

**How To Wash A Heart**  
**By Bhanu Kapil**  
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*Review by Dennis Daly*

Hospitality confers a plethora of emotions upon both host and guest. Some of these sensations, like empathy and gratitude, seem obvious. Others, like intrusiveness and resentment, seem less so. Cultural hospitality evolved historically as a survival trait, inhabiting the very center of tribal society. In her new collection of poems, *How to Wash a Heart*, Bhanu Kapil examines this interesting phenomenon with intimacy and tough-mindedness.

Nothing, if not original, Kapil sets her collection up in five sections of eight untitled poems apiece. The compositions are twenty lines long in the first section and twenty-two lines in the remaining four. She telescopes in and out, engaging in stories, images, scenes, and speculations of an Indian immigrant. Most of the lines are short and they work well lending emphasis and exposing drama.

Kapil is not the protagonist, yet the poems are so deeply personal, so confessional that you wonder at her precise knowledge and the sensitivities conveyed by the narrator. The poet herself was born in Britain and both of her parents were Indian immigrants. She currently resides in both the United States and Great Britain.

Feeling a little like a hoax, Kapil's protagonist, identified as K, a valued refugee, gets her gratefulness out in the very first poem of the collection. This begins a counterpoint of dueling emotions, which frames the forward motion of the host/guest plot as it unfurls,

*Its 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.*

Uneasiness pervades K's guest status. Sexual innuendos appear and disappear. She reaches out to determine her limits and the rules of her new foreign home. Her writing begets a sense of comfort and belonging, but that does not solve the problem. She explains,

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*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 the host logic  
Is variable.  
Prick me.*

Before arriving, trauma clutched this refugee. The truth in detail cannot be forgotten, and only temporarily sidestepped. Kapil weaves in the details of K's past life before, and as she fled the violence endemic to her country. Consider these telltale lines,

*When our neighbors  
Said go, we fled.  
Our hearts beating  
Like fish.  
Hello, sang Lionel Richie, on the taxi's orange  
Radio.  
My grandfather burned his notebooks  
Then scraped the ash  
Into a hole  
He could button up.  
Don't ask me to remember  
The word for zip.  
My secret is this:  
Though we lost all our possessions  
I felt  
A strange relief  
To see my home explode in the rearview mirror.*

Liberal altruism most often needs recognition of good deeds and applause, all of which result from actions closely fitting expectations. Real world venality must suppress itself and conform. The performance should match this insipid world outlook and follow the stage directions as the plot unfolds. Kapil's protagonist cannily does this at first. Here she dissects her own situation,

*Like a thing of beauty  
In the pudding basin  
Of tap water by the door.  
Was I your art?  
My involvement with your family  
Was an act of volition  
And consensus.  
The political face you showed*

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*To your neighbors,  
For example, was contra-  
Regime.  
My links to the community  
Of writers I had been part of  
Had broken overnight.  
And so, I smiled  
And laughed when you did.*

K details her experience from “treasured pet” to exotic disappointment. She explores “the link/ Between creativity/ And survival.” K gets to the point in the penultimate section of the collection. She says,

*So many of my experiences  
Were about waiting,  
Noting the reserve,  
Anxiety and palpable fear  
In those guarded  
Rooms.  
Perhaps you know  
What comes next.  
Perhaps you don't.  
Perhaps you have lived your life  
Without error, fortitude,  
Or end.*

The more especial the relationship is between guest and host the steeper the denouement and the fall. Western liberality extends only to the border of its precious narrative. Guests who do not live up to presumptive notions break a sacred trust. It's almost a religious test. Far from the survival origin of neighborly sanctuary (found in throwback cultures of say Afghanistan and Pakistan), the sponsor strikes out in sneering colonial fashion,

*The host's gleaming hair  
Responds beautifully to the shampoo  
She has set out for us  
To share.  
What's mine is yours,  
She says with a sweet  
Smile.  
I don't want you taking her out  
Without asking me  
First, she continues,  
Holding her daughter tight  
Against her side.  
I can smell your body  
Odor.*

Kapil's poetic sequence concludes in prosaic melodrama. The ending gives a topical and political edge to the collection. It does fit the loose plot and even some of the surreal images. However, the remarkable uniqueness of the book becomes really clear through the reading-trek itself, its ambivalent protagonist, and her definitive, if uncomfortable, relationships.