writes, "Our fingers, half-crescents of light, / can fold prayers into eyelids." Here, we are left with the feeling that although perhaps we cannot fully identify or understand the image painted before us, we can nearly envision the illuminated fingertips, and feel the weight of folded prayers.