

Editor's Notes

It's a great pleasure to feature Kirun Kapur in this issue of *Folio*. Kirun Kapur is the winner of the *Arts & Letters* Rumi Prize in Poetry and the Antivenom Poetry Prize for her first book, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist*. Her work has appeared in *AGNI*, *Poetry International*, *FIELD*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and many other journals. She has taught creative writing at Boston University and has been awarded fellowships from The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Vermont Studio Center, and MacDowell Colony. She is the founder and co-director of the Boston-area arts program *The Tannery Series* and serves as Poetry Editor at *The Drum Literary Magazine*, which publishes exclusively in audio form. Kapur grew up in Hawaii and now lives north of Boston with her husband and son.

Novelist Andre Dubus III has praised Kapur's work for its ability to capture "the spiritual resonance of the past on the present" while former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky has expressed admiration for the range of her first collection, a book remarkable for the way it "encompasses many phases of history, several religions, multiple myths, family stories, eros and terrorism, poetry and war, cultural clashes and cultural overlaps." In this selection from *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist*, readers will encounter richly detailed poems exploring the turns of fate that shape familial destiny and maternal identity.

Family stories run the gamut from cautionary tale to exercise in nostalgia, qualities that make them as captivating as they are artistically compelling. Facts can be fuzzy or take on the irrefutable nature of myth and, as is especially true of parents, the actors in these dramas are easily overshadowed by the roles they've come to inhabit in our lives. Yet Kapur's keen eye and compassionate voice render the familiar figures of youth as irresistible characters in their own right: here we meet a father who "quotes Frost as easily as Ghalib" ("Meat and

Marry”); a mother whose singular personality is effaced “beneath the Benedictine coif” in the line-up of novitiate nuns she’s joined (“Family Portrait, USA”). As she recreates the origins of their joint histories, Kapur reveals difficult truths without compromising the formal rigors of art.

In “Nursery Rhymes (or The Time She Chased My Mother with a Carving Knife,” Kapur revisits a terrifying scene, imagining the fear felt by a child “taught/to overlook the stench of last night’s gin/to kneel, say prayers over all your sins” as she scrambles to escape the drunken mother chasing her. The poet sets her account against the backdrop of familiar lines from Mother Goose, creating a chilling counterpoint to underscores the vulnerability of the child.

“Jack be nimble Jack be quick,” she writes, summoning up the past’s terror into the present, “don’t be afraid/you’ll slip, fear eats up time, eats candle sticks,/the chime of your childhood will find its silence,/quietly untie, like a shoelace.” This approach provides the poet with an effective tool for re-entering the moment:

Oh, Mother, may I

stand between you and my grandmother,
you and you not being my mother, I believe
it was the holy ghost of me, there in the foyer,
dining room, kitchen, in the living room blocking

her drunken way, keeping her from falling
on the knife, keeping you 20 paces ahead....

In this way, the poet constructs a healing narrative whose vivid testimony transcends the trauma. In Kapur’s hands, art is a means of discovery—a vehicle for apprehending grace and paying tribute to the survivor’s resiliency.

Reflecting on the composition process of poems in *Visiting Indira Ghandi’s Psalmist for the Beloit Poetry Journal*, Kapur commented on the challenges of writing about violence and the efficacy of form as a means of modulating the sensational. She observes,

...I happened to be at a reading where a poet read several sestinas.
I came away thinking about repetition: a word or phrase paced and
repeated becomes an incantation, a ritual, a structure. Isn’t that
exactly
how the telling of these stories had worked in my family? And what
about variation, the breaking of expected repetitions? Might it en-
act retelling, misremembering, the rupture of family structures and
rituals?

This very enactment of remembering and retelling is evident in “Light,” where the poet memorializes the suffering of Partition, the gender violence that ensued, and the deleterious effects of silence in public and private history. Here, the enclosed space of the kitchen—one where domestic advice is freely given—becomes confining, a quality underscored by the pantoum’s interlocking lines:

Knead carefully to make the atta.
Good girls know how to make good puris.
Make sure the gluten doesn’t toughen,
A puri should be light and golden.

Good girls know how to make good puris.
They don’t ask for the old stories.
A puri should be light and golden,
Like your cousin’s and your cousin’s cousin’s.

Although the speaker’s aunt may be resistant when directly questioned, stories are shared in whispers among the family’s women. In Kapur’s cinematic recreation, the women name “lost aunts and daughters,” including “one niece who could have been recovered” but “whose brothers refused to take her back” as a solitary scene widens into a broader historical current. Kapur’s poetry gives us an unforgettable glimpse into the bonds between mothers and daughters, tracing the connections between private history and the inheritance of kin—a timeless and necessary wisdom.

—Jane Satterfield