

How to Wash a Heart by Bhanu Kapil



Bhanu Kapil is a British poet who has lived, for the last twenty-one years, in the U.S., where she taught poetry, fiction, performance and hybrid writing seminars at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. She has also taught part-time for Goddard College in Vermont and Washington. Bhanu Kapil is the author of five books of poetry/prose: *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (Kelsey Street Press, 2001), *Incubation: a space for monsters* (Leon Works, 2006), *humanimal [a project for future children]* (Kelsey Street Press, 2009), *Schizophrenie* (Nightboat, 2011), and *Ban en Banlieue* (Nightboat, 2015). She is also the recipient of the Windham-Campbell Prize for Poetry, 2020.

Reviews

‘Bhanu Kapil’s extraordinary and original work has been published in the US over the last two decades. During that time Kapil has established herself as one of our most important and ethical writers. Her books often defy categorisation as she fearlessly engages with colonialism and its ongoing and devastating aftermath, creating what she calls in *Ban en Banlieue* (2015) a ‘Literature that is not made from literature’. Always at the centre of her books and performances are the experiences of the body, and, whether she is exploring racism, violence, the experiences of diaspora communities in India, England or America, what emerges is a heart-stopping, life-affirming way of telling the near impossible-to-be-told.

How To Wash A Heart, Kapil's first full-length collection published in the UK, depicts the complex relations that emerge between an immigrant guest and a citizen host. Drawn from a first performance at the ICA in London in 2019, and using poetry as a mode of interrogation that is both rigorous, compassionate, surreal, comic, painful and tender, by turn, Kapil begins to ask difficult and

urgent questions about the limits of inclusion, hospitality and care.’ (description via Poetry Book Society)

“It’s exhausting to be a guest/ In somebody else’s house/ Forever.” So reads British-Indian poet Bhanu Kapil’s poem “How to Wash a Heart”, which interrogates the relationship between citizen hosts and immigrant guests. Written at a time of rising hostility to immigrants, this collection of the same name explores the limits of hospitality. These difficulties, you sense, may never come out in the wash. In previous collections, Kapil has written of the 1979 Southall race riot and the trauma of the South Asian diasporic communities. Moving from the war zone to the spare bedroom, her new book meditates on “unbelonging”. When I hear “How to Wash a Heart”, I imagine an instruction manual. Not the one of its title. That part is easy: “Remove it/ Then pack it/ In ice/ Remove it then paint it/ In the course of one afternoon/ Like Edvard Munch”. The instruction I seek is more complicated: how to act, as a society, to welcome immigrants with radical hospitality and how to diminish hostile parts of the system.’ (Sammy Gale, *iNews*)

from How to Wash a Heart

Like this?

It’s inky-early outside and I’m wearing my knitted scarf, like
John Betjeman, poet of the British past.

I like to go outside straight away and stand in the brisk air.

Yesterday, you vanished into those snowflakes like the ragged beast

You are.

Perhaps I can write here again.

A “fleeting sense of possibility.” – K.

Keywords: Hospitality, stars, jasmine,

Privacy.

you made a space for me in your home, for my books and clothes,
and I’ll

Never forget that.

When your adopted daughter, an “Asian refugee”

As you described her,

Came in with her coffee and perched on the end

Of my cot, I felt so happy.

And less like a hoax.

Showed her how to drink water

From the bowls

On the windowsill.

I don’t want to beautify our collective trauma.

Your sexual brilliance resided, I sometimes thought,

In your ability to say,
No matter the external circumstances:
"I am here."
From this place, you gave only this many
Desiccated fucks
About the future.
Day by day, you discovered what happiness is.
As your guest, I trained myself
To beautify
Our collective trauma.
When night fell at last, I turned with a sigh
Towards the darkness.
I am about to squeeze out an egg, you
Murmured
As you kissed me
Goodnight.
Hold a funeral for the imagination,
I thought.

To my left is a turquoise door and to my right, a butcher's
Table.
Above you is a heart
Beating in the snow.
When I described the set of my play, an environment
More vivid to me
Than the memory
Of my childhood home, your
Face
Turned green.
What made you know something was over?
The milk in your eyes
Seared me.
In that moment, I understood that you were a wolf
Capable of devouring
My internal organs
If I exposed them to view.
Sure enough, the image of a heart
Carved from the body
Appeared
In the next poem you wrote.

There's a bright caul of fire
And cream
As I write these words, stretching out
These early spring or late winter
Mornings with coffee
And TV.
I don't remember
The underneath,
Everything I will miss when I die.
It's exhausting to be a guest
In somebody else's house
Forever.
Even though the host invites
The guest to say
Whatever it is they want to say,
The guest knows that host logic
Is variable.
Prick me.
And I will cut off the energy
To your life.

How to wash a heart:
Remove it.
Animal or ice?
The curator's question reveals
Their power style.
If power implies relationship,
Then here we are
At the part where even if something
Goes wrong,
that's exactly how it's meant to be.
Your job is to understand
What the feedback is.
It's such a pleasure to spend time
Outside the house.
There's nowhere to go with this
Except begin:
To plunge my forearms
Into the red ice
That is already melting
In the box.

Discussion Ideas

- Details of the installation / performance / poetry reading / ritual from which the book *How to Wash a Heart* developed <https://www.ica.art/live/how-to-wash-a-heart>. What can live poetry, or poetry in performance, do that poetry read on the page can't – and vice versa? What memorable poetry performances have you experienced?
- 'This is the voice of this book: an immigrant guest in the home of their citizen host' writes Bhanu Kapil. What are the tensions between guest and host? How might they be exacerbated between immigrant guest and citizen host? How do you start to see this relationship played out in this first section of *How to Wash a Heart*?
- 'living with someone who is in pain / Requires you to move in a different way' – what does this phrase mean to you? From where – or whom – does the requirement come?
- Both J O Morgan's collection and Bhanu Kapil's collection have an overall narrative arc. How do their approaches or styles compare?
- Bhanu Kapil writes 'In the U.S. and the U.K., as I wrote this book, anti-immigrant rhetoric amped up. Perhaps by the time you are reading these words, it is worse.' Is it worse? What can or does poetry do in the face of this situation?

Other books by Bhanu Kapil

Schizophrenie (Nightboat, 2011)

Ban en Banlieue (Nightboat, 2015)

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Bhanu Kapil online

[An interview with Bhanu](#)