

THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF WATER

Michelle Mariano

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

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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.