



Adam Phillips & Paul Holdengräber discuss 'Missing Out'

Holdengräber & Phillips 04:50~10:11
Holdengräber & Hyde 12:22~23:01

nypl.org

▶ || 🔊 30:06 / 1:24:54



You brushed my hair to one side, kissed my forehead. You studied me, a bit too long, before falling back on the sofa waving your hand. "Get me another cigarette."

When I came back with the Marlboro and a Zippo lighter, the TV was off. You just sat there staring out the blue window.

The next morning, in the kitchen, I watched as you poured the milk into a glass tall as my head.

"Drink," you said, your lips pouted with pride. "This is American milk so you're gonna grow a lot. No doubt about it."

I drank so much of that cold milk it grew tasteless on my numbed tongue. Each morning after that, we'd repeat this ritual: the milk poured with a thick white braid, I'd drink it down, gulping, making sure you could see, both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy.

I'm drinking light, I thought. I'm filling myself with light. The milk would erase all the dark inside me with a flood of brightness. "A little more," you said, rapping the counter. "I know it's a lot. But it's worth it."

I clanked the glass down on the counter, beaming. "See?" you said, arms crossed. "You already look like Superman!"

I grinned, milk bubbling between my lips.

Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed.

Lan, through her stories, was also traveling in a spiral. As I listened, there would be moments when the story would change—not much, just a minuscule detail, the time of day, the color of someone's shirt, two air raids instead of three, an AK-47 instead of a 9mm, the daughter laughing, not crying. Shifts in the narrative would occur—the past never a fixed and dormant landscape but one

that is re-seen. Whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone. "Make me young again," Lan said. "Make me black again, not snow like this, Little Dog. Not snow."

But the truth is I don't know, Ma. I have theories I write down then erase and walk away from the desk. I put the kettle on and let the sound of boiling water change my mind. What's your theory—about anything? I know if I asked you, you'd laugh, covering your mouth, a gesture common among the girls in your childhood village, one you've kept all your life, even with your naturally straight teeth. You'd say no, theories are for people with too much time and not enough determination. But I know of one.

We were on a plane to California—do you remember this? You were giving him, my father, another chance, even with your nose still crooked from his countless backhands. I was six and we had left Lan behind in Hartford with Mai. At one point on the flight, the turbulence got so bad I bounced on the seat, my entire tiny self lifted clean off the cushion, then yanked down by the seatbelt. I started to cry. You wrapped one arm around my shoulders, leaned in, your weight absorbing the plane's throttle. Then you pointed to the thick cloud-bands outside the window and said, "When we get this high up, the clouds turn into boulders—hard rocks—that's what you're feeling." Your lips grazing my ear, your tone soothing. I examined the massive granite-colored mountains across the sky's horizon. Yes, of course the plane shook. We were moving through rocks, our flight a supernatural perseverance of passage. Because to go back to that man took that kind of magic. The plane *should* rattle, it should nearly shatter. With the laws of the universe made new, I sat back and watched as we broke through one mountain after another.

When it comes to words, you possess fewer than the coins you saved from your nail salon tips in the milk gallon under the kitchen cabinet. Often you'd gesture to a bird, a flower, or a pair of lace

curtains from Walmart and say only that it's beautiful—whatever it was. “Đẹp quá!” you once exclaimed, pointing to the hummingbird whirring over the creamy orchid in the neighbor's yard. “It's beautiful!” You asked me what it was called and I answered in English—the only language I had for it. You nodded blankly.

The next day, you had already forgotten the name, the syllables slipping right from your tongue. But then, coming home from town, I spotted the hummingbird feeder in our front yard, the glass orb filled with a clear, sweet nectar, surrounded by colorful plastic blossoms with pinhead holes for their beaks. When I asked you about it, you pulled the crumpled cardboard box from the garbage, pointed to the hummingbird, its blurred wings and needled beak—a bird you could not name but could nonetheless recognize. “Đẹp quá,” you smiled. “Đẹp quá.”

When you came home that night, after Lan and I had eaten our share of tea-rice, we all walked the forty minutes it took to get to the C-Town off New Britain Avenue. It was near closing and the aisles were empty. You wanted to buy oxtail, to make bún bò Huế for the cold winter week ahead of us.

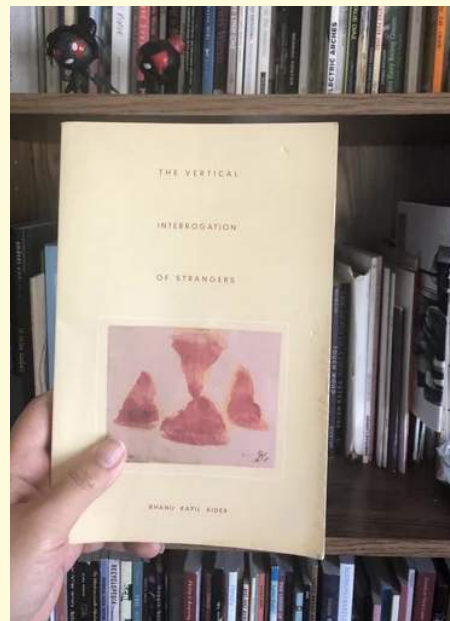
Lan and I stood beside you at the butcher counter, holding hands, as you searched the blocks of marbled flesh in the glass case. Not seeing the tails, you waved to the man behind the counter. When he asked if he could help, you paused for too long before saying, in Vietnamese, “Đuôi bò. Anh có đuôi bò không?”

His eyes flicked over each of our faces and asked again, leaning closer. Lan's hand twitched in my grip. Floundering, you placed your index finger at the small of your back, turned slightly, so the man could see your backside, then wiggled your finger while making mooing sounds. With your other hand, you made a pair of horns above your head. You moved, carefully twisting and gyrating so he could recognize each piece of this performance: horns, tail, ox. But he only laughed, his hand over his mouth at first, then louder, booming. The sweat on your forehead caught the fluorescent light.

29:44-35:10

Twelve Questions

1. *Who are you and whom do you love?*
2. *Where did you come from / how did you arrive?*
3. *How will you begin?*
4. *How will you live now?*
5. *What is the shape of your body?*
6. *Who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?*
7. *What do you remember about the earth?*
8. *What are the consequences of silence?*
9. *Tell me what you know about dismemberment.*
10. *Describe a morning you woke without fear.*
11. *How will you/ have you prepared(d) for your death?*
12. *And what would you say if you could?*



<https://imgur.com/gallery/hiff3TE>

Bhanu Kapil- The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers~ (various extracts)

BHANU KAPIL

The *Umwelt* of the Question

Notes on Territory and Desire

What is a question? Literally, it's a way of gathering information but not of processing it. As a mode of enquiry that's also, linguistically, founded on doubt, on not having the words for what passed between you and another person at the end of a relationship, the question seals space. That tiny, bounded pocket of something that is also space is so free. Optically, a spore. Or: a bubble with two spherical envelopes rotating at different rates: one you can't see, which I think of as the formless intensity or anxiety gathering in the body before speech, which is heat; and one that processes along a subtly different elliptic. That second membrane is oily, with rich blue and red hues, and in my dream of the question it's what drives or compels the response, whether that's a rupturing fingertip or the eye tracking the color until it bursts.

In a poem, a question develops a "lifeworld" or *umwelt*, which arises as soon as the question is asked. It simultaneously provides an extremely swift way to scan territory. In fact, according to my intricate Punjabi logic, derived almost entirely from reading philosophies of art and sensation, the instant that the response appears marks the physical limit of what a body experiences as its environment. So what we see in the *umwelt* of a question that's being asked of the body is: a body that's breaking up before our eyes. In the poems of Jean Valentine, which appear in a section of *Little Boat* called "From the Questions of Bhanu Kapil," this is a body that's also tearing or distending the membrane of what bounds it. Two things: 1. My name is Bhanu Kapil, and 2. What information does Valentine have for us, about what happens to a body at the limit of its being? How does she record a site that's both transgressive and failing at the same time, failing to sustain the body as an entity? And what does this body, which appears in these five short poems in such varied ways, dead ways, living ways, want?

233

In working through these ideas, which are really questions about how a ruptured body experiences desire, and asking these questions of Valentine's poems, I've been accompanied by another smallish, hard-backed, smart-looking book with a blackish, shiny cover: *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, the newest set of essays by the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz. It's from her work that I gathered the word *umwelt*, which appears in a quote from the Estonian biosemiotician Jakob von Uexhüll:

Every object becomes something completely different on entering a different *Umwelt*. A flower stem that in our *Umwelt* is a support for a flower, becomes a pipe full of liquid for the meadow spittlebug . . . who sucks the liquid to build its foamy nest.

I read these words and said a question was a stem. I said the question had one function in the *umwelt* of the book I had written, but that something happened to snap it off. This is what happened: Jean Valentine wrote to me on thick creamy paper, or perhaps ordinary white paper, from New York City, asking if she might use the questions I had invented (for a book of poems I wrote in my twenties, *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*) for a book she was writing now. Without any hesitation, I snapped the stems and gave them to her to build a foamy nest.

In the first poem of her own sequence, "Where did you come from/how did you arrive?," Valentine extends this plant matter into a domain neither of us, the speaker or the reader, can really witness:

trying to follow the body

up its stem to the air—

I couldn't . . .
(*Little Boat* 53)

The body in this poem is torn out from an imaginal "Tipperary" onto the "restraining blankets" of the birth bed, with tremendous force that has the register of a violation. I registered the broken stem, and how, without any information or memory supplying the duration that followed, the body became, in the next poem, a set of remains: a "ghost-body" with "Whatever kind of eyes / you have" ("What is the shape of your body?"). Then it happens again:

234

36:27-51:12

suddenly, without any cartography, the body appears in the following *umwelt* as an ecstatic, forming self: “my throat sang” (“What do you remember about the earth?”). However, what comes out of the throat—the human sentence—starts to fail in the passage it precedes:

I was twenty, your student.

I was going to tell you about it, your name, but the air
was too thin, I couldn't.

[“What are the consequences of silence?”]

(*Little Boat* 56)

As I track this composite subject, which is a breathing subject, an organism that takes in and exchanges “air,” I was deeply moved by the way Valentine uses the question to dissipate the body at the instant that it clarifies. The originary domain, which holds the record of the earlier part of life, its many mothers, the first deaths and marriages, mutates as soon as it's glimpsed, into what is weirdly an even earlier, particulate form. That is how I understand the dense, yet spectral narrative of the poem I quote from above. It's not memory *per se*. It's memory of an event before it's happened. An *umwelt* of the pre-sense, of the space before writing begins, of sentence that's not located in a visceral port.

And in the last poem, “How will you / have you prepare(d) for your death?,” this body, which I can't quite capture as a form even with these words, starts to desire in a new way, moving incredibly fast toward an eroticism that's completely unboundaried by time or space. The love that was experienced and mourned is happening now at the same time as the future love, the love to come:

I know you brokenheart before this world,
and I know you after.

(*Little Boat* 57)

If I ever marry, I'd like to read that poem at my partner's funeral, or ask for it, I suppose, to be read at mine. That's separate. But not entirely. Valentine's poems make me feel something in my heart, an electromagnetic prerequisite, perhaps, for something happening to it (a heart) in the outer world. Full disclosure number 3: I am writing this in Loveland, Colorado, which is known as the “Valen-

time City.” In tracking the subject of these poems, the body of a woman as she moves toward a particular sensation, which is also thought, I'm struck by how vividly Valentine takes up the concerns that seemed so particular to the immigrant/Indian body I was tracking in my own work.

A history of violence, of erasure, of the experience of nonbeing, is, in these poems, precisely what carries the body into the new world. Like a necessary force. I love the modulated, proto-Marxist way in which Valentine then says, *good*. The body “whirl[s]” and “daven[s],” an incredibly vulnerable and sweet posture that's complicated by fragments of intense attachment to the particular time in which the speaker loved and was loved: was a daughter, a student, an unacknowledged beloved, a niece. The repetition of these fragments is part of what makes these poems develop irrational spaces, which, as the mind attempts to cohere them / make them touch, causes an unexpected space to open, space that refers to lost intimate contact but which nevertheless provides it, through its own sensual pressure and pattern:

I wrote you about it,
but you never answered or spoke about it;
two years later, we were in love, and still
never talked about it: not about the quilt, not about
our lips that never touched—

[“What are the consequences of silence?”]

What I gather as a reader, and not as a reader who writes but a person reading a book in the middle part of her life, is a profound surrender of prior content and history. What such a reader, a dark reader, is left with is not a voidlike space, but, rather, a vibratory experience of love that makes border crossing a construction that's no longer the dominant marker of a radical relationship to the earth.

I'm an experimental writer. I'm a poet not born or raised in North America. I came here because I wanted to love in a different way, and though I haven't exactly discovered what that's like yet, I'm grateful to live in a nation that lets me try. I hope this is not insanely patriotic, but what I recognize in the move Valentine makes, toward vibration, is the immigrant's desire to stay. To come into feeling and the inner part of being and loving in a way that's

not possible if you're constantly crossing the edge of something. Maybe that's generalized language, a result, too, of recent conversations, with nearly every woman I know—writers and nonwriters—about Eckhart Tolle's writing on the "pain body." I don't know. "From the Questions of Bhanu Kapil" gestures to a future-present in which there's a love that unfolds regardless of the conditions, regardless of the difference between *umwelts*. It's the opposite of being a victim of the world. It unties the body from the memories of loss, the visual recollections of abhorrent acts, which have bound it to a particular moment in world history: intimate history: recurrence without the progressive oscillate: a kind of obsessive or addictive looping or reseeing that's hyper-ordered and fixed. Again, this is the language I use when I talk with my friends, and I hope it's not too banal to employ in a literary context. Luckily, though, I've also got Grosz; a section in her book called "Vibration, Animal, Sex, Music." In it, she writes about the irregular, uncontained oscillation of "fragments" and "notes" as marking the limit of a creature's *umwelt*: a marker of "the transformation of species" (33).

And so, these are my notes:

1. A question is an evolutionary act.
2. At the limit of a species domain, there's vibration.
3. Four poems in a lyric sequence constitute a species.
4. Jean Valentine is a biologist.
5. She's the spittle-bug.
6. I'm an ant.
7. I carry the stem of the flower on my back to another ant, which is you.
8. Who are you?